

# 1. Leigh

I RUSH OUT OF THE rusty trailer after Jesse. He's already climbing into his truck, and I kick up a cloud of dust trying to reach him. It's barely spring, but everything feels hotter when you're stuck in rural Kentucky. Aside from the Peacock family's cluster of trailers in this stretch of country, there is nothing within five miles but hills of dirt.

"Jesse, wait."

He slams the door shut just as I reach him. Panic cracks across my chest. My knees threaten to buckle. I look him in the eyes, rapping my fist against the side window until he finally rolls it down.

"I can't have you making this any worse than it needs to be, Leigh. Not today," Jesse says. "We all need to do our part, and that don't mean you can get out of it just because you're my gal." I can barely see his dark eyes under his heavy brows.

"Can't I just come with you, and then we'll both make the drop-off together?"

He looks down at me, his expression as flat as his other features. Only his eyes show any sign of hurt or worry that nobody else can catch but me.

"Look sweetheart, you know I wouldn't have you doing this on your own if there's any way around it. I promise, nothing's gonna go wrong. The Gorch brothers are no different than Mackie, Slim Jim, or any other boys you've delivered to before."

"But these guys are all the way out in Owsley," I say. "That's at least a four-hour drive from here. I've never even heard of the Gorches before. Do you even know anyone that can vouch for them?"

"They're decent enough folk from what I hear. A little squirrely, but nothing dangerous. What's more important is they're willing to take everything we got ASAP," he says.

“But Mackie’s seen you make deliveries with me before. He knows what would happen to him if he tried to lay a finger on me. And hell, even I could take down Slim Jim. We don’t know anything about these guys. Doesn’t that make you nervous?” My words make about as much impact on Jesse as the dust settling on my feet.

“We don’t got any choice,” he says, his voice rising in frustration. He promised not to take that tone with me anymore, though it wouldn’t do me any good to call him on it. Especially now, when his day has already been so rough. The way Jesse stares at me makes me feel like he’s probing inside my head, figuring out what to say to get what he wants. He finds it, just like he always does. “I need you to do this for the family. Everyone’s depending on you. Me and Uncle Mel, we’ve been good to you, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He aims for guilt, a surefire way to the heart. And what’s worse, he’s not wrong. Well, at least not totally. As shit of a situation I’m in right now, I can’t imagine how much worse off I’d be if it hadn’t been for Jesse and his uncle. Of course, that was before they manipulated me into becoming a delivery person for their trailer park meth lab.

“When you didn’t have nowhere else to go, we took you in and treated you like one of our own, right? Got you fixed up and put a roof over your head?”

He smiles as he watches the fight go out of my eyes. “Yeah.”

“The family needs you to step up today just like the rest of us are. We all got shit we don’t want to do, but it’s got to be done, and it’s got to be done now.” He’s not lying. Today’s been an absolute shitshow for the Peacock family, and without some damage control, it could mean serious jail time for Jesse and Mel. Maybe even for me too, depending on how this turns out.

“Can I at least borrow a gun, just in case?” I ask.

Jesse sighs. His already thin patience is worn to its last strands. “In case of what?”

“In case they try to rob me, or rape and murder me.”

He laughs in my face. “Rape and murder you? You’ve seen too many movies. Nobody around here gets ideas like that. Most of them already got permanent limp-dick from being on that shit too long anyways.”

“That’s easy to say when you’re six-foot-three and built like a redwood. It’s a little different as a girl showing up at a stranger’s house, all alone, with thirty thousand dollars’ worth of meth hidden in the back of a van. I’m serious, Jesse. You already made it clear I can’t bring a phone with me because of government tracking or whatever.”

“Not this again.”

“I’m not trying to fight you. I’m just saying if I can’t have a phone to call for help, I need to have at least something for security. Christ, you don’t even let me carry pepper spray.”

Jesse gives me an impatient look and then checks his wristwatch. “Fine, you can take one of the nine millimeters in my bedside drawer.” I turn toward the trailer, but his massive hand grips my forearm like a vice and tugs me to face him. “Don’t lose it. I already got enough shit to deal with today.”

“I won’t. What’s the combination to your ammo safe?”

He gives me a pitying look, making me feel small and stupid for asking. “Ain’t no way I’m telling you that, sugar. You can take the gun for your peace of mind, but the last thing I need is you getting hysterical and putting bullets into some good folk because you’re feeling twitchy.” He checks his watch for the second time in the past minute. “I gotta get moving, Leigh. I wrote down directions from MapQuest on a sticky note. Just relax about the whole thing, and you’ll get through it just fine.”

I plant my feet and try to yank my arm out of Jesse’s hand, putting all hundred and nothing pounds of my weight into it. I might as well be trying to pull a brick out

of a wall. Eventually, he lets go, and the sudden release makes me stumble back a few steps. A glimmer of petty amusement flashes across his eyes, but it's gone just as quickly as it appears.

"Fine," I say, biting my tongue. Pushing this conversation any further would only end in us being even more upset. I turn and start heading back to the trailer.

"Hey, hold up a second. I love you." He only says that to me when he's in trouble or needs me to do something rotten for him. Right now, it's both. I pretend not to hear him as I climb back into the crappy trailer I've been calling home for the past year.

I'm starting to get *the itch*. It's a feeling I get when I've been in a situation long enough to know that things are falling apart. It's a crawling, prickling sensation just under the skin, constantly drawing my attention. It's an itch that's next to impossible to satisfy. The longer I spend scratching at it, the more damage I end up doing to myself. I know this pattern well, yet I keep standing there silently screaming to myself as I dig deeper and deeper until it becomes this infection in my heart that has to be cut out entirely before I rip myself apart.

I grab my black duffel bag from under the bed and toss in all my clothes from the closet. I pack up my makeup supplies from the tiny cupboard above the sink and drop them in, too. Most of my worldly possessions don't add up to much more than basic clothes and makeup, nothing special. The only exceptions lie wrapped in tissue paper at the bottom of the bag—a series of souvenir snow globes from places like Miami, Yellowstone, Chicago, and Alberta. Sixteen in total. Some of the places I don't even remember, others just a few bits and pieces. They're the only mementos I have of my parents. The only proof that at some point in the last twenty-four years, I had people who actually cared about me. Most of the snow globes are dried out now, their white plastic flakes permanently glued to the models

inside, slowly fading like the memories of the people who gave them to me.

There's some catharsis in just going through the motions—loading up everything I own into one bag and pretending like that's all it takes to leave. Most times, it's enough to soothe the itch for a while, like a cortisone cream for the soul.

This is the third time I've packed up since living with Jesse. My record was with Tyler, the "entrepreneur." I packed up five times with him, and we weren't even together a full year. With Jesse, I'd always ended up putting everything back in its place before he came home, but this time, I think I'll take the bag to keep me company. Jesse is so preoccupied trying to hide his little meth empire from the cops that I'm guessing he won't even notice my things are gone. If he does, I'll just tell him when I get back that it serves him right for guilting me into risking my life for his stupid family business.

In Jesse's bedside drawer, I find several small black pistols. I grab one and inspect it. The damn thing doesn't even come with an unloaded clip—just an empty promise that practically advertises that it's incomplete without something inside of it. I slip the piece into the duffel bag anyway.

Outside of the trailer there's a VW bus, a rusted green monstrosity from the seventies that belongs to Uncle Mel. Jesse's managed to keep it limping along with what mechanics skills he has. I toss my bag in the van and lift the rug off the false floor in the back corner. Inside the secret compartment are brick-shaped packets covered in cling wrap. Even though I've made over half a dozen deliveries by now, I'm always shocked to see the stuff in person. It never quite feels real, more like something out of a movie. Still, part of me must recognize it for what it is, as my arms prickle with gooseflesh.

According to the sticky note on the dashboard, the Gorches are even further than I thought—almost a six-

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hour drive to where the exchange is supposed to happen. I check the clock on the dashboard; it's just past nine in the morning. If I'm lucky, I'll make it back alive. If I'm really lucky, I'll make it back before dark.

## 2. Leigh

THE STICKY NOTE'S DIRECTIONS LEAD me further into the heart of nowhere, ending in a dirt road surrounded by overgrown brush. A chain-link gate is open. The yard beyond is overrun with dry yellow weeds that scrape against the van as I drive in. At the end of the path is a two-story mess of a house. Half the windows are boarded up, and the front porch has been rendered unusable due to a partially collapsed roof.

Ever since I packed my duffel bag, I've been waiting for the itch to die down, but it only gets stronger as I pull up to the house. *This is a bad place*, the itch tells me, my whole body squirming just under the surface. I check on my duffel bag and unzip it a little, making sure the gun is easily within reach. Holding the bag gives me a moment to catch myself from falling into a panic attack, but the comfort is short-lived. By the time I look back up, two men are standing in the crooked doorway of the house. One is dressed in filthy overalls, and the other is wearing a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing armfuls of tattoos that probably connect to the ones climbing up his neck. The men are obviously related—their sneering faces look like they share a common ancestry with a rat.

“You Jesse’s girl?” the one in overalls says, clearly amused with himself, as if he’s the first person to make that joke.

I unroll the window and ask, “You the Gorches?”

“I’m Kyle,” he says, climbing haphazardly over a beam of rotted wood on the porch as he approaches. “That’s my brother, Ricky,” he points a thumb behind him. I check to see if either of them is carrying a briefcase, but all I see in Ricky’s hand is a small paper bag.

“Is that the money?”

“Some of it,” he mutters like he’s got a mouth full of marbles.

“Well, where’s the rest of it?”

“Inside.” He gestures back to the decrepit house with a lazy roll of his head.

“All right, why don’t you go get the rest of that money, and I’ll get my stuff from the back.” I keep my hand wrapped around the gearshift, ready to crank it into reverse at a moment’s notice. The two men just stand there, staring at me. I don’t know how else to fill the silence, so I repeat myself. “Go back in the house and get the money. I’ll grab your delivery.”

Shuddering as I turn away from them, I squeeze between the front seats and crawl across the van. As I head to the back corner and lift the false floor to pull out the stash, I wonder if there’s a way to do all this without me ever leaving the vehicle.

My skin crawls as two sets of feet crunch through waist-high clumps of dead weeds. From the side windows, I see the two men following me around to the back.

“We was thinking instead you give us a piece, then we all head inside and try a little bit,” Ricky says in a deep-fried Kentucky accent. “Then if it’s all good, we can square up.”

“Sorry, that’s not how we do business. Jesse should have told you this over the phone.” I make a point of dropping Jesse’s name to help remind these guys who I’m attached to in case they get any ideas. I pull one bundle of meth out of its hidey-hole and hold it up so they can see it through the window. “This is a straightforward deal. You bring me all the money, I give you all the product, we call it a day.”

“Damn girl, you’re all business,” Kyle says, standing at the side door, forehead pressed against the window. His mouth hangs open. His teeth are almost the same shade of yellow as the house and in almost the same state of decay. I can practically smell the rot inside his mouth through the fogging glass. “Can’t you at least open the door and talk to us like civilized folk? I promise I don’t



bite. Hell, I barely even got any teeth left, see?" He bares what's left of his disgusting teeth to me like a sick animal. It does very little to endear him to me.

I reach behind me just to feel the black duffel bag, making sure it's still there. Maybe I am being ridiculous. I remind myself of something Jesse once told me. Around these parts, on the level they're dealing, there's rarely any violence or double-crossing like you see on TV. Everybody's business is run on their reputation, and if they're not known as someone reliable, then they won't be in the drug business very long. Then again, it's probably easy to hold up your end of the deal when the other guy is six-foot-three and looks like he could break every bone in your face with a single punch.

I tell myself that these guys may be a couple of skeezy, uneducated, white-trash morons, but they also probably want to get this done and move on with their day just like everyone else. I grab one of the side doors and swing it out towards the brothers.

"There she is! Ain't that better?" Kyle says, the corner of his lip curling into a sneer.

I hand the brick over. "Look at it. Do whatever you do to make sure it's what you want while your brother goes and gets the rest of the money."

"Ricky stays with me," Kyle says, grabbing the brick of meth and tossing it to his brother. My heart skips a beat. Already I've lost control of the situation. Ricky pulls a knife from the back of his pants and stabs it into the brick, scooping out clumps of tiny white flakes. They look like the dried-up snowflakes plastered to the surface of my snow globes. Ricky sets the paper bag next to me on the van floor, then looks over at his brother.

"Listen, guys," I tell them, trying to sound professional. "I've got a long drive home ahead of me. If everything here looks good, I'd like—"

"Whoa whoa whoa," Kyle cuts me off. "What's with all the hurry? We ain't never done business with the

Peacocks before. I'm just trying to make sure y'all are legit." He peers behind me. "You know, we're going out on a limb here picking up this much product on short notice. How's we even supposed to know you got as much stuff in there as you say?"

"What, you want to see it?" At this point, I'm so ready to leave that I'll do just about anything short of abandoning this vehicle to get this deal done. I turn and crawl over to the rear corner of the van, lifting the false floor and pulling out another brick. Suddenly, there's a hand on my ankle. My leg gets pulled out from beneath me. My chest slams on the floor, knocking the wind out of me.

"Well, shit Ricky, that was even easier than we thought," Kyle says, dragging me out of the van. I claw at the floor but can't catch a grip on the ratty, stained carpet.

I kick as hard as I can, but he just won't let go. As I slip away from the safety of the vehicle, I reach for the duffel bag and manage to grip its nylon handles, towing it with me. It does nothing to slow me down. Kyle jerks me out and I fall. By some small miracle I manage to twist myself over, landing on my back instead of my face. The duffel bag tumbles out of the van and lands with a thud. Kyle hauls me through a thicket of weeds toward the house. His brother has already climbed into the van, loading bricks into his arms from the secret compartment I had stupidly revealed.

"Please, you can have the drugs. Keep the money. Just let me go," I beg.

"Tempting offer, but I think I want Jesse's girl." Kyle's eyes are hidden under greasy tendrils of black hair. A sadistic look of pleasure is plastered over his cracked lips.

As I get dragged, I realize my hand is still gripped tightly to the duffel bag. I pull it toward me and fish around inside for the gun. It's still sitting at the top of

my pile of clothes. I wrap my hands around the grip. It doesn't have any ammo—I'm basically holding nothing more than a toy. I pray that Kyle is too preoccupied to notice. I drop the bag and cup the base of the grip, hiding the hole where the clip should be.

"Let go of me now!" I scream, pointing the useless gun straight at Kyle's head. Through his mess of hair, I can now see the whites of his eyes as he freezes in place. I seize on his moment of shock and kick my free foot up, hitting him squarely in the groin. He stumbles backward, releasing me to cup his family jewels. Awkwardly, I scramble to my feet, both hands clutched on the gun.

"Now hang on, sugar," Kyle says, doubled over, reaching one hand out to me in a gesture to wait. "We was just fooling around, I didn't mean nothin' by it."

"Back the fuck up," I say. "Now get on the ground."

He takes a couple of steps back and drops to his knees. His eyes dart around wildly, putting me on edge. I spin around to find Ricky with a bundle of meth under one arm, and his knife pointed out at me with the other. He stops dead when I train the gun on him.

"Toss the knife," I command, gesturing my head at the thicket of weeds.

"Aw c'mon," Ricky says. I take a few steps back to try and split the difference between them. "This is my favorite knife. I ain't never gonna find it in there again." He gives me a sour look but eventually tosses his weapon into the overgrowth. I walk in a large semicircle, keeping both men in check as I make my way back to the van. I step in through the side door, ready to get the hell out of here. I'm one second from slamming the door when I see the duffel bag sitting in the brush next to Ricky. My heart almost stops. Everything I own, including the last traces of the only real family I ever had is in there, and there's no way I'm leaving without it.

"Alright, Kyle Gorch, you can get up and head back into the house." Slowly, Kyle stands up and starts to make

his way toward the building. He glances back and forth between his brother and my pistol.

“What about me?” Ricky asks.

“I want you to pick up that duffel bag and bring it over here. Slowly.”

Without taking his eyes off me, Ricky squats down, grabs the straps of the duffel bag, and moves toward the van. Bricks of meth litter the yard, but at this point, I couldn't give less of a shit about them. Ricky gets within arm's reach of me and holds out the bag.

In my rush to leave, I forget what I'm doing—I reach out to grab the bag and toss it in the van. By the time I've returned my hand to the bottom of the gun, I can tell it's already too late. It's right there in those deep-set eyes.

He knows there's no clip in the gun.

Ricky lunges forward and clasps my neck. His hands aren't strong like Jesse's, but he's got a good enough grip on me that I can't pull away. I try to kick at him, but he's too close to give my legs any room to swing.

“Kyle! The gun ain't loaded!” he shouts. It's only a matter of seconds before his brother will be back on me, and then it's all over. I bring the gun down over Ricky's head, trying my hardest to smack him loose, but his skull is as thick as pavement. His grip around my throat doesn't loosen.

I can't breathe. It feels like my windpipe is slowly being crushed. My head feels like it's swelling up like a balloon, and my temples threaten to pop at any moment. In the distance, I can hear the *swish swish swish* of feet tromping through crisp weeds.

Exhausted from the futile effort of knocking Ricky over the head, I punch the nozzle of the pistol into his face instead. By sheer luck, the tip of the gun pokes him right in the eye. He lets go of me for just a second, stumbling back as he howls and clutches at his face. My head starts to deflate, but the world is still spinning. I

throw the gun at his head, hoping to do some further damage, though he hardly notices it.

As he looks back up, I reach out of the van and grab hold of the side door. He lurches forward for another attack; I yank the door toward me. Ricky catches it, halting my escape. I jerk the door harder, but he's got a firm grip now.

"That wasn't very nice, Jesse's girl." His face is inches from mine. His breath smells like rotten dog food, and it makes my stomach roil. "Gonna have to find some way to punish you."

When he leans in, I reach back into my bag, fumbling around for anything I can use as a weapon. My fingers find purchase on the paper-wrapped base of a snow globe and a white-hot surge of energy pours into me. I hold my family memory tightly as I smash it into Ricky's temple. The glass explodes on contact, tearing his skin as easily as the tissue paper wrapped around the snow globe. He screams. Blood runs in sheets down the front of his face. While he's distracted, I reach forward again to shut the door, but one of Ricky's hands is still in the frame. The door bounces off his hand. Ricky falls backward onto his ass, screaming as he stares at his mangled hand through blood-soaked eyes. Some of his fingers are pointing the wrong way. He looks like he's crying blood, and the thought of glass piercing his eye forces my stomach to do a backflip. My jaw clenches shut, my body warning me to look away before I vomit.

I pull the door closed, lock it, and scramble on my hands and knees to the driver's seat. Through the front window, I can see that Kyle has almost reached the car. There's something in his hand—a crowbar or maybe a piece of rotted gutter pipe from the collapsed roof. I don't plan on sticking around to find out. I punch the car into reverse and slam my foot on the gas, twisting the wheel as I go until I'm facing away from the house. I put the car in drive, but as I near the gate, I see it's now shut and held

together with a chain and a padlock. A third man stands next to it with a shit-eating grin plastered across his dirty face.

Shit, there's a third Gorch brother? No one told me there would be three of them.

I press harder on the gas, and the van slams into the chained gate. My eyes squeeze shut. The crash jolts me forward, but my safety belt yanks me back as the car grinds to a halt.

My eyes open. I didn't break the padlock; it still holds two sides of the gate together. Instead, the entire gate lies in the grass in front of me, torn free from its hinges. The van couldn't break a simple padlock yet somehow managed to knock the whole damn gate off the fence. I'll take what I can get.

I slam my foot on the gas again, praying to whatever's out there listening that none of the tires pop as I drive over the broken fence. A cloud of dust kicks up behind the van. My wheels squeal as they try to catch traction, and then I'm bouncing over the chain-link fence. The car seems to be holding up alright, but I can hear the underside getting scratched up to hell. This van is a piece of shit on the best of days; I pray it doesn't break down when I'm this close to freedom. I grit my teeth through a couple more seconds of being jostled around by fate, and then just like that, I'm back on the dirt road.

I don't even pay attention to which direction I turn—I just want to be out of there. The sticky note with directions got lost in the chaos. Even if I had it, my hands are shaking so hard I don't know that I'd be able to read it anyways. It takes all I have just to keep the car from spilling out into a ditch on the side of the road. I take a left turn down one dirt road, then a right down another. I'm constantly glancing in my rearview mirror for a truck full of enraged meth freaks to pull up behind me, waving lead pipes and shotguns. Eventually, somewhere between

ten and a hundred miles away, I slowly realize that no one's following me.

I pull over to try to process what happened and soak up the pure horror of my experience. If things had gone even slightly different, I'd be dead by now—or worse. My hands shake violently as I lift my shirt and check for injuries. Apart from a few bruises on my ribs and a skinned knee, I seem to be physically OK. I tell my hands to stop trembling, but all I can see is Ricky Gorch's tangled mess of broken fingers. The rivers of blood running down his face.

I try to think of what my mother would say in this situation. It's been almost six years since she died, but I can still hear her voice pushing me ever forward in my head. *You survived, and that's all that matters*, she would have said.

Eventually, the terror shifts into a blazing anger toward Jesse. I told him this would happen. I knew from the minute he first tried to push me into delivering drugs for him that this would end badly.

Who am I kidding—I knew way before that. I knew from the moment he picked me up off that parking lot, blue eyes blazing through a face made of stone. He asked if I needed help. At that moment, deep down, I knew he would be the death of me, or something damn near it.

“Fuck this,” I say out loud. My whole body is itching so badly that it gnaws deep in my ear canals. I turn around and take stock of what I have. There are a few bricks of meth strewn about, a small paper bag filled with what I hope is money, and most importantly, my duffel bag.

It's time to get out of here for good. I get back on the road and pull into the first motel I see.