

Chapter 11 –Ali’s collapsing relationship with her mother

Ali hits the bottom stair at 7:42, twenty minutes late and moving like a Tasmanian devil in a windstorm. Her backpack is half-zipped, her shirt's on inside-out, and she's pretty sure she didn't brush her teeth. Sleep—what little she got—clings to her like cobwebs.

The kitchen smells like burnt toast and instant coffee. Morning light slants harsh through the window over the sink, catching dust motes and the smudged glass of the juice pitcher left out overnight. Cassie hunches over a bowl of Cheerios at the small table, spoon hovering, eyes down like she's trying to disappear into the laminate.

Mom's at the counter, slamming cabinet doors in that particular rhythm that means she's already furious before Ali even opens her mouth. Her work blazer is wrinkled at the elbows, her hair half-pinned, lipstick uneven. She's running late, too, and the air between them crackles with it.

[< Queen of drama's decided to grace us with her presence finally. >]

The thought hits Ali like a slap before Sara even turns around.

"You could have woken me," Ali fires first, yanking open the fridge and grabbing a Tupperware container that may or may not have something still edible in it.

Sara wheels on her, spatula in hand like a weapon, as she empties the dishwasher. "Oh? I could have communicated that it was morning? Like you could have communicated where you were going last night? Something like that, you mean?"

"Mom, I ate ice cream with a friend! It's not like I was a runaway." Ali slams the container on the counter, fumbles with the clasp. Her hands are shaking and she hates that they're shaking.

[< It's not like we'd be lucky enough for you to run away. >]

The thought comes sharp and hot, born in the flash of anger Sara doesn't even register having. But Ali does. Ali always does.

"What?" The word drops out of her mouth hollow and flat. The Tupperware lid pops off, forgotten. A leftover pork chop inside smells not quite right.

"Don't 'what' me!" Mom's voice rises as she turns back to the sink, scrubbing last night's pan with more force than necessary. Water splashes. "I got TWO calls from the school about you yesterday! First the office—you've missed four classes this week, Ali. Four! Then that counselor calls last night wanting to talk to me about you coming to see her yesterday? Skipping classes. Going to the shrink?! What the hell is going on with you?"

They're both moving now—orbiting each other in the too-small kitchen like angry satellites. Ali grabs bread from the bag on the counter, the pork chop idea dismissed. She fumbles for the peanut butter from the cupboard. Mom's gathering her work things—keys, purse, her own prepared lunch she packed the night before. Their paths cross and don't, a choreography of avoidance.

The silence hangs uncomfortably long while Ali gropes for words.

"I, um..." Ali's brain stutters, stuck on shrink and calls and the way her mother's thoughts are screaming louder than her voice. "What did Mrs. Brennan say, Mom?"

"Nothing." Sara spins, holding a glass in a fist that looks like it might break it. "She wants to meet with me. Away from the school. What the hell is that about?" Her voice cracks on the edge of something—fear, maybe, buried under the anger. "What is she going to tell me, Ali? What are you hiding?"

Ali stands there, frozen, mouth open, a knife full of jelly dripping onto the counter. Her brain is racing but her mouth won't work. She looks, she knows, like a deer in headlights—wide-eyed, stupid, caught.

In the corner, Cassie's spoon clinks against her bowl—once, twice—then stops. The little girl stares into her cereal like she can will herself small enough to vanish. Her shoulders hunch up near her ears.

"Ali, damn it! What does she want to talk to me about?"

[< Are you on drugs? Having sex? Are you pregnant? Christ — don't be pregnant. It'll fuck up your life like it fucked up mine to get pregnant in high school. >]

The world tilts.

Ali's hand goes numb. The knife clatters to the counter. Dark red smears across the Formica in a long slashing streak.

Pregnant. In high school. Fucked up her life.

Mom was twenty when she had me...

But there's something there— something in that thought. So bitter and old and... deep, from years of carrying it.

'Like it fucked up mine.'

She's not saying, 'when I had you'.

Not me.

Before.

Someone else.

Ali's mouth opens but nothing comes out. Her eyes are wide, unblinking, staring at her mother like she's never seen her before. The pudding cup she grabbed from the fridge sits in her other hand, sweating condensation onto her palm.

"Ali!" Mom's voice cracks like a whip, snapping her back. "If you don't tell me, I'm going to learn it from Mrs. Brennan anyway, so spill the beans and make it easier on everyone!"

"Stop yelling at me!" Ali's voice breaks, too loud, too raw. "Damn it, Mom! I've got enough on my plate already—I don't need this shit!"

The room drops into silence so sudden it feels like someone vacuumed out all the air.

They stare at each other across three feet of kitchen linoleum that might as well be a canyon. Both breathing hard. Both wild-eyed. Two trapped animals in a cage neither of them built.

Cassie's breath hitches—a small, wet sound.

Ali blinks first. She swallows. Forces her voice down, forces her hands to stop shaking. "We can talk about it later, okay?"

Sara's jaw works. Her knuckles are white on the edge of the counter. "Go," she says finally, voice flat and cold as November pavement. "Later. We'll discuss this later. You're going to be late for school."

"Yeah."

Ali moves on autopilot—sets the pudding cup in her open backpack on the floor, shoves the sandwich in forcefully after it, and zips the whole mess shut. The sound of the zipper is too loud. Everything is too loud. She stands, slings the pack over one shoulder. It weighs a thousand pounds.

As she turns toward the door, she forces herself to say it, quiet and small: "Goodbye, Mom."

Sara doesn't answer. She's already turned back to the sink, hands moving in the soapy water, shoulders rigid.

Cassie hasn't moved. Her spoon sits abandoned in the bowl. Milk-soaked Cheerios float like tiny life rafts. Silent tears streak down her face, dripping off her chin into the cereal.

Ali crosses to her, crouches down so they're eye-level. Her throat aches. "It's okay, Cassie," she whispers, even though it's not okay, even though nothing is okay. "Mom and I will be just fine, and so will you. Okay? Okay?"

Cassie draws a deep, shuddering breath through her nose—a wet, choked sound—and nods once, quick and sharp. No words. She can't seem to find any.

Ali leans in, presses a kiss to the top of her sister's head. Her hair smells like baby shampoo and sleep. "See you tonight."

She straightens, looks back at her mother one more time, but finds her scrubbing the same pan in circles, over and over, staring at nothing.

Ali walks to the back door. Her hand closes around the knob—cool metal, solid, real. She opens it slowly, steps through, and closes it behind her with the gentleness of someone diffusing a bomb.

The door clicks shut.

The morning air is cool and damp, everything still wet with dew. A crow calls from the telephone wire. Somewhere down the block, a dog barks.

Ali stands on the back step for three seconds, four, five—and then the tears come.

She swipes at them hard. Angry. Defiant. Smearing wetness across her cheeks with the heel of her hand.

Don't cry. Don't you dare cry.

But her face is wet anyway as she hitches her backpack higher and starts down the driveway toward the street, toward school, toward another day of pretending she isn't drowning.

Behind her, through the kitchen window, she can still hear it—faint but clear as a bell:

[< I can't do this anymore. I can't keep doing this. >]

Mom's thoughts are raw. Exhausted. Breaking.

Ali doesn't look back.