

Content Warnings:

Abduction, youth & substance abuse, weapons, murder, death, neglect, abandonment.

Do not read if you cannot handle any of these themes.

You will know right away how this story ends, and you will try to change it. That voice in your head will clutter, and those voices will scream. And you will believe if it's loud enough, you can shift this story's course. You **will** believe that. But you cannot change it. You are the reader, and this story is already written.

Still, you will invest. You will invest because you will want to change the end. And if I write it well, you will care a great deal. You will care as much as I do. If I write it well, you may curse or cry or throw your fists at your desk... It does not matter. Curse or cry if you must, but you cannot change the end.

You will know how it ends because I do. They said they will kill me if I try. And I am going to try. They've given me no choice.

I'm nauseous. You will be too.

They've taken her. She's twelve. No, she does not belong to me. She does not belong to anyone. She once did, but her mom and dad did not want her. When she asks me if they did, I lie. I say of course. I say that because of course mom and dad should, and of course, she should believe it. Her parents did not want her, but she *was* wanted. By me, and by them.

In twelve years, she's had to grow far many more. She's had to learn profound grief and anger. Profound courage and bravery. She's had to learn to keep secrets and smile when she is sad. Things I wish had taken her longer than twelve years to learn. Things I wish she hadn't had to learn at all.

I wasn't supposed to have her. I wasn't supposed to love her either. Not in the way I would if she did belong to me. I knew her parents – that's how I knew mom and dad didn't want her. Mom and dad wanted medicine more, but not the kind shelved behind a pharmacist. Her parents chose medicine when they should have chosen her. And then I loved her the way her parents didn't.

I applied to adopt her, and the rejection was acid. So, I took her instead. I was the first to take her, but I took her with the best intentions. I took her, and I wasn't supposed to love her. Not in place of the people she deserved love from. But I do love her, and that much too,

and now they have taken her. They took her with the worst intentions, and they do not love her at all.

I took her and stripped her of her identity to keep her. I've hidden her, and that's why she's valuable for them. No history, no records, no one to want her or look for her. No one except me.

My stubble has grown longer than it should have since they took her.

You're trying to change the end. By now, you wish you could change the middle too. Need I remind you: you are the reader. This story is already written.

She is profitable, they said. Prized on the streets. Men will pay plenty for her.

Twelve years old.

See? I must try. They've given me no choice.

They don't know she still prefers the crust cut off her grilled cheese. They won't know, because she's ashamed to say so. She's ashamed to prefer it at twelve. But I know. I know because I love her. I love her, and I wasn't supposed to. I wasn't supposed to have her, either.

My stubble grows. As it does, I believe what I wish. I believe that the worst they've done is have her eat the crust on her grilled cheese. I want to believe that still, but I must stop. I must face what is real, and I must try.

I must try, but I will not succeed. They said they will kill me, and they are many.

I will not succeed. This is not an action film. I am not Bruce Willis. I am not Liam Neeson. I am not strong enough on my own to save her, and I cannot ask for help. Because I'm not supposed to have her. Because I took her first. Because I wanted her when her parents didn't. I wanted her and I took her first - even if I knew she did not belong to me.

Isn't it funny, reader, that you try to change the end? In this story, and in many you've read, I'm sure. You believe if you wish hard enough, you can rearrange the letters already inked into the page. Foolish. You wish for the ending you think you want, but let me ask you this: Whenever you wished for a different end, was yours better? I bet not. I bet yours fall flat. Sure, you wish for it, but it would be less impactful if it changed, wouldn't it? Stop wishing to change the end. I've told you: you can't.

As much as I, you can't.

I am the only one who will try. The only one who knows to try. I've thought long about how I will try. I have knives and I have a gun and I have a handful of bullets. I have love and I have a place where she belongs. Where she is wanted.

We have reached the end of the story. Silly, you thought you could change it by now.

It's time I try.

I will not write the epilogue for the dead cannot hold a pen. You're still trying to change it, but believe me, reader, you must stop. You know this is the end.

A note from Danika:

I'm dying to hear what you think! If you loved it but don't wish to write a comment, you can let me know by clicking the "Love" button just below! If you wish to leave a comment behind, I will be excited to read it! Tell me everything: the good, the bad, the ugly. I want to know what you loved, what you didn't. What you thought, what you felt. I cannot tell you how much it means!