

10. Aylar A.

Thief

I shouldn't. I really shouldn't.

But I have to.

The streets are busy, and no one will notice. My fingers itch, and my hands twitch three times. The man in the leather jacket is close enough for my hand to graze the fat wallet wedged into his pocket. I edge closer, my eyes darting around the street.

I ease the wallet out of his pocket, giddiness spreading through my veins. The itching in my fingers ceases almost immediately. A familiar feeling of relief calms my speeding heart. I slink into the crowds of people.

I laugh to myself as I make my way to the small library a few blocks away. It's usually empty, with books older than the library itself. As soon as my giggling fit starts, the familiar sensation of guilt tugs at my mind. I know what the guilt means. I'm not about to give into it. Give it back, give it back, give it back, Grayson. All you have to do is give it back.

Maniac, Maniac, Maniac Grayson. Nothing but a maniac. The other guys at school call me a maniac, a thief. They call me a maniac even though they were the ones who shoved me into the little hole in the iced-over lake. They call me a thief even though they snatched my bus money right before the driver asked for it. I'm not a maniac.

The memories are enough to nudge me forward. The library greets me with its musty odor, and the librarian's eyes flicker over me before going back to the magazine on her desk. I follow my legs to the men's restroom.

I slip into a stall and sit in a corner, rubbing my finger over the wallet's leather exterior. But the inside is more important.

I want to open it, but the thrill is too... well, thrilling. I caress the wallet. It is filled to the brim and falling apart. Good thing I took it. What if the wallet had met its fate right in the middle of that busy street? I had done the man a favor.

My breath hitches when I see the girl watching me, her head peeking out from above the stall's door. Her eyes are fixed intently on the wallet. Shoving the wallet into my pocket, I scramble to get up. I run out of that stall like no body's business. The girl jumps out of the stall next to mine and grabs my elbow. Panic courses through me.

Without turning around, I jam my elbow backwards. I must have struck something because she snatches back her hand, stifling a scream.

She deserves it.

The crowds of people have reduced to small mobs. I fight the urge to grab a shiny bracelet hanging loosely from an oblivious lady's wrist. Slowing down, I enter a peaceful neighborhood.

And then I'm shoved to the ground and kicked in the stomach, my cheek scraping the rough concrete. But that's the least of my worries. I didn't need to see my attacker to know that the police had finally caught me.

"I swear I didn't mean to. I'm not a thief. I swear--"

A bony hand grabs my ear and pulls me up. Relief washes over me. It's only the girl. Up close, she's scrawny with red-rimmed eyes. A tattered beanie is pulled just below her eyebrows.

She smacks me.

"What's wrong with you, boy?" She whisper-screams in my ear and slaps me once more. "You steal. You run. You hit a girl. Do y'know nothing?" Blood is dribbling down her chin from where my elbow had struck her. Her eyes dart furiously around my face, and I almost forget how vulnerable she looks.

I can't say anything.

"Gimme the wallet," she spits. When I hesitate, she kicks my shin. "Gimme the wallet."

Spotting the wallet in my pocket, she grabs it. "You should be ashamed, boy. Whoever you stole this from must be frettin' to death."

Turning on her heel, she marches away; I stare at her back until I can't see her anymore. I turn around and walk, but I don't know where I'm going. The emotions swirling around my head are perplexing. Should I be angry? Grateful?

I stop dead in my tracks when a disturbing thought crosses my brain: she stole the wallet from me. Anger wins.

I run in the direction I had seen her take off in. It takes me a while to find her; she was faster than I had anticipated. When I do find her, she's sitting in an alley, her back

pressed against a brick wall. I hunker down behind a large, green garbage can in the alley and choke down a gasp when she shifts out of the shadows.

She's completely bald. And she's cradling a baby.

Her beanie's thrown carelessly on the ground. And there's the wallet, laying a few inches away from my foot. It's wide open and stuffed with nothing but paper. No money whatsoever.

I try to swallow my guilt like I had practiced so many times before, but I can't.

I leave.

The next day, I return to the alley, a plastic bag in hand. She's not there, just like I predicted, but a large cardboard box catches my attention. Inside, the baby stares up at me with big eyes and whimpers quietly. Looking away, I pull out the things I had brought with me from the plastic bag: a baby bottle, a burger, and all the money in my money jar at home.

I try to feed the baby the bottle. He spits the milk back at me. I don't mind... until he starts wailing. I don't want to, but I cradle the baby and rock him back and forth in my arms until he falls asleep again. I stand up to leave but think twice. If I leave all this money here, someone could steal it.

I wait.

Wait. Sleep. Wait.

She never came back.