



# ESCALADE

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I rolled the window down. The air hit wet and green—cut grass, exhaust, the river somewhere below. I closed my eyes and let it take my face.

David's elbow found my arm. The joint glowed between his fingers, trailing smoke that smelled like skunk and burnt cotton candy.

I waved him off. "I'm good."

He nodded, his eyes already closing, head ticking side to side. The bass thudded through the seat, through my spine.

Up front, Julie howled at something Bethany said. I'd missed it, didn't matter. "Stop," Julie gasped. "I'm gonna pee."

David leaned between the seats and killed the volume. "You piss in my Jeep, you're paying to clean it."

They shrieked. David dropped back beside me, grinning.

The world jerked forward. My chest hit the seatbelt. A single headlight, dead center. Glass sang. Then white. Then nothing—just cotton silence and my hands floating somewhere I couldn't see.

Something tugged at my shoulder. Sound came back in pieces—a voice, urgent, far away. Then closer. "Wake up. We gotta go." David's face, hovering. The door was open. When did that happen?

I tried to sit up. My body moved in pieces, delayed, like I was underwater.

"What..." My voice sounded wrong. Thick. "Where are we?"

David's hands were under my arms, hauling. My feet found pavement. The world tilted and then steadied.

I looked at my hands. Scraped. No blood. I patted my chest, my legs. Everything moved. Everything hurt, but nothing screamed.

My fingers found my scalp. A lump the size of half an egg, pulsing.

The Jeep sat crooked in the road. The front end was gone—crumpled around twisted metal, a motorcycle folded into the wreckage like something swallowed. Chrome and fiberglass and a shattered wheel jutting sideways. “Bethany.” The name left me before I knew I was speaking. “Julie.” I lunged for the driver's door.

David's arm caught mine, shoved me back. “We gotta go.” His voice was cracked open. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the car.

“No...” I reached past him. “Help me. We have to...”

His fingers dug into my arm. “We can't be here.” His breath was short, ragged. “The cops. You think about what happens when they get here?”

“We have to help...” I twisted free.

“Help how?” David's voice broke. “Look at them.”

I stepped to the window. I didn't want to. My body moved anyway.

Something was wrong with Bethany's face. Metal. There was metal in her face. Her mouth was open. Her eyes were open. She was looking at something in the windshield—a shape, a helmet, a head inside it, wrong, cracked like an egg, and I couldn't... I looked away. Looked back. It didn't change.

Julie wasn't moving. She was folded over the wheel, her arms hanging. Her hair—blonde, she had blonde hair—it wasn't blonde anymore.

A sound came out of me. I stepped back and hit David.

My stomach came up. I bent double and let it go—onto the pavement, onto my shoes. David scrambled back.

I spat, wiped my mouth on my sleeve. Straightened. “It's your dad's car. They'll know you were here.”

“Julie took my keys. Julie took the car.” He was talking fast now. “Nobody saw us get in.”

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## “A BOOK MUST BE THE AXE FOR THE FROZEN SEA INSIDE US.”

— FRANZ KAFKA

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“So we just—what? We were never here?”

“If we were here, we lose everything.” He ticked it off—my scholarship, his internship. “All of it. Gone.” His voice steadied. Hardened. “And she was the one driving. Coked out of her mind.”

“From your coke!” The words ripped out of me. My throat burned.

I turned away from him. From the car. The sky was clear. Stars. “Wake up,” I said. To no one. To myself. “Wake up, wake up, wake up.”

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes until I saw colors. Pulled them away.

David hadn't moved. Behind him, light swept across the road. Headlights. Coming closer.

The Escalade rolled up slowly. Black, massive. It stopped close enough that I could feel the engine idling in my chest.

The rear window slid down. A shape inside, no face I could see. “Get in.” Not a request.

David exhaled. He still wasn't looking at me. “I called him. Right after.” He walked toward the car.

I looked down. My shoes. Vomit on my shoes. The headlights caught the puddle. In it, upside down and shimmering, the Jeep. The shape in the windshield. I looked away.

“Ben.” David's voice. Not a question.

I looked back. Julie's hair. Bethany's open mouth. The helmet between them.

“I'm sorry.”

Then I walked to the car.