



IV.

I have always loved red clay,
but resent it in this moment.
It is the last thing that you will ever touch.
What a profound honor for dirt.



Levi didn't cry as he watched his brother get lowered into the ground.

Rather, he found himself feeling a little pissed that Ellis couldn't have waited until the fall to shoot himself. Given, Levi was pissed Ellis'd shot himself to begin with, but while he's thinking ill of the dead, might as well add another offense.

It was oppressively hot despite the early hour. June had a way of not caring what time of day it was before making the air thick enough it feels like you can grab handfuls of it from around you. There was a bead of sweat making its way down his spine even though he'd already rolled up his shirtsleeves as high as was socially acceptable. He'd forgone a suit jacket, knowing that it'd just make an already miserable day even more so, but even he'd drawn the line at showing up to his brother's funeral in a short sleeve shirt.

He was sitting in the front row, not listening to whatever words of platitude the preacher whose flock his mother had belonged to years and years ago offered to the dozens and dozens of mourners. His sister's hand was sweaty in his. He detested the feeling but didn't let go. Birdie, who had always worn her heart not just on her sleeve but her entire body, had been incredibly stoic the past four days. Calling florists and funeral homes and insurance companies, writing both the obituary and the eulogy while he tried his damndest to wake up from whatever this nightmare was, and while he may be a piece of shit, he was not going to deny her whatever comfort she was managing to get from her hand in his.

The coffin was a rather nice shade of navy blue. Levi hadn't even known how many options for coffins there were. It was just a box for someone to rot in. He hadn't thought there was much of a need for different colors and features, but he'd been wrong. He looked from the coffin to his sister's hand in his. Her nails were bitten to the quick, the pale green polish she had excitedly applied the night before her birthday was nearly all flaked off, the cuticle on her thumb was still a little bloody. She'd only painted her nails because she had been so proud of herself for doing better at not biting them. For some reason, seeing his sister's ruined pride made Levi come closer to tears than Ellis sitting dead in a box less than six feet from him. Grief was a fickle thing. Or so people kept on telling him.

Birdie'd always had a *nervous disposition*, as Ma had put it. The doctors had said it was *severe anxiety* and *panic disorder*, but Ma'd never been a big fan of what doctors had to say.

Look where that got us.

Levi ignored the thought and shifted his attention to Birdie's profile. Bags under her eyes weren't an unusual sight, sleep was hard for her in the best of times, but they seemed more pronounced than ever, so did the dark circles under them. She had expressive eyes. That's what folks had always said. Well, the ones she would make eye contact with, that is. She had a hard time looking someone in the eye when talking to them. She'd said she didn't like people looking at her, so she assumed most people felt the same when Levi had asked her about it when he noticed it a few years ago. Now they were just eyes. Sad ones at that. Not much about her appearance could be described as soft, even if that was the best word to describe her personality, despite her *nervous disposition*. She was pretty and kind and funny as all get out, but all of that was cased in a sturdy shell.

Birdie turned her head a fraction, meeting his eyes for a moment before nodding her head at the preacher whose name he didn't know. He thought she was getting onto him for not paying attention, but when she met his eyes again, it was so she could roll hers. Birdie's got gumption and a hell of a lot of faith, but Levi knows she believes the words the preacher is saying about as much as she believes it can snow in Hell.

Levi had to suppress a laugh, not that Ellis would have minded a few jokes at his funeral, but the other people in attendance probably would have thought it was in poor taste. And Levi's been to enough funerals to know that they're for the living, not the dead. But he shifted his attention back to the man in front of him so that he could at least pretend to pay attention.

He alternated between looking at the preacher's straining shirt buttons and the pretty blue box his brother would rot in. Some far away part of him wondered what he looked like, if he was playing the part of *mourning brother* well enough. Ma had always been mindful about how they all presented themselves. That's why he's sweating his balls off wearing his nicest button up shirt in the merciless June sun. It was also why, despite her lack of sleep and lack of time and general hatred for going out in public, Birdie had added even more to her plate and gone to four stores to find a dress she had admitted to him last night she would never be able to wear again. It was a nice dress, he thought. Long and black with short sleeves that showed off the tattoo on her arm that had made Ma place a hand over her heart and have a conniption fit over when she got it and every single time she saw it after. Not that Ma was here to bitch about it now. She'd been gone for a while. If people in their twenties were allowed to be orphans, he supposed that's what him and Ellis and Birdie were.

Just me and Birdie now, he corrected. Almost made him want to laugh, but he didn't because Birdie was pulling him up and walking him to the grave.

It was quiet. They were out at the old church which neighbored a corn field this year. The only thing for miles were trees and what had to be the worst road this side of Mississippi, yet not even the birds had anything to say. It made Levi wonder if they knew what was going on any better than he did.

Birdie reached down, grabbing a handful of the red clay they used to play with as kids, and tossed it on top of that nice blue coffin. Levi followed her lead, aware of the eyes on him, it made him think of how much Birdie must hate this. On top of burying their brother, everyone is looking at her while she does.

His handful of clay falls on the coffin with a dull thud, it occurs to Levi that it'll be the last thing that ever gets to touch Ellis.

What a profound honor for dirt.