ART MONSTER: STORIES AND A NOVELLA

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ELIZABETH ANNE COOK

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ART MONSTER: STORIES AND A NOVELLA

Elizabeth Anne Cook, Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

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ABSTRACT

Monsters external and internal stalk the margins of the stories and novella that make up this collection. Though each selection engages in its own distinct exploration of the monstrous, the pieces hint at a shared question: how does entrenching and isolating ourselves in a singular experience—of place, of occupation, of grief—cripple our ability to understand one another? In Sea Monsters, a young girl comes to terms with how loss has hollowed out the adults in her life, morphing familiar faces and comforts into grotesqueries. Eva Americana explores the power and pull of a small Midwestern town on its inhabitants, suggesting that nostalgia might be the most monstrous indulgence of all. In Derivatives, a washed-up former prodigy sabotages his own happiness at every turn, punishing himself for failing to live up to specters of expectation. And in Mr. Jelly, a children’s book author confronts the horrific, perhaps supernatural power of her own creation, fearing she’s to blame. Art and sacrifice are so often conflated in the popular imagination. Art Monster: Stories and a Novella dissects this relationship, questioning who—or what—might be sacrificed in the stories we tell.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Art Monster: Stories and a Novella,” presented by Elizabeth Anne Cook, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts Degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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**Supervisory Committee**

Christie Hodgen, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of English

Whitney Terrell, M.F.A.
Department of English

Daniel Mahala, Ph.D.
Department of English
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................... iii

Critical Introduction ........................................................................................................ 1

Sea Monsters ....................................................................................................................... 7

Eva Americana ..................................................................................................................... 166

Derivatives .......................................................................................................................... 185

Mr. Jelly ............................................................................................................................... 206

VITA ..................................................................................................................................... xxx
INTRODUCTION

I’ve spent three years building up a bookshelf to protect myself. As a writer of young adult fiction—and, perhaps more crucially, a female writer of young adult fiction—I’m hyper-aware of a tendency to arm myself in academia, to clutch Serious Literary Influences to my chest as proof of my legitimacy. *I deserve to be here,* my bookshelf says to me. *These are the hallmarks of an apprenticeship steeped in the works of the masters.*

And my exposure to the masters of craft over the course of my three years here has undeniably changed the way I think about writing. Sam Lipsyte gave me the freedom to inject sarcasm into storytelling. Kelly Link opened me to the possibilities of magic and mystery in the literary landscape. George Saunders raised every expectation for what writing should be and do, and Lydia Davis inspired me to give my sentences the care and closeness of a straight-razor shave.

But if I’m being honest, the writer who’s had the most influence on my motivation as a writer—the writer who put me in touch with the why of it all—is popular young adult author John Green.

I had the chance to meet Green last year while I was working on a piece defending young adult literature for *The Kansas City Star.* He spoke at the Kansas City Public Library’s Truman Forum to a packed house of mostly young women (“infatuated tweens,” an arch colleague appraised, a dismissal that raised my hackles), and he spoke about the importance of empathy and imagining others complexly. Admittedly, teenagers aren’t often lauded for
their ability to engage in either project, but I suspected then, as I believe now, that our shared conception of the younger generation as disengaged, insincere narcissists is as much a failure of our own empathy—our inability to imagine them as fully-formed humans with complex emotional landscapes—as it is theirs.

When Green spoke, he shared a story that struck at the heart of what I want my writing to do. He detailed a year living with three roommates in Chicago at the height of the Iraq war. One of his roommates was a Kuwaiti man named Hassan, who spent his days stress-watching cable news on the couch, searching for some sign that his relatives were safe. One night, as Green and Hassan watched the news together, the camera cut to a reporter standing in a fraught Baghdad neighborhood, Arabic graffiti scrawled across the wall behind her in messy black spray paint. As she pointed to the wall, using it as a prop for the anger in the Arab streets, Hassan began to shake with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Green asked.

“The graffiti,” he said. “It says, ‘Happy Birthday, Sir, Despite the Circumstances.’”

That line appears, in a slightly altered form, in my novella Sea Monsters, a gentle homage to a story that stuck and a reminder to myself to consider, when I look at the world around me entrenched in pessimism or despair, the “Happy Birthday Sir, Despite the Circumstances” possibility.

I’m not sure any of the writing in my collection could be described as optimistic. When my characters aren’t punishing themselves, the rest of the world steps in to do it for them. But in their struggle with monsters internal and external, they brush against moments of mirth and magic. They find opportunities—despite the circumstances—for relief and release.
They don’t always do this elegantly, of course. I’ve grown a great deal as a writer over the past few years thanks to the instruction and feedback I’ve received, but I remain keenly aware of two of my common narrative pitfalls: an overreliance on theatrical conventions and tropes and a rejection of authentic emotion.

The first I chalk up to an undergraduate career in theatre, spending long hours in Acting and Script Analysis picking apart scripts to see how they were put together. Consequently, my first workshop submissions read more like overstuffed ten-minute plays than short stories. I prioritized dramatic scene to the exclusion of everything else: I didn’t have the patience for summary and “stage directions,” so I attempted to resolve conflicts—even internal ones—and suggest their resolutions almost entirely through dialogue.

I still feel most comfortable when I work in scene, and I think Sea Monsters, in particular, reveals that predilection in dialogue-heavy scenes that stretch on for pages at a time. But I hope that it also reveals an attempt to temper that impulse with a little more narration, description and attention to internal landscape. I realize now that my first efforts completely discarded the unique entry point into character that fiction offers: the chance to turn inward, to peer at a character’s hidden emotional landscape and discover the feelings and motivations she hides from others.

Mr. Jelly emerged as an attempt at course-correction. Its scenes are much shorter than is my habit, spliced with longer passages of reflection and reaction. That self-censoring impulse is perhaps exemplified by the “Three things happened the next day:” list, an efficient, if a bit clunky, narrative device forcing me to focus on the particulars of events instead of just the way people talk and move through them.

I mentioned a second pitfall as a writer, however, and this is a snare I’m still trying to
claw my way out of: the rejection or disdain of authentic emotion. I recall a line from a feedback letter a professor sent me in my second year of the program: “I want to care about these characters and their problems,” he wrote, “but it’s hard to do that when I feel as though the writer is constantly undermining them and keeping them at an arm’s length.”

His critique was spot on, although I couldn’t see it then. I recognized an impulse toward sentimentality in my writing and wanted to punish it. In the process, I excised it from my work at every turn, refusing to allow myself—or my characters—to own their emotions and desires. Though I’m proud of the writing in “Derivatives,” this story is a symptom of that disease. The main character, Righteous Bridges, takes his fears and insecurities seriously, but I don’t; instead, the narrator mocks him relentlessly, throwing the legitimacy of his actions and desires into question. Readers may wonder why they should care about Righteous, and the story fails to offer them a compelling answer.

Part of this shift away from sentiment I ascribe to a larger cultural trend among young women, and part to my own misappropriation of two female writers I admire: Lydia Davis and Jenny Offill. The latter inspired the title of this collection with a line from her most recent novel, Dept. of Speculation.

“My plan was to never get married,” Offill writes. “I was going to be an art monster instead. Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern themselves with art, never mundane things. Nabokov didn’t even fold his umbrella. Véra licked his stamps for him.”

Offill’s narrator tries to live as an “art monster” for a time, adhering a post-it to her computer screen that reads “WORK NOT LOVE,” but finds it unsatisfying. Pesky relationships with her husband and infant daughter keep getting in the way.
When I read those lines, I latched onto what I thought was the message and rejected the critique Offill had coded into it. I needed to be an art monster, I thought, and ignore the mundane details of making a life. That was how, as a woman, you escaped the cult of domestic fiction and threw in your lot with the big boys. I needed to be ruthless and unsentimental. I needed to be selfish. I needed someone else to lick my stamps.

I turned to Offill and Davis as models: both writers leapt from the page with sentences dazzling in their cold fury, super-condensing real, fraught emotions to the level of a guilty joke or errant laugh. I tried and failed to ape their prose.

But Davis and Offill had something I didn’t (besides unfathomably richer banks of talent and experience): a recognition of the emptiness of that project, coupled with lines and emotions that escaped from the constraints they tried to place on them, looming even larger and more significant as they broke free from their bonds.

It took another writer, Leslie Jamison, to help me realize why emotional impotence wasn’t going to get me very far. In The Empathy Exams, her collection of essays, Jamison interrogates female pain and our modern attempts to divorce ourselves from it. “Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain” shook me like any great sermon ought to, and I recognized myself a little too well in Jamison’s descriptions of a generation of young, “post-wounded” female writers who treat their characters’ problems with boredom or contempt, “aware that ‘woundedness’ is overdone and overrated.”

In trying to avoid the traps of easy sentiment, I’d let the pendulum swing too far to the other side. As a hopeful young adult novelist (and frequent reader of young adult titles), I’m uncomfortably aware of one of the genre’s unfortunate tropes: manic pixie dream girls, flighty, tragic young women whose suffering helps young men self-actualize. Ditto the
febrile, virginal women swooning on the jacket art of bodice rippers, the kind of novels my narrator’s best friend devours in *Sea Monsters*.

I want my writing to encourage empathy and a complex imagination of others—to encourage readers to consider the “Happy Birthday, Sir, Despite the Circumstances” possibility in a swath of angry-looking graffiti. I fear dwelling on pain and sentiment to the point of indulgence and self-absorption,

But there’s a sweet spot to be negotiated between glib self-effacement and the kind of emotional tunnel vision that prevents us from seeing others problems because we’re too absorbed in our own. The story that I think strikes the closest to this balance is “Eva Americana,” a piece I wrote when I was struggling to understand a series of suicides that took place in my hometown. Perry, Iowa is a small town, under 7,000 people, but it seems to exact a disproportionately large toll on the people who grow up there and, especially, the people who remain. If this story succeeds, I think it does so in an earnest engagement and sensitivity to the questions it poses. Writing, to me at least, has always been an act of interrogative empathy. I’m compelled to write as a way to make sense out of chaos. I write because I don’t have it all figured out. I write to explore the questions that plague me, and to imagine how others might answer them.
SEA MONSTERS

CHAPTER 1

I always assumed that when your family went through a tragedy, it brought you together and made you closer. So I had to confess feeling a bit let down when, almost a year after my sister Rachel's organs got parceled out for the white market in picnic coolers, my parents were still dropping me off at the American Legion for grief counseling on Wednesday nights so they could go get drunk in the Hy-Vee deli.

“It’s not grief counseling,” Mom said, after my umpteenth protest. Summer break (and my sixteenth birthday) were a week away, and I was already mentally on vacation. I wanted nothing more than to sit at home on the couch and watch re-runs of “Cake Boss” while our enormous orange tabby, Catrageous, cleaned his butthole on my lap.

“Then why do I leave every week feeling counseled?”

I saw something pulse in Mom’s jaw. “Honestly, Caroline, if you just opened up a little more in those sessions, you’d have already graduated.”

Graduation was the Prime Directive for Silver Liningz (ugh, I know), Iowa City’s premiere teen “leadership training program”. It was all euphemism: Silver Liningz was one of those new-age yuppie inventions, like Montessori schools or sparkling water. You went to “leadership meetings” (read: group therapy) for a few months until they deemed you ready, and then they matched you up with a charity or after school program so you could volunteer your way back into psychological health. It was like a temp agency for the emotionally
disturbed.

Mom pulled into the parking lot and flipped on the hazards. “I know you hate this. But you’re in control. You could graduate next week, if you wanted to. Promise me you’ll make an effort, okay?”

I stopped chewing on my thumbnail and grunted neutrally into the cuff of my sweatshirt.

“That’s my girl.”

I thought about what she said as I waited for the meeting to start, sitting Indian-style in a white plastic folding chair in the equally white and florescent Legion atrium, flipping through pamphlets so I didn't have to make eye contact with anyone. Not Making Eye Contact was one of the first things you learned at “youth leadership training” (or “Sneaky Grief,” as Dad and I called it when Mom wasn’t around). Eye contact was the gateway drug to hearing about other people's problems, which was 99% of what I did at Sneaky Grief. The other 1% was listening to our “Conversation Partner” Hans, a near-obese youth group leader, rattle off platitudes about what grief expressions were healthy. Spoiler alert: all of them.

I could feel the prickle of him staring at me from across the room, so I buried my nose in a glossy trifold. “Is Your Loved One's Grief Problematic?” it asked, in bold red letters. I wondered if Hans knew Silver Liningz' literature was undermining his message of inclusivity. Was my loved one's grief problematic? I uncapped a pen to take the test for Mom and Dad. I suspected turning to alcohol was fairly normal, but I scanned through the checklist anyway:

- Minimal or total lack of emotional expression regarding the loss
- Prolonged inability to recognize that the loss has occurred
- Overactivity without a sense of loss.
So, basically, if you ever got over your grief, then you had a problem. That was comforting.

Hans barked two little faux-coughs into his fist, which meant the meeting was about to start. I stuffed the pamphlet into my bag.

“All right, friends, let's circle up for our opening prayer,” he wheezed in his soft mezzo-soprano. The three other regulars, the only kids that actually talked in these sessions, stopped chatting and scraped their chairs over to the center of the room. I dragged mine to Hans' left side. Sitting next to him had two advantages: one, I could remain in his periphery and thus avoid Meaningful and Direct Eye Contact, and two, if I peered over his shoulder, I could read the scribbles on the yellow legal pad he kept propped against his knee. Snooping in his notes from previous meetings was the only part of the group I enjoyed.

Hans laced his fingers and started wheedling through the usual Lamentations passage (“The unfailing love of the Lord never ends!”) while a few kids mumbled along or mouthed the words to their feet. I bowed my head and used my hair as a privacy curtain to sneak a peek at today's notes. The top left corner of the pad had his weekly schedule, a list of dates and mysterious acronyms. Later on tonight, he'd meet with the RV's. Tomorrow at six he had the AA's again (“BRING CD,” he reminded himself in cramped cursive).

Five or six different grief groups met at the Legion every week, but I'd never know it if it weren't for Hans' shorthand. Our pain was segregated, neatly categorized into cohorts of circumstance. There were other groups entirely for abuse victims, cancer patients and eating disorder survivors. We were isolated, but we all had one thing in common: Hans. If you wanted to cross the river of grief in Iowa City, Iowa, Hans would be your gondolier.

He was nearing the end of the prayer, so I quickly scanned the pad for our group. We were the LB's—Hans never used anything but initialisms, so I didn’t know for sure, but I
suspected it stood for “Left Behinds.” Every week, I rattled off the acronyms in my head (“RV,” for instance, was pretty easy to guess) and reminded myself that our group was the shallowest—it was one thing to be an alcoholic, or fight cancer or live through abuse, but we were grieving because someone else's life had been awful or abbreviated. The whole thing felt selfish and indulgent.

“For the Lord does not abandon anyone forever,” Hans finished, “Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion according to the greatness of his unfailing love.' And the people say?”

“Amen,” mumbled a few kids.

“Before we start check-ins, I want to introduce today’s guest. We’re going to have another adult joining us, but I promise, this is still your space, guys!” He beamed, spinning around like a lazy susan to make eye contact with each of us in turn. I slouched down in the chair and turned up my ambient thought noise. We had “guests” every month or so, usually associates from the counseling center there to check up on Hans. I tried to play up the troubled teen bit whenever anyone from the center came out, so they wouldn't blame him for my silence. Counselors expected you to be messed up—I think it was easier for them, honestly, to have an obvious explanation when you refused to participate. Polite silence made them nervous. That was “problematic” grief.

“He's not from the Center.” Hans' lilt broke through my mind fog for a second, and I straightened. “He's one of us, another conversation partner here to share his story. His wife went home to God after an unexpected aneurysm last year.”

I looked up to see Hans boring into me with Concerned Adult eyes. Rachel, my older sister, had died of a brain aneurysm at twenty-seven. And “unexpected aneurysm” was
redundant. It was always unexpected. Aneurysms rarely came with warning signs—you didn’t get the hospitalization or long treatment or the slow waning with heartfelt promises and tearful goodbyes. You were putting away groceries one minute, and in the next you were dead on the kitchen floor in a growing halo of shattered glass and hormone-free milk. I craned my neck, trying to see where the guest was lurking. But as it turned out, I didn't need to see him. I heard his voice behind me, and recognized it instantly, familiar and dark, frayed around the edges from a pack-a-day habit he swore he'd given up.

“Sorry I’m late. Thanks for the invite, Hans.”

I felt a jolt of panic twist my insides and I shot up from the chair, half-jogging toward the emergency exit. I needed some air. It was him. I couldn’t believe he’d come back.

Kelly. Rachel's husband. Lover of frisbee golf, Australian shepherds, and nineties’ pop-punk. And missing, as far as our family knew, since the day before her wake.

The Hy-Vee was only a few blocks away, but I took the scenic route, following the ped trail as it wound along Ralston Creek. If I got there too early, they'd know I skipped out on the end of the meeting. The mosquitoes were out in full force: we’d had an unusually soggy winter, and the melting snow and April rain had flooded the usually timid creek dangerously far up its banks. I swatted a cloud of bugs away from my face, zipped up my hoodie and checked my cell phone. Two new text messages, both from Jessie:

WERE EXORCIZING SID. COME NOW!

Followed by:

WHERE R U???
Jessie had been my best friend since kindergarten (Montessori, because yuppies), but she could be pretty high maintenance—and hypocritically impatient for someone who always ran ten minutes late.

I HAVE SNEAKY GRIEF EVERY WEDS, I texted back. U KNOW THIS. DO U MEAN 'EXERCIZE'?

Her reply was almost immediate:

SPELLING BEE CHAMP, BITCH.

I knew better than to argue. The spelling bee in question might have been seven years ago, but Jessie was eternally the top of our class. It was a source of constant confusion for new students, who couldn't believe a bubbly half-pint like Jess was the smartest in our year. It wasn't any less confusing when you got to know her. She loved logic puzzles and aced the critical reading on the ITEDs every year, but still nursed twin obsessions for dime store romance novels and obviously faked paranormal investigator shows. (“Cognitive dissonance,” she’d explained once, adjusting an imaginary monocle.)

I checked the time and slipped the phone back into my pocket. Fifteen minutes to kill. I debated heading over to the ice cream joint on First to eat my feelings, but then I heard the sneakers slapping up the sidewalk behind me. Kelly. He stooped over to catch his breath and peered up at me through heavy-lidded brown eyes.

“Thought I recognized you.”

I crossed my arms and turned out to the creek. I wasn’t ready to have this conversation—I'd deliberately left the Legion to avoid it. Everything was mixed up, and I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to feel.

“I see you're smoking again.”
He winced, anchoring a hand to his side. “Just out of shape.”

I nodded, still not meeting his eyes. “I'm actually kind of in a hurry. I have to give Mom and Dad a ride home.” My voice sounded hollow, harder-edged than I'd wanted it to be, but he didn't seem to notice.

“That's bull. Your birthday's not till next week. I remember.”

“I have to practice. I'm not taking the driving test cold turkey.”

He rubbed his palm against his chin, where a patchy beard had started to take root. It was a bad look for him. Rachel once said his facial hair was “aggressively terrible.”

“Should I come with you? I mean, I should probably see them sooner rather than...”

He trailed off, uncertain.

“Absolutely not.”

“Whoah. Okay.”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to peek at him through my bangs. “I just mean. That's not a good idea. They're drinking. It'd be messy.”

“Well...when is a good time?” He sounded flustered.

“I don't know.” I backed away, pissed off by his impatience. “Not now. And definitely not during my grief counseling meetings.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—look, I ran into Hans at the Dairy Queen, he guilt tripped me about coming to talk—”

“—what an incredible coincidence.”

He looked like I'd slapped him. “Fine. I asked him about you, okay? I wanted to talk to my sister-in-law. Is that so crazy?”
Nothing in Sneaky Grief had prepared me for this conversation. Some irrational part of me begged my legs to just turn and run, like a startled deer. I don’t know if he could sense my anxiety, but he took a step back.

“Hey, I'm sorry, I've obviously gone about this the wrong way, I can see that. I… I didn’t know if I’d get a better opportunity.”

I balled up my fists and shoved them deep into my sweatshirt pockets. “I don't know, Kelly. You could have called me? Like a normal person? You could have e-mailed, you could have sent a wax-sealed letter by carrier pigeon, you could have done literally ANYTHING else and it would have been better than ambushing me at Silver Liningz.” I laid into the “z”.

“I didn't mean to ambush you.” He deflated. I felt a twinge of guilt, but I focused on stuffing it back into the Feelings Compartment. He was trying to make things happen too fast. He had no right to invade my space, to come back and expect a warm welcome when he'd abandoned us for a year.

“I gotta go. I'll see you around.” I pulled my hood up, even though I was sweating, and started down the trail.

“Cary—”

“It's Caroline.” I called over my shoulder, quickening my pace.

“Caroline. Okay. See, you've grown up. I get that.” I heard the keys in his pocket jingling like sleigh bells as he jogged to catch up. “But can we just... set up a time to hash things out? I need to talk to someone.”

I could hear the note of desperation, but I didn't care. I wheeled around, plunging my fists deeper into my pockets as though they could anchor me to the ground.

“You didn't show when we needed you. Why would I do the same for you?”
I watched his half-smile fade. He combed a hand through his thick brown hair, gelled in that faux-messy style guys tried to cultivate when they cared a lot about looking like they didn’t care. I could tell that I'd hurt him, but I set my jaw and clenched my muscles tight, closing myself off. I knew that if I relaxed for even a second, he'd find room to wriggle his way into my sympathy, and I wasn’t sure he deserved it.

“Right,” he said, his practiced goofy-aloof persona abandoned. “I get it. I'll be around, if you change your mind.”

I set off for the Hy-Vee parking lot, relieved when he didn't follow. I wasn't sure I believed in any kind of afterlife, but I mentally begged Rachel not to be pissed at me anyway. She wouldn't have let him get away with this, either. We'd planned her funeral without him, picked out her epitaph without him, engraved his name and birth year on the couple’s headstone we weren't even sure he wanted. We'd fielded uncomfortable questions at the wake about his absence, parceled and frozen all of the macaroni salads and Pyrex dishes of stained glass Jell-o he wasn't around to eat...no, he could wait a little longer, I decided, weaving between the rows of cars. In a few months, I might reconsider.

I didn't mention Kelly on the ride home. Mom and Dad were sleepy from Wine Tasting Wednesday, and I was fine just listening to Dad's only CD (twelve consecutive covers of The Kinks' “Apeman”—Dad had a thing for making weird mixes) and guiding the Landboat around Iowa City. Wednesday nights were the only times I enjoyed driving. Mom took me out to practice every couple of weeks, but we drove each other crazy. She sucked air through her teeth and clawed wildly at the handle above the passenger door whenever the van started to go too fast for her comfort. Not that she had anything to worry about: the Landboat
was thirty years old, and its acceleration was so poor that approaching the speed limit seemed asymptotal. The ‘boat hit terminal velocity at fifty-five miles an hour.

Just concentrating on one task helped calm me down a little. Cary: drive the car, my brain commanded. Deal with the rest later. I backed off the accelerator when we got to our cross street, and Dad sat up and yawned.

“Right blinker, kiddo,” he offered cheerfully. I signaled and pulled off. He closed his eyes again, squeezing Mom's shoulder a little tighter. “Thank you, sweetie,” he mouthed to the rear-view mirror, and nuzzled his cheek against Mom’s.

As soon as we got back to the house, I pocketed the keys and ambushed Dad in the mudroom. “I'm heading to Jessie's tonight,” I lied.

“You're not supposed to drive without a legal parent or guardian.” He frowned, but his eyes were warm and soft from the wine.

“You're always with me, Dad. In here.” I thumped my chest for emphasis.

“Spiritual guardians don’t count. On this much the law is clear.” He yawned again and leaned against the wall, scanning me over, appraising risk.

“I'll be sixteen in a week,” I pleaded. “I need to get used to driving without you. And it's like six blocks. Super safe. I'll have her back before Mom wakes up, okay?” I hugged him before he had a chance to respond and started toward the garage.

“You’re a ruthless negotiator. I didn’t raise you to be such a con artist,” he called after me.

“Yet here we are.” I hopped into the Landboat and steered her home to Neil's.
I felt guilty about lying to my parents, but Dad never would have let me go if I told him the truth. Neil's dad got busted for growing pot a few years ago, and that wasn't the kind of thing you could be discreet about in Iowa City. The only reason anyone in town subscribed to the *Press Citizen* was to read the arrest reports. We mostly hung out in Neil’s garage, though, so I figured there was a semantic loophole when I promised Mom and Dad I wouldn't go over to his house anymore. Maybe I was a “ruthless negotiator,” but we were completely safe. Plus, it’s not like Neil’s dad had ever offered us any pot.

I pulled into the driveway and knocked six times on the brown plastic garage door. Usually they just hit the automatic door opener to let me in, but this time Jessie poked her head out of a side door.

“He’s almost done. Hurry!” She waved me over. Her eyes were laser-focused, intense like she was in the middle of an experiment. I jogged around the house and squeezed under her arm.

Inside the garage was almost pitch-black, and I had to blink a few times before my eyes adjusted and the images settled. All of the lights were off, save a MagLite that Puck had obviously blue-gelled. Puck was our resident drama geek, and the only one with a key to the light board above the school's auditorium. Supposedly it was because he was “responsible,” a characterization that seemed off given his penchant for stealing sheets of colored stage light gels from the equipment cabinets. Puck widened the MagLite’s beam, and I finally saw what Jessie had called me over to witness. Neil was lying in the middle of the floor on what looked like a wooden Mechanic's Creeper. Puck, a blue plastic tarp fastened around his shoulders like a cape, was waving his arms over him like an overly-caffeinated magician.
“BEGONE, FOUL DEMON,” Puck boomed in a deep baritone, flicking the MagLite on and off. “UNCLEAVE THYSELF FROM THIS INNOCENT'S BREAST.”

I cleared my throat. “What on earth are—”

“Shhhhh.” Jess shot me a dirty look, and Puck pushed to a crescendo. “AWAY! I SAY AWAY, SID! RELEASE NEIL FROM THIS VILE ENCHANTMENT. I BANISH THEE TO THE FIERY CHASMS OF HELL.”

“Hell seems a little severe,” Neil protested from the Creeper.

Puck sighed, and lowered his arms. “Fine. Purgatory?”

Neil paused. “It’s just…”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake.” Puck crossed his arms over his chest, crinkling the plastic tarp beneath them. “What?”

“Maybe we just banish him somewhere super far away. Like Denver.”

“Fine, fine,” he cut him off irritably. “I BANISH THEE TO…DENVER.” He flailed his arms over Neil like a manic puppeteer. I felt my way along the wall to the light switch, and flicked on the overheads. Puck ripped the tarp from his shoulders and shielded his eyes with one hand. “‘Denver’? Come on, man.”

Neil sat up and rubbed his eyes. “It's okay. I don't think it was working anyway.”

“You didn't tic the whole time! I was breaking through to him.”

I dragged an old corduroy beanbag to the middle of the cement floor and plopped down across from Neil.

“An exorcism for his Tourette's? Classy.”

Neil rolled over to me on the creeper. “It was Puck’s idea. Sid's been nasty today.”

Puck nodded solemnly. “He called me a 'Dirty Hebrew'. Something had to be done.”
I cocked an eyebrow. “Anti-semitism? That's new.”

Sid was Neil's name for his Tourette’s-inspired alter-ego, and a source of constant entertainment for the rest of us (I know that sounds bad. We were all sensitive about it at first, but there are only so many times someone can squeak “Metallic Catfish!” in the middle of conversations and expect you not to react). Tourette’s wasn't the screaming, obscenity-ridden affair YouTube videos had led me to believe. For a lot of people, Neil had explained, the tics were just physical, sudden head jerks or muscle contractions. Neil was “fortunate” enough to have both the verbal and physical tics. Occasionally, he'd have a nasty episode where Sid would trap him in a constant loop, pummeling his face and chest with his fist over and over again, and we'd have to intervene and pin him down until it passed. Those were scary moments, but they were also pretty rare.

Puck produced a six-pack of ginger ale from the mini-fridge and kicked his own beanbag over to us. I leaned back and surveyed our patchwork clubhouse. It was still unmistakably a garage, peppered with brooms and bright plastic sleds and yard waste containers, but over the last four years we'd also accumulated framed posters, a threadbare rocker recliner and a mini-fridge from the neighborhood's large item trash pick-up day.

I took a ginger ale from Puck and gestured to the old page-a-day calendar on his Dad's work bench. “What's the quote of the day?”

Puck took a swig. “Something something Chekhov. We kind of glazed over it, given the excitement.”

“I'll check.” Jess hopped up and grabbed the calendar. “On this day in 1998—”

“A fine year,” toasted Neil with his soda.

“—the quote was, 'A man with a toothache cannot be in love.'”
“Anton, you gloomy bastard.” Puck laced his fingers behind his head and stared up at the glow-in-the-dark stars we'd stuck on the rafters in middle school.

Neil frowned. “What does that even mean?”

“You can't scoodelypoop while you're having a root canal, obv,” Jess said.

I rolled my eyes. “I'm pretty sure it's figurative, Jess.”

“That's totally not clear. It's just a quote. We don't have context clues.”

“Sucks to your context clues,” Neil muttered darkly, like he was remembering some past ill.

“You guys are so literal,” I said. “It makes sense.”

Jess leaned back in the recliner and steepled her fingers in mock-seriousness. “All right, Cary. I'll bite. What does the toothache symbolize?”

“It's not, like, a thing. I think he's just saying people don't have the time or mental clarity to focus on manufactured emotional problems when they're, you know, starving or bleeding or whatever.”

Jess snorted. “Manufactured emotional problems.' You're so romantic.”

“I think I'm falling in a manufactured emotional problem with you, Jess,” Puck deadpanned. Neil and I shared a look. It was obvious to everyone else that Puck had had a manufactured emotional boner for Jess for years.

“You're going to die frigid and alone, like Emily Dickinson,” Jess insisted. “You seriously need to borrow one of my books.” She plopped down onto the beanbag next to me, so close I could smell her floral perfume, and rifled through her purse.

“If the title is any permutation of 'The Sheikh's Love Slave,' I'll take the Dickinson.”
“Oh, give it a rest. There were like two books TOPS that had anything to do with sex trafficking.”

“It's not about the sheikhs!” I argued, and Neil nodded emphatically. He had taken a keen interest in feminism after a class last year with Miss Peale, the hot, young sociology teacher. “It's the formula. The Blank's Blank Blank.”

“The Oil Tycoon's Mistress!” Neil said. “I remember that one.”


“That is not a real title!” Jessie shrieked.

I got up to get another soda. The gang always cheered me up. I'd been at Neil’s for half an hour, and I'd already quieted the panicky, stomach-flipping guilt that had me on edge since I’d talked to Kelly. I toed the mini-fridge door shut, and noticed a patch of fur sticking out from under the workbench. I squatted down and tugged out a dust-covered mammal. Like most animals in Neil's house, it had died some time ago (when he wasn’t getting busted for pot, Neil’s Dad designed museum exhibits, a trade that often required taxidermy. Iowa history didn’t need much staging beyond Native American mounds and artificially-preserved prairie dogs). This one, however, was like no animal I'd ever seen. It had a body like a muskrat, but its face was completely alien: wide, flat eyes, bulbous nose, snarling mouth with a brown tongue frozen permanently between its thin lips.

“What the heck?” I blew some of the dust off its back and picked it up by the tail.

“Neil, what is this?”

He scrambled to his feet. “No way! I thought Dad chucked this thing. Cool!”

Puck's eyes widened in horror. “Jesus. What is that supposed to be?”
“A marmot!” Neil called. “And 'supposed to be' is right.” He took it from me and caressed its dirty back lovingly. “This was one of Dad's first animals. A wildlife preserve brought him this dead marmot, but its face was totally fucked by a tractor. Dad had never seen a marmot before, so he just put it back together based on how he thought it might look.”

I let out a shout of laughter. “I'm guessing the customer wasn't pleased.”

“Well, we still have it, don't we?” Neil cleared a place for it on top of the work bench and took off his baseball cap, holding it close over his heart. “I christen thee Frankenmarmot.” He placed the hat on the animal's head, and I stepped back to admire his handiwork. It was definitely less frightening in a Marlins cap.

“I always forget how weird your head looks,” Puck said, squinting down at him. Neil combed his fingers through his sandy bangs, trying to break up the hat hair. With the exception of school dances and Friday mass, he was almost never without the cap.

He reached for it back, but his hand froze halfway to the marmot and his head twitched to one side.

“Uh-oh,” said Puck.

Jessie jumped up from the beanbag. “No! We were so close!”

“Fight it, Neil!” shouted Puck. “Resist!”

It was too late. “FLAPJACK SURPRISE!” Neil creaked in a high-pitched voice. Everyone laughed except Puck. “'Denver,'” he muttered. “I was so close...”

“Sorry,” Neil said sheepishly. I knew the exorcism had been a joke, but it always shocked me how little like Neil his tics sounded. His eyes would roll back in his head and an unfamiliar voice would break out, a stranger pulling on his vocal chords like marionette strings. I wondered if that was how it felt to him, too, if he could sense when his body was...
being hijacked. Whenever he had a particularly bad episode, I always wondered if he was still \textit{Neil}. Did Sid take over his brain, too? Or was he the same person, the same consciousness, just trapped in a body that obeyed another master?

I didn't feel like I could ask. We’d been friends for years, but we were hardly ever serious with each other—even when Rachel died. They tried to distract me by cutting class to take me to the movies instead of asking me about it. If I was disappointed then, I wouldn’t have brought it up. We had an unspoken agreement about keeping things light-hearted.

I scratched the Frankenmarmot’s misshapen ears. “I should probably go. It's getting late.”

“You aren't staying over?” Jess asked. “My parents don’t care.”

I had planned on spending the night when I left, but the stress of the day was catching up with me, and I felt exhausted. I just wanted to go home and sleep. “Mom'll freak if she knows I took the van,” I said. “Not looking forward to the bitching.”

“Your parents are awesome, Cary,” Neil said, an unusually testy edge to his voice. “Don't be a brat.”

It stung, but it was a fair challenge. I bowed to the marmot, told the gang I’d see them at lunch the next day, and shuffled out to the Landboat. I was tired, but I liked driving at night when the roads were empty and I could let my mind go blank, settling into a robotic routine. Right blinker, right turn, peek at the speed gauge, check the rearview mirror for cops (even once I had my license, it would be illegal for me to be out this late on my own. Iowa had weird first-year driver restrictions.) I ended up in the driveway without really being conscious of how I'd arrived, and hovered at the split-level entryway. My room upstairs was right across from my parents’, and I knew I’d wake them up if I climbed the creaky steps.
Before I could second guess myself, I padded down to the basement, feeling my way across the cool, dark walls to Rachel's old room and slipped inside, shutting the door behind me before I turned on any lights.

I had to blink a few times to clear away the ghosts. Her room was exactly the way she'd left it when she started her first year of college: cloud-patterned comforter, feather pillows stacked up on one side of the bed, a wicker nightstand with a yellow lava lamp and a stack of books Mom had nagged her repeatedly to pack up and take to her new home. When she and Kelly got married, Mom made her promise she'd come back and clean out her old room, but she never got around to it. I scanned the spines of the books on the nightstand and wondered if she'd ever had a chance to read them.

I turned off the overhead light, flicked on her lava lamp, and snuggled under the covers fully clothed, my face pressed deep into the overstuffed pillow she'd never let me use when we were little and still shared a bed. I stared into the warm yellow light of the lava lamp and watched it heat up and sputter, loosening liquid that had been frozen in suspension for at least a year. Lying on my side, eyes fixed on the lamp, I could almost imagine her curled up behind me, snoring softly, face framed by brown sugar tentacles of glossy magazine hair. I breathed in and rubbed my cheek against her musty sky-blue pillowcase, soft in the way sheets only got after years of use.

“Night, Rach,” I mouthed into my chest, too embarrassed to whisper it louder, and froze, listening for her tossing and turning in the sheets behind me. I knew I wouldn't hear anything, I knew she wasn’t there, but I stayed still anyway, holding my breath and squeezing my muscles together until it hurt. I missed Rachel, I missed her so much, but I missed her the way you missed a friend who went abroad, or a cousin who went into the Peace Corps. I
missed her the way you missed your still-sleeping sister on Christmas morning, nerves fluttering in your stomach as you squatted by the snowman-papered packages, bargaining with yourself that if you didn't look at the clock for five more minutes, she'd wake up and come trotting down the stairs. I missed her without an authentic sense of loss. I missed her problematically. I relaxed my muscles slowly, one by one, but I couldn't bring myself to turn around and check behind me. Instead, I drifted off, with or without her, while the lava lamp traced shifting Rorschach-patterns on my eyelids.

In the morning, I shuffled upstairs for breakfast and found Mom icing a sheet cake on the kitchen island.

“You're up early,” I said, surveying her face for hangover signs. She looked tired, her coarse gray-blond hair poking out haphazardly from the red bandana she wore while decorating.

“I have to finish this cake by noon.”

I leaned against the island and watched her pipe a series of little squiggleys onto the cake in white icing. “What are those supposed to be?”

“Balloons.”

“...Really?”

She put down the pastry bag and swiped the back of her hand across her forehead.

“Yes, really. The bride was very particular.”

I stared at the cake. The entire face was covered with the “balloons,” tiny white ovals trailing wavy ribbon strings. I cleared my throat. “You know I love your cakes, Mom. You’re great. It's just—”
“Don't say it. I don’t want to hear it. I know, I know.” She collapsed onto the kitchen stool, sounding miserable. “I tried to talk her out of it. I told her white balloons with white strings would just look like—”

“SPERM!” shouted Dad. He shuffled into the kitchen and kissed the top of Mom's head, a Donald Duck necktie looped over his hands. “Don't worry, darling. It's still appropriate for a wedding.” He took the orange juice out of the fridge and shook the bottle in my direction.

“Yes, please,” I said.

He draped the necktie over one shoulder and poured me a glass. “Did you sleep in Rachel's room last night?”

“Yeah, sorry. It was late, and I didn't want to wake you guys up.”

Mom hopped up from the table. “Oh. I'll go make the bed.”

“I'll do it after breakfast, don't worry about it.”

“No, really. I'll take care of it. It's not a problem.” She wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and jogged downstairs, leaving a sperm half-piped in the middle of the cake. Dad and I exchanged glances.

“Is she—” I started to ask, but he just shook his head.

“Just let her,” he warned softly. “It's not hurting anyone.”

I took a sip of orange juice and swallowed my objections. I'd noticed something off when I woke up. Rachel's room looked exactly how she’d left it: old track shoes stacked on the floor, an empty water glass with lip prints on the rim forgotten on the nightstand. But it was way too clean to be her room. The green carpet under her shoes was cris-crossed with fresh vacuum tracks, and there wasn't a speck of dust on the water glass or anything else.
Someone had been cleaning in there regularly, picking up her shoes to vacuum and nestling them back in the exact same place, laces carefully arranged. It made the room feel suffocating and stale, less alive, somehow. It was staged like a roped-off museum exhibit, something Neil’s dad might have been paid to arrange. I pressed my lips together and took my cup to the sink, trying not to think about Mom curating down there now, preserving the fossil record of Rachel's teens.

“I saw Kelly last night.” Dad's Honey Nut Spooners (we were a generic-brand household) froze on the way to his mouth.

“Kelly...Rachel’s Kelly?”

“Yeah.” I took the cereal bag back out of the pantry and busied myself at the counter so I wouldn't have to look at him. “He came to Silver Liningz. Said he wanted to talk to us.”

“And did you? Talk to him?”

“Talk to whom?” Mom was back, her face flushed. “Caroline?” I shoveled a spoonful of dry cereal into my mouth.

“Kelly,” Dad explained. “Munchkin says he came to therapy.”

“It's not therapy, Scott,” Mom warned, her eyes darting over to me.

“It's okay,” I said. “I didn't talk to him. I told him we didn't want to see him.”

“Oh, honey,” she said softly, shoulders slumping.

“What? What was I supposed to say?” I didn't understand why she sounded disappointed.

Dad coughed, and he and Mom exchanged glances. “It's just—” He trailed off and took a deep breath. “It was probably very difficult for him to come. It’s been hard on all of us, Care, but—”
This wasn't going how I'd expected. I figured they'd be angry, upset, maybe even a little grateful that I'd diffused the situation for them and handled it myself. Instead, they were flashing each other meaningful looks and talking to me like a child. “I don't get it,” I said carefully, trying not to sound hurt. “You want to see him? This doesn't bother you at all?”

“It was hard not to have him here,” Mom admitted, picking up the pastry bag. “And I was mad for a long time.”

“Ditto,” Dad said, sliding his juice glass around on the counter.

“But we agreed we'd welcome him back when he felt ready. This has been really hard for him, sweetie.”

My voice caught in the back of my throat. “For him? This has been really hard for us, too. But we didn't drop off the face of the earth for a year. He…Mom, he missed the funeral. You don’t do that to someone you care about.”

“I’m leaving this to you, Heather,” Dad said, eyebrows raised. “You know how I feel.”

“Love makes people do crazy things” Mom said to me, like that explained anything.

“You might not understand now, but you will someday.”

I picked at my fingernails and tried to ignore the sick, swooping feeling creeping back into my stomach. “I’m tired of people telling me that. I won’t. If this is how people act when they’re in love, count me out.”

She smiled thinly. “I'm just fine with that attitude for now, sweetie, but you'll change your mind when you’re older.”

“I might not” I said. “Jessie says I'm a cynic.”
“Cynicism requires a level of self-awareness that I find frankly unhealthy for a fifteen-year-old.”

“Almost sixteen-year-old,” I corrected.

“For any age,” Dad interrupted. “Don’t let the world make you mean. There’s enough of that already.” He had been hovering over the mixing bowl for a while, and swooped in for a fingerful of frosting. Mom swatted him with the spatula.

“Keep your greasy mitts out of my sperm frosting. I still have the anniversary tier left.”

He sighed and licked a dab of frosting off his forearm. “If you just used fondant—”

“—I’d be a sculptor, not a baker. Out.” She banished him with a shake of the spatula and went back to piping sperms. Mom's run the bakery out of our kitchen since I was little, and in that time she's fielded about a hundred requests for fondant from brides who watched a lot of “Cake Boss.” She always refused. I don't know why she was so stubborn. She claimed fondant, despite being completely edible, tasted like “shingles,” so she did everything the hard way. Ever tried to make a cake shaped like a space shuttle without fondant? Mom has. Once. Dad nicknamed it “The Challenger.”

I wasn't hungry anymore, so I ran some water over the rest of my cereal bowl and shuffled off toward my bedroom.

“Munchkin?” Mom called as I padded across the tile floor.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for sticking up for us. I know you were trying to do the right thing. But if you do see Kelly again...tell him we'd like to see him. We're ready whenever he is.” I nodded, my throat tight. “You don't have to be part of it if you don't want to,” she added quickly. “You
don't have to do anything until you're ready. Just...keep it in mind. I think it would help us heal.” The “us” sounded like a euphemism.

She bent back over the cake and hummed to herself as she worked. I wiped my sweaty palms on my legs and left to put on my school uniform.
CHAPTER 2

The last week of school felt like a fake exercise. The teachers at Xavier were just as eager for vacation as we were, so none of the lessons were particularly challenging. I breezed through Keyboarding, World History and an American Lit quiz, where I got points just for remembering Gatsby wasn't the narrator, and met the gang at the usual table by the gym for B lunch. Puck and Neil were already halfway through their pork tenderloins and whipped fauxtatoes when I sat down. I slid my tray across from Jessie, who was moving her lips along with her latest romance, and slouched down to peek at the spine. This week's title was *Harpoon My Heart*. If the cover art was any indication, it was to be a whaling romance.

I stabbed a piece of iceberg lettuce swimming in an ocean of Zesty Italian and kicked her foot under the table. “How’s the ‘poon, Jess?”

“How’s the ‘poon, Jess?”

“It's actually quite literary,” she said without lifting her eyes from the page. “The narrator's chasing after a ship captain who disappeared after a night of furious lovemaking. The first line is 'Call me, Ishmael.'”

“So…*Moby Dick* fanfiction?” I asked.

She slipped a one-ply napkin into the binding and set the book aside. “You guys are such snobs.”

“No, no, I like this one,” Puck said, ripping open the spout on his second chocolate milk. “It has lyric possibilities.”

“Please don’t,” Neil begged.

He grabbed the milk carton and crooned into it anyway. “I thought our love was
“I've got your Love Trident right here,” muttered Neil.

“Whatever,” Jess said, spooning fauxtatoes onto her tenderloin. “You guys are just jelly no one's harpooned you yet.”

Puck shook his head, and tried to look pious. “I'm saving harpooning for marriage. You should pay more attention in Religious Studies, Jess. Your loose morals are rubbing off on the impressionable youth.”

“If you want to rub one off on some impressionable youth, I’m not going to judge.”

Jessie straightened the collar of her polo (light blue, like every Xavier-issue uniform piece).

I cleared my throat. “When you've finished being clever.”

“Do I detect a twinge of self-importance?”


“That’s our next implant,” Puck said. “Twinge.” Sid was prone to the power of suggestion: almost every week, Puck would come up with something new to repeat, trying to implant a tic in Neil’s brain. It was a battle of wills, one Jessie and I tried to avoid.

“THE POINT,” I pressed on, “is that you guys are wasting valuable birthday planning time.”

“Oh, shit.” Jessie pulled out her planner (standard Xavier issue). “Already?”

“It's the same day every year,” Puck chided. He turned to me. “As long as it doesn't conflict with the musical, plan to your heart's content.”

I'd forgotten about the musical. Every spring, Xavier's drama department put on a school sanctioned version of a Broadway hit. This year was *Grease, Jr.*! which, according to Puck, was every bit as exciting as it sounded (Rizzo was a bitchy virgin, nobody smoked, and
the chicks “screamed” for Greased Lightning).

“Right.” I said. “After the musical, then. Who do you play again?”

His eyes narrowed. “Eugene. The nebbishy nerd, of course. Tyrannical Catholic stereotyping.”

Xavier was a Catholic high school, but Neil and I were the only ones at the table from Catholic families. Puck was Jewish, and Jessie was a self-professed Secular Humanist, whatever that meant. The public high schools were so notoriously awful and underfunded that pretty much anyone whose parents could afford the tuition (or anyone whose parents fell under the poverty line and qualified for free tuition) went to Xavier. It was a weird mix of the Haves and the Have-Debts, and I was grateful for the school uniforms, which made them harder to tell apart. Other than stiff chinos and mandatory Friday mass, though, it didn’t feel all that different from public school. Same cliques, same homework, same underage substance abuse (though I guess the drugs were different, if that was your thing. Everyone knew you went to City High for pot and Xavier for pills).

“So what do you want to do for your sixteenth?” asked Neil, sliding his empty tray to the middle of the table.

“I haven't really given it much thought,” I said. “But I feel like I should be doing something.”

“Well,” Neil said slowly, eyes flicking to Puck and Jess, “if you really want to make it special...”

“Come off it, Neil. We're not doing it,” Puck said.

“Whoah, whoah. Not doing what?”

Jessie rolled her glitter-lined eyes. “Neil found this flyer for a boat race at the bus
“Not just any boat race,” he said defensively. He smoothed a crumpled square of hot pink paper in front of him. “The Thirteenth Annual Cedar Rapids/Iowa City Corridor Cardboard Boat Regatta.”

“You have only succeeded in making it sound more gay, which I declared to be impossible,” Puck said.

“Gay is not an insult,” Jessie scolded. Neil slid the paper over to me, and I scanned the event description. He wasn't joking. The Thirteenth Annual Cedar Rapids/Iowa City Corridor Cardboard Boat Regatta had its round-up event this Saturday, with races two weeks later.

“So, you just make boats out of cardboard?” I tried to picture it. “How does that work? Wouldn't they just get wet and sink?”

“There's all kinds of stuff you can do to make them buoyant!” Neil hopped over into the seat next to me, his algae-green eyes unusually bright. “They have a list of stuff that's banned for construction, but there's special tape you can use to reinforce the joints and make them waterproof...I was looking at pictures online. Some of them are crazy elaborate.”

I glanced up at Puck and Jess, neither of whom seemed moved by Neil's excitement. I folded the paper into quarters and made a show of putting it in my back pocket.

“Well. It could be cool.” I said diplomatically. “We've got till Saturday to decide, right?”

“Don't lead the boy on, Cary,” Puck warned. “I am not sticking my big toe in anything he makes out of cardboard. Wassermans are notoriously un-buoyant.”

“You can't blame your parents just because you failed Dolphin Level four times,” Jess
said. “Dolphin” was the level two swimming class at the Iowa City community rec center. Most people passed it in the second grade.

Puck sniffed. “The backfloat is for dead men and cowards, and I refuse to perform it just to pass a test.”

The first lunch bell rang, and I hopped up to return my tray. “I'll see you guys later. Brainstorm some ways to not suck on my birthday.” The rest of them lined up for fifth period, and I heard Mr. Hawthone shout at Neil to take off his Marlins hat “for the penultimate time.” I smiled. I liked Neil a lot, but I hoped he hadn't been too serious about the cardboard boats.

I scraped my tray and started off toward study hall on my own when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Caroline? Do you have a minute?” Tammy Valline, Xavier's bug-eyed guidance counselor, was standing behind me, too close for comfort.

“Uh...I don’t want to be late for study hall.”

“I'll call your monitor. I thought we might have a chat about your plans for next year.” She took my arm and steered me across the cafeteria.

“Next year?”

“Yes, yes,” she waved a hand in front of her face impatiently. “We can talk in private.” I followed her into the main office and past the front desk, evading the stares of the nosy secretaries. Like most counselors, Tammy was incessantly perky, but she gave me the creeps in a way Hans, however obnoxious he might have been, never did. Something about her huge round eyes, or her simpering smirk whenever the conversation turned serious. There was something voyeuristic, maybe even a little predatory about that smile, like she enjoyed
making you uncomfortable.

Her office was a tiny, windowless concrete room at the very back of the administrative center. The cheesy motivational posters on the walls didn’t keep it from feeling like a prison cell. I slouched across from her in a burgundy plastic chair and stared at her desk. She collected Mrs. Potato Head dolls, and there was a line-up of accessorized miniature potato wives all along the edge. I picked up a soft-bodied fabric model at the end and un-velcroed its nose.

“Well, Caroline, it's been a while,” she said, huffing down into her computer chair.

“I guess.”

“It's been a busy year. A rebuilding year.” There was the smile. I velcro-ed the nose back onto the doll where its privates might have been. She pulled a yellow file folder out of her desk drawer and plopped it on the desk in front of her. “Your grades took a bit of a hit, but that's to be expected after a tragedy.” She hung onto the word for too long.

“Yeah. I've been catching up.”

“And I know you'll get there. But your grades in English and Geometry are quite poor, and right now, we’re looking at summer school. If everything goes well.”

“If?” My voice cracked, and I thought I saw the corners of her mouth twitch.

“Yes. You’re close to failing.”

I stared down at Mrs. Potato Head, trying to keep my breathing even. I knew Tammy was hungry for my reaction, and I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of crying in front of her. “So,” I said after a minute. “What does that mean?”

“Well, a couple things. First, that you’ll want to set up an extra credit project—with permission from a faculty advisor, of course—as soon as possible. That could get you into
I nodded at the doll, my throat tight.

“But we also need to be thinking ahead. Junior year’s sneaking up, and, well, that’s the time when we traditionally want to start thinking about colleges. Of course, any college is going to be looking at your whoooole transcript, not just your grades. And I noticed you aren’t in any activities this term.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, I-I haven't really had much time.”

She nodded, unblinking. “I know it's hard. It'd be good to find a positive outlet, though, don't you think? An activity, a sport…It makes a big difference on your application, especially if your grades aren’t…well.” She clapped her hands together once, as if to clear the air.

The subtext was unmistakable. “Yeah,” I said, buffing my fingernails on my jeans. “I guess I should do something.”

“Great!” She pounced on my response, her voice hollow and too-bright. She flipped through the file folder and pulled out a piece of paper, eyes scanning quickly down the list. “The yearbook staff’s already chosen for next year, though we could maybe petition MacCauley to let you in if that really interests you. There’s the prom committee, of course. BUT!” She slapped the desk for emphasis. “I had a thought.”

“Just now?”

The question surprised her, and she laughed uncomfortably. She shook her head like she was clearing an Etch-a-Sketch. “Well, no. I had an ulterior motive in calling you in here, I suppose. I’m facilitating a group next fall that I think you would be perfect for. It’s called...
‘Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies’. We’d meet every week to share our feelings, our concerns—"

“Oh no—"

“—and we’d put together skits on conflict resolution for the middle school. Outreach!” She beamed. “And, of course, there’ll be snacks. What do you think?”

“I already have an activity,” I blurted out.

“You do?”

“Yeah. I go to this grief group, Silver Liningz?” I never thought I’d be grateful for Hans, but the only thing that sounded worse than Silver Liningz was Silver Liningz led by Tammy. The simpering smile spread across her face again. I squeezed the Mrs. Potato Head in my fist, hard, and imagined it was her.

“I think that’s wonderful, Caroline, I really do. So healthy. But we should look for more of a resume-builder. The middle school outreach component would show off your leadership skills.”

“No, I mean, I have an activity through the group. They’re placing me in a leadership opportunity. Perfect for college applications.” The lie came to me so easily, it almost felt real.

“What kind of opportunity?”

I cleared my throat. “Well. The details haven’t all been worked out yet.”

“Mm-hmm.” She pursed her lips.

“It’s—it’s a boat race.”

“Sorry?”

I wiped my sweaty palms on the Mrs. Potato Head doll, evading Tammy’s moony eyes.
“A boat race. It’s this big leadership thing where you form teams and build boats. They do it every year.” I pulled Neil’s flyer out of my back pocket and thrust it across the desk. “They gave me this, in case the school could put it on my transcript. It has all the details and stuff. I’m the team captain. It starts this Saturday.” I jiggled my foot up and down, heart beating fast, waiting for her to call my bluff. I could tell I was blushing, and hoped she didn’t notice. I always blushed when I lied.

She read the paper, her smile fading a little with each line. She pressed her lips together. “This wasn't really what I had in mind, Caroline.” She sighed. “And it’s not something you can letter in, since it’s not school-sponsored. But…I’ll see what I can do.” I took the flyer from her and pocketed it.

“So we're good then?” I needed to get out of there. I knew she meant well, but her dinner plate eyes made my skin crawl.

“For now. We should chat again before the end of term and see if you’d like to give ‘Healthy Minds’ a try in the fall. I think it would be very…beneficial.”

I hopped out of the chair. “Great. See you later, Tammy.”

“It's 'Miss Valline'."

“Sorry. See ya, Miss Valline.”

I was halfway out the door before she called after me.

“Caroline, you will tell me if there's anything I can do to help?” Her high-pitched perkiness had disappeared. She just sounded tired.

I tried to keep my features blank. “Help with what?”

She nodded slowly, as though I'd answered her question. “Right. Thanks for coming in.”
I had seventh period with Neil, but I decided to wait to mention our new “leadership opportunity” until I had had a chance to work over Puck and Jessie. It couldn't be that hard to make a cardboard boat. When the 3:15 bell rang, I shuffled out to the circle drive to wait for Mom and turned on my cell phone, an ancient model with a pull-up antenna (“a Clinton-era antique!” Dad had pitched). I'd missed two text messages, both from a number I didn't recognize. I opened the first:

IT'S KELLY. GOT A NEW NUMBER. WANTED YOU TO HAVE IT JUST IN CASE.

I flipped through to the second. Same number.

I REALLY AM SORRY ABOUT YESTERDAY.

I toed the concrete with one sneaker and hovered a thumb over the reply button. Mom had made me feel guilty about him that morning, but I wasn't sure my silence was unfair. She'd said “whenever you're ready.” Was I?

I was granted a momentary reprieve by the familiar brrzzzzzt of the Corolla's E-brake. Mom's car was a manual, which was why I always had to take out the Landboat for driving lessons. I hopped in the car and chucked my bag in the backseat.

“Follow that van!” I cried, jabbing my pointer finger at the windshield. Mom laughed and shifted into gear, pulling out after a Chrysler minivan I was pretty sure belonged to the volleyball coach.

“Seatbelt,” she prompted. I buckled in, relaxing into the gray upholstery and slid the cell phone back out of my pocket. I fiddled with the volume buttons and wondered what to say.
“So Kelly texted me,” I said, after a beat.

“You’re not supposed to have your cell phone on during school,” Mom started in immediately. “I told you—”

“I didn’t! Yeesh. I just got it now, in the parking lot.”

“Well?”

I opened his text again. “I haven’t responded. Should I tell him to come over?”

She looked over at me, searching my face for something before her eyes settled on the phone in my lap. “Fine by me. Dinner's not till seven, though. The kitchen's still a disaster.”

I opened up the text menu.

DINNER'S AT 7, I typed. BRING WINE. M&D WILL NEED SOME. I hit send and chewed my lip, hoping I wasn’t going to regret this.

Once we were home, Mom kept me too busy cleaning for me to worry about what I would have to say to him. By the time the living room and bathroom were tidied to her specifications, it was already six thirty, and I still needed to change out of my Xavier uniform. I threw the cleaning rags down the basement stairs and went to my room to pick out an outfit. I didn't know why I was so anxious. He was the one who needed to explain. He was supposed be nervous, not me. I had just enough time to wriggle into some skinny jeans and throw on a shirt (a graphic tee of Tesla hugging a nuclear reactor Jessie left at my house a few weeks ago) before the doorbell rang. I hovered in the doorway until I heard Mom and Dad greet him, and then tiptoed into the living room.

Kelly was wiping his feet on the rug and clutching a bottle of wine, looking paler than the Arctic tundra. I had to swallow my grin. His hair was slicked back and he was wore a white button down, a formality I'd only seen once before: at Rachel's wedding. If I had met
him on the street, I might have thought he was on his way to a first date. Mom took the bottle of wine and ushered him in.

“Please, please, make yourself at home. Scott just put the chicken on the grill, so dinner'll be a bit yet. Do you want to wait in the den, or…?”

“That’s—” he croaked, choking halfway through the word on some spit or something, and doubled over, coughing. I could tell Mom was trying not to laugh.

“I can show you my room,” I offered. “It’s changed since you were…here.” I let the word hang. I could tell he was terrified, but somehow, that didn’t make me feel any better.

“Okay,” Mom said. “Door open, please.” I blushed, and hoped he didn’t notice. She shrank back into the kitchen and Kelly hovered in the middle of the living room, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

“My room's this way,” I called over my shoulder, and Kelly padded down the hall after me.

Once he closed the bedroom door behind him (a violation I knew would be more awkward to correct), he exhaled deeply and seemed to relax a little. He leaned against the door, arms crossed, and surveyed the room.

“Did you repaint? It looks nice.”

“Yes. Mom finally let us take down the terrible wallpaper.” It had been miserable, scraping off the thirty-year-old porcelain doll patterned paper, but well worth it when I got to pick out the paint over Christmas break. The room was a bright turquoise now, with one wall covered in chalkboard paint that I used for To-Do lists and games of hangman with Jessie.

“Sweet. Um. Should I sit down?”
I shoved a pile of clothes off my bed and straightened out the comforter, my cheeks warm. “Yeah, sorry. Here. I don't have chairs or anything.”

He sat stiffly on the edge of the bed. “Thanks.”

“So,” I started. “I'm sorry about yesterday.”

“Really?”

“Well. No.”

He laughed hollowly. “I figured. It's okay. I'm sorry I invaded your space. I don't really know what I'm doing here.”

“Where have you been?” I pulled my knees into my chest and hugged them, resting my chin in the dip between. He shook his head.

“Near. That's not a very interesting question. You could ask me what I was doing.”

“Okay. What were you doing?”

“The last eleven months? Well, nothing at first.”

“Then?”

He took a deep breath. “You’re going to laugh.”

“I doubt it.”

“I…spent a bit of time trolling people on Craigslist.”

“You did not.” It fell out before I could concentrate on making my voice cold and distant.

“I did,” he said. “I'm not proud. It wasn't even good trolling. I mostly just mocked errors in spelling and punctuation.”
“You?” I couldn't help but laugh. Before Rachel died, Kelly had worked as a freelance writer, churning out weekly columns for a few small town Iowa newspapers. I never pegged him for the grammar Nazi type. “Well, I'm sure some of them deserved it.”

“Maybe,” he shrugged. “I wrote a blog about it. Want to see?”

“Obviously.” I grabbed the old laptop from my desk and booted it up, grateful for a focus to the conversation. “It'll be a minute. This is Rachel's old computer from college.” He flinched at the name, but recovered quickly. I typed in my password and handed him the laptop, cracking my knuckles while I waited for him to type in the URL.

“Here we go.” He squinted at the screen, scrolling quickly through a few entries.

“There. This one's not bad. You've gotta read the description first.” He angled the screen back until I could see it. It was a screenshot of a Des Moines Craigslist ad for a baby stroller and car seat. I scooted closer.

“$125 or best offer.” I read out loud. “Stroller barely used & car seat in excellent condition. My son was in it for only the 1st year of his life and after that kept in closet covered by blankets. Any questions feel free to ask.” It took me a second, but then I got it and laughed. “Wow. Someone should call CPS.”

He scrolled down to show me his response. “I told her I understood. If I had her son, I'd probably keep him in the closet and cover him with blankets, too.”

“I hear it stunts their growth.”

“Bonsai children!” he exclaimed. “I can't believe I didn't see it before.”

I stared.

“…you know, like, bonsai kitties? That old e-mail forward with the kittens in glass bottles? Maybe you're too young.” He mumbled the last word.
“Oh, I got the reference.” I said. “I was just trying to decide if you were really that terrible a person.”

He smiled, grateful for the joke. “I just confessed to sending abusive Craigslist messages to strangers. I figured you already knew.” He closed the laptop and fell back onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling, fingers laced behind his head. I hopped up and leaned against the wall in case Mom came in. It wasn’t like he was a Boy, but he was definitely a boy, and she was weird about that stuff. “So it's your turn,” Kelly said.

“My turn for what?”

“I showed you what I did for a year. How have you been dealing with it?”

I froze. “Dealing with what?”

He stared up at me with an “are you kidding me?” expression.

I cleared my throat. “Sorry. I thought—never mind. You really want to see?”

“Unless you’ve got a shoebox full of Barbie doll heads or something, I seriously doubt it'll be worse than mine.”

“Challenge accepted.” I got on my hands and knees to slide the bulletin board out from under the bed. I leaned it against the chalkboard wall. “Behold.”

I watched his eyes widen, then narrow. “Is this—”

“—exactly what you think it is? Probably.” The bulletin board was covered with a road map of Iowa, red pushpins anchoring it to the cork at several different locations. Each was connected to the same pin in eastern Iowa with a thin blue string. Fanned out in front of me, it looked a little like a constellation, a connect-the-dots drawing someone had never gotten around to finishing. Kelly whistled.
“Sweet. You realize this is exactly the kind of shit serial killers have on their walls in movies?”

“Also revenge-obsessed detectives. The trope works both ways.”

“You've thought about this before.”

“It had occurred to me. They're her organs,” I explained, pointing to a red pushpin near the Missouri River. “Each pin is a different hospital, a different donee, a different part of her. The one here,” I pointed to the easternmost pin, “is Rachel. Was Rachel. It's Iowa City.”

“Are all of them on here?”

“Almost.” He looked at me for clarification, but I didn't elaborate.

“All right,” he said, after a few seconds. “You win. This is worse than Craigslist.”

I ran my finger across the yarn line from Rachel to Sioux City. “It's not that bad. If I were crazy, the string would be red.”

He cocked his head to one side. “You're right. Blue is a calming color. When I look at this neat web of your obsessions, I feel soothed.”

“Obsession. One. And I think it's pretty rational.”

“Didn't say it wasn't. Corneas?” He got up and touched the shortest line, a three-inch yarn road to What Cheer, Iowa.

“Yeah. How'd you know?”

“I read a profile about a guy with donated corneas in the Gazette a few months ago and wondered if they were hers. Couldn't be sure.”

“Yeah, that's him. He’s a P.E. Teacher. Formerly blind. His letter made Mom cry.”

“His letter?”

“Yeah.” I gathered a few carpet fibers between my fingers and tugged, trying not to
look at him.

“I thought...aren't organ donors anonymous?”

“They are.” I felt my cheeks burn. He was the first person I’d told, besides Mom and Dad. I wasn’t sure how he’d take it, or why I cared so much. “The hospital will pass on a letter for you if you write one, though.”

“And you wrote letters?”

“Yeah. His name was Ravi. The cornea guy. He wrote back right away.”

“Wow.”

I chanced a look up at him. His face was creased with worry lines I'd never seen before. He looked pained, and I pretended to fiddle with a piece of yarn in case he needed a second to recover. He took a deep breath, and his voice came out light and even. “What Cheer. Sounds like a pretty cool place.”

“He's a pretty cool guy. He and his wife drove down for Memorial Day.” That had made Mom cry, too, but I didn't mention that to Kelly. Seeing Ravi kneeling in front of the headstone of someone he'd never met, shoulders shaking...it was the kind of memory I wanted to hoard, selfishly, and keep all to myself. His service dog had curled up behind him in the sun, blonde snout buried under one paw like he was grieving, too. I thought about that day whenever I was pissed off at the world. It made me feel a little better about people in general.

Kelly sat back down on the corner of my bed and stared at the map, his face unreadable. “That kind of breaks my brain a little.”

“Him coming down to meet us?”

“No, the whole thing. I wonder what it would be like to see, if you'd never had that
sense before. I mean, if you never knew what you were missing. You'd have to start over from scratch, right? Your whole life, you probably had this idea of what the world looked like—"

“How the world looked like.”

“What?”

“That's what Ravi said. How.” I grabbed a three ring binder from my book shelf and flipped through the slippery sheet protectors to the second-to-last page. There was one more empty sleeve after Ravi's letter that I had been saving. “How we physically see it. He said he'd never been able to really figure out dimensions before. I mean, he knew he was moving through space and objects had thickness or whatever, but his concept of “flat” or “multi-dimensional” was different than the way he thinks about it now. If you get rid of the visuals...”


“Yeah, it's tough for me to understand. He explained it like he'd basically pictured everything as spread out in this huge horizontal plane. And then suddenly he could see all these layers. He wrote, 'I never knew the world was so crowded.'”

“That's a headline, right there. Someone ought to type that over a picture of a sunset.”

“You're the one with the blog.”

He smiled, the warm, full Kelly smile I hadn't seen in almost a year, and I felt something loosen in my chest. I wanted to stay mad at him, to make him feel as cut off as I had, but when I stared up at his goofy smile and stupid messy hair, I had a hard time summoning the frosty anger I knew I should feel. I closed the binder and slid it across the floor to his feet. “They're all in there, if you want to know. All but one.”
He sat in front of me, cross-legged, and flipped through to the last sheet protector.

“What are you waiting for?”

“That's the one you haven't heard from?” He stared down at the binder, flicking at the corner of the empty sleeve with his pointer finger.

“Yeah. I wrote another one, a couple months ago. Never heard anything back from either of them.”

He frowned. “I don't know why, but I wish it were anything else.”

“I know.” I'd had this conversation with myself a dozen times before. “It shouldn't matter, right? It's just a heart. It pumps blood. Everything that made her, her...emotions, the people she loved...it's all in the brain.” *The part that killed her*, I thought, but I didn't say it out loud.

“It's all in the brain,” he repeated, trying it out. “Love, heartache...”

“My brain didn't hurt when she died.”

“Mine neither.”

We were quiet for a few seconds, and I felt the awkward tension of our unfamiliarity rush back in to fill the empty space. I searched for something to say to break the silence, but he jumped in first:

“That would be much more annoying, right? If every time you got your heart broken, you had a massive headache?”

“A man with a toothache cannot be in love,” I mumbled, remembering Neil's calendar.
“What's that?”

“Something Chekhov said.”

He looked at me to explain, but Mom opened the door before I had a chance. She gave me a long look, and I knew I was going to get a lecture on the Open Door Policy later. Then again, I might get lucky: she was a forgetful drunk, and I wagered from her pink-tinged face she and Dad had already broken into the wine.

“Dinner's ready,” she said. “Nothing fancy, it's all on the counter, just go on in and serve yourselves.” I pushed the bulletin board and binder back under the bed and followed Kelly out of the bedroom after her.

“Thanks again for having me at the last minute, Heather,” he said, back to rigid attention.

“It's really no trouble,” Mom fussed. “We're so glad to have you. You picked a good night, actually—we don't usually have dessert.”

“I hope you didn't make anything special on my account.”

“Oh, heavens no. It's just leftover sperm cake.”

I laughed as I saw Kelly's eyes widen in shock.

“Don't worry,” I said, as we followed her down the hall. “Mom's not that into the natural foods trend.”
CHAPTER 3

It was a warm night, so Mom shooed us onto the deck once we filled our plates (Shake n’ Bake chicken, asparagus and dinner rolls). I squinted out across the creek that wound through our backyard to the house behind ours. Their family owned a Mexican restaurant downtown, but they were home tonight, grilling sharp-scented meat on their patio while a boom box blared Mexican restaurant music (variations on a theme of oom-pah and accordion). I heard our outdoor speakers crackle as Mom patched in her own music, some tinny swing tune from her iPod. I sat in a camp chair cross-legged and listened to the two strains of music battling for dominance across the darkening lawn.

Kelly plopped down at the table next to me and bit off a hunk of naked dinner roll.

“Hungry?”

“Enthusiastic,” he corrected. “Haven’t had a home-cooked meal in a while. I have not adjusted well to bachelorhood.”

The phrase came out too comfortably—bachelorhood? It felt wrong. It wasn’t like they’d gotten divorced or something.

Dad laughed politely and squirted some ranch dressing onto his chicken. “You made Rachel do all the cooking?”

Mom bristled, and I pushed asparagus around my plate. Dad had brought her up too soon, by-passing the small talk we all needed. Her name hung heavy in the air, like smoke after fireworks. He seemed to sense it, because he backpedaled right away:

“Well, we’re happy to feed the destitute. They say you don’t have a problem until the
delivery guy learns your name.” It was a lame joke, and Mom nodded like she could read my thoughts. “So when did you get back into town?”

Kelly swallowed down another hunk of roll. “A couple weeks ago. But I’ve been getting things organized, finding a place to rent…”

“The house?”

“Back on the market. Too much space for me now.”

Dad frowned, but didn’t say anything. We chewed in awkward silence for a few seconds, trying to put off the inevitable.

“School was fine,” I prompted.

“What did you learn?” Mom asked.

“The green light is a symbol.”

“Gatsby?” Kelly smirked, and leaned back in his chair.

“Yeah. We just finished it.”

“I hate Gatsby.”

“Seriously? You hate Gatsby?” It was a little boring, I guess, but it didn’t seem that offensive.

“A bunch of self-absorbed rich people whining about how money couldn’t buy ALL their dreams.” I saw Dad’s eyes flick first to Mom’s, then skyward.

“So what does the green light symbolize?” Mom asked, her voice bright and loud.

I shrugged. “Mr. Hawthorne wouldn’t tell us. He kept asking us over and over again and getting mad when we didn’t answer the way he wanted. Then he threw Neil out just for tic’ing,” I said.

Actually, Hawthorne hadn’t gotten mad until Neil tic’ed “Cabbage Cum,” and added
“I stand by my answer.” Then Hawthorne’s neck rolls got all red and he accused Neil of “manipulating” his “condition” to deliberately disrupt our “learning environment” (Hawthorne used scare quotes liberally and without “discretion,” something he loved to tell us we needed more of). The tic sounded real, but it was hard to tell sometimes. Last year, at the high point of his crush on our hot sociology teacher, Neil told us he was going to start “reclaiming” his Tourette’s by using tics as social commentary ten percent of the time. He refused to tell us which times.

“Well, I’m sure he had a better reason for throwing him out than that,” Mom said, and I rolled my eyes. She still hadn’t gotten over his dad’s arrest and acted like Neil was a part of it, no matter how many times Jessie and I tried to tell her pot wasn’t contagious.

“All you grown-ups are in cahoots,” I said to my asparagus. Kelly laughed, and Dad just shook his head, staring at his plate and trying not to smile.

“So, Kelly,” Dad started. “You planning on sticking around for a while? Coming back to the IC for good?”

Kelly had gnawed off another hunk of roll and started chewing fast, fanning his mouth with one hand like he had eaten something spicy. He gulped down some wine.

“Sorry. I don’t know about ‘for good,’ but I’m here at least till the end of the summer. Depends on how long they can use me after that.”

“They?”

“I got a gig working construction. Roofing, mostly. It’s hard work, but you can tune everything else out, you know? Feels like you’ve accomplished something at the end of the day.”

“Construction,” Dad repeated.
“Scott,” Mom warned, her voice hard-edged for reasons I didn’t understand.

“I didn’t say anything,” Dad said, throwing up his hands. To Kelly: “It’s fine. Just seems like a waste of your talents, that’s all.”

I watched Kelly stiffen, squaring his shoulders and mimicking my Dad’s posture like he was at a job interview. “It’s nothing personal,” he said, “it’s just—”

“Stupid,” Dad nodded, uncorking the wine bottle with a soft plook. Kelly’s eyes darted back and forth between Dad and me. The conversation had officially outpaced my understanding. I looked to Mom for answers, but she was just staring out across the pond, hand shading her eyes like she was looking for something.

“You’re right,” Kelly said after a few painful seconds. He held out his glass for more wine, conciliatory, and Dad tipped a splash into it. “I should have taken you up on the offer. I know. I wasn’t ready to go back to work.”


“I know that probably doesn’t sound like a good excuse,” he continued, like he hadn’t heard me. “And I wish I could have gotten back to normal as soon as you did, but—”

“Ho there,” Dad said quietly.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Like what?” I asked again. Catrageous was pawing frantically against the sliding door to the deck, the pads of his feet making airy little squeaks on the glass.

“Cary,” Mom said, snapping back to attention. “Want to help me cut the cake?”

“No,” I said, staring Dad down.

“Let me rephrase that. Cary. Help me cut the cake in the kitchen.” I glared, and shoved my chair out from under the table. I hated that she used the Mom voice in front of
Kelly. It made me feel childish. I had set the whole thing up—the only reason Kelly was here was because of me, and she couldn’t even include me in the conversation? I threw down my napkin and followed her into the house, scratching Catrageous’s rump as he lumbered past to go hunt in the warm night air.

“What was that about?” I asked, as soon as we were out of earshot. Mom grabbed a serrated knife from the block and started hacking off uneven pieces of cake.

“Your father offered him a job.”

“What? When?”

“Months ago.”

“You talked to him months ago?” I tried to keep the hurt out of my voice, but I couldn’t.

Mom pursed her lips and transferred the cake shards to a serving plate. “Not directly. Kelly answered one of his Craigslist ads for Skywalk.”

Skywalk Group was the HR and Recruiting firm Dad worked for in Cedar Rapids. He called himself a “corporate shill,” but Mom and I both knew he loved it. He helped other people find jobs, he told me once, and I couldn’t imagine why anyone would feel bad about that.

“Kelly answered a job ad?”

“Sort of,” Mom said, hunting for clean forks in the dishwasher. “He answered at first to correct your father’s grammar, I think. But then Dad recognized the e-mail address, set up an interview for him…”

“And?”

She snapped the dishwasher closed with her hip. “And he never showed. Apologized
over e-mail, said he wasn’t ready. Nothing came of it.”

“And you never mentioned it?”

“There was nothing worth mentioning,” Mom said, voice even but firm. She jerked her head toward the sliding door, and I knew the discussion was over. I followed her out onto the deck, where Kelly and Dad were having a contest to see who could look more relaxed. They were both losing. I could hear the mariachi music from the Mexican restaurant family drifting across the pond, and Mom clicked up the wheel on her iPod a few more decibels to compensate. When Frank Sinatra started in on “Come Fly with Me,” she plugged in the white Christmas lights that wound around the deck railing and clapped her hands.

“That’s better. It’s beautiful out here, isn’t it?”

I slid a jagged piece of cake onto my dinner plate, and Kelly followed suit.

“You okay?” I said under my breath, scooping up a bite of mostly frosting.

“No less than I deserve,” he whispered. “I’ll tell you some other time.”

The frosting was so sweet it made my teeth hurt. I slid my tongue over my front teeth and watched Mom serve Dad a piece of cake. The soft glow from the Christmas lights made them look younger, lighter somehow. Kelly watched them with me for a second, then pushed his cake plate away.

“I don’t have much of a sweet tooth, actually.” he said. “Want to walk down by the creek?”

I looked at Dad.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Heather and I will hold down the fort.”

I nodded, relieved. It was getting dark, and the mosquitoes would be out soon, but the deck felt cramped with all of us sitting together. I skipped down the steps to the lawn and
pointed Kelly toward the wooden glider near the bank. Dad had built it when Rachel and I were little. We’d spent a lot of summers on that bench, eating peanut butter and chocolate syrup sandwiches and taking turns pushing away from the ground with our jelly sandals.

I sat down next to Kelly now and hugged my knees to my chest, staring at the family across the way. They’d finished dinner and had started in on a board game, something high energy that involved a timer and a lot of excited chattering in Spanish.

“Sounds like they’re having a good time.” Kelly nodded up at them, then coughed into the crook of his arm.

“Why didn’t you take the job?” I asked, eyes on the happy family. It seemed pointless to pretend Mom hadn’t told me.

He paused and let out a slow breath, like he was really thinking about the answer.

“I guess I just couldn’t bring myself to be around so many people who had their lives together. People who’d never met her, who had no idea what was going on. It didn’t seem fair. Does that make sense?”

“Not really,” I said, truthfully. After Rachel died, Jessie and Neil and Puck had been the only ones I could stand to be around. Everyone else just looked at me like I was a time bomb, my parents included. It was like they were waiting for me to fall to pieces.

“Maybe it’s different because you’re a girl.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well—and don’t get pissed—”

“Then don’t piss me off.”

“Ha. It’s just, no one expects you to have your shit together. You could run away to Arizona, or start saving your fingernails in a box or something, and everyone would just look
the other way.”

“I think they’d prefer that, actually,” I said, kicking off from the ground to start the glider again. “Then they’d know what to do. ‘Retrieve Cary from Arizona.’ Bam. Done. Which, by the way, Arizona?”

He slouched deeper into the bench, folding his hands over his chest. “I just assume that’s where people go when they’ve exhausted every other option.”

I laughed, and heard it carry across the open yard. I hoped the neighbors could hear.

“It’s nice not to have to pretend to be okay,” he said. “Like us, now.” He bent over and focused on tugging a loose thread from his pants cuff.

“Like us?”

“You know. No bullshit.”

I was suddenly and uncomfortably aware of the weight of my hands. “I like to pretend.” My voice came out stilted and shrill. Kelly looked over, surprised.

“Sorry?”

I cleared my throat as it tightened. “Nothing.”

He turned toward me, pulling his legs underneath him on the glider so he could face me. “Hey, hey, it’s okay. I just meant—you can talk to me. We understand each other. I had Craigslist, you have your bulletin board…we’re in this together.”

“Huh.”

“You know,” he said, like it had just occurred to him. “I could help you. Track down the heart. We could find it together.” He was telling me, not asking.

“I’m cold,” I said. “I’m gonna go back in,” I pushed away from the bench and tugged my shirt sleeves down over my hands. I felt a little queasy, an uncomfortable nervous energy
that I couldn’t identify. Something about the wide look in his eyes, the way his voice got sort of innocent and soft when he said “we.” It was déjà vu, a prickly feeling I was certain of without knowing why.

I passed Mom and Dad on my way into the house. They were dancing over by the Christmas lights, holding each other close and swaying to a slower number. “It must have been moonglow,” a heavy-vibratoed woman crooned through the speakers. I fake-retched at the sight, like something out of a Tom Hanks rom-com, but then Dad dipped her and I saw the tears glimmering at the corner of her eyes, caught in a slant of soft white light.

I felt like I had seen something I wasn’t supposed to. I slipped back into the house and grabbed my cell phone from my room (Mom and Dad made me keep it there during dinner). Three missed calls from Jessie. Not all that unusual, but she usually sent a text if she needed something. I pressed her speed dial button and counted the rings.

“Getoverherenow.” Her voice spilled out of the phone in a panic.

“Hello to you, too.”

“Cary. Carycarycary. Something unspeakable has happened.”

“What? What’s going on?”

“It is literally unspeakable. I cannot speak of it.”

I sighed. “You are literally the worst.”

“I know. You’re coming over, right?” Jessie was dramatic by nature, but her voice had a panicky edge that seemed genuine. I looked at the clock. It was almost ten.

“It’s a school night.”

“I’m not asking you to spend the night. Just tell them you forgot about an assignment and ran over to get it from me. They’ll buy it. You’re a total space case.”
I gave her a beat to regret the dig while I chewed on a hangnail.

“…sorry.”

“You’re not even going to tell me what this is about?” I sighed and clamped the phone between my cheek and shoulder while I rooted through the desk for Dad’s keys.

“Heart problems.”

I froze.

“…Cary? Are you there?”

“Sorry. I, uh. Phone must have cut out. Heart problems?”

“You know. Big Heart Feelings. *Harpoon My Heart* stuff. Only awkward and terrible.”

“Those are my two middle names. Hold on. I’ll be right over.” I hung up and scrawled out a quick note to Mom and Dad. They’d be mad I left, but the assignment was a good excuse, one they wouldn’t try to guilt me about. Miss Valline had one thing right: my grades had slipped since the “traaaaagedy.”

Before I left, I chanced a peek through the patio door. Mom and Dad were still swaying together on the deck, but I couldn’t hear the music anymore. Kelly was sitting alone where I’d left him, staring out at the empty creek, rocking back and forth on the glider. It had a weird symmetry. Everyone was moving, but no one was going anywhere.

I knew it had to be serious when Jessie didn’t meet me at the door. Her Dad let me in to the house instead, and gestured down the hall with one cast-covered arm. Mr. Fuller was an academic at the U of I, something science-y, and he was always injuring himself for reasons no one had adequately explained.
“Jessie’s in the Think Tank,” he said, squinting at me through wire-framed glasses. “She wouldn’t let me in. Think you could take her these?” He held out a plate of chocolate chip cookies, balanced on top of his plaster arm.

“Thanks, Mr. Fuller. I’ll take it from here. Your arm okay?”

“Probably,” he said, shrugging. “I dropped an oven hood on it.”

“Oh. You got a new oven hood?”

“Nope.” He didn’t elaborate—just shuffled back down the hall in slippers too big for his feet. “You kids have fun,” he called, dreamily.

I did the secret knock on Jessie’s door and she opened right away.

“Thank God.” She had taken her contacts out already, and her eyes were red and puffy under the big, square glasses she hadn’t upgraded since middle school.

“What’s going on?” I extended the plate of cookies and she plucked one up, holding it with two hands like a mouse.

“Comfuter,” she spat around the cookie. I looked over her shoulder to the desktop machine perched on a few upended milk crates. A chat window was open. “Just read it,” she said.

I felt the queasy feeling in my stomach come back as I sat down in front of the machine. The chat window was already scrolled halfway down, so I just started where it was.

_wassermania: i’ll just be on land, cheering you to a watery grave
xxjessiesgrrlxx: u canNOT ditch us.
_wassermania: didn’t say i’d ditch. you know those guys on the Olympic rowing team?
xjessiesgrrlxx: not personally.
xjessiesgrrlxx: 😊
_wassermania: i’ll be that guy in the back of the boat who shouts at the rest of the peons and doesn’t have to row.
xjessiesgrrlxx: i don’t think anyone has to row. it’s cardboard. And tht guys still in the boat, no?
_wassermania: touche. so i'll be that guy, but on land. it's cool. i'm in theatre, i can project.
xxjessiesgrrlxx: suck it up, dolphin level. Neil really wants to do it. & I think it will be
good for Cary.

I looked over at Jessie, who winced. “Sorry,” she said. “I forgot about that part.” She
waved me back to the screen:

_wassermania: but what do I get out of it, eh? ;)
xxjessiesgrrlxx: u could do it out of the goodness of ur heart?
_wassermania: lol
_wassermania: hold on a sec, i need to catch my breath
_wassermania: lolololol
xxjessiesgrrlxx: >=(
_wassermania: kidding, jess. but i’m gonna need *something* to sweeten the pot.
xxjessiesgrrlxx: ???
_wassermania: idk.
xxjessiesgrrlxx: May 29.
_wassermania: *headdesk*
xxjessiesgrrlxx: what?
_wassermania: …
xxjessiesgrrlxx: …
_wassermania: it’s cool, i’ll wait for you to figure it out.
xxjessiesgrrlxx: OH
_wassermania: there we go.
xxjessiesgrrlxx: MOTHER OF GOD
_wassermania: well, ok, maybe we’re overreacting a little…
_wassermania: jess? you still there?
_wassermania: not a great time for a bathroom break. fyi.
_wassermania: jesus, nvm, ok? It was a joke.
_wassermania: …jess?
_wassermania is Away

I glanced over at Jessie. She was clutching her knees to her chest. I recognized the
terrified look in her eyes. It was the same one I had whenever I replayed something
mortifying I’d done or said in my head.

“Come on. It’s not…that bad.” She shook her head silently, wet hair flying. “I’m
serious,” I said, louder. “He passed it off as a joke. Just pretend everything’s normal. Tell him
your computer froze.”

“He wasn’t supposed to say anything,” she said feebly.

I knew what she meant. Everyone knew Puck loved Jessie, but he’d loved her for years. I didn’t understand why he had to do something about it now, after so much undercover pining. It was going to upend our whole group dynamic. It seemed selfish.

“First things first. Damage control.” I put Jessie to bed, tucking the covers around her like a mummy, and sat down at the computer. Puck was Away, but still online.

xxjessiesgrrlxx: SORRY! cary came over for a sec so I had to get the door.
xxjessiesgrrlxx: I know u were joking. cya tomorrow!

I closed the chat program and sat back in the chair, hoping two lines would be enough. I glanced at the clock at the corner of the screen. 11:30. Mom would call soon.

“Is it over?” Jess called from the bed.

“It’s over. The Drama Queen can go to sleep.” I grabbed the last cookie from the plate. I’d earned it.

“He loves me,” Jess moaned miserably, voice muffled by the covers.

“I know,” I said through a mouthful of crumbs. I sat down onto the bed beside her.

“But so do you. We all knew. What’s the big deal?”

She sniffled, and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “He said it, which means he’s going to say it again. And that makes me feel…”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Sick.”

That seemed a little harsh. “I know he can be annoying, but…”

“No, not because he’s gross or something. I like Puck. I just…” she trailed off, sounding hopeless. “I know I’m being crazy. I just feel like everything’s changing around me
and I don’t even get a say.”

I thought about that for a minute while I rubbed her back over the comforter, while I turned on her soothing ocean sounds tape and switched off her computer monitor so the light wouldn’t keep her awake. I knew how to take care of Jess, how to play with her hair when she was upset or buy her a Nutrageous from the a la carte line at school when she was stressed out. But I didn’t know what to say to that. I grabbed my keys and turned off her bedroom light.

“Jess?” I said, hovering in the doorway.

“Yeah?”

“Nothing. Just wanted to know you were there.” I closed the door behind me and captained the Landboat home.

I checked the Iowa City Craigslist on my laptop when I got back to my own bed that night, not sure what I was looking for. I skimmed through For Sale ads, Schnauzer puppies and Fiesta dinner ware. The Missed Connections page was a sea of desperation. “HOT QT @ THE QT (KWIK TRIP)” one read. Or: “Cute bagger at the Hy-Vee.” I clicked into that one. Jessie bagged groceries at the Hy-Vee on weekends. “I was the guy in the Pink Floyd t-shirt,” it read. “You were the hot blonde with D-cups chewing Big Red. Reply to this message and tell me what scratcher I bought.” Definitely not Jessie. I opened another one with a title that seemed deliberately vague: “I Miss You So Much.”

“Please come home,” it said. “I miss you. I love you. I’m so, so sorry.”

That was all. No name, no identifying information, no “write back and tell me what song was on the radio when we met.” Just a missile, aimed at someone, hitting everyone. I
tried the Lost + Found category, scrolling quickly through the first few entries. I was ready to close the window and go to bed when I saw it, just after an ad for a missing Chow mix with apricot coloring. “Missing: heart” the title announced. Posted today. I felt a surge of adrenaline, like I was reading someone else’s diary, and clicked the link.

“LOST: One heart. Physical, not figurative. Donor from Iowa City, IA, dead June 5 last year. Seeking donee for resolution, not repossession. Reward for information that leads to apprehension: good karma, homemade ice cream sundae, expired gift certificate to Shanghai Gardens (LIMITED AMOUNT! ACT FAST! Amount: One). You got one of the biggest hearts around. Help a broken man repair his.”

Then, a few lines below:

“no dick pics plz”

It was Kelly boiled down to essence: one part crushing sincerity, two parts immature humor. He was disorienting, something I could never navigate, even when Rachel was still alive. I closed the laptop and slid under the covers. I stared in front of me until my eyes adjusted to the dark and I could see the bulletin board, casting shadows against one wall.

That night, I dreamed I was the captain of a cardboard ship, careening down the Iowa River in the middle of a storm. It was pitch-black, so I didn’t see the snag downstream until it was too late to turn. A wave crashed over the side of the boat, knocking the wind out of me and filling my mouth and nose with water, thick with mud and salty from the rain. When I came to, I was in Arizona.

When I woke up, I was in Iowa City.
CHAPTER 4

Puck was in a bad mood. Friday was Mandatory Mass Day, and thanks to designated homeroom pews, I was sandwiched between him and Ken Chen, who spent the homily using a golf pencil to draw pictures of boobs from different angles on a collection envelope. Every now and then I’d catch Puck searching over his shoulder for Jess, who somehow managed to be staring up at the ceiling, beet-faced, whenever he turned around.

“Looking for something?” I whispered.

“I’m worried about Jess. Has she—have you talked to her?” His hair was crumpled on one side, like he’d slept on it funny.

“About what?” Lying in church felt wrong, but maybe lying by omission was okay. I glanced up at the domed ceiling, covered with portraits of saints, and waited for confirmation. They were silent, as always.

“Nothing. I made a joke and I think she thought I was serious.”

I felt my cheeks flush again, and pretended to be engrossed in Ken Chen’s optimistic depictions of female anatomy. Couldn’t you have given me a less obvious tell? I thought, unsure whom exactly I was asking. I knew there were specific saints to pray to for when you lost something, or when you were falsely accused or had gout, but I wasn’t sure which department I could complain to about physiology.

“Cary? Earth to Cary.” Puck kicked my foot. Everyone in our pew was kneeling except for me. I slid down to join him.

“Sorry. What joke?”
“She really didn’t mention it?”

I swallowed. I wasn’t all that superstitious, but with all the religious iconography staring down at me, it felt like I was lying under oath. “You’re being deliberately vague,” I said, being deliberately vague. “Maybe you should ask one of those guys for advice instead.”

I nodded toward the ceiling.

“Jews don’t have Saints,” he said. “They’re bureaucratic. It’s like outsourcing prayer. We also don’t kneel.” He rubbed his knees like an old man. “Or pretend we’re drinking blood.”

My eyes flicked to the altar, where Father Higgins was breaking pieces of communion wafer into a gold chalice. “Say what you will about Catholicism, at least we get wine in school.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I’ll give you that. Went to my cousin’s church over the summer, and all they had at communion was grape juice.”

I nodded gravely. “The juice lobby is powerful, but Catholic traditions are worth preserving. Our coffers will never be lined by Big Grape.”

Puck snorted, and Hawthorne ‘shushed’ him from the end of our pew. Father Higgins launched into the “Christ has Died” communion jingle a second time.

“See?” he whispered. “I’m not welcome here. It’s just like that time we read The Passion.”

“Hold still, you’ve got some crumbs on your shoulder.” I mimed trying to brush it off. “Nope! It's a whole chip.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Everyone stared right at me when we read the ‘Crucify him!’ line.”
“Yeah. Because you said it really loud.”

“I'm an actor,” he hissed. “Am I supposed to just ignore dramatic context? Maybe if the rest of you stepped it up once in—”

“SHHHHHH.” Hawthorne whisper-shouted again, shooting us his focused death stare.

“Sorry.” I mouthed, and he nodded and turned back to his missalette. One of the perks of Troubled Teen status was that discipline was pretty lax. Everyone was afraid you would snap and make a scene. Sure, they wanted you to grieve, they just wanted you to do it out of earshot. Hence Silver Liningz, and all the other “support groups” that felt more like grief internment camps. I wondered sometimes if they were for our peace of mind, or everyone else’s.

Puck slid a collection envelope across the wooden seat to me.

*Boat thing tomorrow AM?* it read in his loopy cursive.

I plucked another golf pencil from the holder on the back of the pew in front of me.

*Why?* I scribbled without thinking. *Because it will be “good for me”?*

Puck read the envelope and his face darkened. He dropped it to the floor conspicuously and bent to pick it up, gesturing to me to follow suit.

“Who told you that?” he hissed once I’d slouched over to join him. The blood was rushing to his head, which only made him look angrier.

“Told me what?”

He underlined the words *good for me.* “That. Where did that come from?”

I felt my stomach drop. Jessie had typed it in their IM conversation last night. The one I wasn’t supposed to know about.
“Well?” I said, trying to sound chilly. “It’s what you’re all thinking, right?”

“It’s in quotes.” His eyes flashed.

“For emphasis.”

“Hawthorne does scare quotes. You don’t.” His face was already red, but I could tell he was embarrassed. “She showed it to you, didn’t she? She showed you the whole damn thing.” He looked at me, eyes pleading for me to interrupt him, to tell him he was wrong, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. He shook his head.

“I was the one who wrote back to you,” I confessed. It seemed pointless to pretend.

He straightened, settling rigidly into the pew, and kicked the kneeler up from its position on the floor with a thud-ud-ud-ud that echoed through the church. “And you both had a great laugh, I expect. Poor Puck. I bet it was a great sleepover.”

“What? No. It wasn’t like that. No one was laughing. She was too afraid to respond, so I—”

“Afraid?” Puck said, his too-loud voice carrying in the enormous space. I felt Hawthorne’s laser eyes heat up for a second attack.

“Not…not afraid. That was the wrong word. Please, can we talk about this later?” I kept my voice as low as possible, hoping he’d take the hint. He didn’t.

“You know what Cary?” he asked, voice rising dramatically. A couple girls in the row ahead of us turned around and glared. “I’m sorry for being condescending. You clearly don’t need this boat thing.”

“O-okay?”

“You don’t need it,” he said, picking up steam, “because this kind of petty car-crash leering at someone else’s misfortune is the act of someone with nothing more significant to
worry about.”

“That’s not fair,” I said to my feet. “You don’t even know what happened.”

“You two are heartless.” He turned away, disgusted. I would have laughed, if I hadn’t felt so sick. I was heartless, I supposed. Just not in the way he meant.

“Don’t stop on my account. Please, take your time. Finish your conversation.”

I whirled around. Hawthorne was squatting behind us, his thick neck flushed and mouth set in a hard line. “You two have repeatedly disrespected me, Father Higgins, and your classmates this morning.” He said. “Do you have anything to say for yourselves?”

“Ken Chen’s drawing nudes again,” I blurted out, and immediately regretted it.

“What the hell, Cary!” Ken’s pencil clattered against the wooden pew as he dropped it and crossed his arms.

“Mr. Chen,” Hawthorne spat. “Language. In church.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hawthorne,” Puck said in a flat voice. “I got upset. I’ll cool it.”

“A grand idea,” he said. “All three of you can ‘cool it’ in detention this afternoon.”

I groaned, and Ken stared daggers at me. Hawthorne shuffled back toward the end of the pew, his loafers scraping against the thin blue carpet. Students were starting to file up to the front for communion.

“Oh...sir?” Puck’s voice sounded higher-pitched than usual.

Hawthorne whirled around. “Yes?”

“I have drama practice after school.”

“You can go to rehearsal afterward.”

“It’s just...” He took a deep breath. “We open next week. It’s our first dress rehearsal. I really need to be there. Could I make it up before school some time instead?”
Hawthorne smiled thinly. “The world doesn’t start and stop at your convenience. You can’t make up detention any more than you can make up today’s mass, from which you were mentally absent. Unless you can tell me what the homily was about?” Puck shook his head. “Discipline, Mr. Wasserman. Discipline.” He crossed his arms over his chest and waddled away.

We had tested Hawthorne’s limits and lost. We sat through the rest of the mass in stony silence. Puck was the first to leave the pew after the final hymn, beelining toward the exit with his head down. “Thanks a lot, Cary,” Ken Chen mumbled, shouldering past me toward the aisle.

“If it’s any consolation,” I said to his back, “your nipple shading was spot on.”

Neither Puck nor Jessie showed up at lunch, so Neil and I ate our “BJ Cheesebread” (Xavier’s mascot was the bluejay, and the lunch ladies didn’t seem particularly hip to the parlance of the times) together and talked about the boat regatta. At least Neil wasn’t doing it as some condescending favor for my mental health. He seemed sincere—he brought web printouts to lunch showing construction techniques and boat styles. “It’ll add to the wind drag,” he said, circling a photo of a whale-shaped ship, “but I think it should definitely have a dorsal fin.”

“Like a dolphin?”

“Exactly. Or…a Marlin.” He doffed his baseball cap with a flourish, and I had to smile.

“If we want to win the race, we might want to base it off something with a better record,” I said.
“It’s not always about winning, Cary,” he scolded, reshaping the bill of the hat in his hands. “It’s about loyalty.”

“Still,” I said, and slurped a spoonful of spaghetti fragments in marinara sauce. “Maybe we could do something less recognizable. I don’t want to get sued for logo infringement.”

I saw something spark behind Neil’s eyes. “Like the Frankenmarmot! We could mix a bunch of parts together and do an Everyfish!”

“Yes! Give it a pointy nose, a big frilly fin…”

“A whale tail.”

Neil shook his head. “Too Harpoon My Heart.”

“One of those dangly head lamps, then.”

“Angler fish!” He thumped the table with a fist and made the silverware jump. “They’re the ones with the scary teeth and the built-in streetlight. Want to help me do a concept sketch after school?”

I peeled open the spout of my chocolate milk. “Can’t. Got detention from Hawthorne.”

Neil’s head jerked back and his tongue made a loud clicking noise. “Sorry,” he said, stretching his neck from side to side. “I guess Sid was surprised. I am too. What for?”


Jess would be too, if she found out I spilled the beans. I took a small, perverse comfort in knowing Puck was too humiliated to talk to her.

“Huh,” he said, tucking a sandy cowlick behind one ear. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really, actually. But thanks for asking.”
“Okay.” He shrugged, and flipped to a new page of boat blueprints. It was such a small thing, asking me if I wanted to talk, not pressing when I didn’t. But the last couple days had been almost more than I could handle, and I was grateful for the small things.

We finished our lunch in comfortable silence. Neil took out his drawing pencils and started trial sketching boats while I checked my phone for new texts. Lunch was the only time we could have our phones on, presumably to keep us from under-desk texting in the afternoon. I waited impatiently for the boot screen to clear and clicked in to the inbox. New message from Kelly, sent ten minutes ago.

FOUND A LEAD RE: <3. MEET POST-SCHOOL?

My pulse quickened. I’d been at a deadlock for months. No way he could have found something after one day.

IT’LL HAVE TO WAIT, I typed out, thumbs flying over the keypad. DETENTION.

I waited a few minutes for a response. Nothing. I jiggled my foot anxiously. Could I have missed something obvious? I’d worked on the board for months, sending out as many letters and phone calls as I could, but nothing had gotten me any closer. I’d all but given up. I knew I should be excited, but honestly, the thought of him finding something so easily made me feel kind of crummy.

Something pressed down on my knee. It was Neil, prodding at me with a pencil eraser. “Can you stop the jiggling? You’re making the whole table shake.”

“Sorry.” I rested my chin on the cool laminate table top and stared at the downy blonde hairs on Neil’s arms while he drew. He scraped a hole in the paper with his pencil point and squinted down at the loose leaf in frustration. “You always press too hard when you write,” I offered, my jaw clicking against the table. “Like you’re mad at the paper.”
“I don’t know my own strength,” he said. He flexed a skinny arm. “I’m a big, brawny oaf.” I laughed. Neil was barely an inch taller than me, and I was hardly the person to call when you needed something from a high shelf.

I checked my phone one last time. Nothing. “I’m gonna jet,” I said, and scooped my books up from the table.

“Cool. See you tomorrow?”

“Definitely.” I turned my phone off and surrendered it to my pocket. I hoped Kelly wouldn’t do anything without me. “Hey, Neil?”

“Yeah?”

“I like that one.” I pointed over his shoulder to his most recent drawing, a monstrous amalgamation of fish parts with a big, goofy-toothed smile. He was a pretty good artist. “That’s our Frankenfish.”
CHAPTER 5

After the 3:11 bell rang, I spent as much time as possible dawdling by my locker, rearranging my textbooks and cleaning scraps of paper out of the bottom. Probably no one would have noticed or cared, but I didn’t want anyone to see me walking into detention.

Hawthorne’s room was filled with cheesy motivational posters, photos of foggy mountain ranges and tabbies wearing tiny neckties. The bulletin board was still Gatsby themed. “What’s YOUR green light?” it asked, in pink stapled-on cardboard letters. Underneath was a sea of Sharpie-scrawled comments. From the back of the room, I could make out “420 BLAZE IT” and “Cassie Hoffman’s poon tang,” which someone else had tried to scratch out in pen. There were a few serious answers, but they were all in the same handwriting. I suspected, with a sudden twinge of embarrassment, that Hawthorne had written them himself.

I nodded to Hawthorne and slid into the seat across from Ken Chen, who was still staring peevishly at me. Puck was in the corner, desk angled toward the wall, scribbling something in his *Grease! Jr.* script. I tried to catch his eye, but he didn’t look over.

I rifled through my bag for something to do. I’d finished my Biology homework in study hall, and I’d turned in my Gatsby essay on Monday. I still had Geometry problems, but I wasn’t sure I could summon the mental strength to confront proofs. My hand closed on a slim paperback in the bottom of my bag. Jessie’s book. She’d been nagging me about the legitimacy of romance as a genre for ages, so I’d borrowed one a few months ago to shut her up. I still hadn’t cracked the spine; I was too embarrassed to read it in public. It had a garish
lilac cover, and the title curled along the front in embossed gold script: *Pirate’s Bounty*. If the blurbs were to be believed, it was “scintillating” and “surprisingly political.” I flattened the book on the desk to hide the cover and thumbed to the first page.

“Water droplets sparkled against the Somalian captain’s ebony, salt-stained skin as he stared into the boiling sea.”

Well. Somali pirates. That was unexpected. I kept reading, tuning out Hawthorne’s pen scratches as he dogged his way through a stack of student papers, and the tinny Swedish hip-hop blaring from Ken Chen’s headphones.

Apart from the modern twist on the pirate theme, the story was pretty predictable: a blonde, ponytailed personal trainer gets kidnapped on her honeymoon by a band of “exotic” Somali pirates and struggles against her growing Stockholm-y lust for the meatiest of the lot. I imagined reading it out loud with Kelly. Some of the dialogue was laughably bad.

“Could you ever love me?” she begged, trying to staunch the captain’s bleeding with a scrap from her dress. “Truly? With all of your being?”

“With all of the being I have left,” the captain growled, gesturing to the stub where his ankle had been.

*Unrealistic*, I imagined scrawling in the margins like I was Hawthorne grading an essay. *A man with a toothache cannot be in love*. Instead, I pulled out a piece of loose leaf and scrawled a note to Puck. *I’m sorry*, it said. *Boat thing tomorrow? I’m playing the chimp card.*

The “chimp card” was a no-questions-asked distress signal we’d invented in middle school, redeemable for an instant friend intervention. It was stronger than any guilt trip I could conjure: the chimp card was forged from the iron bonds of mutual trauma.

We’d been bored at Jessie’s house one snow day, so we’d snooped around her dad’s office looking for something scandalous. We found a stash of brutal nature documentaries
instead, and Neil insisted on popping one into the player. We sat on our hands in horrified silence while a gang of chimps ambushed a family of small monkeys and ripped them apart with their bare hands. Blood and fur flew through the air. It looked as easy as shredding tissues.

When it was over, even Puck was lost for words. The DVD menu animation looped four times before Neil broke the silence.

“Some days, I feel like the monkey,” he said, his voice Buddha-calm.

If there was ever an appropriate time to invoke the chimp card, the threat of summer school was it. I peeked through my bangs at Hawthorne and waited for him to attack an essay with vicious concentration. I folded the note up as many times as I could, squeezing it in my fist, then skipped it along the floor underhanded to Puck. Without looking up from his script, he plucked it up and palmed it into the trash can next to him.

It was a shame, really, that Jessie didn’t love Puck back. They had a similar flair for the dramatic.

I leaned over to put my head on the desk, defeated, and nestled *Pirate’s Bounty* under my chin like a cushion. I listened to the second hand tick its agonizing progress on the wall clock. Ten minutes left, if Hawthorne was in a good mood. His current Grading Scowl didn’t leave me optimistic.

Hawthorne had been kind enough to me this year—he’d had Rachel as a student back when she was at Xavier—but I got the feeling I was a bit of a letdown compared to her. Rachel had always been better at English than me, taking AP classes and bringing home fridge-ready essays free from the red ink monsters that chewed up mine.

I could read fast enough, but my writing was painfully slow. I scratched out and
rewrote sentences over and over, and they still never came together how I wanted them to. Things never seemed to connect on the page the way they did in my head. “What is this referring to?” Hawthorne would scribble in my papers’ margins. “How does this support your central argument?”

It doesn’t, Imaginary Caroline argued in my head. It’s an allegory (vocab word!) for my life, which doesn’t fit neatly into three coherent body paragraphs. It’s full of disjointed references that don’t connect to anything.

But Imaginary Caroline was a lot braver and smarter than Real Caroline. I’d never actually talk back to Hawthorne. Still, English felt like grief counseling sometimes. All this energy wasted hunting for symbols and meaning. In my (admittedly limited) experience, things just happened, and they had fuck all to do with the color of your curtains.

Hawthorne’s room was stiflingly warm—the school air conditioners were on some kind of seasonal timer, and always turned on two weeks after we needed them—and my breath felt hot against my forearm. I was just starting to nod off to the clock’s hypnotic ticking when I heard someone call my name. I snapped my head up too quickly, and gray spots prickled at my eyes. Kelly jogged into the room wearing a tuxedo, visibly out of breath, an untied bow tie dangling from his throat like a shawl. I almost laughed at how ridiculous he looked, huffing and puffing in a penguin suit, but he shook his head from side to side in a tiny, almost imperceptible motion that I knew was meant for me.

“Kelly,” Hawthorne looked up from his desk blotter. “This is a surprise. Where’s your Visitor’s Badge?”

“No time. I came as fast as I could. I’m sorry, sir. I need to take Cary home. There’s been…there’s been a family emergency.”
My throat caught, and I forgot to breathe for a moment. I felt everyone’s eyes snap to me, even Puck’s. He stared, wide-eyed and helpless, a look that made my stomach swoop with hot panic. It couldn’t be happening again. Not this soon. I shoved the lilac paperback inside my bag and zipped it closed, my clumsy fingers stumbling on the pull. I scanned through my mental Loved Ones roster, something that had raced in the background like a stock ticker since Rachel died. Granny? Grandpa Gregory? No. Mom or Dad would have come. They would only have sent Kelly if…

I shook my head hard, as if I could fling the thoughts away.

Hawthorne’s eyes darted from me to Kelly’s tuxedo, then back to me again. His neck rolls flushed red. “Is there anything I can—?”

“No. No, no, no. I’m sorry, sir. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear about…” he swallowed the last syllable and shook his head, like he was choked up. Hawthorne nodded and looked away.

I got up and slung my backpack over one shoulder, hands clammy, my exhalations loud in my ringing ears. It’s going to be okay, I repeated in my head. Everything had fled from my brain but a clichéd Hans mantra. Lightning doesn’t strike the same place twice.

I caught Kelly’s eyes for the first time as I filed numbly toward the door and slid past him.

He winked.

I stopped dead in the threshold, but he prodded the small of my back with a finger until I stumbled into the hallway.

“Not here,” he hissed in a low voice, and we sped-walked toward the parking lot together, silent until we’d climbed into his sweltering Metro and slammed the doors behind
“Explain.”

He cracked his knuckles. “We have a lead.”

“You texted. What’s the emergency?”

He flashed a toothy salesman smile, his eyes shining dangerously. “I thought you might want an out.” He reversed out of his parking space and chugged along toward the exit, the Metro’s muffler absent or irrelevant. “Plus, I couldn’t wait to show you. I was going through some old papers at the library—“

“NO,” I shouted, surprised at the sound of my voice. “No, no, no.” I was a mass of confused energy, the relief of the prank battling against the adrenaline still surging through every pore.

He slowed for a crosswalk and looked over. “Sorry?”

“You said there was an emergency.”

“Well, yeah. You were in detention with Hawthorne. That’s an emergency in itself.”

“You were wearing a tuxedo.”


“Only the criminally insane.”

He tapped the steering wheel for emphasis, lecturing an imaginary classroom. “It crafts the illusion of emergency. Now you’re thinking about the tuxedo, not the message. It’s a tragic costume. You’re wondering what landmark occasion in my life was cruelly interrupted by this terrible news.”

He was in his element, riffing like an overly caffeinated stand-up comic, a smirk
caught in his throat. This was the Kelly Rachel had loved: the unembarrassed commitment to the joke, the way he tripped over his own words with manic delight.

“But there ISN’T any terrible news,” I argued, digging my fingernails into the grubby, sun-bleached carseat upholstery. “Right?” My voice came out thin and whiny. I hated it. Kelly looked over, as if noticing me in for the first time, and his smile faded.

“Oh, geeze. What did you think it was?”

“Lightning.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Lightning?”

I shook my head, frustration rising. I wanted to be serious, to make a point, but it just sounded pretentious after his disarming prankster routine. “It’s something Hans always says in Sneaky Grief. ‘Lightning doesn’t strike in the same place twice,’ you know?”

“Well, sure. Because the place it struck the first time isn’t there anymore.” He meant it as a joke, but it hung in the air between us. I knew we were both thinking of the same thing. “Sorry I scared you,” he said, after a few seconds. “I guess I didn’t think about how it would look on your end.” He shook his head and raked a hand through his gelled hair self-consciously. “I just couldn’t wait to see you. To show you what I found, I mean.”

“Right.” I was so flustered, I’d forgotten the purpose of the charade. “What did you find?”

“Well, I’m not 100% sure,” he said, craning his neck around the headrest as he backed into a parking spot, “but we’ll know soon enough.”

I stared out of the window. We were parked in a “reserved for expectant mothers” spot outside a butter-yellow brick building. “The library?”

“Yep. We’re looking for an old clip. I found the story in the Press Shitizen’s online
archive, but you had to be a paid subscriber to read it.”

“And you wonder why newspapers are dying. You’re a writer, and you don’t subscribe?”

He rubbed his chin stubble against his palm. “Hard to pay for the sausage once you’ve seen how it’s made.”

The library was at the end of the ped mall, the brick-paved district of restaurants and businesses that delineated Iowa City’s “downtown.” We passed Streetfighter, a homeless vet and Iowa City fixture in the library’s air conditioned entryway, his cheek pressed against the window. Kelly poked a bill into a Dixie cup by his feet, but he didn’t seem to notice.

As soon as we entered the lobby, we were ambushed by a tanned old woman wearing an enormous necklace and a turquoise linen pantsuit.

“Can I help you?” Her eyes shifted suspiciously back and forth between Kelly and I, and I blushed at the implication. Kelly didn’t seem to notice.

“Yes, I called earlier,” he said. “We’re looking for an old copy of the Press Citizen.”

Her lips tightened. “There’s a year’s worth of back issues in the file drawers in Periodicals, but this library is not an—”

“—archival library, yes. I’m aware. Heaven forfend.” Kelly smiled at her disarmingly, and rolled his eyes once we stalked off toward the newspapers. “Some crabby old biddy said the same thing to me earlier. I’m sure it was her.”

“I thought cranky librarians were a stereotype.” I searched over my shoulder for Miss Sackett, the Mr. Rogers-mild children’s librarian who ran story time.

“Oh, they mostly are. But that woman was wearing a Friends pin.” His eyes narrowed.
“Seriously? You’re throwing shade on The Friends of the Library?”

“No one thirsts for power quite like elderly women in volunteer positions.”

The back issues were banished to a file cabinet in the far corner of the library, next to a wooden shelving unit covered in oversized atlases and imposing-looking reference volumes that were Not to Be Removed From This Library.

I flipped through a softcover road atlas, hunting for Iowa, while Kelly yanked open an enormous steel drawer and thumbed through a few file folders.

“Here. It’s about a transplant.” He covered the atlas with a yellowed newspaper and jabbed at the headline in bold:

_JACK JURGEN JR. HAS A CHANGE OF HEART._

I groaned.

“I know,” he said. “The puns are contagious. I started to do it myself, back when I still wrote.” He slipped a pair of brown-rimmed reading glasses I hadn’t seen before from his breast pocket and squinted at the paper. “This part. Right here.”

I cleared my throat and read aloud. “Jurgen Jr. was at the Cedar Rapids airport when he got the call. It was June 1st, his mother’s birthday, and he was boarding a flight to Missoula to visit her. ‘It was a miracle,’ Jurgen Jr. said. ‘If they’d called ten, twenty minutes later, we’d have been in the air. They told me they had a four hour window for the transplant. I could come to the hospital right then, or I’d go back on the list.’”

I stopped reading and scanned silently through the rest. Quotes from the surgeon, PR garbage about the hospital’s three-year graft survival rate for heart transplants (best in the nation!), info on Jurgen Jr’s businesses and building projects and net worth. Nothing about the donor heart.
I looked up from the paper. Kelly was staring intensely into my eyes, like he was lining up a shot through a rifle sight.

“This—” I trailed off, unsure what to say. My heart was beating like a hummingbird.

“Yeah.”

“But it doesn’t mean—we don’t know for sure if—”

“Nope.”

“Well, shit.” I said, loud enough that the old lady librarian (or Friend?) threw a venomous look my way.

Kelly nodded. He looked like he was holding his breath. I stood there for a minute, bent over the shelves, soaking up the smell of old newspaper and soy ink while patrons circled around us. I felt exposed; the chattering and incessant beep-boop as the circulation clerk scanned bar codes crowded my head. “I need to think,” I said. I grabbed the newspaper and tucked it under my arm as I loped in an awkward half-jog to the children’s section. We’d passed the summer reading program display on the way in (“Camp out with a good book!”), and the two-man tent in the play area was calling my name.

I unzipped the flap and crawled inside on my hands and knees. The blue nylon walls coated my hands with peaceful shadows, and I could pretend, for a moment, that no one else was around. It smelled like a plastic-y diaper, but that was a small price to pay for the comforts of an isolation tent.

Then Kelly poked his head in.

“You okay?”

“I need to think,” I repeated. “I can’t think with a bunch of people around.”

“Should I leave?”
“It’s okay. Just…don’t talk for a minute. And look away so I can’t hear you thinking.”

He climbed in awkwardly and sat red-faced in front of me, hugging his knees and stooping his head to avoid grazing the cramped tent roof. I knew he was trying hard not to accidentally touch me, and I wasn’t sure if that made it more or less awkward.

I stared down at the article again and tried to concentrate. June 1st. The day Rachel died. The day Mom signed a donor consent form in coral lipstick because her hands were shaking too hard to hold a pen. It was hard to believe that the U of I performed multiple heart transplants that day.

It was harder, still, to believe that Rachel’s heart might have gone to the 55-year-old millionaire responsible for *Honkers*.

*Honkers* was a local breastaurant chain, a hunting-themed Hooters rip-off Jack Jurgen, Jr. started in the early 2000’s. The uniforms were infamous: the waitresses (and they were all waitresses) wore skin tight camo crop tops adorned with the Honkers logo in silver lamé—a silhouette of a goose in flight.

I’d never been inside, for obvious reasons, but Jess and her Dad had dragged me with them to protest the one they’d opened in the former space of a Mom and Pop Indian joint last year. The protest was a wash: the chants were drowned out entirely by a slew of people obeying the “HONK IF U <3 HONKERS” sign that faced the street.

I took a deep breath and let the air out slowly through my nose, another Hans-issue relaxation technique.

“You okay?” Kelly shifted his weight, and the tent tilted dangerously in one direction.

“I’m okay. I don’t know, I guess I just always pictured the heart going to someone…”

“Younger? Worthier? Less of a corporate-teat-suckling misogynist?”
“Yes. Yes to all of those things.”

Rachel loved Iowa City, and had been diametrically opposed to everything Jurgen, Jr. stood for: corporate franchises, out-of-town developers, the ugly concrete and glass apartment complexes downtown he’d bulldozed small businesses to build.

But it was naïve, I realized with a flush of guilty anger, for me to have expected some kind of Lifetime Original Movie ending. Douchebags needed organs, too, and you didn’t need to take an ethics course to get your name on the waiting list.

“Well,” I said, fiddling pointlessly with my shoelaces so I didn’t have to look at Kelly, “at least we lucked out with the others.” We had, really. I should have been grateful. I had a binder full of warm stories and hand-written thank you notes. College students, youth ministers, kind-hearted men like Ravi with young children and moving, print-ready backstories.

“Whoah, whoah. This doesn’t prove anything. It’s just one crummy lead.” He was backpedaling, undermining his discovery for my benefit, I knew, but I seized onto the tiny hope anyway. “You wrote letters, right?”

I nodded, trying to swallow away the tightness in my throat.

“And no one answered them.”

“Right. But would you really expect Jack Jurgen, Jr. to write a letter back to some random teenager?”

“It’d be good publicity. God knows he doesn’t get a whole lot of that.”

I snorted. “‘Millionaire Meets Donor Family, Deigns to Shake Their Dirty Peasant Hands.’

“Honkers CEO Plucks Fledgling Talent from Donor Family.”
“Gross.” I folded my hands in front of my chest protectively.

“No love for bird puns? My feathers are ruffled.”

“I don’t want to think about Jack Jurgen, Jr. taking a gander at my chest.”

He grinned, his teeth whiter somehow in the blue cast of the nylon tent. I’d heard of people with “100-watt smiles” before, but Kelly’s was a compact fluorescent. It started small, then spread slowly across his face until he looked like a big, glowing goon.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I didn’t mean to ruin your day. I kind of figured you’d seen it already, actually.”

“It came out the week Rachel died, yeah? I wasn’t super interested in current events.”

“Sure, but even your Dad didn’t read the paper or anything?”

He tossed out the question a little too casually, and I remembered, with an uneasy feeling, their conversation from last night. “Look, if you and Dad are engaged in some Battle Royale of Manliness, I want to be left out.”

“It’s not about manliness. It’s about grief.”

“It’s not a competition.” Heat crept into my cheeks. “And even if it was, I’m pretty sure you forfeited your spot when you missed the funeral.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Are we doing this now? In a child’s tent?”

I shrugged, trying to look tougher than I felt.

“Look, I didn’t come to the funeral because I didn’t want to deal with the Grief Olympics,” he said. “All of these people who never cared about her while she was alive, showing up in black muumuus, talking to you in that wide-eyed whisper like you’re a spooked horse.”

I couldn’t help but picture Miss Valline.
“One of Rachel’s college roommates posted this poem she’d written online, like, three hours after she died. They lived together for a summer. Three months. Hadn’t talked since. And here were these precious little rhyming couplets about how she’s with God now and how we will never truly heal.” The fluorescent smile was gone. “I just got…I don’t know, I couldn’t handle it. Everyone wanting to parade around this phony scar from a wound they’d never had. So I didn’t come.”

“What does that have to do with Dad?”

“He called me after the visitation.”

I bristled. Another thing my parents hadn’t bothered to mention. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Chewed me out for not being there. Called me a coward. We were…handling it differently. He could compartmentalize it. I couldn’t.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” I hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but there it was. For the first time since I’d known him, he looked slack-jawed surprised, like he’d forgotten what his face was supposed to be doing.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. What, because he didn’t fall to pieces in front of everyone, that means he loved her less? Because he actually sucked it up and did what he had to, he’s in the wrong?” My voice was rising, loud enough for people outside the tent to hear, but I couldn’t stop. “You think I wanted to go to the visitation and shake people’s hands? You think I liked people looking at me like I was a grenade?”

“That’s not what I meant. I know you’ve had a hard time.”

“No. You don’t get a—” I swallowed the curse word in my mouth and picked at a loose piece of rubber on my shoe. “You don’t get a stinking prize for being selfish. You don’t
get to come back after a year, after you left us to deal with it on our own, and mope around like you’re the only one who’s hurt.”

A shadow passed behind the tent flap. “Is everything okay over here?” The Comrade of the Library was back, hovering outside.

Kelly unzipped a corner and poked his head out, letting the library’s warm overhead lighting flood in around him. “We’re fine, thanks.”

The librarian peered past him at me. “Are you okay?” she asked, pointedly.

“I’m fine. We’re fine. We’re leaving.”

She nodded, and her necklace slapped hollowly against her jacket buttons as she stalked away.

“Sorry,” I muttered. I felt naked without the tent’s semi-darkness to mask my face. “It just bugs me that you’re giving Dad a hard time when, you know, he’s been here for us.”

Except on wine-tasting Wednesdays, I thought, but figured that was better left unspoken.

“Message received,” he said, raising his hands defensively.

“Besides,” I pressed on, “you and Dad have a lot in common. Stubbornness, sense of humor, the early signs of Male Pattern Baldness—”

“Turn down the snark, Cary, there’s a human being under this ruthlessly handsome exterior.” He was mugging, but he looked wounded nonetheless. He flattened his hair down over his forehead. “I should take you home, huh.”

I nodded, and clambered awkwardly through the open tent flap.

He didn’t say anything else during the ride home, and I was grateful. There was too much competing for brain space. Jack Jurgen, Jr., summer school, Puck’s shattered ego, how I was going to explain away Kelly’s prank to Hawthorne come Monday.
When he pulled into the driveway, he turned the car off and twisted in his seat to face me.

“I’m sorry for scaring you. And for...” He swallowed. “I’m sorry, that’s all. I’m apologizing a lot lately, huh.”

“You had to make up for lost time.”

He laughed, but his voice was strained. “It’s a lot, coming back here. Trying to re-connect after…well. It’s your lightning bolt, right? Same place isn’t there anymore.”

It seemed like he was talking to himself more than me, so I stayed silent, even though the analogy bothered me. I didn’t want to think of Rachel like she’d destroyed some part of me forever. She wasn’t a lightning bolt. Rachel was the sea horse night light from our old bedroom, comforting and familiar and laced with the kind of nostalgia that settled in your chest and tightened like a cold. I unbuckled my seat belt to leave, and Kelly’s eyes snapped back to me and focused, like I’d broken him out of a trance.

“Arrivederci for now, Cary Grant. We’ll re-group soon for Stage Two.”

“What ‘Stage Two’? There is no Stage Two,” I said. “We’re back at square one. Even if Jack did get the heart, he clearly doesn’t want me to know. I sent two letters.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about that on the drive back,” he said, tapping his chin. “I think it’s time you wrote another one. And maybe this time, we don’t go through the hospital.”
I heard our ancient dryer shrieking from its basement lair as soon as I stepped in the house. If Mom was down there doing laundry, I had a few minutes to myself before she came to check in.

I loved Mom and Dad—Neil’s “don’t be a brat” warning from the night before still stung—but they’d been joint parental hovercrafts since Rachel’s death. Partly to make sure I wasn’t falling apart, I figured, and partly because they were terrified I, too, might drop dead if they looked the other way.

I wasn’t unsympathetic. It had to be rough, parenting a Left Behind. With Rachel gone, they’d had to put all their eggs in one basket case. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t annoying.

I slipped into my room and turned on the stereo, waiting for the cassette player’s mechanical thunk before I fiddled with the volume knob. Neil had made me a Lou Reed mix tape after I’d admitted I didn’t know any of his songs but “Take a Walk on the Wild Side.”

Neil recorded bootleg tapes—honest to God cassette tapes—from his Dad’s old LP collection. It frustrated Puck to no end. “Why don’t you just download them illegally like a normal person?” he’d asked. “It’s not like shitty hipster tape recordings make it more ethical.”

Neil had just shrugged and smiled. “If you’re going to pirate, you should hoist the
sails yourself.”

I didn’t listen to enough music to feel like my opinion was worth much, but Lou Reed seemed like an artist meant for the tinny sound of bootleg tapes anyway. I didn’t know any of the track names, but I fast forwarded through to my favorite, an eleven-minute long song about dragging a dead woman into the street and leaving her there after a drug overdose. It was a horrible story, sung with a kind of polite, unsentimental practicality over an angelic cello hook. And I could hear, in Neil’s diligent recording, his dad’s record player crackling static every few seconds, like fat on a fire.

I grabbed a box of colored chalk from my dresser and sat cross-legged on the floor, drawing random curlicues and spirals on the chalkboard wall in time with the music. The lyrics should have repulsed me, but the soft voice and gentle strings made me feel sort of numb and comfortable, like falling asleep in a snowbank. Horrible things happened all the time, and the universe didn’t seem to care if you beat your chest and wailed in the street about it. Sha la la, man, Lou Reed sang by way of explanation, and that seemed truer than any of the other bland grief memes I’d encountered.

Mom knocked and forced a too-full laundry basket through the doorway before I could tell her to come in. Her hair was pulled up in a blue bandana (red was for cake decorating), rogue gray-blonde hairs snaking out the sides. She had a Rosie the Riveter thing going on, if Rosie had iced artisanal cakes and baked kale chips instead of, you know, riveting.

“You doing okay?” she asked.

“Mmhm.” I plucked a stubby piece of blue from the box and started chalking waves across the wall. “You?”
“I guess.” She winced and dumped the laundry out across my bed, waiting for me to ask what was wrong. I hummed along with the cello instead. “Did you just get in?”

“Yeah. Kelly gave me a ride home after school.”

“You saw Kelly today?” She wrinkled her nose.

“Is that a problem? I thought you wanted me to be nice.”

“I just didn’t realize you were BFFs now, that’s all.” Catrageous slid through the open door and jumped into my lap with a soft purrow. I scritched his neck scruff with one hand while Mom folded the laundry as though it had injured her personally.

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s fine. Fine.” She slapped the seams of a pair of Dad’s pants together with vicious concentration. “I doubt I’ll book a wedding again, but it’s fine.”

I drew a sad face on the chalkboard. “Sperm cake, huh? So the bride freaked?”

“No, she loved it.” Mom sighed. “I don’t think she made the connection. But everyone at the reception did.”

“How do you know?”

“When the guests are giggling and sneaking cell phone pics of your cake in the dessert line, it’s not hard to read. Urgh.” She shuddered like she was reliving the memory. “That’s the problem with doing big weddings, I keep telling your father. You mess up one cake, and you lose 200 potential customers”

“Hey, you might get some bachelorette parties out of the deal,” I suggested, rubbing Catrageous’s cheek with my thumb. “They love that kind of stuff.” I’d seen my share of blurred-out “erotic cakes” during Cake Boss marathons on TLC.

“Don’t be gross, Caroline.”
I rolled my eyes at the wall.

“Who are we listening to?” She squinted at the stereo. “Sounds super mopey.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “No one. Just a mix tape.”

Mom balled up a pair of my school knee highs and lobbed them into an open dresser drawer. Miss.

“Aiiiiiiirbaaaaaall” I sang, crawling across the floor for the assist.

“So have you thought any more about what you might want for your birthday cake?” she asked.

“I was thinking white balloons.”

She waved a *tsk*ing finger. “Don’t you even start, or its cream cheese frosting all over.”

I shuddered. “Okay. Chocolate with cookie dough filling, please.”

“Same as always? Don’t you want something special for your 16th?”

“Cookie dough *is* special.”

“Okay. It’s your birthday.” She said it like “funeral.”

I turned back to the chalkboard wall and started to sketch out different fish. I was nowhere near as good an artist as Neil, but at least the angler fish was passable. I filled in its dangling head lamp with a buttery piece of yellow while Mom folded towels in time with the music.

She broke the comfortable silence after a minute. “I found your workbook when I was in here earlier sorting laundry.”

The chalk snapped in half in my hand. “So?” I asked, without turning around. This, I realized now, was the reason she’d come in.
“So your father and I were under the impression you were going to make an effort.”

I heaved Catrageous off my lap and draped him over my shoulder, burying my cheek in his warm orange fur. *Silver Liningz* came with a “grief workbook” we were supposed to complete between meetings, a floppy, childish activity book full of exercises such as writing a letter to God and imagining your pain as a shape. “What shape does it take?” the instructions prompted helpfully. “Use the box provided (*and your imagination!*) to draw an emotion map of Grief. And remember—*No Judgment!*”

“*No Judgment!*” appended the instructions of almost every activity in urgent italics. I had been rebelliously judging the workbook for months.

“I am making an effort,” I mumbled into Catrageous. He purred in agreement.

“It’s empty.” Mom said flatly.

“Maybe drawing pictures of my emotions isn’t the effort I was talking about.” *And you should talk,* I wanted to add, but the words dissolved like ice chips on my tongue. I imagined the shape Mom’s Grief would take. A perfect scale map of Rachel’s room, maybe.

Mom sat on the edge of the bed and leaned forward, balancing her elbows on her knees. “I wish you wouldn’t give up on this stuff before you’ve even tried it. I know you think it’s silly—”

“Hear, hear.” I lifted Catrageous to the sky like a flute of champagne.

“—BUT. You can’t judge something you haven’t experienced. It’s not going to kill you, Caroline. It might even help.” She slapped her hands against her thighs. “Or it won’t, and you won’t have lost anything but time. You can be a little harsh sometimes, you know? A little cold. To your father and I. And…others. We’re just trying to help.”

She swept a few wispy strands of hair neatly under her bandana. A glint of light
refracted from her watch onto the wall, and the cat launched off my shoulder, claws deployed, after it. I pretended to rearrange some chalk in the box and waited for the heat to drain from my face.

“I just don’t know what else to do,” she continued. “Every time, you brush me off, tell me you’ll do it, and then you just keep on ignoring the people who—hang on.” She turned an ear toward the stereo, eyebrows raised. “Did he just say the c-word?”

“What? What c-word?” I faked a coughing fit, hoping to drown out the lyrics. I couldn’t remember them all, but I knew she’d freak out if she listened closely.

“Didn’t he just say ‘That you-know-what’s not breathing’? I think that’s what he said.”

“That girl,” I lied. “I’m pretty sure he said ‘that girl’.”

Her face hardened like concrete. “I don’t like you listening to this kind of stuff. Where did you get this?”

“Neil,” I admitted. There wasn’t really a believable alternative.

“Of course.” She threw her hands up, a gesture of defeat.

“It’s just music, Mom. You don’t have to be such a prude.”

“I’m not a prude,” she said. “But I don’t think this is good for you. Garbage in, garbage out.”

“That’s such a Mom Line.” It was something she pulled out whenever characters in a movie cursed too much or a sex scene came on, like she needed to perform her disapproval for the room. No one is making a big deal out of this but you, I always wanted to say, but adults never let you contest them on maturity.

“You need better influences.” She said firmly. I knew she meant Neil.

“Not this again.”
“I’m serious. I’m sure he’s a perfectly nice boy, but—”

“But what?”

She batted away an imaginary fly, annoyed. “Don’t make me the bad guy just because I don’t want you around drugs.”

I clenched my jaw. “It was pot, Mom. For his arthritis. Neil didn’t even know about it. Besides, his dad is one of the nicest, most interesting guys I’ve met, if you want to talk about good influences.”

We hung out in the garage instead of his dad’s house chiefly because Neil was embarrassed by Dave’s longwinded-ness. His dad held court instead of conversing, launching into story after story that began with “Did you kids know…?” We never knew. Dave was an everything nerd, from history to the history of taxidermy to fountain pens, and their house looked a little like one of his museum exhibits in progress, old coins and dimpled arrowheads and busts of dead presidents crowding every surface.

“It’s an illegal drug, Caroline. It doesn’t matter what it’s for.”

“What was that you were just saying a minute ago?” I couldn’t help but raise my voice. “About not being able to judge something if you haven’t experienced it?”

“That’s different.” Her jaw pulsed.

“How?”

“It just is, and you know it is. I don’t need to explain why drug abuse and grief counseling are different.”

“Grief counseling.”

“What?”

“You said ‘grief counseling.’ I thought Silver Liningz wasn’t grief counseling.” I
stared her down and watched the prim indignation fade from her face.

“It’s not. That’s—” she sighed, and rubbed her palms on her jeans. “I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry. But drugs are bad news, and I don’t want you around them.”

“I’m not around them,” I said defiantly.

“Or people who use them. Who we are is reflected by the company we keep, whether you like it or not.”

“That’s funny,” I said, “because I don’t think I’m very much like you at all.”

She looked as if I’d slapped her. She pinched a dried clump of mascara from her lashes and blinked hard, squinting at her fingers instead of me. “I swore I would never be like my mother when I was your age, but I act more like her every day.”

“What’s wrong with acting like Granny?”

“Nothing. She wasn’t the world’s best mom—and I know I’m not either,” she interrupted, holding up a hand, “but she was the mom I needed, and she was great with you girls. It just starts to feel deterministic after a while.”

“I see.” I grabbed the stereo remote from the nightstand and muted the volume.

“Do you know what ‘deterministic’ means?”

“Nope.”

“Like I was destined to become her no matter what I tried to do differently. Like it was hardwired into me, and I didn’t have a say.”

It was Jessie’s complaint about Puck. Everything was changing, and none of it felt like it was in our control. I knew the feeling, but I wasn’t ready to resign myself to that world.

My phone chirped in my pocket, and Mom grabbed the laundry basket and started to
“Just think about it,” she said. “There’s a lot of poor role models out there. I hope you choose to surround yourself with positive ones.” She grabbed the *Silver Liningz* workbook from the floor and draped it over the stereo as she left.

I slipped out my phone. A new text, from Puck’s family cell number (he didn’t have his own):

CARY HAS PLAYED THE CHIMP CARD. WE MEET AT THE RES TO DISCUSS OUR IMPENDING DROWNING DEATHS. TOMORROW 10 AM.

I let the air out of my cheeks and slouched back into the wall, inviting the pain where it pressed into my shoulder blades. A silver lining: he must have dug my note out of the trash can after I’d left. I should have guessed. With Puck, curiosity always trumped pride.

Eventually.
CHAPTER 7

The Coralville Reservoir was about twenty minutes away, so Jessie picked me up the next morning in an unfamiliar minivan. It had to be at least fifteen years old; patches of peeling blue paint curled up on the hood like chocolate shavings.

“This is different,” I said, thumping the captain’s chair in the passenger side as I hopped in. A cloud of what I hoped was dust spun up from the seat.

“It’s Dad’s new baby.” Jess shifted into drive and the minivan groaned in response.

“‘New’?”

“Yep. Plymouth Voyager. He bought it in an online auction.”

“I think they literally stopped making these in 2001.”

“Exactly. Dad says it’s an antique, and antiques only appreciate in value.”

I smiled at the window. I was never sure whether to take the things the Fullers said seriously, or as some thick irony I was too dumb to grasp. It didn’t seem to matter much; they played along either way.

“So have you talked to Puck?” I asked, searching her face for a reaction. She looked nicer than usual; she’d tamed her thick brown hair into a French braid, and swapped the usual glitter eyeliner for something subtler.

“Not really.” She kept her eyes on the road and her hands and ten and two. That was a bad sign. I slouched into the dusty seat and waited for an explanation, but she didn’t seem
interested in talking for once.

The res was teeming with adults in matching orange t-shirts when we arrived. The morning breeze blew chilly across the water, and I tried to rub goosebumps from my arms as we picked our way across the parking lot.

“Watch it, Cary,” Jess warned, jerking her head at a pair of long-necked geese tearing savagely into an old sneaker. The Coralville goose population was famously aggressive, and we gave the shoe surgeons a wide berth as we skirted toward the water’s edge. An old guy with a ponytail handed us a registration packet at the check-in table, and Jess and I trudged up a hill to a nearby tree to scan its contents while we waited for Puck and Neil.

“The Corridor Cardboard Boat Regatta,” Jess read, leafing through the official rulebook. “People take this seriously, huh?”

“Seems so.” I plopped onto the dirt and immediately regretted it; the dew-damp ground soaked through the thighs of my jeans.

Jess inhaled deeply, then tossed the rulebook aside and turned to face me, her eyes determined. “Puck’s text said you played the Chimp Card. Why.”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.” There was an edge to her voice I wasn’t used to.

I pretended to scan the crowd for Puck and Neil. “It was justified. I might have to go to summer school. Or…worse.” Admitting it to Jess made it feel even more shameful. She racked up straight A’s without even trying. “I needed to tell Valline I had a project.”

“And the detention?” She was pushing hard, driving at something I didn’t understand.

“How did you know I had detention?”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Everyone in church knew you had detention. Hawthorne wasn’t
exactly subtle. I’m surprised God himself didn’t hop off the cross to offer you last rites when he heard. Well,” she backpedaled with a wicked smile, “not that surprised.”

“I think,” I said ponderously, “you’ll find it’s Jesus on the cross.”

“Eh. Six of one.” She shrugged. “Seriously, though. Is everything okay?”

“What? Yes. Everything’s fine.”

“Okay,” she said. “It’s just…I always tell you what’s going on in my life.” She threw it off like it was nothing, which meant it was everything.

“It’s self-preservation,” I said. “I tell you the important stuff. If I told you everything that was going on in my life, then you’d know what a loser I am.” It was half-true.

“You’re not a loser, Caroline,” she said, eyes wide.

I shrugged, tongue-tied, and was grateful to catch sight of Puck and Neil shouldering their way through the crowd toward us. Jessie turned back to the info packet and pretended to be lost in the regatta rules, her reddening cheeks the only sign she’d seen them.

“Morning, skippers,” Neil said, uncharacteristically chipper. He’d swapped his Marlin’s cap for a Day-Glo visor topped with an enormous foam parrot. It had the kitschy stink of the Dollar Tree all over it.

“It’s no use,” Puck told us by way of greeting. “The parrot has seeped into his bloodstream. Neil is now under its control.”

“There is no Neil,” Neil joked in an android voice. “There is only Parrot.”

“Neil,” Jessie said patiently, “What is going on with your head?”

He grinned, tweaking the parrot beak at her. “It’s pirate-y, right? I thought it could be our theme.” A team of adults gave him the side-eye as they sidled past us up the hill, but he didn’t seem to notice.
“So we’re stealing someone else’s boat and boarding it, then? I love it already. Huge time saver.” Puck plopped onto the ground next to me, brushing dirt off the backs of his calves. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” I said. “Though I have reservations about the pirate theme, having recently read about the plight of Somali captains in the third world.”

Jessie squealed. “So you did read it. I knew you’d love it!”

Neil and I exchanged a silent, meaningful glance, the sincerity of which seemed compromised by the neon parrot bopping on his head in the breeze.

Puck drilled his finger into my shoulder like a woodpecker and dropped his voice conspiratorially. “Hey. Seriously. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. It felt like I’d been doing nothing but answering that question lately. “It’s fine. That detention stuff was just one of Kelly’s pranks.”

“A little mean-spirited for a prank,” he said, eyes dark. “And how is our favorite deserter? I wasn’t aware he’d returned.”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “Kelly is Kelly. I don’t really want to talk about it.” I felt both embarrassed by him and protective of him at the same time, and I didn’t want the two separate parts of my life to intersect any more than they had already. Puck’s reservoir-blue eyes bored into mine, a challenge. He didn’t say anything more, but I knew he wasn’t going to drop it.

Feedback shrieked from an old megaphone, breaking his stare. Ponytail Organizer was motioning all of the teams toward the water’s edge while he barked largely unintelligible orders through the megaphone. I climbed up and brushed damp soil from the back of my jeans, standing tippy-toe for a better look at the action. They’d set up a floating cardboard
stage—a boat from a past competition, I guessed—and it bobbed gently behind them in the res’s calm waters.

“We should probably take notes, huh.” Neil said, squinting at the water. He slid his sketchpad out from under his arm and Jessie held out an expectant hand: she was the only one with decent handwriting.

Ponytail adjusted the levels on his megaphone and launched into opening remarks, welcoming old and new teams to the Iowa City/Cedar Rapids Corridor Cardboard Regatta. We had two weeks, he reminded, to construct our boats before the race. “It’s more than just a race, though, as our past competitors know. We give prizes for Most Artistic, Best Team Costumes, and—lest we forget—there’s the “Hot Mess” award!” He paused for a laugh, and the over-forty crowd responded generously.

Jessie winced. “There’s nothing sadder than old people trying to get hip with the youths.”

“Know the warning signs,” Puck said in an announcer-voice. “Is your adult experimenting with slang?”

A second man, who seemed way too large to be supported by cardboard, took the floating stage with tentative, wobbly steps and shouted some more instructions I could barely hear. Neil, however, had a hand cupped around one ear, and was translating animatedly to Jess.

“Oh, so he’s basically saying we just have to math it. If a man his size will float in a boat about—”

“It’s sixty-two pounds.” Jess was already scribbling rapid-fire calculations across his sketch pad.
“The boat?”

“The water,” she said, like it should have been obvious. “A cubic foot of water weighs like sixty-two and a half pounds. So if we add up our weights…” she trailed off, filling the page with round, bubbly Jess-writing.

Puck started rattling off random numbers while she calculated, trying to throw her off.

“127. 13. 42.”

“Quit pulling my pigtails, Puck,” she snapped, not bothering to look up from the paper. He swallowed a number as it was halfway formed. “Huh,” she said after a few seconds. “It doesn’t need to be nearly as big as I thought.”

“That’s a relief,” I said. “Because I have no idea where we’re going to get all this cardboard.”

“We can dumpster dive,” Neil said, the parrot nodding in agreement. “It doesn’t have to look nice. It just has to be corrugated.”

“Oh, good,” Puck said. “So the water will have more places to infiltrate as we sink into the scummy lake.”

“You seal the edges,” I scoffed. “Obviously.”

Three heads and one parrot swiveled toward me in unison.

“What? I can read.” I brandished the “PERMITTED MATERIALS” list from the registration packet. “You can use silicone, paint, water sealant…”

“I bet Dad has all of that crap in the garage,” Neil said.

“It doesn’t say how we’re supposed to propel the thing, though,” I said, scanning through the list a second time. “Are we supposed to make cardboard oars, too?”

“We could lash a bunch of geese to the front and have them propel us through the
“And you’re volunteering as Chief Goose Herder?” Jess said. “Because I want nothing to do with those thugs unless and until they’re made into pillows.”

“Careful, Jess,” Puck warned. “Their spies are everywhere.”

My gaze drifted to a gang of geese sunning themselves on the reservoir’s far bank.

“I think we’ll be okay,” Jess said, and it took me a moment to realize she was talking about the boat. She closed the sketchpad and tossed it to Neil. “At least, in theory. It should be seaworthy if we stay within those dimensions. But it’s up to you guys to make sure the real thing lives up to the design.”

“Do I still get to design it, though?” Neil asked. “I’ve got some pretty sweet fish templates brewing.”

“You’re the architect, Neil,” she said. “I’m just the structural engineer.”

I cleared my throat pointedly. “So what does that make me and Puck?”

“Eye candy,” Puck said, layering the disgust on thick. “I don’t know about you, Cary, but I’m getting a little tired of only being recognized for my body.”

“It is pretty recognizable,” Jess admitted. “Like, ‘hey, look at that guy’s weird body.’”

“Damn you, Fuller.” Puck mock-shook a fist at the sky. Their eyes met for a moment and Jess fought back a smile, flicking her braid over one shoulder as she tilted her face to the sun. Some dynamic between them had shifted while I was heart hunting with Kelly, and I couldn’t put my finger on what it was.

Neil seemed to have noticed, too; he was staring, jaw agape, a perfect imitation of the parrot on his hat.

“Should we head back to the garage, then?” I asked. “Build a model?”


water,” Neil offered.
“And miss the rest of the opening ceremonies? Absolutely.” Puck hopped up, foot slipping sideways over a tree root as he tried to balance on the uneven ground. Jess winced.

We split up into our carpool groups and promised to meet at Neil’s when we got back into town. The savage shoe geese were still camped in the same corner of the parking lot when we got back to the car, but the dissection was over. A dusty gray piece of heel rubber dangled from one of their beaks like a warning.

The doorway was blocked by a pile of water-stained cardboard when we got to Neil’s. Somewhere between Coralville and the garage, the boys had stumbled on a jackpot of appliance boxes and empty twelve-packs.

“We found them in a yard,” Neil said vaguely, offering me his arm as I scaled Mt. Garbage. I didn’t press the issue. It wasn’t hard to imagine them raiding some college student’s recycling while he slept it off. Neil’s house was in Goosetown, one of the oldest parts of the city. In Iowa City, old typically meant cliquey neighborhood associations and rich women spearheading preservation initiatives, but a lot of the old Goosetown homes had been converted to cheap rentals for U of I students in the eighties. No one was interested in gentrifying duplexes, apparently.

I collapsed into my usual musty beanbag and wriggled my hips down into it while Puck and Jess rock-paper-scissors-ed over the rocker/recliner. Neil rolled a can of grape soda along the floor to me before I could ask.

“Did you like Lou Reed?” He’d swapped the parrot visor back for his worn Marlin’s cap, and he was warm, familiar Neil again.

“I loved it.” I popped open the soda tab and slurped a mouthful of warm purple fizz.
“What’s the super long song? The one about the dead girl.”

“‘Hipster Bullshit,’” Puck called. Jess snipped at his hand with her fingers, and he groaned. “Two out of three?”

“It’s called ‘Street Hassle,’” Neil said, glaring at Puck.

“Huh.” I licked the sticky soda film from my teeth. “That’s an understatement.”

He nodded. “It’s like that story Hawthorne made us read. ‘Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.’ Remember how he wouldn’t shut up about the title?”

“Oh God,” Jess interrupted, yanking up the recliner’s footrest with a grinding screech of bent metal on metal. “‘Occurrence.’” She mimicked Hawthorne’s sweeping hand gestures, nearly upending her own soda in the process. “‘Occurrence, class. A man dies a violent death, and to the universe, it’s just one tiny, insignificant occurrence’”

“WE ARE ALL JUST DUST MOTES FLOATING IN AN INFINITE, INDIFFERENT COSMOS.” Puck flopped into a beanbag and yawned, stretching his arms behind his head. “I’ll never understand why adults get so rapturous about that stuff, like it’s this grand revelation. If you want proof of an indifferent universe, just read the Xavier lunch menus.”

“I happen to enjoy ‘Dry Bread with Slice of Cheese’ day,” Jessie said.

Neil ignored them. “You should look up the music video for that song,” he said to me. “It’s great. It’s mostly just shots of Lou in dark glasses drinking out of an old bottle of Coke. And then he makes out with a lady who just brushed her teeth.”

I saw Puck and Jess exchange glances.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “I gotta go with Puck on this one. Sounds like hipster bullshit.”

“I think you actually have to be cool to be a hipster,” I said, trying to mask my
annoyance. “Should we maybe work on this thing?”

Puck toed a piece of cardboard from his beanbag perch. “Ehhh.”

“Hey, I did the math,” Jess said. “That’s my contribution. I’m just going to read a book and supervise. Speaking of...” She clamped her hands together like lobster claws at me.

“Yeah, yeah.” I dug through my purse and pulled out *Pirate’s Bounty*. The cover had gotten creased in my bag, but I figured she wouldn’t mind. I lobbed it over to her and she caught it between flat palms.

“Sick ending, right?”

“I didn’t actually get that far,” I admitted. “My free reading time in detention was...interrupted.” I could feel Puck trying to catch my eye meaningfully, and I squinted up at the unfinished ceiling rafters.

“Keep it, then. I didn’t know you were still reading.” She aimed the book like a boomerang.

“Oh, that’s...nah, it’s fine. I’m pretty much done. It wasn’t really my thing.”

Jess lowered the book and gave me The Look. “Why? Because it’s not about dead drug addicts?”

“That’s only one song,” Neil piped up. “Well, on that album.”

The Look intensified.

“What? It just wasn’t my thing.” I slurped some soda, trying to look casual, but it went down the wrong way and I doubled over coughing. “Besides,” I wheezed through involuntary tears, “I don’t think you can really compare Lou Reed to a paperback romance.”

“Why?” She asked, eyes blazing. “Is one just *objectively* better than the other? Just because some girl croaks instead of falls in love, it’s artsy and cool?”
I rolled my eyes. “Jess, don’t make this a thing. You’re allowed to like romance novels. No one’s trying to make you feel bad about it.”

“The fact that you have to reassure me I’m ‘allowed’ to like them says a lot,” she said, a crispness to her voice that meant she was sliding into Debate Mode. I pressed my lips together, regretting I’d said anything. Jess lived to argue; her face lit up like a power plant when she sensed an opponent, currents charging behind her eyes.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said. “But you have to admit, they’re a little formulaic.”

“The Blank’s Blank Blank,” Puck repeated, then withered in Jess’s gaze.

“They’re fun,” I conceded. “I get it. Just kind of cliché. It’s all the same story, just, you know, sometimes it’s on a beach and sometimes it’s in a stable in Victorian England.”

“Sure, there’s a lot of romance novels out there,” Jess said. “And there are just as many about dead people, or testosterone-fueled drug addicts, or teen moms with rape babies.”


She sighed. “I’m just saying, if you’re going to pick on clichés, pick on them equally. I think it’s crap we act like love stories are soft options just because they’re not actively trying to nudge us closer to suicide.”

“I get it,” I said, throwing my hands up in surrender. “Really, I do. You’ve made your point. I don’t think tragedy is inherently smarter than romance.”

“I sense a ‘but’ there,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

“But nothing,” I said. “Maybe everyone just relates to some things better than others, and that’s why we seek them out.”

“You can’t relate to being in love?”
“A man with a toothache can—”

“Oh, not that crap again,” Jess said, fighting to extract herself from the recliner. She huffed over to the workbench, face pink from exertion, and ripped the Chekov quote from the calendar. “That’s so…two days ago.” She squared the calendar in front of her face. “We’re turning over a new leaf. New day, new wisdom.”

“And what’s today’s wisdom?”

“‘I’m not afraid of death; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.’ Great,” she said, letting the calendar fall from her hand. “More irony.”

Neil snorted, and smacked his chest with one hand, by tic or by choice.

“What’s wrong with irony?” I asked, feigning offense. “Has the snubbed become the snubber?”

“I’m trying to be serious for once about something that’s important to me,” she said, hands perched Mom-like on her hips. “You’re like Irony Central all the time. Public Irony Number One.”

“I played the Chimp Card,” I said. “We’re not supposed to be arguing.”

“We’re talking.”

“I’d like to argue that point.”

“Guys.” He said it so softly, I almost didn’t turn around, but the tone shivered against my spine like ice water. It was the tone of someone fighting for control, diverting power away from all non-essential functions, a tone I’d only heard from Neil once before.

I leapt out of the beanbag, kicking over my soda in the process, but I left it to spill, soda stretching out along the concrete floor in foamy purple fingers. Neil was pummeling his shoulder with his right fist over and over again, hard enough to bruise. He was trapped in one
of his tic loops, heaping physical abuse on himself. To an outsider, he might have looked like a football player preening after a touchdown. A near-mechanical movement, his fist slamming somewhere between his collar bone and shoulder. *Thud. Thud.*

I grabbed his forearm and tried to hold it in place, but it jerked easily out of my grasp. *Thud.* He was surprisingly strong. It took both of my arms to pin down his one, and I had to lean in to him for a better grip as his fist pulsed, frustrated, against my hands. He smelled like ivory soap and clove chewing gum, and as I met his eyes, I saw that they were clear and calm. He was still Neil, I realized with a two-pronged pang of recognition and rage. Just trapped, his body glitching in a program he couldn’t override.

Puck took his place on Neil’s other side, hands hovering above his left arm in case it, too, started to rebel. Jess sat cross-legged in front of him and read aloud from *Pirate’s Bounty*—it helped, Neil had told us once, to have something else to try to focus on—her voice as grave and composed as if she had been reading the Gospel at Friday mass.

We held him for five agonizing minutes, each doing our part to halt his self-destruction, until he let out a deep breath and wiggled his fingers in my hand to let me know he was okay. I let go, and watched as the blood rushed to fill the tiny white splotches on his forearm where my fingertips had dug in.

“Thanks,” he said, rubbing his wrist gently. We didn’t talk about it anymore, just turned to the pile of cardboard on the floor and started working without purpose, desperate to feel something bend in our hands. I hummed the cello line to *Street Hassle* in my head while Puck and Jess argued about fin placement and Neil mixed experimental paint colors in a plastic ice cream pail. We were a long way away from having anything to paint, but he bent diligently over the cardboard anyway, swiping careful swatches of color onto a test piece like
a scientist preparing samples.

And on the toolbench above it all, the Frankenmarmot held vigil, deranged eyes watching us, lips frozen in a silent snarl. I caught his glassy gaze when I got up to stretch my legs; it reminded me a little of *The Great Gatsby* and Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s Metaphorically Resonant, All-Seeing Eyes, and I couldn’t help but laugh when I thought of it. Somehow, I didn’t think Hawthorne would appreciate the connection.
CHAPTER 8

Sunday meant taekwondo lessons for Jess and Grease, Jr. rehearsal for Puck, so we took the day off from boat building. I was glad to have the time to myself; Kelly had been needling me all weekend to draft the letter to Jack Jurgen Jr so he could “take the next step.” I wasn’t sure what that meant, but the empty sheet protector in my heart binder was all the nagging I needed.

I squared a few clean pieces of loose leaf against a clipboard and tugged the bulletin board out from under my bed for inspiration. A couple of the pushpins had fallen out, so I fumbled around in a thicket of carpet fibers, waiting for them to prick my hand.

I hopped up to tip the rogue pins back into their jar without thinking, but froze halfway to my dresser, cupped palm hovering in the air. They’d come out of the map. I had to put them back.

My breath beat back warm against my cheeks as I hunched over the bulletin board like a jeweler, feeling for the tiny holes where they’d anchored the map to the soft cork. What Cheer and Perry, Iowa. I’d almost lost two organs. I pushed them back in and wrapped the blue yarn around them, doubling the loops for good measure.

“Routine maintenance?” Dad was leaning against my doorway in a wrinkled red tracksuit, arms folded across his chest.

I blushed. “A couple pins fell out. Just fitting them back in.”

“Mmm. You hungry?”
“Always.”

“Bachelor party?”

I smiled. “On my way.” I propped the bulletin board up against the mattress and took the clipboard and paper with me.

“Bachelor parties” were vintage Dad. Back when Rachel was wedding planning, she and Mom would often disappear for whole weekends, testing caterers and comparing stationery stock. Maybe Dad was worried I’d get lonely or jealous, but he always bragged loudly to Mom and Rachel that we were going to have a “bachelor party” in their absence. “We’ll eat Blue Bunny straight from the tub with our hands!” he’d shout as they walked to the car. “We’ll bet on the big game. Right, Cary?”

Rachel had just rolled her eyes and smiled.

The occasion had changed, but the routine stayed the same. Mom was stuck at a bridal showcase all day, so Dad and I seized the moment and ate popcorn with M&Ms for dinner in front of the TV (A Steven Seagal movie marathon—nothing is certain in life but death, taxes, and Steven Seagal on basic cable.)

“Under Siege?” I guessed as the opening credits rolled.

Dad shook his head and choked down some popcorn with a slurp from his white wine spritzer. “Under Siege 2. This one has Kathryn Heigl.”

“Well, we’ve all gotta start somewhere.” Catrageous jumped onto my lap with a chirp, and I balanced the clipboard on his flabby back, pencil hovering pregnant over the page. The first two heart letters had been easy—I hadn’t known who I was writing to. Now that I knew—or maybe knew—I wasn’t sure how to start. The thought of addressing Jack Jurgen, Jr left me tongue-tied.
Glad my big sis could help keep the Honkers legacy alive, I scratched on the first line, mostly to get it out of my system. I folded the page into a paper crane and tossed it overhand into the waste basket across the room.

Dad grabbed an afghan from the back of the couch and draped it over his chest, nestling the popcorn bowl on top. “What are you working on over there?”

“Geometry homework,” I lied.

“Good girl.”

I doodled a rhombus in the margins of the next page to keep the guilt at bay. I should have been working on Geometry. I’d been copying off of Jess too much lately, and she was starting to get self-righteous.

Dear Jack, I started, but that felt wrong, too. Dear Mr. Jurgen, Jr.? Dear Douchebag? I left it anyway.

Dear Jack,

I don’t know if you remember my last two letters, or if you even got them. But I had to try again. I think you may have received my sister’s heart last June.

“Munchkin,” Dad said. “Toss me the remote. Steve’s emoting.”

I pointed to my lap. “I have a cat.” I ruffled Catrageous’s fur against the grain. A cloud of ginger cat hair spiraled into the air, catching the light from the TV.

He sighed and kicked the blanket off his legs. “Exemption noted.”

I’m not looking for friendship or sympathy or even a thank you note. God knows I don’t deserve one, and Rachel can’t hear us anymore. But I am looking for confirmation. If you did receive the other letters from the hospital—if you did receive Rachel’s heart—could you
Could you what? What did I want from him?

I erased the last line, the old rubber streaking red across the page and paused. Gunshots ripped through the surround sound, pinging metallically as they ricocheted away from Our Hero.

*I think it would help all of us*, I wrote instead, tracing over the letters a second time so they’d stand out against the smudges. *We need to know where she is so we can finally lose her.*

I shifted a sleepy Catrageous from my lap to my shoulder and toted him to the family computer. I had to click through a few pages of stolen iPods and lost puppies to find it, but it was still there.

“Missing: heart.”

I printed Kelly’s Craigslist ad and stapled it to the back of the notebook paper, then folded them both into an envelope and sealed it with one of Mom’s bakery stickers. *You Take the Cake!* it cheered in flowery cursive.

“HE’S CLIMBING A ROPE THAT’S NOT ATTACHED TO ANYTHING!” Dad bellowed from the living room, and I used the distraction to sneak out to the curb and slide the letter into our mailbox. The cicadas were deafening, hurling prayers from their tiny insect lungs to the sky. I leaned against the mailbox and soaked in the white noise for a minute, a cleansing drone like gunfire.

LETTER’S IN THE MAILBOX, I texted Kelly. CAN’T SEE YOU TONIGHT.

He fired back immediately, like he had been staring at his phone: ON MY WAY.

I headed back inside and made Dad another spritzer, just the way he liked it (“Easy on the wine, heavy on the spritz”).
“Thank you,” he said, wincing. “My sixteen-year-old daughter, the bartender. Let’s keep those skills out of your college admissions essays.”

“Fifteen,” I corrected. “Till Wednesday. I would have let you make your own, but you had a cat.” I pointed to where the fickle Catrageous was pooled at his feet, whiskers twitching while he dreamed of opposable thumbs and free love.

I half-watched the rest of Under Siege 2, picking through the old maids at the bottom of the popcorn bowl and chewing the partially popped nubbins from a few kernels. Dad and the cat dozed. Steven Seagal fired a bullet through a laptop. The villain wailed and died.

I jumped up when I thought I heard a car door and licked salt from my fingertips, peering through the lace curtains as they undulated in the cold blast from the air vent. I didn’t see Kelly, but the little red flag on the mailbox was raised triumphantly, a message not for the mailman but for me. My mind leapt to polar explorers and their conquest flags, driving national emblems into the ice like stakes, to Xavier kids carving their names into desks with the pointy ends of paper clips. No matter the accomplishment, our messages the same: I was here, I was here, I was here.

Dad dropped me off at Xavier early the next morning so he could get to a work meeting. The parking lot was dead, a field of empty concrete flushed gold in the early light. I figured I’d kill time in the cafeteria until the 8:05 bell, but I ran into Puck leaning against the front entrance, frowning into his dog-eared Grease, Jr. script.

“Trouble in paradise?” I pressed my back to the plate glass window and slid down next to him.

“They changed a song. One week before the show opens, and we have to learn a
whole new goddamn number. Sorry, Jesus,” he added, waving a limp hand toward the cross that hung over the entrance. He tossed the script on the ground and rubbed his eyes with his palms. “I am surrounded by Philistines, Cary. And this is supposed to be a Catholic school.”

“What happened?”

“The T-Birds wouldn’t stop changing the lyrics for ‘Born to Hand Jive.’ Well, lyric. Between that and the accompanying hand gestures—”

“I get the idea,” I said, stopping his wrist as he mimed a lewd gesture. “The ‘jive’ was absent.”

He nodded miserably, kicking at nothing with one foot. “I suggested murdering them all and replacing them with attractive mannequins, but Herr Director was not convinced. So now we have four days to learn brand new choreography. Speaking of which,” he plunged a hand into his messenger bag, “Happy Birthday.” He pressed an envelope into my hands.

“You’re a little early,” I said, ripping the top off with my teeth. I shook two Grease, Jr. tickets out into my palm.

“Wanted you to save the date. Friday at seven. You’ll have front row tickets to the trainwreck.”

“Happy Birthday to me, indeed.”

“It’s not your only present,” he huffed, batting a ladybug out of his nest of curly hair. “We’re all chipping in for something else. But it’ll be a little late this year. Because reasons.”

“Hmmm.” I tucked the tickets into the front pocket of my backpack. “So you and Jess are getting along, then?”

“So you and Kelly are getting along, then?” he returned.

I rolled my eyes. “He’s helping me with something. It’s not a big deal.”
“Sure. It required wearing a tuxedo and faking a tragedy to get you out of detention, but it’s not a big deal.”

I stared out across the parking lot, shielding my eyes from the morning sun with one hand. Miss Valline was slipping out of a silver Honda near the back of the lot, carrying a child-sized backpack in one hand. Mrs. Potato Head-themed, no doubt. I tucked my face in toward the window. I’d rather deal with Puck’s needling than hers.

“He’s been pretty okay,” I said, breath fogging a white halo on the safety glass. “I think he’s trying to make amends.”

“Better late than never.” Puck said briskly.

I drummed my hands on my knees, trying to keep my face casual. “So what happened with you and Jess? Did you guys talk?”

He blushed, feigning intense concentration as he fiddled with the laces of his already-tied sneakers. “She didn’t tell you anything?”

“Nope.”

“That’s a first.”

“So?”

He sighed and leaned his head against the glass. “I’ll tell you what, Cary. I’ll fill you in on Jess as soon as you tell me what you and Kelly are up to.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “It’s really not that important. Just something to—”

“Can it,” he hissed, eyes wide. “Tammy, three o clock.”

I groaned, a little too loud.

“Uh oh, Caroline!” Tammy chirped behind me. “Stomach ache?”
“Uh, yup.” I leapt off the ground, brushing concrete dust from the back of my jeans.

“Was just heading in to the nurse.”

“I’ll walk you there,” she said, pulling the door open for me. “Good morning, Mr. Wasserman.”

“Is it?” Puck tilted his head up to the sky, dumbfounded, as though he’d just realized it were there.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “Yes it is. Caroline?”

I narrowed my eyes at Puck and ducked under her arm into the school.

“So sorry to hear you’re feeling poorly,” Tammy said, steering me through the entrance. She walked too close to me, and I had to stare at my feet to avoid tripping over her enormous clogs.

“It’s okay.” I stopped before she could follow me into the front office. “I can take it from here.” Her milky blue eyes bored into mine, and I found myself longing to switch them out, Mrs. Potato Head-style, for a less creepy pair.

“Any update on that extra credit project?” She angled her body in to me, blocking the door. “You’ll need to get some written work in soon to your advisor to grade.”

“Gotcha.”

“Oh, good! So you’ll have something to them Friday?”

“I…” Friday? The stomach ache was starting to feel real.

Tammy squinted down at me. “Now, remind me, who is your advisor for this project?”

I gummed at the air like a fish. I had nothing. No advisor. No explanation. My eyes darted toward the front doors and Puck, watching us brazenly from the other side. He
couldn’t help me. I had to swallow my pride. I had to go for the nuclear option.

“My advisor? It’s…oh, no,” I moaned, doubling over in what I hoped was a convincing portrayal of someone on the verge of a pantsplosion. “My stomach.”

“Cary?” Tammy squatted in front of me, trying to peer through my hair to my face. “Cary, look at me. Are you okay?”

“No,” I moaned through clenched teeth. I squeezed my legs together, clawing wildly at the air. “I need the bathroom. It’s an rnngghmergency.”

Tammy’s startled expression was all the permission I needed. I caught Puck’s eye through the front window again as I danced away, clutching my butt like a cartoon character. He had scrawled acting notes on the back of a receipt with a Sharpie, and was pressing it against the glass. “Abysmal,” it read. “3/10.” He shook his head at me in case I’d missed the message, the portrait of supreme disdain.

“Everyone’s a critic,” I muttered under my breath, and I thought, for one wild moment, that I heard Tammy, behind me, whisper “Amen.”
I kept my head down for the next couple days, jogging between classes in case Valline tried to ambush me again. I should have been lining up an advisor, but asking any teacher during the last week of school felt pointless. All I was going to get, I knew, was a prim lecture on procrastination and responsibility: adults loved nothing more than punishing you with life lessons, even when they came too late to do you any good.

My birthday, at least, went smoothly. With two days to go till summer, the teachers had all but gone to sleep at their posts, turning to a series of “educational” games to kill time instead: Biology Jeopardy, Geometry Jeopardy, even Gatsby-themed Hangman in American Lit (though Hawthorne soured it by insisting we called each other “Old Sport”). Plus, there were snacks: Mom had baked Oreo cupcakes for me to take to homeroom, frosted with little turquoise hearts and “16” in white gel.

I inhaled the two leftovers in the car after school, sucking off the frosting before it could melt in the afternoon sun.

“I don’t get one?” Kelly pouted as the Metro chugged down First Ave.

“No,” I spat around a mouthful of cake. “Cupcakes are distributed at the discretion of the birthday tyrant. Besides, you get Real Cake at dinner.”

He stared wistfully as I lapped crumbs from the inside of an empty wrapper. Kelly had agreed to shepherd me to the DMV before birthday dinner—they were only open till five, and I didn’t want to wait until Saturday for Dad could take me. I knew it didn’t really matter, but getting my license on my actual birthday seemed ceremonial, a rite of passage.
like my first communion. Sixteen came with privileges, and I intended to exploit them immediately. I had diem to carpe.

Kelly hung around the grimy, fluorescent-lit DMV waiting room while I breezed through the written test, missing only one question about recommended stopping distance in the rain (my answer was too conservative). I took the printout with my results to the woman behind the desk, and she plucked it from my hand with grotesquely long fingernails, shellacked in a Windex-blue.

“Ruben,” she called over one shoulder. “You free for a practical?”

“Mmmrf.” A plump man with jet-black hair and a tiny mustache emerged from behind a cubicle wall, chewing through the heel of a sub sandwich. He wiped crumbs from his downy black mustache hairs with a Java House napkin and gave me an appraising look. “You ready now?”

“Sure.” I tugged up the waistband of my jeans, suddenly self-conscious. Kelly’s head poked over the waiting room partition; he grinned and shot me a thumbs up.

“Well,” Ruben said, grabbing a clipboard. “Let’s head out to your car and check your lights and mirrors.”

Kelly tossed me the Metro keys as we filed past. “Knock ‘em dead, Cary Grant. 10 and 2.”

“It’s ‘9 and 3’ now,” I said. “They oughta yank your license. Ruben, please confirm that you will yank his license.”

Ruben smiled thinly and gestured to the door with his clipboard, revealing a planetary sweat stain under one arm.

“Thank you, Ruben,” Kelly called after us. “You’re a credit to your profession.”
(“SHHH,” hissed Fingernail Desk Lady.)

I was used to driving the Landboat, so it took me a few tries to acclimate to the Metro’s touchier pedals. Having Ruben in the car didn’t help: hearing his pen scratch against the clipboard with every jerky acceleration made me feel even clumsier.

I mastered the three-point turn well enough, and we circled back toward the glass recycling bins for the final item on his checklist: parallel parking. I’d only practiced it with cars, not traffic cones, and I tried to visualize one next to me now, frowning out the window as I squared the Metro with an imaginary seatback.

“You’ve got it,” Ruben said flatly. “Just ease her in.”

I cranked the steering wheel and reversed, little by little. I had it. I was perfectly even. All I had to do was straighten the wheel and—

“SQUO000O0NK.”

I slammed on the brakes and we jerked forward in our seats. The Metro’s back bumper had met an obstacle. And the obstacle was pissed.

“No, no, no,” I moaned, sliding the Metro into Park. Ruben was squinting into the side mirror, shaking his head at whatever I’d just hit.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and hopped out, ignoring the whine from the door ajar alert. A lone feather rested on the Metro’s bumper. I’d backed into an enormous goose. It crouched by the curb, trumpeting a throaty growl and beating one wing against its side as I approached.

Ruben poked his head out of the window. “Get in the car,” he said impatiently. “Let’s head back.”

I balled my hands into two tight fists and tried to blink away the prickling tears of embarrassment and anger. I’d done everything right, and I’d still managed to screw it up.
“That’s why we always check our mirrors,” Ruben warned as I climbed back in.

“I checked my mirrors,” I said, louder than I’d intended. “There was nothing there.”

He winced and tapped his pen against the clipboard. “Well. It was an accident. You can come back tomorrow.”

“Wait,” I said, trying to smooth the panic from my voice. “You’re failing me?”

“Well, I—” he ran a finger under his collar, tugging it away from his bulging neck. “I think we should just scrap this and have you try another day, don’t you?”

“But I aced the written test.”

“Perfect! So you’ll be ready next time.”

I swallowed hard and gripped the bottom of the steering wheel with both hands, trying to tamp a sob down into the Feelings Compartment while my chest heaved in betrayal. Ruben averted his eyes toward the passenger side window. He couldn’t wait to get out of the car, I knew, as far away from a crying teenage goose assaulter as possible. I took a deep breath.

“I think you should reconsider.”

“S-sorry?”

“I checked my mirrors. There was nothing there. The goose must have waddled out from behind those bins,” I pointed to the recycling dumpsters. “There’s no way anyone else would have seen it, either,” I said, voice rising with indignation. “You didn’t, did you?”

“No, but that’s not the point. There are rules.”

“Which rules?”

He unclipped a manual from his board. “It’s an automatic fail if you hit any fixed object…”
“A goose is not a fixed object.”

“I know that,” he snapped, leafing through the pages frantically. His face was red and sweaty, his pit stains even darker than when he’d first gotten into the car. I’d completely frazzled him. And in that moment of surprise and sympathy for my stressed supervisor, I started to laugh. Pinched and harsh at first, as it forced its way through ugly sobs, then resigned and resonant.

Ruben flopped the manual closed and tucked it between his legs. “Is everything…okay?” He raised a tentative hand as if to pat my arm, then let it fall limply to his side.

“Fine,” I said, dabbing under my eyes with a crumpled napkin I’d fished from the cupholder. “Just great. I’m failing at everything this year, including, apparently, my driver’s test. It’s my sixteenth birthday. And I may have just murdered a goose.”

His eyes widened, seizing on an epiphany. “We need to call animal control.”

“I know.” I sniffed back some mucus. “They’re nightmares. They’re bullying the whole town.”

“No, I mean,” he gulped. “We need to call about this particular goose. We need to get someone out to…put it down, I guess. We—we can’t just leave it. Right?” He sounded desperate.

“You’re asking me? If we should…”

“…put it down.”

We craned around in our seats to look for the goose at the same time. It was still trumpeting profanities, weaving drunkenly around a fire hydrant with one wing plastered to its side.
“I’m sorry,” Ruben decided, eyes still fixed on the tottering goose. “About your license, that is. But Happy Birthday, miss. Despite the circumstances.”

To Kelly’s credit, he didn’t laugh. We rode home without speaking, the radio on, I suspected, to cover the sound of my sniffles and give me some privacy. I found an old tube of concealer in the glove compartment—Rachel’s, I realized with a familiar rush that made my head spin—and dabbed it under my eyes, hoping it would depuff me and cover up some of the redness.

“You ready?” he asked as we pulled in the driveway. “I can take us around the block another time if you want.”

“I’m fine,” I said, channeling my inner Hans as I let a deep breath out through my nose. “Let’s rock.”

I smelled Dad’s special occasion spaghetti sauce simmering on the stove as soon as we entered and breathed deeply, letting the scent of carmelized garlic and onion wash over me. Food was calming. I understood food.

“Is that you, child?” Dad called from the kitchen.

“Reporting for duty.”

He shuffled into the living room, a wine glass wilting between his fingers, and kissed the top of my head. “Hasty Birdday!”

“Thanks, Dad. Cool apron.” He was still wearing his work clothes, but had swapped his hard-soled shoes for tiger slippers and covered his button down with one of mom’s lace-trimmed aprons.

“I thought so. Good to see you again, Kelly,” he said, eyes flicking toward his empty
hands. “Get you some wine?”

“That’d be swell.”

We followed him into the kitchen and hopped onto stools. Dad topped off his own wine before pouring Kelly a glass, and I feigned grabbing it for myself.

“Nice try,” he said, handing the glass to Kelly over my head. “I picked up a bottle of that sparkling goose you like from the Hy-Vee. You can have that instead.”

“Duck, Dad. Sparkling Duck. Champagne of juices.” I grabbed the cold bottle from the fridge and tipped some faux-booze into a frosty freezer mug.

“So how was the test? Did you crash?”

Kelly choked on some wine.

“Nope,” I said, blushing. “All good.”

“Is that Cary?” Mom poked her head around the corner. “Happy Birthday! How was the test?”

“Fine.”

“You got it, then?”

“Yep!” I said, forcing my voice into a cheerier octave.

“Well?” Dad opened his palms. “Let’s see the mugshot. You’re not an adult until you have a state ID that makes you look like a psychopath.”

“I...” I looked from Dad to Kelly to Mom’s floating head, helpless.

“They don’t give it to you there,” Kelly jumped in. “Haven’t for a couple years, I think, since they switched to the new machine. They give you a piece of paper and mail the real thing to you a week later. But I can attest from watching them take the photograph that Cary will make a fine murderer.”
Mom nodded, and disappeared again. Dad turned back to stove, tipping some wine from his glass into the now-empty meatball pan, scraping the bottom with a spatula while it sizzled and steamed.

“Is that true?” I whispered, leaning across the island to Kelly.

“Yup,” he murmured. I could smell the red wine, tart on his breath. “But you’d better pass it soon, or we’re both going to get in trouble.”

“I believe,” Dad said, spinning the burner dials back to zero, “that dinner is served.”

“I’m almost done!” shouted Mom from the other room. “Don’t come in here!”

We came in there anyway. Mom was tidying silverware in the dining room, a place she usually reserved for distant relatives or Fancy Company. In the center of the table, perched on an ornate wire stand, was a heart-shaped cake—“chocolate with cookie dough filling,” she confirmed. It looked a little like a blown-up version of the morning’s cupcakes, dimpled with the same thick turquoise frosting, but with tiny symbols and gel-icing drawings scattered across the face. I could make out music notes, a test tube, an orange cat face, a stick-figure Caroline with yellow snakes of hair.

“Is it too cheesy? Oh, it’s cheesy, isn’t it,” Mom said, wringing a dish towel in her hands.

“No, it’s—”

“I just thought, you know, we were all so miserable last year, and your birthday wasn’t really about you, so this time—”

“I love it,” I said firmly. It was like a charm bracelet in cake form. “What’s this?” I pointed to a silvery cloud with a lightning bolt.

“Silver Liningz. I know, I know” she said, holding up a hand, “but it was part of your
year, too, whether you liked it or not.”

“I’ll eat that piece first,” I said. “It’ll make up for me missing a night.”

“Oh, rats. It is Wednesday, isn’t it.” Mom looked at her watch, disappointed. “Well, it’s too late now, I suppose.”

“Heather.” Dad shook his head, carrying two bowls of spaghetti and pork meatballs to the table. “Cary can take a day off. Sneaky—ah, Silver Liningz will be there next week.”

“Amen,” I said.

We said grace, pretending not to notice Kelly fumbling over the words, and plowed into dinner. It was too delicious to waste time on conversation, and I was grateful for the reprieve. I ate slowly and deliberately, relishing the moment when I cut into each tender meatball and a little pocket of steam escaped from the pink center.

“This is fantastic,” Kelly said finally, pushing away the plate and tossing a napkin on the table in defeat. “But I want to save room for cake.”

“Smart man,” Dad said. “Sauce was my mom’s recipe, so I can’t take all the credit. Speaking of, there’s a card from her somewhere in that stack.” He pointed to a small pile of packages on the sideboard, wrapped in the Sunday funnies.

“Are we ready for presents?” Mom asked.

“I love you, Mom,” I said, “but that might be the most ridiculous question I’ve ever heard. Presents ahoy.”

I ripped into the packages while Mom cut the cake. It was a pretty good haul: money from the grandparents, a couple books, and, for the main event, a 4.5” reflector telescope.

“Cool,” Kelly said.

“Cool,” I agreed, turning the box over in my hands. It was surprisingly heavy.
“We might have taken it out of the box once to make sure it worked,” Mom confessed. “But we can show you how to set it up after dinner. Here,” she said, scooping me a slice of cake. “Silver Liningz, as requested.”

“I think I ate stick figure Cary,” Dad said, levering a half-finished piece with his fork.

“Is that hair here?”

“Kelly, you get Catrageous and a spaceship.” Mom passed him a dessert place.

I dug a bite of cookie dough filling out of the center of my slice and swirled it in some frosting. “What’s this one supposed to be?” I poked at a clump of white icing with my fork. It looked a little like a pair of sneakers.

“Track shoes!” Mom chirped. “Those were tough. I had to do a practice run to get the laces right.” She cleaned frosting from the cake knife with one finger and popped it in her mouth.

Kelly and I exchanged an uneasy glance. Dad spread some frosting around his plate like he was painting it. “Mom,” I said slowly, “You know I don’t run track, right?”

“What? Of course you do.”

“Mom, I—” I looked to Dad for help, but he was staring intently down at the table, forehead growing redder by the second. “You’re thinking of Rachel,” I said finally. “Not me.”

It was the second time in my life I’d seen all of the color drain from Mom’s face, then seep back in in patches of blotchy red. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “Oh, no, Cary, honey, I know that. I don’t know how I—”

“Ice cream?” Dad interrupted.

“No, thanks,” I said.
“Kelly?”

“Uh, no, sir.”

Mom moaned and buried her face in her hands.

“Well, I’m having some,” Dad said angrily, clattering plates together as he stacked them at careless angles.

“I should go,” Kelly said, pushing out his chair. I nodded.

“Stay,” Dad warned. “Sit down.”

“No, really,” he said, “I don’t want to impose,”

“You’re not imposing,” Dad said, an aggressive edge to his voice I didn’t understand.

“It’s fine. We’ll hang out, have some ice cream,”

“I don’t want ice cream, Dad,” I repeated dully, but he kept stacking plates and piling silverware into drinking glasses as though he hadn’t heard me.

Kelly wiped his mouth on a napkin and tossed it on his plate. “No, I—I shouldn’t. I can’t stay.” He and Mom stood up at the same time, freezing for a moment as their eyes locked across the table. She tucked her chin to her chest and ran from the room, choking back a sob; I heard the bathroom door close and the fan turn on a few seconds later.

Dad winced, arms flapping helplessly at his sides. “It’s okay,” he said. “Everything’s fine. I’ll go talk to Heather. Let’s all just stay put and have a nice time.”

“GIVE IT A REST, FOR CHRIST’S SAKE,” I bellowed, my voice ringing against the dining room walls. Silverware slid from Dad’s fist and clattered hollowly against the floor. Kelly stared, eyebrows raised, something between guilt and admiration poised on his face.

“I failed the driver’s test,” I said, in the space before anyone could react. “I’m sorry
for cursing. But in case you hadn’t noticed, everything is not fine.”

I turned on my heel and stalked off to my bedroom, the new telescope cradled in my arms.

I couldn’t sleep that night. Thoughts tumbled around in my head like leaves, crumbling into powder whenever I tried to hold onto one for too long. In the background of it all, the soundtrack of my mother’s pain. I’d heard something I wasn’t supposed to over the hum of the bathroom fan: a howl of pain that didn’t dissolve so much as snuff out like a candle, a song clipped before the slow fade.

I kicked the twisted sheets from my legs, unbunching the pajama bottoms from around my knees, and stared up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. I didn’t need the telescope to find them; I knew the imaginary constellations by heart.

_A spaceship, a heart._ I’d been touched by Mom’s charm bracelet cake, but now I couldn’t stop thinking about the pictures she had iced into its face. Did you need to know someone, really, to make a list of their hobbies and preferences? Maybe it was the track shoes, but I couldn’t help but think of the Rachel Museum downstairs. The projects seemed the same: static collections of attributes, memories frozen like points on a graph.

I closed one eye, focusing on the only real constellation I’d bothered to reproduce: the Big Dipper in plastic miniature, Not to Scale. Was I doing the same thing with Rachel? Tracing pieces of her, pieces that said almost nothing about who she was, connecting the dots with colored string like it might somehow map her shape. Like it might somehow bring her back.

Had she left?
Did I want her to?

A tapping at the window sent a jolt of adrenaline through my body. I froze, clammy palms gripping the fitted sheet, and waited, hoping it was just a raccoon.

A persistent raccoon. The tapping returned, louder. I slipped silently from the bed and crouched below the windowsill, heart pounding in my ears. I lifted the tiniest corner of the shade to peek out.

It was Kelly.

I cracked open the window and bathed in the wash of humid night air. “What are you doing?” I hissed. “What time is it?”

“Two,” he said. His eyes kept darting over his shoulder, like he expected someone to come bursting out of the trees at any minute. “I’m sorry. I fucked up, Caroline. I fucked up bad.”

“Hold on. I’ll meet you out front.” I shoved my bare feet into a pair of sneakers and stalked through the empty house like a ghost, floating around creaky floorboards and laundry baskets. I unlocked the front door, holding the knob rigid so it wouldn’t rattle and wake Mom and Dad.

“What’s going on?” I asked, as soon as I’d pulled Kelly away from the house. “What did you do?”

“I’ve been tailing Jack Jurgen, Jr. all week,” he said. He talked rapidly, jumping at every snapping branch or gust of wind. “I wanted to see him open the letter, gauge his reaction. But I missed it. I know it got to him—I took it to his office myself—but I never saw him with it.” He pounded a fist against his thigh, his eyes wide and glassy in the moonlight.

“Okay. What’s the emergency?”
“I…” he bounced up and down on his heels like a little boy and shoved his hands into the pocket of his sweatshirt. “I threw a brick through his window.”

“WHAT?”

“Shhh.” He peered around me, squinting into the dark. “I know. I said I fucked up. I don’t know how I—it was like I wasn’t even there, you know, like someone was just executing a program in my brain. Break in. Put brick through window. And I did.”

“So did you find anything?”

“No! No. I didn’t even go in. Place is probably alarmed, I don’t know. I just panicked and got in the car and wound up here.”

“Your car’s here?”

He nodded.

“Take me,” I said.

“You’re not serious.”

“I’m serious.” I folded my arms against my chest, suddenly very aware that I hadn’t put on a bra. “I’m not as small as a brick, but I’m smaller than you. I bet I can fit. Take me.”

“I’m not going to get you in trouble,” he said. “Just because I was stupid doesn’t mean you have to be.” He tugged his hood lower over his forehead.

“I’ve already murdered a goose today,” I said. “I got my first taste of the criminal life, and now I need another fix.”

“That’s not funny, Cary.”

I chanced a look back at the house. The longer we were out here, the more likely we were to get caught. “Look, the brick’s through the window,” I said. “There’s no going back. It’s done, so we might as well do it.” I jogged away to his car, determined, and waited,
tugging at the passenger door handle until he unlocked it. The evening’s confusion was threatening to pull me under, and I had this idea, vibrating harder in my brain each second, that if I could just find the letter, just know he’d read it, that everything might untangle itself from that one fixed point.

The Metro started up so loud I wanted to scream. I was so sure I’d see the living room lights snap on at any minute and Mom and Dad storming out onto the lawn. But thanks to miracle or sedative, the house stayed dark, and we chugged along the street into the night.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“Off Mormon Trek.” Kelly cranked down the window. Almost no one else was on the road, and the car filled with the hazy noise of cicadas and crickets, competing with the muffler for dominance. “It’s a dingy little office park in the middle of nowhere. I didn’t believe it was his when I saw it. I figured he’d be somewhere nicer.”

“Well, heart transplants are expensive,” I said, hope or something more reckless somersaulting in my chest. “Maybe he needed to make rent.”

The scenery changed as we drove: business and residential districts shrank away, replaced by bowing wild grasses and enormous piles of moved earth. The only light came from streetlights as they whizzed by, orange lamps floating like fireflies in the dark. We didn’t talk. I stared out the window, and Kelly tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to a beat only he could hear.

We parked in the lot for the office next door just in case anyone came by, and sprinted to Jurgen’s building. Kelly was right: it was dingier than I’d imagined. Just a simple, one-story concrete rectangle, surrounded by a moat of generic landscaping: a few wimpy shrubs and flower bushes poking their heads from the mulch. It looked more like the sports
equipment building at Xavier than an office.

“It’s here,” Kelly said, steering me around the side of the building. “This one goes right into his office.”

I ducked under a flat branch from an evergreen and picked my way through the flowerbed that ran along the building’s side, soft mulch cushioning my sneakers. Jurgen, Jr.’s window was a few feet off the ground.

“Hold on a sec,” Kelly cautioned, and nodded toward the parking lot. “Will you keep watch?” He tugged his sweatshirt off over his head and wound it around his fist like an enormous boxing glove. He cleared a few remaining shards of glass from the window opening, the muscles in his bare arms taut as he strained on his toes to reach, and draped the sweatshirt over the sill when he was finished. “You’ll want to avoid the sides,” he said, short of breath.

I stared up at the window, dread and impatience mixing a queasy cocktail in my stomach. “I feel like I’m in *Prison Break.*”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Touché. Give me a boost,” I said, before my courage fled. He clasped his hands together to form a little bridge and I clambered on, steadying one arm on his shoulder for balance.

“There’s a light on inside,” I whispered down to him as soon as I could peer through the gap. “Some kind of industrial looking thing. Bare bulb on a pole.”

“Sounds like a ghost light,” Kelly said. “It’s fine, they only turn those on when everyone leaves. Here.” He shifted his weight to get better leverage and buoyed me up until I could swing myself through the once-window without him.
Inside, I leaned against Jurgen’s desk to catch my breath while Kelly climbed through
on his own. It was pretty utilitarian: a bookshelf full of three-ring binders and delivery
menus, tiny cardboard boxes of paperclips and staples, a grubby desk chair with stained
armrests and a pillow propped against the back. The only personal touches were a framed
Honkers uniform (signed, with Sharpie hearts, by the inaugural class of “Honkers Honeys”) and a single photograph on his desk, set in a simple, recessed wooden frame. I scooped it up and handed it to Kelly when he dropped inside.

“Look at this. It’s just him. Who keeps a photo of themselves on their own desk?”

“Rich narcissists?” He shrugged, and pulled his thin white t-shirt back down over his belt. “We should hurry.” He slid a binder from the bookshelf and flipped through it for a few seconds before tossing it onto the floor. I put the frame back on the desk reluctantly, wiggling it back into its original place. The photo’s backdrop made it look like a professional job. I brushed an imaginary speck of dust from the glass with the hem of my shirt and tried to puzzle out why anyone would make an appointment with a photographer for a picture of their own face. He looked thinner in the photo than in the one from the *Press Citizen* article, the curves of his face hollowed out. I wondered which was more recent.

“What’s that noise?” Kelly said, wrinkling his nose. “Listen. Something’s dripping.”

I held my breath. *Ploop.* A few seconds, then again: *Puh-loop.* I blinked hard a few times, trying to adjust my eyes to the darkness. The ghost light cast everything more than a couple feet away in harsh shadows, highlighting silhouettes and little else.

“There’s a bucket,” I said, as the shapes started to settle in front of my eyes. “By the door. Maybe there’s a leak?”

“Jesus, this place is a dump. Did you check the desk yet?”
“On it.” I rolled out the top drawer and panned through the pocket debris of the wealthiest man in town: flash drives, post-it notes scrawled with logins and passwords, an almost-full punch card from Which Wich, a stack of mail. Mail. “Hold it,” I murmured. I palmed the Which Wich card as a douchebag tax and tugged out the stack of letters, flipping through bills and a few angry-looking envelopes stamped with “FINAL NOTICE.”

I recognized the handwriting on the last one. “Here,” I said, voice shaking. My heart pounded double time, a burst of confused energy that didn’t energize so much as exhaust me. Kelly dropped the binder he was holding and peered over my shoulder, his breath warm against the back of my neck. Jurgen, Jr. had smoothed a tiny, bright green sticky note onto the envelope: “File with others,” it read in a cramped but tidy script.

*Ploop.*

Every echoing drop in the bucket seemed to reverberate through my bones. I collapsed to my hands and knees and crawled under Jack Jurgen, Jr.’s desk, scraping my palms on the thin industrial carpet. I felt like a little kid, but I didn’t care. It was the library tent all over again. Sounds and images were crowding my head, pressing at me from all sides. I just wanted to feel safe.

I slid the letter from the torn envelope with clumsy, shaking hands and read it again, trying to imagine, now that I was surrounded by his things, how he might have reacted when he’d seen my handwriting.

“File with others,” the Post-it read. So he had to have seen them. He had to have read them all. And kept them, apparently, filed them for reasons I didn’t understand.

Kelly’s head poked below the desk. “You okay?”

I shook my head.
He climbed down awkwardly, knees cracking, and tucked himself next to me under the desk, his side pressing against mine as we huddled together in the dark. It was so quiet. All I could hear was our ragged breathing, intermittent drops from the leaky ceiling and the gentle drone of a red-lit EXIT sign outside Jurgen’s door.

“So that’s something, right?” he said after a minute. “Now we know.”

“Now we know,” I repeated. I flattened my bangs over my forehead, an old habit.

“What happened earlier?” Kelly asked. He rubbed the back of his neck like he was peeling a sunburn. “I mean, with your Mom?”

I let the letter fall to my side. “Nothing,” I said. “I went to my room and didn’t see her the rest of the night.”

He whistled.

“What?”

“Nothing. My lips are sealed. I remember what happened the last time I tried to criticize your parents.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s fine. You can say whatever you want about last night, because for once, you were actually there.”

He cringed, but recovered quickly. “So is your Dad always like that when Rachel gets mentioned?”

“Like what?”

“You know…the aggressive ‘DO NOT TALK ABOUT THE EVENT’ kind of stuff. Sweep it under the rug and fake a smile.”

“We don’t talk about Rachel much.”

“Seriously?”
“Seriously. At first, everyone begged me to talk about her all the time, like they thought I was this pressure cooker that was going to explode if they didn’t break the seal. But then…” I picked at a patch of dry skin on my palm. “I don’t know, they stopped asking questions when I stopped giving them the answers they wanted. People only ever want to talk about it on their terms. When it’s comfortable, or convenient, or…appropriate.”

“So you just don’t talk about her at all? That’s messed up,” he said. His voice sounded husky, sort of thick and far away.

“Yeah.” I tried to lean my head back against the desk and grazed his shoulder. “It was okay for a while, when everything was still too fresh and sore, but now…I don’t know. I hear Mom and Dad arguing sometimes,” I started, unsure where I was going, and felt Kelly’s eyes snap to me. I didn’t know why, but there in the humid dark, our faces creased with shadows, hiding in a place we had no right to be, I felt like I could finally breathe. “Dad says the same thing a lot, like he’s trying to convince himself it matters: ‘But it’s been a year!’ So what happens, then,” I said, turning to face him, “When it’s been a year, and she still hasn’t gone?”

“Let me know when you find out,” he said. “If I knew, I wouldn’t be breaking into dreary office parks in the middle of the night. I’ve been a monster since she died, and it’s not getting any easier.”

“Tell me about it. Just today, I became a killer.”

“I’m a dream-killer,” he said. “All that Craigslist sniping.”

“I’m failing at school.”

“I’m failing at everything.”

“No,” I said, blowing air from my cheeks. “Like, I’m actually failing. I’m probably going to have to go to summer school.” Confessing it to Kelly felt kind of cathartic.
“I bet I can top you,” he said quietly, his voice high-pitched and strange. “I’m homeless.”

“What? How can you be homeless? You own a home.”

“It’s on the market,” he said. “And I can’t stay there.” He shifted his weight, and my head plopped onto his shoulder almost by accident, his thin white t-shirt impossibly soft against my cheek. It seemed awkward to make a big deal out of moving it, so I just let it rest and relaxed into him, listening to his heartbeat.

“I’m not a realtor or anything, but I’m pretty sure you’re allowed to stay there until it sells.”

He threaded his fingers together and stared down at them intently. “It’s not that they won’t let me,” he said after a moment. “It’s that I can’t. I haven’t been able to, since she died. The house is full of ghosts.”

Another drop of rainwater fell into the bucket with a soft, tonal ploop.

I tilted my head up to scan his face, trying to feel out the joke, but for once, there was nothing there. “You believe in ghosts?”

“Not, like, guys in bedsheets. I…agh, I don’t know. Memory ghosts.”

“Memory ghosts,” I tried out.

“It’s all the little things. You open the medicine cabinet, and there’s her toothbrush. You climb the stairs and there’s the library book she left propped against the railing so she’d remember to return it. And every time, this wave just rushes in and uproots you from whatever you were doing or thinking.” He shook his head gently, like he was angry at himself. “I couldn’t even bring myself to throw away this stupid little jar of expired horseradish, because I’d bought it before she died. It was the last thing in the fridge I
remembered buying with her, and getting rid of it felt so finite. She didn’t even like horseradish,” he added. “But it was this tiny snapshot of a person I used to be, standing in supermarket lines with my wife, buying condiments she didn’t use. And I’m holding onto the jar and just losing it. I’ve just gone. Does that sound crazy?”

“You okay?” I said. “But that doesn’t make it less real.”

“So I moved out and bounced around a while between friends’ houses and shelters. I tried the Catholic Worker House in Cedar Rapids for a while, but I was terrified all the time that I’d run into someone your parents knew. So that’s it. That’s why I smell like a homeless person now.”

I laughed. “You don’t smell like a homeless person. You smell like,” I burrowed my nose into his shirt sleeve, “cigarettes and dollar store cologne.”

“Eau de Vagrant,” he said. “Ouch.”

“You know, sometimes I’m not sure she’s really dead,” I blurted out. I felt Kelly’s shoulder tense beneath me.

“How do you mean?”

“I know it’s stupid. But she died, and there was this rush to get her organs out, and then she had to be cremated, obviously, because there wasn’t much…left,” My breathing started to quicken and shallow, and I waited for panic to rush past, clenching my muscles and relaxing them one by one.

“You okay?” Kelly asked.

“Okay,” I nodded.

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” he said. “I get it.”

“No, I want to. I just…I guess what I’m trying to say is that everything happened all
at once, and I never actually got to, you know. See her. One day she’s here, laughing in the living room, making fun of Dad’s new haircut, and then she’s gone, and I just have to take someone’s word for it. It’s tough.”

I wound the drawstring from my pajama bottoms tightly around one finger, watching the blood drain from the tip. “I used to fantasize that maybe she was actually this CIA agent, and they had to fake her death when her cover was blown.” A blush crept back into my cheeks, and I was grateful it was too dark for him to tell. “I told you it was stupid. It’s just childish stuff.”

“It’s not stupid,” he said quietly. “I wish that was it, too. But you have to admit, Rach would have made an awful secret agent.”

“Terrible poker face,” I agreed, smiling as I pictured it.

He moved his arm around my shoulders and tucked a strand of hair gently behind my ear, moving like he was in a trance. His fingertips brushed my neck, and I shivered. “You’re so much like her, you know,” he said, and tilted his face toward me, brown eyes mudsliding into mine. Something sharp-edged and queasy swooped in my stomach again. “I see so much of her in you. It freaks me out sometimes when I hear you laugh, like I’m right there back in our kitchen. Like I could just reach out, and…” his thumb skipped down my cheek, as gentle as a feather alighting on my skin. He brushed it across my lips, and I felt myself shrink into nothing.

“Don’t,” I barely whispered. I didn’t know what was happening. I was afraid that he’d heard me, afraid that he hadn’t.

He blinked, and something hazy passed from behind his eyes. “Don’t…?”

“Nothing,” I said, the moment deflated. I wriggled away, too embarrassed to look at
him, and slid myself out from under the desk. “It’s nothing.”

“Cary.”

“It’s fine,” I croaked, bile raising in my throat. “I’m fine. Should we go?”

“Oh my God,” he said, crawling out from the desk. He looked sick and stunned. “Oh God. I didn’t—”

“No. I know.”

“It’s not—”

“—of course—”

“—anything. It’s not—ah, goddamnit.” He kicked the desk, frustrated, his hands opening and closing rapidly at his sides like hungry little mouths. “I didn’t meant to make anything… something.”

“You didn’t,” I said, throat tight. “It’s fine.”

“I don’t want you to think—I know,” he pleaded, voice strained and aching. “I know you’re not…not…”

“Her,” we said in unison, and I felt the white-hot punch of losing her all over again, this time in a different, uglier way.

It was a funny design, that building. Throw a rock through the window, ransack a few shelves and nothing happens. It was only when I shouldered open the front door, sprinting blindly into the night to vomit into a plant stand, that the burglar alarm finally started to scream.
CHAPTER 10

I stayed home from school the next day, complaining about a stomach ache that hollowed me out. It was only half-fake. Mom brought me ginger ale, promised she’d call to get my assignments and fusses over my forehead with a wet washcloth no matter how many times I told her I didn’t have a fever. She felt guilty about dinner, I knew, and an evil little part of me wanted her to.

She came in at lunch time with two pieces of dry toast and bustled around doing things that didn’t need doing, adjusting the window shade and tucking the blankets under my feet. “Feeling any better?” she asked.

“No,” I said truthfully. “Still dying inside.” I tossed the book I was pretending to read to the floor. I couldn’t concentrate on anything. ‘Dying inside’ was a little melodramatic, but it was more wishful thinking than anything. I didn’t want to die so much as I wanted to just be dead, if that meant I wouldn’t have to feel the roiling nausea and searing humiliation that bubbled up like blood from a cut whenever I thought of Kelly or the dripping, water-stained ceiling or the spicy smell of his cheap cologne.

“Well let me know if I can get you anything,” Mom said, hovering by the door.

“Some more ginger ale, a Tums, a cat.”

“A cat would be nice.” I curled up into the fetal position, hugging my knees to my chest like I could squeeze all of the embarrassment out of me.

I’d been here before. In sixth grade, a boy I’d hated sent me a love letter and started
calling the house every day after, begging me to respond. I’d stayed home sick from school for three days before Mom answered the phone and realized I was faking so I wouldn’t have to see him. Then she’d sat me down for “The Talk,” which consisted of her handing me a church-approved book on puberty called *The Care and Keeping of You!* and mumbling that I should come to her with any questions.

Rachel had handled it better. She wheedled the backstory from Mom and came bursting into my bedroom uninvited one afternoon, a half-eaten popsicle and Dr. Albert Longtooth, her favorite stuffed alligator, in tow. She tossed Albert to me and I squeezed him to my chest.

“I hear you had the talk,” she said, biting off a chunk of frozen purple.

“Sort of. I had the book.” I pointed to *The Care and Keeping of You!,* still unopened on the dresser.

“Awful. Just awful.” She sat on the bed next to me, legs tucked underneath her, and cleaned the rest of the popsicle from the stick with her teeth. The gesture reminded me of a cartoon cat, popping a whole fish in its mouth and removing a gleaming, perfectly intact skeleton. “Here’s the thing you need to learn about guys, Cary,” she said, “and the sooner, the better: they will always make you the villain.”

“I feel like a villain,” I admitted, stroking Albert’s nubby gator head. “Like I must have done something to make this happen.”

“Don’t.” She grabbed a Dr. Pepper-flavored chapstick from my nightstand and applied it without asking. “It sucks to hear, but you’d be in the same boat no matter what you did. You can try to head guys off, tell them you’re not interested, but then they just get all defensive and pretend they were only being *friendly,* like you must be really stuck on
yourself to think they were coming on to you.”

“So I shouldn’t say anything?”

“No,” she sighed, “that doesn’t work either. Then they accuse you of leading them on, and whine about how obvious their intentions were. So here’s my version of The Talk: stuff like this happens, and it’s going to happen to you again, and it blows. But never let anyone make you feel guilty about not having sex with them.”

“Gross,” I said defensively. Sex was still an abstraction then, something I only understood in vague, Catholic terms: Don’t have it. It’s not for you. It felt weird hearing my own sister mention it so casually, like it was even an option.

“What ever. All I’m saying is teenage boys are egos on legs, and they bruise like peaches. You gotta roll with the punches and know they’re just trying to save face.” She flopped over on her stomach and dangled over the side of the bed, tracing patterns in the carpet with one finger.

“You make them sound so appealing,” I said. “I can’t wait to get a boyfriend of my very own.”

“Hey, that’s all any us are doing, huh? Saving face?”

I blinked, and Rachel disappeared, her voice shrinking back into my head where it belonged. I rolled over and balled the sheets up in my fist, wishing I could go back there, when a visit from Dr. Albert Longtooth was enough to save the day. I was embarrassed and heartsick, and it felt permanent. And I was angry. Angry at Kelly for detonating in front of me, angry at Rachel for leaving me to pick up his pieces, angrier still for her leaving me without anyone to help pick up mine.

I turned on the stereo and dozed off to Neil’s mixtape until 3, when I heard Mom on
the phone with Xavier. I got out of bed to rewind the tape and start it over again, waiting for the cello line to snake its way under my skin. I knew I was going to have to find a way to concentrate somehow, force myself at a set of geometry problems or study for the World History quiz I’d missed.

I waited. Minutes ticked by, and Mom still didn’t come in. I pressed my face into the cool side of the pillow and stared across the room at the chalkboard wall, where the remnants of a fish tail lurked in a sea of yellow chalk curlicues. I nudged up the volume button on the remote a few ticks, hoping the music would drown out the chorus in my head.

Mom called something from the hall, but it got lost in Street Hassle’s jungle of strings.

“In here!” I shouted. “I can’t hear you.”

She appeared in the doorway a second later, hands rigid at her sides. “Caroline,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Shut that off.”

“I’ll turn it down. It’s fine.”

Mom strode to the stereo, opened the cassette player without bothering to hit pause, and ripped the tape from inside.

“Whoah. What was that for?” I leapt out of bed and tried to snatch the tape from her hand, but she slid it into her back pocket.

“I just got off the phone with your guidance counselor,” she said, drumming her fingers on the dresser top. “Miss Valline?”

“Oh, no.”
“‘Oh, no,’ is right. And just when were you planning on telling your father and I about your grades? When the trimester ended? When it became too late for us to do anything about it?” Her jaw pulsed, and she yanked a loose bandana from her head, raking her fingers through her crown to fluff up the flattened hair. “Help me understand, because right now, I just don’t.”

I tried to reach behind her for the tape, but she spun away. “This isn’t that big of a deal,” I said.

Her eyes flashed. “You don’t think failing two classes is a ‘big deal’? That’s comforting, Caroline. Honestly.”

“No, I mean—” my throat dried out, and I collapsed back onto the bed. “I have a plan, is all. I have this Special Problems kind of project, and I’m going to turn it in at the end of the semester, and it’ll all be okay.” I knew I was just digging myself a deeper hole for later, but I couldn’t stop myself. All of my little lies had snowballed into a big, ugly monster, and I didn’t know how to get away from it anymore.

“She told me that, too,” Mom said, folding her arms across her chest. “Said you didn’t have an advisor, that you hadn’t gotten administrator approval, and that she had no idea what you were actually turning in. You’re a smart girl, Caroline, but you’re not acting like it. This is dumb. What you are doing here is dumb. What is happening with you?”

“Nothing’s happening with me,” I said to my feet.

Mom pinched the bridge of her nose and let out an exasperated breath. “I don’t understand what’s going on with you. You sit in your room and listen to this depressing garbage over and over again. You’re not participating in Silver Liningz, you’re not participating in school, you act like a brat when your father and I try to talk to you. You can’t
tune the whole world out, Caroline,” she said. “You’re part of it. Your problems aren’t just going to go away if you ignore them.”

“That’s rich,” I snorted.

“Excuse me?”

“Coming from you? You send me to Silver Liningz so that you can pawn me off on someone else to fix, and then act like I’m the one ignoring my problems?”

“No one is ‘pawning you off,’” she said, cheeks reddening. “But you won’t talk to us. What are we supposed to do? You can’t just keep things bottled up forever.”

“Physician, heal thy fucking self.”

Her jaw dropped. “That’s enough. You’re grounded,” she said. “You can’t talk to me like that. You can’t talk to anyone like that. I don’t know where you learned that it’s okay to be foul to everyone around you, but I have a hunch. You can just cool it for a while.”

“Great,” I said, shoving my feet into a pair of sneakers. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Are you listening to me? You’re grounded.”

“Which is why I’m not driving. My feet will remain firmly on the ground at all times.”

“And just where, exactly, do you think you’re not driving?”

“Neil’s,” I said, mostly to agitate her, but it sounded like a decent plan.

“Great. So he can give you more of this?” She grabbed the cassette tape from the back pocket of her jeans and snapped it clean in half. I snatched the pieces from her hands, but it was just a mess of jagged plastic and slippery black ribbon.

“You have always been worried about exactly the wrong things,” I said, shivering as I remembered Kelly’s arm around my shoulder.
“And what else should I be worried about?”

“You yourself,” I spat. “And maybe telling your daughters apart. Should be a lot easier now that you only have one.”

I shoved past her, clutching the broken tape in my hands. It was a low blow, meant to wound her, but I was too mad to feel guilty about it now. I slammed the front door behind me as loud as I could and set out for Neil’s on foot.

Neil’s house was over a mile away; I must have looked ridiculous to the cars passing by, some sniveling teenager tromping around Goosetown in pajamas, hair unwashed and pillow-rumpled. I took his front steps two at a time and knocked, leaning against the railing to catch my breath, hoping he’d gone straight home after school.

His Dad answered, his hands stained taupe with cracked clay.

“Hullo,” Dave said, peering warily out of his half-moon glasses. He looked me over, inventorying my puffy eyes, blotchy cheeks, the broken cassette tape in my fist. “What can I do for you?”

“Is Neil home?”

“I think so,” he said, and closed the door in my face. I sank onto the steps, the cement burning the backs of my legs, and stared into the trees at some squirrels jostling for position at a feeder shaped like a tiny piano. I’d watched Dave build it a couple years ago, peering over his shoulder while he sanded the edges and painstakingly scrawled “The Mighty Squirrelitzer,” on the front with the tip of a rust-red brush pen.

The door clicked open a minute later and I turned to see Neil, cocooned in a faded blue comforter. His eyes widened when he saw my face.
“I don’t want to talk about it,” I pre-empted.

“Okay. Do you want to dance about it?” He wriggled his body around like a spastic worm, thrashing the comforter violently around him.

I smiled in spite of myself.

He shepherded me in and we camped out on his dad’s futon, playing Battle Toads on the Nintendo and sipping grainy glasses of powdered lemonade while Dave curled over a potter’s wheel in the corner, spattering a plastic tarp with dewy flecks of clay.

I set the controller down after our Toads died for the third time. “I got in a fight with Mom,” I said. “That’s why I’m here. She broke your tape.”

“Ouch,” Neil hit ‘Continue,’ and we started back over at the beginning of the level, punching the same enemies we’d eviscerated minutes ago. “But I can make you another one. What happened?”

“Just Rachel stuff. Mom mixed us up at dinner, and things got super awkward.” I pummeled the controller buttons over and over, but I was either getting the combinations wrong, or my Toad simply refused to do battle. Maybe he was a conscientious objector.

“Has she ever done that before? Mixed you up?”

“I don’t think so. But Mom spends all this time down in Rachel’s bedroom now, picking things over and cleaning them. Plus, she and I never talk anymore, except when she’s mad. I guess she was bound to slip up eventually.”

Neil nodded. “That’s the trouble with spending all your time with dead people. The live ones stop being interesting.” He jerked his head over to the corner. “I don’t think anything I do could surprise Dad. He’s seen it all, done better, a hundred times before.”

I craned around to look at Dave, surprised Neil would talk about him so brazenly, but
he was sliding his hands over a hunk of clay like he hadn’t heard a thing.

“It’s okay,” Neil said. “He has his earbuds in. He always listens to ‘Sunshine of Your Love’ on full blast when he’s working. I made him get an iPod because it drove me crazy. Watch out for the wall!” he shouted, and through some miracle of button mashing, my Toad vaulted over.

“I don’t know, Dave seems okay to me,” I said.

“Yeah, he’s all right. I just wish sometimes…hey, do you remember that poetry showcase we had freshman year?”

“Sure. I liked your stuff.”

He made a face. “It was pretty stupid. But Dad came to see it, and in the car on the way back, he just started telling me about all of these famous people who had written poems like mine, about the same thing, and then he read them to me out loud as soon as we got home. He never said anything about the one I’d actually written. I know that’s just his way of being helpful,” he said, pausing the game and resting the controller on his lap, “but sometimes I wish he’d just say ‘good job’ and then shut up and take me out for ice cream like all the other parents.”

“Who are they,” I asked, “the other parents? I say that, too, like, ‘why can’t Mom and Dad just be like other parents?’ but I don’t know if I’ve met them. Probably everyone’s parents are messed up somehow. Unsupportive.”

“Puck’s Mom,” Neil said, grinning. “I think she might be ‘other parents’.”

Mrs. Wasserman was a large woman with an even larger stage presence: dyed red hair combed into a vertiginous bouffant, chunky gold hoop earrings, a voice you could hear a block away. And she was always the first parent at any Xavier event, camping out in the front
row while she clutched an oversized gold handbag studded with photo buttons of Puck Through the Years. Baby Puck posing with a bat at teeball practice, Puck holding a ribbon from speech contest, Puck in the fall play…we’d laughed about it once, but she actually embarrassed him, which took all the fun out of teasing him. So we kept silent whenever she swept us into bone-crushing hugs and told us, blue-lined eyes swimming in tears, how proud she was of her son for choosing such good friends.

“She’s definitely Other Parents,” I agreed. “Grass is always greener, I guess.” Just being around Neil had made me feel calmer—the anger wasn’t gone, but it was hibernating for now, curled up in my stomach like Catrageous in a patch of afternoon sun. “Hey, do you think I could borrow the Frankenmarmot? Just for an afternoon?”

He shrugged. “Fine by me. We should go out through the garage, though, in case Dad has a problem with it.”

“You’re not going to ask me what I want it for?”

“You’d tell me if you wanted to.”

I followed him into the cool, dark garage and waited while he slapped the dust off the marmot with real affection. “Take good care of my boy,” he said. “I know he’s homely, but he has a good heart. Or he used to. He might be full of sawdust now.”

I scooped the marmot up with both hands, surprised at how light he was. “Thanks,” I said. “I will. I’m going to get some weird looks walking down Governor with this.”

“You’re right,” he gasped. “We can’t let him out of the house like this! He looks so naked.” He slipped off his Marlins cap and draped it over the marmot’s head, stepping back to appraise the effect. “Much better. Just two cool cats out for an afterschool stroll. You ready?”
“Ready.”

He punched the button on the garage door opener and the Frankenmarmot and I stepped out into the light.

Mom was waiting for me in the living room, pretending to read the paper while her foot bounced rapidly up and down. She folded it when I entered, but whatever lecture she’d prepared withered on her lips as soon as she saw the Frankenmarmot.

“What…is that?”

“What was that,’ is more appropriate. It was a marmot. I’ll be right back,” I said, and started lugging it down the basement steps.

“Cary? Where are you going?”

“I’m putting it in the museum,” I called up the stairs. “With the rest of the dead things.”

She followed me down into Rachel’s bedroom, stunned as though I’d bludgeoned her. I cleared the books from Rachel’s nightstand with my elbow, sending them tumbling to the floor, and slid the Frankenmarmot onto it instead, angling it so that his snarl seemed aimed at the whole room.

“Where did you get that?” she asked, her expression pained.

“Neil’s. It’s his dad’s, actually,” I said, watching the words sink in. “I thought it was time for a new exhibit down here.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” she said quietly.

“Really? Because I figured you could use a change of scenery.”

“I don’t like it.” Her voice wavered. “It’s ugly.”
“That’s the point.”

Mom took a deep breath and hugged her arms to her chest. “I don’t know if you’re acting this way because of Rachel, or school, or because of Neil’s…family,” she waved a limp hand at the marmot, “but this has to stop. Do you hear me? The sarcasm, the jokes. I need you to be mature. What you’re doing here…this isn’t healthy. It’s sick. It’s cruel.”

“You’re right.” I strode to the foot of the bed. “This,” I picked up one of Rachel’s track shoes, “is so healthy.” I threw it across the room, watching mom flinch as it struck the wall with a dead thump. “Getting drunk on tiny cups of wine every Wednesday night so you don’t have to spend an hour alone with your thoughts is such a great model. Thanks a heap, Mom. I’m so sorry I didn’t listen.”

She blanched, and lowered herself onto Rachel’s bed, rubbing her temples with her fingers. “Caroline, I—I know you’re hurting. We all are. But this is just what I have to do. This is how I keep your sister alive. All I want is for you to find a way to do the same.”

“I tried,” I said. “For a long time. And maybe that’s the problem. Maybe that’s the problem with this whole family. Because she’s not alive, is she?”

The question rang in the air. Mom got up and plucked the track shoe from the floor, cradling it in her lap. “There are ways to deal with these things,” she started, voice shaking. “Ways we process them. Procedures. Stages.”

“So what? So if I don’t go through the Five Stages of Grief, I’m not doing it right? I’m so tired of people telling me how to feel. You, Dad, Hans…like anyone has it figured out, like anyone else is doing any better. There’s no script for this stuff, Mom,” I said. I took the Marlins cap off of the Frankenmarmot and shaped the brim in my hands, trying to absorb some of Neil’s calm by osmosis. “And whatever one we’re trying to follow right now isn’t
I don’t know what else to do,” she said, twisting the shoelaces in her fingers.

“I don’t either,” I said. “But it isn’t this. We can’t keep doing this, dusting off her things, faking it, pretending like nothing happened. It’s like everything changed when she died except for us.”

“You’ve changed,” Mom said. “You’ve gotten older. Harder. When your father and I weren’t looking.”

“I guess you had other things to pay attention to,” I said, without malice, and felt something loosen in my chest. I tugged Neil’s hat onto my head, pulling the brim down until it hid my eyes.

“Are you going somewhere? You’re still grounded.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I said, and tugged the shoe from her grip. “I’ll be in my room. But I’m taking this with me as collateral. We’re done with this.”

“I don’t like being bossed around by my own daughter,” she warned.

“It’s your fault for raising me this way,” I said. “But as a show of good faith, I’ll try something new, too.”

She lifted her head, eyes weary. “Oh, really? What’s that?”

“Homework.”
CHAPTER 11

Hey, you! Welcome to the Grief Workshop™. If you picked up this workbook, chances are you’re dealing with some difficult emotions. Loss. Anger. Depression. We’re here to help you through them all. What else is a workshop for?

I don’t know. Making chairs, maybe? Dad watches “The New Yankee Workshop” on PBS sometimes, and no one seems to be working through difficult emotions there. Just mortise and tenon joints.

Like any good workshop, we’re stocked with TOOLS to help you tackle the job. Try to keep an open mind as you work through the following questions and exercises. There’s no right or wrong answer. Just remember the golden rule—No Judgment!™

Why is “TOOLS” in all caps? Is it an acronym? Tiger- Or Ocelot-Like Species?

Terrible Odor Of Lost Socks?

Look at me, breaking the golden rule. “No Judgment.” Right.

We bet you’ve heard of an iceberg, but what about an Emotional Iceberg? There’s so much going on under your surface that no one else can see! Use the graphic organizer below to list the emotions you try to hide.

“PUBLIC FACE”

“All of them.”

“PRIVATE EMOTION”
Whew! We got a little misty there. Thanks for sharing. But while you’re being honest, why do you hide those emotions from others? What are you afraid might happen if you let them peek “under the hood” at the whole iceberg that is you?

I’m afraid they’ll realize exactly how messed up and crazy I am, and decide to spend their time with someone who doesn’t need to map their emotions onto icebergs instead.

Also, I realize this is a technicality, but I don’t think icebergs have hoods. Just polar bears, clinging to them while their habitat melts and they float into an endless, oceanic void. Global warming, you see.

We bet more people might be able to appreciate your Emotional Iceberg than you think. List some of the people in your life who care about you below. Who can you trust with your Whole Self?

Neil, Jessie, Puck, Mom, Dad, Kelly.

I could talk to any of them, I guess. Jessie would probably love it. She’s always been big on swapping secrets, and she gets down when she thinks I’m holding out on her. It’s not that I don’t trust her. I just don’t want to make our relationship that serious. It doesn’t seem fair to the other person, asking them to look at the Whole Enormous Iceberg That is You.

I keep thinking about something Kelly said, about Rachel being a lightning bolt, this force that destroyed a piece of him forever. Maybe part of him was destroyed when she died, but I can’t think of it that way. I don’t want to make it her fault. I don’t want her to have taken more from us in dying than she gave us by living.

I’m not saying it’s Kelly’s fault, either, although part of me wants to. It’s easier when you have someone to blame. I hurt because you hurt me. But it doesn’t get you anywhere.

This is the fear, I guess, in talking about this stuff. That I’ll wield my grief like a weapon and injure everyone around me. That I’ll wound someone by opening up my wounds.
It’s not self-destruction if someone’s holding onto you when the grenade goes off.

*What a list! Look at all those people who love and support you! Choose a name from the list and tell us something about him. Maybe he watched your dog when you went on vacation! Maybe she brought you soup when you were sick!*

I met Neil in elementary school, but we weren’t friends back then. I don’t remember ever meeting him or thinking about him until Field Day in third grade.

Lucas Elementary’s Field Day was in late spring, and the whole school filed across the street to the dirt track, swinging peanut butter sandwiches and tubes of Gogurt in our white paper sack lunches. Cassie Hoffman was super sick that day, but the teacher’s aide thought she was faking, so she made her go out anyway.

Every teacher’s aide I’ve met, now that I think of it, was a cynical tyrant who hated kids. They should have rules, I think, about letting people who don’t like kids control them.

Anyway, Cassie pooped herself halfway through the fifty-yard dash, and everyone started laughing, including me, because it’s hard not to when diarrhea starts streaming from this eight-year-old’s orange Tigger skirt while she’s flying down the track. She was the fastest girl in our year, Cassie.

She started bawling at the finish line, and everyone crowded around her like she was this wounded zoo animal. But then Neil pooped himself, too, so they laughed at him instead.

I never asked him about it, but I’m pretty sure it was on purpose. Two eight-year-olds in the space of five minutes? That’s rare, you gotta admit. I heard one of the teachers call it a “copycat crime.”

Plus, Neil just does stuff like that, deflecting attention off of people when they’re embarrassed or hurt, helping them in his own weird, quiet way. Maybe you have to be pretty thick-skinned and chill when you grow up with Tourette’s. But Neil never seemed to care
what anyone thought of him. Not in that aggressive, fuck-the-system kind of way that people put on sometimes, like they’re too cool to care, like everyone who thinks they’re a knob just doesn’t get them.

Neil just isn’t bothered.

It’s time for free association! Before you start, write the name of the loved one you lost in the two boxes below:

[Rachel Kaus]

Now, put your pen to the paper and start writing whatever words come to mind that describe [Rachel Kaus]! Don’t stop until you have a good-sized list—if you can’t think of what to write, just write the same thing over again until something jumps into your head!


See? It’s easy to get going when you turn off your Inner Critic and embrace the power of the pen! Circle a word from the list above and tell us a little more about how it describes that person.

Can I pick a different word?

Our family went on vacation to Quebec City the summer before Rachel started college. It was a kind of final send-off, the last time we knew we’d all be together, and we were nervous and giggly because of it, slipping fake treasure maps between the pages of Sky Mall on the tiny commuter plane, running through the Detroit airport in slow motion like we were chasing down our lovers in a cheesy romcom.

Rachel tried to score us while we ran with this romantic chorus she half-remembemed, but then Dad told her she was humming the theme to Mr. Holland’s Opus.

Now try the same thing with another word from your list!

I don’t remember the touristy parts of the trip that well. We toured an old fort and
took pictures riding the cannons, went to the oldest grocery store in Canada or something for lunch. What I do remember is Rachel and I sneaking out of the hotel one night after Mom and Dad had gone to sleep.

It was pouring rain, huge drops that slapped the cobblestones, wind that ripped umbrellas from your hands, and the two of us shrieked as we sprinted across the street to the little 24-hour patisserie, its warm orange light spilling onto the ground from plate glass windows glazed with rain.

No one else was inside but a couple street performers on stilts, their wispy silk costumes soaked to their chests and dripping, hiding out until the rain died down. We sat in a booth that faced the windows and watched them mime and clatter around the tile floor on their stilts, going on with their act like they were surrounded by a crowd.

I couldn’t stop watching them as they pouted and mugged, pretending to be scared of their clownish reflections in the bakery case, lit from underneath so that the pastries seemed to glow. Rachel watched me instead, smiling every time I gasped or clapped. She bought each of them a delicate pink macaron before we left, which they accepted in open palms, bowing to us steeply like strange, spindly birds.

We walked back to the hotel in a slow processional, letting the rain drench us and fill our shoes. We were heavy with water and alive with a silent, shared moment, drunk on the uncomplicated romance of hot, flaky pastries and drizzled old stone. We slogged under the hotel awning, and I looked up at my sister, her skin golden in the light from a heat lamp, tentacles of brown hair plastered wetly to her face. Rachel tilted her chin up to the gray sky, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth, and shook her whole body, flinging luminous drops from her hair like a newly-bathed dog.
Ecstatic. That’s the word. And also: Dead.

So there’s a memory of Rachel for you. And now she’s gone, and I won’t have any moments like that ever again.

It’s so good to reminisce. Take a short break and go do something to relax. Play a game of badminton. Drink a cup of tea in your attic window and watch the sun rise! When you come back, we’ll get into the tough stuff. We’ll be waiting right here, just for you.
EVA AMERICANA

The day the game-show host came to town, back when I was still a boy and John was still alive, Fletch, John and I buried a time capsule behind the middle school cafeteria. It was afternoon gold and fall warm, September 2000, and as I shoveled dirt over a shallow-graved Ziploc bag, I remember having two hunches: first, that I finally understood what weird, schizophrenic force was pulling my hometown apart at the seams, and second, that we were all probably screwed because of it.

I didn't have the vocabulary to describe the first hunch then, and I probably don't now. You can try: it's the name for that quicksand-paradox-tug between unearned nostalgia and a naïve zeal for an imaginary future. That was Perry, Iowa, at the beginning of the new millennium. For my part, I thought the nostalgia was the most toxic. It rotted us from the inside, made us long hollowly for the piece of small town railroad Americana that our town had never been. I might have recognized it, but I wasn't immune. Even now, I look back on that day, and I'm looking through tinted glass. The memories are all artificially colored in the same slant of late afternoon light, like a goddamn camera lens filtered in 'Antique Gold'. I'll try to tell it straight, but I don't think you can really sterilize your childhood. Color's going to creep in somewhere.

Facts help. The time capsule specifics: letters to our future selves, a cool piece of petrified wood I found at the Forest Park Museum, half a misshapen joint Fletch rolled with ditchweed from his grandparents' farm. None of us knew how to smoke weed, “but we might
in ten years,” Fletch suggested. I had lingering concerns about the shelf life of no-grade pot, but I kept them to myself. John shook a clump of his overgrown black bangs from his eyes and tucked in a second sealed envelope, addressed to us “in case anything happened.” I didn't think much of it at the time, but I can't help but wonder if he saw the next seven years of his life laid out in front of him on rails, if he knew then he was on a track he couldn't escape. It makes me a little sick to think about. You shouldn't have to know that when you're 12. I try not to think about John much, anyway.

After we buried the capsule, Fletch snapped a Polaroid so we'd remember the spot. I plucked a fuzz-white dandelion from a crack in the building's foundation and tried to blow the seeds over the fresh mound of dirt. Camouflage, I said. If it's covered in weeds, nobody'll look twice.

We brushed our dirty palms on our jeans and headed back in through the middle school bandroom. It was 3:40, and John and I needed to change into our black-and-whites and put our instruments together for the parade. The town’s annual week-long “Sentimental Journey” festival was ending, and the host of a national nightly game show was giving a speech on the steps of the Carnegie Library downtown. The band was supposed to play the fight song to welcome him onstage, then follow the parade route back down to the school.

“It's bull,” John said, and buzzed his lips against his trumpet mouthpiece in a duck call. “Everyone else gets to hang around downtown and get an autograph.”

“Screw the autograph, I'm gonna ask him what his assistant’s boobs are like,” Fletch said, peering out of the bandroom window. Fletch's parents didn't make him take band, but he hung around with us after school most days until his brother picked him up.

“Dude, she's older than your mom,” I spat around the clarinet reed soaking in my
mouth. “And five bucks says you don't get within ten feet of him.”

“You're on, Ev.”

“Get us an autograph and bring it tonight,” I said.

“And if you don't get it, you have to goose Keeley Spellman,” John added.

I tightened down my ligature and blew a test honk down the barrel of the clarinet.

“Like this, Fletch. Hooooonk.”

Fletch scowled, connecting the freckles on his forehead in angry creases. “I ain't gonna goose Keeley Spellman just 'cause John wants to get his dick wet.”

Keeley was three years older than us, a red-headed goddess, and came to PMS from the high school once a week to talk to our class about keeping off drugs while the boys sat on their hands and tried to peek down her blouse. John had been in love with her since we were six, back when Keeley still lived across the street from me and came over every day to play Barbies on our front porch. John stopped dropping by my house uninvited once she and her parents moved out to a new-construction geodesic dome off Country Club Lane. I guess the view from my porch no longer interested him.

John emptied his spit valve onto Fletch's backpack. “Just bring it with the tape recorder tonight, then. If you're not chicken.”

“I'm not chicken. You get the keys from your Dad?”

John nodded. “Copied 'em at Pamida yesterday while he was taking a nap. Didn't even notice I was gone.” John's dad was the middle school janitor, and the only one we know who had keys to the school's condemned third floor attic. We'd been planning a sleepover there for weeks: John was convinced the school was haunted.

I trilled a low note on my clarinet. “What d'we need Fletch's tape recorder for?”
“For the EVP, dummy. Everyone knows you can only hear ghosts on tape.”

“You can, too, hear 'em,” Fletch piped up. “You just have to record it so you can slow it down and play it in reverse and hear their messages and stuff. Ghosts are always talking to you backwards.”

“Why can't they just talk to you normal?” I asked.

“'Cause fuck you, Evan, that's why.” Fletch swung his now-spitty backpack over one shoulder and kicked open the bandroom door. “I gotta go. Grits is here.” Grits was the collective noun for Fletch's older brother and his oatmeal-colored '91 Fiesta. I'd never heard Fletch call his brother anything else. I don't even remember what his name was outside of that car.

“Get me an autograph!” John shouted. Fletch slammed the door behind him. “He's not going to get it, is he?”

I shrugged. “Probably not. Or he'll get one for himself and not tell us. You know Fletch.”

John sighed and kicked his trumpet case closed, his eyes dark. “Figures. A celebrity comes to town for one night and we don't even get to ask him for a lousy autograph.”

When I turned eighteen, some would-be historian published A Town Called Perry, a book about Perry's history as a former railroad junction and factory town. It sold about twenty copies, half of which went to the Perry Public Library to gather dust in Special Collections. The other ten were sold to Perry residents, who mostly bought the book to make sure they weren't in it. One of the redeeming features of the hardcover, however, was a big fold-out map with a timeline of important events in Perry's history. Here are some things that
weren't on it:


1997: They have a kid, James, who, like his father, is uglier than sin. Roberta invests million of her new husband's money in beautification projects and small businesses to help “revitalize” her former hometown.

2008: Roberta pulls all of her money out of the town, closing four businesses and firing 78 people. She does all of this from California. She never returns to Perry to deal with the mess.

Also 2008: John Ballentine, shift supervisor at the Perry Beef Processing Plant, leaves work on the evening of his twentieth birthday, drives out to the Violet Hill Cemetery and shoots himself in the head.

“I'm saying it matters how he killed himself,” John interrupted, jumping off the last two steps of the bus with his trumpet in hand. “Shotgun? Pistol? Did they show a picture of his head afterward?” The middle school band bus had dropped us off at the corner of Second Street and Willis, a block away from where the game-show host was going to give his speech. Half the town was already there for “Sentimental Journey” picking their way through the town triangle, the three blocks of downtown proper that today featured a pupusa truck, a popcorn cart, and a 1950's-style soda fountain that Roberta Edmondson only paid to keep open one week a year.

“They didn't show his head. Inside Edition's on at six. They're not going to show somebody's blown-out head.”
“Why not?”

“Because it's sick. No one wants to see that. Why do you care?”

“Because A: it's cool. And B: who's going to remember this guy if they don't show it?”

“What are you on about?”

“Well, what's the point of doing it, otherwise? He might as well have just drank detergent or something, if no one's going to see what he did. You gotta be able to picture it.” He grinned and blew a piece of hair from his mouth. “It's hard to forget somebody if you've seen bits of their brain stuck to the pavement.”

We shlepped our rented instruments across the street to the roped-off section for the band, right in front of the law offices of Spellman, Spellman, Spellman, Kealhofer and Spellman. I watched John crane his neck around, scanning the crowd for Keeley.

“She's behind you, dude.”

“Who?” he said, too quickly.

I shook my head at him and waved my clarinet high above my head. “Keeley. KEELEY!”

She stopped talking to her dad and turned to look for her admirer, shielding her eyes from the sun with one hand. She caught my eye, smiled, and picked her way over to us. John’s neck flushed as red as her candy-apple hair and he punched me in the shoulder, hard.

“Ev! Hey! How are you guys doing?” She squeezed my shoulder and smiled, dimples stretching her freckled cheeks. The afternoon sunlight crept over her shoulders and caught her red curls, dancing across them in waves of shimmering current whenever she turned her head. I had a sudden impulse to reach out and touch them, wondering if her soft hair would
feel warm against my fingers like sun on a cat's fur.

“We're good, Keeley, we're actually--”

“--staying in the middle school attic tonight!” John blurted out, his dark eyes shining behind the long eyelashes Fletch liked to tease him about. “You should come. We're going to catch ghosts.”

“Ghosts, huh?” I saw the corners of her mouth twitch, and I glared at John. I didn't think Keeley would tattle on us, but she was definitely too old to believe in ghosts. She'd probably think we were a bunch of babies.

“Yeah. We'll leave the side door unlocked if you wanna come. We've got keys. It’s gonna be pretty sweet,” John bragged, his voice dropping half an octave lower than usual.

“We have to get going,” I said, before he could embarrass himself anymore. “We're playing the school song. See ya around.”

I grabbed a lovestruck John by the wrist and tugged him over to the band section. The game-show host was already on the steps of the Carnegie Library, rocking back and forth on his heels near the podium. He looked shorter than he did on TV.

“Maybe I can give Keeley his autograph tonight,” John whispered, as the mayor started her introduction.

“If Fletch even gets it,” I reminded him. I moistened the clarinet reed in my mouth and waited for our band director to call us to attention. I wasn't listening to the mayor make her fourth “can I buy a vowel” quip of the afternoon, or to the sound of the Iowa flag over our heads, snapping in the wind like a gym towel. I was still thinking of Keeley Spellman's hair, glossy like a magazine cover, and the way it fell across her shoulders in feather-light waves. I was wondering what I'd look like in curls.
March 2009: The restored Carnegie Library museum closes its doors to the public, unable to pay a fulltime employee to staff it.

May 2009: A piece of junk mail addressed to Eva Dominy arrives at my old house. My mother tells me this over the phone while I'm at college and laughs at the typo.

October 2010: The former Perry Middle School is demolished. The land is leveled, time capsule and all, and zoned for low-income housing.

November 2011: Fletcher Knapp III is arrested following an incident outside the G-Spot Lounge, Perry's only nightclub. Knapp is charged with public intox, felony battery and aggravated assault.

“Quit being faggots,” Fletch hissed, as we tiptoed up the third floor stairs. John and I were hugging the walls, treading on the edges of the steps so they wouldn't creak under our sneakers, while Fletch squatted at the top of the landing and waited for us to catch up. It was late, after 10, and the only light to guide our progress came from the stairwell's glowing red EXIT sign and the plastic Fisher-Price flashlight in my left hand.

“We're just being careful. You're going to get us caught.” John said in a low, even voice.

“BOOBS!” Fletch shouted, his voice rattling tinnily against the stairwell walls. “BIG HUGE BOOBIES. JOHN BALLENTINE IS A WEENY LITTLE FUDGEPACKER.”

John took the stairs two at a time and drove his fist in Fletch's gut.

“Owwwwww.” Fletch wheezed, doubling over.

“Don't be a jackass.” John cursed through clenched teeth. “My Dad can't find out we
were here. And watch your goddamn mouth, Keeley might be coming.”

Behind his back, I rolled my eyes at Fletch.

“No one's going to find us. Everyone's downtown for the lousy sock hop, anyway,” Fletch grumbled, crossing his arms protectively over his round stomach. “And if you want your stupid autograph, you better not fucking punch me again.”

“You actually got it?” John straightened, abandoning all pretense of stealth.

“Yeah, I actually got it. Got an extra one for you, too. But maybe I feel like keeping 'em both now...”

I flicked the flash light on and off to get their attention. “Guys, can we maybe, you know...get in to the attic first? This bag is killing me.” I couldn't take everything I had wanted to from home without rousing my mom's suspicion (she thought I was staying the night at Fletch's), but I'd managed to stuff a plastic water bottle, a sleeve of Fudge Rounds, my lunchbox full of Magic: the Gathering cards, and my California Raisins sleeping bag into my pack before taking off. The sleeping bag had stretched my backpack to its limits, and the straps were starting to cut into my shoulders.

“Throw me the flashlight.” I tossed the flashlight up to John, who fumbled with a bulky key ring in front of the narrow beam. He tried three different keys before one turned in the lock. “Gentlemen?” He pushed the heavy door open with one hand, the muscles in his tanned forearm stretched taut. Fletch and I ducked under his arm and into the attic, breathing in the stale scent of dust and mold as we blinked, trying to adjust our eyes to the darkness.

“Do you have the recorder?” I whispered to Fletch. John had closed the door behind us, but I felt even more nervous about talking up here, where no one but us and a couple of janitors had probably been in years. It was virgin territory, and I didn't want to spoil the
excitement. Even Fletch seemed to understand: he took the recorder and a blank cassette tape out of his messenger bag and handed them to me without comment.

John shone the flashlight around the corners of the room, outlining the walls, an old chalkboard, a few boxes of retired gym uniforms, three messy rows of broken wooden desks with swivel chairs.

“Cool,” Fletch breathed, dropping his bag at his feet.

“Cool,” I agreed.

We pushed the desks toward the perimeter and set up camp in the middle of the room, once John had “swept” the floor with an old t-shirt. I unrolled my sleeping bag, grateful it was dark and Fletch couldn't see it. I had been begging my parents to get me a grown-up sleeping bag all year, one of the shiny solid-color polyester numbers my friends all had, but my birthday was still two months away. This one was a hand-me-down from my older cousin. I didn't even like the California Raisins.

Fletch tossed me a Fruit Roll-Up and stretched out on the floor, using his still-unrolled sleeping bag as a pillow. “So how was the parade?”

I felt my face get hot with the still-fresh embarrassment, and stuffed the whole end of the roll-up in my mouth so I wouldn't have to answer.

John wedged the flashlight under his chin, scary-story style, tinting his high cheekbones and semi-permanent frown with warm orange light. “It was awful. Literally no one was out there watching. And Mr. Christiansen still made us play the school song every two blocks.”

I spat the roll-up out of my mouth. I had forgotten to peel off the plastic. “It was so dumb. Everyone was already downtown for the speech. I don't know why they thought a
parade would be a good idea in the first place.”

Fletch snorted. “If a bunch of bandfags march to a fight song, and no one's around to hear them, do they make a sound?”

“You weren't marching in front of the saxes.” I shuddered and bit off a hunk of the sticky, red-flavored fruit sheet. “They definitely made sounds. Terrible, terrible sounds.”

John took a six-pack of Grapette out of his dad's old military duffel and lobbed us each a bottle of soda. We hung out on the floor for a while and played a couple rounds of Magic—John told us we couldn't count on seeing anything supernatural until midnight.

Around eleven thirty, I paused the latest match to go refill my water bottle. The Grapette had run out two games ago, and I was feeling a little sick from all the sugar anyway. I propped the attic door open with a box of musty, Perry-blue gym shorts and ran down the stairs to the second floor drinking fountain, skirting the middle of the laminate floor in a familiar pattern. The floors at PMS crackled under your feet like cellophane unless you stuck to the edges.

The drinking fountain throbbed to life with a low hum when I jammed my finger on the button and started to fill my bottle. I had just capped it when I heard a crackling noise from underneath me.

Someone was walking the first floor.

I felt a grapey burp coming on, and I buried my mouth in the crook of my arm. The sock hop wasn't over till midnight. Who would have come to the middle school?

I felt my way along the wall back to the stairs, praying the floors wouldn't give me away. I heard a man's voice filter up through the stairwell—it was throaty, stretched like a tv announcer's, and I couldn't help but think I'd heard it somewhere before. I heard someone
John poked his head out of the attic door. He pointed below him and mouthed a question, his dark eyebrows raised. I shrugged, and edged farther down the hall. The voices were getting louder, warmer. They had to be coming up to the first floor stairs.

I was fifteen feet from the attic stairs and John when I heard the man's voice again. I froze. John froze. We stared at each other, mouths open. I knew immediately why the voice had sounded familiar.

It was the game-show host.

I could hear him coming up the stairs, his hard-soled shoes clattering against the stone treads. John waved his arms to get my attention and gestured frantically for me to come back to the attic. I froze like a rabbit in a field, my back flattened against the wall of the girls' bathroom. I didn't know what to do. If I stayed where I was, he would see me in seconds when he rounded the landing. If I tried to make a break for John, I risked making the floor crackle under my feet and giving our position away anyway.

I debated just standing there—after all, I doubted a fully-grown man was supposed to be skulking around a middle school after dark, either—until I heard Keeley Spellman's soft giggle.

I looked at John. John looked at me. I shouldered through the swinging door and dove into the girl's bathroom, landing hard on my right shoulder. I cursed silently, and rolled over on to my back, rubbing my shoulder and trying not to shout from the pain. The floor outside crackled.

“What is that?” The game-show host was ten feet away from me. I could see the bottoms of his brogues under the crack in the bathroom door.
Keeley giggled again, and I wondered if it was for our benefit. “It's just the floor. The school's a million years old. It sounds like a bowl of Rice Krispies, huh?”

“Jesus. What are you, sixteen?” he said, a twinge of impatience clinging to his husky voice.

“Almost.”

“Jesus,” he repeated, his voice harsher, tighter somehow. “I'm going to pretend you didn't tell me that.” His brogues moved out of my line of sight and they started off down the hall again. “You don't actually go here, do you?”

“No!” Keeley's voice rang out through the hallway. She sounded hurt. I crept forward on my stomach, pressing my cheek to the floor so I could get a good look under the crack in the door. “I just...everyone else is downtown. And I knew it’d be unlocked…” She trailed off. I was flat on my belly, but I still couldn't see them under the door. I heard a metallic thump, followed by a loud reverberation, like a door shaking on its hinges. I wish I had just stayed put, waited for them to move on. But I was curious. I climbed up to my hands and knees and nudged the door open a tiny crack with my (still smarting) shoulder. If I pressed my forehead against the doorjamb, I could just make them out.

Keeley Spellman, the same girl who, just two years ago, had linked her arm in mine while we skipped all the way from our neighborhood to the municipal pool, our matching jelly sandals slapping the pavement beneath us, had her legs wrapped tightly around the game-show host’s waist, feet crossed at the ankle. Her back was pressed flat up against our seventh grade class president's locker. And he was kissing her and running his old, creepy fingers through her beautiful copper hair.

I collapsed back onto the cool tile of the bathroom floor, feeling the acidic burn of the
night's Grapette rising in the back of my throat. I didn't think we were going to find any
ghosts that night, or ever again. My heart sank when I thought of John, trapped at the top of
the third floor stairs, watching the whole thing unfold beneath him. I remembered what he'd
said about *Inside Edition* earlier, about how you had to be able to picture the gunshot wound
in order to remember it. I peeked through the crack in the door at the host again. I was right.
He did look a lot shorter in person.

September 17th, 2000: Three seventh graders bury a cassette tape in a hole behind
Perry Middle School.

May 23rd, 2004: Keeley Spellman graduates from Perry High School and moves to
Seattle on a full-ride scholarship to UW. She is valedictorian, student body president,
and voted “Prettiest Eyes” by the ’04 Senior Class.

The three of us made a pact that night never to tell anyone what had happened.
Everyone in town saw the game-show host take off from the sock hop early, heard the rumors
from the hotel staff that he hadn't checked back in to his room until late that night, but no one
ever connected him to Keeley Spellman. No one would have believed it. Instead, a rumor
spread through town that he’d been spotted with one of the Warner girls from the Bar-Jack
Estates trailer park. No one had anything bad to say about him, even with that fiction in
place. “I hope he doesn't think we're *ALL* like that,” I heard one of the band booster moms
whisper when the gossip first made the rounds. “Those Warner girls are bad news. You can't
teach class.”

I said I'd try to tell this whole thing straight, as straight as I could, but there are two
parts of Perry's timeline, my timeline, that I can't whitewash. I can't detach myself from them. I'm keeping them in here because I think they're important, but you've got to know that they're being filtered, coming at you through colored glass. Nostalgia rots you from the inside.

November 2011: Fletcher beats the ever-living shit out of me in the parking lot of the G-Spot Lounge.

It's my first weekend home since I started transitioning two years ago. You know when you hear your voice recorded on cassette tape, and it sounds like a stranger? Imagine that feeling every time you look in a mirror or catch your reflection in a store window or the bowl of a spoon. Imagine feeling like a stranger to yourself.

I think that's why people make so many goddamn time capsules. It lets us look back on our lives like we're strangers. We've forgotten what it was like to be that person, to live by those codes. We can play pretend in our own bodies.

I stopped playing pretend two years ago. I come home now, and Mom tells me she loves me, that she's so proud of me, that I'm so brave, I'm her brave, brave so—daughter. She says she's sorry. Force of habit. I just smile. Two years ago she buried her face in my father's neck and sobbed, "Why couldn't you just be gay?" We've come a long way since then.

I tell her I'm going out.

Where, she asks. I hear the edge in her voice.

I'll be fine, I say. I don't know many people here anymore.

She brushes my cheek with her wrist, tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. Be
careful. You're so beautiful, Ev. You're beautiful and brave and I love you.

Facts help. I leave on a Tuesday. I'm wearing trouser jeans, floral wedges, a cute button down top with a ruffled front.

I come home on Thursday in a torn paper dress.

Fletcher is drunk. He is waving his glass in my face. He is pushing a woman away from him. He is following me to my car. He is shoving me into my passenger door and asking what I did with Evan, what the fuck I did with Evan.

His breath is terrible. He smells like stale liquor and sweat and ditchweed, and he's breathing with his mouth open, exhaling right into my face, and I can't think straight. I know I shouldn't say anything, but I do. I'm tipsy enough to say the only thing that comes into my head while he's pinning me to the door of my Buick and exhaling his hot, disgusting breath into my nose.

What kind of gun did John use?

He lets go of me, staggers backward, his eyes cloudy and unfocused. What the fuck do you mean?

A shotgun? A pistol? I tuck my hair behind my ears and I see his eyes follow my movement, his reaction time delayed like he's looking at me underwater. He takes a step closer, pulls on a piece of my hair with his fingers.

Is this real? He asks.

Did you see pictures? Did you see bits of his brain on the tombstones?

He slaps me across the cheek with the back of his hand.

You pervert, he says. You sick pervert.
I try to leave but Fletch has a handful of my hair in his fist that he yanks on when I turn to get back in my car.

Is this a wig, Ev, he asks, his face red from the booze and the cold and the exertion. Is this a fucking wig?

I don't remember everything that happens. At some point I fall down onto the gravel in the parking lot, and Fletcher goes down with me. Someone says they're going inside to call the cops. Fletcher keeps screaming at me. He's asking if I'm wearing a wig while he's twisting my hair at the roots, trying to tear it away from my scalp, and at some point I think he pulls a handful away because I hear a woman scream, but I can't tell, I don't register when it happens because by then my eyes are filled with saline and blood and white, burning heat. Who the fuck are you? Who the fuck are you now? he asks, and he pulls my head up by my hair and then slams it back down into the gravel. Get up, he says, breathing hard and shallow. Get up you dirty piece of shit. Hit me. Hit me back, you pussy.

He yanks my shoulders off the ground, wedges his foot underneath me and kicks me, kicks me in the middle of my spine until I slump over forward, legs stretched out in front of me, and he shakes me and slaps me closed-fisted across the cheek and he pulls my head back by the hair and looks me in the eye and shouts hit me back you piece of shit. And he's punching me down and pulling my shoulders back up toward him, over and over, and the whole time he's shouting the same thing, hit me, hit me, hit back, hit back you motherfucker, stand up and be a man, hit me back like a man, like you used to, hit me, be a man, Ev, be a man, be a man, be a man, you're a man.

The police show up, ten minutes too late, and haul Fletch away. I learn all this from the barstaff, two days later. In the moment, on the gravel, the only thing I can hear is Fletch,
sobbing like a broken little girl.

1994: Keeley Spellman moves into the house across the street.

She holds my hand on the way to the bus stop. She sits with me even though she has her own friends, even though I'm four years younger and shy and she's tall and beautiful and bright and the coolest girl in school.

Every now and then I'll hear people try to tell stories about when they were a kid, and they'll get this wistful, far-away look in their eyes. Oh, nostalgia, they'll say, shaking the memories away from their heads like leaves and smiling like they've said something funny. They prattle on about how much they miss wooden playgrounds, or Big League Chew, or staying out until the streetlights came on, but they're really thinking about the day they held the cool girl's hand on the bus and felt that swelling happiness inside of them that told them they could be anything, that their future was infinite and open and unassailably bright.

I don't think we feel nostalgia for the past. I think we feel nostalgia for the future we imagined.

I haven't seen Keeley in years, but the image I have of her in my head is always the same. She's sitting cross legged in the back of a Bluebird school bus, chewing thick watermelon bubble gum with her mouth open and bobbing her foot along to a Springsteen song blaring through the speakers over the bus's labored purr. I sit next to her, cuddled up to her on the seat so our legs are touching, and stare up at her in awe. I remember taking in the curve of her long pale legs, my eyes stopping at the crook of her knee, the dimples in the side of her calves, her glittery aqua toenails tapping against the sole of a worn foam flip-flop.

She catches me staring. “Do you want me to paint yours, Ev?” she teases, kicking up
her legs and wiggling her toes. She laughs, loose red curls grazing the tops of her shoulders, and I catch my reflection in her polarized sunglasses. A scrawny, straw-haired little boy stares back at me, and I wonder who he is.

1994: I begin.
DERIVATIVES

Righteous Bridges fastened the collar on his enormous poodle and fervently wished he were a mathematician. The thing, the *Theorem* had flashed into his head that morning like the face of a B-movie actor, name dancing maddeningly on the tip of his tongue. He wrapped Apollo's leash around his wrist, grabbed a poop sack from the box by the door and tugged the blind, waist-high poodle down the back steps of his apartment building.

“Landing,” he called, and the dog tested the nubby indoor/outdoor carpeting with a hesitant paw, sliding it around in front of him like an ice dancer. Righteous waited for him, leaning against the wobbly iron railing, and probed the corners of his mouth with his tongue, trying to taste the formula that had seemed so clear to him an hour ago. It had only been in focus long enough for him to glimpse the name: the *Bridges Theorem of Nominal Affectation*. He didn't know what it was yet, but he had a feeling it held the answer to his problems. He had a feeling it was extraordinary.

He paused briefly in the parking lot to let the poodle do his business, then loaded him into the backseat of his Prius, buckling a safety belt across the dog’s chest. Apollo's nappy fur was coal-black, suspiciously so, as though someone had rubbed him all over with shoe polish. Righteous kissed the top of his poodley head. “Sorry, pup. No park today.”

Their usual schedule had changed last week. Wednesdays were now the days when Apollo saw his analyst. Righteous hated the idea of pet therapy, how bourgeois it sounded, but something had to be done. Apollo, perhaps tiring of consumptive blindness in his old age,
had taken to indiscriminately humping the obstacles in his life: pillows, posts, legs. The analyst had assured Righteous that this was normal aged-dog behavior, until she'd witnessed it herself during last week's session, when the poodle had taken a keen interest in her ceramic umbrella stand. Apollo wasn't humping to completion: he humped slowly, soulfully, staring at his target with bottomless blank eyes. It was an intense experience, taxing to watch. Sometimes Righteous hummed Marvin Gaye to lighten the mood.

They drove to the analyst's office in silence. Righteous ran the same words over in his head like a mantra, hoping repetition might shake the memories loose: the Righteous Bridges Theorem of Nominal Affectation. Nothing. He tried emphasizing different words each time: Theorem, Nominal, Of. Nothing budged. It felt like trying to open a stubborn pickle jar.

Frustrated, he forgot to make his usual stop on the way to pick up a doughnut for Mona and arrived at the waiting room empty-handed. Mona was the pet analyst's secretary, a dreamy, thick-waisted woman with hooded eyes and limp brown hair that clung to her cheeks like pieces of seaweed. She was a tabloid fanatic and smelled like a hospital tongue depressor. Righteous found her impossibly erotic.

“Hi, Mona,” he called, tugging Apollo away from a potted faux-fern.

“Halloo,” she said in her miserable monotone, not bothering to look up from the day's National Enquirer. Amidst the paper's usual promises of celebrity scandal, he made out the headline “Cannibal Chef Broils Wife to Death.”

“Sounds like that meal was to die for,” he faux-joked.

“Sorry?”

“I said, 'Sounds like that meal was to die for,’” he repeated, cringing at the sound. She closed the paper and stared up at him with vacant, moony eyes. She looked a bit like a Basset

She peered down at the front page. “Oh,” she said, after several seconds. “Yes. I see.”

She was so dull. Righteous imagined bending her over the desk and taking her violently from behind, running his hands over her pale, shapeless body while Apollo humped a magazine rack.

“Can you tell Dr. Smart we're here?” he asked instead.

Mona appeared to notice Apollo for the first time. She pressed a red button on her desk phone.

“Yes?” a crisp, official-sounding voice came through the speakers.

“Apollo's here to see you.”

“Who?”

“Umbrella stand.” Mona smirked.

The voice on the other end sighed. “Tell him I'm with a client. I need a few minutes to hump-proof the office.”

“Will do.” She covered the speaker with one hand and turned to Righteous. “She's with a client right now. It'll be just a few minutes.”

“...Mona? You don't have me on speaker, do you?”

“Nope, boss.” She stifled an evil giggle.

“Okay. Hanging up.”

“Roger that.” She pushed another button. “Whoopsie.”

Righteous blushed, and fiddled with the row of flourescent Post-Its that lined her desk blotter. A phone number, a filing to-do list, a child-like doodle of a cat wearing a bowtie. He picked up the last one. It had some kind of math problem on it:
\( \int (mx + nx^2 + 6) \)

Mona's phone *tweedle-eedle-eedled*, and he stuffed the Post-it into his pocket when she turned away to answer ("Ahoy-hoy, you've reached the offices of Elizabeth Smart, Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist"). He took a seat next to the only other person in the waiting area and booted up his smartphone. It didn't take long to find an online graphing calculator. He punched Mona's equation in:

> ERR: INVALID INPUT.

It figured. Mona was hardly a mathematician. It was probably for the best. If she showed any mental acuity at all, he might feel guilty about his imaginary excursions to the *Terra Incognita* between her thighs. He gave Apollo a scratch behind the ears. Maybe the poodle wasn't so neurotic; maybe there was a reason he only humped inanimate objects.

“Apollo?” Elizabeth Smart's commanding voice rang out against the water-stained ceiling tiles. Righteous shot up from the chair, dropping his phone on the tissue-thin carpet. He unclipped Apollo's leash and hooked a finger under his collar, guiding him down the hall after the muffled thud of Smart's patent sling-back heels.

He nudged Apollo gently into her office and leaned against the doorway in what he hoped was a casual-looking pose. Everything about Elizabeth Smart made his hands shake. The first time he brought Apollo in, he made the mistake of riffing on her name ("Like the kidnapped girl!"), and she looked at him as though he'd pooped on the rug. Apollo's tryst with her umbrella stand hadn't helped. She was a woman of few words, and all of them were terrifying. Even her office was imposing in its minimalism, all dark wood and clean lines. He could count the personal touches on one hand: the formerly-violated art deco umbrella stand, three framed photographs, a coffee table covered in several fanned-out issues of *Highlights*.
for Children. That was a bit odd, now that he thought of it. She was a pet analyst, not a child psychologist.

“He really is the darkest poodle I've ever seen,” Elizabeth called over to him, pressing gently on Apollo's rump to make him sit on the dog-sized fainting couch.

“It's not shoe polish,” he said reflexively, wiping his sweaty palms against his khakis. She looked up at him, one eyebrow raised, the downy blonde hairs too perfectly-arched to be natural. He looked down at her desk to avoid eye contact. There was a framed picture of a blonde teenager in a concert dress, playing the harp. “Hey, isn’t that a picture of—“

“No.”

He took a deep breath. “It really looks like--”

“No, it doesn't.”

“So you're not--”

“Nope.”

“Alrighty, then.” He tried to force a laugh, but even his chuckle shook. She just stared at him, arms crossed, her hard eyes boring through his like diamond-tipped drills. Righteous swallowed. He wished he weren't so frightened of this tiny blonde woman, with her Highlights for Children and pictures of harps and probable Stockholm Syndrome. “Okay then. Should I just...” he waved to a chair next to the dog couch.

She shook her head, tucking a strand of shampoo-commercial hair behind her ear.

“No, I thought Apollo and I would meet alone today. I think it's for the best.”

Righteous heard the accusation in her voice. “What are you suggesting?”

“Nothing at all,” she said, all cool professionalism. “But he's obviously working through some sexual repression. I think it's quite likely that his behavior is a manifestation of
some other, unfulfilled desire.”

She was fixing him with her bright blue laser-eyes again, like he was supposed to be making a connection. Righteous looked down at the dog, curled up serenely on the fainting couch. “Wait. Are you saying Apollo wants to...ehm...”

“Engage in coitus,” she prompted, taking a seat behind her desk.

“...thingy. With me?” He held out his hand for Apollo to sniff and searched his rheumy eyes for some sign of unrequited poodle lust.

“Well,” she said. “He is blind.”

Righteous padded back to the waiting room, wondering both what he was going to do for half an hour and what he was going to do with a lovesick dog. Apollo had been his best friend and only roommate for eleven years: he'd never felt any “will-they-or-won't-they” tension before. He wasn't sure he was equipped to handle the pressure. He dawdled by Mona's desk, hoping it would take his mind off things. There was something about her that always made him feel cool, confident, in control.

“Looks like I've got half an hour free, Mona,” he said, leaning against her desk like a lounge singer. “Want to grab some lunch? Sushi down the street.”

“I don't eat sushi,” she said morosely. “Raw fish is dangerous. It's flu season.”

“Well, I'll take you to get your flu shot, then.”

Her beady little eyes widened in horror. “Flu shots cause autism.”

“Of course they do.” He resisted the urge to rip open her blouse, to grab her saggy breasts in even palmfuls. He imagined porking her on Elizabeth Smart's fainting couch, doggy-style, while she prattled on about dangerous mercury levels or natural childbirth.
Moan-a, he thought, and the *Bridges Theorem* loomed larger in his mind.

Mona cleared her throat. “I'm up here.”

He snapped back to attention, realizing he'd been leering. “Sorry.”

“I gotta work. Why don't you go sit over by Patience Beavers? She's nice.”

He looked over his shoulder to where she was pointing. The redhead with the pet carrier who'd been waiting when he came in was still there, nose in a beat-up paperback. She creased the top of the page and looked up when she heard her name.

Righteous gave Patience Beavers a stupid little finger wave and she smiled in response. She seemed harmless enough. Her pinstriped skirt suit was a little intimidating, but her hair was wind-rumpled and her face was smooth-skinned but plain. He took the chair next to her and pulled out his smartphone. Maybe he had typed Mona's equation in wrong the first time.

> ERR: INVALID INPUT.

Well, he thought, at least Mona was still an idiot. It was good to have consistency in life.

“You're typing it in wrong.” Patience Beavers leaned over his armrest and pointed at his phone screen. “The 'm' and 'n' are just placeholders for the actual digits. You need a real number for the coefficient, or it won't graph.”

Righteous blushed. *Coefficient.* It sounded familiar, something he should have remembered from high school Algebra. “Uh, thanks. Are you...interested in math?”

“Physics. I like—well, I *teach* Physics. I like math a lot, though. It's *The Matrix*, right? It lets you see all the underlying patterns...” She trailed off and smiled self-consciously. “That sounds silly. But pop a couple integers in there and it should graph just
fine.” She turned back to her book.

Righteous popped a couple integers in there. It graphed just fine:

![Graph](image)

It didn't look half bad, he thought, but he wasn't sure what it was supposed to mean. He tried a few different numbers as coefficients, looked at a few different variations on a theme of up-and-down-squiggles. He turned back to Patience Beavers and watched her move her lips in silence while she read. The theorem would still be extraordinary if he had help, he decided. After all, women had helped make Great Discoveries for ages: the men always got top billing on the academic marquee. He cleared his throat and tried to think of a good opening.

“Is that your beaver?” he asked.

It was a bad opening.

She looked up from her book and frowned. “Excuse me?”

“In the...in the carrier. I...you know, Patience Beavers...I...Oh, God. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't even—that sounded—hah.”

“Oh!” She laughed a strange, resonant laugh that made Mona look up from her desk. Righteous drummed his fingers on his knees. Women with distinctive laughs made him nervous. “It's okay,” Patience continued. “Not a beaver, though. It's a Fennec.”

“A what?”
“Fennec. Fox?” She plucked the carrier off the floor with two fingers and held it up with the wire door facing him. Righteous slouched down to peek: inside, a sand-colored animal with a sharp nose and satellite-dish ears stared back, cocking its tiny fox head to one side. It was adorable. Extraordinarily so.

He frowned. “What's his name?”

“Foxface.”

“Apt.” He tried to smile convincingly. “What's wrong with him?”

“He's pining for his homeland.”

“Pardon?”

She thrust the carrier into his hands without asking and shifted her handbag onto her lap, pawing through it while she spoke. “I bought Foxface off a wholesale Norwegian breeder. Got my last one from them too, but he died in February. I thought I'd found instructions on 'How to Care for a Norwegian Blue Fox', but it turned out to be 'How to Care for a Norwegian Blue Fox Jacket'.” There was something hypnotizing about her voice, authoritative and crisp with a sarcastic arch, like every line was a joke if you were smart enough to pick up on it. He couldn't tell if she was deadpanning or being sincere, and it made him anxious.

She pulled a juice box out of her enormous handbag and deftly punctured the foil hole with the thin plastic straw. He squinted at the label.

“Ecto Cooler? I thought they got rid of that years ago.” He watched her take a sip, her full lips pursed tight against the straw.

She smiled. “They did.”

“Then...”
“No,” she said, in a perfect imitation of Elizabeth Smart. He wondered if it was intentional. She downed the juicebox in one long suck, then dropped the empty carton back into her purse. “Can I ask what you were graphing?”

“I'm not sure,” he admitted. He pulled out the Post-It and lowered his voice. “I found this on Mona's desk.”

She plucked it from his hand with two red-lacquered fingernails. “What's this on the back?” She flipped it over and held it up to him. On the back of the Post-It, in Mona's childish script, it read:

*Words I don't get: melody, bus, obviously.*

“I hadn’t noticed that before.”

Patience leaned in conspiratorially. “Is she....y’know...?” She made a stroke-y face. He smirked, glad to be in on a joke. “I don't think so.”

“Well, to her credit, 'bus' is a pretty complex concept.” She winked at him and he felt a surge of confidence.

“Mona,” he called out, “what's a bus?”

Mona squinted up from her paper. “A bus? Like, 'the wheels on the bus go 'wheel, wheel, wheel'”?"

“That's it. Thanks.” God, she was sexy.

Patience snorted, then covered her mouth with both hands, like she was trying to force the stuffing back inside a teddy bear. He watched her forehead flush red as she tried not to laugh. Her face was actually quite pleasant, he thought, taking in her full cheeks and ski-slope nose. Not frightening in the least.

He took a deep breath. “Can I ask you another math question?”
“Sure thing. What are you working on?”

“That's...hmm. Well, I'm not totally sure,” he said. “A theorem about names.”

“Names?”

As he looked at Patience Beavers, eyes skipping over her pouty smile and cute freckled nose, he felt the theorem start to congeal, the memories slide back into place. Ms. Beavers was a lucky charm. Maybe he would ask her to lunch. “More...the associations. Like, you meet a bunch of different people named Josh, and they're all douchebags?”

She nodded slowly. “All of the Pats I know are fat.”

“Yes! You got it. Brittanys are dental hygienists who use too much self-tanner.”

“Marks are accountants who play Fantasy Football on the weekends.”

“Hirschels are Jewish,” he riffed.

She laughed her distinctive laugh, a modulating ha-HA, ha-HA. “I think that one's a bit different. What about mine? 'Patience' always seemed kind of old-fashioned to me.”

He shook his head. “You're not a Patience. You're 'Patience Beavers'. It's different. You'd be part of the theorem, probably. You have a Distinctive Name.”

“What does that mean?”

He picked through his words carefully. “It's...an unusual name. Or combination of names. Unusual enough that it sort of demands certain things from the person who has it. Does that make sense?”

“I guess. It doesn't sound very scientific.” She scrunched up her nose, and Righteous felt his palms start to sweat. “Is this based on your experience? You never told me your name.”

“It's Righteous Bridges,” he said, and waited for her to laugh. She didn't.
“'Righteous Bridges'. Huh. I don't mean to offend, but is your family religious?”

He shook his head. That was part of the problem. His parents (now dead: trampled in a Black Friday rush for discounted televisions) hadn't been religious fanatics or union executives or civil rights activists. They were entirely ordinary.

“But that's what I'm looking for,” he went on, hoping she wouldn't ask any more questions. “A theorem, a formula. Some way to predict what happens to these people. Do they live up to their names? That probably sounds stupid.”

“No, I think I get it. My dentist's name is Don Tooth,” she offered.

“That's exactly it!” He thumped the wooden armrest with a sweaty palm. It was coming back to him now, in fits and starts. Fragments of numbers, flashes of impossible-looking graphs. “Maybe it molds us, who we are...or maybe we consciously choose to play along?”

“We claim it for ourselves.” She nodded slowly, her eyes distant, fixed on a point somewhere above Mona's desk.

“Yeah. But it's always one or the other.”

“That makes sense. I might not have gotten my Ph.D if it weren’t for all of those kids teasing me. 'Patience Beavers.’” She shuddered. “So which is it for you?” she asked. “Did it make you who you are? Or did you choose to play along?”

Tightness crept into the back of his throat and he tried to swallow it away. *Neither,* he felt like saying. *I'm ordinary in every possible way.* But he knew now that she wouldn't understand. He'd dared to hope that she might have just been a high school teacher or a tutor, but she had a Ph.D. He wished she'd told him that before he'd mentioned the theorem. She probably woke up every morning feeling like God's gift to graphs, Dr. Professor Beavers. He
slouched down in the chair and pulled out his calculator again, hoping she'd take the hint and leave him alone. She wouldn't have gone to lunch with him anyway, he decided, when she turned back to her book, looking hurt. She probably hated sushi. There were high levels of mercury in fish. Besides, it was flu season.

Righteous Bridges used to be extraordinary. When he was younger, he'd been a bit of a prodigy: the fastest reader, the sharpest thinker, the highest scorer. He was voted “Most Likely to Become President” in his Middle School Yearbook and had perfect, even white teeth. His mother (before the accident) had pulled him close one day and kissed the top of his head, whispering, “Righteous, you are a special, shining snowflake. You're going to do Great, Important Work. You, my darling, are extraordinary.” He thought about that day whenever he saw an ad for deeply discounted television sets, and his heart clenched like a vice. When he walked near a Best Buy, he could almost smell her freesia perfume.

The shit thing about being a child prodigy was that eventually the rest of the world caught up. In four years, Righteous went from the top of the pack to near-top of the pack to just pack. He started drinking too much coffee so he could study more and keep the rest of the students at bay, and soon even his perfect teeth had yellowed.

Here was another shit thing: being a prodigy, Righteous had never learned to work.

College had been a series of major changes and flights of fancy. When the going got tough, Righteous hightailed it the hell out of there. He dropped out of college after his junior year, when he stopped writing papers at all. He couldn't bring himself to type his name. “Righteous Bridges,” he told himself, was the name of a politician, a lawyer, a star athlete. “Righteous Bridges” inspired bald kids with cancer and under-privileged urban youths.
“Righteous Bridges” ran half-marathons and took fish oil supplements.

*He* was a barely above-average student with a growing paunch and potential you could watch diminishing in real time. So Righteous didn't type his name. He stared at the blinking cursor on the computer screen and let thoughts explode in his head like Catherine Wheels. He wondered if you could give yourself an aneurysm by silently screaming too loud.

Righteous tried not to think about Patience Beavers for the rest of the week. He busied himself with the theorem, pinpointing variables, assigning names to numbers, trying to make the graph change in a consistent, measurable way. The harder he focused on it, the more it seemed to slip away. Without Patience, the Theorem shrank in his mind like a tumor.

When it was time for Apollo's next appointment, he arrived at the office ten minutes early, hoping he could drop the poodle off and leave before Herr Beavers arrived with her fox and her juice boxes. He dreaded her.

Mona was reading a tabloid again, but she closed it and held it out to him as soon as he approached the desk. He glanced at the paper: “*Elizabeth Smart: Kidnapped Again?*” screamed the blood-red headline. A grainy photo of a blonde girl playing the harp was splashed across the cover. It looked like a low-res version of the framed picture in the analyst’s office.

“Seriously?” he asked.

She nodded, wide eyes framed by her lensless vanity glasses. “Isn't it awful? I hope they find her.”

“She's not here today, then?”

“Who?”

198
“Dr. Smart.”

“Of course she's here. Why wouldn't she be?” Mona looked puzzled. Righteous wished he could commission a nude portrait of her in that moment, freeze-frame her thick, furrowed brow over empty eyes and soft, open mouth and hang it above his bed.

He heard the waiting room door open behind him. Beavers. He tossed the tabloid back on the desk and turned around. Patience Beavers towered over him by at least an inch in her heeled suede boots. She was grinning, and her cheeks were flushed from the cold.

“I found a solution.”

“Sorry?”

She thumped the fox carrier down onto Mona's desk and pulled a tiny pink Post-It from the pocket of her knee-length, quilted coat. “For your theorem? I was thinking about it all weekend. I mean, it's not perfect, and it's not, you know, strictly academic, but...voila.” She stuck the Post-it to his chest with a flourish. “Give it a go, huh? Gorgeous dog, by the way. I've never seen one like him before.” She flounced her Beavery flounce over to a waiting room chair and made a lot of noise unzipping her coat and spreading out her things.

He bent down and kissed Apollo on the head, holding out his favorite squeaky walrus toy. “Hear that, pup? Patience thinks you're special. You're extraordinary.” He felt a nauseating mix of pride and envy. Apollo pulled the walrus to his belly and began to hump.

Righteous unstuck the Post-It from his sweater and pulled out his phone. She couldn't have come up with a working Theorem, not in a weekend. The equation was a mess of sines and cosines and coefficients and constants. He tapped it in and pressed graph:
It was beautiful. Irrational, complex, and totally useless.

“Do you like it?” Patience reappeared over his shoulder.

“It's...unusual. What does it mean?”

She smiled and smoothed the collar of her turtleneck. “It's me.”

“You?”

“I put in the values for my name when I gave it to you. It changes, depending on what numbers you assign. Want me to show you how to do yours?”

“Uh...maybe later.” He snapped the sliding cover on his phone closed. He wasn't sure he wanted to see the graph of his name. He was sure it would look nothing like Patience's. It was probably something bleak, like an upside-down parabola.

“Oh, no. You aren't upset, are you? I don't mean to...I mean, I know this is your thing, I just thought it would be a fun challenge...” her voice faltered.

“No! No. I love it.” he lied. “It's just I spent all weekend working on it, and nothing I tried looked half this good.”

“That's information, though, right?”

“Sorry?”

200
She picked up Foxface's carrier and cradled it in her arms while she spoke. “When you try something and it doesn't work, or nothing happens. That's still information. It means you're closer to figuring it out. Sometimes the misses are just as important as the hits.”

He thought about that for a second. It sounded like a lot of hooey.

“Apollo?” The analyst’s voice echoed behind them. Dr. Smart was leaning against her office doorway, arms crossed, wearing a red power suit and heels. She'd dyed her hair a dull, flat black since he saw her last, and it wasn't particularly flattering. She'd forgotten to dye her eyebrows to match, and they perched on her forehead like wispy ghosts.

He waved to Patience, then tugged Apollo down the hall and into Smart's office, which looked even sparser than usual. It took him a moment before he realized what was missing: all of the framed photographs were gone.

“Didn't you have a--” he asked.

“No.” She glared at him, cold and distant as always, but there were dark circles under her tired blue eyes, and her toe tapped a nervous pattern into the thin carpet.

“So that article about--”

“No.”

“--has nothing to do with--”

“Definitely not.”

Righteous sighed. “Okay.” If anything poked a hole in Beavers' theory, it was Elizabeth Smart. She was all misses, all the time, and he wasn't sure any of it could be construed as “information”.

He shuffled back into the waiting room and took the seat next to Patience. She was sipping another juicebox and flipping through an electronics ad. “Lowest Prices of the
"Season!" it blared. "Door Buster discounts on all of our name-brand televisions!"

He thought about her name equation, its erratic oscillations and incomprehensible patterns. Patience Beavers frightened him, true, but she had spent her whole weekend thinking about him. Or his theorem, at least. That had to count for something.

He cleared his throat. "I think you're wrong."

She looked up from the ad. "Sorry?"

"About the hits and the misses." He probed the corners of his mouth with his tongue, searching for the right example. "They don't always give us information. Or maybe they do, but that's not...a good thing."

"I'm listening." She set her carton of Ecto-Cooler on the end table.

"Like...when your car is out of gas." He winced at how stupid it sounded, but knew it was too late to back out. "The empty light's on, but you're only a few blocks from the grocery store, and you don't have time to get gas, so you figure you'll wait until the next time you're out. Then the next time you get in the car, you're running late for work and don't have time to stop for gas, so you just go for it and hope you can get there."

She scrunched her nose up at him again, and Righteous felt a familiar panic latch on to his stomach.

"Just...bear with me here," he said. "That's information, right? You put it off because you don't have time, you get to your destination okay, so now you have information. You know you can drive your car X miles on an empty tank."

"I guess. Why isn't that a good thing?"

He thought for a moment. "Because...then every time you run out of gas, you push it a little further. You wait a little longer. Eventually, you're going to run out of gas in the middle
of the highway when your wife's in labor because that 'information' made you confident. Everyone thinks that it won't happen, that they're too important or too busy to run out of gas this time. No one plans for it, no one thinks 'Oh, wouldn't it be great to run out of gas? Wouldn't an interruption be nice?'. But it's got to happen eventually, right? So it's dangerous. It makes you keep going when you shouldn't. It makes you take unnecessary risks.”

“And did getting your equation wrong over and over make you take unnecessary risks?” she teased.

Righteous wiped his palms down the top of his thighs. “No. Because I don't look at the misses as information. I look at them as failures.”

“I feel like we're talking about two different things.”

“Probably.” He shouldn't have said anything; she thought he was an idiot. He took out her Post-It and stared sullenly down at the equation. *The Beavers Theorem of Nominal Affectation*. He thought about plugging in his name, but thought better of it. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. Instead, he flipped the Post-It over, half expecting to see a list on the back like Mona's: *melody, bus, obviously*. Instead, there was a phone number.

He looked over to her, confused.

“In case you have any other math problems,” Patience explained, grinning. The sarcastic arch to her voice was back. He couldn't tell if she was joking or being sincere, and it made his hands shake. He looked down at the Post-It and felt his stomach swoop, first with nerves, and then with terror. He wondered if it was love. He wondered if it was Stockholm Syndrome.

He knocked on her door at midnight, kissed her before she could say anything, and
backed her down the hall to the bedroom, running his fingers through her long, thick hair. He peeled off her clothes piece by piece and made passionate love to her, slow love, soulful love. He humped her like a sex God. He humped her like Apollo. He bent her over a lamp stand and hummed Marvin Gaye.

He left Mona's apartment as soon as he'd finished. On the stucco front of her building, a female praying mantis was devouring her mate in a tedious, metaphorically resonant way. Righteous ignored her and sped-walked the six blocks back to his apartment, shoving his hands deep in his coat pockets to keep them warm. Fucking Mona was every bit as satisfying as he'd imagined. She'd called out his name in the heat of things, screamed “Righteous” like a vintage surfer. It was the first time the name had seemed to suit him.

He thought of his mother as he walked, of the day she'd kissed his head and told him he was extraordinary, and wondered if this was the life she'd imagined. Why would she give him a name he had to earn? Hadn't she known how ordinary he was? There were so many children with Distinctive Names in the world; they couldn't all be special. Who were they, these parents? What were they thinking?

His hand brushed Patience Beavers' phone number in his coat pocket and he rubbed it between his fingers. Mona was a start, but she wasn't enough. He wanted to hate-fuck all of the boring people in the world, anyone who dared to be unapologetically ordinary. He wanted to line up all of the self-proclaimed “in-the-box thinkers” and Republicans and yoga instructors and fuck them one by one. Being ordinary was a privilege that they didn't appreciate, didn't deserve. They acted like it was easy, like anyone could do it. They didn't know how lucky they were.

Righteous rubbed the Post-It between his fingers while he climbed the stairs to his
apartment, while he tugged Apollo off of a hatbox, while he programmed a number into his phone he wasn't sure he'd ever use.

    Righteous thought: I don't know how to be Righteous Bridges.

    Righteous thought: An interruption would be nice.
The knocking started at noon. This was unusual for two reasons. First, because most of the seasoned reporters had given up days ago. They were still out there, clogging up my lawn, biding their time, hoisting cameras onto their shoulders whenever I came to the window to water the hanging ferns. But I hadn’t answered the door or the phone in days, so: message received.

Second, the knocking was so…persistent. Most of them pounded on the front door a couple times, “shave and a haircut” if they were in a good mood, and slunk away when I told them to. Today’s competitor just kept knocking, minute after minute, hammering out the same steady beat. I started humming 4/4 tunes over the top without realizing: “Eleanor Rigby,” “Paint It Black.” A saner person might have found it maddening, but I couldn’t get enough. It was the kind of incessant metronome that pounded away thoughts before they could congeal.

I must have hummed too close to the door, because it stopped, mid-measure, and a man’s voice came through, muffled like he was underwater.

“Ms. Danforth?”

I didn’t say anything, just kept subdividing in my head. One and two and three and four and.

“Ms. Danforth, it’s Jefferson Anderson. From the Chief?” His voice was louder, clearer this time, coming from somewhere around my calves. I dropped to my knees on the carpet in front of the door. The man had propped open my antique brass mail slot with one
hand, and his disembodied lips were floating in a strip of daylight.


“Definitely not.”

“Care to give an official statement?”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” I said. “That’s my official statement. Bye.” I clambered off the floor, embarrassed when my knees cracked, and strode off down the hallway.

“Mr. Jelly was nervous,” Two Last Names shouted through the slot after me. “It was the morning of the Tri-County Potato Sack Race.”

Panic tore through my insides like a torpedo. He was reading my book.

I’d been writing Mr. Jelly books since I was 24. Mr. Jelly and the Pirate Cove. Mr. Jelly and the New Krill in Town. Mr. Jelly Meets the Stranger Danger Ranger. The Great Sack Race was probably the last one I’d ever publish. People kept killing themselves after they read it.

I tried to tune him out, but each syllable burrowed into my brain like a pop tune. I wanted to stop him, to drown out his voice with 4/4 rock anthems, to open the door and rip the book from his hands, but doing anything but nothing would just make me look guilty. Four people had committed suicide already; happy parents, by all accounts, emotionally stable folks who loved their kids. They had another thing in common: reading Mr. Jelly and the Great Sack Race to their children was the last thing they ever did.

But it had nothing to do with me, or with my book. It was a statistical anomaly, a circus freak of circumstance, a witch hunt borne from a slow news day. God, it was a coincidence. And as soon as I thought it: coincidence, my mind rebelled, flashing to
Pottsville, Pennsylvania, to a mother dangling from a third floor banister, face swollen and purple, her lips parted as if in surprise.

The reporter had almost reached the end of the book. I paced in front of the door, rocking back and forth on my heels. I gnawed off a hangnail and watched a tiny pinprick of blood bubble up on the surface.

“‘You don’t run out of love, Mr. Jelly,’” Two Names read, straining into a falsetto for Leona the Lobster’s voice. “‘There’s enough room in your heart for everybody.’”

I flung open the door before he could finish the last line; he fell face-first onto the hall carpet, a thin laptop and my book clutched tightly in his hands. A flashbulb went off somewhere on my lawn, and I tucked my face into my armpit as I hip-checked the door closed behind him.

“What is wrong with you?!” I gasped, furious. “Do you have a death wish?”

Jefferson Anderson tugged a fleece vest down over his belt and winked, his dark eyes shining. He might have been handsome, if he didn’t look so ridiculous: rosy cheeks, Groucho Marx eyebrows, a khaki fishing hat covered in rainbow lures.

“So you admit it,” he said. “Your book’s a killer.”

I flushed. “I’m not admitting anything. How did you get a copy?”

“You sent us an advance reader’s proof back in September.” He chewed his words like a piece of bubblegum, with a slow, deliberate ease. “I’m glad we held onto it. Stores keep pulling ‘em off the shelves. Mind if I sit down?” He gestured into my living room.

I knew I should tell him to leave. But he was the first person I’d spoken to in four days; my voice was cracked from disuse. Loneliness made me crazy. Just having someone else here in my house, stupid hat and all, was comforting.
“Just for a minute,” I said. “Then I’ll sneak you out the back way. I don’t need any more photo ops.”

“So is he in here? Your jellyfish.” He poked his head around the corner.

“Nope. He has his own room.” Mr. Jelly lived in a dark, temperature controlled room off the kitchen, but I wasn’t about to give him directions.

“His own room.” The reporter whistled and shook his head. The fishing lures danced, swinging wildly from side to side. He strolled through my living room like an art gallery, laptop clutched to his chest. He picked through my things as if he owned them, snatching up photos and paperweights to examine them then putting them down where they didn’t belong.

“Who’s this?” he demanded, poking at the glass of a small, macaroni-art picture frame. I snatched it from him and buffed off the cloudy fingerprint with the soft edge of my t-shirt.

“My niece,” I lied. The frame held a child’s drawing, “self portrit” scrawled across the top in flaky black crayon. Waxy yellow corkscrews jutted from the girl’s head like electricity.

“Creepy,” he said. “Her eyes are all black. Like buttons.” He pantomimed a crazy, wide-eyed expression. I didn’t laugh.

“Tough crowd,” he wheezed, plopping down into my leather rocker recliner. He snapped up the foot rest with a mechanical kerthunk.

“You make yourself right at home,” I said.

“Thank you.”

“That was an observation, not an instruction.”

He opened his laptop and burrowed his hips deeper into the recliner like a squirrel.
“What’s your WiFi password?”

“Not a chance.”

“No spaces?”

I stared blankly in response.

“Oh,” he said after a moment, steepling his fingers in front of his face. “I see.”

“I don’t need you live blogging my breakdown.”

“You’d call this a breakdown, then?” His fingers were poised, pregnant, above the keys.

“No! I mean—I don’t know.” I ripped my fingers through my rats-nest hair, a pointless attempt at presentability. “Shouldn’t I be having one? Look, this is all off the record, okay?”

He hesitated. “Sure.”

“Do you really think this is my fault?”

He snorted. “Of course not. I’d have to believe in magic, for starters. Or a God with a sick sense of humor. It’s a freak coincidence, and I’m sorry it happened to you. But you gotta admit, it’s a helluva story.”

“Not when you’re the villain of the piece.”

He half-closed the laptop lid, craning forward in the recliner. “Do you think this is your fault?”

The guilty knot in my stomach tightened in response. “I didn’t think so.”

“Didn’t?”

I stuck my fingers in my mouth again, sucked a drop of dried blood from the tear where the hangnail had been. “It’s silly. The people who died…it’s just, I hear about them
later, after they’ve happened, and I feel like…God, I don’t know. It’s so stupid.”

“No. Go on.” He was leaning so far forward in the recliner, I was afraid it might tip over. I took a deep breath.

“I get this creepy déjà vu feeling, you know? Like I knew it was coming. Like I’d seen it or dreamed about it before.”

The silence was deafening.

“I told you it was stupid.” I shook my head like an Etch a Sketch. “I probably heard something in a news broadcast and forgot about it. Or saw something online and didn’t make the connection until later.”

“Mmmm.”

“This kind of thing…your subconscious picks up on this stuff all the time, and you don’t even notice.” My voice came out desperate, brittle and whiny. I hated the sound of it.

“It’s subliminal. Or maybe I’m just crazy.”

“Why would you say that?”

It was too late to be cagey. I took a deep breath. “Last week, I locked all the kitchen knives in a safe and poured all the house cleaners down the sink. Bleach, ammonia. I even did the Spic & Span. No reason. I just did it without thinking. I don’t even know why.” Tears swelled up in my eyes before I could breathe them away and I turned away to laugh, embarrassed.

Jefferson collapsed the footrest with a mechanical thunk that echoed in cartoon waves across the empty house. The sound was a current, tugging at my brain; I just wanted to float, suspended, like a piece of mandarin orange in a fruit cup, like a jelly in the brine.

“Are you okay?” His voice had softened, the aw, shucks Midwestern air abandoned
“That sounds…no offense, but that sounds like something you do when you’re thinking of the end. Have you contemplated suicide?”

“Of course I’ve contemplated suicide,” I scoffed. I had. But only in the most general of ways, as you might wonder about a distant cousin, or the way pistons were machined. I’d nerfed the house out of an impulse I’d only examined sideways until now. It was, I realized, with the mental rush of solving the murder before the protagonist, for an experiment. I hadn’t hidden the paring knives and tipped toxins down the drain to protect me.

I’d done it for him.

At 3:15, I padded to the kitchen to slather two honey graham crackers with peanut butter and pour a couple glasses of milk. It felt good to fix a snack for two again.

I carried the food into the living room, and the reporter laughed.

“Is this our after-school snack?”

My eyes flicked to the macaroni-framed picture, an almost imperceptible check-in. Almost. His eyes gleamed beetle-like with recognition. “She’s not your niece,” he said.

“No.”

“Oh,” he said, a clipped staccato note.

“My daughter. Josie.”

He nodded, slowly. “I thought I recognized your name from something else. I’m sorry. A car, wasn’t it?”

I set the glasses down on the coffee table too hard, my hands shaking. Milk sloshed over the rims onto an old magazine, something I’d never read but kept around as decoration. I steeled myself and thought of one of those Encouragements my mom had embroidered in
gold on a throw pillow: *Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.*

Some people’s battles were harder than others.

“You’re a little brash for a reporter,” I said, trying to keep my voice even. “You should work on your bedside manner.”

He shrugged. “It’s the Perry Chief. Only reason people subscribe’s for the gossip.” He selected a honey graham and bit into it with an exaggerated snap, spraying peanut butter-flecked cracker crumbs across the front of his fleece vest. “Speaking of. How old’s the fish?”

I stared at him for a moment before I realized he was talking about Mr. Jelly. “Oh. That’s…actually a difficult question to answer. I’ve had him three years.” My brother bought him for me the year *Mr. Jelly and the New Krill in Town* came out, the same year my daughter slid her wrist out of a stretchy red child leash and tottered on chubby legs into the middle of the street.

“Can I meet him?”

“It’s almost time for his luncheon shrimp,” I said, slowly. “But what makes you think you get to meet him? I don’t even know you.”

“I thought there was ‘room in your heart for everybody’.”

“Sure, when you’re a kid. Eventually you grow up and run out of space.”

“I read your book out loud, you know,” he said. “Can’t you grant a marked man’s dying wish?”

“You forgot the last line,” I prompted. “That’s like saying Beetlejuice twice.”

He swallowed a lump of cracker and probed his tongue around his mouth, like he was sponging up the peanut butter. “Right.” He grabbed the book and leafed through the floppy pages with his peanut butter hand. “‘And in my sack!’ *Mr. Jelly held open the burlap bag so*
Leona could hop inside. Maybe next year he would win the race. Today, he was grateful for his friends.” He recited the lines with a faux-gravitas that made me giggle and snapped the book closed. The light in the room shifted; the sun had dipped behind a cloud.

“There. The covenant is sealed.” He rolled his eyes. “Now take me to my executioner.”

“Sure,” I said, brushing crumbs off my jeans. “Now that I don’t have to worry about you publishing anything about him.”

I led him down the hall to the room off the kitchen and shut us both inside.

“This used to be Josie’s,” I said, and felt the walls soak up the sound. In the deadened acoustics of the space, my voice sounded even meeker. I’d soundproofed it after her death, stapled corrugated acoustic foam over every inch of drywall. For months, it was the only room I could bear to be in: the silence absorbed my panic, sucked it out of me before it could clatter around my head like a spoon in a glass. In every other part of the house, my thoughts echoed cavernously, reverberating through my bones like a cathedral organ.

I heard the biographer move behind me. He squatted in front of the aquarium, his lips parted in a curious half-smile. “So this is it. He’s smaller than I imagined. You don’t know his age?”

“Nope. Neither did the guy I got him from. Older than you and me, maybe.”

“I thought jellyfish only lived a few years.”

“Most do. But he’s a special species.” I loved to tell people this. “They can reverse their life stages, start over from scratch. Only animal we know that can. See, he’s in full bloom right now.” Mr. Jelly bloorped across the tank in response, his umbrella head rippling from the water’s gentle pull. “But in a few weeks, he’ll go back to a polyp. Then Medusa.
He’ll wither and bloom again and again. If he doesn’t get sick or injured, he’s essentially immortal. For all we know, Mr. Jelly could have been around before humans existed.”

“So he could be some cursed, ancient evil?” He drew “cursed” out into the archaic two syllables.

“That hadn’t occurred to me,” I said flatly. It had.

I collapsed into the only other piece of furniture in the room, an enormous bean bag chair, and watched Jefferson Anderson arch his furry muppet eyebrows at the tank. He was silent for once, staring into the pool blue substrate, the aquarium lamp dappling shadows across his face.

“I think he likes me,” he said after a beat. Mr. Jelly had bobbed his way to the far end of the tank until he was level with him, floating still and stoic in the brine.

I followed the reflection of Jefferson’s eyes in the thick aquarium glass. “Don’t get cocky. Mr. Jelly keeps his friends close, but his anemones closer.”

He groaned, playing along. “Mr. Jelly is likely a mass murderer.”

“Shhh. He’s sensitive.”

“He’s not sensitive. He’s a gelatinous zooplankton.”

“You have no imagination.”

“No,” Jefferson said, suddenly serious. “I suppose not. That’s your area.” He brushed his hand across the top of the tank, and a firework of dust motes danced into the air. “Does he glow?”

“They’re not glow-in-the-dark, really.” I stood to join him by the aquarium and shook some dehydrated shrimp into the water. “He just…shimmers. Like a bubble, when it catches the light just right.” I imagined Mr. Jelly floating out across the grass, borne on a
bubble-wind, his angel-hair tentacles lolling gently in the breeze. The reporter caught my eye, the half-smile gone from his lips, and I wondered if he was picturing it, too.

He ruptured the moment to go use my bathroom, and I crouched down on the rug, eye level with Mr. Jelly, alone at last.

“Jellyjellyjelly” I whispered into the glass, tracing his happy outline with my finger. He waved his tentacles back at me, soft and lazy, buoyed by the stream from the pirate chest bubbler I’d bought a few months ago. I imagined reaching in to the cool water and cupping the top of his velvety-smooth head in my hand. “It’s time for the sack race,” I would sing, and he would nuzzle my palm in response. I stroked his oversized tank with sweaty fingers, and thought about all the books we had left in us that no one would read: *Mr. Jelly and the First Planktonsgiving, Mr. Jelly and the Christmas Eel*.

Somewhere in Ohio, a woman was slitting her own throat.

I invited Jefferson Anderson to stay for dinner. I hadn’t been to the grocery store in a week, afraid of a media ambush, so I pulled my last box of Panburger Partner from the cupboard and browned some ground beef while the reporter tried to guess my WiFi password.

“Just give me a hint,” he said, scowling at his laptop screen.

“I’m not giving you a hint. I don’t want you using it, period. This isn’t Rumplestiltskin.”

“I’m also not asking for your first born child,” he said, then winced. I turned my back to him and worked a pepper grinder over the skillet to break the silence. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said. We listened to the beef crackle and spit in the pan for a few
seconds.

“Do you ever wonder, though—”

“What? Do I wonder what?” I snapped. From the look on his face, I knew I’d frightened him. I smoothed my hair again, trying to shape it into something a little less Disney Villain.

“Geeze.” He tipped back in his chair, balancing on two legs. “It’s just…you lose your daughter, now these parents are killing themselves. Doesn’t that seem a little, uh, odd to you?”

“The universe is not a metaphorically resonant place,” I said. “It’s a coincidence, that’s all. Like you said. You’re still here, right?”

“I guess.” Something raced behind his eyes like a Wall Street ticker. It was a look I’d seen before, but couldn’t quite place. I grabbed half a package of thick sliced bacon from the counter, but squeezed the bottom too hard—the bacon slid, toothpaste-tube style, from the package, and fell to the linoleum with a wet smack.

“Slippery fingers. You’re practically a jellyfish yourself,” the reporter joked, lowering his chair to the floor.

“My mom always used to say that pets resemble their owners,” I said, “but I don’t think that’s true. I think we start to resemble them.”

Three things happened the next day:

1. I ran out of toilet paper, and summoned the courage to drive to the store.

2. I went to the garage, and found Jefferson Anderson lying on the pavement behind my back tires, snuggled in close to hide his body from view.
3. I marched him back into the house like a child, where he murmured bewildered apologies and rubbed tire grime from his eyes, repeating, “I’m sorry, Jenny, I’m so sorry, sorry, it just seemed like a good idea at the time.”

I’d proofed the house for exactly this eventuality, but he thought of ways to die faster than I could prevent them. I pulled his head out of the jelly tank later that afternoon, sodden and wilting, gasping for air. He dripped salt water all over the carpet, and I dried him off with my good towels.

“This can’t be happening,” I groaned, working the towel through his shaggy black hair. “Not you, too. You can’t do this to me. You said it was a coincidence.”

“It’s a freak coincidence,” he repeated, his eyes swollen and sad. “I’m sure of it. Please don’t be upset.” I wrapped him in a blue fleece blanket and plucked his hat out of the aquarium. One of the lures, a chartreuse plastic fish, had come loose in the water, and bobbed gently at the top of the tank. A trophy for Mr. Jelly. I took the fishing hat to the living room and lay it on top of the radiator to dry, but I knew the salt water had ruined it.

“Thank you,” Jefferson whimpered, burrowing his face in my hair, and my stomach turned, first from revulsion, then from guilt. Weakness woke something ugly inside of me, a violent contempt that gave way to shame and self-loathing. I swallowed it down like bile and stroked his hair, stiff from his saltwater swim.

“Josie,” he whispered into my neck, and I pushed him away.

“What about her?”

“How did it happen?” He rested his head against the couch.

My eyes darted from him to his laptop, lying docile on the other side of the room.
“I was arguing with a neighbor,” I said after a moment, my wooden voice husky with memory. “He planted a crab apple on my side of the property line.”

He nodded slowly, eyes closed, like he was listening to a symphony.

I’d gotten my way with the neighbor in the end. The last night, the night I rode home from the hospital in Perry’s only taxi, I’d hacked the baby tree with a pair of hedge clippers, sawing into it savagely again and again until my arms ached and red welts puffed on my palms. I saw the lace curtains of his window ripple in my peripheral vision and knew he was watching, but I didn’t care, and he didn’t come outside. When I finally flung the clippers to the ground, exhausted and empty, I met his eyes. Something passed between us through the storm window pane, a coded message I’m not sure either of us understood, and he let the curtain fall from where he’d gathered it in his hands.

“The driver.” Jefferson’s eyes opened and burrowed into mine. “Who was he?”

“No one,” I said, and stroked his eyelids shut with the pads of my fingers. “Shhhh. It wasn’t his fault.” He was the high school principal at the time. When Josie died, he hit the bottle pretty heavy, and his wife divorced him a year later.

I’d ruined two lives in one day, and I knew it. Everyone brought over cheesy casseroles, told me it wasn’t my fault, but they said it too often, when no one had suggested it was.

He didn’t stay long. My house was childproofed now, its violence intangible. Eventually, the reporter resorted to standing in front of the microwave for hours. I made him keep a cup of water inside so he wouldn’t break it, but I let him switch it on and press his face against the clear, humming glass. It was non-ionizing radiation, I remembered from
science class, harmless over time. And it was the only thing that made him smile.

I pleaded with him to stay. I knew I could save him. I taught him how to feed Mr. Jelly. I promised him an exclusive interview, with a color photo spread. I gave him my WiFi password and let him key all five letters in himself. But it couldn’t last. I went to the garage to get us sodas one night and came back to the porch screen door bouncing gently in its soft wooden frame.

Time was hard to hold onto in a lonely house. I heard a door slam off the kitchen one morning (the next morning?)—Jefferson—but then I had a guilty flash of memory, like calling for your child and remembering she was dead. I tried to concentrate, to picture him in a sunny café, writing about me while fishing lures jangled like keys on his head. But I couldn’t shake this image of him lying naked and cold in a motel room, deep papercuts all along his spine.

I floated down the stairs to investigate the sound, skimming my hand along the banister, and oozed into Josie’s room. The aquarium lid was gone, the tank empty. Mr. Jelly was pooled in the middle of the rug, silent and still, a floppy pincushion. The air rushed out of my lungs; had someone, anyone come home? Had Mr. Jelly flung himself from the tank like a jilted lover?

His wispy tentacles looked so fragile without the water to buoy them. I imagined how easy it would be to press my foot down on his pillowy head, the skloooootching sound he would make as the water gushed out of his weak, crippled form. The familiar ugliness rippled through me like a wind sock, crested inside of me like a wave. I thought wildly of the salad spinner in my pantry, of scooping Mr. Jelly inside and whirling his limp body around and around until he looked like so much jerky.
I laughed, a full jelly laugh, and exhaled it out again. I bent down to his tiny, broken body, and stroked his slippery head with my fingers, a gesture of useless comfort that seemed familiar somehow. Déjà vu spun through me, a carousel of memories that whipped by before I could catch them in my hands. One I wanted to hold: a blonde little girl with curls like electricity, sun-soaked and shrieking, chasing grape-scented bubbles in the lazy summer grass. I watched her grow, Polyps to Medusa. Few things could be immortal. I thought my bones would dissolve from grief.

I stayed on the carpet next to him long after the sun went down, long after the last reporter left my lawn and drove home to his family. I waited with Mr. Jelly until the aquarium lamp flickered and died and stared down at him in the dark, breathless and aching, waiting for him to bloom.
VITA

Elizabeth Cook was born on July 5th, 1989 in Perry, Iowa, where she lived until graduating from Perry High School in 2007. She received her B.A. from the University of Northern Iowa, where she double majored in English and Theatre Performance with a minor in Creative Writing, graduating as a Presidential Scholar, cum laude and With Honors With Distinction in 2011.

That same year, she moved to Kansas City, Missouri to attend the M.F.A. program in Creative Writing and Media Arts at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Elizabeth served as both a graduate teaching assistant and adjunct composition instructor during that time, and received second place in the 2013 Sosland Teaching Awards. As part of the M.F.A. program, she completed an internship at The Kansas City Star, where she now works as a freelance book reviewer. Her book reviews have also appeared in The North American Review, and her theatre and art reviews run regularly in The Pitch. She currently holds positions as Director of Youth Programs for the Greater Kansas City Writing Project and Managing Editor of Poverty & Public Policy, an academic journal based at the university.