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TIES THAT BIND

by

Sarah Louise Slack

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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To Mom and Dad

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“Keeping the Light” is forthcoming in the University of Memphis Magazine.

ABSTRACT

Ties that Bind is a collection of short stories that explores the lives of women. From physical danger that Rickie and her friends face from the flood in “The River’s Children,” to Maureen’s emotional distress as she realizes she’s losing her memory in “The Visit,” from Mattie’s work ethic as she tries to take her mother’s responsibilities in “Keeping the Light,” to Justine’s struggle with an unexpected pregnancy in “Here There Be Dragons,” from Rae’s confusion at her roommate’s carelessness in “The Tree that Holds the World,” to Anya’s temptation at the thought of suicide in “An Artist’s Eye,” the first six stories stand alone and address issues that shape the lives of people everywhere—fear, loss, birth, death, loneliness, overwork, aging, change. The final piece, “Ties that Bind,” is a three story series linked by Nathan Owen, whose death changes the world views of Madison, his nurse, Olivia, his biological mother, and Naomi, his daughter.

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THE RIVER'S CHILDREN

When Jaxon and Charlie and I kick around my football in the empty lot, sometimes we kick up stone spear heads and old, old fishing hooks. People have always lived in our little valley, next to the river, Sophia says, and she's fourteen and in high school so she should know.

Once, when the four of us were digging near the river bank, we found this root with hands and a head and river moss for hair. Sophia made us throw it straight back in the river. That was the river's dollykin, and if we took it, she might get angry and rise out of her banks and sweep the town away.

"The river is greedy, you know." Sophia leaned in and whispered it to us so the river couldn't hear. "I learned it in school. Way back in olden times, when there was nothing around for miles but Indians, they used to keep the river calm by feeding her little babies every spring."

We pretended to shiver, but really we can't be scared of the river. We're the river's children, after all.

We live while the river flows warm and free. In the winter, when she backs up with ice and broken logs, we pause with her.

That's when our daddies come home. Their rumbling anchors us indoors, the air thick with everything they don't say when we're awake. When my daddy's home, his breath covers me and Mama and Pete, all together like we were a giant with four heads. Me and Pete follow him around, watching him with big eyes to make sure he doesn't vanish while he whitewashes the shutters and unstops the drain and does all the other little things around the house that Mama saves up for him all summer long.

Jaxon and Charlie and me, we don't see each other often in the winter. In the summer, all the houses on the street are open so that if our game carries us to someone's kitchen, we flow in and back out without even thinking about it. But in the winter, all the doors are shut and locked against the ice.

In the cold, Mama laughs. Her cheeks glow like sunlight off the water, and she wears her good dress every day not just Sunday. Mama and my daddy laugh together, late at night. But in the spring, her face pales.

My daddy's never seen my birthday or Pete's. In the summer he vanishes, leaving nothing of him in the house except his big winter coat that's heavy on my shoulders and hangs past my toes. Sometimes I wear it to remember the smell of him, a mixture of damp and grease and pipe smoke and peppermint and old socks, a hard mix of smells to remember when summer boils it away.

It's important to keep the smell of him in my nose or the river will take him away.

When I woke that morning, I could smell spring—mud and new grass and warm air misting off the river. I stretched under the quilt, staring at nothing, my stomach full of ice because I knew. Today, the river would take my daddy away again and we wouldn't see him again until she ran sluggish and cold.

I got up slow and dragging. It had been hard to sleep with the sound of argument echoing late into the night, my daddy's voice low and unstoppable as a flash flood. Mama, aching and shrill, saying, "I don't want to do this alone, again, Caleb," before I drew my pillow over my ears.

As I opened my door, Mama was at the bottom of the stair to shout me awake. “Ericka!” She blinked as though I weren’t in focus. Her nose was red, but her eyes were dry. “Oh, there you are. Get your brother and come to breakfast.”

Five minutes later, Pete was dressed and we were watching daddy reduce a stack of pancakes like he hadn’t eaten all winter. He had his good blue shirt on, his hair was cut short, and his mustache was trimmed back. He looked just like he had when he came home last winter.

Pete sat across from me. We stared hard, memorizing daddy for the summer. He was the most important man on the boat—the engineer who made the motor go—but the sea was so far away.

Mama cleared his plate and stuck another stack in front of him like she was trying to weigh him down. It wouldn’t work. Even though he loomed bigger than Mama and Pete and me all together—so big that his arms brushed the sides of the engine room door—he took no space in the kitchen. He was already gone. His eyes saw so far down river that he didn’t see us.

Pete didn’t remember last spring when Daddy left. Mama and Daddy and I knew the game, but Peter was a rookie trying to figure out what to do with the ball. I couldn’t take him four months back across the winter to the day our daddy came home. We were sitting at dinner when the door crashed open like it weighed nothing. “Lizzie,” he said, and his voice rumbled through my chest like when a train passes the school. Mama was laughing and crying and knocked over her chair as she stood. He swung her in a hug so tight I thought I heard her ribs creak.

I was next. “Rickie! How’s my girl?” He tossed me until I was all elbows, knees, and flying pigtails.

Pete could have gone even higher, he was so little, but he hid behind the door wondering who this strange, loud man was. That night, daddy courted Pete like I would a kitten, sitting ever so still with his hands out. By bedtime, Pete curled to sleep on daddy’s lap.

But now it was spring, and we watched him inhaling those pancakes. Already the water was flowing and he’d go where she wanted. My daddy belonged to the river, and so we all did.

He stopped eating after the third plate and turned to Mama. “Lizzie, the car’ll be here and I have to be ready to go.”

“Caleb—please.” She wanted to say more but she was all talked out—so she shrugged and caught him tight like this time she wanted his ribs to creak.

He patted her back. “Don’t worry. Rickie’s old enough to help you.”

Pete ran around to cling like a creepy vine on Daddy’s leg. Daddy reached with his big rough hand and patted Pete’s head. “Don’t cry, Petey. I’ll be back before you know it. You be a good boy for your mama and mind what she says.”

I sat at my plate, feeling slow and pale—like the pancakes he had eaten were weighing my stomach instead.

“Rickie?” Mama’s voice was crumply. “Ericka? Say goodbye to your father.”

I hugged him and helped pry Pete off. I held my brother tight as our daddy headed out the door and joined Mr. Robinson and Mr. Olsen and all the other daddies who’d spent the winter on our street.

That night, the rain started.

The rain fell steady—sometimes light like mist, mostly drumming on the roof like it would never stop. Mama kept Pete and me in for nearly a week before she gave in and sent us out to play in the rain.

I heard her tell Charlie's Mama, "Petey sits still and stares at me like he was trying to burrow a hole into my brain. But the house is as close as a pressure pot while Rickie's cooped in. What with my mornings—I just can't stand it anymore."

Charlie and Jaxon were playing in the lot with an old ball that flopped when they kicked it. I'd brought the ball my daddy had patched up over the winter so we were all right. He'd sent it to me for my birthday when I was little with a picture of him dressed in football gear when he was young. Every winter, he taught me tricks so that I was the best football player on our row.

Pete's too little to play, so we made him sit by the street while I ran circles around Charlie.

We chased the ball up and down the lot, trying to get past Jaxon into the goal. He doesn't like to run like Charlie and me. He prefers story games like Sophia used to play before she decided we were beneath her interest.

The mud splashed around our knees and the rain plastered our hair against our heads. I didn't care about the warm wet—I was out and running and the indoor cobwebs were too slow to keep up with me. I ran and laughed and shouted for the pure joy of it.

With one corner of my mind, I kept my eye on Pete, who sat so quiet, staring at the game.

One moment he was sitting there, like I told him to. The next he was gone. Charlie stole two points while I turned around in place, peering through the rain to find him again. Jaxon noticed and caught the ball in his hands.

Jaxon ran to one side of me and Charlie to the other. “What’s the matter?”

“Where’s Pete?”

We looked around. Jaxon spotted him first, a little moving speck of red coat by the river. Jaxon was always best for spotting things.

I ran off so fast that even Charlie couldn’t keep up. Pete was standing at the top of the bluff. I slowed way fast when I saw where he was.

That was the spot we’d been standing the day we found out that Jaxon’s daddy had been taken by the river.

The summer just before Pete was born, when Mama was fat and tired with him, I was good so she wouldn’t get mad, because then the baby might come too soon and I’d be in trouble. Jaxon and Charlie had come to help eat my birthday cake. We sat in the corner hoping that our mamas wouldn’t remember we were there and kick us outside because we felt sure this was too important to miss. Jaxon’s Mama, Ms. Brown, was crying. She was usually a pretty lady, her hair all shining and smelling like banana bread, but that day her eyes were red, her nose was running, and Ms. Robinson hugged her shoulder. Mama was pale and waddling and dropped a cup in the kitchen. I heard her nearly say a bad word but she said *fudge* instead.

Ms. Brown near busted into tears and we pricked our ears. “What’ll I tell the children? Sophia’s old enough to understand, but Jaxon . . .”

Mama handed her a cup of tea. “Don’t you worry. Jaxon’s like my Ericka. They understand that sometimes fathers go away.” She shoed us outside. and as we ran, I heard her say under her breath so that Jaxon’s Mama couldn’t hear, “Why would they miss what they never had?”

We’d ran to the bluff and stood in a line looking at the river. It was running slow and sluggish with the end of summer. Mosquitoes were humming, birds screaming, and the air was full of all the sweat we’d lost running.

We’d stood, looking at the river, and we knew. It was as big as the whole world. I reached and caught Jaxon’s hand and Charlie had his other hand and we just stared at the river a long time until we couldn’t stand the quiet any more. Then Charlie’d tagged me and tore away like he thought he was fast and we played like nothing had happened. But it had and we remembered.

Now, four and a half years later, Pete had found that same place, overlooking the river.

We stood behind him, not touching, wondering if the river was speaking. We were all solemn—like church.

“Do you see that?” Pete sounded worried.

I looked at the water, but I couldn’t see it.

Then Jaxon caught his breath and pointed. “Remember the flat rock where we drew the treasure map last year?” I nodded and looked where it should be. Instead of a grey stone about five feet above the bank, there was a white water crest.

“The river is rising.” There was awe in Charlie’s voice. The river rose every spring, but this was higher than she’d ever been as long as we could remember.

Pete shivered, because the rain was cold or because the river was creeping over her banks or because he was scared he might fall in.

We stood there, the four of us in a row, dripping with mud and rain.

Finally, Charlie said, “We better ask Sophia.”

When we were small, me and Jaxon and Charlie only had one older sister between us. Technically, she belonged to Jaxon, but he lent her to us. She was so sad after Jaxon’s daddy went away, almost as sad as Ms. Brown, but when Charlie and me were around, she laughed and played nearly as strong as we did.

Sophia was four years older than us, but until she started high school, that never made a difference. Princess Sophie sent us off to slay the dragon, Black-heart Sophie, the pirate queen, had us bury her treasure and then poisoned us so we would guard it with our bones, and Master Craftsman Sophie planned the tunnel that began in Charlie’s backyard and ended in Edmonton.

Since school started, we only saw her at the bus stop talking with the other high school kids and pretending she couldn’t see us. Everything changed when she started hanging with older boys who rode in old junkers and leaned on their horns loud and hard so the sound echoed down our street. Once, Mama wondered aloud if they were scared that if they turned the motor off and came to the door like civilized folks, the car’d not be able to start again.

It should have been impossible to ignore us in Sophia’s room, our shins smeared with mud and our hair dripping like we were drowned ghosts, but she managed. “Not

now, I'm busy—and you're dripping all over my floor.” Then she turned back to her phone call with a shrug of her shoulder.

After we left, we stood there with rain pouring over our heads. I knelt by Pete and stared straight into his eyes. “I promise, I'll always talk to you if you need me. Even when I'm all grown up in high school.” Jaxon and Charlie put their hands on Pete's shoulders and nodded, and I knew he was theirs, too. The only little brother we have.

The rain kept falling. Every night when I went to sleep I heard it sheeting over the roof. Every morning when I woke, the sky was invisible past the grey. Sometimes when it wasn't pouring, mist hovered in the air and soaked us under our umbrellas.

Every morning, we checked the river on our way to the bus stop. We lay sticks in lines in the mud to mark her progress over her banks, drowning the brown, leftover summer grass and the bushes. Every morning the river ate two or three lines, carrying the sticks away, so we found more.

Before a week passed, the river spilled over the vacant lot. We had to be careful not to kick the ball too far.

Mama kept the radio on the weather, listening for a break. Her eyes weren't as red anymore, now that the sky was doing all her crying.

Every afternoon when we got home from school, Jaxon's Mama and Charlie's Mama would be sitting and talking and knitting a rainbow of color like they needed enough to fill the walk-in closet in Mama's room.

After we'd put our school things up, Mama would tell me, "Now, remember, that's nasty flood water, full of icky things and the current's strong enough to pull you to the sea. Don't you or Pete set foot in it."

Every day, I promised to stay out. I'd set Pete with his umbrella at the side of the road and for a while I'd keep clear. But the game would shift and I'd be running through water to my ankles, and it wouldn't feel like I'd broken my promise, because I was all wet anyway from the rain. All day long I'd play, not even thinking about the water until dinner time.

Mama would ask if I'd stayed out of the river, and I'd nod and look at my muddy ankles and know I was lying and swear to myself that tomorrow I'd do better.

I never did.

Even when we saw the world floating by, tumbling twigs and pebbles down the white water where the current should have stayed, we couldn't be scared of her. We were the river's children, and she'd come to join our play.

By the end of the third week, we didn't bother marking her banks. She'd taken over half our playing field and soon she'd be wide enough to take over our street. Then we'd have to build boats to get around, just like our daddies on the sea.

One day, Jaxon looked from the river to our little row of houses. "I don't think she'll come to our doors. We're high enough on the hill."

Daddy had been gone for nearly six weeks, and Mama stood at the sink with her back to the stairs when we got home. Ms. Brown was making tea instead of knitting. We

raced upstairs like normal, but when we came down, Mama just waved us out, her shoulders shaking.

It made me feel odd to be outside without the lecture about water. I must have been distracted. Not that it was Mama's fault. I just should have been careful like I normally was.

We were playing ball. I kicked, Charlie missed, and my football landed where our playing field used to be. The current caught it and my ball was suddenly ten feet down river, heading for the bend. I yelped and raced to the bank.

Jaxon caught my arm before I plunged in. "Careful, Rickie. She's stronger than you think."

Charlie pointed. "Look. It's caught up. We have time."

He was right. The river had deposited my ball on the snag where twigs and nasty things caught, right before the bend. It was like she didn't want to lose it—like she just wanted to play too.

Jaxon was frowning and chewing on his thumb to help him think. "You see the tree?" He pointed, and sure enough, a big pine had fallen and reached from where the bank was now almost to the snag. "What we need to do is creep out on the limb. We'd be only a couple of feet from the ball, and it's no more than thigh deep out there."

I nodded. The pine had prickery bark and broke-off branches jutting every which way. Its roots had torn out of the ground and they towered even taller than Pete would be sitting on Daddy's shoulders. The river was using it kind of like a dam, with higher water on one side, and not going over the trunk at all. It should be safe enough.

I made to climb on and Charlie took hold of my arm. "It was my fault. I should go first." Charlie's bigger than me, so it would have made sense, but this was my daddy's gift.

I shrugged his hand off. "It's my ball." I clambered onto the trunk, Charlie right behind, and Jaxon in the rear. We crawled out using the broken branches for hand holds because we knew better than to try standing on rain-wet tree bark.

As we inched further out, I could hear the water gushing under the trunk and felt the tree getting thinner and thinner. I was just glad the three of us were too light to make it dip into the water.

Soon the trunk was so thin that I sat and dangled my legs on either side. The river tugged at them just hard enough that I knew she was there. We were nearly to the ball. I swung my leg over and stood in the water as high as my waist. Charlie swung after me and took my hand by the wrist so we had a good grip, while Jaxon stayed on the trunk to anchor Charlie.

I inched out, careful like, reaching my hand, leaning out, pulling the ball out of the snag, and catching it close to my chest.

Charlie and I backed toward the trunk. The river was tugging too hard for us to be safe turning around. Jaxon went back until he was sure we had a firm grip. Then he helped Charlie back on. Charlie took the ball, passed it to Jaxon, and helped me up.

We scooted backward until the tree was thick enough that we could pull our legs out of the water, and then we turned around.

As he turned, Jaxon gave a yell, and moved quicker than safe. Then Charlie and me turned around and we all saw. Pete was walking out to us on the trunk. Over the water. He wasn't even crawling.

I froze. My heart stopped—I felt that—and my throat caught in a knot. Jaxon was closest. There was nothing I could do.

Jaxon handed the ball back to Charlie. "Pete?"

Pete was keeping his eye on his feet, but he anchored himself and looked up. He smiled and looked as proud as anything.

Jaxon took a deep breath and then made his voice calm, soothing. The worst thing would be if Pete panicked, and then . . . Under the trunk, the water current was stronger because all that water was going through a littler space.

"You're doing a good job, Petey. Now, what I need you to do is sit. You see how we're crawling? The tree's so slippery in the rain, so we hold on with our hands and our feet."

Pete got a concentrating look on his face and nodded. He knelt and grabbed on with his hands.

"We're heading back to the bank. Do you want to wait for us?"

Pete shook his head. Careful, with each hand testing the grip, he came on. Jaxon moved to meet him, and Charlie and me followed, our clothes wet and muddy to our armpits. Charlie was holding the ball with his left hand and crawling with his right. I can't blame him. If I had been holding the ball, it would have happened just the same. We were so praying that Pete would be safe and not fall in, and he didn't—but the ball. My ball that Daddy had sent me special with a picture with a note on the back that said:

Dear Rickie,

This football was the one my daddy used to teach me to play. I can't wait to come home and see what you can do.

Love,

Your daddy

The ball that we'd played with since we were barely bigger than Pete was now. As Charlie crawled forward, the ball slipped backwards out from the crook of his arm, almost as though he was passing to me.

I screamed, but it was too wet to catch. It sailed out of my hands and into the current where the white water carried it out of sight.

I might've sailed in after it if Charlie hadn't grabbed my arm hard enough to bruise.

I didn't watch the river take my ball away because I was watching Pete.

When we reached him, he had such a proud look on his face that I couldn't tell him off. The tree widened beneath us, and Jaxon gave Pete a piggy back crawl, and soon we were back on the bank.

For the rest of the day, we played in Jaxon's back garden. I kept touching Pete, checking to make sure he was still there.

That night, I was prepared to go to bed without supper for playing in the flood, but Mama was distracted. She didn't ask if I'd been in the water or notice I was muddy. She didn't even notice when I drew myself a bath and changed my clothes before dinner.

That was nearly as scary as Petey walking the trunk.

When I went to sleep, the river came calling—lapping at our door and singing out like she was Jaxon or Charlie. *Riii-ckie, Riii-ckie, come out, come out and play.* Outside I saw a whole little house, made of tree limbs, barn doors, and chicken wire that the river gathered and built, just for me. The river wanted a playfellow and she knew I played hard and strong because she'd tasted me when I came in after the ball.

I stepped close, lifted my foot to climb in and float down the river to the sea, where my daddy was waiting for us and we'd all be together, forever. Me, my daddy, and the river. My ball was in the little house, waiting in a special corner, and I rushed forward.

And woke to cold fingers and toes wiggling against my side.

“Petey?” I whispered. We were supposed to be asleep.

He clung to me, shaking like his bones were made of ice.

“What’s wrong?”

He whimpered and caught me so I could hardly breathe. I pulled the covers around him and held him tight and patted his back for the forever it took before he relaxed and went to sleep. I went to sleep too, but I didn't find the dream again.

In the morning, Pete had slipped back into his own bed. When I went in to wake him, he shivered under all his covers, but his forehead burned the back of my hand.

“Mama!”

Pete caught at my hand. His voice was rough. His face shone, and I wiped him with my sleeve. “Don't go away, Rickie.”

I called for Mama again, and held his hand while she clattered up the stairs. She hadn't moved that fast in months.

"I'm not going," I promised, before Mama shouldered me out of the way. She took one look at Pete and shoved me out of the room.

"Get me some cool water, and then you need to go wait for the bus."

I hesitated and she pointed to the door. "Ericka, the last thing I need is for you to get sick, too."

At school, I did a lot of thinking. Jaxon took in how I was chewing my thumbnail, and so he and Charlie went off to play at recess while I sat staring at the wall.

I was still thinking on the bus home, and when we got off the bus, I stopped and stared at the river. Jaxon and Charlie were right behind me.

"The thing about it is," I said, "it's all the river's fault. She made Pete sick. He's scared and so is Mama." I didn't mention that I was scared too. That was none of their business. "That's not right. She's like a friend who came for the afternoon and stayed all month, spreading toys around the house like she belonged there."

"It's time for her to go," said Jaxon, and I nodded.

"But how?" Charlie looked over at me, knowing I'd been thinking all day about it.

"Well, I reckon we need to do what Sophia told us," I said. "The river's lonely. She needs a dollykin to play with or she'll take one of us."

We planned it for the rest of the afternoon. Charlie found a piece of pine root and carved it into shape. I gathered dried grass and mud and we all spit on it to make it ours.

Jaxon added pine needles for hair and the fluff from a milkweed pod for a skirt. We held it up, like we were at church. It was a perfect dollykin, just what I'd want if I was the river.

The hard part was meeting at midnight. Mama was shut in with Pete, but I still worried she'd hear me on the stairs, so I slipped out my window.

We gathered at the spot on the bluff, which was still above water. Jaxon got out the penknife that used to be his daddy's before the river swallowed him, and we each cut our pinky fingers and squeezed a dark drop of blood on the dollykin's head.

Standing there in the dark, I whispered a promise for that little dollykin to share with the river. "I'm going to follow you someday. I promise. When Pete doesn't need me anymore, I'll follow you all the way to the sea. You don't have to have Petey. I promise, you can have me. I'm your daughter and I'll be yours for always. Just be patient."

Then I kissed it goodbye, and gave it to Charlie to throw as far as he could into the river.

We watched it fly, but when it hit the river, it was lost in the dark. We stared after it for a long moment before turning around to go back home.

The river crested that night. In the morning, she was headed back to her banks.

A month later, Pete was over the pneumonia and out of bed. Mama was fat and tired with the new baby but the three of us stood in a row, all in black. Jaxon and Charlie were both there in their Sunday best. Even Sophia was there, looking as though she wanted to tell me something—maybe something about when she was my age and she and Jaxon's daddy didn't come home.

I tossed a handful of dirt on the box and then I helped Pete with his own handful, and I thought about my daddy, staying with the motor out on that boat, even while the storm raged. I thought about my mother's face as she told us he wasn't coming back. I thought about his shoulders, braced in a doorway somewhere at the end of my dream.

THE VISIT

Maureen sat up straight with her hands folded neatly in her lap. Her mother's hands had looked like that, all those years ago—folded together neatly, sitting in her armchair in the corner, blankets piled high.

Maureen remembered those evenings. They were a happy family—baby, father, mother, grandmother. David was only a toddler playing toy cars in front of the fire. Kenneth in his ridiculous easy chair, reading the paper. Maureen knitting. And her mother sitting in the corner, motionless, gathering dust.

“Is this how you felt, Mother?”

Maureen's hands felt strange and heavy. Swollen lumps at the end of her arms.

“I ache, Kenneth. Even when I don't move a muscle. I can't even pick up my needles, let alone knit anymore.” She hated the whining note that had entered her voice, even though she knew there was no one to hear. Kenneth's chair sat across from hers. It had been empty for...for a long time.

“David and Sylvia are coming by for dinner. It's shameful that the boy has to be bribed to pay his mother a visit. But I love to cook.” She frowned at the low table in front of her.

Everything was ready. She had set the coffee table for company with the good plates Kenneth had given her on their thirty-third anniversary.

He had wanted to give her jewels.

Sapphires to match your eyes. After a third of a century, you should let me give something pretty and sparkling.

“Extravagant fool,” she muttered. “Spending money on useless when we need practical.”

He just smiled. He had a beautiful smile.

I couldn't find a sapphire in the world to match the warmth of your eyes.

He'd gone out and got the most frilly and fanciful blue practical china that he could find. It was pretty. Sometimes, when she was alone in her kitchen, she'd take a plate or a cup down and just look at it. So dainty.

It reminds me of you.

“It's a silver tongue you have in your head, Kenneth David O'Connor. I'm as sturdy as stoneware, and as hard to break, you hear?” She shook her head. “Lot of good I'd be if I made myself dainty and ornamental—just another knick-knack to dust.”

She stared at the colors swirling about on her television. It sat silent in the corner. “So many awful new programs, full of shoutings and vulgarities. I should toss it in the rubbish bin.”

But she liked it on. The movement made her feel as though there was someone else in the room.

Sometimes she could even imagine that Kenneth was there, sitting in his easy chair. He was so proud of that chair. Went out to buy it when they hadn't been married a year.

The first she'd heard about it was the beeping as the big truck backed up to the front door. He had directed them in, getting in the way of those nice moving people while she'd just thrown up her hands. He was so impulsive!

But there was no changing Kenneth, so she made tea for the movers, and when they were gone she'd gone into the living room and sat in her straight backed rocker while he lounged. "Hedonist."

You should try it.

There was a hint of the Irish in his voice when he wheedled.

I've always wanted a good leather chair. And look.

He reached down and suddenly the chair lifted his feet up for him. She covered her mouth to hold in a gasp. He jumped up out of the chair.

You try it, Maureen.

Her mother had snorted her disapproval from her corner, so Maureen let him help her out of her seat and into his. It was soft and comfortable. For a moment, she'd closed her eyes and felt about to drift away. The leather carried the warmth of him already.

But her fingers itched to be doing.

"It's positively decadent." She stood up and went back to her chair to take out her knitting. "Kenneth, you know I have too much to do to spend all day lounging about in an easy chair. What were you thinking?"

He just laughed. He was always laughing.

Maybe not all day. But of an evening it'd be nice to relax. Rest my old bones.

She sniffed. "There's nothing old about you, Kenneth David O'Connor. You can still put in a good day's work." She didn't look at her mother, sitting motionless in the corner.

He laughed again, and sat up, his feet swinging to the floor with a thud.

Thud. Thud.

Maureen jerked awake. What was that?

The doorbell rang. “Someone at the door.” Her body creaked with the rocker as she stood. Only two tries before her feet could support her. But her hands hurt. They hurt all the time, now.

She walked slowly to the door. The bell rang again.

“I’m coming,” she called. Who could it be at this time of night? Her door was locked, of course. Nasty people preyed on women living alone. She heard enough of that on the television.

She looked through the peephole but saw only a tall blur. Peepholes were so small. Checking the chain, she opened the door a crack.

“Mom?”

She recognized the voice. David. Her baby. He was such a handsome man. With blue eyes, just like his father. And so tall, too. Sylvia was a lucky girl.

“David!” Maureen shut the door and unlatched the chain. She gave him a quick hug. “Come in, come in.”

She paused as she shut the door and looked out onto the porch. It was empty. Odd. “We weren’t expecting you tonight.”

“It’s Friday. You know I visit every Friday after work.”

She frowned. No, he didn’t. She was just telling Kenneth yesterday that they hadn’t seen David in ages.

Young love. They’ll resurface soon enough. You remember how it was—we hardly even came up for air.

“But I hardly know her,” Maureen muttered. “She’s the one who’ll take care of David now. And she doesn’t even know about his weak chest.” They’d been so impatient. Engaged for barely a year!

Let the children alone, love. They’ll work it out.

She walked back to the living room. David was standing behind Kenneth’s chair. “No matter. At least you’re here now.” She hugged him. “It’s so good to see you.”

The television was on, its colors glowing quietly in the corner. “That’s funny.”

“What’s funny, Mother?”

“The television is acting up again. Coming on by itself.” She always turned it off when she left the room. No point in wasting electricity. “Never mind. I’ll call the repair man in the morning.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.” He laughed, but he sounded tired.

“Thank you, David.”

He was so handy to have around the house. Just like his father. Kenneth took care of everything. Maureen just had to mention that something was wrong and he would have it fixed.

She looked down. The coffee table was set with the good china. Dainty, useless stuff.

Ah, but it’s pretty. Haven’t you ever wanted something that was just pretty?

She shrugged. Of course she did. But she didn’t need it.

Three places. “How’s Sylvia doing? She never comes with you to see me anymore.”

David was standing by her rocker where she kept the pictures that he sent her of Sylvia and the children. There was a lovely one of David and Sylvia on their wedding day. That had been a good day. She had cried. But everything had worked out for the best.

“Mother, you know Sylvia is gone.” He paused. When he spoke again, his voice was soft. “You have to know.”

“I haven’t seen her in ages.”

David gave a choking sort of cough.

“Do you have a cold, David? You had one the last time you were here, didn’t you? That was months ago. Have you seen a doctor? You should try some hot lemon and honey. I remember when you were sick for a week with bronchitis, all that kept you going was hot lemon and honey.”

She remembered that time. Her mother had recommended the tea. Sitting in the corner with her hands folded in her lap, watching Maureen fight for David’s life. He was such a little thing—so still and pale. The doctor had told her that he might never fully recover.

You’re worn away to a thread. Something’s got to give, love.

Maureen turned abruptly to the kitchen. “Would you like a cup of lemon tea?” David followed.

“Sylvia shouldn’t let you out so late. Maybe she hasn’t noticed that you’re coming down with something. After all, she’s always so ill herself, bless her soul.” Too ill to take care of David as she should.

Let them alone, love. They’ll work it out.

“But I’m his mother,” she wailed.

“I’ll get it. You should sit down, Mom.”

He filled the kettle and set it on the stove. He was loud. He clattered cups together and slid the sugar jar out of its place beside the stove with an unholy scraping. She winced.

They’re just things. Let the boy learn his way around the kitchen. It’ll do him good in the long run.

“Please—David...” she began, but stopped, knowing Kenneth was right. But her china! “Please, just be careful.”

David sat down across from her. “Mom? How are you really doing?” He cleared his throat. “Have you had any more trouble with the neighbors? Last week you were saying how loud it was.”

“What?” Maureen frowned. “I wouldn’t say anything like that.” She loved the neighborhood. She hadn’t had any problems since she had moved here as a young bride. Betty and Arthur lived upstairs with a little boy just David’s age.

“But you told me,” he started. Then he shook his head. “Mother, I loved the neighborhood I grew up in. But it’s changed. You know it has. Most of your old friends are living in retirement communities or dead.”

She gasped. “I’ll have you know that your father and I are happy here.”

“Have you taken a look outside recently?” He stood up and paced the kitchen. Maureen had to smile. His father was the same way.

How can I organize my thoughts if I can’t move around?

“The corner store has been gone for years. There’s always a group of kids tearing up and down the street, spray-painting the walls. It’s not safe for you to live here anymore.”

The kettle whistled. She stood and slapped his hand away from it. If he took it in, he’d set the tray in some odd place in the living room, and the next thing she knew she’d trip over it and break her good cups. “I am perfectly capable of pouring tea.”

He chuckled, but it sounded forced to her.

“Mom, I worry about you.”

She looked over at him, a blur leaning against her clean counter, watching her pour. She smiled and reached up to pat his cheek. “There’s no need to worry about me. I’ll be fine. I always lock the windows and the doors.”

She led the way back into the living room and set the tray on the coffee table. The television was bright in its corner.

“That’s odd. I always turn it off.”

David sighed. “I’ll call the repair man.”

She smiled at him. He was such a good boy. Taking care of her now that his father was gone. “Thank you, David.” She sat down in her chair.

“Mom, have you thought at all about moving like we’ve talked about? It would be so much easier for me to visit. You liked Crestview when we went to visit Aunt Ethel.” He took a deep breath, just like his father when he was going to say something annoying. “And you need help. You’ve got to face facts . . .”

You’ve got to face facts, love. It’s just too much for you.

She broke in. “Sit down. I can’t talk to you when you’re looming like that.”

He took the chair opposite. Kenneth's chair.

She handed him his cup. "Do you have any news from the children? Any more weddings? How is Sylvia?" Sylvia was good for David. Even if she wasn't what Maureen would have chosen for her son. "Where is she? She never comes any more. I miss her." She set her cup on her knee.

There was a long pause and she tried to see whether he was smiling or frowning. He looked so like Kenneth sitting there.

He moved restlessly. "Mom, you need to be closer. I worry about you out here, when you can't even remember . . ." He paused to clear his throat.

She frowned. There wasn't anything wrong with the house. It was paid off. Time to change the subject. "Have you seen my new toy?"

Blast it, woman, don't you go changing the subject when I want to yell. It's time for you to face facts.

She frowned across at Kenneth, then reached down to the bright purple booming box—was that what the sales lady had called it? She liked it because it was bright enough to see even though she didn't turn it on. "You think I know nothing about electronics. But this is simple. See, this button here has a triangle, and that means go."

She pointed. The triangle made a darker blur that was just big enough to see. "Maybe Sylvia and I can go into town to find some books on tape." She loved the noise. Sometimes the house was so quiet, but she had the TV for color and movement and her booming box for noise. She got along fine.

He sighed. “You’ve shown it to me every week for two months. Don’t you even remember that?” He ran his fingers through the blur that was his hair, so that it would stick straight up. Her fingers itched for a comb.

She always loved combing Kenneth’s hair. When they were newly wed, it had been long and red and smooth. It flopped down to cover his eyes when he bowed over her hand. A record played a dancing tune and her mother sat in the corner with her hands folded on her lap.

May I have this dance?

She looked at him over her imaginary fan. “But sir, I am a married woman, and my husband is a jealous man.” She smiled mysteriously. In those days, all her smiles were mysterious.

He snapped his fingers.

That for your husband. He sounds a brute.

“But I love him.”

Do you? What a coincidence. I love you, too.

“I love you too, Mom.”

Kenneth was gone. It was David she was talking to.

He stood up and paced the room. Finally, he stopped and faced her. “Mother, listen. You can’t ignore this forever.” He was getting louder. “You’re not well. What if something happened? You’re all alone, here. You can’t . . .” Her eyes widened. How dare he yell at her? She was still his mother.

“David Michael O’Conner. Don’t you yell at me. Don’t tell me what I can and cannot do.” She placed her empty tea cup on the table in front of her.

Children!

As she straightened she folded her hands and stared into the colors on the TV. It was good company when her family didn't come for months on end.

Don't be sad, love. I just want what's best for everyone.

He touched her hand. "I'm sorry, Mom."

She nodded, once.

"Would you be able to come visit me at least? I've done up the guest room just for you. It's waiting for you, whenever you want to come."

You know she'll be welcome to stay with us for as long as she needs to.

She smiled. She clasped his fingers . . . they were so warm. "That would be perfect. I would love a visit. Only a short one, mind."

She's your mother. Family. How can family be a burden?

She paused, wondering how to put the question delicately.

What do you mean? I know your mother is sleeping in the next room. We're new wed, love. She knows.

"David, does Sylvia know that you're inviting me?"

"Mother, I wish you could remember." His fingers clenched around hers. "Sylvia has been dead for over six months. Remember? You were there. At the hospital? Can't you remember? You came to the funeral. You bought a new dress."

Maureen reached out to hold his hand.

"Mom, you can't stay here alone. You need to be around people who can help you. You liked it when we visited Aunt Ethel. They've got an opening at Crestview. You could be there with your sister and your friends."

He was so close she could see his blue eyes, just like his father's. When had his hair gotten that gray? "Mother? Are you listening to me?"

Maureen, love. You're worn to the bone. David's looking rosy again, but you're getting as pale and thin as he was. We have to make some changes.

"You don't understand, Kenneth. I can handle it."

"What do you mean? Mother?"

That's just it, love. You can't handle it. At this rate, you'll wear yourself out caring for her and David—and then David won't have a mother anymore. Do you want that for him?

"I'll always be his mother. Just like she's my mother."

"Of course you're my mother. I love you."

I've talked to the doctor. There's an opening at the old folks home—the one that my Aunt Mary stays at. It's clean. She'd be with people her age, friends she can talk to. She'll be cared for by trained nurses. We can visit.

"I told her, Kenneth. I told her. She told me . . ."

David was standing in front of her. Maureen looked at him and shook her head.

"She told me that someday I'd be old, just like her. And that they'd say they loved me—then ship me off to live in a cage—a padded cage full of frills and useless dust catchers. And I would sit there with my hands folded on my lap, catching dust. Just like her."

"What are you talking about, Mom?"

It's not going to happen, love.

"You promise?"

“Maybe if I came to see you every night. It’s such a long drive. A nurse? No, you don’t like strangers.” His voice was so low she could hardly to hear him. “It’ll have to be Crestview.”

I’ll be there with you, for better and for worst. In sickness and in heath. You won’t have to face it alone. I promise.

“You promised. Kenneth, you promised.”

KEEPING THE LIGHT

Ten-year-old Mattie Jamison brushed out the ashes from the cast iron stove and laid the new fire just as Mama would do if her pregnancy wasn't taking so much of her attention. It was hard. The coal wanted to remain in a muddle instead of forming a neat stack like Mama's. She wished Mama had taught her how. It was difficult to try to do from memory. There wasn't much light to see by, although Mama kept a lamp burning in the kitchen to guide the men home after their solitary shifts in the lighthouse. There were two keepers: Mattie's father and Mr. Davis, who boarded with them.

Mattie used a long taper to light the kindling under the coals and waited until the fire caught. She sighed and sat back on her heels. That would have to do. She put on her coat to go find Mama. The sleeves were short. She'd grown since the last supply run came in September.

Outside, Mama was standing in the shadow of the lighthouse with her hand on the baby in her belly, looking out to sea.

"Mama?"

Mama looked around. "I wouldn't want to be buried here, so close to the sea."

Mattie shivered. She wished Mama would hug her and tell her that everything would be all right. This person only looked like Mama and said things that shook Mattie right through.

The wind cut up her sleeves. She pulled Mama toward the cottage. "Let's go in, Mama." A February storm was building in the northeast. Mattie could smell it.

Mama let herself be led back inside. "No sail today," she said.

Mr. Davis, the fourth inhabitant of their tiny island off the Maine coast, had just come off his eight hour shift in the tower. He and Papa stayed up all night making sure the light didn't go out. He whistled and placed a pail of fresh milk on the counter.

"Thank you," Mattie said, glad the cow was already milked, but most of her attention was focused on tucking Mama into the chair by the kitchen stove with a heavy shawl to keep off the chill. Mama's teeth were chattering, but she didn't huddle into the shawl. She just sat, wilted and boneless as a rag doll.

"Is that better?" Mattie asked, and waited, but Mama just stared through her.

Mattie wanted the old days, when they had first come to North Rock. Back then Mama has laughed and talked with Papa late into the night, and when Mattie woke up, breakfast was already on the stove. She'd time to play with her doll and run around the island.

She sighed and stood. Mr. Davis had been busy while Mattie got her mother settled. Already, he had the batter made for hotcakes and the griddle set on the stove. Mattie was glad. The cast iron griddle was heavy.

"I can get breakfast," Mattie said. Mama never let Papa anywhere near the stove. The kitchen was Mama's domain. Papa could wind the lens and trim the wick and wipe down the tower windows so that the light cut through the night, but he was a lost bear in the kitchen.

Mr. Davis just laughed and poured batter on the griddle with a hiss. "My mother would turn over in her grave," he said. "She always said bachelors who don't cook will starve before they find a wife to cook for them." The sound of Wales grew stronger in his voice, and Mattie grinned back. "How many do you want?" he asked.

In a few minutes, Mattie was polishing off her plate. Mama's fork was halfway to her mouth, dripping syrup. Sometimes she took a bite when Mattie reminded her, "Eat, Mama."

Mama wasn't ill. She didn't have a fever or a rash. There was nothing wrong in her body.

Mr. Davis put his hand over Mattie's. "That was a long sigh. Where's our little songbird?"

Mattie shook her head. She stared at Mama. "I should get her back to bed," she said, but she didn't move. She couldn't. Mama was so restless that she would keep Papa awake, and he had to sleep so he would stay awake for the light.

Mr. Davis looked serious for once. "Mattie, I know I'm not as handy in the kitchen as your Mama, but I've worked lights and kept house for a long time. I can do it again. You're not alone."

Mattie knew Papa would be so disappointed if she took Mr. Davis away from his duties. "I'll manage," she said. "You need to get your rest."

Mattie climbed on the step-stool so she could reach the sink and stared out the window at the sea. The wind was kicking up and waves broke in a long spray. She wished she was out in it, running along the shore, the wind and the waves catching her so she was nearly flying.

She wondered what new face the island would show after the storm. Because the island was just barren rock, no more than fourteen feet above the sea, a storm would

overturn stones and wash up seaweed and starfish and treasures from the deep. She loved roaming the island, gathering flotsam and marking new paths.

Mattie had been sad when they left their last assignment, a coastal light on a headland over town. Her aunts and grandma lived close enough to visit nearly every Sunday. But her first glimpse of North Rock had been magic. She was six years old, standing with Papa on deck while Mama rested below. Papa pointed straight ahead. “See, Mattie? There’s our new home.” She’d followed the line of his finger. Floating above the surface of the water was a tower, painted in red and white checks like Grandma’s good tablecloth. She knew she would love it, even though there were no other children, no school, no grandma, no aunts, no presents on her birthday—nothing but the sea and the tower.

Mattie poured hot water from the kettle over the dishes and added a handful of soap. She stood washing the dishes, her elbows resting on the sink, then set the plates on a towel to dry. The dishes were easy. It was more difficult to keep the cottage properly clean. Every Saturday, Papa put on his white gloves and went over every surface just as though he were an Inspector from the Lighthouse Service come to test them. Last week he’d been dismayed at the dust that had settled on the high places where Mattie couldn’t reach. Mattie had wilted under the gentle reprimand. Mama hadn’t noticed the lecture.

Late that afternoon, the sky was dark and gray and the wind wailed around the house as Mattie warmed up the Sunday beans and baked cornbread in the stove. It wasn’t as good as Mama’s would have been, but at least she remembered the salt this time and it wasn’t too badly burned. Mama sat, staring out the window and rubbing her belly.

“Mama?” Mattie touched Mama’s shoulder. “It’s nearly suppertime. Papa will be up soon. Are you ready to eat?”

Mama looked around, then stood and got the good bowls down from the high shelf. Mattie hoped she’d be able to wash up without breaking them.

There was a stomping from the stairs and Papa came into the kitchen with a roar. “And how are my girls today?” He gave Mama a loud kiss and picked Mattie up to whirl her around until her head spun. “Let me look at you,” he said, setting her on her stool. “You’re getting bigger every day.”

Mattie smiled, but she was waiting for Mama to say her line—her part of the ritual of suppertime. She should say *Mattie’s the only thing that can grow on this rock*. But Mama drifted across the kitchen silently, ladling food into bowls as though she were dreaming.

Dinner was silent. Mama stared out the window at the darkening sky with her hand on her belly. The wind had stilled as if to gather itself before the storm broke.

“Well, no point wasting daylight,” Papa said as he always did at four o’clock when he left for the tower, and with that, he was gone. He wouldn’t come down again until Mr. Davis started his shift at midnight.

Before Mattie could clear the table, Mama stood and then sat again with a surprised look on her face. “It’s too soon,” she said.

“Mama? What’s the matter?”

“It’s time.” She sounded hoarse. “Mattie, I need you to be calm and do exactly what I tell you.”

“Shouldn’t I go get Papa?”

Mama stood again, leaning on Mattie's shoulder so heavily that her knees started to buckle. "Having a baby is women's work," she said.

Mattie felt as though she would be sick, but she straightened her back. "What should I do first?"

Having a baby, Mattie learned over the next eternal five hours, happened in cycles. Mama had her stoke up the fire and put a new kettle on, then take the hot water and wash up around all of Mama's private area. Pains came, and Mama clutched Mattie's hand and bit down on a wooden spoon to keep from yelling loud enough to wake Mr. Davis in the next room, although Mattie was pretty sure Mr. Davis wouldn't hear Mama over the wind even if she screamed, but it made Mama feel better to try and be quiet. Mattie's hand ached from the strength of Mama's grip. Then Mama told her to feed the fire again, as though Mama was cold in the stifling room.

Icy rain and snow lashed at the cottage, and wind whistled down the chimney. Mattie's eyes were sore from rubbing them awake.

"What time is it, Mattie?"

"Nearly nine."

"Take your Papa his dinner." Mama closed her eyes and bit hard on the spoon. After a long moment, the pain seemed to pass.

"Yes, Mama." Mattie's heart leapt. Papa would know what to do.

Out in the kitchen, Mr. Davis was eating a plate of beans. "Shouldn't you be in bed, songbird?"

Mattie could barely think she was so tired. She went over to the sink. She scrubbed her hands like she was going to take her skin clear off. “Mama’s having the baby.”

Mr. Davis shoved back his chair with a scrape that made Mattie jump. “What about your Papa? Should I get him?”

“I’m going up now.” Mattie got down the tray and ladled some beans into a bowl. She slipped a spoon into her coat pocket so the wind wouldn’t steal it. The lighthouse was only steps from the cottage, but the gale was strong now.

Mr. Davis stood. “Wait. I’ll take it up and send your papa down to help.”

Mattie shook her head and pushed open the door. “You finish your dinner.”

The wind nearly lifted her skirts up to her waist. It pulled at the napkin that covered the beans and filled the air with salt, enough to take the skin right off her face. It wasn’t more than five steps to the base of the tower but the ice forced her to take twenty tiny steps. The storm took the door out of her hand, so she put down the tray and used both hands to pull it closed again.

Tonight, it was difficult to climb the stairs. They were steep and shallow, the tray was big, her skirt was long, and she was unbalanced and tired. At least she could see, as Papa kept lanterns lit every twenty steps so that he could get from the light to the bottom of the tower where he wound the shutter.

One-hundred-thirty-one steps to the top of the tower where Papa was wiping down water from the windows. The shutter that passed over the lens was spinning, sending a flash pattern to passing ships. North Rock’s pattern was unique, distinguishable from the next one down Maine’s south coast. Mattie loved the lens. It was beautiful, like

a gigantic diamond, taking the oil lamp that Papa kept trimmed and burning all night and multiplying it a million times to send the beacon out to sea.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep? Where’s your Mama?” Papa asked.

“The baby’s coming.”

He stood and started pacing, always careful to stay out of the beacon. “It’s too soon.”

“Mama’s telling me what to do.” Mattie swallowed. “Could you come down? I need help.” She looked down, not wanting to see his disappointment in her.

“She wanted to be on the mainland with her own mother. The supply ship is due any day now.” He stopped. Mattie looked up, but he was looking through her as though she wasn’t there. The shutter spun around and around. In the corner, the big hourglass was nearly empty.

“It’s time to wind the shutter,” he said finally, and cold settled in the pit of her stomach.

On the way down, Mattie passed Mr. Davis. He patted her shoulder and continued up. Mattie paused to eavesdrop as he talked with her father.

“I hear there’s going to be a baby tonight, Don. Congratulations. I’ll take the rest of your shift.”

“She has Mattie. I’d just be in the way.”

“In the way?” Mr. Davis’ voice rose.

“Eliza doesn’t like me to see her hurting.”

“And what about Mattie?”

“Mattie has a good head on her shoulders. I can’t go down, Rhys. I have to finish the shift.”

“You have to . . .” Mr. Davis’ voice sputtered and then started again, low in his throat. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. You have a wife and a daughter who needs you. I’ll take the bloody shift.” He shouted the last words.

Papa’s voice was almost too low to hear. “I just . . .”

Mattie ran down the rest of the stairs.

Four hours later, the wooden spoon broke between Mama’s teeth when she pushed. She was too tired to yell.

“What do you see, Mattie?” she said, panting.

“I think it’s a head.” There was so much blood that Mattie couldn’t be sure.

“I need you to catch the baby. It mustn’t fall.”

Three breathless screams later, Mattie had her baby brother in her arms. She rubbed his back until he took a deep breath and wailed.

With shaky hands, Mattie did what Mama told her to, cleaning up the bed and the baby. Mama lay there, so still.

“Should I get Papa?” She’d heard when he came in, well before the end of his shift.

Mama didn’t move.

Mattie cradled the baby in her arms and went to find Papa. He was in Mattie’s bed with his eyes closed. When Mattie came in, he sat up.

“Is it over?”

Mattie nodded.

Papa stood and took the baby from her. “You did well, Mattie. Now you go to bed.” But he was looking through her, still.

Mattie straightened her bedclothes. She’d done everything they asked, and still everything was wrong.

She could hear them talking in the next room.

“Donald, the baby . . .”

“He’s beautiful.”

“Tobias—after your father. Tobias Donald Jamison.”

“That’s a good name.”

“Donald?” Lightning cracked with a thunderclap that made the baby wail.

“Donald, please. Don’t leave me here. The sea won’t let me rest.”

Mattie squared her shoulders. She’d just help more, that was all. She’d figure out how to care for Tobias. She would dust even harder, scrub even deeper.

She could fix this.

HERE THERE BE DRAGONS

They made love with the lights on. That way, when it was over, Mitchell didn't have to hunt for his glasses.

Justine passed him his stack of files, and picked up her laptop.

"Thanks," he said. He patted her head—and she pushed his hand away. She was thirty-five, too old to be dismissed like a pet.

She stopped buttoning her shirt and looked at him—really looked at him for the first time in she didn't know how long. He was patting his bare chest, looking for the pen he'd already parked behind his ear between the frame of his glasses and his head. He didn't look up.

"It's behind your ear," she said.

He fumbled a bit more before reaching for the pen. "Did you have a good day?" He crossed out a line on the page in front of him.

"Fine." She let the word trail off, hoping he was listening enough to look up. She waited. He bit the end of his pen and stashed it behind his ear.

If he would just look at her, it would be so much easier to say. She didn't want to talk about work—she could think about work when she was there. She wanted to talk about the box in the bathroom—the one she'd used and stashed under the tampons. She wanted to look in his eyes and say, *Mitchell, I'm pregnant*. She wanted him to be panicked, too.

There he sat, looking for his pen again, making vague, encouraging noises.

"Mitchell?" She waited. This was too important to say to the back of a file.

"Yes?" He crossed out another line without looking up.

She looked away. “Never mind.”

She could hear the scratch of his tiny, precise corrections as she opened a browser. Time. She needed more time to think. Tomorrow she was on a plane to Atlanta for a trade show, and three days later, the plane ride home. She wouldn't have a moment to breathe, let alone think.

But if she cashed in her ticket home . . . the bus ride would be two and a half days back home to LA. As she sat, she planned the trip—answering the questions, mousing on the next button. It was so easy, just a few clicks and the website was asking for a credit card. She reached for her purse and hesitated.

“Mitchell?” In Justine's head, the words were so simple. *Mitchell, I'm pregnant. I'm having your baby. You're going to be a father—do you want to be a father?* Why was it so hard to say it?

This time they made eye contact. “What is it?” He held his pen but he had looked up and there he was. The same apologetic eyebrows she remembered from the day they met, when he nearly ran her over with his grocery cart.

“Tomorrow's the Atlanta trip.”

The connection was going and he turned back to his page. “Really? I thought that was next week.” He circled something and made a marginal note.

“It's going to take a bit longer than I planned. I won't be back until Sunday night.”

“Okay.” He didn't ask why, and she reached for her credit card.

Three days later, Justine regretted the impulse decision. She stared out the bus window at the heartland of America. All she could see was nature—weeds and stunted trees. Every so often there was a house set back from the highway or a barn nearly buried in green weeds. She was on her way back to Mitchell, sick, tired, and pregnant.

Thunderheads marched in from the southwest, dominating the horizon. The bus was heading toward them.

She had to tell Mitchell. That wasn't even the question. This was his problem too. But she was the one pregnant—her body, her decision. He couldn't help her until she knew what she was going to do.

Mitchell was great with logistics. When he moved in a year ago, he had arranged his things in her apartment with mathematical precision. But his default opinion when she asked for it was: *What do you want?*

Under the circumstances, that wasn't helpful.

The driver said something about the next stop through a wave of static. She put her bag down on the other seat, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

Justine was so tired. The trade show had been draining—fifteen-hour days, working behind the scenes. Her boss, Barbara, had been there with her perfect husband and perfect hair and perfect child-free figure, taking most of the credit for Justine's hard work.

Barbara had a way of looking down her nose that made Justine feel like checking her teeth for spinach. She could just imagine asking Barbara for maternity leave. Barbara would stand there, in her perfect makeup and her nylons that didn't dare run up her legs.

“But Justine,” she would say, “couldn’t you think? That’s our busiest time of the year. What—this wasn’t planned?”

Unplanned pregnancy shouldn’t happen at this time of a woman’s life.

Justine shifted on the seat as the bus slowed. She couldn’t face her boss. She should make the appointment for the abortion next week. She wouldn’t even have to tell Mitchell. Her stomach churned, which the internet had told her to expect, but the thing growing inside her didn’t get a vote either.

The bus stopped, kicking the constant vibration up a notch. Justine pressed her head against the window. The a/c had chilled the glass, and the change in temperature made her teeth ache without settling her stomach. The bus rocked as people boarded, but she didn’t pay any attention until she felt her shoulder tapped.

“Can I sit here?” The voice piped pain into her head. It was too shrill, too loud. A child.

Justine waited before opening her eyes. She had a simple method for discouraging seatmates. Whenever the bus stopped, she pulled out her bag and set it on the seat next to her with her hand on it, as if she were willing to put it away, but with her eyes closed as though she were asleep. Most people wouldn’t wake someone unless the bus was completely full.

It had worked so far.

She sat up and pulled her bag onto her lap.

The kid bounced down. It was a little boy of some age before acne but after kindergarten—eight, ten, maybe? He had an oversize red backpack, ratty jeans, and a smudge on the end of his nose. He stowed his pack under the seat and bounced again.

Justine swallowed hard. The nausea wasn't just a morning thing—although it was what had first clued her in and sent her to the drugstore for a pregnancy test.

“I've never been on the bus before.” Not only a kid, but a chatty one.

“Neither have I,” she said, regretting the automatic response. She knew better than to encourage him, but those few words were enough.

“It's awful high, isn't it? I liked it when the driver made the steps lean down. He threw my suitcase into the underneath part. Do you think I could stand up down there? I think I could, but the driver just laughed.”

Justine reached down to get her novel. The kid kept talking.

“I guess it would be hot. Mom said yesterday that it's so hot that it's like trying to breathe soup.” He laughed. She sat with her book in her hands, waiting for a pause so she could open it. “Who would breathe soup?” the boy went on. “Is it hot in Arizona? I'm going to Flagstaff.”

Justine stared at the cover, opened it and glanced at the ticket she was using as a bookmark, but she couldn't settle in to read. She was too well conditioned—even ten years in LA hadn't driven her mother's southern drawl from her head: *If someone's talking to you, Justine, you don't ignore them. At least, not so obviously that they can see you do it, dear.*

“That's really near the Grand Canyon.” He said it as though it was some great secret. “My dad promised he'd take me this year. It's going to be so much fun. Just me and my dad.” The kid paused, probably for breath. “My dad knows everything about the Grand Canyon. We're going to hike to the very bottom. Did you know mules walk on the edge of the path? It kind of feels like you're going to fall. That's what Dad told me.”

She'd almost tuned him out when a line on her ticket caught her eye. She had to pass through Flagstaff. She would be stuck with Mr. Chatterbox for seventeen hours straight.

"Mom says remember he's a busy man, but he promised. This year's the year." He paused, and before he caught his breath again, Justine turned to look out the window at the weeds and tall clouds. Miles to go before dark.

At dusk, the passengers were let off for fifteen minutes of fast food. Justine put her book down without marking the place. She would have to read it again anyway—she didn't remember anything. Her attention had been fully caught by the one boy live action show,

Against her will, she was enthralled. It was like a train wreck, horrifying and fascinating at the same time. He hadn't been still for five consecutive minutes. He read a comic aloud, asking for help with the long words, bounced along to his music—he couldn't hold a tune—played video games until his second set of batteries had run down, read another comic, and spilled his colored pencils everywhere.

Justine kept looking around to see what other passengers made of him, but they seemed to be able to ignore him as she couldn't. All around her were dull, sleep deprived faces and blank stares. Except for the boy.

As soon as the bus stopped, she stooped upright while the boy reached down for his pack. She pushed past him and into the flow of passengers. Outside, a crowd of them, including the driver, were already lighting up. She held her breath as she passed. Her nose had become more delicate with pregnancy.

Justine was nearly to the counter before she felt a tug on her arm.

“Is this enough for a cheeseburger and a soda?” He held a handful of change in his grubby hand. Six quarters, eight dimes, two nickels, and about twenty pennies. It looked as though he had raided a piggy bank.

What was his mother thinking? Everyone knew better than to put a kid on a bus without enough food money. An envelope labeled “Dinner” with five dollars in it, or better yet, a debit card—that way he wouldn’t be carrying cash. Even ignoring the theft factor, coins were heavy. And surely he had more than two and a half dollars to spend. As a child, when Justine made the summer switch, her mother had fixed a money belt around her waist before depositing her in the taxi to Dad’s house across town. Did his mother really expect him to survive seventeen hours on so little?

Even Justine knew better. It was common sense.

She crouched down to look him in the face. “I think so. Do you need help talking to the cashier?”

He nodded. Justine started to stand, but he pulled at her arm again. “What about a milkshake, too?” He looked at her with wide blue eyes. For a moment, something about the arch of his brows reminded her of Mitchell.

She bent back down. “I think you’ll need a bit more than that.”

He bit his lip and looked at the ground. He wasn’t really upset, but it was obvious he was disappointed. Justine couldn’t blame him—it was so hot that she wanted a milkshake too.

She put her hand on his shoulder. It felt fragile—like if she squeezed too hard, she might break him. “How about this. The woman sitting across from us left at the last stop.”

He watched her with those eyes.

“I’ll buy you dinner if you take her seat. That way we can both stretch out.”

“Are you sure?”

She stood. They were at the front of the line at last. “A cheeseburger, a grilled chicken sandwich, two regular sodas, and two milkshakes—vanilla and...” she looked down at the boy.

“Strawberry, please.” He smiled and took her hand.

Back on the bus, the boy finished his food and stuffed his trash away. Then he pulled out his video game and another set of batteries. Justine opened her book to not read some more.

One thing was certain. Adoption was off the table. If she went through the inconvenience and pain of having the baby, she was going to keep it. There was no way she would risk her career and dress size for another couple.

Which led back to Mitchell. They never discussed children. Or politics. Or any controversial topic. She just couldn’t picture how he would react to the news. They’d been together nearly two years, and she had no idea how he would take impending fatherhood. Neither of them had a close family—she’d never met either of his parents, and he’d never met hers. They spent holidays together to avoid the awkwardness of home

visits. At the time, she'd been glad to avoid the drama, but now she realized she had no idea how he treated his mother.

The closest they'd ever come to talking about the future was just after he'd moved in. She had brought home Chinese, and they were eating in companionable silence. She'd convinced him to sit picnic style on the floor—one of the few times she'd ever seen him relax. He had just showered, so his hair was still damp.

“This is nice,” she'd said, putting her chopsticks down and leaning into him.

Mitchell wrapped an arm around her, caught her hand and playfully nibbled on her fingers. She liked that playful side of him.

“Are you finished?” he asked.

She liked that considerate side of him. She made an assenting noise and closed her eyes. “I love you.” The minute she said it, she could feel him tense and knew she'd said the wrong thing.

She sat up and twisted around to look at him. “I didn't mean it like that,” she said, although she wasn't quite sure what he had heard. “There's no obligation.”

He didn't say it back. Instead, he stood, and reached a hand down to help her up. “I need to brush my teeth.”

Justine didn't use his hand. She stood, wishing that he felt close enough to her to forget teriyaki breath.

That night she stayed awake a long time after he fell asleep, watching the rise and fall of his back.

That was Mitchell. As militantly non-confrontational in his personal life as he was argumentative in court. They never argued. He ducked and ran. Justine was tired of chasing him.

She set the book down and closed her eyes. She had changed for him. She didn't bother trying to argue with him anymore. They had a pleasant sort of relationship where they came home to the same apartment and took turns doing the dishes. It was like being married without any of the traditional nasty complications. Until the little blue line was drawn, she thought they had years to worry about that kind of commitment. Now she was being pushed over the edge of a precipice, and she didn't know if she trusted him to catch her.

Or if she wanted him to.

Justine looked over at the opposite seat at her young friend. He had stashed the game and was curled up for the night. A ragged rabbit that used to be white served as a pillow. His sweater was stretched down his body like a very short blanket. Now that the sun was down the bus was too cold. As she watched, he shivered and tightened his arm around his backpack. His mother hadn't packed a blanket and pillow for the trip. Justine dug out an extra throw from her bag. It was soft, fluffy, and lime green. Mitchell had banished it from the couch because it always slipped off and onto the floor. She stood and tucked it around the child. He didn't wake, but his shoulders relaxed with a sigh and he drifted deeper into sleep.

Justine curled up under her own blanket, bringing up her pillow to muffle the bus's vibration. She closed her eyes and tried to relax.

Some time and miles later, a shriek of wind shook the bus. Without opening her eyes, Justine dug through her purse for a cracker. That helped with the nausea. Another blast of wind woke her the rest of the way. She sat up and looked out the window.

Beyond her reflection the sky was heavy and dark. Lightning flashed, and in that instant she could see prairie grasses bending, bowing before the storm. Thunder crashed. There was nothing but grey ahead of them but the rain hadn't hit yet.

Lightning broke again, followed closely by a thunderclap, and she felt the seat give a familiar bounce. She looked over at the boy. He was staring past her out the window.

At the next flash he counted, "One Mississippi, two Mississippi," and then flinched as the thunder roared. Justine put her arm around him and he relaxed into her side until another bolt hit. Thunder followed immediately. Not even one Mississippi.

She rubbed his shoulder and he relaxed again. "That was close," she said, trying to keep her voice calm.

"I don't like storms." He raised his voice so he could be heard over the thunder. It was nearly constant as they passed through the storm. "It sounds like fighting. Sometimes, at home, I hear the sirens at night and I have to get out of bed and wait with Mom in the living room and listen to the radio. If it's really close, we go down to the basement until the sirens stop. That's the safest place in the house, you know."

"Not in an earthquake." She gave an exaggerated shudder, trying to distract him.

He grinned. "I've never been in an earthquake. Is it scary?" The sky lit up again but he didn't seem to notice. "When I was six, tornados hit Jackson. We went to help

clean up. It was like all the trees had lost branches, and there was this one street where nothing was left but bricks and branches and I saw a chair upside down on top of a tree.”

“Amazing.”

“Sometimes it’s fun when everything is turned upside down, though.”

Justine lay a hand against her stomach. “But it can be scary, too.”

He nodded. “It was scary to buy the ticket this morning. I’ve never ridden on the bus before. Last year, my dad got me a plane ticket to come out and visit, but this year he only sent money for the bus. Mom was kind of mad about that.” He looked down at his backpack and started playing with a zipper. “But I had to go. My dad really loves it when I visit for the summer.”

“Do you ever wish your parents weren’t so far apart?” As soon as Justine asked, she wished she hadn’t. She had always hated it when people asked her about her parents after the divorce.

The boy thought for a long moment. “It’s hard. But at least they don’t argue all the time anymore. Just when they have to talk to each other on the phone. Mom says the only reason they ever got married at all was because of me.” He wrapped the green throw around his shoulders. “I’m not sure she meant for me to hear that. My dad has to move a lot for work. Mom had a really hard time getting hold of him this year. I had to leave a message on his voicemail to tell him when the bus will get there. I hope he got it.”

“I’m sure he did.” Justine shivered with the effort of keeping doubt from her voice. Poor kid. No kid of hers was going to be shipped across the nation. On a bus. Even if it meant—but that was still in the future. Mitchell might be thrilled, after all.

“He never takes Mom’s calls. He just loses track of the days. He’s a very busy man.”

“It’s hard to make time, sometimes,” she heard herself say. “That’s why I’m on the bus.”

“What do you mean?” He was wide awake.

“I’m pregnant,” She said. Her cheeks grew hot and she knew she was blushing. It was the first time she’d said it aloud.

Outside the bus, the lightning had stopped but the rain fell in sheets that hammered the bus. She could feel the temperature dropping even further. The driver slowed to a crawl.

“That’s so neat,” said the boy. “Is it a boy or a girl?” He curled into the curve of her ribs.

She laughed. “I don’t know yet. I just found out.”

“I hope it’s a boy. Girls are okay, but boys have better toys.”

“I never thought about it like that.” She closed her eyes and leaned back against the seat. “I’ve been busy wondering what kind of mother I would be. I didn’t stop to think about who had better toys.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be a good mother. You have a nice face.”

Justine blinked.

He yawned. “I like the rain. It sounds friendly. Can you imagine what it must have been like before cars and buses when people never travelled anywhere? My dad gave me this old map, and at the edge, it says, ‘Here there be dragons.’ It might be fun to meet a dragon, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.” She made her voice soft. Maybe he’d be able to sleep even if she couldn’t. “There’s enough real problems in the world without added pretend ones like dragons.”

He was nearly asleep. She helped him straighten his rabbit. He was almost on her lap. She tucked in the blanket around his shoulders.

“If you think about it,” she said, stroking his head, “we don’t really see all that much more of the world than they did in olden times.” Justine rested her hand on his shoulder. His breathing grew longer and deeper. “Airplanes, buses, cars cart us from place to place but our lives aren’t any bigger at all.”

She let her voice trail off. He was asleep.

She put her other hand on her stomach. Would it be a boy? She could find out. Her doctor would run the tests. Thirty-five wasn’t too old.

Justine let herself imagine holding her baby. A little head resting in the crook of her elbow. Mitchell’s eyes staring up from a little face. Trusting her.

She doubled her pillow over and leaned it against the window. She would have to move. She might have to find another job. She still didn’t know what Mitchell would say.

Lulled by the heavy drum of rain on the bus, she drifted into sleep.

She woke up nauseous, and again without opening her eyes, she dug crackers out of her purse and ate.

When she was well enough to turn her head, she looked at the boy. He was folding the lime-green blanket.

“Good morning.” He was impossibly cheerful. “The driver says we’ll stop for breakfast in about half an hour. And then, it’s just an hour or so to Flagstaff. I can’t wait to see Dad.” He handed her the wadded round bundle, and she thanked him.

In Flagstaff, Justine had to change buses, so they got out together. She gathered her luggage to sit with the boy until her bus was called. The station smelled of diesel and spilled soda.

He kept looking around. “He’ll be here any minute. I’m sure he will. He lives a ways out of town. Sometimes he forgets the time.”

Justine felt sick. Why hadn’t his mother . . . she thought back to the ride: he’d bought the ticket, he’d called his father, he hadn’t brought money or an extra blanket. Did his mother even know where he was?

“Do you have your father’s phone number?” she asked.

His face brightened, and he began digging through his backpack.

Her bus was called.

“Bye,” said the boy. He hugged her as she stood to gather her things. “Thanks.”

Where was the information desk? “Do you see that woman over there?” He nodded. “If he doesn’t come, talk to her. And you should call your mother to let her know you got here.”

They called final boarding.

Justine looked back at him as her bus pulled out of the station. He was still digging through his backpack.

She didn’t even know his name.

She curled around her stomach. He was all alone. His father didn't know he was coming. His mother was at home, and had no idea where he was.

Without opening her eyes, Justine reached for her crackers.

THE TREE THAT HOLDS THE WORLD

I sit at the table and feel the clay in my hands and under my tools. I ignore the murmur of classes. Ceramics students use the studio all day. As a senior, I have a key. The theory is we need to come in at all hours of the day and night, increasing our body of work.

I've put in more hours in the past week than I did in the past three months in an attempt to avoid home and Danielle's life.

Nothing exists but the clay. The voices and the driving beat of the radio fade into the background. I stare at the lump before me, begin kneading it through my fingers—pack it high and work it down into clay waves. The clay is soft and fluid. It oozes with water, the surface smooth and sticky. But the same water which makes it workable also makes it heavy and prone to fall. Unless I'm careful.

The clay erupts in a frenzy of growing, limbs taking form. I pant to keep up, to mold the graceful trunk climbing out of the clay. As I work, it is drying, becoming firmer and cooler.

Here is the fork in the trunk and the delicate branches—not too many to overburden my small tree. They will dry too fast. They spread and arch into each other, a necessary web of support that feeds back into the trunk so that it doesn't fall.

I stand to wet a paper towel to wrap around the branches, careful of the places where they join the larger clay body of the trunk—those are where the clay will be the most delicate. The thickness of the clay determines how fast it dries. If the main body dries slower than a branch, the clay will crack. Even the slightest touch can ruin an effect.

I examine the clay. For other trees I've had to prop up the high branches with thick supports, but this one is short and strong. When I am drawn to build a tall sculpture, I start at the wheel. Thrown components can carry the height I sometimes need. Then, while the vase is still workable, I add and reshape.

But recently I've avoided the wheel—I need the clay to ooze between my fingers and into shape. Such work is inevitably shorter, eight inches at most, before the heat of the kiln condenses it even more.

I glance up from the clay. The class is gone and the studio is empty except for Alexi who is throwing a pot. He doesn't look up from the wheel. His eyes are narrow and his lips are pursed in concentration. I laugh because he has clay in his hair and his clothes. But he is lost in the wheel and I don't think he hears me.

It is nearly midnight. I begin to clean up. That will take another half hour, longer if I'm thorough.

Everything must be put neatly away. I must wash my hands and arms and face where I can feel the dried clay drawing the moisture from me. Lotion to replenish my hands. Cover the clay with plastic. Change my clothes. I dress more conservatively now.

Alexi is cleaning up too. I loiter in my side of the room, waiting for him to leave. I look at the greenware waiting for the bisque. The beginners' work lines the shelf. Some of it is good. Some of it is—interesting. One dragon, sitting up with his mouth open, tempts me to touch him. But I don't. One of the rules of the studio is to never touch someone else's work unless you're putting it in a kiln. The clay is too fragile, not yours to touch.

Alexi looks up. “You can go home, Rae,” he says. “I’ll lock up. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I shrug and gather my bag together, then stand, watching Alexi clean up. His hands are gentle as he picks up pot after pot and carries them to his work area to dry. He carries them separately, with two hands, each pot on its own board. They are thin and tall. Taller than I can throw. He is one of the best ceramicists in the studio.

“What?”

I start and realize I haven’t moved for at least five minutes. “Sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

He flashes a smile. “That’s all right, I don’t mind.” He drapes plastic over a vase, wrapping it so that the air does not dry it too quickly. It could crack or become too hard before he can turn and finish it. It takes gentle hands to work with porcelain.

I clear my throat, and he looks at me, frowning. “Are you all right?” He reaches out to me. I can see the porcelain under his fingernails. His hands are so big.

I jump up and grab my bag. “Sorry.”

I hurry out and start my short walk home.

There are three of us in the apartment. Danielle has the upstairs, with her own bath, but she shares the front room and kitchen with us. She has some special deal because she knows James, the landlord’s son. He’s one of her clubbing buddies. She’s the only one of us who isn’t going to school.

I have a private room at the back of the house with a private toilet, but I share the shower with Lisa, who has the third room.

Danielle moved in nearly a month ago, just after Halloween. Lisa and I were on the couch when she shoved her first bag through the door. Danielle had a black eye. She noticed my stare and smiled, wincing when her lip split open again. “Kevin gets so jealous.” She turned to go out for another box. “I love it when he’s wild—but he’s just too possessive. I just couldn’t live with it anymore.”

I exchanged a look with a frowning Lisa. Low enough that her voice wouldn’t carry to the door, she said, “No one should live with it.”

We stood and went out to help bring Danielle’s things in.

As we came back downstairs for another load, her phone rang. I tried not to listen, but by the time we’d gotten everything upstairs she was yelling into the phone.

“It’s so over, you bastard!”

“Good.” That was Lisa again, under her breath.

Danielle flipped the phone shut and looked at us. “There’s just no living with him, you know what I mean?” She rolled her eyes.

I returned her smile, feeling as though she’d let me in on some older, womanly secret, but I wasn’t sure how to reply. I’d never even had a steady boyfriend. Never, in fact, been kissed. But I wanted to imagine I could be part of her world.

I looked at Lisa—she rolled her eyes and headed back downstairs.

Danielle didn’t seem to notice her leave. She looked me over with a critical eye. I suddenly realized I was wearing a glaze-stained t-shirt and no make-up. I was sweating from carrying bags up the stairs. I felt grubby, and very young.

“You’ve got potential. Let me make you over,” she said. She turned away to check her mirror, correcting some flaw in her makeup that I couldn’t see even with my artist’s eye. “Come with me tonight. I’ll hook you up.”

Some part of me wanted to go with her. I could play the part. I could have fun. But more of me was uncertain. I’d never been clubbing before.

“I need to get to the studio,” I said.

I knew what to expect there. But, if she’d pressed, if she’d really wanted me there, I would have gone. This was back when I wasn’t afraid.

Danielle reached out and ran a quick finger down my cheek. “What a waste,” she said, and shrugged out of her top. I turned and left her room.

Downstairs, Lisa’s fingernails beat against her laptop. “It’s frustrating,” she said. “And I bet she doesn’t listen to anything against him.”

“She seems nice,” I offered, feeling out of my element.

Lisa snorted.

When Danielle came down she was made up so that the black eye didn’t show. She never showed her bruises in public, we would learn. A horn sounded from the street, and she threw us a bright smile. “Don’t wait up!”

The next morning, after Lisa went to class, I met Kevin over the breakfast table. Danielle had another black eye. She shrugged at my stare.

Kevin didn’t look up from his eggs. He sat quietly, eating. He didn’t look dangerous.

Three days later, Kevin was out of town, and that's when we met her clubbing friends. They blared their horns, and Danielle came bounding down the stairs. "Don't wait up!"

I didn't. But I woke up at three am when the party moved up into her room. In the morning, she cooked breakfast for the three guys who hadn't made it home the night before. She didn't introduce them or me. The dark one, his hair still wet from her shower, his eyes closed against the kitchen light, looped his arm around my waist and pulled me onto his knee, rubbed his face against my neck, his hands reaching to touch me. I squeaked, elbowed him, and ran to shut myself in the bathroom.

I could hear him grumbling, "What's her problem?" Danielle laughed, but if she said anything I didn't hear it because I'd turned on the shower. I scrubbed until the water turned cold, but I could still feel his hands, sliding down me like he wanted to shape me into something else.

By the time I came out of the shower the boys were gone. Danielle looked at me and frowned, as though she hadn't seen me before. "You know something, Rae? You're just like me. Too appealing for our own good." She laughed and put her arm around me. "He didn't mean anything by it. Men are creeps. Don't expect anything else."

She'd said that so easily. I shook my head, thinking of my brothers, my professors, of Alexi. "No one has ever touched me like that before."

"You don't believe me?" She looked me over from head to toe. "He thought you were me, you know. I was complaining this morning about his scruff, and so he shaved. If he hadn't been so hung-over, he'd never of grabbed you like that."

I couldn't believe her. What about Kevin?

“I think I’m jealous.” Her voice trailed off. “You have wonderful skin, did you know that? And your hair. It’s natural, isn’t it? Almost red, and so long.”

I pulled a bit in front of my face. “It’s just brown. Dull. I could never be like you.”

“I don’t know about that. I think I’m going to have to keep an eye on Kevin when you’re around.” She turned and headed for the stairs.

“No need,” I said, though I wasn’t sure she heard me.

She was walking up to her room. I followed her.

“Sex is power,” she said. “It’s a contest of wills—a give and take.” She sat at her vanity and caught my eye in the mirror. “The stronger one does the taking. People like you and me, we have the power. It’s like they do exactly what we think they’ll do. We can lead them wherever we want.” She stretched, checking the line of her body in the mirror. Then she looked at me.

I looked down. I was ready for the studio: baggy t-shirt with stains and a hole under one arm. I could never pull off the kind of sexy she wore. I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“Men are just sheep,” she said. “Horny sheep.”

“What about Kevin?”

In the mirror, I could see her face soften, her eyes grow distant. “Except Kevin. He doesn’t do what I think he will—I think that’s why I love him.” She laughed and rubbed a bruise on her leg the size of my fist.

She wore short shorts as if to show it off.

That was a month ago.

It's one o'clock before I get home from the studio, but Lisa is still in the living room typing on her laptop with the TV on a random show about rape and murder. She needs noise when she works, or so she told me when I asked her about it.

I sit beside her with my dinner. Every so often her lips move as she types. I wish I had her calm. Danielle's social life doesn't seem to bother Lisa at all—at least, not personally. She just gets angry at Danielle's choices.

There's a crash from upstairs and Kevin's voice yelling. Danielle yells back. Another crash. Quiet.

They've been at it since I got back from Thanksgiving. A whole week now. I think he's moved in.

Lisa looks up and through me. "But what does it mean?" she asks. I wonder if she needs an answer. I hope not, because I don't know the question.

She shakes her head and looks at me. It's almost painful to watch her come back to earth. "Rae. I didn't see you there." She turns back to her laptop. "Did you have a good day?"

"I got some work done."

She doesn't answer. She's gone again.

Danielle squeals. I avoid imagining the scene upstairs. I think about buying ear plugs or good head phones.

Lisa goes on writing.

I finish my meal and head back to my room. I lock my door, and then sit against it with my legs pulled up into my chest.

I never used to lock myself in at night. I don't like it at all.

Just after two, things go quiet upstairs, but I still can't sleep.

I'm afraid that Danielle is right. Maybe love is only about power. Maybe all men are creeps.

Maybe I am like her.

Two weeks ago, just before I left for Thanksgiving, I climbed up to Danielle's room in the afternoon before she left for work. That was the safest time. She was not likely to have any visitors then.

She was burning candles, and the mix of scents made me cough as I came in.

She was sitting on the floor next to her perfectly made bed. She had turned to look at the door, but when she saw it was just me she returned to painting her toes a dark red.

"Happy birthday." I pulled the present from behind my back.

She carefully screwed the lid back on her nail polish before reaching up for the package. I sat at the top of the stairs and watched as she un-wrapped it, feeling sick to my stomach the way I always get when giving away my work. What if Danielle didn't like it? Would she see something I didn't mean? I always spend too much time trying to fit the perfect gift to the person.

"I love this paper," she said, unfolding it carefully from the box. She smiled at me before opening the box. I'd packed it in newspaper and she looked up at me when she saw how carefully I'd packaged it. "Did you make this?"

I nodded.

She wasn't nearly as careful with the newspaper, tearing away at it in a way that made me want to protect what lay inside. I kept my eyes on her face, and I saw the anticipation change to puzzlement, and then eagerness.

It was one of my early trees: short with stylized branches surrounding the trunk. I had glazed it in reds and dark greens—a high fire glaze. It had been a risk, but I liked how the dripping had interacted.

She turned it around. “There are people in this, aren't there.”

“I can't see a tree without wondering who's inside. There's so many myths about trees that they almost need to be people.”

I stopped, not sure she'd heard me. She kept turning it around. “It's like there are two people in the trunk.”

I nodded. I'd wondered if she'd be able to see the other figures surrounding the lovers in the spaces between the branches. The glaze fire had made them harder for even me to see. They disappeared into the colors. An ominous piece. But it was her, and hers. I had to give it to her.

She got up to set it on her nightstand. “I absolutely love it.” She was smiling when she turned around. “You're so lucky to be so talented.”

It's impossible to reply to a compliment. People always assume I'm fishing for more. Maybe someday I'll be good.

She came over to where I sat. “You have such lovely hair. I wish you'd let me do something with it.” She reached over and touched the top of my head. “And your skin is so clear. If I looked like you, I could catch any guy.”

“I’m fine,” I said. She’d offered that before, but she never did anything about it. After two weeks of watching her life, I was grateful that her interest in me faded if I wasn’t talking to her. I didn’t want her help, her makeovers. I didn’t want to catch any of the guys she’d brought to the apartment since she’d moved in.

“Brian was asking about you, just last night. I don’t know what you did, but he never even looks at me anymore.” She laughed. “You should come out with me sometime. We’d have such fun. You’d like it. You already drive all the guys wild.”

I felt pale. She turned and opened a drawer, and I sank against the wall. What had I done to attract one of her friends? How could I avoid doing it again?

I couldn’t even remember who Brian was.

Maybe he was the one who pulled me down to sit with him and pass his hands over me.

Or was he the one who broke in? Lisa had tripped over him on the way to school. I’d heard her yell, and came out just in time for him to knock me into the wall on his way out the front door. She’d called the cops while I nursed a bruise on my arm nearly as big as one of Danielle’s trophies. In my almost dreams before I slipped into sleep, I still replayed flying across the room.

But Danielle had promised she didn’t know that one. He was just some bum who’d come through the window to sleep on our living room floor. Kevin had sat at the table with his arm around her while we gave statements to the police. She’d covered her new black eye with makeup.

That was the night I moved my dresser to block my window. I never open my blinds anymore.

“Brian’s such a sweetheart,” Danielle said. “Not as creepy as most.” I wished I could figure out who he was. Somehow that was the scariest thought of all. Someone I couldn’t even remember was out there, thinking about me the way Kevin thought about Danielle.

The next morning, when I unlock my door, Kevin is sitting at the kitchen table. He hasn’t shaved and his clothes are wrinkled. I avoid looking at Danielle, who is cooking breakfast.

He says hi. He is so soft-spoken it’s hard to believe that he would ever raise his voice, let alone his hands, and without thinking about it, I say hi and join him at the table.

“You’re the one who made Danielle’s tree,” he says.

“I make a lot of trees.” I push my cereal around with my spoon, trying to end the conversation.

“I like it,” he says. “It reminds me of a ghost story, the way the couple is surrounded.”

I look up, surprised.

“The other people,” he says. “You know. In the branches.”

“I wondered if anyone would notice,” I say. I glance over at Danielle. She’s scrambling eggs and swaying to the music piping through her ear buds. “She didn’t when I gave it to her.”

“She doesn’t notice anything if it’s not about her,” he says.

I catch myself before I nod. She was a friend—I shouldn’t agree with him out loud, even if I thought he was right.

He looks over at her and then leans closer. “She get’s jealous. That’s why she moved out.” His voice is lowered as though he’s sharing some secret.

I’m confused. “What?” I start to move away from him.

“If she got jealous again...” he lets his voice trail off and he reaches out to almost touch my hand.

I don’t move back at first because I’m remembering what it was like before she moved in, before I locked myself in my room every night. When the thought of coming home wasn’t repulsive. And then I remember the bruises. How could I live with myself knowing that I was sending Danielle into harm’s way for my own peace of mind? I open my mouth, not knowing whether I am willing to go along with Kevin.

I’m too late. A plate firmly sets down in front of him making me jump away from his outstretched hand. Danielle is glaring at me. Kevin has a little smile on his face.

I get up and pour my cereal into the sink, uneaten.

As the front door closes behind me, I can hear Kevin rumble, “Now I can’t even have a conversation?”

I hurry to the studio. Alexi is there, at the wheel. I look at him for a moment. He’s six inches taller than me, and big. He moves with exaggerated slowness in the studio, afraid that he’ll knock something over. He never has.

I go to my corner to look at my latest tree, reaching in under the plastic to feel the clay. It’s cold and smooth and damp to the touch. It’s ready to be carved and shaped with tools, although it no longer can be manipulated with my hands.

When the clay is bone dry, it stays at room temperature because the water in the clay has evaporated. Then it's time to fire it. But my tree is still leather hard. It is time to hollow it out so that it can survive the kiln.

I use tools to riddle the tree with holes. Some that can be seen where perhaps birds live and some hidden by the curves of the trunk and branches. I shape and smooth it, correcting the minute imperfections left by my fingers.

I sit back and look at what I've made. Something in the shape of the trunk tells me someone is trapped inside it. A woman. I can see the curve of her hip and the hollow of her knee. Her arms and fingers and hair have lengthened into branches. Her mouth is open in a long scream.

I drape her once more in plastic so she can dry properly, and it's then I realize I can't hear the wheel. I look to see Alexi dipping pots into one of the buckets of high fire glaze. His hands are steady on the tongs. In the studio, we work at all of the stages in the process all of the time so that we never have nothing to do. I go over to my work area for another lump of clay.

There's a class in session. The students look so earnest and innocent. Their teacher is walking them through their first critique. One by one, they stand in front of the class and tell what they were trying to do and then they stand there as the teacher and the other students say what they see.

Critique is uncomfortable for me. It feels wrong to describe what I was doing as though I had planned it out. I never have been able to plan what I would do—it just comes, instinctively. The planning comes later.

I look down to my clay. While I was distracted by the class, it has already begun taking shape. I draw it up and out between my hands, forming it into the rough stump of a tree. The clay body is too wet, sticking to my hands as I shape the edges—making the surface pocked and coral-like. I smooth it back. As I work the clay it loses moisture. When it is fairly dry, I use a knife to break it, forming the sharp, jagged edge where the woodsman has let the tree crash through the last inches of trunk holding it up. I use my fine needle for the details—the rings etched in different concentric levels, and the heavy bark.

I sit back to look at it. It's not finished—something else is moving in the clay. I can't see it yet.

I cover it tightly, leaving a damp sponge inside the plastic so that the clay does not dry out.

Now that I've stopped working, I know that I'm alone. I didn't even hear Alexi leave. I am lightheaded with the beginnings of a headache. It's eleven, and I haven't eaten all day.

It's midnight when I open the door. Lisa is on the couch watching a movie. There's absolute silence from upstairs and I look up in surprise.

"I think they're gone for the night." Lisa grabs a handful of popcorn and motions for me to sit down, pausing the movie. "Remember, you live here, too." She smiles at me. "Don't let them take your home."

I hadn't thought I was that obvious. Since Thanksgiving, I haven't been home except to sleep. "I've been working a lot," I say and she nods.

I wish I could be like her. I wish I didn't care what Danielle did.

I sit and take some popcorn.

Ten minutes later, just as I'm getting into the movie, the door slams open.

"Don't you come near me," Danielle shouts to the outside, "or I swear I'll call the police."

There's no reply, then we hear the motorcycle speed away.

"I am so ready to file a restraining order against him."

"So, why don't you?" Lisa asks, but Danielle doesn't seem to hear. She slams the door and walks over to flop dramatically on the couch next to me. She's not displaying any bruises that I can see and I'm good now at seeing the tell-tale makeup hiding purples and greens.

"What did he do?" I ask. I want to know if it's because of this morning.

Danielle tosses her hair. "You're awfully curious about him, all of a sudden," she says.

I look down. She makes a triumphant sound.

Lisa stares at me. I shake my head, not knowing how to explain.

I try to watch the movie, but Danielle's fidgety.

An hour later, we hear the motorcycle return. The engine dies and the doorbell rings. Danielle stares at the TV. She's stopped squirming and there's a small smirk in her lips.

He knocks, politely at first. Lisa turns the television up. He raps, then bangs, then pounds with what sounds like both his fists. Then he kicks and we can hear him swearing as though there was no door at all.

It hits me then how fragile a door can be.

He yells for Danielle to come and open the damn door, but she just sits smirking.

At last he tries the knob. It's unlocked. All of us turn to look at him standing in the open doorway. He fills it with leather and anger, his hair matted to his head and his helmet under his arm.

He looks at Danielle. "I'll tell you when we're over." He says it quietly. As though it had been someone else on the other side of the door, and then he turns and leaves. A moment later we hear the motorcycle speed away.

Danielle turns back to the movie. Her smirk is gone.

I get up, close the front door, and lock it.

That night, when I lock the door to my room, I pull the desk in front of it. It's almost too heavy for me to move. It's not enough.

In the morning, I leave before anyone is up. Kevin's motorcycle isn't in the drive.

It's Saturday. The studio is empty.

I dip my hands in my water bucket before touching the cool stump. The water on my hands moistens the surface. I carefully blur the lines I carved so painstakingly the day before. It's easier, now, to see the woman trapped within the stump. She is curled into herself. Her hair is long and flows over her body through the bark. With my wet fingers, I bring her out a bit more. The curve of her stomach is a hollow at the top of the stump. Her hands are clasped together near her face. I pick up my tools to renew the etched lines. I begin to see her expression.

Then, even more carefully, I carve out the inside of the stump, leaving her empty and ready for the fire.

I almost have enough greenware to justify appropriating a kiln. My storage area is covered with plastic covered shapes in various stages of dryness. I move with special care. The clay is never more fragile than when it's green—dry and unfired. The first, or bisque, firing takes the clay past quartz inversion, changing it forever from clay into ceramic. Even completely dry greenware can be put into the reclaim bin. In time, it will absorb the water, lose its shape, and return to clay. But bisque-ware is ceramic—no longer reclaimable as clay and able to withstand the far hotter glaze firing.

One after another I unveil my trees, adding them to the grove on my desk. They are made of different clays, whites and reds, none more than eighteen inches tall, and most far shorter.

Too many things can go wrong with clay as it is worked and fired, so it's foolish to love a piece before it's complete. That's the first thing a ceramic artist learns.

I am foolish, then, for I love my little forest already. I try to look at them objectively, to find flaws, but I know that they are some of the best work I have done. There are more than two dozen of them.

When I present them to the senior class for critique, I will talk about legends and mythology. This body of work celebrates the lore of the green wood, I will say. Daphne, who became a laurel to escape a god's love, Merlin, imprisoned by Nimue in an oak with his own spells. I will mention the tree spirits who dance in the rites of spring and Yggdrasil, the tree who holds the world. I will tell them I can't pass a tree without wondering who rests inside it, protected by the tree's silence.

Alexi stands on the other side of the table from me. I didn't hear him come in the studio. He's so still.

"I love what you do with these," he says, and reaches out to almost touch a branch. "Have you had any trouble with cracking?"

"Only a bit. I've used up nearly two rolls of paper towels."

He looks down at his hands. They look so big next to my trees. "I guess it's a good thing I prefer the wheel," he says, and we both laugh.

He walks around my workspace, examining the trees.

I try to see as he sees. They are arranged in a chronology of sorts: the laughing woman reaches to touch the sky. A powerful woman trapped but ready to burst free, singing, playful. A woman frozen with shock. Another cowering within her tree, twisted in agony. Others, praying, hiding, screaming. All different. Too many of them are fearful, I now see.

He points to my stump, the latest woman. "Is she dead?"

I look at her. She might be. She is drawn into herself, protected as best she can from the ravages of the woodcutter. "I don't know. I hope not," I say.

He reaches out, with the very tips of his fingers, very nearly touching her. "I hope not, too."

I carry them one at a time on their boards into the kiln room like a ring bearer at a wedding, holding them waist high and close to my heart. Alexi helps by holding the door.

I have enough to fill one of the small, top-loading kilns. When I load the big kiln, I'm always careful moving another student's work. It would be dreadful to shatter someone else's creation.

It's different when it's your own. Sometimes, after a piece has struggled through bisque and glazing, and it still hasn't done what you want it to, there's nothing to do but to smash it to the concrete floor of the studio. It's a happy sound. A pop and shatter—almost musical.

I never shatter greenware. But after the clay is bisqued, if it turns out badly, it can't be reused. If it doesn't work, it's only good for smashing. The fired clay dust can be ground and mixed back as grog, strengthening the clay body.

I arrange the kiln, one layer at a time, taking care with each shelf and support. Alexi helps, handing me the supports as a nurse hands the surgeon his instruments. All my trees must be bone dry all the way through, or they will crack—even explode in the kiln. Even though they feel bone-dry to my touch, I will leave the kiln open for longer than normal to make sure.

I set the cone and turn it on. For the next few days I will schedule my life around the kiln. For the first twenty-four hours, I leave the kiln hot and open in order to finish drying out the clay. Then, I close it and turn it up. When it reaches the proper temperature inside the kiln, the cone turns the kiln off. I will crack the kiln, opening it to cool down slowly, and only then, will I see what I have done.

The living room window is lighted when I walk home. Lisa sits in front of the TV. I stand outside watching.

She looks up, as if startled by a crash upstairs.

Kevin's motorcycle is in the drive.

I turn around and head back to the studio. I use my clay spattered clothes as a pillow and sleep on the floor in the warmth of the kilns.

Alexi is throwing a pot when I wake. He looks up as I walk into the studio from the kiln room. “Good morning.” He sounds surprised. I wonder how bad I look. And if he will notice that I’m in the same clothes I wore yesterday.

“Forgot my house key,” I say. I feel my face glowing. I hate telling lies.

He nods and doesn’t mention my blush.

I head to the house for a shower and food. Danielle and Kevin won’t be up yet.

Lisa’s eating breakfast as I walk into the house. She smiles at me. “Good morning. Are you all right? I was a bit worried.”

“I spent the night at the studio. I needed to mess with the kiln at about six.” This is, in fact, true. Last night, at six, I started the kiln.

She nods but we both know it’s not the real reason. I can’t stand the tension. On the way to my room, she grabs my arm. I know she can feel me trembling. “Don’t let her get to you like this. She has no right to do this to you—to us.”

I just look at her. How does Danielle not get to her? She doesn’t like what Danielle is doing with her life, but she hasn’t let it change her behavior.

What’s wrong with me?

“I can’t help it,” I say, and pull my arm out of her hand to head for the shower.

I slam the clay down on the wheel, pat it into place, douse it in water. When the wheel is up to speed, I lean over the clay and guide it with my wet hands.

I think of nothing but the clay, centering it on the wheel in a perfect circle so that there are no bumps to jar my hands away. I guide it up and press it down, forcing out any impurities I may have missed when I kneaded it. I feel clay and water coating my apron and pants and arms and face and hair, but it doesn't matter. Only the clay matters.

It's ready, so I press my thumbs into the center of the clay body, making the hole that is the start of any kind of vessel. Then I relax my hands, take them away so that I can slow down the wheel. I dash my fingers in water. If my hands are too dry, the pot will fail.

I draw clay up from the bottom of the vessel, making the sides thinner and taller. It feels like I am chasing a bead up the sides. And I must be more careful now that the wheel is going slower. If I move too quickly, the clay will collapse into a wider shape. A vase longs to turn into a bowl, a bowl into a plate.

I need tools, sponges to add water or to take it away. Ribs to shape it. A needle on a stick to level the top. A wire to cut it from the wheel. It has clean lines for now. I sit back and watch it spin. It is ready. If I touch it again, it will spoil. The wheel comes to a stop. I cut it off and transfer it to a board. A quick wipe with the sponge takes away my thumbprints from the wet sides. Then I drape it in plastic so it will dry slowly and evenly. In a few days, it will be dry enough to turn over, to finish it. It will be tall and airy—I can almost see it, ethereal limbs reaching up.

I clean the wheel before I begin the next one.

Alexi calls to me as I wipe down the wheel after my third vase.

"Hmm?" I say.

"I was just wondering if you were ready for lunch."

I look at him, then at the clock. My stomach growls.

“I didn’t bring anything.” I think about it. I should eat. “I guess I could go home.”

At the thought, all appetite leaves me.

“I have an extra sandwich if you’d like. It’s only peanut butter, but it’s food.”

“Thank you,” I say. “I should keep something here for the long days.” I wipe the clay from my hands and take the sandwich.

“No problem,” he says. He watches me eat almost long enough to make me uncomfortable.

“What?” I swipe the back of my hand across my face, trying to brush whatever got his attention away, and can immediately feel clay transferring, drying my skin.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to stare.” He grabs a paper towel from his work area and goes to the sink to wet it.

He gives it to me, and I do my best to get the clay off my cheek. Apparently, my best isn’t enough, because he takes the paper towel back. “Let me get that.”

His hands are gentle as he wipes the clay away.

Working the wheel has exhausted me so that I’m too tired to move my desk in front of the door, too tired to feel unsafe. I lock myself in and fall asleep before ten. At four, I hear a caterwauling from outside. In the midst of what I assume might be singing, I hear laughter and shouting from outside.

“Danielle!”

Another voice. “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

I think about my desk, but instead I grab my CD player and my headphones. Hopefully by the time the music plays itself out, I'll be asleep and they'll be gone.

Danielle is in the kitchen by herself when I get up. No noticeable bruising. Despite the yelling, I haven't seen any bruises since Thanksgiving. "Rae! Do you want some pancakes? I haven't seen you in a while."

What about the other night? The breakfast table? "No, thank you," I say. "I've been at the studio a lot. I've just bisqued some work so I should open the kiln today."

I stand there for a moment, wondering if she will ask about my work. Would she like to hear about trees?

"Well, I have some news." She turns off the burner and pours syrup on her pancakes. She looks at me, obviously waiting.

"What's up?"

"Kevin wants me to move back in with him."

I am still, startled and dismayed, but unsure of how to react.

She smirks, triumphantly. "He can't move in here, obviously. Not when James's dad owns the place. But he doesn't want me out of his sight." Her grin broadens.

I hesitate. I still can't understand what draws her back to him. "Is that what you want?"

"Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way." She laughs. "He's finally realized that he just can't live without me."

I try to work my head around it. This past month—has she just been testing him? Did she once think that she might be putting us at risk? What kind of person can't see the consequences?

She doesn't seem to notice my confusion. "Isn't it wonderful?" she asks. "I knew he would come around."

She finishes her pancakes, dumps her plate in the sink, and heads upstairs, humming.

I sit there, thinking about how I will feel when she is gone. Worried for her, of course. I rinse off my cup and her plate and load them in the dishwasher.

I tell myself that I'm upset that she's going, anxious for her stay. But inside me I feel a bead welling up like clay on the wheel, and when I open my mouth, I laugh.

I am practically dancing when I get to the studio. I stake out my wheel, grab my apron and gather some clay. I pound out the imperfections and divide it, then I pound it some more. I pound and pound until any air pockets in the clay are dead, and still I pound. Until my arms ache and the beads in my stomach spill out in giggles.

I prepare the wheel, but I can't focus, so in short succession I ruin six pots. As each flies off the wheel, I giggle more. I can't be bothered by the fact that I have suddenly lost the ability to throw a pot.

I set the clay aside so it can dry into workability, and collect another lump. I knead it, smoosh it, draw it up. The shape comes easily to me. No tree, just a woman sitting, her head leaning back into her hands, her feet crossed and pointed in front of her. Her chair is cushy and soft. Her elbows jut out on either side of her head.

Those elbows are what will dry the fastest. I get up for a wet paper towel to protect them.

Alexi comes over to look, and I wait to cover her.

“Ah.” He reaches out. “It is good that she got out of her tree.” He smiles at me and reaches out to almost touch my face. I giggle because his hands are covered in porcelain. He raises his eyebrow and returns to his pots.

I go upstairs to see if Danielle wants me to help her pack. She’s lying on the bed looking up at the ceiling.

“Thanks. I never know where to begin.”

I start making up boxes.

She doesn’t have very much besides clothes. I pick up the tree that I gave her. I run my fingers over it and feel a fault in the glaze. I look more closely. Several of the branches have been broken and super-glued back—in the wrong places. I can’t see any trace of the figures that used to surround the trunk.

I hold it up. “What happened?”

She looks over from the bed and frowns. “Oh, crap. I didn’t think you’d notice. I’m sorry. It flew across the room a couple of times.”

Was she blind? How could I not notice?

She has never known me, I realize. I wonder if she’s ever known anyone. “No worries,” I say. “It’s yours.” I wrap it in newspapers and place it in the box.

Alexi helps me unload the kiln.

I examine the trees as they come out. Each one ready for glazing.

Last to come out of the kiln is the stump. She is harder to see, now. The firing has made her shrink into the tree. She has drawn too far into herself. And she's cracked near the base of the stump. I must have fired her before she was bone-dry.

We carry the other trees to my workspace, and when we finish, we both go to the kiln room.

Alexi picks the broken stump up and looks at her from all angles. I meet his eyes and shake my head.

"She's dead." I say it. He nods. I take her from him with both hands.

There's nothing else to do.

I let her slip from my fingers. Alexi makes a gesture to save her, but he's too late. There is a pop and a crash as she smashes musically against the floor.

AN ARTIST'S EYE

Anya Litten glared into her canvas, painting the storm in broad, angry strokes as she considered the many ways she could kill herself. Her palette was a mess of reds and greens and blues, combining into a muddy brown that fit her mood and the day. Her hair was bleached white and loose, and the wind whipped it high above her head in a tangled mass. Over the sea, clouds piled on top of each other forming a dark curtain ready to fall over the land. At her feet, the path over the headland was white pebbles, some splashed in yellow or red or green with remnants of other paintings.

This was one of her favorite places. It would be the perfect place to kill herself; she could simply step off the headland and let the sea dash her body into the rocks below. The waves had kicked up, so that the spray almost reached her there on the headland above the sea. It would be over quickly.

After the storm they would find her, her hair tangled into a mass of seaweed, washed up into the harbor. A group of school children at play would find her there, battered and bloodied, with her skin encrusted with sea salt so thick that they would have nightmares of salt white masks for weeks and be sent into therapy. One boy, dared by the others, would touch her face—and that touch would haunt him. He would grow up to be a poet. One girl, ten years later, when in the throes of the aftermath of her first love, would throw herself over another cliff into the sea. A legacy of suicide.

It was strange to think that people would perhaps be affected by her death. She had no family, anymore. The cottage had belonged to her parents, but they were long dead. No husband, no children. The people she talked to most were medical professionals

and the woman who ran the art gallery that sold her work. The more she considered the cliff, the more she liked the idea.

But not today. It wasn't time yet.

Anya traced a delicate line of red onto the canvas—an echo of the invisible sun. The paint bled into a swirl of cloud, and Anya swore under her breath. This air was too damp. It clung to the canvas like dew. She relied on the air to dry her oils enough that the next layer of paint could be added without losing the painting's integrity. It was time to stop. If she touched the canvas again at this point, everything would smear into a blur of muddy color as bad as her palette. Besides, the storm was ready to fall, strong and cleansing.

With practiced motions she placed the canvas in the wooden box she kept to protect her work from the elements. She broke down her easel, wrapped the brushes to be cleaned, and made sure all her paints were capped and in their bag. This was a two trip job.

And then the rain hit.

Within seconds the world was a blur and Anya's hair and clothes were soaked. At least it was a warm rain. She turned back to the cottage.

It was then Anya saw her. A drowned-looking waif, maybe half Anya's age, was hovering just behind where she had been painting. Through the downpour, it was difficult to see any clear features, but the newcomer was thin and short and trembled like a butterfly under the battering of a downspout. There was no decision necessary. Anya picked up the bundle of supplies.

“Make yourself useful,” Anya said, handing the bundle to the girl. Picking up the box, she turned to the cottage. “Follow me.”

Not looking to see if she was being followed, Anya strode up the familiar path. Setting her box on the table, she turned and took the bundle back. “Thanks. I cut that a bit close,” she said. Now for dry clothes and a towel. As she walked toward the bedroom, her hair cutting an annoying drip down her back, she said, “You’re welcome to stay until the storm passes. I’m Anya, by the way.”

“Shannon.”

Anya winced. Shannon’s voice was hoarse and broken, as though she was a smoker or had been shouting for days.

“I don’t suppose you have a towel?” Shannon said, her teeth chattering and her breath coming in a wheeze that Anya could hear from down the hall.

Anya tossed her a pink towel with a white duck embroidered on a corner.

Ten minutes later, their soaked clothes were in the dryer. Shannon looked even more like a waif with a towel on her head and a pair of Anya’s old sweats swallowing her in fabric.

Anya put the kettle on and stared out the window at the storm. Thunder crashed, sounding like a gunshot. She had never held a gun. Never fired one, although she could imagine the noise and the kickback against her hand. That was the surest way, of course. When one used a gun, death stuck. But she would not know how to buy one.

Or she could take pills. Strong, opium-laced pills, the kind where if she took too many, she’d slip into nothingness in her sleep. She’d take the pills with water in her own bed, and then slip away surrounded by her own things. No one would know until she had

been dead six months, and then the sheriff would break down the door, and there she would be, on her own bed, dead.

But that was impractical, Anya decided. She didn't have a prescription for that kind of medication, and she had no idea where to look for illegal drugs. She sighed.

“So, you're an artist,” Shannon said.

Anya jumped at the croaked words. She had forgotten she had company. “Just a dabbler,” she said and turned to the stove. The kettle was whistling. She poured tea and sat down with her unexpected guest.

The rain beat a hypnotic rhythm against the window and Anya thought about the doctor visit the next morning and what she feared he'd say. She was nothing without her eyes.

“I know your father,” Anya said. Isaac Matthews, her neighbor, was the lawyer who'd handled her parent's estate. They had been lovers that summer, when she was twenty, her turning to him in grief, him separated from his wife, until the wife came back pregnant with their only child. Anya had broken it off immediately. It hadn't saved the marriage, but at least Anya wasn't the culminating factor.

Anya had parted with him amicably. When she saw Isaac around town, he smiled and chatted as though they had always been casual friends.

This was that child, twenty years later. “You're at Julliard, aren't you?” Anya said. “The one who sings.”

Shannon swallowed hard, and the ensuing croak made a mockery of the sound that Anya knew it could produce. She'd heard Shannon sing Evita at the local theatre last

year. Her voice should be clear and breathtaking, with a clean sound that pierced Anya to the soul. Today, instead of saying anything, Shannon nodded.

Anya smiled. In another universe, this might have been her daughter. But she would have been an impatient mother. It was better things had worked out as they did. “Have you ever thought what you would do if you couldn’t sing again?” she said. She tried to make it sound like an idle question, but if Shannon had an answer Anya needed to know. Anya didn’t have an answer. Without her art, she was nothing—an empty life full of meaningless days.

“I can’t imagine not singing,” Shannon said, her voice no more than a whisper of sound. “It’s who I am. I never paid attention in school, because the real lessons were about breathing and scales and learning to make my voice soar.” Her voice got stronger as she spoke, as though she were gaining confidence as she thought about it. “Dad says that when someone has talent, there is an obligation to cultivate that talent.” She sat back in her chair, breathing heavily. The sound of it rasped loudly in the room.

Anya just looked at her. That sounded like a duty, not a gift. Was Shannon happy? “Do you enjoy singing?”

Shannon made an impatient gesture. “It’s not something I enjoy. It’s what is,” she said. “I’ve sung since I was three and Dad made home videos to inflict on everyone who entered the house.” She chuckled. “The plumber didn’t quite know what to do about it.”

“So, you sing because you sing.” Anya nodded. She could understand that. In some ways, painting was that kind of imperative—something that she did because she had to, without considering whether she enjoyed it or not.

“Isn’t that how it is with art? You paint. Why do you paint? Can you imagine never painting again?”

“Yes,” Anya said, and it was the truth. The floaters were back, the same swelling and headaches that had come when she was first diagnosed with cancer of the eye. Three years ago, the doctors had thought that if they took her left eye, the one which was already blind past repair, the cancer would go with it. She hadn’t talked to the doctor yet, but she knew, deep within herself, that the cancer was back. And without her other eye, painting would be impossible.

Shannon shook her head, not believing.

“I have a vision of what I want to turn the canvas into. I’ve never got there,” Anya said, waving her hand in a dismissing gesture and turning to the window. “But every day I get closer. Someday, I will finally paint my perfect picture, and then, what else will there be?” She would finally be ready to die, but she didn’t say that even though Shannon was an artist too and would probably understand. She was too young to burden with Anya’s truth. There was no life without her art.

Shannon stared at her, half in disbelief, half in awe. She turned the question back. “What will you do?”

Anya looked down at her hands. She would not know how to go about acquiring a gun or pills. It would be the cliff. “I will be content,” she said, turning away from her almost daughter. She would have to be content.

The following day, after the doctor's visit confirmed her fears, Anya stood on her bluff, painting the calm in broad gestures. Her palette was blues and greens and yellows, bright and bubbling like spring.

Ocular melanoma. Recurrent. She wondered if she would see spring, when it came. The doctors had hope that they could save her eye this time, with radiation. Anya had hope as well, but she refused to count on remission. Not again. From what she read about cancer, a recurrent melanoma was much more likely to metastasize to the ocular bone or the liver. When that happened, surgery would no longer be even a possibility.

Under the knife. That was another way she could do it. A knife at her wrist or thigh as she relaxed in a warm bubble bath, letting the blood and water mingle and stain her body red. When the sheriff broke down the door, only her hair would be visible, floating on the red water, preserving her modesty into eternity. Clean up would be easy as well. Her life washed down the drain.

She picked up her palette knife and scraped a stray line off the canvas. Who was she kidding? She had never had the ability to cut herself. In ninth grade biology, while the other students pricked their fingers and found their blood type, she had watched her finger flinch away from the needle a dozen times.

She looked out over the sea again, but the light was gone, so she packed the canvas away. As she turned, she saw Shannon sitting on the cliff, an unexpected but welcome distraction. Anya joined her, watching the waves crash on the rocks below.

Finally Shannon laughed, throwing herself back against the grass, her arms and legs spread in glorious abandon. "It feels so good," she said, and her voice was slightly clearer to Anya's ear. "I'm so tired of sickrooms."

Anya nodded, drawing up her legs so that her knees were tucked against her chin and her arms wrapped around her shins. She would get to know sickrooms intimately—the first radiation treatment would require staying in a hospital room for a week with limited movement and visitors. A week from this afternoon, she would be in hospital, waiting, wondering if the radiation would be successful.

“I hate having pneumonia,” Shannon said. “It gives you a dry cough that refuses to leave, even when you feed it tall glasses of water and juice and tea. It burns you up from the inside, leaving nothing. It sits on your chest, ties bands around your breath until you sleep. I’m always tired. Always sleeping.” She stretched.

Anya watched, wishing that pneumonia was what she had. But for Shannon, maybe it was worse. A blind woman could sing.

“I can’t sing through it,” Shannon said. She sounded surprised by the fact. “Since I was small, I’ve always been able to push past weakness. If my chords were sore, I could go up to whistle voice. Now, I can barely get out of bed without falling over.”

“It will go away,” Anya promised. “Eventually. There will come a time when your energy is back and you don’t sleep so much.”

Shannon looked up.

“Of course, some cures are worse than the disease,” Anya said, and touched the lid of her left eye. The prosthesis was a good one. Sometimes, looking in the mirror, Anya couldn’t tell it wasn’t a real eye.

“What happened,” Shannon said. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

Anya minded, but she had brought it up. “Everyone falls apart,” she said and made a gesture as though she were throwing something away. “In the end, it’s a long story and not very interesting. We thought I had beaten the cancer, but it came back.”

There was a long silence. Anya stirred the grass in front of her, moving small stones and twigs into a bursting firework. She liked the roughness of it, the feel of the stones, the way they brought her vision into another dimension. It reminded her of falling.

She came back to the image of the cliff. She would wear a long dress—the white dress with spring flowers embroidered into the bodice. As she fell, it would float out behind her like a comet, a white trail that would hit the water last. The cloth was silk soft. The water would wear it away into tatters. Children would come to the cliff and imagine that they could see her, a white lady with hollow eyes and long fingers to pull them off the cliff.

She would be a legend. But not yet.

She leaned forward and ran her hand across the ground, scattering her picture away.

“How will you know your perfection?” Shannon said.

Anya looked at the cliff. “I don’t know yet.”

“Sometimes,” Shannon said, “at the end of a recital, it’s been so perfect that I know, if I tried, I could sing the Queen of the Night. The audience loved me, and I fed off that and they fed off me, and it just works. Perfect is a feeling. It doesn’t last.” Her voice was getting rougher with use. It was nearly as bad as the day before. “And it’s always singing. For me.”

Anya let the words wash over her, but her eye caught a break in the clouds over the sea. The sun shone through it, a glittering line—a conduit into eternity. “Do you see, Shannon?” she said, and pointed, reaching behind her with her other hand to her sketchpad. But by the time her pencil was in hand, the magic was gone. Anya tried to capture it on paper anyway.

From behind her, Shannon said, “Was that a moment? If you caught that image exactly as you liked, would it be everything you needed?”

Anya frowned. It had been beautiful, but no. It wasn’t everything.

“Even after I’ve got it down, my professors have notes. I can always do better.”

Anya stood, unable to listen to Shannon’s naivety any longer. She gathered her belongings and headed back into the cottage, but the thought chased her. What if the impossible happened?

What if she lived? Even after her other eye was gone. Was there anything else to her without her art? Others painted blind, relying on their memories and their hands to bring life to their unseen visions. Her talent didn’t stretch that far.

The next afternoon, Anya returned from the gallery—she’d sold her latest painting—to find Shannon waiting on the bluff, her shoes off, staring out at sea. She was bundled up in sweat pants, what looked like multiple sweaters, and a shawl wrapped around her neck. Anya settled in next to her with a sketchpad.

“I saw the doctor today,” Shannon said, her voice even raspier than before. “He says I push too hard. That if I don’t stop long enough to recover, my lungs will scar, and then how will I breathe. And the coughing will make my vocal chords develop nodes.”

Anya couldn't think what to say. She felt for Shannon.

"If I don't beat this," Shannon said, "I may never sing again." She turned abruptly to look at Anya. "What would you do without painting?"

Anya closed her eyes. The world felt different blind. The sun was warmer against her face and the wind cut deeper. "The cancer came back. Last time it took my left eye. According to the doctor, there's a fifty percent chance it will take my right." She opened her eyes, and Shannon was right there, staring with her hand covering her open mouth. "Without my eyes, I won't be able to paint. Not anymore."

Her hand still covering her mouth, Shannon looked at the cliff and back at Anya and shrank into her oversized clothing. There it was. Shannon understood.

Anya turned away from her almost-daughter to face the sea. "So, tell me, Shannon. What would you do if you couldn't sing?"

Shannon got to her feet. "I could find something," she said. "I know I could. I refuse to believe that singing is all that I am." She turned and headed down toward her father's house, but paused at the curve that would take her out of sight and called up to Anya, "And I know you're more, too."

The hospital loomed closer—six days, five, four, three, two, tomorrow. Anya spent time every day on the cliff, painting, waiting for Shannon to return, but every day the path remained empty. Anya didn't think about ways to kill herself anymore. Instead, she went over arguments in her head, trying to convince Shannon that this was the right thing. The only thing.

I have no friends, Anya would say. No one will be hurt by my absence.

I am your friend. When you kill yourself, I will hurt every time I think of it. I'll be haunted by questions—what if I could have stopped you. What if I could have found the words? Why didn't I find the words?

It won't be your fault.

It will be my fault. Because I understood.

I love the way the sea and the sky meet in shades of blue. I love the blush and the fire of a dawn. I love the way yellows blend into greens into grays as a storm gathers. I love the bright afterimage of lightning cutting across my eyes. I love the way every day is different, and the way those differences impel me to capture them on canvas. Without my eyes, the world is empty.

You would still hear the gulls and smell the sea. You would still feel the sun's warmth on your face and taste the perfume of spring flowers. Without your eyes, you still have so much. There are artists who are blind. I believe in you. You are as strong as them.

“I don't feel strong.” Anya said it aloud. She turned around, but she was still alone on the headland.

What if it were me? Shannon would say, and Anya's gut ached at the thought. She thought about Isaac, who had loved her for a while. This girl was his only child. When they passed in the supermarket, he told Anya about Shannon's life with such power. With such joy.

What if I couldn't sing again, and I chose to step off the cliff into eternity, falling like a comet into legend? Could you forgive me? Could you forgive yourself? Would you

*spend time asking yourself if you'd given me the idea? How would you tell my father?
You call me an almost-daughter. Would you leave me alone?*

Anya's hands trembled and she put her brush down, too shaken to paint another line.

Anya was due at the hospital at noon. Her bags were packed with sketch pads and pencils that she wasn't sure she'd be able to use. They were going to insert radioactive plates in her eye, near the tumor, and she wasn't sure if it would affect her vision.

On the way, she stopped at Shannon's front door. She'd never been there during the affair. She'd brought Isaac to her own bed, leaving his home to retain familial memories. At her knock, Isaac opened the door.

"Anya," he said, looking surprised. Anya realized that Shannon had not told him they had met. His hair was greyer and thinner than it had been, and his eyes were underlined by weariness. "What are you doing here?" He wasn't upset to see her.

"Is Shannon in? I met her on the headland last week, and wanted to let her know I would be away."

"You're looking good," he said. He stood back to motion her inside. "She's had a rough couple of days, but the fever broke this morning. I'll see if she's awake."

Left in the front room, Anya wandered, taking in the pictures of Shannon that dominated every flat surface: as a baby; as a young child running through a playground; asleep in a high chair; playing soccer; doing a handstand. As she looked, Anya realized that there was only one picture of her on the stage singing. Anya smiled. Shannon was more than her voice, and Isaac knew it.

Isaac came back and led her upstairs. Shannon was sitting up in bed, looking pale and fragile. She'd lost weight since the last time on the cliff. Shannon looked at her with a guarded expression.

Anya sat in the chair next to her bed. She could almost feel the warmth Isaac must have left there during the long nights before the fever broke. "I'm glad you're feeling better," Anya said.

"Much better," Shannon said. Her voice was soft but clear. The croaking hoarseness had burnt away. She glanced up at her father, who was standing in the doorway. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm going into hospital today," Anya said. "I'm going to be there for a week. I wanted to let you know so you wouldn't wonder if you came to the cliff and I wasn't there." Anya didn't want to come home to find her door broken in by a concerned friend.

"Thank you," Shannon said. "I would have worried . . ." She broke off the sentence, but Anya could fill it in.

"I wanted you to know," Anya said, her voice lower. She turned around. Isaac was still in the door, but he was distracted by a paper in his hand. She took Shannon's hand and leaned in close. "You are right. I'll find something else."

The relief that filled Shannon's face made Anya's fingers itch for paint.

TIES THAT BIND

Professional Detachment

Madison slams into the house. The noise echoes and the mirror at the end of the hall shivers, catching her eye. The remnants of the responsible woman she thought she was this morning wonders if her sister, Jordan, is sleeping. The new, wild-eyed woman she sees wants to have woken Jordan up. Madison is ready to be the center of attention.

The house remains silent.

“Typical,” she mutters at her reflection, and takes the stairs two at a time to her room.

Her first memory involves a mirror. It isn't a real memory at all. It's the memory of her mother telling the story.

In the mirror is a little girl, blonde, blue eyes, and “too cute for her own good,” Mama says. Madison reaches toward the little girl, and to her delight, the girl reaches back.

That is her first realization: she can make the little girl do anything. She makes the girl smile, frown, touch her nose. For a while, they trade permutations of angry, which makes them both laugh—angry is such a silly face.

She hears footsteps and she and the little girl push out their lower lip to practice sad. They aren't supposed to be in Mama's room. The footsteps stop in the doorway. Sad isn't quite right—their breathing is too even.

Mama calls from the doorway, “John, come and see.” More footsteps.

She ignores her parents. In the story, Mama always laughs at this point. “Just like a toddler. Life’s too short to think of the consequences.”

She and the girl try surprised. The little girl’s eyes aren’t as wide as she thought they would be. Try again.

“Madison’s practicing faces in the mirror. Trying to work out how best to twist us around her little fingers.”

She and the little girl frown together. Later, as she hears Mama tell the story, she knows that’s wrong. The faces have nothing to do with her parents or wanting something from them.

Mama kneels down beside them and she stares at the Mama in the mirror. “That last wasn’t very convincing. If you want to keep people from knowing how you feel, you need to control your eyes.”

Suddenly, there is a rush of arms and legs and Daddy has picked her up and she’s shrieking a laugh into the ceiling and the story of a memory ends. But two thoughts blossom out of the memory that stick with her.

First, if she practices, no one will know what she feels. People can be tricked. She isn’t sure why, yet, but she is certain that it will be important. If she practices, not even her eyes will betray her truths. She hasn’t realized before that she will need secrets.

Second, and this is a frightening one: sometimes, Mama doesn’t know everything.

Madison’s life as a situation comedy:

Scene: Sunday dinner. Time: Six weeks ago.

Madison takes her seat at the foot at the table. Her father is reading a paper on geriatric medicine. His food is on a plate by his right hand, the fork between his fingers because otherwise he wouldn't remember to eat. He spears a bite without looking and raises it to his mouth but stops halfway.

Cue laugh track.

Madison rolls her eyes, imagining an audience to appreciate her disdain. She eats, fork in her left hand, knife in her right. It's a habit she learned in London when she went with the drama society in high school. She sits straighter as a lump of mashed potato slips from his fork and lands on his suit cuff. He doesn't notice, even when he lifts the empty fork to his lips and then returns it to spear another bite. The potato falls onto the back of his hand. He swats at it, an automatic gesture, like he would a gnat, looking surprised when it squishes but not looking up from his paper.

Cue laugh track.

Madison knows exactly what will happen next. He'll make some comment about work. It won't need an answer, because he is the doctor and doesn't ask for advice from her. She's just an RN. He'll compliment the food, which he hasn't actually eaten, yet.

He finally notices the smashed potato on his hand, looks at it as though wondering if it was meant to be there, then wipes it off with the napkin he tucked into his shirt to keep his suit clean. He looks helpless. Madison has gotten into the habit of thinking of him as another patient. At the hospice facility where she works, she's used to patients who forget to look after themselves.

Madison finishes, but she waits before getting out his birthday cake. No candles. She's too sensible for candles, she tells herself, not admitting that she wishes she wasn't that sensible.

She brings the cake to the table. "Happy birthday, Dad."

He wipes the crumbs from his lips. "Thank you, dear. And happy birthday to you, too." He is fifty-four today. She is twenty-seven, exactly half his age.

For dessert, Madison has baked carrot cake because it's his favorite. She doesn't particularly like carrot cake. Chocolate is more her taste, but he would make personal comments about her weight.

"I got you something." She hands him a small box. It's not gift-wrapped because he wouldn't appreciate it. The cufflinks are novelty items made to look like red and white pills. He'd seen them in a catalog last month and they'd tickled his sense of the ridiculous.

He hasn't gotten her anything, but she didn't expect it. She is the one who keeps track of his personal life—if he was going to get her something, she would have to buy it herself. She winks at the dining room mirror, sharing the joke with the studio audience.

Yesterday, they received cards in the mail postmarked from New York. His was an obnoxiously funny one signed "Love from Adele and Jordan." Hers had a hallmark poem that made her feel old, signed "XOXOXO Mama and your sister, Jordan." Mother's signature involves pink hearts and reminds Madison of junior high. She'd stood both cards on the mantle in the living room because her chair faces the other way.

“We should do something special,” Dad says. He reaches up to pat her cheek.
“We should go visit New York. Jordan’s twenty-one now. Your mother and I can finally take that trip to Europe we always talk about.”

The laugh track slows, Doppler’s down until it doesn’t sound like laughter at all. As Madison’s smile freezes, she hears his voice echoing as though through a tunnel.
“You wouldn’t mind the drive, would you, Madison?”

Why should she mind a six-hour drive from Maine to New York to visit a tiny apartment? Why would she mind listening to her mother bubbling with excitement at Jordan’s latest accomplishment?

“If that’s what you want.” She puts down her fork. Her slice of cake is only half-eaten. “I’ll clear your schedule.”

Scene: Crestview Hospice Care. Time: One hour ago.

Madison storms out of Mr. Owen’s room. She is breathing hard and something’s wrong with her eyes.

Donna catches her at the reception desk. “I heard that, Madison,” she says. “I don’t care who your father is, you can’t talk like that to the patrons or their families. Especially to one who’s grieving.”

Madison turns away. She catches sight of her face in the mirror behind the desk. Black streaks run down from her eyes and she closes them. She feels an arm around her shoulder.

“What happened?” Donna has lost the lecturing tone.

Madison looks at her supervisor. Donna is the epitome of what a nurse should be. Even though she's angry, her eyes are sympathetic and calm. This is the woman she's tried to become.

Madison's throat aches. She shouldn't have yelled like that. Not to Mr. Owen's son.

"I can't do this anymore," Madison says as she shrugs off Donna's hand and runs down the hall.

Donna calls after.

Madison is so young that she's never certain whether this actually happened or whether it's a dream. Mama never tells this story and Jordan isn't there to confirm the details.

She's very small, not more than six. Mama is sitting on the bed, looking through a box. It's full of paper—newspaper clippings. Mama takes out each one, reads it, and folds it carefully away again.

The older Madison knows that these are Mama's reviews from the time when she danced on the New York stage. The clippings are the remnants of Mama's dreams—dreams that Madison's birth has altered.

The air is heavy. Madison can tell something is wrong, and it scares her. She reaches up to be cuddled.

Mama stares through her. There are tears in her eyes, but Mama isn't supposed to cry.

Someone is whimpering.

It isn't until Mama picks her up, takes her out of the room, and closes the door between them that Madison realizes her own voice has slipped out, that she is the one crying.

In her room, Madison stares at the ceiling. Her parents aren't mind-readers. She can't expect them to understand if she can't say it aloud.

What would she say? She clears her throat and tries to rehearse the conversation. "Daddy, sometimes I," she clears her throat again but the words *I hate you* are too strong for her to say, even to an empty house. She is too honest to believe them, although she admires the dramatic effect. It might be shocking enough that he would finally see her. To see the life she gave up for him when Mother abandoned them both.

"Why do you always forgive her?"

Her phone rings and she rolls over to answer it. It's Donna from work. She turns the phone off.

Character Study: Nurse.

Madison moves with quiet, efficient movements, checking the chart while Mr. Owen sleeps. A nurse must be kind, competent, unobtrusive.

Mr. Owen has been in her care for nearly six months now, a long time for one of her patients. A hospice nurse eases the minds and bodies of the dying. Mr. Owen suffers from stage four pancreatic cancer. She keeps him comfortable as the cancer eats away at him from the inside out.

Mr. Owen opens his eyes as she passes to the window. He is too weak to walk in the garden anymore, but, in Madison's opinion, there is nothing like sunlight to soothe a patient. Her father agrees. Although he makes most of his rounds at the hospital, he spends volunteer hours here.

"Good morning, Nathan. What's the number this morning?" Her voice is consciously cheerful. This is no time to let the mask slip.

"About a five," he says.

She shakes her head and writes the new pain number on the board. Up from yesterday but she thinks he's lying. Any of her other patients would have told her a nine or a ten. Cancer hurts.

He rolls over onto his side so that she can change the sheets. A nasty process for everyone concerned so pause the cameras for the moment. She has to be careful. He bruises so easily.

His pain is getting worse, but she knows he hates the way the meds mess with his head. Before all this, Nathan Owen had been a physics professor, someone whose mind spun with the motion of the universe. For such a man, clarity of the head is worth pain of the body.

For the longest time he avoided admitting the pain, but now he's begun to give up. He is fading away—so much so that she knows it is time for her to pull away so she won't be hurt when the inevitable happens.

She sighs. She is not good at doing the sane thing. Despite knowing all the right answers about professional detachment, and why it's necessary for nurses in general, she can't maintain her objectivity when facing an actual patient.

She writes the date on the board. He sounds almost surprised as he says, “It’s Friday.”

“Yes,” she replies and raises his bed to check his vitals. “Are your kids coming?” He talks about his four children all the time, but they never visit. It makes her angry, sometimes, to think of how his family ignores his needs—reminds her too much of her own family. He is one of her favorites and deserves better.

Mr. Owen breathes against her warmed stethoscope. There’s a rumble in his chest that she doesn’t like. He doesn’t answer her question, but instead turns the spotlight on her. “What are your plans?”

What she doesn’t say: *I’m taking my father down to visit my mother and sister. What, you don’t know I have a sister or a mother? I never talk about them. They moved to New York ten years ago because Jordan dances and Mother cares more about that than our needs. And Dad misses them. They haven’t been back to Maine since, except one New Year’s. Instead, we have made the trip to New York so often that I’ve memorized my favorite restaurants along the route.*

She jots down her observations on his chart and teases, “I’d love to tell you, but it wouldn’t be good for your heart.”

His smile is wan. “If I were young . . .” His voice trails off into sleep.

Madison is ten and hates the dance studio where Mama forces her to take classes every day after school. It smells of stale sweat and floor polish. For years afterward, Madison cannot smell lemon without hyperventilating.

Madame has long fingernails that poke when she sees a girl slip posture. Madison's shoulders and sides and bottom are covered with tiny bruises. She is sure that every other girl in the class gets things quicker.

Every day, Madison tries out new arguments to prove that she should be allowed to quit dance and take up something else. Lacrosse. Acting. Piano. Acting. Soccer. She comes back to acting often—in the long hours of sleep, she dreams of becoming someone else. In school, her teacher is impressed. On Madison's report card, her teacher writes, "Madison has a gift for bringing the written word to life." Her mother doesn't comment when she signs and returns it. Mama doesn't care about words.

That afternoon, the class is passing across the floor on a diagonal. Madame is clapping out a measured rhythm and has an encouraging word for everyone but Madison, whose feet refuse to learn the movements. Mama is staring, which makes everything more difficult.

Jordan is only four. She isn't supposed to be on the studio floor, but she gets past Mama in her pink ankle socks. Madison remembers the socks.

Jordan runs across, tiny feet passing on the diagonal just as the teacher has instructed. It is the first time Madame has seen her move. Mama and Madame stare. The class is forgotten.

Madame does a simple combination. Jordan furrows her brow and mirrors Madame's movements. Madame becomes more complicated. Jordan is flawless as she executes the pattern.

Mama's face is hungry as she watches Jordan.

Madison watches too. Something changes that day. Jordan is the one who belongs to the dance studio, now.

Scene change. September. Time: Three weeks ago.

The trees are red and gold in Maine, but as they head south, the world becomes greener. Madison is driving her little coupe, leaving her father in charge of food and navigation.

Background music playing in her head: comfortable, unobtrusive.

Her father reads a mystery aloud, his voice a counterpoint to the whir of the road. It's a beautiful day, or would be if not for their destination.

Madison hates New York. She hates the siren screech of traffic that never sleeps. She hates the smell of a million restaurants overpowering the clean salt of the sea. She hates the people crowding in on her, taking her breath. The apartment that Jordan and Mother rent is cramped and entirely too pink—which is more a reflection of Mother's taste than the city, but the combination blends together in Madison's mind to a stomach medicine hue.

After lunch, Dad lapses into silence. Madison doesn't mind—the road has too many potholes to actually fall asleep.

They are about half an hour out when she stops for a treat. It's a tradition—one last moment of peace before they really hit traffic. One last time to be their Maine selves before Mother intrudes.

"I hope you don't mind, Madison," he says as they enter the restaurant, "but I told Adele what time we'd be here. They're planning to meet us for dessert."

The words hit her in her solar plexus. Background music stops mid-note. She freezes a smile to her face. “Don’t apologize. We’re happy to see them.”

Madison retreats when people ask her favorite color or favorite food. The question tangles up her head. She doesn’t understand how anyone can have that strong of an opinion. She feels for all the colors who aren’t the favorite.

When she is six, Jordan enters her life—all pink and new. Even though she is busy in school, Madison can see how Mama’s focus changes. Jordan is the new center of the world. Madison’s world shifts to quiet and responsibility.

Daddy’s face lights up when he sees the baby—a light Madison wanted.

Madison never minds when Jordan follows her on baby feet. She shares most of the hidden places in the house, the high places and the dark corners. They cuddle up together on Daddy’s big rocking chair and Madison reads to Jordan, changing her voice to capture all the characters so that Jordan laughs in a bird trill of glee.

When Mama calls, they have one name: *Madisonandjordan*.

In her bedroom, Madison stares up at the ceiling. Talking won’t work. She is out of the habit.

Madison swings off the bed and over to her desk. She catches a glimpse of her face in the mirror—a happiness behind her eyes.

She gets out a sheet of paper and begins the first of several letters.

Dear Daddy,

I love you.

But that's just not enough, is it?

It's time for me to find my own way.

I've spent so much time trying to shape myself into the perfect nurse and the perfect doctor's daughter and the perfect manager that I'm not sure I remember what I want anymore.

Was that right? She stares at the wall trying to find the words she could use to explain.

By the time she looks back at the page, the pen has oozed a glob of ink. She sighs, throws out the ruined page and begins again.

Dear Daddy,

You don't owe me anything.

Scene: Restaurant, nearly deserted.

Mother stands, talking to the hostess as though they'd been childhood friends and met again after years apart. Jordan stands out of Mother's direct line of sight. Every so often, her hand or foot makes an abortive movement—leashed grace. Dad pauses in the door to look at them. Madison is behind him, where she can catch everything.

“John!” Mother doesn't run, her heels are too high, but she totters quickly into Dad's open arms. Madison brushes past them to share a quiet hug with Jordan. She tunes out their murmured love words.

“How are you?” Madison asks. She leans back, trying to reconcile her memories of the baby in Jordan's adult face. Jordan is twenty-one and dancer-lean, but there is a softness to her that reminds Madison of a rabbit or a hummingbird.

Jordan smiles. “I’m dancing solos in our recital—five of them.” Her voice sounds scratchy, as if nearly unused.

Madison frowns. Now that she is close, she can see the pallor under Jordan’s make-up. Her hands are icicles. “That’s the dancing. How are you?”

Before Jordan can answer, Mother catches Madison up in a cloud of perfume to kiss her cheek. Dad gathers Jordan in like a precious, fragile thing and calls her his baby. Madison tells herself the words don’t burn.

Madison is fourteen, a freshman in high school. She doesn’t tell Mama about the auditions. She just stays late one afternoon. It’s Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and Madison wants to be anything but a fairy.

A week later, the cast is posted. She is the only freshman with a speaking part—*Puck!* Jordan squeals and does a war dance around the living room. For the first time in years, Mama’s boasting includes Madison again. Daddy devotes his evenings to her rehearsals, becoming a fixture in the theatre.

The cast is mostly girls, and Madison has the feeling that the reason she was chosen for Puck had more to do with her look than anything else. She is short, with a narrow chin and big eyes, and is still waiting for curves. It helps that she can memorize speeches easily. She is off book two weeks before the rest of the cast.

She is, in fact, the pet of the drama club.

Opening night. She is on, from the moment the fairy from Titania’s court finds her until she apologizes to the audience and the curtain closes. Afterward, she looks for them in the audience.

Daddy is there. He gives her a wilting bouquet of multicolored daisies. “Your mother wanted to be here, but there was an emergency at the studio and she couldn’t get Jordan away.”

Madison sniffs deeply at the fading flowers. “I understand,” she says. And she does.

Scene change: Airport. Time: Two weeks ago.

They come four hours early because it is an international flight. Mother flutters with nerves. Dad watches her, smiling.

Mother, air kissing Jordan: “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

Jordan, quietly: “I’m twenty-one. I can take care of myself.”

Mother turns to Dad, sobbing into his shoulder. “I’m such a bad mother, going off to have fun when she needs me.” He rubs her back. Soothing her.

Madison opens her mouth, but doesn’t know what to say.

Jordan laughs. “If you think you’re going to cancel because of me, don’t. I’m gonna live it up. You’ve been cramping my style, Mother.”

It is the longest string of words Madison can remember her saying to Mother.

Mother laughs.

Dad checks his watch. “We need to get going. I want to get past security with plenty of time to spare.”

The scene dissolves into a mess of kisses.

Dad whispers to Madison with one last hug, “You’ll keep an eye on Jordan for us, won’t you? I don’t want your mother to worry.”

Madison closes her eyes, wishing.

She nods.

Madison bites the end of her pen. This one is harder.

Mother,

I think I must tell you . . .

Nothing comes.

Madison is seventeen and thinking about the rest of her life when Mother first mentions taking Jordan to New York.

It is a sudden decision, but Madison can tell that Mother has made up her mind. “Talent like hers needs care and there isn’t a teacher within fifty miles I’d trust her with.”

Jordan rises from the dinner table and dances to the living room. She doesn’t care where she is or who is watching as long as she can dance. Madison knows this and knows its Mother who wants New York.

Dad is helpless. “But my practice, our house.”

Madison stares at her father. He already looks lost. “It’s my senior year,” she says. “I don’t want to move away from everyone.”

Mother blinks at her for a long, uncomprehending moment. “But it’s New York! Everyone is there!”

“I’m not going. I have exams scheduled. I have college applications to fill out. I want to stay.”

Mother throws up her hands, and turns to watch Jordan. Within a week, the two of them are gone. They send postcards and letters and requests for money. Dad quietly reads and pays and sends long letters that Mother is too busy, it seems, to acknowledge.

Madison makes some quiet changes in her college applications. She is going to go in state. She is not going to major in theatre as she always thought she would. Instead, she will be close to home. She will be the one who takes care of him.

She is needed.

She likes being needed.

Her eyes are carefully blank when she tells him she wants to be an RN.

Character Study: The Caretaker.

Madison stays with Jordan in her little apartment. The first night, they go to the thrift store and buy scarves in every color but pink and drape the walls with them. Jordan has an early rehearsal, so they go to bed early.

The rehearsal is in a studio at Jordan's school. Madison feels as though she's walking into memory. The room smells of lemon furniture polish. The first hour of rehearsal goes well. The movement looks beautiful to Madison's inexperienced eyes, but the dancers stop and restart, repeating a series of movement until the director is happy.

The rest of the dancers are dismissed for an hour while Jordan runs her solos. Madison sits up. Something is wrong. Jordan should be floating, but she has missed something. Madison has never seen her stumble, fall. She rushes to her sister, bending over her. She touches Jordan's head.

“She's burning up.”

Ambulance. ER. She is the next of kin. She isn't certified in New York. She is forced to wait. It takes hours. Doctors say: "Pneumonia."

"I'm taking her home with me." Madison doesn't know she has made the decision until she says it. "She can rest in Maine without distractions."

The doctor nods. "That will probably be best," he says. "Is there anyone else to tell?"

Jordan and Madison say together, at once. "No!" At the doctor's startled look, Madison explains, "Our parents are in Paris."

Obvious answer: come home.

Madison feels a burst of excitement to think she might see her father before the two months were up, but quashes it. He will have his second honeymoon.

Time: This Morning.

She returns to work after nearly two weeks away. She's been in town, but Jordan needed looking after.

"Only a few changes around here," says Donna, her supervisor. "We've picked up two more patrons." They go over the new charts and then the old. "We lost one while you were gone. Nathan Owen—last night."

Madison closes her eyes and wipes her hand across her face. Not crying, just tired. "He was one of mine," she says. "May I pack up his things for his family?"

Donna pats her on the shoulder.

Mr. Owen's room seems hollow without him. There isn't much to pack. Pictures of him, his wife, his parents, his children. As she packs them away, she remembers the stories he told her about them.

Didn't they know how lucky they were?

She packs his drawers into a box, rolling ties that she has never seen him wear and socks that there at the end had been loose on his feet. Then random things: a few books—his medications so clouded his head that they mostly remained closed; a tiepin that reads " $e=mc^2$;" a mug with Einstein's hair on a giraffe body; a craft project another patron gave him; his watch and wedding ring.

"I'm sorry," she whispers to the empty room. "I promised you wouldn't have to die alone, and then I wasn't here. I was taking care of family."

Someone clears his throat behind her, and Madison whirls around, hand to her heart. "You startled me." The man is tall and clean-shaven, with dark hair that needs cutting.

"Sorry." He reaches out to shake her hand. "I'm Daniel Owen. Nathan was my father."

She pretends she doesn't see the hand. There's a rushing in her ears.

"Mr. Owen talked about you all the time," she manages to say.

He opens his mouth, but she raises her hand and says, "Before you say anything, you need to know, I spent a lot of time with your father. He was very proud of you. And the more he talked about you—you're the veterinarian, aren't you?"

"I know," he says, and she rushes on.

“The four of you were all he ever cared about,” she says. Her heart is pounding. “And it’s a crime that none of you so much as set foot through that door while he lived. He died a lonely man, Mr. Owen. Lonely and in pain.”

He raises his hand as though to slow her, but she can’t stand to look at him any longer. Tears have come to her eyes. She turns around.

“He never told us,” he says. The words are hard for her to hear because they’re so low. “I never even knew he had cancer.”

“What?” She wipes her eyes and turns around.

He lifts the mug out of his father’s box and brushes his hand across it. “My father was a private person. He apparently preferred dying alone to making any kind of fuss. I’m not a mind reader. If I had known . . .” His voice trails off.

The words echo in her ears. The last six months of conversations with Mr. Owen suddenly shift into a new shape. If they had known . . .

“Here are his things.” She swipes her hand across her eyes and turns away. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

She rushes from the room, leaving him standing with his father’s box.

To Donna King, NP:

Please accept my resignation, effective immediately. I find I am unable to maintain the kind of professional detachment necessary for a nurse. Although this is a sudden choice, I feel it is the right one for me.

Sincerely,

After Madison signs the letter of resignation, she looks at the two unfinished letters to her parents. Then, carefully she tears both letters, and retears them until the pieces are so tiny she can't get a grip to tear again.

Secrets

I'm at the garden center, contemplating the bleeding hearts when Maisie King finds me.

"Olivia!" she shouts. I close my eyes and gather strength, then turn to face her. There's no maliciousness in Maisie, and she's been a good friend since I first met her in kindergarten over sixty years ago, but she does love to talk.

"Maisie," I say, and quickly try to redirect the flood of gossip she's about to unleash on me. "How's that husband of yours?"

She blinks and looks lost for a moment. They were high school sweethearts—married forty-eight years. The Alzheimer's means he's leaving her by inches, but I envy her. All her life she was part of something great.

"He remembered me last night," she says at last. "Wanted me to dress up like I was a cheerleader again, dirty old man." She shakes her head in mock disgust, her tight blue-white curls bouncing, but I ache at the wistful pride in her expression.

I look down. "You wouldn't have him any other way," I say. I smooth the sleeve of my cardigan, noticing a fresh green stain. I should be more careful, but paint will get everywhere.

Maisie blinks and reaches out to touch my hand. "You're right. But that's what I wanted to ask you about."

My mind still on dirty old men, I say, "Maisie Lynne King, I absolutely refuse to believe that your husband wants me to stuff myself into a cheerleader's uniform."

She laughs and gives me a quick hug. I pat her shoulder, feeling awkward. “As if I’d let him,” she says. “No, while I was at Crestview I saw your nephew’s name on another door. Why didn’t you tell me Nathan was in hospice?”

I feel the words like a blow to the gut. Hospice means the doctors have no hope. Hospice is where people die the long way. I hear the echo of my mother’s voice, telling me my father was dying—*he doesn’t recognize anyone anymore, dear*. I push her ghost away and turn around to face the flowers, but I don’t see them. “That can’t be right,” I say. The heat and humidity of the nursery rise up around me, and it’s hard to breathe through the smell of fertilizer and the sound of Maisie’s voice. I reach out to lean on the table, pushing a pot aside. “Are you sure it’s our Nathan?”

“The nameplate said Nathan Owen, sure as you’re standing there. Here—my gosh, you’re white as a ghost.” Maisie takes my arm and pulls me to a bench. “But I’m sure if you don’t know a thing about it, he must be some other man.”

I sit and stare at my hands. Then I look up at Maisie and smile to hide my panic. “Yes, it must be someone else. Nathan would have told me.”

I don’t check immediately. I can’t. That afternoon, I bask in the unseasonably warm November sun and plant along the north side of the lighthouse. The bleeding hearts are cut back, so what I plant is a row of roots to blossom next spring. Perennials. They’ll come back even after I’m gone.

I wonder if Nathan will even see them, and suddenly I can’t move. My hands rest there, buried in the rich soil, and I shake.

I'm old. No one gets to be as old as I am without death touching us, over and over. My parents died before I forgave them. My sister, Susan, and her husband went suddenly, in shattered metal and glass on the highway. Nathan's wife was gone as their youngest was born.

But Nathan. I try to imagine life without him in it and fail. At sixteen, I left home to hitchhike across the country with love in my mind and flowers in my hair. At seventeen, I came back, pregnant and alone. Somewhere in my mind, Nathan is still the infant I held for a moment before giving him to Susan forever. Nathan is my gift to the future. He can't die before me.

I sit back on my heels and stare at the dirt on my hands. No parent should have to watch their child die. I hear Susan's voice, *He's mine, now, in every way that matters.* I'm glad in that moment that my sister is dead. At least she is spared living with this potential loss. I try to ignore the ache in my chest that reminds me that no matter the bargains we made, Nathan is my child too.

The row planted, I go in to wash up. In the hall, one of my early portraits catches my eye. In it, Susan stares down at an infant Nathan, her face glowing. Madonna and child. I hear the whisper. *Olivia, what's wrong with my son?*

I can't ignore her. I resolve to visit Crestview right away and prove that it isn't Nathan dying there.

I stand outside the door, rechecking the name plate before I knock. Yes, this is the right room. The pale, thin voice that calls, "Come in," doesn't sound like Nathan. His

voice is deep and strong. He can fill a lecture hall and the corridors beyond without trying.

I push inside, ready to apologize and back out hastily if this is the wrong man.

The room is shadowed after the antiseptic white of the hallway. I blink until I can see it, concentrating on the walls, the decoration. Anything but the man lying on the bed. The walls are pale blue and there are visible attempts to personalize it with books and other objects but nothing can disguise the sound of the heart monitor and the smell of dying.

I recognize the cover of a book about the stars sitting next to the bed as though the occupant had tried to read that morning. A picture of the children is on the wall, facing the bed that dominates the room. I recognize the picture because a smaller version is on my own nightstand: Nathan's three boys on the couch, Daniel in the middle with John reaching across him, threatening a laughing Michael with bodily harm while Naomi sits on the floor in front with her knees drawn up under her chin. I took that photo last Christmas.

I focus on Nathan then, lying on the bed. He is so still, so gray. He looks old and dried up, a hollowed out echo of the man he should be as he stares out the window. I recognize the mug he holds—Daniel gave it to him. The one with Einstein's wild hair pasted onto a giraffe.

He hasn't moved a muscle, as if he doesn't have the strength to even wonder who has invaded his space.

“Hello, Nathan.”

At the sound of my voice, he turns himself in the bed and the beeping from the heart monitor spikes. “Aunt Livy. What are you doing here?”

The emphasis on *you* makes me wince. I hear the echo of my father shouting, *you are no longer welcome in this home*, and I turn away from the memory and from the accusation in Nathan’s voice and body. I spot the antibacterial hand wash by the door. To give myself a moment, I squirt some on, wincing at the smell of alcohol.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were here?” I rub my hands over and over without looking at him. “When Maisie told me she’d spotted your name, I didn’t believe it. I can barely believe it now. What’s wrong?” My face as composed as I can make it, I turn to look at him.

He has turned his face into his pillow and is shaking. I take a few quick steps to his side, ready to push the nurse’s call button, but he stretches out a hand to stop me. He wheezes out a sound that I recognize as laughter—evidently this is not a medical emergency.

I sink down into the chair next to his bed and wait. As he takes a breath, the laughter changes to a coughing fit that shudders through his entire body. I reach out, but he waves me away again, groping the bedside tray for a tissue to mop his eyes.

When he has control of himself, his voice is even rougher than before. “I should have known something like that would happen. No one minds their own business in this town. Do my kids know?”

I shake my head. “Not from me. I wanted to be sure I knew the story before I talked to them.”

“Don’t.” He pushes a button that raises the hospital bed so he can look directly at me. “I would prefer that they remember me as I should be instead of as I am.”

“It’s not fair to them.” I want to add that it’s not fair to me either, but I’m just his aunt. What I need doesn’t matter.

Nathan turns his head to look at the window. “What’s one more secret?” he says.

Secrets. Sometimes, I think I’m made of secrets. Old, dusty ones that clog my lungs and make it impossible to breathe. I stare down at my hands, twisting my fingers together and apart again. They are knobbed and ache with arthritis, now. So different from the smooth, painted fingers Susan clung to while Nathan was born.

“What did the doctors say?” I say.

“Pancreatic cancer. Stage four—untreatable.” He rubs his left arm above the IV.

I flinch. Untreatable. That means he’s being doused with morphine, not with medication.

“They gave me three months—five months ago.”

I feel my face freeze and I blink until my hands come back into focus. He has known since June. “I wish . . .” I clear my throat and start over. “I would have been here for you.”

“Everyone dies alone, Aunt Livy.”

But I want more for you, I want to say. The words stick in my throat.

“It’s bad enough that I’m dying. I don’t need an audience.” There’s almost strength in his voice as he says it.

A nurse knocks and opens the door without waiting for a reply. She hesitates in the door as she sees me, then pushes her cart right in. “And how are we this afternoon,

Mr. Owen?" she says in an overly cheery tone. There are towels and fresh linens on the cart.

Part of me wants to insist on staying. He has nothing I haven't seen before. I know the folds of his baby skin and the birthmark on the small of his back. I gloried in him for a week. Until Susan took me aside. *I think it's best if you leave*, her voice echoes out of the past. *It's too confusing for him with you here.*

I want to argue, but I meet his eyes, and he shakes his head, and I know he doesn't want me there while she changes his bedding and sponges him down.

"I'll be back tomorrow," I say.

"Don't tell them."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Back at home, I settle into my chair and flip through the channels, then turn the TV off again. I pick up my knitting and set it down again without being able to figure out the pattern. I get up again and fill a kettle with water and set it on the stove without turning it on and then stand with the refrigerator door open.

Nathan is dying.

I blink. The inside of the refrigerator comes back into focus and I shut it. I'm not hungry. I'm not anything. I climb to my tower studio to lose myself in the smell of paint and turpentine. I stare out the tower windows with a sketchpad in my hand, letting the pencil wander as I watch the sea. It crashes against the rocks, a continual heartbeat that I've lived with most of my life. The north Atlantic shaped me as surely as it shaped the rocks under the tower.

I met Nathan's father on a much different coast. The Pacific is calmer, less moody as it laps against the sandy beaches where young people gather to dance and sing and fall in love. I can't remember the shape of his hands or the color of his hair, not anymore. He is lost to me, just a warm summer, a guitar, a pair of blue eyes that promised everything but had nothing to give. When I told him I was pregnant, his voice squeaked in panic as he introduced me to a new girl with flowers in her hair.

I glance down and realize that the pencil has captured Nathan in his hospital bed, his back turned to me.

Footsteps sound on the tower stairs. Nathan's oldest, Daniel, stands in the doorway. He looks so solid after the memory of Nathan's frailty. I turn the page to hide the sketch.

"Was I expecting you?" I ask, standing to give him a hug.

"It's Sunday, Aunt Livy." His veterinary practice is on the other side of town so he is the only one who comes for Sunday dinner anymore. Nathan could join us, but he's so focused on his books and his telescope that it's a shock when he comes. I never noticed that I hadn't seen him for six months. The rest of Nathan's children live too far away.

"Oh." I find myself searching for words that don't involve Nathan and dying. "I put a stew in the slow cooker this morning. It should be ready," I say, and I can hear my mother's voice lecturing, *Roast beef and potatoes. That's a proper meal for Sunday dinner.* I do my best to ignore her ghost.

He walks over to my easel where a commissioned portrait is drying. "Have you been working all day?"

I think past the trip to Crestview to the beginning of my day. “I spent some time on it this morning while the light was good. Then I did some gardening.” I open my mouth to mention Maisie and Nathan, but I don’t know how to say it. It should be simple, four words: *Your father is dying*. But Nathan wants him kept away. “It should be ready,” I say again, and he leads the way downstairs, moving more quickly than my slow pace. I hear my father snort and call me a coward for remaining silent. I ignore that ghost as well.

“I saw Daniel last night,” I tell Nathan, as I try to distract myself from how yellow his skin has gotten with jaundice.

“You still feed him?”

“Even bachelors need home cooking,” I say. Besides, it’s easier to be enthusiastic when I cook for someone who isn’t me. “I wish you’d tell him,” I say. “The children deserve a chance to prepare.”

Nathan shakes his head. “I can’t be so selfish. What could they do? Drop everything and come watch the spectacle of dying? Besides, Michael is overseas, John is building his law practice, and Naomi is in her first year of medical school. It would be wrong to distract them.”

“Daniel’s here in town.”

“I couldn’t tell only him. It wouldn’t be fair.” Nathan turns the cup around in his hands. “Aunt Livy?”

I look up from the cup and meet his gaze.

“I need you to promise me you’ll keep this secret. It won’t be long. The pneumonia will get me if the cancer doesn’t.”

“I nearly told Daniel about you last night.”

Nathan sits up and his heart monitor speeds up until he settles back onto the pillows. “How’s he doing?”

I relay the most recent news, watching as he drinks it in. He longs for the children, I know, even as he shuts them out.

“They’re good kids. They’ll be fine,” he says and closes his eyes, at peace for the moment.

But they won’t. I know what it feels like to answer the phone and hear a medical professional announce that someone is dead.

“When Susan died,” I begin but he interrupts.

“Mom died in a car crash. It’s completely different.”

“Is there anything you wish you could have told her? Asked her?” Her death had been so sudden. There was no way for any of us to prepare our minds and hearts for her loss.

He is silent but the monitor quickens.

“My father wouldn’t have me at his death bed,” I say. I stare out the window, but I can see him look at me. “We were angry at each other. By the time Mother let me in, he couldn’t remember me anymore. Let alone accept my apologies.” Or my forgiveness.

“I don’t remember much about him.”

“You were only five when he died.” I can feel my stomach tying up in knots.

“But I don’t remember him being an unforgiving man.”

I shake my head, editing as best I can. “I was his favorite and I thought there wasn’t anything I could do to stop him from loving me.” I laugh and wince at the same time. “I was wrong. When I was seventeen, I did something that hurt him very much and we never talked to each other again.”

He waits. I look up, to gauge his reaction.

“Did you argue because of me?” he says. His eyes are clear and focus on me intently. “Was it because you were pregnant with me?”

Panic fills me. I can’t believe he knows. I can hear Susan: *Promise me you’ll keep the secret. He’s mine in every way that matters.*

“What makes you say that?” I say. I’m impressed with how calm my voice sounds.

“Aunt Livy,” he says, and he sounds disgusted with me. “I figured it out years ago. I’ve always known I was adopted.”

“Adopted?” My voice is faint.

“Ninth grade biology. My blood type doesn’t match.” He shrugs. “I asked Mom about it. She told me that I was loved, and that was all that mattered but I insisted. I was always a logical child.”

I would grin at that understatement, but the panic is still in control of my heart.

“She told me my biological mother loved me, but she couldn’t give me a home with a mother and a father. And that she and Dad wanted children but couldn’t have them. She told me we were a perfect fit.”

I am frozen. I feel like shouting at Susan’s ghost for not warning me that this could happen someday.

“I guessed that you were my biological mother when I remembered you telling me that I had my father’s eyes. And then, things made sense.”

I feel pale. It is true. He has his father’s vivid blue eyes. It’s also true that Susan’s husband’s eyes were brown.

“You’ve thought this since you were in ninth grade?” I say. “Why didn’t you ask me?”

“I was waiting for you to tell me,” he says and shrugs. “I’m running out of time, Aunt Livy. I wanted to know the truth.”

“Susan was your mother in all the ways that matter,” I say, echoing her words. Susan had taken me in when our father sent me away. And when Nathan was born, she was there, with me. Hers was the first face he saw. She let me hold him again before he was hers forever. That was the bargain we made.

His shoulders shake and the monitor spikes with what I know now is repressed laughter. “Still, you won’t admit it. You guard your thoughts like a black hole.”

“You give me far too much credit.”

“Keep my secrets. Please.”

“I don’t want your children to be left with regrets.”

He throws up his hands. “I’ve nothing left unsaid.”

I want to reach out to him. To hug him and promise that everything will be fine—but that’s the mother’s promise to her child. I twist my hands together in my lap. “But you don’t know what they need to say to you.”

“Please,” he says. He reaches out and clasps my hands in his. His grip is so fragile that I feel as though I could break him. “Please, Mother, let me die in peace.”

My breath catches. “No one has ever called me that.”

“I’ve thought it. Every day since Mom died.” He reaches up and I can’t help it. I lean over and he hugs me with his fading strength. He is not a demonstrative man and I wonder if he needs to be a child again in this moment. I need him to be a child too. “I needed you. I need you now,” he says, these words a whisper I can barely hear.

My shoulder is wet when he finally lets go. We are silent for a time. I want these moments with him, desperately, but it’s selfish. I shouldn’t want to keep him for myself when his children need him.

“I think you’re wrong,” I say. “They need to know.”

“Do you know, I can’t remember the way Mary smiled?” he says, shutting his eyes. “I examine her face in pictures, but as soon as I put them down, I see her pale and too weak to scream. And all that blood. It haunts me. Shouldn’t I be able to remember the sound of my wife’s laugh?”

I touch his hand.

He opens his eyes and stares at me. “I am a nightmare vision of myself. I can’t let them see me like this.”

“They’re stronger than you think,” I say, but I feel light. He needs me. For the first time since I carried him under my heart, he is mine again. Even the ghosts are silent, all their secrets out in the open. “I’ll try to change your mind every time I see you, but I promise. They won’t know that you’re here from me.”

“And I promise I’ll think about telling them,” he says.

With that, we are content.

Maisie tracks me down in the frozen foods aisle of the grocery store.

“Was it your Nathan?” she asks.

I shrug, pretending that the nutrition label on a TV dinner has me fascinated.

“I saw your car there, yesterday, and again today.”

I close my eyes. There really are no secrets in a small town. “Yes,” I say at last and I find myself having to hold back a wail. I never cry. “Maisie, he’s dying.”

She puts her arm around me, but I know if I relax, I’ll break.

“He doesn’t want anyone to know. He wants his children to remember him as he was.” I don’t tell her that I don’t agree. I don’t tell her that I’m glad I have him to myself, here at the end of his life as I had him at the beginning. I don’t know how to say anything.

She nods. “They won’t hear it from me.”

“Thank you,” I say.

A month later, the holidays are coming. Crestview has hung paper garlands in the rooms to make them festive, but the smell of dying has gotten stronger.

I slip into Nathan’s room without knocking. I don’t want to wake him if he’s sleeping. But he is awake, staring out the window. His hair is nearly gone and his skin is paper thin.

“Hallo, Mother,” he whispers.

I flush warm as I always do when he calls me that.

“Naomi’s semester should be almost over,” he says.

I nod, even though he can't see me with his back turned. "Daniel told me she's heading home at the end of the week."

"When she gets home," he says. "Maybe I'll tell them then."

I nod, but I'm not sure he has that much time left.

He coughs, great wracking coughs that are too strong for him to bear. I want to give him an arm to prop against, but I can't touch him anymore, no matter how lightly. The last time I did, he bruised in minutes, purples and greens and yellows on the back of his hand. When the coughing fit is over, the tissue in his hand is spotted red and his mouth gleams with blood he's too weak to cough out.

"Should I call the nurse?"

He smiles, but doesn't laugh. His movements are careful now, as he tries to avoid another fit. "She can't do anything. None of them can."

I sit back against the chair. Even the morphine isn't helping ease the pain. Not anymore. "I wish there was something."

"You should go," he says. It's the first time he's tried to make me leave since I found him here. "You shouldn't have to see this."

For a moment, my insecurity comes back. Why doesn't he want me there? Then I realize what he's trying to do. "Don't be an idiot," I say. "You can't shield me from this."

"I want better for you," he says.

"Nathan," I say, finally. "I can't think what my life would have been if you weren't in it. You've changed me, over and over." I pause, not sure how to say it.

"Because of you, I'm always better."

He reaches out and touches my face. “No parent should have to watch their child die.”

“You’re not dying now,” I say. “You’re too stubborn.”

“You know all about stubborn,” he says. “Please, Mother. Let me die on my own terms. With dignity.”

“There’s no dignity—not in birth, not in death.”

We are both silent. After a while, the heart monitor slows and I know he is sleeping. I watch him sleep until they kick me out at midnight.

The next morning, I am painting when Daniel calls to me, and then comes galloping up the tower stairs.

“Did you know?” he asks, before even greeting me.

I flinch inside, but keep my face composed. “Context please, Daniel.”

“Dr. Johnson from Crestview just called to tell me that Father is dead.”

The bottom drops out of my world and I’m floating away. I put my brush down without cleaning it and sit before I fall over.

Daniel doesn’t notice. He’s pacing. “Dr. Johnson said you’ve been coming to sit with him, with Father, every day for a month. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I look down. My left thumb is smeared with red paint. I focus on that instead of the pain he’s feeling. The pain I’m feeling. “Your father insisted. I only found out by accident.”

“I would have been there. You should have seen the nurse—she chewed me up and down for ignoring him.”

“That wasn’t fair of her.”

“I couldn’t blame her. What kind of son am I that I didn’t even know my father was dying?”

“Cancer is an ugly thing. Your father wanted you to be left with good memories.” I don’t tell him I didn’t agree. Better to be angry with the living than the dead. I can take it.

“So, he blindsided us.”

I think back to how he looked at the end, and I’m glad his children aren’t burdened with that memory. “He did what he thought best.”

Daniel stops in front of the canvas I’m working on and glares at it. It’s a picture of the sea with the base of the lighthouse wreathed in a tangle of bleeding hearts. Each flower is a pink heart, frozen in the process of breaking with a white drop of blood held in permanent stasis at the flower’s end. It’s innocuous, unworthy of a glare, so I’m fairly sure he doesn’t see it. “He never was good with grief. Or loss. Or talking about anything,” he says.

“He couldn’t tell anyone because then he’d have to tell everyone.”

“You knew”

“He didn’t tell me,” I say. And that still hurts me, even though we found peace with each other in the end. “He tried to send me away, there at the end. I told him not to be an idiot, but he still refused to have you called.”

Daniel is standing in front of me. I reach out a hand and he takes it.

“I thought we had more time. Last night I left at midnight. He was finally sleeping.” My breath catches, but I continue. “He knew me still. I don’t know if that

makes it better or worse—that he never lost his mind. He knew himself. He knew exactly what was happening. There’s strength in that.”

In the end, Nathan was alone. Just as he wanted. I hear Nathan whisper: *Thank you, Mother. My new ghost.*

Daniel draws me close. I can’t help it. I compare his strength to Nathan’s frailty, this man who is the child of my child. Daniel is mine, too, somehow. I bury my face against his chest but my eyes are dry. I feel almost happy. Nathan is mine again. It was selfish of me to horde his death, but it is done now. I can’t change it.

“Let me help you,” Daniel says. His voice rumbles in my bones. His arms are so tight. He shudders. Outside, the sea crashes against the rocks like a heartbeat, so steady, so strong.

We stand there, supporting each other.

Breaking the Silence

You can never go home. The thought kept running through Naomi's mind as she drove, dry-eyed, to the house where she'd grown up in Maine. She was only an hour away from a place that wasn't home anymore. Her father was dead.

She knew that she should feel something—sadness maybe. Or anger that he had slipped away without telling them he was ill. The only thing she felt for certain was disbelief. How could her father be dead? If she closed her eyes, she could still picture him sitting, as he always was, shut away behind his closed door.

As she drove, she tried to remember her father's smile, but the strongest memory she had was the bald spot at the top of his head as he bent over his desk. He had never locked the door of his study, but that didn't mean he could be interrupted. When his mind was involved in the mysteries of the universe, he'd barely noticed his children's presence.

Her brothers, Daniel, Mike, and Johnny, had told her stories of times before she was born, times when they had gone to picnics or sung around their mother's piano. They had been an idyllic family, according to her brothers. Then Naomi was born, and their mother was lost.

That's how people had always talked about it, those old women who flocked to the house during her childhood. Not that they talked to her. Naomi couldn't remember who had first explained it to her. It was part of the low murmurings over her cradle, of conversations overheard with eager ears. One of her first games involved searching through every hiding place in the house to find her mother again.

She would paint dust circles on the boxes in the attic, slither under the big bed in her father's room, and peek in her brothers' dressers, and after learning every hidden

cranny, she would creep into the back of the closet under the stairs and press her ear to the floor hoping to hear an unfamiliar voice.

Sometimes she stayed there for hours, feeling her heart throb through her body, wondering if she would ever find this thing called mother.

She never did.

Mother's absence was a hole in their lives that Naomi only knew because of the pitying whispers that echoed through her childhood. *Poor children. Poor little motherless girl.*

She had envied her brothers, as a child, because they at least knew what mother meant. Johnny was seven when Naomi was born, Mike nine, and Daniel eleven. Three stair step copies of each other growing faster than Naomi could catch up. She was the odd one out—*baby, tagalong, nuisance, girl.*

The closest thing to a mother was Aunt Livy, who was tall, pale, with a warm laugh and long, cold fingers pinching Naomi's cheeks. She had come to help when Naomi was born, and then stayed when it became clear that her nephew, their father, couldn't boil an egg without burning the pan. Aunt Livy watched a lineup of afternoon soaps with religious dedication and had a kind of wavering operatic voice that lingered too long to every note on the radio.

When Naomi was five, Aunt Livy had packed a lunch and sent her off to her first day of kindergarten. When Naomi got home, Father was there instead. Aunt Livy had left for England to find herself. Naomi got a key that she was to wear under her shirt every morning and instructions to do her homework and not touch anything until Daniel and Mike got home from high school. If there was an emergency, she could knock on

Father's office door. When she saw Father's face as he said that, she made a promise to herself never to have an emergency.

Without Aunt Livy, the house was Naomi's only companion. She spent long hours every day listening to the absence of voices.

Now, Father was gone too.

Naomi kissed her fingers and touched the roof of her car as she passed the sign: "Welcome to Meredith. Population 7,541." It was barely visible in the dusk. She'd be there just in time for dinner. She wondered if there was any dinner in the house. Father had been at the hospital for the past few months he'd spent dying.

From what Daniel had said when he made the call—had it only been three days ago?—they lost Father to inattention. By the time he noticed that his health was affecting his ability to concentrate and went to the doctor, the cancer had clawed its way into his pancreas and was impossible to uproot.

He'd died just as she finished her third semester as a first-year medical student. Naomi had been driving for fifteen hours over the past two days, through cities and smaller towns and bigger mountains. The funeral would be Sunday.

As she parked, she was happy to see lights on downstairs. Daniel had his place across town that he shared with a cat, two dogs, and a mynah that recited dirty limericks—all rescue animals. He was a vet with a heart too big for his apartment. But there was no way she wanted to stay alone in their father's big, empty house.

At the sound of her trunk closing, the front door opened. She looked up where two men stood, back-lit. One was Daniel, of course. She recognized the shape of him

even before he strode down the porch steps. It wasn't until the other turned his head and shrugged that he came into focus. "Mike? Is that you?"

"Hey, Naomi."

She dropped her things into a pile on the yard and rushed across to give her middle brother a hug. "I wasn't expecting you. Don't you have three more months?" He'd lost weight in the nearly two years he'd been away and what was left of him felt wiry and a little fragile. "How was the South Pacific?" Mike was coming to the end of a tour with the Peace Corps.

"They sent me home early for the funeral." A deep breath shuddered through him. "It was time, anyway. I was between projects."

Daniel came up behind them with her bags. "I see how it is. One little overseas trip and suddenly he's your favorite brother."

"Don't be silly." She turned around and gave Daniel a hug, squeezing him tight to prove to herself that he was still there. "He's always been my favorite."

Mike and Daniel both laughed at that. They both knew that her favorite had always been Daniel. When she had disappeared into the bowels of the house for hours on end, he was the one who had found her and sat with her with his hand on her back so that she knew he was there. He'd watch her as she listened to the sounds of the house, lift her up as she fell to sleep, and carry her back to the light and warmth.

"Well, favorite," Daniel said, and squeezed her hard enough that she gave an involuntary squeal. "Help me with her bags. I think she must have loaded her bag with some of those med school bricks disguised as textbooks."

Naomi grabbed her purse and followed her brothers into the house. “Daniel, what do you need me to do?”

“Everything’s taken care of,” he said, leading the way to her childhood room and placed her bags on the bed, which was already made up. He caught her in another hug. “You don’t have to do a thing. I’ve got things under control.”

Naomi thanked them both as they left the room, but she wished she had some chore to settle her mind. Surely she was needed somewhere—surely there was something she could do to help her brother. She had always been the baby, but now she was an adult. She didn’t need to be pushed into a corner with a toy to be kept out of the way.

If he would only let her, she would prove she was capable.

Maybe that would make things more real.

Half an hour later, she followed the smell of clam chowder to the kitchen.

Mike was stirring his bowl, staring at the white soup as though it was foreign. Daniel was eating with his left hand and marking off items on a list with his right. She stood in the doorway just memorizing them. It was a familiar scene: Daniel organizing things while Mike dreamed and she watched.

She slipped around the table and over to the stove. It was the same gas monstrosity she remembered—with burners that didn’t light without one of the long matches that were kept in a jar beside it. Father hated change.

As she lifted the ladle, it hit the pot with a bell-like tone. She jumped and glanced up, then realized what she was doing with a shaky laugh. “I keep on imagining there’s

been some mistake—that he’s really up there working at his desk. At any moment now, he’s going to bellow downstairs for quiet.”

“I think the worst thing about it is he didn’t let us know.” Mike cleared his throat, but his voice was still husky. “He didn’t give any chance to say goodbye—and it wasn’t as if he didn’t know. Six months . . .”

Daniel set his pencil down and wiped his eyes. “When I went to talk to his nurses—after—the worst was their looks. Like they were saying, you live in town, and you never came to visit your dying father. I wanted to say—‘Look, I would have been there.’” He blinked and picked up the pencil again. “He always was stubborn.”

Naomi sat down at the table. She hadn’t been surprised that Father had slipped away into silence. He had spent his evenings locked away. Quiet was the first rule of his house. While he was out, Aunt Livy filled the rooms with competing electronic noises, but at five the television and radio switched off, Aunt Livy headed for her own little house on the other side of town, and the children tiptoed as though a dragon were sleeping down the hall. The death of the dragon wasn’t enough to change the habits of a lifetime.

“I couldn’t believe it when they told me. They had to make a special trip out to the school because the satellite phone was on the blink.” Mike shook his head and took another slow bite of soup. “I guess I just thought that nothing could touch him. That he’d always be at that desk of his, waiting for me to get home.”

Daniel nodded. “Tell me about it. The last time I called, I got the machine, and I just thought he was in the middle of some physics thing. I hadn’t seen him since Easter

Sunday when Livy cooked for both of us.” He grinned. “Something about bachelors starving to death.”

“I hadn’t seen him since last Christmas.” Naomi stared down at her chowder. They all came for holidays when they could but not because there was any glue that held them together as a family. To put it in terms that their physics professor father would have used, it was simple inertia: they gathered because it was habit—it was what they always did. “And I don’t think we said more than two things to each other all holiday.”

There was a long pause as they turned to their meal. Naomi finished first, and set her spoon down beside the bowl. After she did, she realized how quiet she was being, her actions constrained by the oppressive absence upstairs.

She jumped as Mike scraped back his chair and began gathering dishes. As he ran water in the sink, he asked, “When does Johnny get in?”

Johnny’s absence hadn’t registered as odd to Naomi, because it matched her expectations: in high school he had the most active social life, staying out late and getting into as much trouble as he could find in Maine. He lived in DC, now, where he was a very junior defense attorney who still had more people revolving around his life than Naomi could keep track of without a cheat sheet.

Now that she was at school in Baltimore, only a couple of hours away, he had made a point of visiting her often—meeting her friends. She knew for a fact that he’d tried to scare Phil off when they first started dating. And while Johnny had stepped over the line, of course, she had to admit that he’d been right about Phil, who really had been a jerk.

Daniel shrugged. “He’ll be here before the service.” He struck a heavy line across the page. “Even if we have to postpone the service, he’ll be there.”

She said good night to her brothers early, leaving them sitting on the porch with a bottle and the stars. She was tired to the bone from the trip.

As she lay in her childhood bed, the curtains making ghost shadows in the moonlight, she could feel the stillness of the house. Because she couldn’t hear the city sounds—the whispering of cars passing, of sirens in the distance—the creaks and groans of the settling house were magnified. Despite her exhaustion from the drive, she listened until late in the night, straining to hear voices, watching the walls. In daytime, the wallpaper was cheery—bunches of strawberry plants making a regular pattern on the wall. Tonight, in the moonlight, for the first time, she saw that the shadows of the strawberries were soldiers marching, spears in hand. They were in squads of four, and she imagined the battle they were facing, until some trick of cloud over the moon made them disappear and she sat up, her eyes wide and her heart pounding.

The clock blinked a red 3:28.

A car door slammed and the voices wafted up to her window.

“How was the flight?” That was Daniel. Johnny’s answer was a lower mumble she couldn’t catch.

“Well, just get a good night’s sleep, because in the morning I need you to . . .” the front door closed and she couldn’t hear anymore. She buried her face in her pillow, breathed deep, and let herself drift.

It was just after dawn when the smell of pancakes and the sound of whistling drew Naomi down the stairs. Johnny glanced over from the stove as she walked in. “Hey, sleepyhead.” He’d always been the first one awake—he ran on less sleep than anyone she knew.

She blinked the night from her eyes. “Hey, hotshot.” She ran a hand through her hair and grimaced. “Are you making one of those for me?”

Five minutes later they sat together with their plates—his heaped seven high, hers a more manageable three.

She had always liked sitting with Johnny before he headed off to his day. He could not keep still, always moving and tapping rhythms that drowned out the stillness of the house.

He finished first and headed back to the stove. “You ready for today?”

With a start, she remembered the funeral. “Maybe.”

He looked at her over his shoulder. “Well, it’s only five hours away. You might need to get past that maybe soon.”

“It still doesn’t feel real, you know?” She finished her breakfast and gathered the dishes. For a long moment she watched the sink fill. “I remember when I graduated high school, he sat me down in the study to ask what I wanted to do with my life.”

“I think he did that with all of us.”

“I told him I wanted to be an anesthesiologist, and you know what he said?”

Johnny stood, waiting. “He said, ‘You’ll be going out of state, then.’”

Johnny laughed.

“I’m not sure he knew quite what to do with four kids,” she said. “Sometimes I wonder if he wanted one of us to take up his work or give him a legacy in academia, but none of us have gone there.”

“He always encouraged us to follow our dreams.”

“Especially if those dreams took us far away where we couldn’t disrupt his life anymore.”

Johnny laughed again. “He did like the quiet,” he said, “When you were born, I think he spent a month in his room with the lights off. Of course, that was more because of Mama than because you cried a lot.”

She dried the last dish and put it away. “Do you think he blamed me?”

He flipped a pancake over. “Blamed you for what?”

“For Mother.”

Johnny took a deep breath before he answered. “I don’t think he ever blamed you. None of us did. I was sure she’d died because I wandered off at the grocery store the day before you were born, and she had to run to get me.”

Naomi just stood there by the sink, staring out at the dawn. Johnny came up behind her and put his arm around her shoulders.

“I remember when you were just tiny,” Daniel said, his voice soft from the doorway, “listening to him talk with Aunt Livy when they thought I was in bed. If anything, he blamed himself. Not any of us.” He took the stack of pancakes Johnny handed him and sat.

Mike padded in behind him and grabbed the orange juice. “Did we all think it was our fault? I got a C in English the day she died—for the longest time, I blamed the disappointment.”

Johnny put Mike’s plate in front of him and turned off the burner. “Are we playing competitive neuroses? Naomi, for the longest time, I didn’t like you at all. And it had nothing to do with the parents—you just had the nerve to be born two days before my birthday. I missed my party because of you.”

“Sorry, Johnny.” She was grinning, but she remembered how he used to tease her sometimes. He had always been the one who told her she was too little to play the games they played—he had reveled in her disappointment.

“I’m sorry, too.” He had a faraway look in his eyes. “I really was a little idiot.”

Daniel laughed, just a little. “Sometimes I hated that you all got away. I didn’t hate you, but I hated the fact that I have roots here, when you don’t. I get his voice in my head, sometimes—‘The oldest has a responsibility . . .’”

Mike interrupted. “So, if you could go anywhere, where would you go?” His dreaming eyes were suddenly focused on their oldest brother. “Imagine that we take over your house and pet sit that bloody parrot of yours . . .”

“Mynah.”

“Whatever. What would you do? Where would you go? He’s not here anymore—there’s nothing tying you to the place.”

“Inertia,” Naomi said. Her brothers all laughed and the four of them looked up toward the study. They were sitting around the table now, close enough to hold hands if

they had been that kind of family. There were only four chairs at the kitchen table. When Father had eaten with them, they'd brought in a stool.

“Maybe—I'd go to Canada. You know, I've never seen Niagara Falls?”

Johnny made a rude noise. “Think bigger. Sky's the limit—the falls are barely leaving the state.”

Daniel shrugged. “Take it easy. I'm new at this.”

Naomi sighed. “I wish I could have told him things.”

“Like what?” Mike tossed the words over his shoulder as he cleared off the plates and set them in the dishwasher.

“I don't even know. I think I wish that I hadn't left him here. It's so quiet here.”

She paused, and looked around. Everyone was nodding. “I think it would have been better for him if we'd given him some noise.”

“Mama always sang.” Daniel said.

Matt came back to the table. “When she was alive, he could only stay cooped up for a while, and then she swooped in to the rescue.”

“He laughed when she was around,” Johnny remembered.

Naomi was quiet. She wished she had a memory to add, but to her, Mother was a silence.

“That's it, then.” Mike stood, scraping his chair back so they all cringed. “We need to take this upstairs.”

They headed upstairs, Mike and Johnny stomping as they went.

“I haven't been able to open the door,” Daniel admitted. “It isn't locked, but it felt like I was intruding, or something.”

Naomi knocked on the door. She laughed at herself. “I don’t know why I did that.”

Mike opened it and they filed into the room. It was the same as it always was. Piles of papers covered the desk. There was a pencil on top of the stack as though Father would come home at any moment and lift it again. The top paper was covered with a thick layer of dust.

Johnny was the first one to move. With a swipe of his arm, he knocked over a mug that crashed to the floor. Matt took the pencil that miraculously remained on the desk and broke it with single minded determination. Daniel picked up a pile of papers and sent them floating to the ground. He muttered something that Naomi couldn’t hear.

She didn’t care, because she could feel a scream welling up from the part of her that still was listening for voices that never would answer.

From the doorway, Aunt Livy said, “I hope you all got that out of your systems. We have a lot to do today.”

Naomi felt the scream choke back, unheard.

Aunt Livy was shorter than Naomi remembered. Shorter and fragile. She had always been a big woman, but now she moved with deliberate motions as though she were afraid she might break. But she organized the siblings with military precision.

“Daniel, have you arranged for the flowers? There should be some here for the open house. Michael,— ”

“Mike,” her brother interrupted.

Aunt Livy looked at him and he sat back in his chair. “Michael, there will be people coming. You and John need to make sure the living room, dining room, kitchen, and bathroom are all clean. They’ll bring food, so clear out the refrigerator.” Naomi held in a laugh as Aunt Livy effortlessly managed the three men standing around the office. “Well?” she said after a moment. “What are you waiting for?”

They made their escape, which left Naomi alone with her aunt, awaiting orders.

Aunt Livy closed her eyes and sagged against the desk.

“Aunt Livy?” Naomi said. “Are you all right?”

“Ah, Naomi.” Aunt Livy jumped as though she hadn’t remembered that Naomi was in the room. “I need to clear this mess up. You go find something to do.”

Downstairs, Naomi had gotten the vacuum cleaner out and was starting on the living room when Daniel came in.

“Here, let me get that.”

Johnny was mopping the kitchen floor and Mike was scrubbing the toilet.

“What do you need me to do?” she asked Mike.

He looked up. “No worries. I have it. Why don’t you get ready?”

Five hours later, Naomi stood in a line with her brothers, her aunt, and the pastor at the chapel door, accepting condolences. They made a solemn line, Johnny, neat and lawyer-like in his black suit, Daniel and Mike in black shirts (Aunt Livy would have insisted on suits if either brother had owned one), Aunt Livy in a somber purple with long black gloves, and Naomi, herself, in Aunt Livy’s best black dress, which overpowered in both volume and color.

Aunt Livy had insisted—“It doesn’t matter what I wear. You’re his daughter. It will show respect for you to wear black”—which Naomi couldn’t argue with, although she wanted to. She felt very young, more like a child dressing up in grown-up clothes, then the grown, college woman back for her father’s funeral that she was.

Behind them, the chapel was slowly filling. Her father’s colleagues from the university, a busload of nurses and friends from the hospice facility where he had died, random people whom Naomi never had known, but who could honestly say to her, “I’m sorry for your loss. Your father was a great man.”

The more she heard the phrase, the more she wanted to scream out a protest. Here were people who had known her father in ways he hadn’t permitted his children to know him. Here were people who had been told that he was dying, who had been given time to adjust to the news, when he hadn’t given his own children the same courtesy. She bit her objections back, hoping that her lack of speech would be taken for grief. The truth was, she still wasn’t sure what she felt.

A flock of old women approached the chapel, white hair gleaming, scarves flapping in the November air, wearing the long sober but not black dresses they probably wore to church on Sunday. Naomi didn’t recognize any of them from a distance, and she wondered for a moment if the priest had called in random members of the congregation to fill out what should be a sparsely attended funeral. Or maybe they were paid mourners, come to cast their shawls over their heads and raise up a wail. A modern answer to the ancient custom of sackcloth and ashes.

Were there still people who did that, she wondered, people who were paid to show all the outward signals of grief, so that funerals functioned as people expected them

to? She could use a professional to mourn in her place. She certainly didn't seem to be able to do the job by herself.

But as the flock of women grew nearer, she realized that she did recognize them: friends of Aunt Livy's who used to sit in the kitchen whispering the business of the town, while Naomi played quietly in the corner. She had known them only by variations in the way they'd pinched her young cheeks.

Now they descended en masse to the small line of principal mourners, shaking the priest's hand, hugging Aunt Livy who bore their attentions with a quiet dignity, and offering both condolences and marriageable grand-daughters to Naomi's three brothers. They pinched Naomi's cheeks remarking how much she'd grown and recalling how she used to run naked through the house. The very old seemed to have an unerring memory for what would embarrass. She was relieved when they passed inside the chapel.

Naomi pulled at the oversized black sleeve to check her watch. Ten minutes until the service started, and already the church was full of people she barely knew and didn't care about. What's more, she wasn't sure how they had known her father. The man she remembered had rarely gone out except to the university where he taught. He'd gone to church at Christmas and Easter and attended various functions while his children were in school, but she couldn't remember him ever having friends.

Thinking about that, a wave of grief hit her in the pit of her stomach, and she reached for it, trying to feel something appropriate for the occasion—but it was gone and she was empty again.

Johnny touched her shoulder. "It's time to go in."

Naomi started. She'd lost track of time. "Already?" She didn't want to face the body again.

He nodded. "How are you holding up?"

She gestured vaguely—she was fine. How was she supposed to feel under the circumstances? "How about you?"

"I hate this." He turned and headed into the chapel.

An hour ago, the funeral director had shut them in for a private moment with the deceased before the funeral began. Their father looked like a waxwork figure painted with too heavy a hand, so unreal that Naomi had not looked for more than an instant. She'd been afraid she would be sick.

It shouldn't be so difficult. She was going to be a doctor. She'd already spent hours dissecting cadavers until the stench of formaldehyde was so deep in her skin she couldn't wash it away. But her father. He looked so still—like a doll of himself. It was somehow wrong to see him like this.

She took her place at the end of the line of family, last and useless. The priest went in first, signaling the organ. All conversation ceased, and she could feel a hundred pairs of eyes on them, watching, judging the amount of pain in their faces. She wished that hats with veils were in fashion again, anything to shield her from those eyes.

On their way to their seats, the five of them filed up to the corpse, and this time she didn't look at the last remains of her father. She watched her family.

Johnny's lips moved as he looked down at his father's closed eyes. Naomi wondered what he hadn't had a chance to say. As a lawyer, words were his business, but

their father had never allowed for any kind of conversation except on his own terms. He and Johnny had always had a difficult relationship.

Aunt Livy was stony faced, but her hands were in constant motion, smoothing her black gloves up her arms, over and over again.

Daniel walked with his hands behind his back. Occasionally, he would twitch. He looked so tired. Naomi wished he would let her help. All her brothers were so much in the habit of treating her as a child. He had asked Mike and Johnny to take care of little things, but she had no duty, nothing to do but think.

Mike met her eyes—he wasn't looking at their father either. She wasn't surprised. He was the most sensitive of her brothers—always ready to help, always the one who softened the mood of a room by a smile and a quiet word. He reached out and she took his hand, grateful. She wondered what he'd seen in her face.

Aunt Livy removed the flowers from her nephew's dead hands, then turned to sit and the four of them reached up as one and closed the casket. Naomi caught one last glimpse of her father's unnaturally still face.

Hand in hand, they found their seats in the front pew, where everyone would see their every movement.

Naomi looked down at her hands, held them quietly in her lap, imagined they weighed as much as the lid—imagined what it would feel like to be cocooned in the cushions of a casket, to feel the lid come down, stealing her breath. Why did they put cushions in a casket? It wasn't as if the dead would get uncomfortable.

The priest began the sermon and Naomi let it wash over her. She didn't want to hear about better places or that now he was with her mother after twenty years alone. The

chapel felt cool—almost cold. The stone walls soaked up heat and gave nothing back, although wooden panels gave an illusion of warmth. The pew was a hard ache against her back and legs. A ray of sunlight shone blue through stained glass and inched closer and closer to the altar and the casket. The priest’s voice rose and fell with a hypnotic intensity. The congregation rustled, a constant shuffling of feet, occasional loud sniffs.

Naomi wondered again why her eyes were so dry.

She caught the priest’s words, “and now, Daniel, Nathan’s son, will read the eulogy,” and her oldest brother stood, squaring his shoulders. He walked to the pulpit, taking a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and smoothing it down.

“I’ve been thinking about this since I got the call,” he began, his voice clear. “How can I turn my father’s life into words?” He looked out at the congregation.

“My father was a quiet man. When I was very young, Mama would pull all her boys out of the house to go camping in the backyard. Dad would set up his telescope and we’d huddle around while he showed us the stars. He knew the name of anything we spotted, and what kind of star it was, and how far away.” Daniel chuckled, and people from the crowd joined in. “He used to say that the stars were a gift—how special we were to be able to see a million years ago. Mama would put her arm around him and around us and we’d sing.”

Naomi looked down at her hands as another laugh warmed the room. She remembered times when her brothers had camped in the backyard with a telescope, pointedly not inviting her along.

“She was what kept us together. When Mama died, he put the telescope away, at least while he was at home. He couldn’t bear to play games in the sky without her.”

Naomi reached over for Mike's hand. This was a story she'd never heard, one she'd never been part of. Her father was silent. He had been silent for the twenty years since her mother had died, the twenty years Naomi had been alive.

"My father was a teacher," her brother continued. There was a rustle from behind her, and she wondered if former students were attending. "He would bring home students, classes of graduate students studying physics and astrophysics. He was a different man around them—so enthusiastic, even laughing. I've often wondered if he would have liked one of us to follow him into the field that he loved so much. But he supported our own ambitions, however far from the stars they took us. When I told him I wanted to be a vet, he just nodded and told me where to look to follow that dream."

Naomi could remember those dinners. She'd wished she could make him laugh and talk like his students could. It had been a reminder to her of how little he needed her.

Daniel cleared his throat before continuing. "The last time I saw my father was at Easter. That seems like such a long time for two people who lived in the same town. He knew by then about the cancer, but he was as quiet as ever. He never could stand to have us worry or fuss over him. Maybe that's why he didn't tell us he was dying. It came as a shock that he was gone." He rubbed a hand over his eyes.

"When my mother died, Dad shut himself away from the world. It was as if the stars had gone out, as if there was no light left for him. Now, he has joined her, and the stars will shine brighter for their reunion." His voice choked on these last words, and he returned to the pew and sat down again. Aunt Livy put her arm around his shoulder.

Naomi looked over at the casket. Was that the father her brothers remembered? Daniel was talking about someone she didn't recognize.

The priest closed the service, and Naomi sat with Aunt Livy while Daniel, Mike, and Johnny joined three of her father's friends to carry the casket to the hearse. She wished again that they could have made room for her, but Daniel was right. It looked heavy. She would have been more of a hindrance than a help.

When the dead had left the building, Aunt Livy stood and took Naomi's arm and walked back up the aisle. Naomi could feel people watching, could feel her cheeks shine with lack of tears.

As they reached Aunt Livy's car and prepared to follow the hearse to the cemetery, she realized that even now she had nothing to do. Aunt Livy was in charge of getting her to the burial. Naomi was just along for the ride.

"It was a good service. Your father would have been happy."

Naomi nearly choked at the thought. She cast around for something to say that wouldn't reveal how little she'd heard of the funeral. "Daniel did a good job."

"Yes." Aunt Livy started the car. "It was very moving." Her voice sounded cold, so cold that Naomi stared at her. "Your father was a very special person. You know, I gave him his first telescope."

"Really?"

"He was ten—Susan, your grandmother, thought it was a bit too advanced for him, but he would go out on the roof and set it up. He always did love the stars."

"I wish I'd seen them with him."

Her aunt didn't seem to hear her. "He would name them for me, lisping out the Latin," she said. "I tried to tell him stories about the constellations, and he would just

look at me as though I were crazy. To him, the magic of the stars was always in their reality.”

Naomi was silent.

They followed the hearse. Naomi remembered the twists and turns from childhood visits to her mother’s grave. A yellow backhoe provided an incongruous backdrop to the gravesite.

The grass was autumn drab, but it was warmer out here than it had been inside the chapel. Naomi joined her brothers at the priest’s side as he said a few more words. Other than the principal mourners, there were only ten other people at the gravesite—all of them Aunt Livy’s friends. Naomi was glad because there would be less need for playacting.

“Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.” The priest gave each of them a handful of dirt and in turn they sprinkled it over the casket. Naomi was last. She released her dirt and stepped back to catch hold of Mike’s hand. One of the older women stepped forward and sang “Amazing Grace” as the coffin was lowered into the ground.

Mike’s hand shook in hers. She put her arm around him. One final prayer and the service was over.

The old women came up again and offered final condolences and hugs. Aunt Livy bore it stoically. Naomi was glad they refrained from pinching her cheeks. And then the five of them were alone.

“I didn’t think it was real.” Mike was talking so quietly she was probably the only one who could hear him.

She nodded, leaning her head into his shoulder. “He’s gone.”

Johnny took a quick step forward, touching the stone that now bore both of their parent's names. He seemed to shake the mood off. "We should get back to the house."

Daniel nodded and the three of them stepped away. "Coming?"

Naomi glanced at Aunt Livy. "I think she needs a few more minutes. We'll be there soon."

Daniel gave her a hug and the three men headed back to their car.

Naomi moved closer to her aunt. She was staring at the hole in the ground.

"Aunt Livy?"

"I never cry." The older woman's voice was flat and cold. "I haven't cried since before Nathan was born."

"It's okay," Naomi said, putting her arms around her aunt. Aunt Livy's spine was so stiff it felt like hugging a statue. "You don't have to cry if you don't need to."

At those words, her aunt sagged against Naomi's shoulder and shook. Naomi could feel her arm getting damp. She rubbed her aunt's back wishing someone else was here. Someone who could soothe her aunt, who was crying so hard now she seemed barely able to breathe. They stood there until she finally cried herself out.

Aunt Livy shuddered a final sob. "He loved the stars," she said, as though that explained everything.

Naomi leaned back to see Aunt Livy's face, but the crisis appeared to be over.

"Why don't you show them to me?"

Aunt Livy looked surprised, but nodded.

That night, the five of them were alone again. Johnny was sprawled out on the couch with his eyes closed, Mike sat cross-legged on the floor, and Daniel sat in their mother's reading chair and stared at his hands in his lap, looking lost. Their father's reading chair was conspicuously empty. Aunt Livy had stopped at the remembrance table they'd set up with pictures of their father throughout his life. From where Naomi stood, leaning against the wall, she could see her aunt's shoulders starting to quiver.

Naomi cleared her throat. Everyone looked at her. "Why don't we take out a telescope," she said, "and look at the stars?"