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IF YOU CAN BELIEVE IT

by

Mary Elizabeth Cartwright

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May 2020

This work is dedicated to my mother,

Brenda Cartwright,

and her mother,

Virginia Jones.

Abstract

If You Can Believe It is a novel of three female perspectives. Marla Morrow, Judith Pleasant, and Cassandra Henry are three women on the path of self-discovery in various ways. Set in a fictional town of Erusa, Kansas, this text explores both religious beliefs, the definition of motherhood, and what it means to love. *If You Can Believe It* is fictional work that explores the craft of magical realism mixed with biblical origins. For example, Marla Morrow experiences a virgin pregnancy. Marla, Judith, and Cassandra experience both the real and the unexplainable, which in turn leads the three characters towards different paths yet finding the same conclusion; love is the only true medicine. Real people and events inspire this manuscript and events. All names and places are changed.

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Prologue

She was made. That was certain. Yet, not even she knew how. She was born with Earth and grew as it grew. She pulsed with her private sources of life throughout time. Then, a man covered her with stones, then gravel, and then asphalt. Now, two rows of shirt-waist houses lined her body like mismatched buttons of a beloved sweater.

The beings above her spoke of Erusa, Kansas. But she had been called many names before. Now she was called Dolorosa Road, a street of the tiny town frequently left off the map.

Her houses rose from the dirt as if grown. Six houses of various shades of beige arranged like dominos, equal distances from one to the next. All the same number of blades of grass lived in the yards. All the same cedar wood front doors. Though there was something distinctive, she knew about the middle two, something slightly off. Not off, but strange. Not strange, but different. It didn't surprise her when one of the middle ones was the first to be filled.

Kassandra and Albert Henry. Childless. Just turning over into middle age when they filled the left house with all their things. Dolorosa loved Kassandra. Her children loved her too. They loved how she watered the yards beside hers. How she added flowers and herbs to her garden, placed rocks with painted white lines, to starve off bad intentions, around those flower beds. How she murmured under her breath when a root stretched out from the dirt, and instantly it would burrow its way back down like a dog told *fetch*. How she buried banana peels and carrot tops and potato skins back into the earth as if she knew how Dolorosa hungered too. Dolorosa knew what Kassandra was, a woman sensitive to all living things, and wondered if it played any part in the reason why she was here. Did Dolorosa call for her? Was this just always how it was supposed to be? Fate. Faith. Cosmic Revelation. Regardless, she was here, and Dolorosa was thankful.

Then came the Archibalds, the Douglasses, the Logans, the Evans, the Grillers, the Hendersons, the childless, the children-blessed, the three dogs and two cats, the animal haters, and the animal possessed. There were the Brights, two sets of Smiths at the same time, the Palmers, the Joneses, the Meadows, the Miltons, Mr. Hill-Hornbag-that-hits-on-everyone's-wife, the Hamby's, the Swingers, the Saulsberry couple who were *swingers*, the Connors, the Cochrans, and the Christians. Here they came, and here they left. Dolorosa was okay with this, though she disliked heavy foot traffic. She wasn't fond of many of them anyway.

Like a second act, Dolorosa welcomed the Morrows. Anne, just shy of twenty-five, with her baby Marla cocked on her hip, right across from the Henrys. Or the Henry now, Dolorosa should say, for Albert Henry left his body that very same day. It was odd, Dolorosa thought, how that name they called her no longer felt right without that short graying man by her side as if the mask the woman was hiding behind was ripped away from her face.

The Morrows came late that night. The next morning, Anne made the neighbors brownies and pecan pie. She presented them on ceramic plates wrapped in wax paper and tied with a bow. Anne delivered them along their side first. We wanted to say hello, and nothing says hello better than pie. Then they went to Cassandra's. Oh, what a mess. Not the event, but rather the woman that was standing in the door. She went gray overnight. *We brought treats* they said, *sorry if we woke you*. Anne thrust the plate into Cassandra's hands. We just moved in across the street. It seems we've come at the wrong time. They turned to leave, yet Marla Morrow, that infant of only twelve weeks, reached out her hand and grabbed Cassandra's thumb. Squeezed it in a tight grip, that child did. A tear slipped down Cassandra's cheek.

Enter the Andrews. Georgie and Simon. Exactly one year after the Morrows. Newlyweds finding someplace new to land. They were still so fresh that the rings felt heavy on their hands.

They picked the house to the right of Cassandra's. The home the Joneses left so quickly, both their separate ways, one would have to assume that something drastic, or perhaps disturbing happened between those walls. Dolorosa knew but never told.

Like Anne Marrow, Georgie Andrew knocked on Cassandra's door early morning, but with empty hands. *Sorry if I woke you, we just moved in next door. It seems I've come at the wrong time.* Cassandra tried to close the door, but Georgie Andrew's hand stopped its path. Please wait, she said. Wait, Dolorosa whispered in the wind. Georgie, a step closer, ma'am, are you all right? The door opened back up, and Cassandra let her in.

All was well if you could believe it. Cassandra, the Morrows, and the Andrews remain as other families come and go. Cassandra's sorrow lessened, just like Marla grew. Cassandra opened up a store in town. Teas. Medicine. Therapy. Dolorosa knew what it actually was. Magic. A word that lost its power over time. Dolorosa loved to say it aloud, a rumble beneath everyone's feet.

Anne and Georgie became friends. Cassandra and Georgie became friends. Anne and Cassandra kept their respectable distance, and perhaps that was better for everyone. Cassandra and Anne were of the same stone, unmoving, their edges too jagged to fit against one another.

For ten years, everything is Eden. Or as close as it can be.

Then, the Pleasants came. Next door to the Morrows. On the left. Judith and Peter and ten-year-old Gabe. Everything remained the same, if not better. Marla had a friend that lived on the same street. Judith and Anne and Georgie became linked. Mind, Body, and Spirit. Wine on Fridays after work, rotating houses like a traveling show. Georgie extended invitation after invitation that Cassandra politely declined. Everything was fine. For six years it was fine, fine, fine.

Then, one night, all quiet, even the bugs twenty feet deep in the soil fast asleep, Georgie Andrews showed up at Kassandra Henry's house with tears in her eyes.

Dolorosa Road shuddered as Kassandra pulled Georgie Andrews in and closed the door.

Part I

Conceive Tea

Ingredients: nettle leaf, green tea leaves, raspberry leaves, bone broth with bones (chicken bones preferred), full-fat milk (pasteurized), ginger powder

Directions: add all ingredients into a cast-iron skillet. Omit bones. High heat until the mixture begins to simmer. Transfer mixture to the pot over low heat. Use bones to stir until a soft boil forms. Serve when room temperature.

Note: For best results of conception, drink in summer months, when raspberry leaves are in season: July-October.

-cow bones resulted in an unusual increase of sexual activity, see tips for nymphomania in section addictions, obsessions, and Edward VII notes.

Kassandra

Kassandra Henry moved to Dolorosa Road from Whittier, Alaska, with her husband, Albie, for two reasons. The first, the advertisement for Live in the Heart of America spoke to her. Sitting at their breakfast bar in their apartment one brutal winter morning, the newspaper spread out between them she looked at the image of the three shirt-waisted homes equal distance apart with their wide-open front lawns and front porches and thought the shows she and Albie liked to watch before bed. She shoved the crumpled newspaper into Albie's face after she read it.

"Doesn't that look like where we should be?"

"Looks like any other place to me," Albie said, only giving it the barest of glimpses before going back to the front page.

"It doesn't. It looks like our place. Can't you see it? That house," she pointed to the center, "right there in the middle. That's our home." It was a whisper in her brain telling her it was time, the way it always did when the world told her to move onward. A voice telling her when and what to do. A muse. Though the voice always felt like her own, not of a different person. Albie called them instincts. Others called them witchery. Kassandra called them delights.

Albie looked up and eyed the middle house of monochromatic shades of gray.

"Sure?"

A month later, the Henrys bought the house. It was a bargain, really. A price they couldn't believe when they asked. They sold the two-bedroom apartment in Begich Tower, packed everything up, and flew to the heart of America.

The second reason was one she kept hidden from everyone, including herself.

Kassandra and Albie were the first residents of Dolorosa Road. A fact that was not lost on her. The world had a funny way of communicating with Kassandra, and this was just one of

those moments. While Cassandra considered herself a permanent resident on Dolorosa Road, there was always someone leaving, and more still coming. When one of the houses on Dolorosa went on the market, no matter the state of the economy, it sold by the end of the day.

They saw every family move onto Dolorosa Road. She could tell the moment the moving trucks pulled up how long they were going to stay. She liked to keep track of all the leavers in a notebook like a guest book at a wedding, something to open up, and recall the people she spent a moment or two with. Cassandra saw every one of them come and pass. A few, she missed. The others, she said a prayer for the next town to which the leavers were headed.

She took to introducing herself less and less. Even less after Albie passed.

Kassandra saw his death coming. She felt it in her bones, the way her organs pressed against them harder than ever before pushing her ribs open like gates. It was as if they were getting ready to leave, too, as if every part of her wanted to touch him one last time.

It was the same day the Morrows moved in right across the street into 2627 Dolorosa Road.

They were stayers.

Like the Pleasants.

Kassandra felt the tingle with each family as she did that morning at her breakfast bar with the newspaper stretched out before her. They were all headed toward the heart without fully knowing why.

+

She knew the Morrows were going to be different. They must be, coming in on Cassandra's darkest day, almost sixteen years ago. Or, perhaps she thought they were different because she had the most access to the mother and daughter, their front window lined up with hers. Curtains

still hadn't been put up. Cassandra had a front-row seat to the works of the Morrow household. She knew their routine just as well as her own. Yet, the people who lived in their house before didn't stir any interest. Cassandra never stopped to see what the Joneses concocted across the street, or how the Hamby's were holding up. Cassandra didn't have a lick of interest in actually learning the lives of her neighbors until the Morrows moved in. Observing was one thing, interjecting and investing was another.

Kassandra didn't think much of Anne Morrow, or Saint Anne, as many liked to call her, with her charities and luncheons and bullshit. Saint Anne tried everything to be something she was not. Anne reminded Cassandra of her own mother, Cora. A woman who tried her best to be something more than what she was. As a result, Cassandra was compared and fell short to her mother's standards. Cora wanted more attempt, more desire to better her abilities. It was a feeling that never went away. A feeling that intensified the day she left their home in Gettysburg to be anywhere and everywhere else. Magically, the distance made her mother's opinions of her all the more powerful. Though her mother wasn't around the day she decided to marry Albie, Cassandra felt the trickle of disappointment through her blood song. Even after Cora's passing, that feeling of discontent still managed to make it through. She felt this same feeling the day she saw Anne, despite the woman's kindness. Beneath the surface, she knew Anne was sizing her up like a seamstress, finding all the loose seems, the missing buttons. Cassandra saw how Marla looked up at Anne and how Anne always found something that needed fixing. A stray hair. A piece of lint. An invisible smudge against the girl's cheek.

Right now, was a prime example, Cassandra thought as she watched Marla Morrow come out her front door and sit on the brick-lip step of the porch with a roll of paper in her lap. That meant half of the PTA or one of the other committees that Saint Anne was chair of was meeting.

Kassandra would leave the house too. No telling what non-sense they were pretending was important.

Kassandra petted her Italian Greyhound; the soft strands beneath her hand were calming.

“Look, Bathsheba. I bet Anne and her gaggle of geese are across the street.”

So many cars lined Dolorosa Road. Up and down, minivans, the newest models of SUVs, a couple of sports cars were parked neatly like a dealership. Kassandra wanted to walk across the street and pretend that to shop for a new vehicle.

“Well, it is a Friday,” Bathsheba said. The dog didn't care to look up to confirm Kassandra's comment. When she was a child, Kassandra believed that the voices emitting from her childhood cat were just a figment of her imagination. Yet, it kept happening. Not with every animal, but most. Each instance completely different. Spirits of past blessed being such as herself, trapped or reborn, she still wasn't sure. Bathsheba had a low, sultry voice that came from age, a few too many heavy drinks in her day, and too many packs of cigarettes. Bathsheba was either a smoker in her past life, or she was doing a stellar impersonation of Kathleen Turner. They knew each other for over eight years. Their communication skills instilled a curiosity from those unaware or simply naïve toward Kassandra's aptitudes. Though they would probably look longer if Kassandra revealed the fact that she heard words when Bathsheba barked. Fully formed sentences. They were more often than not curse words, but words all the same. She kept their talks to herself.

Bathsheba looked in the direction of Kassandra gazed.

A girl, her brunette hair parted down the middle like a curtain of untamable curls against her pale, flushed cheeks, was one of the very few children Kassandra tolerated. There were few normal beings that Kassandra thought were perhaps reborn into a new era. Marla was one of

them. A young Lily Elise. Thick eyebrows. A nose bigger than society deemed pretty. A round face holding on to the plumpness of youth in her cheeks.

Marla Morrow held her back straight against what Cassandra knew were hens clucking nonsense.

“She looks sad,” Bathsheba said, then slid her eyes closed. “Why don’t you get her one of those cookies you bought from the store. Grab me one too.”

“No, not sad.”

Marla placed plastic headphones in her ears.

She wasn’t one to ignore, this girl. There was a spark about her. Cassandra stared harder, paid closer attention. “Something is different.”

Kassandra got a shiver down her spine and tingles in her toes as her eyes took in the girl.

Coaxing Bathsheba off her lap, Cassandra stood and walked the short distance to her bedroom to change into her armor, Bathsheba’s nails clicking behind her.

The bright yellow jogging suit, she knew, was harsh on the eyes, but she felt powerful when people stared. Cassandra enjoyed the power that the simplicity of being different conjured. Neighbors stared and murmured *did you see her*, as they passed. Gossip of what Cassandra had or hadn't done always took precedence over the truth. Half the women of Dolorosa cared more about warming town gossip in their mouths than recognizing the lies they whispered to themselves every morning as they looked in their bathroom mirrors. She didn’t care what they said about her behind closed doors. Those whispers gave her all the power she needed to say what she wanted when she wanted.

She didn’t fear the women of Dolorosa Road.

But the women of Dolorosa Road were scared of her, though none were brave enough to

start a hunt. Every place Cassandra lived was the same. People talked about her more and kept a careful distance. Nothing more than gossip and overwhelming curiosity from those around her. Yet, she never lived in the same town as Judith Pleasant before, and Judith Pleasant now held a flaming pitchfork ready to use against Cassandra. She lived on the very same street. It had come as a surprise to Cassandra, Judith's sudden wrath toward her. They conversed many times. Had coffee a time or two. Judith bought tea from her shop, though it was nothing special, just the standard green tea. They were nothing but cordial to one another, but that ended this past July. The same month that Georgie Andrews left. The same time that words moved over Erusa as easy as the wind that Judith was trying to get rid of Cassandra's hippy, homeopathic, and fraudulent bullshit.

Kassandra combed her hair down into her silver bob that Albie had adored running his fingers through. It was the only reason she still took the time to brush it over the preferred bedhead she knew would be a beacon to spying eyes.

“You're going to have to buy me sunglasses if you buy any more clothes that color,” Bathsheba said.

“Don't be rude, or I'll take you to the vet for a bath and request Bertha, queen of Brobdingnagian, to do it,” Kassandra replied.

“One of these days I'm going to run away.”

“Good luck finding kibble on your own, sister.”

Kassandra walked out the front door, Bathsheba close on her heels. She picked up the gardening gloves she kept beside the clay pot of dirt and grabbed the short gardening shovels.

Bathsheba wandered in the yard. Kassandra didn't dare place a leash or collar around the greyhound's neck. Bathsheba made her opinion on such devices known on the one and only time

Kassandra took her to the pet store. Three potential fights and a call to animal control later, Kassandra shuffled out of the store bagless and with a growling Bathsheba hidden beneath her winter coat as a salesman shouted behind her about his potential case of rabies.

“Am I supposed to be doing something?” Bathsheba asked as she sniffed the ground.

“Are we acting like I asked to come out here?”

“Act natural,” Kassandra said beneath her breath.

Kassandra pulled a plastic bag from her pocket.

“Coming from you, I have no idea what that means.”

“Hi, dear!” Kassandra shouted across the yard, waving her hand with the bag in the air.

Marla was already staring right at her, as she knew she would.

“Yes, that’s the natural thing to do. Waving a shit streamer in the air. Perfect, Kass.”

Marla waved in return.

The girl had a glow. Subtle. Almost as if her skin reflected the sun. Kassandra moved around her front yard. Some called them auras. Kassandra didn’t believe in those. Light simply adored some people more than others.

Judith Pleasant’s navy Subaru passed with a quick honk.

“No cookie for you,” Kassandra said, still smiling like a madwoman just escaped from a vacation at an institution.

The delight running down Kassandra’s spine was a sensation. Pricks and pulses that tingled through her limbs.

The world had plans for Marla Morrow, she thought.

Kassandra Henry, for once, had no idea what her part would be in it all.

Marla

Marla Morrow sat on the front porch of her house as her mother held a Ladies of Erusa Baptist meeting in the kitchen. The countertops were burdened with homemade dishes still covered with aluminum foil. The smell of rosemary roasted potatoes, the tang of tomato sauce that Marla knew was a heavy coat over a row of ravioli, and eggs, made Marla Marla smelled wet, hard-boiled eggs. Egg salad, no doubt. Marla's stomach rolled and made her way for the front door to get away from the smell. Her stomach soared upward and into her mouth, but she managed to push the contents back down. She was always uncomfortable in crowds, especially crowds that brought egg salad and consistently remarked on her appearance.

“Takes after her father.”

“Divine skin, though.”

“There's make-up now that helps with contorting. My Molly got some, and it really makes a difference. If only I had that in high school.”

“I don't understand this eyebrow trend anymore.”

“She'll be gorgeous once that baby fat drops. That's how it always is.”

Not even the open comic book on her lap or the scalding Kansas sun of August heating the brick beneath her were distractions enough to turn the voices into silence.

The bright, printed pages didn't hold her attention this afternoon, one of the few afternoons left before the beginning of her junior year at Erusa High School. Now, seven weeks shy of her sixteenth birthday, comic books seldom held her attention. She didn't feel like her younger self. The Marla of yesterday seemed like distant memories. Even when she was able to sneak one into the house, away from her mother's prying eyes, and into the floral printed photo box beneath her twin-sized bed, Marla didn't finish them. The “boys books” weren't banned

from the house. Still, it didn't stop her mother from commenting.

“Those are nothing but pictures of disproportionate bodies. Have you ever seen someone that looked like that?” she said.

“It’s not about their appearance, it’s about their powers,” Marla said.

“And what does that one do?” her mother asked, pointing to one panel of Mystique. Blue skin, magenta hair, long white dress cinched at the waist with a belt of skulls.

“She transforms. Shape-shifts.”

“And what good does that do?”

“She can be anything, get out of trouble quickly. Trick people. She’s a villain.”

“Hmm. She sounds like one.”

Her mother’s hatred made Marla fell in love with them all the more. She discovered that make-up bags were welcomed one afternoon when she agreed to hide her best friend, Jane Harper’s make-up from Jane’s strict and relentless cosmetic-captor mother. When Anne found the bag, Marla lied and claimed ownership of the bright eyeliners and various glitter-filled tubes of lip-gloss. It was one of the few times Marla recalled Anne praising her. The next day they spent the afternoon at Macy’s as Anne swiped shade after shade after shade of blush samples to Marla’s cheeks. Marla pretended to enjoy it. She resisted the urge to scratch her cheeks all night long because, like her mind, Marla’s skin wasn’t partial to the cosmetics. After Marla displayed a false interest in all things that she wasn’t, her mother started to give her more space, though her mother occasionally asked her to put on a little of the blush they purchased to brighten her up before guests came over.

Marla knew her mother would prefer Jane if she knew her secret. Marla dreamed Jane was the daughter in the Morrow household. Anne and Jane laughing around the kitchen table. All

immaculately dressed and sitting straight in their chairs as they discussed their days, their accomplishments, and the wide-open world that was Jane's future. Sometimes it was her friend Gabe Pleasant in Jane's chair, conversing with his mother, Judith. Holding hands. Heads bent close in conversation. Closer than Marla felt with her mother. In these dreams, Marla was always on the front porch looking through the peephole of the front door. Marla shivered as she repeatedly called out, "Please!" and begged to be let back in. No matter how loud she yelled, the pairs, Gabe and Judith, her mother and Jane, remained at the kitchen table. Happy. It always ended the same way; a hole opened up beneath her feet, gradually expanding until Marla had nowhere to go. She awoke as she tumbled to a place beneath moments before her body struck the hard surface of the bottom.

Looking down at the comic, Marla closed the pages, not daring to dog-ear the page she was leaving. The X-Men cover was neon purple. She didn't look at which comic she picked when she heard the voices of her mother's friends entering the house. It was one of Marla's favorites. Worlds Apart, part two. Storm versus Shadow King.

Marla looked up and at the houses across from hers. Mass-produced, shirt-waist-styled homes lined the street. The setting sun melted like butter around their structures. It was beautiful to look at. The cherry blossoms in every front lawn not too small to not provide shade on the front porches. The black metal mailboxes with their calligraphed house numbers painted on the side. The families who filled these houses that all seemed just like hers, but only happier. What she wouldn't do to make wind rip through this street, scatter the grass clippings across the clean, even sidewalks, flood a flower bed or two, or fry a dish satellite with a sizzling lightning strike.

Storm feared nothing.

The back of Marla's legs began to sweat.

The sun started to set, yet she hadn't felt hotter.

Mrs. Henry, the widowed sixty-something-possibly-more-years-old, walked out her front door in a neon-yellow tracksuit. Her dog at her feet. Marla watched as Mrs. Henry slipped gardening gloves, floral print, onto her hands.

"Hi, dear," she said from across the street. Mrs. Henry waved a repurposed plastic newspaper bag she used to collect Bathsheba's droppings in the air.

Marla lifted her hand in response.

Mrs. Pleasant, Juju, as Marla called her, drove down the street toward her house. She honked and sent a wave in Marla's direction. Despite the fight between Juju and Anne, Marla still loved Juju like a mother. Juju's son was her best friend. The Pleasant household was often a vacation. She'd go there after school and nearly every weekend for a few hours of peace from what Gabe described as her mother's ability to put the mother in smother.

"They been there long?" Mrs. Henry said, pulling Marla from the thought of running across the street and telling Juju what was burning inside of her. Juju, the town pharmacist, could help her. She'd know exactly what to do. Exactly what to say. Marla wouldn't have to fear her reaction. All she had to fear was the slight possibility of Juju breaking the silent treatment between her and Marla's mother, and spilling the tea. She couldn't talk to Gabe. Not yet, at least. Not after Tracy Shepwel's party, it was too soon. Marla had a different feeling wiggle around her middle when she thought of what had happened.

Marla stayed where she was.

Marla knew all the rumors about Mrs. Henry and her ability to make things happen. She overheard her mother and the tea tyrants gossiping about the time Mrs. Henry told Mrs. Jennings that her husband was a cheating scoundrel at the K-Mart, that she needed to leave him as soon as

she could.

“Allen? Cheating?” Mrs. Jennings had said. “Now that’s hilarious. He wouldn’t know what to do with another woman if he even had the nerve to speak to one. I’m more concerned with him making a robot woman that talks science to him than I am with him having an affair. The nerve.”

“You want to come over? I just started dinner.” Mrs. Henry said. She bent down, without breaking eye contact with Marla, collected Bathsheba’s deposit, tied the end of the plastic bag, and patted Bathsheba’s awaiting head. “I don’t mind at all.”

Her stomach hadn’t found its proper place. She felt it at the top of her throat, just a good cough or deep breath away from falling out. Marla was worried if Mrs. Henry kept yelling, the women inside would appear, migrate outside to find the culprit to the neighborhood noise.

Marla couldn’t tell how long she’d been sitting. Her mother could last minutes, seconds even, while some could last hours. From the number of parked cars, she had a feeling this was a long one. If Marla crossed the street to either Mrs. Henry or Juju’s house, while her mother’s friends were over, the consequences she’d face would be worse than suffering a few moments of their comments.

The sun fell further behind the houses.

“No, thank you,” Marla said. She rolled up the comic book as she stood, stuffing it in the back of her shorts beneath her shirt.

“The invitation is always open, dear,” Mrs. Henry said. “All you have to do is knock.”

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“Are you ever going to tell me what happened at Tracy’s?” Jane asked through the telephone receiver pressed to Marla’s ear.

“I can’t,” Marla said. She eyed the clock on the stack of books next to her bed. Eight-thirty. She was sprawled out across the still-made duvet of her bed. She was lucky to have her own cellphone, as Jane voiced to her younger siblings that they had to wait their turn to use their father’s cell. Jane’s father threatened to *break the damn thing* if they didn’t settle down.

Marla watched her ceiling fan move the dust particles on her popcorn ceiling as she listened. The combination of Jane’s voice and the melodic creak of the fan blades twirling was soothing. Her mind went to that place, where it was consistently wandering, the old treehouse in Tracy’s backyard. It took her eyes a few minutes to adjust to the darkness, to see the cobwebs, the fallen leaves, the baseball glove tucked in a corner. Gabe couldn’t stand against the low ceiling. The closeness was uncomfortable until it wasn’t. She knew there were bigger things to worry about, but she never stopped herself when she caught herself replaying that infinitesimal moment.

“Well, why not,” Jane continued. “One moment you were there, the next you were gone. I’ll put a damn leash on you next time if you don’t tell.”

“Language,” Mrs. Harper’s voice echoed through the receiver.

“You had a good time, right? You aren’t going to hide out in your room next Friday, again, and leave me to deal with Tracy Shadwell by myself, right? Because if I have to spend another moment listening to how she plans on joining both the debate team and the cross-country team while maintaining her four-point-oh-how-nobody-cares, you’ll find out why they call me Jane the Insane.”

“Who calls you that?” Despite her darkening thoughts, Marla laughed.

“People that no longer exist. And you dodged my question.”

“Yes, I had fun.”

“Sooooooo,” Jane dragged the word, slow and loud. “You’ll come with me this Friday? To

Brian's? He's throwing an end-of-summer raver. He's got a pool, and he said his older brother—you know the cute one that goes to Georgetown, not the oldest one, but the one with the wavy brown hair and freckles—well, he's got a stereo with bass speakers that he's going to set up. Everyone will be there, even Gabe. He said something about it today.”

Marla sat up.. She swore she could hear the smile of Jane's mouth when she said his name.

“He told me he had a rehearsal.”

“Apparently not. Something about not being understudy anymore. I don't know, you'll have to ask him. You know how I zone out when he starts talking about plays. I mean we get it, Shakespeare, yay, another old dead white guy that still gets attention. Woo who. I know it was him that you ran off with at Tracy's. I mean, I get it, you were doing him service because he's hideous and doesn't have any other friends, it's in your nature to help the misfortunate, but it was a party. You could talk to other people.”

“I talked to you.”

“Not what I'm talking about, babe. Boys. I mean, unless it's Gabe you're trying to impress. Is it Gabe you are trying to impress? That's cool, but you are gorge, and you could have whoever you want.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm almost done, Sarah,” Jane said away from the receiver. “Calm down. Sorry about that. You there? What were you saying?”

“Gabe, I think,” Marla said. She wasn't entirely sure.

“I mean, some of the guys have been asking about you lately, too. I'm talking, Cole Hutchins. He asked if you were coming to Brian's. I love you enough to not be jealous that he

likes you instead of me, he even called you a Seek.”

“Like *hide and seek*?”

“No, Seek, as in Sexy Geek. Well, that's what Tracy said it meant, and she thought he was talking about her, so she could be making it up. At least they didn't call you a Herd. Get it, hot and nerd. Guys are so stupid.” Jane laughed. “Anyway, I mean, I'm tired of the guys in our grade anyway, they're boys really. Especially Devin. Wouldn't the world be better without Devin Lewis? I just wish I could erase him from my brain and all traces of his tongue out of my mouth. Do you think it's bad to gargle bleach?”

“Superbad. Don't do that. Try flossing.”

"Flossing. Good. I'm going to try and talk to Brian's brother, the cute one, not the older one, on Friday, so you should try talking to Cole. But only if you want to. You know I support you, right. Five more minutes, Mom. Even if it's Gabe that you like, I can handle the theatre talk with you two, just don't ask me to contribute to the conversation, unless it involves The Cher Show.”

“He's a friend,” Marla said. Her brain treading through Jane's words like mud, hanging onto the sentences containing Gabe as if they were life vests.

"Yeah, he said the same thing We had the same shift at I Hate My Life today. Dairy Queen kills the souls of all employees, I swear. He said he'd go if you went. I don't think he technically got invited, but I don't think anyone will care if he's there. I'm sure Tracy will say something, but I'll punch her if you need me to.”

“I'll go,” Marla said.

"I was joking about punching, but I like your acceptance of my desire for violence.”

“No, you weren't.”

“True. I’ll punch you too if you leave me alone with Tracy again.”

“I promise,” Marla said. She meant it. She’d do anything Jane asked if it meant she’d help her get Gabe within talking distance.

“You should get a job with me at Hell on Earth He has the most hours. Oh, maybe you could take my job, I could just tell my parents that I got laid off. Then, I’ll actually enjoy what’s left of this summer.”

"They'd believe you got laid off from an ice cream parlor in the middle of summer. Good luck with that. And I'm good with spending my hours hiding in my room." Going out had been what got her in this mess anyway.

“Jane,” Mrs. Harper said, closer than before.

“I gotta go. I'll see you on Friday, okay? Brian's picking me up, and we'll stop by yours at seven. You won't have a problem with your mom, right?"

“You know Saint Anne will be beaming to greet you both. She’ll probably have gifts for you and Brian for getting me out of the house.”

“Gah, I’m jealous. My mom said I have to be back by nine-thirty, or she'll be sending my dad after me. Don't think for one second that I forgot you haven't given me any details about Tracy's.”

"Nothing happened," Marla said. The phone felt slick in her hand. She contemplated hanging up.

"Don't act like I don't know you. I want the dirt, and you better tell me soon, or I'll start digging."

“Please let it go. For now. Okay?”

"Just answer one question, and I swear on Cher, I won't ask anymore."

“Fine,” Marla replied, regretting the syllables the moment they left her mouth.

“Did it involve Gabe?”

“Jane Elizabeth Harper, get off the phone.”

“See you Friday,” Jane said before the audible click of the lost connection sounded in Marla’s ear.

Marla let the phone fall to the floor. Her back relaxed against the goose feather pillows her mother covered with silk lavender cases while her mind sped up, the thoughts lapping the ceiling fan tenfold.

A soft knock sounded on her door.

“Marla?”

Anne stuck her head around the door.

“Yeah?” Marla said, lifting on her elbows.

“I was just making sure you made it inside.”

Anne was always kindest to Marla after her weekly meetings. It was as if she was trying to ask for forgiveness in the small moments afterward, despite knowing that it would happen all over again a few days later. Anne always looked a little more tired each time. Marla hadn't missed the monthly Mary-Kay subscription that started coming to the front door addressed to Anne.

“I made it in.”

“Okay, goodnight. I’ll be gone most of the day tomorrow. I’ll call you about dinner. I can pick up from that Greek place you like.”

“Sure.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Marla said. “Tired. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” her mother said as she closed the door.

Would her mother be this way if her father were here? Would they be here, on Dolorosa Road, if her father were still alive? Why couldn’t she be Storm and make snow cascade down from her ceiling? Not a blizzard, but a welcoming blanket of clean. She'd count every flurry until she couldn't tell them apart from the textured ceiling. She'd watch the fan spin them in intricate circles before they found their place to land. She'd stare at their whiteness for as long as she could bear. She'd let it surround her, cover her body and soul. She'd feel pristine for perhaps the last time in her life. Yet staring up at her unmoving ceiling Marla knew she could never be Storm the Brave and Strong.

She was destined to be nothing other than Marla Morrow.

Marla Morrow, seven weeks shy of her sixteenth birthday.

Marla Morrow, falling in love with her best friend.

Marla Morrow, pregnant.

Judith

Judith Pleasant was on the warpath. At least, that was what she wanted to call it. Others would call it stalking. Particularly her husband, Peter, when he called from three states away. That was what she heard as he added, and not for the first time that she was on a revenge path and revenge hurts the person seeking it, not the person whom they wish to destroy. Judith pretended to take his nuggets of wisdom that were as welcomed as weeds during their phone calls. What she was actually doing was taking those nuggets and throwing them out an imaginary window. She was doing that more often. Not listening to what he was saying. In her defense, it was hard to take your husband and his words seriously when he picked a yearlong mission trip over saving his crumbling family without even consulting you.

“It’s what I’ve been called to do,” he said with a heavy sigh, as if should’ve been common knowledge. Judith wanted to ask him why he felt like that was where he was supposed to be. Why a group of seven men traveling around in a minivan from impoverished city to impoverished city, handing out bibles and volunteering, was more important than their family. What could a homeless person do with a bible? They aren't thinking about their souls, she wanted to shout. They're worried about surviving today, not about salvation for tomorrow. Lord knows since he left, that is all she’d been doing.

Judith survived best when she distracted herself with work. It was why she extended her pharmacy’s hours. From behind the counter, she watched Lara Cooper pick up every item off the shelf before placing it right back down. What else did she have to consume her days with Peter away, with her son was off doing this and that? She didn't have any friends. Up until two months ago, she’d had two great friends who she'd spent every free hour with; friends who made Dolorosa Road a fantastic neighborhood. The first, Georgie Andrews, had moved away without

telling her. One day Georgie was there. The next Georgie's husband, Simon, was placing a for sale sign in the yard. Simon wouldn't tell Judith where Georgie went, only that they were separating, and he couldn't wait to get out of this God-forsaken place. Georgie only answered her phone when Judith threatened to go to the police. All she said was that she okay and needed space.

Space.

Judith hated space.

She had more of it than she'd want in a lifetime.

The other, Anne Morrow, acted as if Judith were nothing but a puff of air that she could walkthrough. They hadn't spoken to one another in forty-two days. Not that Judith was counting. It was easy to remember. One doesn't forget the day that their friend verbally assaults them for all the neighbors to see. Judith was like a kid with an arm cast, she was counting the days for her bone to heal and all evidence of injury to be sawed off. The broken arm, she released wasn't her fault, but rather that of her neighbor, Kassandra Henry. The thought had knocked her over when she began to place the two acts of Georgie and Anne together. Like all good movies, Judith would make a comeback. She was the underdog, she thought. Second fiddle. Not anymore. She would hold those responsible for the havoc that was her life.

"I heard you are starting a petition?" With her German accent, everything Lara said sounded like a question. She made her way to the counter of Pleasant Pharmacy. Despite the August heat, Lara wore a long-sleeve shirt and jeans. Her brown hair was pulled back from her face. She was beautiful. It was one of the first things that Judith thought when the twenty-eight-year-old moved in across the street. An effortless look on Lara, but when Judith tried to achieve it, patients asked her if she was okay all day as if she was sick.

Judith wore her white lab coat, a state requirement for all hours that she worked, over a sleeveless navy blouse, and thin black slacks. Her hair, a shade she often compared to the yellow-orange skin of a grapefruit, was piled off her neck in a low bun. A portable fan pointed directly at her face, blew wisps of her hair against the bridge of her oily nose. The air conditioning was purring a cool sixty-eight degrees into the room. Judith knew she was sweating an outline of Africa in the covered navy fabric on her back.

“I am. Would you like to sign it?” Judith asked her newest neighbor.

Judith pulled up the woman’s profile in her computer system.

“I don’t have anything ready for you. Did you see Dr. Rofe? I don’t have anything called in.”

"No, I have not gone to the doctor. I have a question about a rash."

Lara slid one of her sleeves up her arm, revealing an angry red welt above her wrist. It was like a burn, but worse. Every hair follicle on her arm appeared to be inflamed, like a million tiny ant bites traveling from her wrist to her elbow.

“What happened?”

“I do not know.”

“When did you notice it? Was it always this bad? Was it a gradual build-up?”

“It happened overnight.”

“Overnight? Did you change laundry detergent? Have you been outside in the yard?”

“No and no.”

“You have no idea how this happened?” Judith looked at Lara. It astounded her that one could be so clueless.

“No. It appeared like magic.”

“Magic.” Judith held her tongue. She hated the word. She never felt so passionate about a simple concept. It was just a word. Five letters. Every time someone said it since Georgie Andrew left Dolorosa road, Judith felt her skin start to bubble.

“Magic,” Lara smiled.

“Well, let’s assume that magic won’t help this. Because it won’t because it isn’t real. I’m going to grab you some hydrocortisone cream.”

Judith walked around the divider that separated her and the controlled medication from customer access. It was simple in its construction; a square spans of wood floors and wallpapered walls. It was a one-story facility, more like a doctor's waiting room over that of a Walgreens. Chairs lined the entrance wall with Salvation Army found coffee tables dispersed on either side. A display tower of anti-itch creams and feminine products were located on the right. Three shelves of sensitive-skin body washes and daily vitamins categorized by age were on the left. Judith grabbed a red and white box containing an extra-strength hydrocortisone cream, then stopped and straightened a wayward box. She moved behind the partition and rang up the medication for Lara.

“\$8.57,” Judith said.

Pushing down the sleeve of her shirt, Lara paid for the medication, then stuck the box and receipt into her purse. Turning to leave, Lara waved her hand and mumbled a quick “Thank you.”

“Wait,” Judith said before she made it to the door. “The petition?”

Judith pulled the manila file folder she kept on her at all times. The document was detailed, well written, and damning. At least, that was what the editor who Judith hired to help right the form said after Judith insisted on a fourth editing session. The five-page document was

prolific with text, jammed with business codes, ethical justifications for the removal of the woman's establishment, and personal commentary of the woman's actions that only the ignorant would find fault with. Judith smiled every time she pulled it out. She knew that it would be a success. She flipped to the last page, a full page of blank lines that welcomed signatures of participants of her cause.

“Here. You can sign right here,” Judith pointed to the first line. She knew more about Lara's medical history than her personality, but if Lara signed the letter, Judith made a promise with herself that she would get to know the woman better.

“Oh no, I do not want to sign,” Lara said.

“You don't?”

“No, I just heard you started a petition. I could not believe it, so I thought I would ask. Thank you again for your cream. I like perennials in your front yard. Very pretty.”

Lara Cooper turned her back on Judith and left. Just in time, too. Judith was ready to recommend another pretty place to put her perennials.

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For Judith, Dolorosa Road had been love at first sight. It screamed families made here with its broad lawns and front porches. Even before he was born, Judith pictured Gabe running across the yard through a sprinkler, shrieking in delight, as Peter chased close behind. She imagined the neighbors with their kindness. The baked pies, the mayonnaise-baptized salads, and all of the just stopping by to say hello. For a few years, those dreams were real. Judith, Peter, and Gabe were happy as munchkins in the land Oz. Gabe's best playmate lived three houses down the road. Judith and Anne became as inseparable. Then, Georgie showed up, and life couldn't have been better. Though Georgie struggled with creating a family of her own, the three families were all influenced

by the utopian atmosphere Dolorosa Road seemed to emit.

Peter started going to church earlier and longer. He canceled date nights and dinner with friends because there was so much work to be done. There was always someone needing to be saved. He was gone more. Then he left. It was hard. Then it wasn't. Judith and Gabe survived with the help of their friends.

Then, Anneageddon. The catastrophic demolition of friendship that took place on Anne's front lawn and for all of Dolorosa to see. Judith remembered all the neighbors out on their porches, hands to their chests as if they too were feeling the frantic beating of Judith's heart. Yet, despite it all, Judith still loved the street. She loved the town, the people, the shops, her neighbors no matter how nosey they could be. Judith belonged here like the trees of her yard.

She felt her love for her street every time she drove up to work and down to come home. Like now, driving home after the emotionally stressful day, she felt one of the many bubbles of tension pop and dissipate in her brain. She saw the bright yellow stick that she knew was Kassandra Henry on her right, the small figure of Marla Morrow on her left. Marla was the closest thing she had to an actual daughter. There she was sitting on the porch step of the house that she was no longer welcomed.

She honked and waved. Wishing she could do more, but knowing if she stopped her car for even a second outside 2627 Dolorosa Road, Anne Morrow would be out her front door with some type of cooking instrument in her hand.

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Pulling in her drive, she noticed Gabe's truck parked in the driveway.

"Gabe? Are you home?" her voice echoed in the empty entryway. She waited to hear the creak of the ceiling from his movements, but nothing came

"Gabe?"

When silence answered her, she took two stairs at a time to the second floor that was known as Gabe's den. Not pausing to take in the dirty laundry piled outside the bathroom that looked like a dictionary's description of the exhaustive state and excreting a musk that burned the hairs of Judith's nose, she walked into his room.

There he was. Asleep. Just as Judith had left him this morning. His orange-yellow hair, the same shade as hers, pointed every which way. The skin beneath his eyes was the softest shade of blue. His chest was bare, yet on his left foot, he still wore his tennis shoe. Even in his sleep, he looked exhausted. His last summer before his final year of high school. He'd been coming home later than usual. Boys will be boys, Peter said when she'd told him she'd caught Gabe sneaking in the front door at three in the morning. She could have sworn that he had lipstick smudged against his lips. Her heart nearly stopped at the thought of her son doing something that he had no business doing during a time where everything he did mattered. Where would Judith be if she'd been as wild as him at his age? Going out with boys, not having a care in the world about tomorrow. She wouldn't be here, she knew. She'd be in her hometown, depending on her parents. Stagnate. She wanted so much for him, but she wanted him to want it too.

Scattered across the floor were books turned on their spines, opened up to the ceiling like offerings. Gabe loved to read. She made her way across the carnage of books and pulled the falling duvet back into its rightful place.

Gabe stirred.

"Hey," Judith said. "It's four in the afternoon. Why are you in bed?"

"Late night," he murmured as he tucked his head beneath his pillow.

"Where were you?"

“Out with friends.”

“Anyone I know?”

“No.”

“Well, then perhaps I should meet them.”

“Mom,” Gabe grumbled beneath the pillow. “Please.”

“Fine. But expect a call from your father.”

“All right,” he growled.

“Be downstairs in an hour. You’ll at least eat dinner with me if you insist on sleeping your days away.”

Judith caught another mumbled response.

Walking out of the room, she paused at the door. She smiled as she flipped on the bedroom light. Gabe groaned *I hate you* and pulled another pillow atop his head.

“Gabe?” Judith asked, not knowing why she felt the need to ask.

“What?”

“You still talk to Marla, right?”

“Yeah,” he replied as he popped his head out from the cave of cushions. He squinted against the light. “Why?”

“I just saw her is all. She was on her front porch.”

Everyone in Dolorosa knew what that meant.

Gabe released a breath as if he had been holding it in. “She’s okay, Mom.”

“Okay,” Judith nodded her head. “Tell her I said hello? And that she’s still welcomed over anytime.”

“She knows.” Gabe and Judith looked at each other. Whatever frustrations Judith had, her

husband's absence, her sudden loneliness, the feeling of powerlessness. She had this. She was talking to her son. No matter how hard her day was or how lonely she felt, she knew she would always have him.

She flipped the lights off as she left the room.

Halfway down the stairs, she heard a murmured thank you.

Kassandra

Standing in the stockroom of her unlit tea shop, DiviniTea, Kassandra begged all the worldly influences, at least those she knew would listen, for help. Not even a quarter past eight, only an hour into her workday, and already she had a headache. Staring at the rain-damp unopened boxes of supplies stacked in a tower while mentally compiling a list of to-dos longer than her years on earth had Kassandra in need of a brew of her TranquiliTea. Today, she thought she would blame it on the rain for her sour mood. The rain was out for her joints. This rain, Kassandra knew, was from somewhere far and somehow got here faster than the world had planned.

DiviniTea was a 700 square foot boutique made up of three eight feet high red-brick walls and a glass front adorned with a picture of an upside-down teacup balancing a crystal ball on its base in acrylic paint. Apothecary shelving took up most of the room, but Kassandra had squeezed a small Parisian café table with matching chairs into a nook by the glass front, and a repurposed barstool to used as a stand for her register. She bolted a rug, a Persian-style fabric that had been her mother's, to the back wall to hide her stockroom door that doubled as a restroom. If one didn't stop to look inside from just the painting on the glass or the shelf upon shelf of bottled spices and herbs, the thirteen birdcages Kassandra used as light fixtures hanging down from the ceiling sure did give them pause.

Her shop sat on the corner of Jaffa Street and Ikea Way, no more than a ten-minute drive from home. It was her means of making it by since Albie died. Through batches of handmade teas and tealeaf readings, Kassandra kept both busy and financially secure. A substantial chunk of his life insurance money went into buying the building, and the rest went into an account to keep it afloat if she hit rough and tough times. She hadn't hit them yet.

It wasn't just tourists that keep Cassandra's shop prospering. Though those certainly stopped by with their Yelp apps open on their phones and looking for that earthy experience, one could only find at DiviniTea. It was the residents of Dolorosa Road who were responsible for DiviniTea keeping its lights on. Cassandra reordered batches of lavender, chamomile, kava kava, and passionflower to blend, grind, and bind in filter paper tied with a strip of cream-colored silk for a fresh batch of her AnxieTeas more than anything else. Her InsomniTea always the bestseller list followed closely by BeauTea. The love teas, a favorite of a few particular ladies and gentlemen on the streets around Dolorosa, were called IntimaTeas because love was too strong a word for some of the patrons that came in seeking just that. Plus, the online marketing course Cassandra took had recommended catchy labels, and Loveteas just didn't blow her dress up.

"You should add InsaniTeas to the list," Bathsheba had offered during Cassandra's five-hour-long creative catchphrase confab (See *Marketing for Magicians and All Things Magical* for more details) many moons ago.

"That's it, I'm taking you off the Board of Directors," Cassandra replied, deleting Bathsheba Y. Reynolds from the CFO line of the letterhead she was designing. "Good luck getting dental now."

Regardless of their labels, Cassandra learned quickly how selfish people were. While she cherished the feeling of helping others, a bitterness had begun to seep into her veins that she had trouble bleeding out. Never did a patron come in seeking answers for ailments of a neighbor or friend, nor did they ask about their loved ones in the readings of PropheTea leaves.

She rummaged in the drawers of the store to help ease her nerves. Though, as she moved from shelf to shelf in the gray light of the overcast sky, she found herself brewing a PropheTea

instead. Her hands moved on their own accord. Pouring hot water from the unglazed clay pot she only used for this kind of tea, Cassandra sat at the table. She watched the nettle push against calendula, the chamomile twirl in a dance between them, the angelica float atop the water before sinking down. The water darkened. She watched until she could no longer see the base of her cup. Bringing it to her lips and sliding her lids close as she asked all her customers to do, she was a hair away from a sip before a tingle warmed her spine, and she froze.

Kassandra's eyes snapped open.

Across the street, Marla Morrow was hunched with her backpack thrust above her damp head, an attempt to shield the rain from her face. Marla pulled on the front doors of shops as she passed. No one would be open for another thirty minutes. Marla didn't appear to know that as she continued to store after store. The girl paused at Pleasant Pharmacy, peering in even though the lights were off, and the door didn't budge as she pulled. She was soaked.

Setting the cup on the table, Cassandra stood and made her way to the door.

"Marla," she projected across the street.

The girl's backpack dropped to the ground with a thud. She turned around as if she was caught in a crime.

"You need to get out of this rain," she continued. "It's not going to be leaving anytime soon either."

Marla looked back at the pharmacy. Some form of struggle across her face before Cassandra watched her shake it free and cross the street.

"Thank you," Marla said as she slid past Cassandra and into the boutique.

She was dressed in tight denim shorts and a size-too-big white top that now showed the light blue tank top beneath. Her toes squished the water into the damp leather straps of her

sandals with each step.

“It wouldn’t have done you any good. Weatherman always gets it wrong. The best thing to do is to leave an old sweater outside, one you loved, where the moon and wind can touch it. Feel it in the morning at dewdrop. If it’s cold, it’s going to rain. If it’s hot, nothing but the sun. If you find critters in the weaves, the weather is changing seasons.”

“What if you walk out and it’s wet because it’s raining? What does that tell you?” Marla asked, walking from shelf to shelf. She plucked a bottle here, smelled a candle there.

“Then, you throw it out, right with your sarcasm, because you didn’t touch it the day before. It’d have told you it was going to rain.”

“I’m saying that there are some holes in your theory. It doesn’t sound like a reliable method.”

“There are holes in everything. We don’t live in a world that has every explanation,” Cassandra said. She waited until Marla looked directly at her. “You’d be good to remember that.”

“Everything has an explanation.”

“That’s the way the arrogant think.”

Kassandra went to the hot plate she kept on the apothecary shelving and grabbed the clay teapot. She walked to the stock room and filled the pot with water from the sink. In the mirror, Cassandra took in the lines around her eyes and the pale skin of her cheeks. She could use some mascara to look more awake, but what she really needed was sleep. It had been another evening of fending off the thoughts that kept creeping into her system. The last time she had been this restless, Albie had cancer in his blood, and she could do nothing about it. She never wanted to feel that helpless again. She felt the thoughts stir. They liked to crowd the spot just above her

eyes and fuzz the edges of her vision.

“I’ve never been in here before,” Marla said from behind the carpet.

“I know.” She knew everybody that walked in these four walls. She knew the ones who would return, the ones that would throw out what they bought without even trying it, the ones that wouldn’t buy anything because their fear of trusting in something that so many rebuked was too much.

“It’s bigger than it looks.”

“That’s just a polite way of saying something is small.”

“No, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“It’s fine,” Cassandra said, closing the stockroom door behind her. She placed the pot on the hotplate and switched the device on. “Why were you running out in the rain?”

“Oh, I was just going to see if anyone was hiring.”

“No one opens up until nine. You got an early start.”

“I walked from home. I didn’t want to leave too late and get drenched in sweat.”

“Why didn’t Anne drive you?”

“She left early. She had to pick up missionaries from the airport.”

“So, she doesn’t know that you’re on a job hunt.” Cassandra pulled the pot from the plate and placed it on the table. She walked around the shop until she had all the right ingredients at the base of a teacup.

“Silences are omissions by default,” Cassandra said as she took a seat at the table. “Sit.”

Marla abandoned the rows of Darjeeling she kept bringing up to meet her nose and sat across from Cassandra.

Kassandra poured the steaming water into the teacup she prepared. For the second time

today, she watched the leaves cavort, then pushed the cup into Marla's hands.

"It's not a big deal," Marla said. "As long as I'm not tarnishing the Morrow image, she doesn't care what I do. What's in this?"

"Just some leaves and water. That's all tea is. Leaves and water. Yet, the wonder that it can do."

Marla stared at the cup. Hesitation on her brow and swirling around her body like lavender wind.

"It won't hurt you, child. I'm the town loon, according to others," Cassandra watched the pink rise up to cloud Marla's cheeks, "but I'm not looney enough to poison my own neighbor, let alone my new employee."

"Really?" Marla asked. "You'll hire me?" She brought the lip of the cup to her own. The girl's eyelids slid down and closed. She took a sip, then swallowed the tea in two gulps. Her throat moved the liquid in visible movements.

"Well, you're looking for work. I'm looking for help. It seems like the world is turning around right on schedule."

"Or we could just blame it on the rain."

"We could do that." Cassandra felt the thoughts in her head move away. The room around her became a millimeter sharper.

"What would you need me to do? I drink tea, but I have no idea what half the stuff in here even is. And I wouldn't know how to help you with your, you know stuff, but I'm a faster learner, promise. I'm not saying I don't want it. I just want you to know that this," Marla waved her hand in the air, "is something new to me."

"What is it that you think I do?"

“You know,” Marla lowered her voice, “spells.”

Kassandra laughed. She laughed harder than she’d laughed in...she didn’t know how long. Her stomach muscles pulled, a tug of muscles moving from a deep sleep. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it wasn’t comfortable either. This girl, Kassandra thought. This girl with her frizzy hair and small frame wasn’t what she expected all those years ago when she watched the Morrow family move into 2627 Dolorosa Road.

“I don’t know about spells,” Kassandra said once she was able to catch her breath, “but there’s a lot I can teach you. If you’re willing.”

“Yes,” Marla said. Her voice lowered still, hardly louder than a whisper.

“Good. It wouldn’t work unless you were. Now, if you don’t have anything planned, I could use your help today. You don’t have school yet, do you?”

“No, it doesn’t start back until next week. When it does, I can come after school, and I can work any Saturday. Sunday’s though—”

“I’m closed on Sundays.”

“Okay,” Marla’s lips pulled up. She had a smile, Kassandra thought. She swore she heard Albie’s chuckle ringing in her ear. The girl’s smile was just like his, wide and full of teeth. The tip of her tongue pressing against the exposed bones. “Do you have a restroom?”

“Behind the carpet.”

Kassandra drank her cold tea in one gulp, the leaves gathered on the bottom. She waited until she heard the door closed before pulling Marla’s mug toward her.

In Marla’s cup, lines of leaves stuck to the sides and pointed in different directions. One, bolder than the others forked into two smaller lines with slight waves to their bodies. At the base of the cup, a mass of teas rested in a solid, bold dot. Around it, leaves spread out in a pattern of

madness. It was as if the dot was magnetic and pulled each different leaf into its orbit as if whatever this dot was, it had everything coming straight towards it. Or her.

The flush of the toilet startled Cassandra. The rim of her nose touched the cup. She jerked it away and placed it back on the table with a soft thud. Cassandra pulled her cup toward her. In the center were three overlapping circles. A chain. A series of events. A chain at the bottom of a cup never fostered good feelings.

“Thank you,” Marla said. The shape of her body was formed against the rug as she pushed it around her. “That’s some powerful stuff.” The girl pointed to her cup. She braided her hair back from her face, the dark locks twisted in a thick plait across her shoulder. She appeared dryer, too. The tea gave her color.

“Yes,” Cassandra replied, not taking her eyes off the girl. “Yes, it is.”

“So,” Marla fidgeted with her still damp shirt. “What should I do first?”

“Funny,” Cassandra said. “I was thinking the exact same thing.”

Marla

It started with a missed period. Marla got hers young, younger than anyone else her age. Eleven. Her mother blamed it on the deli at the supermarket.

“What kind of chemicals are you adding to our children’s food,” her mother yelled to the grocery deli manager before returning home and then writing a letter to Erusa’s councilman regarding the poisoned meat that was pushing girls into womanhood before God’s predetermined time.

Marla had one every month of every year ever since.

She didn’t know how the missed period happened. She knew how it happened in the broad sense, but she didn’t understand how it happened to her. Jane was better than any type of biology textbook in that respect.

In May, she had one, right on the dot as she always did. June’s never came. July’s never stopped by. August’s lost visitor had Marla hyperventilating beneath her bed covers and begging for her least favorite acquaintance in the world to come. She thought she was dying. Marla monitored her temperature for days. She looked at the causes of a missed period. She hadn’t lost weight. As far as she knew, her hormones were fine. She waited for the assault of her missing friend to return stronger than before. What happened if a girl didn’t have one for too long? Would she expand with contained blood like a water blister she always got on the bottom of her feet? Damn, her eighth-grade sex-ed class for not informing her how to properly insert a tampon. What good was the course if she still didn’t understand what the hell her body was actually going to go through during sex. What good does knowing how an egg detaches from her ovaries, or how sperm and egg equaled babies when she didn’t dare look at the male anatomy diagram at the back of her textbook? Why was understanding how babies are made trump teaching her how her body

physically functions? She wanted to scream as she learned more from her internet searches than school. Did you know that black stuff was at the beginning of your cycle? Marla didn't.

Then she felt a flutter in her belly, quick like a hummingbird's wings.

Then the fear began.

She couldn't make a doctor's appointment. Her mother would have to attend.

She couldn't ask Jane. Her friend didn't know how to keep a secret any better than a penguin knew how to fly.

She couldn't walk into Pleasant Pharmacy, the only place she knew where to get a test. Juju would tell her mother. She'd been the one to talk Anne down from suing the grocery store for illegally selling hormones to unknowing customers. She would have to tell her mother, even though they hadn't spoken in weeks. If she saw Marla purchasing the little plastic stick that all mothers feared their young daughter buying, she'd break the silence.

Only one person's name popped into her head when she thought of asking for help.

The only comfort Marla took was the fact that she wasn't the only peculiarity living on Dolorosa Road. When she forgot this, all she had to do was look across the street.

+

The night of Brian's party, Jane picked Marla up twenty minutes late. Glitter lip gloss was smeared across Brian's cheek, and Jane had one of the biggest smiles stretching her lips that Marla had ever seen. Jane's blonde hair was parted down the middle and pin straight. She appeared to have made another step toward her uncanny obsession with Cher. Marla's mother stood in front of Brian's First-Generation Corolla with the red paint missing from the hood and bumpers like mismatched pieces that she didn't notice, or if she did, she pretended not to. She wasn't good at seeing what was right in front of her, Marla thought. For once, Marla was grateful

for this quality of her friend.

“You kids have fun,” Anne said. “Not too late, Marla. We’ve got plans in the morning.”

Not waiting for a response, Marla’s mother turned away and headed back inside their house.

“Another fun trip with the Saint?” Jane asked.

“Shopping.”

“God, I’m jealous. Does she just throw new things at you every week, or does she wait for a new season to start?”

“Let’s go, please. If we don’t move soon, she’ll come back out.” Marla begged. She ignored Jane’s comment. She didn’t want to explain that it was thrift store shopping that her mother was planning on making Marla endure. While Jane might envy Marla’s mother’s need to bond over standard and over-genderized norms, Marla didn’t think that Jane would particularly enjoy the frugality that the Morrow household followed.

Brian geared the car in reverse and moved the vehicle out of the drive as if it was his first time without bumpers at Andy B’s bowling alley, slowly and paranoidly. Marla watched Brian in the rearview mirror mouth words over and over again like a prayer.

“He just got the car. Isn’t it nice,” Jane said. She must have noticed Marla’s concerned gaze and needed to prevent Marla from bolting from the car that second. Brian was going slow enough that it wouldn’t take any effort at all to open the door and step out of what she feared would be a long and laborious drive.

A drive she needed to endure.

A drive she would use to solidify her plan.

“Nice,” she replied. Marla hoped Jane didn’t see her cringe.

+

Brian's house was as packed as Marla imagined Comicon to be. Marla didn't recognize half the people that were dispersed across the front porch with red plastic cups. The bass trembled the floors beneath her feet. Jane, Brian, and Marla shoved their way through the front door. It was less than eighty degrees outside, but Marla felt a musk and chlorine scented heatwave consume her as she entered the house and the sea of bodies.

"We'll go get some drinks," Jane said. She pulled Brian along behind her like she knew where she was going.

"Don't leave," Jane shouted behind her.

"Record time," Marla said to herself. In less than sixty seconds, Marla was alone.

She moved from the front entry, too many teenagers in need of a refill propelled her forward. The living room, the source of the bone-vibrating bass, was less full. Two fabric couches were pushed back against the far wall beneath a large, undraped window. Upon them, two couples were getting to know each other in a way that Marla prayed she never did; she couldn't tell where one face started, and the other began. A group of girls were jumping and swinging their arms to the rhythm of the beat. In the center, Tracy's curls bounced the highest. Froth and bubbles spilled down her arm from the cup she kept high in the air like an Olympian with a torch. A cluster of boys stood beside a speaker pretending to talk to each other, but all appeared more occupied in sneaking glances at the midriffs of the dancers. Through the window, various bodies that Marla recognized threw themselves like collected balls into the crystal blue liquid pool followed by a geyser-like response of exploding water, shrieks of delights, and cheers of appreciation for the God-created untamable entertainment. Surrounding the pool were a school of her wide-eyed peers laughing, heads thrown back as if the task itself was so overwhelming they had to send the sounds to the sky.

Alone, on an island made up of an inflatable donut-shaped floatation device, Gabe lounged in the middle of the grass lawn with one cup grasped in his hands and another beside his feet. His eyes were hidden behind dark lenses. His chest was bare. His black swim trunks sat low on his waist. His poof of red hair hadn't decided which way to lay. His head was tilted to one side. While Marla knew their relationship was shifting, Gabe was and forever would be her best friend.

Crowds and couples sprinkled around him but made no move toward him or welcomed him in. Occasionally, a cannonball competitor shouted his name to coax Gabe toward the destruction. He remained steadfast in his kingdom of isolation. It was the first thing that Marla always noticed about him, his comfortability in his one-man show. It was one of their commonalities. Their desire to take on the world on their own.

Gabe turned his head. If she could see his eyes, they might have met. Marla could feel his stare. But that couldn't be. She was too far away. They were too far apart. It was too bright outside for him to see her here on the inside.

Gabe stood and made his way to the backdoor. He was coming inside. He opened the door and locked eyes with Marla. She nodded toward the front door. He nodded in response. Then before anyone could notice their silent conversation, they moved in different directions and disappeared into the sea.

+

Brian's neighborhood was living. It was the only word Marla could think of as she and Gabe wrestled their way out of the house and walked a block down the road. The sun, directly behind them, was leaving. The narrow streets with houses curving into corners and shaping numerous avenues like a suburban labyrinth were brighter. The streetlights were tall spotlights

displaying the crushed cola cans cluttered on the curb. Marla wondered how Brian got away with the eardrum-damaging-loud music, then realized several homes were just as loud and competing with the cicadas, crickets, and bullfrogs beginning to tune up. The sidewalk was uneven and crooked like the paver didn't know which direction to go. Driveways were full of cars in better and worse shape than Brian's. Window curtains were drawn. Lawns were unkempt. Not one person, not the twenty or so standing in Brian's grass or the couple a few houses down with their pet free from its leash or the jogger hopping from curb to asphalt to avoid a hazard, seemed to care. People lived here, Marla thought. It radiated within her body. People lived here. They lived and didn't care if they didn't get the shiny, plastic Yard of the Year picketed in their flowerbeds.

It was beautiful.

Gabe was silent.

Marla could count on one hand, the times that her best friend was silent. Gabe was the talker. If the two were alone, he couldn't help himself. He possessed the ability to turn the history of an object, a wire, a lampshade, the origins of the canning industry into a blockbuster experience. He would look up bizarre topics and use Marla as a sounding board for his discoveries.

"We need to talk," they said simultaneously.

Silence followed.

They messed this up, Marla thought. This shouldn't be this hard. She never felt uncomfortable, but right now, she would rather eat an egg salad sandwich than stand in this bubble of awkward a moment longer.

"Are we okay?" Marla asked.

"Are you okay?" Gabe replied.

“Yes?”

“You aren’t sure if you’re actually okay or not?”

“No?”

“That’s still a question.”

“I need your help,” Marla said just as Gabe said, “I don’t regret it.”

“I don’t regret it either.”

“What’s wrong?”

Marla reached forward and grabbed Gabe’s hands. They had been the first hands that she held. The first hands to reach out to her in the chaos of Erusa Elementary so long ago. Lost in the congested hallways, he found her and led the way. He had a way of parting a path for her. He was her best friend. “You have to promise not to call me crazy.”

“Why? What the hell is going on?” Gabe’s fingers tightened around hers.

“I think I’m pregnant.”

“You’re what?” Gabe stepped back. His voice lowered and was nearly lost in the opening of the crickets’ nightly song. “Who?”

“No one. You’re the only one that can help me.”

“How is that? No one? You couldn’t be pregnant.”

“Please, you have to believe me. I know how bad it sounds, but please. Please just trust me.”

Gabe took another step back. Marla watched as he took a deep breath, never diverting his gaze from hers.

“Okay,” he said. “What do you need?”

“I need to get into your mom’s pharmacy.”

+

She just needed a test. That was it. Though she didn't know if she was ready for the answer to her question. What if it was what she thought it was? What if nausea, the missed periods, the fluttering in her belly, every symptom that she typed into Google that screamed *pregnant*, was right? But, what if it wasn't? What would that mean? Cancer? Insanity? Was an inexplicable pregnancy truly the lesser evil in this situation? Fuck her running if she was the insane one in the Morrow household; that was even less impossible than a virgin pregnancy. This was the state of her mind for the last three months, and she had had enough.

They waited until the party started to die down when their friends were too intoxicated to notice who was or wasn't there. They left just a little after eleven and drove from Brian's neighborhood to the town square.

"So, we're going to add B & E to our college applications?" Gabe said once they arrived and started the short walk down a couple of blocks. Gabe parked his truck down the road from the pharmacy. Marla wouldn't have thought of that.

Marla jumped. They hadn't spoken a word since Marla asked Gabe to go home and grabbed the spare key to the pharmacy. My mom will be in bed, he insisted when Marla told him to go without her, that she'd wait for him at Brian's. They didn't say a word as they walked into the kitchen and pulled the spare key out of the junk drawer, or even when Gabe grabbed a honeybun out of the pantry and handed it to Marla. They left in silence. They drove in Gabe's truck in silence.

"Don't be so loud. Someone will hear you."

"There is no one here but us."

It was true. Not a soul walked Jericho Way. It was just their two silhouettes that created

shadows from the light posts against the sidewalk.

“I have to ask you something before we do this,” Gabe said.

“Gabe—”

“Are you wanting to end it? Is that what we're here for?”

“What? God, no. I don't even know if I am. I just need a test.”

“A test? You don't even know if you are?”

“No.”

“And you thought I would be the best person for this? Why me?”

“Because you're the only person I can trust.” “Not in this town. You know that better than anyone.”

“True, but why not go to the next town? Bellville?”

“How would I get there, Gabe? Ask my mom for a drive for no reason? Jane? I love her, but the whole town would know before we even got there. The only time I could sneak out without my mom knowing is now. I don't have any more time. I can't wait anymore. It's now or never.”

“Wouldn't the father be the best choice for this recon mission or maybe a female? I know we're friends and all, but clearly, there is someone more fit for this job.”

“That's complicated, and you are the only friend I have that has a key to a pharmacy,” Marla's chest squeezed.

“So is calculus, but if I remember right, you're on your way to being valedictorian, so spill or no key, Mary.”

Her chest got even tighter. Mary, his nickname for her. He called her it in front of others, but she never explained why he acted like it was given name (You look like a Mary. So you'll be

Mary to me). Even teachers from their third to seventh-grade years had turned their heads when he called her such. They called it cute. A crush. So sweet. Anne hated it. To Marla, it had just been Gabe's way of showing he cared. He always knew precisely when to call her it.

"There is no father," Marla said.

"What? Did someone treat you bad? What's his name? Do I know him? I swear to G--."

"There is no father. I haven't had sex."

"Then you're not pregnant. Did Anne make you skip sex's ed in eighth grade? What am I saying, it's Anne, of course, she did. So, it starts when a mommy and daddy really love each other—"

"I'm serious."

"So am I. There's no way. It's physically impossible."

"I know!" Marla shouted. "I know how it sounds, but it's the only thing that makes sense. I've missed my periods. I throw up every afternoon. I'm nauseous. My boobs hurt--."

"Your boobs hurt?"

"And I can feel something," Marla pointed to her stomach, which she measured every morning now. She swore she was bigger despite the unmoved number on the bathroom scale. "A flutter."

"Well, I mean," Gabe scratched behind his ear. He always did that when he was thinking. When he was really thinking and not pretending to for a teacher's sake. "It could still be something else. Stress? It could be a million things. If you're a virgin," Gabe blushed. "How is that even possible?"

"I know how it sounds, but for some reason, I think it's what's happening to me."

For the first time, the words hit her. The act of speaking such nonsense made Marla

break. She didn't know how it happened, but suddenly Gabe was holding her, and his shoulder was miraculously wet, and all she felt at that moment was relief. That at least one person on this planet knew what she was going through, and that person hadn't run away or called medical professionals. He hadn't called her crazy. He might have denied it, but he hadn't called her crazy.

Marla cried harder. End of the world sobs that racked her frame like an earthquake. It wasn't from the confession or even the unknown. No, Marla cried like never before because she couldn't remember the last time that she was held.

+

Gabe insisted that she take the test then and there.

"We're already here. Might as well make use of the time," Gabe said when Marla went to place the pregnancy test in her backpack to head home.

"What if we get caught?"

"We literally stood in the street for like half an hour. Did you see a car pass? A resident walking their dog? Night runner?"

"I just don't think that we should be here longer than we have to."

"Then, by all means, talk some more instead of going into the bathroom and peeing on the stick."

Marla hesitated. Clutching the test in her hands.

"You don't want me to know, do you?" he asked when she hadn't moved to the single bathroom that was less than a foot away from where she was standing. It wasn't that, Marla thought, she was more scared of knowing herself. There really was no turning back.

"Come on," Gabe said. "You can do it. I swear, I won't tell a soul. And if we get caught,

I'll say it was all me. Feel better now?"

No, Marla thought, but she nodded her head instead. She went to the bathroom, and even though she knew Gabe wouldn't dare open the door without her permission, she clicked the lock in place.

A knock sounded on the door.

She opened it and found Gabe standing outside the door with three other tests, each a different brand, in his hands.

"Maybe we should be thorough?"

"Yeah," She should have thought of that. Why was she so bad at this? Why was Gabe, of all people, the voice of reason right now? If Jane were here, her jaw would be to the floor.

"Thanks," she said and shut the door.

"Good luck," he said through the door.

Marla's face turned into a grimace reflected in the mirror. She didn't know what the lucky option would be.

She turned on the sink faucet and got to business. She might have revealed a lot to Gabe this evening, but that didn't mean she was going to let him hear her pee. Less than a minute later, Marla had peed on all four sticks. She placed all four of the various shaped sticks on the edge of the porcelain sink before unlocking the door.

"So?" he asked as he shifted back and forth on his heels. "What's the verdict?"

"We have to wait three minutes for two of them, and five for the other two."

"Oh," he plopped flat on his feet. "Here, let me set the alarm on my phone."

"Yeah."

"So..." Gabe said, sticking his phone in the back pocket of his jeans.

“So...”

“So...What else is new with you?”

“Seriously?” Marla asked.

“What?” Gabe’s shoulders went to his ears. “What else are we going to do?”

“We could be silent.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I don’t see any fun in this.”

“Sure, you do. One day, when we are old and living outside of this stupid town, we will call each other up and be like,” Gabe made his voice higher, “hey you, remember that time when I asked you to break into your mom’s pharmacy?” He leveled his voice back to normal, “And I’ll be all ‘yeah, good times.’”

“And what if those tests come up as positive?”

“Then I’ll be like, ‘hey Mary, put that baby on the phone I want to talk to it,’ because I have no doubt if those tests are positive, that is gonna be one cool baby.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, if you are, that baby has to be special, I mean how could it not. Or it’s going to be super smart. Either way, I’m going to hang out with it.”

“I have a feeling I’m still going to be here no matter what happens.”

“Why?”

“Where else would I go?”

“Anywhere. Everywhere. Don’t you want to leave?”

“My family and friends are here,” Marla said. She had never even thought about it, but if her being was made of one fundamental truth, it be the fact that Erusa was her home, and she

couldn't imagine being anywhere else. It was where she was supposed to be.

"There is so much more out there. There are so many people in this world that we can meet should be meeting. There is more to life than sports and national honor society and going to college for something that you have no interest in studying just because it runs in your family."

"I guess...I guess I had never thought about it. Everything is here. College is only two hours away, and I've always been okay with that. Where would you go?"

"I'm going to Boston. I got into U Mass."

"You got in? We're juniors. We're brand new juniors. How could that happen?"

"I took AP classes over the summer. I've taken them every summer. I took the SAT's too. I'm actually a senior now. As long as I don't mess up, I'll graduate in May."

"A whole year early?"

"A whole year."

"What does Juju think about Boston?"

"She doesn't know. So far, it is just you and me that know."

"Why haven't you told her?"

"Why would I?"

"Well, for starters, she's your mother."

"Oh, okay, so do you want me to call your mom while we wait? Or are you waiting for the results *before* you text her about all this?"

"This is different."

"No, it's not, you just don't like being called a hypocrite. Careful, Marla, your Anne is showing."

"It's not," Marla crossed her arms across her chest. "I don't know what is going to

happen,” she looked down at her phone, “two minutes from now. But at least you know where you’ll be this time next year.”

“So do you,” Gabe said. “You’ll be at the University of Kansas pursuing art and with a minor in mythology.”

“That all depends on tonight, I guess. Either I’ll be there, or my mom will find a way to kill me with no one ever finding out. If I stop showing up to school, hold a vigil for me. A good one, at that. I want candles and photos and cards taped to my locker. I want you crying, on your knees, screaming ‘she was too young.’”

“Promise.” Gabe tapped two fingers to his head and then three to his heart. “I’ll put Stanley Kowalski to shame.”

It was a symbol for promises they created almost eight years ago when they hid in Marla’s bedroom as Anne’s goon squad was over for hours on end. Gabe and Marla laid on their back on Marla’s bedroom floor with bags of baked potato chips scattered around them. Their bellies were full, and their fingers were sprinkled with salt. It wasn’t the first time that Gabe had asked her where her father was, yet the heavy fullness of her stomach made it impossible to hold it.

“Promise you won’t tell anyone,” Marla begged.

“Never will I ever or I’ll stab my brain twice and pierce my heart thrice,” he replied.

She told him. First, Marla told Gabe the lie that her mother told her. That her father was a victim of a building fire at his law firm in Memphis, Tennessee. Lightning struck the building, and less than an hour later, the whole infrastructure was collapsing. The amount of paper in that one building did nothing but kindle the fire. What Marla discovered when she googled her father’s name, and the fire was not only his death in record form but the fact that it was his fault.

James Morrow was responsible for scheduling the maintenance work needed on the building's sprinkler system. Yet, the article showed via the maintenance company that her father rescheduled the job three times. The maintenance crew would have been there the next day to fix the system had the building not caught on fire. According to the fire department, if the sprinkler system was functioning as it should, no one would have died. The fire that started on the second floor would have been quench before it spread to the archive library, which is what turned Wilson, Morrow, and Lit into an inferno. Her mother liquidated her retirement fund, and with the life insurance money from her father's death, they packed up and moved to Dolorosa Road for a new start. Gabe didn't utter a word. He only tapped the front of his head twice and then space above where his heart would be.

“That rhyming phrase you went through was the best,” Marla said.

“I was well-versed and rehearsed.”

They laughed. They laughed until Marla had tears forming in the corners of her eyes. They laughed until Gabe was hunched over like a stitch had formed in his side. They laughed, and they laughed, and they laughed until Gabe's phone sounded like a tornado siren.

He quickly reached into his back pocket and silenced his device.

“So...they're ready.”

“Yeah,” Marla didn't move. “I guess I should see, huh.”

“Wait. Before you do. What do you want?”

“What?”

“Before you know,” Gabe waved his hand towards the bathroom. “What do you want? If you could wish for anything, what would it be?”

“I just want things to go back to normal. I want to know what is happening to me. I

wish,” Marla started, then paused. She didn’t know what she wished for. She had never been this uncertain in all her life. These past months she felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole. She was too far down to climb her way back up.

“I wish,” she tried again. Before she could open her mouth, Gabe was across the room, his lips pressed to hers. If anyone else were kissing her, she’d be across the room, out the door, and on her way home.

I wish for a thousand moments like this, she thought.

Taking a deep breath, Marla gathered her courage, threw it over her shoulder, and headed for the bathroom.

They were where she left them. Four plastic sticks of doom, pillars with the possibility of knocking her world out from beneath her feet.

She looked down and read the sticks one at a time.

Two pink lines.

Pregnant.

Plus-sign.

Smiley-face.

Gabe came into the room. He looked over her shoulders.

“Well, Mary. It looks like we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

“Fuck.”

Judith

Yesterday, Judith walked into the Kinkos to get a few supplies when the idea hit her. All the bright paper stacked on a shelf behind the register and an industrial-sized copier. Ari Mathea, who Judith knew from town meetings and her frequent prescriptions for urinary tract infection antibiotics, requested a rainbow spread of paper for the end of summer bake sale flyers hosted by Erusa High School's PTA. Ari Mathea was the type of woman who talked about the people who lived on Dolorosa Road as if they were a monarchy of do-nothings that were lucky. At the same time, she secretly cursed out her husband for refusing to move all of their belongings two streets over when a house became available. Ari tried talking to Judith about the bake sale and their upcoming children's last year of high school, but Judith couldn't stop staring at the flyers. The bright rectangles of information that her eye couldn't help moving toward. Paper was harmless.

Judith returned the next day with one sheet of paper. Plain. White. Printed from her office computer that she spent the majority of the morning designing in between customers.

"I'll need fifty copies of this," Judith said, passing over the sheet of paper across the counter to the Kinkos attendant "in the brightest paper you have."

"Yes, Mrs. Pleasant," the boy said. He was pimple-faced and was most likely a few years younger than her son. If she could, she would prescribe him the topical ointment that could incinerate those bright pink tic-tac sized bumps at their core.

"Oh, I'm sorry, do I know you?" Judith asked.

"Ah, yes. Well, no. I mean, I know Gabe. And you came in yesterday."

"You're one of Gabe's friends." She looked at the nametag attached to his white and green polo. The attendant, whose name happened to be Peter, but Judith ignored this fact.

"I wouldn't call us friends." Peter pulled a ream of neon blue paper down from a shelf

behind the counter.

“Well, that’s unfortunate. You’re welcome over anytime.” She smiled at him. He looked like the type of boy who needed a friend. Now that she thought about it, her son didn’t bring friends over. There was Marla, of course. Marla attended plenty of dinners at the Pleasant household, but that was different. That was how it had always been. Yet what if Marla just up and left like Georgie Andrews did. What if one morning he woke up with his best friend gone, ran away in the middle of the night. No note. As if they never existed. Like their friendship never even existed. Then where would Gabe be? Friendless? Spending free time contemplating what was for dinner rather than calling a friend and meeting up for a night out. Always home and in bed by nine o’clock.

“That’s okay. We’re not really in the same circles.”

“And what circles would those be?”

“Science.”

“What kind of science?”

“Chemistry.”

They were most definitely not in the same circles. Judith had tried to push Gabe down the science scenic route taking him to work every chance she could, buying books, weekend trips to museums outside the city. None of it stuck. No, her son was attracted to books. As a boy, he requested an afternoon at the library over making slim in the kitchen with her. Almost every time she saw her son, he had a book in his hands. She couldn’t complain. It could be worse. He could be interested in pursuing a life of theology, just like her husband had been. Then he would be out and trying to save the world and wouldn’t have any time for her anymore.

“Chemistry is great. The world wouldn’t have half of what it does without chemistry.”

Peter nodded his head but didn't add to the conversation. Instead he focused on his work. He pulled the yellow paper out from the plastic.

"Are you interested in pharmaceuticals?"

"Not really," Peter replied.

That was the end of that tête-à-tête then.

She watched as Peter finished loading the paper into the copier. As she watched, she thought of what she was going to have tonight for dinner. There was leftover chicken masala in the fridge she made the night before. Unless Gabe ate it this afternoon. In that case, she knew she had the ingredients for spaghetti. She was thinking of homemade bread as she watched the full machine spit out the bright yellow flyers like hot lemon drops.

Lemon icebox pie sounded terrific right now.

"Here you go," Peter said, sliding over the warm paper.

She looked at the caricature of a witch, warts and all, stirring over a black cauldron. A red x obscured part of the image. In bold font, bordering the flyer read: **MAGIC IS NOT MEDICINE**. Judith smiled. Her son, Gabe, said it looked idiotic, but Judith thought it was perfect.

"All right, fifty colored flyers on card stock. It's going to be \$11.75," Peter said.

"Actually," Judith paused. "I think I might need fifty more."

She wanted to be sure that the whole town would see them, and DiviniTeas had an awfully big front window.

Kassandra

The shop that she loved—had put more blood, sweat, and magic into—was covered in bright yellow flyers from sidewalk to ceiling.

A coven of cartoon witches covered her front window in a wall of yellow.

MAGIC IS NOT MEDICINE.

What a fool, Kassandra thought as she stared at her beloved shop. What a fool that person must be. Though, she had no doubt who the perpetrator was. The blue paper practically screamed, *Judith*.

It was early. The sun hadn't yet kissed the sky good morning. Turning, she realized that she was not the only establishment graced with the offensive flyers. On each light post, on all the storefronts on Ikea Way, tucked beneath windshield wipers of street parked cars. A few early birds walked past, eyed the window, eyed Kassandra, then scurried along. A few shops began to open, pulled the flyers from their windows, read them. By mid-afternoon, everyone in Erusa would know all about this and all the over flourished details.

Kassandra's last interaction with Judith Pleasant was one of simple conversations. A collection of hellos, how are you doing, and goodbyes. Perhaps it was because of the whole Anneageddon, as everyone in Dolorosa began to call it, debacle. Kassandra was home when that happened. She felt the air around her, around her house. It felt like walking in a sauna. Damp. Hot. Thick. Her lungs wheezed with the change. She walked over to her front window and saw shimmers in the air. Charged atoms swirled around Anne as she walked across her lawn and onto Judith's.

Then Kassandra watched as Anne transformed out of her saintly self and into a Ladon. Kassandra could see every side of Anne Morrow. All of the emotions brewing in her boiled over

and burst into the air like a hundred snake heads. Anger. Anxiety. Frustration. Confusion. Deception. Anne roared at Judith. Over and over. But what Cassandra saw and heard most, what many most likely missed in that moment of a mythic Anne, was fear. Fear surrounded the woman who lived across the street from Cassandra in a heavy fog. She had noticed it the moment that she moved in but was just now able to put a name to it.

This was why it didn't come as a surprise when Anne turned from the Pleasant house and directed herself right at Cassandra's home.

Her determination became impressive. For a second, Cassandra was impressed by the woman.

Kassandra let her knock once, to help with the woman's internal frustration before she opened the door and moved out of Anne's way.

"Where did she go?" Anne said. Loudly.

"I don't know."

"Don't lie to me, Cassandra. I know you took back that potion. One minute it was there, and the next it was gone. Georgie ran away because of it. If you kept your promise to her, we wouldn't be in this mess. Where is she?"

Kassandra took a seat. It was too early in the morning to compete in a yelling match.

Bathsheba walked into the room, having told Cassandra earlier that morning that her snoring kept her up all night, and no, she would not be going for a walk this morning.

"The one day I ask you to let me sleep in, and you bring this over," Bathsheba barked.

"Will you shut that thing up?" Anne stared at the dog.

"I'm going to bite her."

"If you want her to stop, then I suggest you stop yelling," Cassandra said.

Anne pinched the bridge of her nose. Once Bathsheba deemed the woman quite enough for her liking, her nails clicked down the hall in retreat. Later that afternoon, Cassandra would find a scarf, one of her favorites, chewed apart, the seams ripped to shreds.

“I had nothing to do with Georgie’s departure.”

“Bullshit,” Anne spit.

“Call it what you like, but I didn’t.”

“So, she just left.,” Anne shrugged. “Told no one where she was going. Not even Simon knows where she went. He said she just woke him up and said she couldn’t do it anymore.”

“Then you know more than I do.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. Sure, Cassandra knew a few more details of Georgie’s departure. Cassandra had been the last person to see her, and magic had a trace to it. Magic wasn’t something that came and went. It left invisible stains, the people, that it touched. Like greasy fingerprints. They weren’t always clear as to what they were, but they were still there. Georgie had a noticeable amount on her from her consistent interactions with Cassandra. She knew the general direction that she went in. If she tried hard enough, did the right spells, she’d know exactly where she went. But that morning, Georgie’s face, as she drove out of Dolorosa road, was not a face that wanted to be found.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Anne said. “She would’ve told me.”

“You can never fully know a person. No matter how long or how hard you try to get someone to open up, they still have secrets buried beneath.”

“I’m not asking for one of your prophecy-mambo-jumbos that you sell like fortune cookies. You two were friends. And now, because of you, Georgie won’t talk to me. She probably left because she thought I took that potion from her. She knew I didn’t want her to do

it.”

“I didn’t take it back,” Cassandra said. “I didn’t break any promise either. So why don’t you hop down from that high horse and explain to me what you think happened.”

“The potion. It was in the fridge, and then it was gone. There is only one way that it could disappear like that, and that would be you.”

Kassandra rolled her eyes. You tell a person that you’re a witch and then all of a sudden, you’re the cause of everything. Couldn’t have been a miracle that prevented Georgie from making a horrible mistake, nope it had to have been the witch. And even if she did do it, which she didn’t, why is the Saint of all saints not jumping in happiness.

“Georgie. Oh Georgie,” Anne covered her eyes with her hands as if she were preventing herself from seeing images engrained inside her skull. “She thought I threw it away. She thought I threw her shot at happiness away.”

“If I remember right, you didn’t want her to drink it as much as I didn’t. So why shouldn’t I be pointing the finger at you.”

Anne laughed. She actually laughed a hysterical laugh that sent chills down Cassandra’s back and had Bathsheba barking get her out of here from the back bedroom.

“Don’t try putting me in your place on the fire. I know you have more class than that.”

“What was all that with Judith, then. You think she did it too?”

“That has nothing to do with you. That’s between her and me.” Anne said.

There was that fear again. Wrap tight around her.

Kassandra could never forget that fear. She had only felt fear like that once in her life. The night that Albie left her. It nearly suffocated her, the thought of trudging through life without him beside her.

Ever since Anneageddon, Judith hadn't been the same. She was closed off. And every time Cassandra caught Judith looking at her, she saw hate.

Kassandra didn't do well with hate.

Hate was a coward's emotion. It was quick and always lacked rationality.

Kassandra felt the burning friction of eyes upon her. Turning around, there she was. Judith flipped the closed sign to open. She stood behind the shield of her glass storefront and watched for Cassandra's reaction. The two flyers taped to Judith's window would have thrown off others, but not Cassandra.

Judith waved. A flutter of five fingers like a slap across Cassandra's face.

It took every fiber in her not to snap her fingers and send an army of yellow paper planes directly at Judith's window.

Instead, Cassandra pulled one flyer after another, whispered to the high ones to fall down, as residents of Erusa walked pass. Nothing odd about their days.

Marla

Getting a job was easier than she thought. She went straight to Mrs. Henry's after school and worked until close, at eight o'clock. Mrs. Henry was kind to Marla, allowing her numerous breaks to do homework and insisting that she read or eat or rest in the lull hours without customers. It was nearly a month since she was hired, and her mother, besides the one time, hadn't asked her where she spent her time. Marla was shocked by her acceptance. If she were honest with herself, she was a little worried by her mother's lack of interrogation.

"Where have you been?" Anne asked her after her first evening shift at DiviniTea. She was elbow deep in macaroni salad. Anne twisted warm noodles, cucumbers, bright-red cherry tomatoes, and cilantro slick from a thick white sauce together with wooden tongs in a mixing bowl like a tornado.

"I got a job," Marla replied.

"That's good, dear. Don't let it be a reason you get behind on your schoolwork, though."

"I won't," Marla replied.

Anne had smiled and turned her back to her, focusing on the project before her.

Septembers were all about Salvation Saturdays. The women of Erusa Baptist got together to volunteer at the homeless shelter. The shelter had requested canned goods. Anne and her flock preferred the perishable. Nothing says salvation like a home-cooked meal.

Sometimes she'd catch Mrs. Henry, who threatened to fire Marla if she called her Mrs. Henry one more time, staring at her with an unsettling stare. She swore she heard her talk to her dog that she brought to work more often than not, about her and her situation. She thought at first that perhaps this had all been a bad idea, but as the month went on, and Marla's first paycheck, which Mrs. Henry gave her in cash, and the stuff she was learning, it was too good to leave. Plus,

she was starting to like the woman who she had so many questions about. Who was she to judge and call crazy when she was in an unexplainable situation? Plus, those moments with Mrs. Henry had become the best parts of her day.

“You want to grind, not chop,” Cassandra said, as she held Marla’s hand and the two twisted a transparent pestle against an anthill of lavender seeds, chamomile flowers, and lemon leaves in a ceramic mortar. “You don’t want to make dust, but soil. You want it fine, but not fine enough that it blows away on a windy day. You want force, you don’t want violence.”

Kassandra pulled Marla’s hand back and pushed her shoulder down, releasing the tension that Marla nestled between her shoulder blades. She learned so much in such little time. She knew the names of most of the ingredients Kassandra kept bottled on her shelves. She was starting to recognize what they were without their labels.

“Then pour it directly into the filter paper,” Kassandra said.

Mara followed instructions, letting the ingredients fall into the mesh-like pouch. She twisted the top as she had seen Kassandra do a thousand times, then tied a thin cream-colored ribbon to hold it together.

“Do another.”

Marla did ten more in silence. Her hesitation thinned with each new bag. Trusting herself more with each one. She put the ingredients back on their selves when she walked in. The bell above the door was jarring, louder than Marla ever hear them, though she had quickly realized that the bells never once sounded the same per each visit of the shop. Once a man came in for a tea that had him blushing and avoiding making eye contact with Marla. The bells upon his entrance were soft like wind chimes. Another customer wishing for a natural cure to her migraines hardly procured any noise from the bells above her head. Then as she left, Marla heard

them, they sounded streets away, yet there they rang, three feet in front of her. It was as if they knew that the customer was experiencing one of those migraines and hoped not to disturb her further.

This time, it was as if someone was striking them with a hammer. Solemn. A death march. Yet they didn't appear to pull Mrs. Henry from her work; she stayed bent over a mug that had been dropped and was gluing back together. She continued to puzzle the pieces together. The woman that entered didn't look familiar. Her skin was dark brown. It wasn't someone that she recognized. She was wearing a business suit, a white blouse beneath a blue blazer and a skirt stopping just below her knee. A leather bag was hitched up her shoulder, the same color as her blazer. It was something she could see Anne wearing at one of her charity events. She looked about Anne's age too. Marla guessed thirty. Her hair was pulled back in a bun that Marla could alone describe as painful, her hairline taunt and straight. Before Marla could mutter a single word, the woman's eyes locked onto the back of Cassandra's frame.

"I need your help," the woman said, the words rushed from her lips like a bird released from its cage for the first time.

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They sat at the Parisian table by the window. Cassandra stirred and hummed over the contents of the mug. Marla hadn't spent enough time here to learn the smells. The sweetness filling the spaces between them tickled her nose. It was more potent than plain sugar. Fresh brown sugar with honey, she thought.

"Now," Cassandra said, staring at the woman. "Tell me again what you want."

"I want to forget," she said. "I want to forget him. I want him out of my head."

A tear poured over the rim of her eye and fell to her chin. Marla watched, transfixed on

the shimmer of the tear, the light of the sun illuminated in the drop. As it fell, Marla was reminded of stars shooting across the night sky.

“All right,” Cassandra said. She reached across the table and touched the woman’s hand. “I want you to be sure. Once it’s gone, it’ll never come back. And what you are asking for, it isn’t cheap.”

“It’s what I want,” she used the hand Cassandra wasn’t holding to wipe her cheek. “I’ll pay whatever it costs if you help me forget him.” Three more stars fell from the white clouds of her eyes.

“The good goes with the bad, hon.”

“That’s the part I want to forget the most. The good.”

A flicker of pity marked Cassandra’s face. She pulled her hand back. With both hands, she put the mug into the woman’s hand.

“Drink it in one gulp. Don’t sip. Picture the face you want to forget.”

The woman looked into the mug. Marla tipped up onto her toes to try to see what she saw, but only saw a circle of foam clouding the contents below it.

“What is it,” the woman asked, still peering downward.

“Don’t think of that. Focus on the face. Thinking of nothing else. Absolutely nothing else.”

The woman closed her eyes. Her lids had the remains of blue eye shadow that Marla hadn’t noticed before. She tipped her head back and swallowed the contents of the mug. Her eyes tightened, and her wrinkles formed like valleys across her forehead. She held her mouth in a straight line. Marla watched as the woman struggled to push the contents down her throat. Once it was all down, the woman gasped. She put her hand to her heart and slowed her breathing.

“Now,” Cassandra said. “Go home. Go home and remove everything from your house that isn’t yours. Get anything he touched out.”

“Will I know when he’s gone? Will I know when I don’t remember? Does it happen all at once.”

“No, it will be as if he was never there. You will feel as you do now, then it will start to recede. It will fade away like something you can’t catch, a memory just a hair away, and then it’ll evaporate.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Go now. You need to start before it’s too late. You have to get rid of it all before you forget.”

“What do I owe?” the woman asked.

“I’ll get it over at the register,” Cassandra said, leading the woman to the counter.

The woman smiled and followed. Upon leaving, she grabbed her purse and reached into its depth to pull out an ivory card. “If you need anything, give me a call.” She placed the then rectangle of paper onto the table, hitched her purse back where it belonged, and walked out the door. The bell above the door rang softly above the woman’s head and chimed three notes floating after her as the door closed, and the woman, along with her memories, were far away.

“Will it work?” Marla asked. “Will she really forget the man she wanted to forget?” Marla couldn’t imagine wanting to forget anyone, especially someone that she clearly loved as the woman did. What could possibly hurt so bad that the absence, the space left behind in the person’s silhouette, could require forgetting?

“It will,” Cassandra said. “If she does what I said, this time next week, the face she saw will be nothing, not even a memory.”

Marla had thought Cassandra a loon like the rest of the town. Anne slipped the term in her head when she was young. It was all she called the woman that lived across the street, not knowing her name until Juju made a comment one day. Loon didn't fit her when Marla learned her name. It had been like the flicking on of a light. She could clearly see the woman that lived across the street with the dog that she talked to beneath her breath. The woman that so many crossed the street to avoid when walking down the road. The label had no business being attached to Cassandra. The only label that fit her, Marla thought, staring at Cassandra as if she were seeing her for the first time, was the name she was born with. She had never met someone who was their name; someone, that to their core, was who they were always supposed to be. There was still something that conflicted against their true self. Pride. Guilt. Sue was never just Sue. She was Susan, who lost her best friend at an early age. She was Susanna, who left home before she was ready. Sue was just who hid it all beneath the surface. Marla was Marla through and through. Every layer of her was revealed close to the surface.

“What did you give her?” Marla asked. Curiosity slipped in more the back door of her brain.

Kassandra turned. A shiver ran down Marla's spine. A tingling of pinpricks licking her skin. It wasn't painful, but it wasn't comfortable either.

“You want to know?”

Marla paused. Why would she have asked if she didn't want to know? What if this was Kassandra's way of testing her, seeing if she really wanted to learn? What if it was something else entirely? What if Kassandra poisoned the woman, or worse what if it was all a lie and everything, the bottles, the tea making, the readings that Marla watched while pretending not to would all be a lie? What if Kassandra fooled them all?

“Yes,” Marla said.

Kassandra told her. She told her everything. She told Marla what she put in the cup and how she knew. She told her about how she knew what the winds meant. She told her about the moon, how if you look at her on the right night at the right time up in the sky, she will bless you a hundred extra days. She told Marla about the birds, how each one knew where to go, and whose house to perch upon. Marla listened as Kassandra told her why doves coo, how they carry the souls of the young, the unborn into the clouds, and released them from their beaks. She told her of bugs and what they carry in their chests. Kassandra told Marla how, when some people die, their bodies don't turn to ash and dust but jewels. Strong and sharp and beautiful and priceless. She told Marla about Albie, how she knew when he would go. She told Marla her origin story, how she found Erusa, how she had been the first house upon Dolorosa Road twenty years ago.

Marla listened. She didn't dare move.

“So,” Kassandra said. “Now, you know.”

“Now I know,” Marla said. Her head was blank. It felt wiped clean like the whiteboards at school; every morning in home-period, it was shiny and removed of marks.

Your turn,” Kassandra said.

Gathering her breath and thoughts in a pile like fallen leaves, Marla sat straighter in her chair. Still facing forward, toward the indigo sky, she made sure to speak with all the courage she had left.

“I guess I should start from the beginning,” Marla said.

Judith

Standing in line in the Erusa High School cafeteria to register her son for senior classes, Judith expected someone to mention it. She stood in the middle of three lines that extended out the door. The cafeteria was packed with teachers and parents and students running about. There were tables placed throughout the room and outside it, promoting various clubs and student activities seeking members. The table closest to the one that Judith was standing in was already taking checks for the upcoming yearbook. A pair of identical twin teenage girls smiled behind the table. Parents were conversing with each other throughout the lines. No one peeped a word to Judith about what had done. She had expected to hear a few comments, glance a few side-eye glances around the room that said, who here would have done that? All Judith heard was talk about the raised taxes for Erusa, the additional funding for the school, and what the plan for that money.

A week passed since Judith placed the flyers across town and per every square inch of Cassandra Henry's front window. There wasn't a lamppost, a bulletin board, a mailbox in Erusa that didn't have a flyer attached to it. Judith, feeling happy with her daily accomplishment, smiled as she moved around town and conversed with residents about the absurdity of having a witch selling homeopathic hoopla across the street from a pharmacy board approved and regulated pharmacy. Judith had teas. Green and Black. What more was needed? If anyone was looking for a recommendation on such, she would refer them to Brother's Brew, off Jericho road. They knew tea and could make a cup, too.

What was so special about what Cassandra Henry made, hmm? What was she really putting in those cups that residents were drinking? How did any of them know what they were consuming? It was a state requirement to disclose the ingredients of any sold product of food or

liquid consumption. That witch thrived off of her mystery, retina-burning leisurewear, and secret recipes. How could she not tell her customers what they were putting in their bodies? Were witches held at different standards? What law did they abide by? Was she even a witch at all, or was that something else she made up and was marketing for her personal benefit? If you asked Judith about it, she'd tell you that witches weren't real. Hollywood was real. What had the world come to that people were making money off of the emotions and vulnerability of others. Who was Cassandra Henry supposed to answer to after causing chaos, which resulted in the disappearance of Judith's best friend, Georgie Andrews?

Judith, that's who.

Still, not one person had decided to sign her petition. That was fine. Absolutely fine. If they wanted to accept the lies and deceptions of Cassandra Henry, then that was their prerogative. Let them be manipulated. She wouldn't. Let them keep their heads in the clouds surrounding Erusa. Lord knows that Judith did. Living on Dolorosa had an anesthetic type of effect. Everything felt wonderful until it didn't. Nothing seemed bad until the worst happened. Losing her best friend, her confidant that helped her through Peter's leaving was the worst thing that could have happened.

She'd been kind to that woman. She had even invited her out to dinner on multiple occasions, though she never did accept. Judith, Georgie, and Anne had been warm to the woman. Friendly to their neighbor. She had given Cassandra Henry a Christmas card for ever year that she had lived on Dolorosa, and had she moved, Judith would have kept her on her list for future holiday-themed cards.

"Hello, Judith," Ari Mathea said as Judith made her way to the front of the line.

Judith nodded. She handed over the documents, Gabe's proof vaccination form, her water

bill, and a copy of Gabe's birth certificate to Ari.

"I heard Gabe was skipping a year. You must be proud."

"Very. He's driven when he puts his mind to something."

"Has he gotten into colleges yet?"

"Yes," Judith said, though she wasn't completely sure. She'd seen the mail. The letters with college names embossed on the heavy envelopes. They had a noticeable weight to them. That was good if memory served her right. Heavy was good. So why hadn't he told her? Why had he not opened the letters that Judith intentionally pretended not to notice and reveal the fate that they contained?

"Anywhere in particular?"

"He hasn't made a decision yet. He's weighing his options. Scholarships and such."

"Well, he'll be going places no matter where he gets in. A bright boy like him; he'll leave Erusa proud, I'm sure."

"That he will."

"All done?" Judith asked.

"Yep, everything looks good. Here's Gabe's schedule," Ari flipped through a file until she reached the P's and searched for Gabe's name. Once finding it, Ari pulled it from the manila folder and extended it to Judith.

Judith grabbed the paper only to be met with resistance as she pulled back.

"The flyers," Ari said. "Lowering her breath. Was that you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." The air on the back of Judith's neck rose.

"Oh, never mind then," Ari let go of the paper. "I just figured because of your petition and all that it was you."

“Uh—”

“If you hear anything about it, would you let me know?” Ari asked. She peered up at Judith with a look, pinched eyebrows, and squinted eyes that Judith was all too familiar with when the woman visited her pharmacy. Often that look was followed with numerous questions. “That person is a hero. I think that the town ought to have that established removed.”

Judith had yet to hear someone utter those words. Finally. She thought. Why hadn’t she thought of goody-two-shoes Ari Mathea? She was a ruler follower. Judith knew that Ari followed her pharmaceutical advice to the minute that Judith recommended she take her antacid. She was practical.

“Well, why don’t you sign my petition. I’ve meant to ask you, but the time just hasn’t popped up.”

“I was wondering when I was going to get the honor.” Ari winked at Judith as if it was suddenly a secret, the petition. “I made three extra batches of flyers last week to see if you would ask but no such luck.”

“I’m so sorry. My brain has been mashed potatoes this month.”

“Oh, yes, getting back into the school schedule and Peter being gone must be hard. We’ve missed you at church this summer.”

“Yes, it’s been a little busy managing everything and a teenage boy, I’m sure you know all about that.”

“Teenage boys. Aren’t they wonderful.”

“The best.” Judith smiled.

“Well, let me let you go, being busy and all.”

“Oh, and you as well,” Judith waved a hand toward the growing line behind her. “I would

hate to be at the end of this line, I'll tell you that."

"I'll just swing by tonight, then?" Ari asked with that damn wink again.

"See you then."

"I'll bring wine," Ari said louder as Judith left the line. "Wait, is that okay to take with my medicine?"

Judith waved her hand and pretended she did hear that last part. She almost made it out of the cafeteria when the face of an all too familiar girl stopped her. Marla was sitting behind a fold-up table covered in a royal blue tablecloth and topped with brochures and new testament mini bibles. A hand-painted paper banner that read *True Love Waits* was hoisted above the table. Marla was the only person at the table. Students filtered past, not once looking in her direction or showing interest in the paraphernalia she had to offer. Marla didn't appear to notice them pass as her attention was directed toward her lap at something that Judith couldn't see.

"Hey, Marla," Judith said.

Marla startled and looked up from her lap.

"Juju," she said, standing and coming around the table.

Judith pulled her into a hug. Tight. She'd gotten taller, Judith thought. The last time that she hugged her, her head had just hit her shoulder. Now, they were almost the same height. She was growing out her hair. Judith had never known Marla to let grow past her shoulders, but now it was almost to her waist. Pulling Marla back, she looked at her. Really looked. Her skin had outgrown the pubescent pimples and had a glow to it. Judith would've guessed make-up, but this was Marla. She looked so grown up. When did that happen? Was it not yesterday that Marla was wearing cutoff overalls and skinned up knees while playing an imaginary game with Gabe in Judith's front lawn? With Gabe leaving in less than a year, what reason would Marla have to

come over anymore? When her son left, she knew she would probably lose Marla too. It wasn't the girl's fault, Judith thought. Good daughters followed their parents' orders, and if Judith knew anything, it was that Marla Morrow was a wonderful daughter.

"Now, who am I supposed to keep Gabe in line if you too are in different grades now, hmm?"

"You're the one who let him do it, Juju," Marla said.

"You and I both know that you are smarter than everyone in your grade combined, Gabe included. You could have been out of here ages ago."

Marla didn't respond just as Judith thought she would.

"You all right?" Judith asked. "Healthy? Need anything? Boy trouble? Need me to switch out someone's medicine for laxatives?"

"Yes. Yes. No. No. And God no."

It was their skit. It was how they said I love you to one another.

"You come over for dinner one day, okay." It wasn't a question.

"I will."

"Gabe or no Gabe, you come over. How am I to keep you updated on all the town gossip if you don't even come over for dinner?"

"I promise," Marla said. She smiled at Judith, and for the quickest tick of a second, Judith forgot all the aches in her chest.

Marla was the daughter she'd always wanted. She'd wanted her from the moment six-year-old Marla walked across the street, with her mother's hand in hers, and asked Judith if she could play with the boy who lived there. It was how Judith got to be such good friends with Anne. For those years, Judith had felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

“So True Love Waits, huh? I’m proud of you,” Judith said.

“It was my mom’s idea freshman year, but I kind of like it. Good friends. Nobody hits on you or tells sex jokes, unlike some of the other clubs. But I don’t know if I’m a good fit.”

Judith paused.

“Have you--” she stopped herself. “Do you want to talk about it?” Judith tucked a stray hair behind Marla’s ear.

“No. Oh no, that came out wrong. I didn’t mean to say that. That sounded like I did something, and I haven’t done something. I don’t even want to do something or even know if I can do something, but I—” Marla’s face was a stop sign of red and showed a collision of thoughts.

“Hey, it’s okay. I get it.”

“I promise I haven—”

“I know. But know that if you do, you can talk to me, okay? The door is always open. Did you try the birth control?”

Marla took a deep breath.

“I haven’t started it, no.”

“Well, I guess you don’t need it if you stick to this club, right? Can you convince Gabe to join? Help put a mother’s heart at ease?”

“I’ll try, but I don’t see that happening.” Marla laughed.

“Is he dating anyone? I assume if he is, he wouldn’t tell me.”

“I don’t think so.” Marla looked away.

She wanted to ask Marla about Anne. See how she was doing. Despite Anneageddon, that horror show that Judith still had nightmares about, she couldn’t fault her for being upset. Judith

was upset too. She was smarter enough to know who to be upset with.

“So, there is still no hope that you two,” Judith crossed her fingers like she was trying not to jinx her words.

“No. God no, we’re just friends, Juju.”

“Oh, come on. Make a mother happy, would you? Who knows what he’ll bring home when he goes off to school? With my luck, she’ll have twenty tattoos and a gluten allergy.”

“Juju I—”

“Fine, fine,” she said when the stop sign started to appear again across Marla’s pale cheeks. “I get it. I’ll let the dream go off in the distance like a weed in the wind.”

Judith had a feeling that Marla’s reaction wasn’t just from uncomfortableness, but feelings too.

She pulled Marla in for a side hug by her shoulder and lowered her voice.

“Let me tell you just got a prescription to slow the effects of hair loss.”

Marla laughed and nodded.

Judith leaned in closer to whisper the name. She really missed this girl.

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Ari Mathea showed up at Judith’s house twenty minutes after Judith. She came sans wine and with a smile plastered onto her face.

“Hi, friend,” she said as Judith opened her front door.

“Come on in.”

“You know I don’t think that I have ever been invited to your house before.”

“Really, I could ha—”

“I’ve been to Anne’s for a PTA Christmas party and what used to be Georgie’s house for

one of Anne's charity events, the Cooper's open housewarming party and a few others, but never yours. And never Cassandra Henry's. Though I probably wouldn't go if I was invited to one at that witch's house. There's no telling what she keeps in there. I wouldn't be surprised if she's got late husband's body stashed away."

If Ari Mathea was invited to Cassandra Henry's home, there was no way that this woman would say no. Ari Mathea was the type of person to go just so she could tell people what the inside of the witch's house looked like.

"Well, now you can say that you've been to mine," Judith said. She had no doubt that within an hour of leaving half the town would now that Ari had been at Judith's for whatever reason Ari deemed fit worth telling.

"So, I assume you want me to sign the petition," Ari said, meandering through the open entryway. She stopped and at one table, picked up a candle, turned it over, placed it back down. She touched the leaves of the peace lily, then the soil. "This needs watering."

"You asked to come over—"

"I don't want to sign your petition. You will get nowhere with it, so why waste ink on it."

"So, why?" Judith looked around her. Was she being tricked? Judith was getting sick of this. People telling her that her cause was not worth it. As if none of what Judith wanted to accomplish mattered. Did no one think about all the horrible that that woman could be doing? Did no one question anything that she did? Was Cassandra so skilled that she had poisoned them all into believing her and Judith was the only one that had yet to sip the tea?

"I think that what you did the other day is better," Ari said.

Judith waited a second. Two. She knew it was coming. Three.

Wink.

There is was.

“Rumor of Erusa is that Georgie Andrews was forced to leave. That Cassandra put a curse on her, and the only way that she could be happy was if she left.”

“I don’t think it was a curse.”

“Then why else would she leave? In the dead of night? Abandon her husband?”

“There is more to the story.”

“Oh, and what’s that?” Ari whole demeanor perked up like a chicken that just laid an egg. If she had feathers, they would have shuttered with pleasure.

“What I am saying is, Georgie didn’t abandon anyone.” Except for her. Georgie abandoned Judith. Forget her husband. Simon was a lowlife who deserved a endure irritable bowel syndrome every day of pathetic life, especially when he was trying to have sex.

“Exactly, she was forced to leave,” Ari nodded her head with each word.

Was it force, Judith wondered? She didn’t know. That was the thing that got her. She didn’t know what happened to her friend. The one person who could tell her, Anne, blamed Judith. The day after Georgie left, Annegeddon. Anne marched herself across her lawn. She marched across Judith’s, not using the walking path, but rather leaving footprints in the morning dew. She pounded on Judith’s door like a migraine.

“You stay away from her,” she shouted. Anne never shouted at Judith. “You leave her alone. If you contact her, so much as talk to her, so help me, you will regret it, Judith Pleasant. Do you hear me.”

Do you hear me?

Everyone was standing at their front doors. Newspapers clutched in their hands. Some still in their robes.

“Do you hear me,” she screamed just three feet away from Judith.

Judith nodded. She simply nodded. That was all she thought to do. What did you do when a bear came up to roaring the whole forest down? You played dead. That’s what.

She spun on her heels and walked across the street to the witch’s house.

Judith watched as she didn’t even knock.

Anne Morrow walked right into that house and slammed the door.

Five minutes and twenty-two seconds later, Anne reappeared and slammed the door with good measure behind her. She walked back across the street. Scooped up her newspaper. She walked into her house and closed her front door with no sound at all.

Judith felt everyone on Dolorosa release their breath. She could have sworn she heard the street itself freed a breath through every lawn as Judith noticed every blade of grass appeared to shudder.

Judith hadn’t talked to Anne since.

That’s when Judith put it all together. Cassandra Henry had done something to Georgie Andrews. Something that Anne knew. But somehow, that witch made it seem like Judith was to blame. The reason behind one of the most beloved residences of Dolorosa to move to only God knows where.

“Is that what Anne said?” Judith asked.

“Anne? Anne won’t say boo about it,” Ari laughed. “She’s too embarrassed about that audition of crazy she performed for all to see. That’s why so many didn’t notice that sweet Georgie had left. Everyone was talking about Anne. I tried to get her to serve the dish, but she always found a way around it. If running twenty charities event taught her anything, it was how

to get out of reporting scandal. What was that all about anyway? Her yelling at you like that. It must have been traumatic.” Ari grabbed Judith’s hand. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, I really don’t,” Judith pulled away. She might have been off about Ari. Yes, she was a nosey Nancy on her best days, but what was she capable of doing on her worst?

“Like I said,” Ari walked toward Judith’s kitchen as if she knew exactly where it was. “The petition isn’t going to get you anywhere. I did the research. Cassandra has met all the codes on her building, and she’s actually good friends with the owner of the building. But the flyers that you posted across town. That was how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Get rid of the witch, of course. Isn’t that your mission?”

“Yes,” Judith said. It was what she wanted most. What she wanted more than anything. More than her husband to come home and beg her for forgiveness. More than she wished for Anne to talk to her. More than anything she had ever wanted since she moved to Dolorosa road eleven years ago.

“Yes,” Judith repeated. Louder.

“Well then, let’s get started.” Ari pulled out the chair from the kitchen table and plopped down. She crossed her legs.

Judith moved around her kitchen. She pulled two wine glasses from the cabinet. She procured a bottle of wine from the fridge. She hadn’t felt this type of motivation in months. She popped the cork. This unfiltered need to accomplish something. If she were honest with herself, she hadn’t felt it since pharmacy school. She poured the yellow liquid into the glasses. The rigorous studying. The goal in the distance that if she kept moving forward, she could taste. She sipped from her glass.

Judith walked to the table. She placed a glass in front of her chair, then one in front of Ari.

“Tell me everything you’ve heard about her,” Judith said

“I don’t think I should have that. I took my antacid three hours ago.”

Judith smiled. She couldn’t have picked a better person to start a witch hunt.

Part Two

Fruit of the Poisonous Tree Tea

Ingredients: dried apple, ground cinnamon, hibiscus flower root, passionflower petals,
pomegranate skin, raw cranberries

Mix all ingredients in a metal bowl. Drown in cold water overnight. Boil until cranberries float to the surface of the water. Pour mixture over a colander, catching the liquid in a bowl. While water cools, gather pieces from the colander and grind until a paste forms. Place paste at the bottom of the cup, then pour tea on top. Serve while steaming.

Kassandra

She was worried about the girl. Marla had been spending almost every free second at the tea shop in between home and school. She even requested to work the weekends, which Kassandra appreciated but knew that DiviniTea had become more than a job to Marla. It had become a hiding place. The Pleasant boy was often with her. Kassandra preferred it when the boy was there. Like today.

Gabe was atop of a ladder, Marla at the foot of it, with Bathsheba tucked beneath one arm. When she told them she was going to change a light bulb, the teenagers about threw a fit over doing it themselves. Gabe ran to the storage closet like the Dickens, and Marla kept repeating we'll take care of it. Kassandra was going to do it how she always did it, a snap of the fingers. She was just warning them because the lights always flickered. She expected them to insistently take it upon themselves to change a lonely lightbulb, but she liked it. It made her chest warm in the way that it had been doing every time Marla did something without asking for her. She was mopping the floor and dusting the shelves. Filling in displays. Kassandra could do all it more quickly, of course, a flick of the wrist quick. But the magic had a draining side effect. While Kassandra was used to the aching limbs that magic often left her bones feeling, she hadn't been accustomed to *this*, Marla and Gabe's concerned faces, since Albie. She was being cared for. It was a beautiful feeling.

Yet between the two, the whispering was starting to grate on Kassandra's nerves. Gabe consistently saying ask her beneath his breath to Marla when they thought Kassandra wasn't looking or too far away to hear. You would think that when people knew you as a witch, they would think you more capable than how they treated Kassandra daily. Maybe that was how media portrayed her kind now, or perhaps it was simply her age.

“What are you two over there whispering about?” Cassandra said. “It sounds like mice having a conversation from all the squeaks coming from your direction.”

“Ask her,” Gabe repeated in a normal tone of voice.

“Mrs. Henry,” Marla started, “I was wondering if, well you see nobody knows about me except for you and Gabe, and I was just wondering if maybe, possibly, if you were willing—.”

“You want me to tell your mother for you?” Cassandra asked. She turned to Gabe. “Boy, you’re on your own.”

“Noted.”

“What? No. No please don’t do that,” Marla said.

“Out with it then, I’m not getting any wiser over here.”

“I was wondering if you would go with me to the doctor. I found one a little way out of town. I want to make sure that everything was okay with the baby. You could pretend to be a relative. If Gabe went with me, they would probably ask for one of our parents’ numbers, and we don’t want that, not yet anyway. If an adult went with me, there would be fewer questions.”

“Oh,” Cassandra blew out. She hadn’t thought of this. Cassandra was hosting a feeling that she knew *exactly* what was happening to Marla Morrow. It made sense when she thought about it. The same night that Georgie Andrews goes missing, a tea that helps barren women conceive goes missing from the Morrow household. Then, Marla shows up months later admitting that she is pregnant, though the girl claimed it was the boys. They blushed too much around one another for Cassandra to believe that lie. No, the girl was holding something back.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Marla said quickly. “I just thought it wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

“I want to.” She did. Cassandra didn’t know why, but she felt like she received a gift.

Sure, Marla needed her for this to work. Yet, Cassandra felt honored for the girl to ask her. Her. Cassandra never had children. She had been told numerous times from her mother, Cora, that she didn't have the gene for possessing motherly qualities. That was okay, though. She hadn't wanted to be one either. Her dream when she was a girl, while her friends talked about having families and marrying boys twice their age, was to travel. Covens hardly ever moved. The last time a coven moved its entire member basis was during the Salem Witch trials. Sure, one or two members move, if banned from the coven, but no one ever left intentionally. Coven was home to most members, but to Cassandra, it had never felt that way. She wanted to see all the corners of the world. She went to Italy, Prague, Phuket, New York (though that only lasted a day), and somehow ended up in Alaska. Becoming a mother had never been something that she wanted. She thought that would mean she would be alone all her life. But then she found Albie. They were locked out of their hometown for a night in below-freezing temperatures. She was going to use her skills to get her out of the cold, but when she saw Albie, all six foot three of him step out of the truck to check on her, she hesitated. He was kind. He offered every spare jacket in his truck to her, a stranger.

Despite the cold, she didn't want to leave. They cuddled up in her car until she ran out of gas, and then they moved into his. They didn't sleep a wink. They talked for hours. They got to deep topics fast. What else were they supposed to do as they waited for dawn when the tunnel would reopen? Only two-hundred people in their town and they hadn't crossed paths until that moment. They wanted the same thing in life. To live a life that they were proud of. To see every city, every beauty they could until they couldn't anymore. That didn't include children. It was selfish of them. They knew, but how could you not be selfish when you have such little time in this place. Cassandra regretted that decision.

“Really?”

“Really. Just tell me when and I’ll be there.”

Marla abandoned her post. She placed Bathsheba on the floor and ran over to Cassandra. The next thing that she knew, Cassandra was surrounded by arms and being squeezed rather uncomfortably. Her spine tingled.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Marla murmured against Cassandra’s sweater.

“All right. Let me go. I’m fragile, you know.”

Marla pulled back. Cassandra’s sweater was slightly damp.

Cassandra was still tingling as she watched Marla walk over to the end of the ladder.

“It’s the hug,” Bathsheba barked toward Cassandra.

Marla mistook the bark for her and picked the dog back up in her arms.

“She gives good hugs,” Bathsheba barked.

And for once, Cassandra had to agree with her.

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“So, she,” the nurse pointed to Cassandra, “is your grandmother?” the nurse asked as Marla checked in for your appointment.

She looked at Marla with disbelief. Cassandra didn’t understand the woman’s hesitation. What was not to get. She was an age deemed worthy of being a grandmother. Marla did look younger than she was, though that probably wasn’t to her benefit with her current predicament. Marla had chosen a two-sizes-too-big sweatshirt. One of the many of Gabe’s that the girl had acquired for her wardrobe. She wore sweatpants to match. Her dark hair piled atop her head in one of the cinnamon-roll-like shapes that Cassandra had seen many girls partake. Cassandra, on the other hand, had taken care of her appearance. She’d worried about this appointment. She was

nervous, and she didn't understand why. She wasn't the one carrying a miracle baby in her womb, and no one here knew who she was or what she did for a living. No one would know either of them here, so she thought she should at least try to blend in. She decided on one of her tracksuits. Kelly green. She combed her hair into a smooth bob and applied make-up, something she hadn't done in a while. She looked up how to do it on her phone. *Cat-eye* instantly popped up and followed the video instructions.

“Yes, ma'am. This is my nana.”

Kassandra shot her a look. Nana, she was not. Nana was a dog in a book. Not Kassandra Henry. She had a feeling that if she were ever a true grandmother, she would insist that they call her by her given name.

“Okay, just fill out your address and insurance information, and we'll get you back with the doctor.”

She handed Marla a clipboard with a series of papers attached to them.

“Bring them back up when you're done.”

“Thank you,” Marla said.

“Yes, thank you,” Kassandra said.

The moved over to a row of seats farthest away from the nurse. There were only a handful of women and a couple of spouses in the waiting area of various lengths into their pregnancies. One woman, quite large in roundness, looked as if she was ready to knock over each object that stood in her way to get to the doctor is she had to wait one moment longer.

“What do I do?” Marla asked Kassandra as they sat down. “I don't know my insurance information. And if I put my address, my parents will find out.”

Kassandra took the forms from the girl. She read them over. Insurance. Address. Medical

history. Social. This was what she hated about doctors. Why did one have to reveal everything about themselves just to feel better? Why did so many people have to be involved in helping someone get well? She never asked questions when customers came into her shop. She let them reveal what they were comfortable revealing. Nothing more. Nothing less. The world had her way of providing solutions for ailments. Penicillin, for example, was just a plant. A mold that the world procured for her inhabitants. She didn't ask questions when she created this antibiotic. She simply made it available. Then people came in and marketed it and determined its cost.

“Here,” Cassandra said. She hadn't taken the pen from Marla, yet she handed the forms back filled out. Correctly. Minus the change in address. 2628 Dolorosa Road, Cassandra's address, was what was listed.

“How did you?” Marla asked.

“Don't underestimate your nana, dear.”

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They went to a room that smelled of disinfected spray and lavender soap. Marla sat atop a table in the center of the room with paper that crinkled with every breath she took. She had changed into a cotton gown that opened at the front. Marla wrapped the ends around her and crossed her arms. Cassandra could feel the girl's comfortability from where she was sitting. She watched her pale as she eyes the stirrups at the end of the examination table. Hanging on the walls were various posters of female anatomy that had Marla turning red. Cassandra's personal favorite was the graph of circles illustrating the expansion of the cervix during childbirth. In the center of each circle was a smiley face growing bigger and bigger with each ring. Who would be smiling in that growth, the mother or the baby was beyond Cassandra. She was about to say as much to Marla when the doctor walked in.

A woman walked in. Instantly, Marla sat up straighter and locked eyes with Cassandra. A woman with skin as dark as coffee. A woman who, the last time Cassandra had seen her, had tears running down her face asking to forget.

“All right, Marla, what brings you in today,” the doctor asked, not yet looking up from the paperwork from the clipboard.

“Mrs. Henry,” Marla whispered. “It’s her.”

So much for trying to go unnoticed, Cassandra thought.

The doctor looked up at Marla.

“I know you two,” she said. She shifted her head to the side as if trying to rattle the memory out from where it stuck.

Kassandra waited. Marla remained quiet; the only sound coming from her direction was the crinkle of paper.

“The tea shop,” she shouted. “You’re the woman from the tea shop. I remember you now.”

“Yes, I’m Cassandra. I hope you’re doing well.”

“You made me forget something. But I can’t remember what. All I can remember is that I feel better. I don’t remember why, but I feel better. Lighter.”

“That’s good.”

The doctor looked over at Marla, then down at the clipboard.

“Sorry, I was thrown. I wasn’t expecting to see you again.” The doctor looked back at Cassandra. “I’m Dr. Dae. But you both can call me Delilah.”

“I am here with Marla, and she was hoping to get checked out.”

Dr. Dae blinked up at Marla. She shook her head as if she was trying to settle all her

thoughts back into place.

“Of course,” Dr. Dae said. She walked over to a small sink nestled in the corner of the room and washed her hands.

“About how far along are you?”

“I think I’m four months.”

“You think?”

“That was when I last had a period, and then I took a test.”

“When was the last time you partook in sexual activity?”

Marla looked at Cassandra. The girl’s face began its shift to pink then red.

“It would have been around that time,” Cassandra answered for her.

“Are you two related?” the doctor asked. She walked over to Marla and began to touch around Marla’s middle. “I’m sorry if my hands are cold, they like to freeze us out here. Do you mind laying back?”

“Yes,” Cassandra said. “She’s my granddaughter.”

“That must be nice, working for your grandmother.” The doctor moved her hands around the bottom of Marla’s stomach.

“It is,” Marla said.

“So, is everything all right?” Cassandra asked, moving to stand.

“Everything feels good, but I’ll need the ultrasound to be sure. And I’ll be able to tell you a good estimate of how far along you are. Is the father involved?”

“Ultrasound?” Cassandra asked.

Dr. Dae pulled a monitor around the table. “It is just a camera that will show us what is going on inside of Marla. If she’s as far along as she appears to be, we can use an outer one over

a vaginal one.”

“Outer would be good,” Marla whispered.

“This might be a little cold at first,” Dr. Dae said, squirting a blue-tinted gel directly onto Marla’s exposed middle. Dr. Dae moved a small plastic wand around the gel, smoothing the substance in figure-eight motions. The doctor watched the camera. Cassandra seized to breathe.

She tried to learn as much as she could on magic born children. She read over her texts. Called old friends. Yet none had an answer for her other than what she already knew. The baby, if successful, would live like any other child. The only consequence was that the product of the magic would not be able to reproduce. It was a way of keeping balance in the world.

Magic cannot be multiplied. It lives its life, and then it dies. A natural order. There was no information on the mothers that carried such mythical babies. Nothing had been documented on the births of the children if it was the same as any other birth. Cassandra didn’t even know if it ran the normal length of a pregnancy term.

What if poor Marla was pregnant for a year because of what Cassandra made?

“There it is,” Dr. Dae said.

Then Cassandra heard it. The beat. The sound of life. That rhythmic pulse. Duh-dum. Duh-dum. If Cassandra put her hand on her chest, she would feel that sound. She looked at Marla. Wet strikes marked her face in invisible lines like water on paper.

“It’s really in there,” Marla said.

“It’s there,” Cassandra replied.

“I would say you’re nearly five months along, and if you want to, I can tell you the gender.” Dr. Dae said. “So that the great-grandma can start buying gifts.”

Marla stopped breathing.

“It’s up to you,” Cassandra said.

The girl shook her head. It was too much, Cassandra thought. She could see it in her eyes. What they’d heard, that heartbeat had confirmed to the girl what Cassandra already knew. This was real. It wasn’t a dream.

“Okay, then.” Dr. Dae said. “It will be a surprise. I would like to perform a full exam since you are a new patient if you consent.” She looked at Marla. Marla nodded. “All right, if grandma wants to step in the hall, we can get started.”

“Can she stay?” Marla asked. Panic filled her eyes.

Dr. Dae looked between the two.

“Of course, if you’d feel more comfortable. It will just be a routine exam.”

“I want her to stay,” Marla reached for Cassandra’s hand.

“Then she stays,” Dr. Dae said.

Kassandra squeezed Marla’s hand in hers. She felt it again. That tingle down her spine that she felt that afternoon, she watched Marla sit on her front porch with a comic book in her lap. A tingle that she had had only a handful of times in her lifetime. She was where she needed to be.

Marla

Marla was starting to show. She wore Gabe's hoodies, four sizes too big to hide the rounding bump, to prevent the rumors from starting at school. No one knew of the kiss. Or *kisses* now, really. Everyone thought Marla and Gabe were a thing. Marla didn't know if Marla and Gabe were a thing. She's known Gabe since she was six. She hadn't thought of feelings past friendship when she thought of Gabe. It didn't mean they weren't there. It just meant that she never thought of them, or what they could mean, or if they held the smallest potential for becoming a reality. But then the kiss happened. Kisses. Shit.

Now, as she walked the white laminated floors with the stenciled paw prints leading in various directions of Erusa High School, Jane didn't ask how her day was going but rather "Where's Gabe?" It was as if dating someone meant you had to be aware of their daily schedule more than your own. It was as if Gabe and Marla had always been a pair of magnetic plush teddy bears you win at the fair; they didn't look natural separated.

When Gabe and Marla had drafted a plan for this uncanny circumstance, it hadn't involved pretending to be in a relationship. It was much simpler. If Gabe heard any rumors, he'd stop them. He would be her alibi while she figured things out. If Jane wanted to hang after school, Marla already had plans with Gabe. If her mother wanted to go to the mall or attend Sunday evening Salvation, Marla had made SAT prep sessions with Gabe. Everyone believed in SAT prep sessions. It was how you got into Harvard. And when Marla ran away from home, it was the only option that made sense to her, Gabe would stay and tell the tale of how Marla went to live with an Aunt and attend art school. Yet, when the rumors started, neither Marla nor Gabe stopped them.

"Hey," Gabe said. He leaned against the rows of royal blue lockers as Marla rummaged

through the narrow space for her biology textbook. Gabe slung his backpack high on his shoulder. He pulled at Marla's drooping ponytail.

"Hey," she replied, not glancing up, recognizing his voice.

"Had an interesting conversation with Tracy."

"Okay." Marla couldn't find her textbook. She knew she didn't take it home the day before, and she never took it to work because once when Cassandra had seen it, she'd threatened to light it on fire. She'd waved her hands and said Bunch of lies is what that book is. She went on and told Marla that whoever decided this was science and the way the world spun is dumber than a dung beetle.

"Tracy asked if I was taking you to Winter Formal," Gabe said.

"Huh," Marla said. There was her literature book right where she left it, where was the damned t—

"So...am I taking you to Winter Formal?"

"What?" Marla jerked her head from her locker. "You want to go to Winter Formal?"

"I mean," Gabe paused. He looked down at his feet, then ran a hand through his hair.

"Could be fun."

"The dance. It's next month." Marla looked across the hall, then lowered her voice. "I'll be five months pregnant. I'm already starting to show."

Gabe looked down at Marla's stomach, covered by the spans of fabric.

"You don't look pregnant."

"That's because I'm hiding it." She hadn't meant for it to sound as harsh as it did. The words snapped like the tip of a whip. Fast and sharp. She took a deep breath. "What am I supposed to do? Wear one of your hoodies to the dance? Because that will help prevent the

rumors that will start coming any day now.”

“Maybe we could start another rumor?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if we said you were trying to gain weight? You started a pasta eating challenge, and now you are in it to win it.”

“You’re joking.” Marla stared at the grin spreading across Gabe’s face. “You must be joking.”

“I know we talked about it, but I don’t think you are going to be able to hide this much longer. Let alone at home. How you’ve kept from your mother is beyond me.”

“She isn’t perceptive, especially when she has company.”

“What are you going to do, though, huh? Your plan works for now, but what happens when you start to show more? Have you gone to the doctor? What if something is wrong with the baby? Are you just going to have it in your bathroom while your mom goes out shopping? Be serious. This isn’t something you can hide. This isn’t something that you should hide.”

“I’ll make it work,” Marla said. She could make it work. She had to.

“I just thought that it would be nice to go together.”

“Not an option.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“I’m not ready,” Marla said, turning to grab Gabe’s hand. He had asked this question before. When she first told him that night at Brian’s. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust him; Marla trusted him more than anyone else. She was terrified he would call her what she felt she was, crazy. If she told him how much she loved him right now, she’d scare him away.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

For a moment, Marla was silent. Then the words rushed out before she could stop them, “I told you I can’t.”

Gabe pulled his hand from Marla.

“That’s what I thought,” Gabe said. He shook his head. What little hair he had moved with the moment. Marla wanted to reach out and straighten the strands back to their proper place like she was so accustomed to doing. He looked hurt. The grimace on his face. The lowering of his shoulders. The way he turned away from her all said one thing. He was hurt.

“Gabe—”

“I’ll talk to you later,” he said. He pulled his backpack impossibly higher on his shoulder. Without looking at her, Gabe lifted her standing in the now vacant hallway.

Her vision became liquid, and she turned back to her locker. The tears didn’t push over the edge until she saw it, the green spine of her biology textbook, right where it was supposed to be.

“Damn hormones,” Marla said beneath her breath as she slammed her locker closed.

Judith

The letter came on a Monday. It was just one. At first. A simple paper envelope with her address written in elegant script. One stamp, a dove, in the right-hand corner. No return address. Judith opened it as she would anything else sent to her this way. Later, she would wonder why she didn't think it was odd when she noticed the trifold bright yellow paper.

It was a flyer.

Her flyer.

MAGIC IS NOT MEDICINE.

A caricature witch with warts, boils, and a pointy hat.

Judith crumpled it up and threw it away.

The next day it happened just the same. Envelope. No return addresses. Yellow flyer. Crumpled up, then thrown away.

It went this way for a full week. Judith started to recognize the envelope and didn't open them. Then they began to be delivered in batches. Huge boxes full of nothing but yellow paper.

Judith went into town and bought a shredder. Once, she even threw them in her fireplace and watched until nothing remained of the flyers but gray ashes.

The next week none came. Perhaps the witch used all the flyers, Judith thought. Perhaps she would receive no more. The thought had her happier than she had been all week. She went to work. Chit chatted with customers. Judith went out for lunch and placed an order from Ming's Chinese Restaurant for dinner. Gabe's favorite. She listened to oldies on the radio station on her drive home. Sang aloud. She sat in her car in the middle of her driveway to finish a ballad before going inside.

They sat together at the dining room table; something neither had done since Peter left. They ate straight from the cartoons with chopsticks. Peter always insisted that they eat at the dining room table as families did in the movies. Unlike his family that ate microwaveable meals in front of the TV. And Judith's family had been a working family. They never ate together. Her mother worked nights at the town emergency room. Judith was too busy studying to even think about spending a meal with her father. Her father would come home past dinner time and head to his study to drink away his rough day as a pharmacist for a commercial chain. It had been nice. All those years that they did it. The three of them around the cherry wood table. Conversing over their days, the events that took place in town. It was nice, so nice that she hated it the moment that it was taken away from her. Why create a tradition just to rip it away from them? It helped that Peter couldn't stomach Chinese food. It made it slightly

"How's school," Judith asked.

"School is school," Gabe replied.

"Do you not like any of your classes?"

"Same old stuff just told by someone different."

"That can't be. You would've been ready for college years ago." Judith grabbed an egg roll between her chopsticks only for it to fall back into the paper takeout container.

"That would be correct," Gabe said, shoving lo mien into his open mouth. "I would learn more if you just let me stay home and read."

"And how would you read when your eyelids closed, hmm. Surely there is something that you like. Senior year. That must come with perks. I remember when I was a senior, we got to eat outside when the weather was nice."

"We get an extra elective."

“Oh, what did you decide to take?” Judith speared the egg roll and took a hearty bite.

“Theater,” Gabe said.

Judith heard his hesitation.

“But didn’t you take that before?”

“I did. I’ve taken it twice now.”

“Oh,” Judith set her chopsticks down. “Can you do that?”

“Yeah, you can declare a major freshman year, and your electives center around it. I picked theatre.”

Gabe swallowed more noodles before putting his chopsticks down as well.

“I know it’s not math or science or anything logical like you or dad would have wanted, but I like it. I really like it.”

“Oh honey, I never meant for you to feel obligated to choose a major that was similar to mine. I just that maybe, since your grandfather did it and I do it, that maybe it was in our blood.”

“You wouldn’t be mad if I studied it in college?”

“Of course not.” Judith was instantly angry. Not with Gabe, but with herself. How had she missed this? Three years her son had been perusing something that he enjoyed, and she was just now hearing of it. She had never wanted this to happen, never wanted to be the parent that didn’t know their kid. The one that woke up one morning and didn’t even recognize the figure across from them eating Fruity Pebbles with chocolate milk.

Judith reached across the table. She pulled her son’s hand into hers.

“Whatever makes you happy makes me happy. You could be studying basket weaving, and I would still be proud of you if it made you happy. I would just make sure that I always had a house with enough bedrooms because if you pursued that, you probably wouldn’t be able to

live on your own, which wouldn't be a bad thing. I wouldn't be alone."

"I would weave my own house."

"Well, you would have to weave me one too, wherever it is that you go." Judith squeezed Gabe's hand.

"He's going to come back," Gabe said.

"We'll see."

"I know you don't like what he did. I don't either. I'm mad too."

"He's doing a good thing. We shouldn't be mad."

"Just because the excuse is good doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt."

"Have to make him work for our affections when he comes back."

"I saw we have Chinese his first night home," Gabe suggested, shoving a bundle of noodles in his mouth.

"What a wonderful idea."

The finished their food, too full of sodium and GMOs to care about clearing the table of the paper boxes and used napkins. That could wait until morning. You could always tell when a meal was good and enjoyed when the dishes were left abandoned until morning.

"Oh yeah, you got a package this afternoon," Gabe shouted as he climbed up the stairs. "It's on the coffee table."

"Thank you," Judith shouted back. Not at all thinking of what the package could be. If she were honest with herself, she was too happy to give a care in the world about those pesky envelopes with those endless supply of flyers. She hadn't given them a thought since she picked up the Chinese and brought it home.

Walking into the den, she saw it. A UPS box the size of a textbook resting on her coffee

table. Opening it, she found something similar to a textbook. It was red. No words alerted Judith to what it was. Judith's heart leaped into her throat. Nestle between the cover was an inch-wide span of yellow paper. She broke the spine, opening the text directly in its center. There it was. Her computer-animated character of Cassandra Henry. She turned over the page. Again, there it was. It had to have been at least three hundred pages of yellow paper. Judith hadn't even made that many. She rustled the pages, flipping rapidly to the end. She stopped as she came upon one page that read Magic in bold black font. The page after Is. The next, Medicine.

Judith chunked the book across the room.

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Ari came to the pharmacy the next day after Judith texted her about the book.

"Do you think it was her?" Ari asked after Judith had explained the week worth of mail that she had received.

"Who else would it be?" Judith replied. "No one knows that I did it except for you and her."

"Well, I think more people know about it than you think. And how do you know that Cassandra knows that it was you."

"I just do. Have you been telling people it was me?"

"Of course not," Ari said, picking up a bottle of lotion and opened the lid to take a whiff. "So, what do you want to do to?"

"I'm not sure. Whatever it is, we have to be careful. She is willing to fight back."

"Oh, it was some mail, Judith. How bad could it have been?"

"Clearly, she is capable of doing things that we can't," Judith said as Ari picked up another bottle. "For glory's sake, they're all unscented. Stop opening them."

“Sorry.”

“We stick with the list. That’s what we’ll do. And you won’t tell anyone about it.” Judith sent a look in Ari’s direction.

“All right, all right.” Ari threw her hands up. “We’re going to do this. I mean, I know we talked about it, and I told you that your flyer fury was stellar, but we are really going to do this?”

“Yes. You don’t have to. If that is why you’re asking.”

Judith hoped Ari Mathea would say yes. She wished Ari would say this was too much and walk out of the pharmacy without a goodbye. It would be easier that way. Fewer mouths running and fewer people in the know. Judith wasn’t convinced that she should do any of it when she and Ari compiled the list in their chardonnay haze. Their diluted filters and morals made a list easy to come by. She read over the list that they had drunkenly decided to tape onto Judith’s fridge every morning with more and more doubt. The thought of doing all those things to one woman, no matter what kind of woman that she was didn’t sit well with Judith. Perhaps she had gone too far with the flyers. They were crass, yes, offensive, of course.

A couple of weeks went by with Cassandra Henry doing nothing other than sending a look of indifference her way with they crossed paths. Yet, the moment that Judith opened the box and found that book, she made her decision. Cassandra Henry wanted to play this game, and Judith wasn’t backing out until one of them left Dolorosa.

“No, that’s not why I am asking. It just, I know you have a lot on your plate is all. With Peter gone. I just want to give you an out if you needed one.”

“How kind,” Judith said. “but I’m fine.”

Kassandra

The man appeared at DiviniTeas with a clipboard with an *I'd rather be anywhere else* attitude just as Kassandra flipped the sign over to open. He wore dress pants and a white button-down beneath a gray sports coat. Kassandra knew who he was. Hank Cooper. A neighbor of Kassandra's on Dolorosa. She was fond of the man and his filter-free wife. She knew them through kind exchanges. The pair had been customers at DiviniTea for the occasional ailment, mostly for their overweight corgi named Dav, and more than once, the couple invited Kassandra over for dinner, which she politely declined.

He was here against his will.

Hank Cooper worked for the Health Department and had been one of the members to sign off on all of Kassandra's paperwork, approving her business and deeming it ready for opening once she bought the place.

Since then, Kassandra was meticulous with the upkeep and certification to keep her establishment running.

Which meant there could only be one reason why he was here.

"Who do I have to thank for your visit today? Or are you simply here for a cup of tea before work?" Kassandra said as she opened the door for Hank.

"I think you know, from the talk of the town, it's pretty clear who would call about you, Mrs. Henry," Hank said.

"How many times do I have to tell you, it's Kassandra."

"Sorry, old habit. Why don't we just get started so that I can be out of your hair?"

An hour later, Hank had deemed all the complaints mysterious called upon Kassandra's shop as invalid, and Kassandra had brewed up a handful of SereniTeas for him to take home to

his wife.

“Tell her I said hello,” Cassandra said as she led Hank out her door.

“I will,” he replied. “You should come over one afternoon, bring that dog of yours too. I swear Dav has a crush on that little thing. Every morning, he is up at the window, waiting to watch her during your morning walk.”

As she watched him leave, she saw her. Judith, walking into her pharmacy, sending a frown in the direction of Hank Cooper’s departing form.

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The next day, the fire department showed up at Cassandra’s shop over a reported gas leak. She wasn’t permitted to open until later that afternoon. The next day, a realtor stopped by because someone told her that the shop owner wanted to put the place on the market. Throughout the week, people showed up at Cassandra’s work to inquire about calls she hadn’t made and audits that suddenly needed to be redone just to double-check. It was getting tiresome and getting on Cassandra’s nerves. She had the right to retaliate. She wanted to give the Pleasant woman a taste of her own medicine. Call in a few favors, snap a few fingers, whisper a few words under her breath, and Judith would be out of business for a week.

What good would it do? It would just give the woman more time to scheme.

“Anybody show up today?” Marla asked as she walked in for her afternoon shift.

“Policemen. Someone said there was a break-in. They wouldn’t leave until I made a statement.”

“Geez, who do think is doing all of this?” Marla placed her backpack behind the register and begun pulling the ingredients down for an AnxieTea.

“I have a feeling.” She paused, then asked, “You okay?” as she nodded to lavender Marla

had in her hands.

“I’ve had this feeling all day today. Like a cloud overhead.”

“When did it start?” Cassandra walked over to Marla, placed her hand against her head.

“This morning. It woke me up.”

“Anything else? Pain? Headache? Did it get worse throughout the day?”

“No, just a feeling. Sitting right here,” Marla pointed to the spot between her breasts.

“Like something is coming, and I don’t know why, and it doesn’t make sense. Gabe said I spend too much time here, and that it’s nothing, but it doesn’t feel like nothing, Mrs. Henry.”

“Don’t listen to him. Listen to your body. And when you see him next, you give him a good kick for me. I’m good company, and he knows it.” She touched Marla’s cheek. “Finish fixing your tea, and then I’ll have you help me with a new batch.” Cassandra smiled.

“Something I haven’t done yet?” Marla’s voice lifted.

That girl was eager to learn. She tried if Marla was having a rough day, a day of morning sickness and body aches and teenage drama, Cassandra taught the girl the recipe for a different tea. Like every time before, the girl lit up with fire.

“Something new, yes. For now, drink your tea.”

She was worried. That was certain. Marla was feeling things that she shouldn’t be feeling. It could be the baby. It was made unworldly. These moments could end the moment she went into labor. Yet, the thought of Marla altered permanently did a funny thing to Cassandra’s chest. What if Cassandra had taken away any hope of Marla having a normal life? Sure, having a child as a child did not set the girl up for normalcy, but what if it was more than that?

“A rumor’s been going around. About you. People know you’re pregnant. I’m sorry, Marla. I could convince them that you weren’t. I tried. I promise I tried.”

“What did you say? Who knows?” Marla began panting.

“Everyone. It’s spreading.”

“Holy Moses. What do I do? What am I supposed to do? My parents.”

“Marla, I don’t know if it will help; it might make things worse.”

“What? What did you do?”

“I told them it was mine.”

Marla

The front entry was dark when Marla got home from work. There wasn't a lamp on. There were a handful of occasions that Marla could remember coming home to a dark house. Most of those instances involved her mother being with her, and even then, there was always some source of light to welcome them home.

"I'm home," she shouted from the front door. "Mom?"

Marla flicked on the kitchen light and jumped as she made eye contact with Anne.

"Jeez, you gave me a heart attack. Why are you sitting in the dark?" Marla asked.

"Where have you been?" her mother asked.

"Work. Like I am every day after school." Marla turned to the fridge.

"And where would that be?"

"In town." Marla pulled a container of deli-sliced turkey and packaged cheese before slamming the fridge door closed.

"Where?"

Marla went to the bread box. She pulled a loaf out and twisted the plastic bag open.

"Where, Marla?"

Marla mumbled beneath her breath as she piled together something edible.

Anne got up from the table and went to her daughter. She was less than a foot from her before Marla heard her repeat the question.

"Where?"

Marla stared at the sandwich on the paper napkin she was using as a plate.

"Mrs. Henry's shop in town," Marla said.

"Why?"

“I wanted to save money.”

“That’s fine, dear. I’m glad you’re smart with your money, but what are you saving for?”

“School.”

“Sweetie, your college fund is taken care of, money set aside from your father’s accident. You don’t have to worry about that. It’s admirable that you’re joining the workforce and preparing for your future, but I don’t like that you’re doing it at Mrs. Henry’s. You will put in your two-weeks’ notice, and if you still want to make extra money, I’ll contact some of the girls on the committee and see if any of them need help around the house or a receptionist at work on the weekends. Any place but there. That’s not the place for you.” Her mother walked over to her purse at the kitchen table and pulled out her address book.

“I can’t.”

“All right, I will call up Mrs. Henry tomorrow and take care of it for you.”

“No,” Marla said.

“Okay, then you’ll tell her yourself?”

“I mean, no, I’m not quitting.” Marla looked at her mother, holding her shoulders back just like her mother did when she was trying to prove a point.

“Yes, you are. That woman isn’t sane. I won’t allow you to work for her. Do you even know what she does in her store? She sprouts lies and sells fake potions to make a buck. She uses people’s vulnerabilities to keep her lights on.”

“She helps people.”

“She manipulates people,” Anne said.

“You don’t even know her.”

“And you do? Do you know what people say about her? Do you know what she did to

Georgie Andrews? That poor woman was so desperate for a baby that she went to that loon's shop. Georgie would call me crying, sobbing that it didn't work. That woman gives nothing but false hope."

"You're wrong," Marla said.

"I know it is hard to hear, you've always been one to befriend everyone you come in contact with, but you will no longer be associated with Cassandra Henry. On top of that, you'll be sure to stay away from Judith and her pharmacy."

"I'm not a toddler. You can't tell me who I can and cannot be friends with."

"No, but I can tell you where you will not be spending your afternoons."

"You lost that right the moment I found the birth control under your bed," she asked.

Marla took a step back.

Anne stayed where she was.

"Who gave it to you?"

"I got it myself," Marla said.

"Kids these days are selling birth control on street corners instead of the good stuff. Do not insult my intelligence. When did she give it to you?"

"June."

"Was it just the one time?"

"Yes, I never took it."

"So, you're not having sex."

"I—"

"You're not having sex, and you don't need birth control, and there is no way on earth that what I heard from Ari Mathea about my sixteen-year-old daughter is pregnant is rumor

only?"

"I—"

"It's not that hard of a question. Are you having sex? Are you pregnant? They should both be no because I know that I've worked my ass off to raise you better than this."

"I—"

"Is it true," she continued. "Is it true that you're pregnant?"

Marla's heart stopped. Her mother's chest heaved.

"Is it true that my daughter, the girl that I raised and let live under my roof, was so disrespectful that she whored herself and is now carrying a child out of wedlock? Is that true?"

"That's," Marla stumbled over her words like cracks in a sidewalk. "That's, that—"

"What, Marla? It's what?"

Marla's eyes snapped to Anne's.

"I—"

Marla's mouth had never felt so dry. It was like she couldn't swallow, as if the words that were trying to make their way up out of her throat were choking her. She feared she would drown in her thoughts. All she could do was stand in the corner of the kitchen and let the tears come.

"Whose is it?" her mother asked so loudly the words took up the entire house.

"I--," Marla began.

"Whose is it?" Anne repeated enunciating each word as if the person whom he was speaking to was unable to comprehend such simple words.

"I don't know," Marla said between moments of caught breath. "I don't know."

Anne reached out and wrapped her arms around Marla's shaking frame. She ran her hand

to smooth Marla's hair. "It's okay," she whispered in her ear.

It was just then that Marla felt the thing inside her kick. Hard.

Anne's soothing hands froze. She had felt it too, Marla thought. There was no way out of this now. Then she felt it, a small movement against the walls of her belly that resonated.

"It's okay," Anne said, impossibly softer as if soothing something else entirely. "It will be okay."

Anne dragged Marla toward the front door by her wrist.

"It will be okay," her mother said. It was soft. It wasn't anger, Marla thought but something else. Fear. "It will all be okay. But you are no longer welcome in this house."

"Mom?" Marla sobbed again.

"Don't you come back," her mother said.

"Mom," Marla said. "Please, I don't know what happened. You have to believe me. Please!"

Marla didn't feel as if she was in her body anymore, but rather floating above herself, watching it all happen to her from some other perspective, some other that didn't quite make sense. She watched as her mother gently pushed her shoulders away from the front door, then let go. She watched as her mother turn her back on her, walk back inside 2627 Dolorosa Road and close the door.

Marla felt hands clutch her shoulder and pull her close. There was mumbling in her ears, but Marla couldn't understand what was said. All she heard in her head was *whore* as she was led across the street and into an unfamiliar home. Not her home. Did she even have a home anymore? Did she even have a family? How could she be pregnant?

Whore.

Whore.

Whore.

Judith

Judith didn't notice the first house wren that nestled on one of the cherry-blossom bare branches outside her house, though its song did give her pause. The quick, sharp notes much like the sound of her tape recorder she'd rewound late at night, long after her roommate had gone to bed, to write out her pharmacology lecture notes back in college made her stumble a step. That sound always made her spine tingle, her shoulders bunched and rose as if trying to protect her ears. Yet, even though she once more felt that tingle, Judith walked into her house, shut her door, and didn't give the sound a second thought. She didn't see the house wren cock its brown head and expand its short wings at the close door. She didn't see nor hear it call its friends.

The next day the house wren was there, with three others, singing as Judith got into her car for work, as she did the morning before and as she would the following day. They sat in a straight line on the same branch. The tingle zapped the dip of her spine, that sensitive section of her back, but Judith ignored it.

On and on, her mornings and late afternoons went. A week of the sharp songs piercing her nerves as she left and returned home became two. Three house wrens became six, then eight, then fourteen, then too many for Judith to count each member of this chilling chime. A chime of wrens. Judith had spent her lunch looking it up and discovering that it was rare for such an occurrence to take place where she lived. Even Ari, who came over to dinner, uninvited, commented on the flock.

"Did you put out feed or those pinecones the girl scouts have been selling outside the grocery store this week?" Ari asked, holding her purse close to her chest like a shield from the fist-sized birds.

"No, one was here, and then all of a sudden," she waved a hand towards the cherry-

blossom. “This.”

“It looks like you super-glued brown oversized cotton balls onto your tree,” Ari said as she stood beside Judith on the porch. “That can’t be good for the tree. But, I’ve heard it’s good luck when birds surround your house. It means prosperity or something.”

“Prosperity?” Judith looked at Ari.

“Yeah, I saw it on one of those nature shows. One of the newer ones. Oprah was the narrator.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I figured you’d want to hear it from me rather than someone else,” Ari’s eyes shifted towards the Morrow household. “Though I’m not certain that she knows.”

The look on Ari’s face could be described no other way than smug. The look of accomplishment for knowing something that others didn’t was Ari’s personal brand of cocaine. She would choose to hear the latest gossip over saving a duckling from a landfill. Being in the know was glory, an achievement like no other to Ari Mathea, a trait that Judith had trouble stomaching most days.

“I don’t have time for this. So, unless it personally involves me, I need to get dinner started.”

Judith turned away from Ari, to head inside to the blissful quiet of her home.

“It’s about Gabe,” Ari said. “Everyone in town is talking about it.”

“I’m listening.”

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She heard Gabe the moment he got home. Less than an hour after, Ari left her front porch. She didn’t allow the woman to linger after she retold the town gossip that centered around

her son. No, instead, Judith told Ari a simple, thank you, and entered her home, allowing the door closing behind her to tell Ari she was no longer needed on Judith's doorstep. She went to her bedroom. Changed out of her scrubs and tennis shoes and into a pair of jeans, a sweater, fuzzy socks that Gabe had gifted her three Christmases ago. She didn't know why she did this. Normally, she spent the evening in her scrubs, only changing out of them moments before bed to put them in the wash, pulling a replica of said scrubs out of the bottom drawer of her dresser for the next day. When she heard the echo of the front door closing in her bedroom, Judith took a calming breath.

"It's just a rumor," she said to the walls. To herself. To the damn birds, she hoped had migrated back to where they came from.

She entered the kitchen. Her sock-covered feet silenced her movements across the hardwood floor. Gabe was in jeans and still wearing his winter coat. He had removed his boots, they sat next to his sock covered feet as he leaned against the countertops. He was smothering a slice of bread with what Judith knew was a heavy coating of butter. Judith watched as her son grabbed the plastic Mickey Mouse shaker from the cabinet above the toaster. Brown sugar. He beat the end of the mouse, forcing a shower of brown dust onto the toast, leaving a halo of sugar on the countertop.

"Is it true?" Judith asked, staring at Gabe as he was three seconds from shoving the steaming bread into his open mouth.

"What?" He must have heard it, the fear there nestled beneath the letters of her words like roots. He placed the toast on the lip of the counter. "What are you talking about?"

"Marla Morrow. Did you get her pregnant?"

"Where did you hear that?" Gabe's face turned pallid. For a second, a slight second,

Judith feared he would pass out.

“Answer the question.”

“Answer mine. Who told you?”

“Is it true?” Judith wondered if this was what a heart attack felt like. Every breath she took was heavy as if it was carrying away moments of the life she had left. Any minute now, she would be on the ground, still as a stone. Five more breaths, she thought, that was all she probably had left. Even as a child, Judith had this feeling that she would not live as long as her friends. No matter how illogical the thought was, how absurd an eight-year-old being sure of the fact that she would not ever make it to the grandmother stage in life, the thought hovered there, remaining year after year, never going away. She never thought that this would be the way she went, right in front of her son.

“Yes,” Gabe said.

“How could you be so stupid?” Judith said. “How could both of you be so stupid? Did you not think? I know you know how to be safe. You know how to use a condom, or were the fifty bananas that your father and I made you practice with not real enough for you?”

“It ju—”

“Don’t you dare say it just happened. It doesn’t just happen. Sex doesn’t just happen. It is a choice. You two made the wrong choice. Now you are going to have to live with that choice for the rest of your lives. Do you know what it takes to be a parent? Let me tell you, son; it’s no walk in the park.”

“It sure seems to be for you. You’re never here. I can’t remember the time I had an actual conversation with you that didn’t involve dinner or school,” Gabe said. It was soft like the falling of snow. It didn’t pound on Judith. It didn’t knock her down, but rather it grew heavier and

heavier until she felt buried beneath the softness, unnoticeable under the white, bright truth of his words.

“A lot has happened in the past year. And we talk. What about when we talked about college and theatre a few weeks ago? What was that if not us talking?”

“That was months ago. And don’t you want to know what’s happened since? I applied to schools. I got into those schools. A couple of them even offered me full rides.”

“Well, a lot of good that’s doing you now. How the hell are you going to do school and raise a baby? What about Marla, hmm? Is she going to go off to school? Leave the baby with Anne? Let me tell you now that most certainly is not an option.”

“We’re going to raise her ourselves.”

“Her? Gabe, how far along is Marla?”

“Almost six months.”

“How long have you known?”

“Why does that even matter?”

“How long?”

“Since Marla found out. Five months ago.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me? I had to hear it from Ari Mathea that my son knocked up Anne Morrow’s daughter. You think that little of me.” Judith released a shuddering breath. Four left.

“You don’t talk to me,” Gabe’s words hit every surface of the kitchen. “Every time I try to, you’re not even here.”

“I am here every day.”

“You’re here, but you’re not.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It’s like talking to a wall, Mom. I’ll talk but just bounces right back. You don’t even blink sometimes. Do you know that? I’ll come in after practice. You’ll be in front of the TV, and you don’t even blink. For minutes. You sit there, and it’s like you’re not even aware of where you are.” Gabe’s hands latched onto his head, trapping strands of grapefruit orange hair, the same color as Judith’s, between his fingers like he was trying to rip the image up and out by the roots of his hair.

“This isn’t about me, and you know that. Don’t make this about me. You’ve missed up. You’ve royally fucked up your life. Don’t you get that? Your future is no longer your own.”

“Thank God.”

“What did you just say?”

“I said, thank God. Thank God I finally have a family of my own. A family that I can count on.”

“Did you two plan this?” Judith was down to two breaths. She knew it. She was holding them in, holding on for dear life because if she understood everything that had just happened was currently happening, she had just lost her son. He would no longer be Gabe Pleasant, son of Judith, but rather Gabe Pleasant, the father. Her baby couldn’t be a father. He wasn’t ready. She wasn’t ready for that.

“No, we didn’t plan it. But I am glad it happened.”

“You don’t know what you are saying.”

“Yes, I do. If I’ve learned anything from you and dad, it’s that the only person that you can count on is yourself. Well, I will make sure that I am there for Marla and that she can count on me. No matter what happens.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“You can promise anything, you and dad showed me that. But I plan on keeping them.”

“Fine, you want to make this about me and how horrible your life must have been. How horrible it must have been to grow up with a roof over your head. How awful it must have been to have food in the fridge. Those clothes on your back must have been torture. I know I haven’t been myself this past year, but I am not the bad guy. I didn’t leave, he did.”

“You might have stayed mom, but you left too. Just in a different way. At least dad has the decency to act like life is different. He’s not pretending like nothing is wrong, and everything has stayed the same. I’m not saying what he did isn’t wrong, but at least he doesn’t act like roses are still growing. I would take being homeless over living in a house with a zombie.”

“Well, son. You might get the chance.”

“Are you kicking me out?”

“No, but Anne Morrow knows about this too, and according to Ari, Anne kicked Marla out.”

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“I have to go.” Gabe turned around, searched the counters, his elbowing knocking over the toast, cold and forgotten, on to the floor.

“We aren’t done.”

“I don’t care. We can talk or don’t talk later. Whatever. I have to check on Marla.”

“She’s fine.”

“You just said she was kicked out of her house. She’s pregnant.”

“Kassandra Henry took her in.”

“Good, I’ll go there.” He wasn’t telling her, Judith realized. He was only thinking out loud.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Judith said. “Now, pick up that damn toast and sit the hell down. We’re not even close to being done.”

Judith walked over to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair and pushed it in Gabe’s direction before sitting herself down in the chair across from him.

“I don’t have time for this. I’m leaving.”

“You walk out that door, and you best leave your keys here. You might think you’re life has sucked these past months, but it will be garbage if both you and Marla are out in the cold, with nowhere to go.”

“Mrs. Henry—”

“Is not in any way involved in this. This is our family and Marla’s. And that’s the way it’s going to stay. I’d move before I’d let that woman raise my grandchild. Now, sit.” Judith lowered her voice. The anger left her body in one great breath. She was going to be a grandmother. She wasn’t happy. She didn’t know the last time that she knew what that word even meant. But for the first time, in quite some time, she wasn’t mad either.

Kassandra

Kassandra couldn't believe that Anne, Saint Anne, kicked her daughter out. Kassandra's eye went straight to the hole of her front door when she heard a man yell, then a scream that was undeniably Marla's. And there Marla was, standing on her front porch, sobbing, their green front door closed in front of her. She didn't have time to think before she was halfway across the street, with Bathsheba close on her heels. Kassandra didn't even think that Marla felt Kassandra's hands on her shoulders, leading her across the street and into her home. She sat her down on her couch. Bathsheba jumped up into her lap. Kassandra held her tongue. The dog could be on the furniture this one time.

If the girl was anything like Kassandra, which she had seen much of herself in Marla as of late, then she would want to be left alone with her sorrow. Kassandra went into the kitchen. Nothing made tears worse than an audience. Those kinds of people were on Kassandra's curse list, right beneath athletes that don't pay to run for charity races but rather show up and perform as if the race were their personal battle. Whenever she saw one during a race down Dolorosa, she mumbled *stercus accidit* beneath her breath. Once it resulted in a runner shitting in the Coopers' front yard and the Coopers' obese corgi, Davit, at least that was what their German accident made his name sound like, proceeded to eat it. It was moments like these that Kassandra was happy for her gifts, but then she heard Marla in the other room. Her gifts had resulted in that too. A sixteen-year-old, pregnant, and scared out of her mind all because Kassandra wasn't strong enough to say no. She had been too selfish. She hadn't wanted to lose a friend, her only real friend, so much that she ended up missing up an innocent child's life. If she could, she'd curse herself with diarrhea if she thought it would make her feel better. Instead, she made Marla a cup of tea with crushed chamomile and placed it on the coffee table in front of Marla.

“Make sure she drinks this,” Cassandra said to Bathsheba.

The dog nodded her head then went back to rubbing her nose against Marla’s hand.

Walking back into her bedroom, Cassandra kneeled on the carpet floor and opened her mother’s dowry chest she kept at the end of her bed. She pulled the quilts out, the old linens that had been passed down from mother to mother in her family. She rubbed her thumb against each one. Every quilt had the monogrammed S in the top right corner.

Before Cassandra was a Henry, she was a Sloane. A coven of women just like her. Sloane’s were famous all over America, more than any person knew since many Sloanes changed their name or were forced to. Like Jezebel Sloane, who after a love affair with a southern senator and later married a rodeo clown, thought it best to start over. Or Henrietta Sloane, who, after trying to rid herself of her gifts by drinking poison after poison, went insane. The family legally changed her name not because her lack of sanity shamed the remaining Sloanes, many lacked such sanity, but because a Sloane that receded her gift was no Sloane at all. While Cassandra’s mother had begged her to keep her name, for Cassandra was one of the most respected of their coven, she loved Albie more than any respect or status she might have gained. He had wanted her to be a Henry, so Henry she became. Marrying him wasn’t the problem. Her mother had been so against Cassandra’s desire to marry Albie that she had assumed that all the Sloane’s perspective. To change your name was to withdraw from the coven.

Albie had been worth it.

Beneath the quilts was what Cassandra was looking for. Four books, each a foot wide and a foot deep of pages. She pulled each one out of the chest slowly. They were heavy. They were precious. She didn’t like the word grimoire, but that was what they were, for the most part. Each

text was more than recipes. In each volume, there was evidence of her coven and every coven of Sloane as far back the written word. In one, a tree full of limbs of every Sloane there had ever been. In another, a lineage of where every living Sloane had ended up. It included those that were no longer privileged the name. There was Henrietta, a painted green leaf sprouted from a vine hovering over the map of the world. If it was accurate, and it always seemed to be, Henrietta was in Atomic City, Idaho. There was Cassandra's leaf, floating over Kansas. In the third, a genealogy of Sloane's printed in ink, a map of how Cassandra came to be starting with the first Sloane, Dolores, to ever walk the lands of North America. In the last, was a list of all the Sloanes that left this physical plane and gone on to the next. There was her mother, Cora Sloane, one of the most recent entries.

It was the volume that she guessed to be the most useful in her current state of research. She had to find a way to reverse what she had done to Marla. She had to find a way to fix this.

Kassandra opened the book and started reading the first page.

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Five hours had passed before Kassandra realized that her neck hurt, and her stomach was growling. The crying in the den had ceased. She hadn't made it an inch into the book, and nothing thus far had led to an inkling of solution. Cracking her neck, and her knees, Kassandra stood from where she sat. One by one, she put the volumes back into the dowry chest and covered them with the quilts. They were something to leave out in the open. It wasn't just Bathsheba's unreliable bladder that Kassandra was afraid of.

In the den, Kassandra found Marla asleep on the couch. Her head was stretched at an odd angle. Kassandra would have moved it to a more comfortable position, but the fear of waking the traumatized girl was at the front of Kassandra's mind. Let her stay in her dreams, she thought,

they are better at this moment for her. It might be her only comfort for quite some time.

“How long has she been out,” Cassandra asked Bathsheba, who was curled up by the girl’s feet.

“A couple of hours,” the dog barked. “She cried herself to sleep. You’re going to have to bathe me. It’s like I took a dip in the ocean. I can feel the salt from her tears on my skin.”

“Did she say anything?”

“Nothing coherent. Something about a whore.”

“Were you even listening, or are you making this up?”

“Fine, don’t believe me. You never do anyways.”

“Oh shut it—”

“Which is rich coming from you. You would think someone who is always criticized and judged because of who you are, that you would be a little more caring—”

“If you wake her up, I’ll invite the corgi over for a playdate.”

Kassandra went into the kitchen. If she had learned anything in this mess, this mess that she had created, she learned that nothing could be fixed on an empty stomach. At least for her, that seemed to be the case.

Like all good recipes, magical or cuisine based, this one started with broth.

Kassandra pulled her stockpot from a cabinet beneath her stove. Removing the bone broth, she always kept on hand from the fridge, Cassandra poured all of the transparent liquid into the pot. As she poured the liquid, the garlic, and black pepper, she added when the broth was originally made tickled her nose. In went two cups of milk that thickened the soup. Then went the stick of lard, melting and bubbling quickly in the heated liquid, shifting the shade of soup to the color of the rising sun. She peeled and chopped purple and orange carrots in narrowing

circles. Celery stalks became crescents in the yellow sky of the pot. Next, diced potatoes and onions. Thyme, bay leaf, parsley were stirred in much like she did with her teas. Finally, a dash of pepper. A shake of salt into the pot and then one over her shoulder for good luck. If she couldn't fix Marla with her gifts at the moment, at least she could heal her heart with food. Food was the earth's magic; few recognized this and abused her gifts.

She placed the lid on the pot and gave it time.

"She's waking," Bathsheba barked.

Kassandra peeked around the counter. Marla had risen up on her elbow. Her eyes were scrunched closed in pain. Her free hand went to her neck as if to smooth it out of its awkward angle. Guilt filled Kassandra's chest. She was beginning to see a pattern with those that she cared about. She was making decisions that led to more hurt than good.

"Mrs. Henry?" Marla asked the room.

"Right here, dear." No matter how much she disliked being called it, she'd let it go. She had more important things to worry about, like figuring out a way to tell this girl the truth without having her hate her. She moved around the counter and walked towards Marla as she moved to get up. Marla stood her actions before Kassandra could reach her as if some heavyweight had pushed her back down. She thought something had happened that Marla was somehow hurt. Her eyes roamed the girl's limbs and frame.

"They kicked me out," Marla said.

"Oh, honey," Kassandra said. "I don't think they meant it."

She still couldn't believe it herself. If Marla was confused by today's events, you could put Kassandra right next to her on Perplexed Lane.

"You didn't see his face. They didn't believe me."

“Didn’t believe what?” Cassandra sank down into cushion across from Marla.

“When I told them. He wouldn’t listen. I tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen to me.”

“What—”

“And then I was outside, and then I was here and, and, and they kicked me out, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Marla, I need you to tell me what you told them.”

“I told them that I didn’t know how it happened,” Marla said. “How I didn’t know how this,” she gestured to her expanded middle, “happened.”

“You told them you didn’t know how you got pregnant.”

“Yes, and then he kicked me out. Where am I supposed to go, Mrs. Henry?”

“You told them that you were a virgin and that you were pregnant?”

“I tried to. I told them that I didn’t know how it happened but—”

“You didn’t tell them that you were still a virgin?”

“He called me a whore,” Marla sobbed. “He called me a whore, and then he kicked me out.”

Kassandra watched as Marla’s shoulder shook like an earthquake was happening in her thin frame, racking her from her foundation within.

“They didn’t believe me.”

Marla’s head fell into her hands. Bathsheba jumped into the girl’s lap.

“What am I supposed to do? I don’t even have my phone. I don’t have any clothes.”

“Well, for starters,” Cassandra said. “We are going to stop that crying. It doesn’t do any good other than clearing out the tear ducts. Then, then we are going to eat because I made too much food.”

“I’m.” Sob. “Not.” Sob. “Hungry.”

“Yes, you are. Sadness and fear shrink the stomach. Warmth and broth will open it right back up.”

Kassandra went into the kitchen and prepared three bowls. Removing a loaf of sourdough from her bread box, she tore three fistfuls and placed one atop each bowl, then grabbed two spoons. She took one to Marla and placed it in her slightly shaking hands.

“It’s hot, straight from the pot.”

She returned to the kitchen and grabbed the other two bowls. Kassandra placed one on the floor. Bathsheba jumped from the couch and went straight toward the bread. Kassandra sat beside Marla.

“Eat,” she said. She stared at Marla until the girl took the spoon in her hand and placed a small portion of yellow liquid into her mouth.

“Now again, but with some of the food in it. Not just the broth.”

The room was filled with a chorus of clinking spoons, then the percussion of breath through noses as Marla’s eating increased, and Bathsheba reached the bottom of her bowl.

“Better?” Kassandra asked.

“I could use some more bread,” Bathsheba barked.

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

Breathing heavily from her nose, the dog made her way to one of her pillow beds, the one kept by the front door. She only every chose that one when something was going on that she wanted to watch but watch in the comfort of her plush.

Nosey four-legged thing, Kassandra thought.

“Yes,” Marla said. “That helped. I guess I didn’t eat earlier when I got home, and then

everything happened.”

“Good. Now we can get the ugly out of the way so that we can make sense of this hocus pocus.”

“Hocus pocus?” Bathsheba barked, not even lifting her head.

“You,” Cassandra said as she pulled the empty bowl from Marla’s warmed hands. “Will stay here with me. You will go to school as normal.”

“But the rumors. Everyone is going to be talking. Oh God,” a sob reverberated from her throat. “The things they are probably already saying. If Dad knew, then they’ve already started.”

“Rumors are rumors. They move like the wind; you never know where they come from or where they will go. But like the wind, they are gone before you know it or shifting in a completely different direction.”

“I don’t think they will be gone anytime soon. I mean, if this is like a normal pregnancy, I’ve got four more months of this. That’s April. Oh my God, April. I’m going to be pregnant until April.”

“Time is faster than—”

“That’s even if this is a normal pregnancy. I mean, how can this possibly be a normal pregnancy. I’m still a virgin. There is a baby in me, and I am a virgin.”

“It will be a normal pregnancy.”

“How do you know? I’m a virgin. Oh my God, I have to deliver a baby, and I didn’t even get to have sex.”

“Marl—”

“I have to push this thing out of my body, and I didn’t even get to have sex.”

“Marl—”

“It’s going to kill me. There is no way a baby, and surely it’s going to have something weird with it, can possibly come out of me down there.” Marla pointed between her legs. “Jane was telling me that one time a guy stuck his fing—”

“Marla,” Cassandra said. She didn’t want to know where that sentence was going. “I need you to calm down. I know that you are scared, but I need you to listen to me.”

Marla’s eyes were wider than she had ever seen them. Her lips were closed in a straight line as if it was taking all her will power to keep them there.

“I need you to breathe too, dear.”

Marla took a visible breath.

“Good, do it again.”

Marla complied. Her chest moved up, then down.

“Now, I am going to tell you something that I should have told you months ago. Something that I should have told you the moment you told me what was happening to you.”

“What?”

“I know how this happened,” Cassandra said, looking down at her hands. Her hands were the cause of this mess. “This is my fault.”

She looked up to Marla.

“How?” Marla asked.

“Well, I guess the easiest way to explain is with the beginning. It started with Georgie Andrews.”

“Mrs. Andrews? My mom’s friend?”

“Yes, but before she was your mother’s friend, she was mine.”

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Kassandra Henry had been contemplating a new tea with Bathsheba at her feet when she heard the bell above her door chime two times. Anne Morrow was the last person that she ever imagined would grace the door of her tea shop, DiviniTeas. Now, Georgie Andrews, the woman standing next to Anne, was not unexpected, but rather right on time. Georgie, the petite woman, with a voice as small to match, was a frequent secret visitor, coming early in the mornings before work, just as Kassandra flipped the open sign against the front window. But, Saint Anne, in her pressed polo and creased slacks, was a sight to see. Not even a foot in the door and Kassandra could feel the disdain pouring out of Anne's pores like wine. Anne's eyes seemed stuck on birdcages hanging from the ceiling.

"How can I help you today, Georgie?" Kassandra asked. She purposely ignored Anne, knowing full well what it would do to the woman.

"I want to try what you recommended last time," the blonde woman said. "The herbs for Simon didn't work," she stared at her feet. "I used them all on him, and nothing happened. Nothing stuck."

Georgie's voice broke on stuck. Never had Kassandra met a woman so desperate to carry her husband's child. Kassandra and Georgie had spoken for hours on what it could mean, what her body was telling her by not conceiving her husband's child. How it was possible that an empty womb was protecting her heart, her mind too. We need a baby, Georgie had insisted. It will help, I know it will.

"Are you sure?" Kassandra asked. What the woman was requesting was no easy feat. Sure, the way in which it happened was easy, a simple concoction that needed to be drunk only once. But, the result, a child made without conceiving. A child of the earth that was nothing but the product of the mother could cause more problems than solutions. Lack of connection

between father and child, for starters. An emphasis for the maternal over the paternal. And the child, no matter what gender, would not be able to conceive children of their own. The hypocrisy wasn't lost on Cassandra. She had tried to explain this over and over to the small, desperate woman. The only way she could hold her off was by telling Georgie of something else that could work, something less drastic.

"She's sure," Anne snapped. "We wouldn't be here if she weren't sure." She said it as if the decision to visit Cassandra's shop this Monday morning was preceded by an argumentative battle in which Anne lost.

"Well, then." Cassandra smiled at Anne. "Best get to work. I'm sure we all have places to be today. Have a seat." Cassandra waved an arm toward the two Parisian chairs set beside the front window. It was where Cassandra liked to sit most afternoons. She watched the people walking past with lists of things to do, hardly looking up to from their phones, never thinking the earth for another beautiful day.

Kassandra pulled vitex, maca, cinnamon, tribulus terrestris, and iron shavings from a cast-iron skillet off her selves. She shaved a ginger root to cover the smell that the concoction emitted. She ground the herbs until her arm hurt, until all that remained was a thin layer of black dust. She poured them into a clay mug. She heated a saucer of goat's milk laced with Mary thistle on her oven plate.

Kassandra tilted her ear toward the two women as she stirred the thickening milk.

"You don't have to do this," Anne said. "We could try another doctor."

"They will just say the same thing as all the others. This will work. She said it would work. I trust her."

"She said that about the herbs."

“She said that wasn’t certain. This has a better chance. I know her, Anne. She’s helped me before.”

“How can you possibly trust her. She is just here to make a buck off of your pain, Georgie. Let’s leave. We can call Judith, see what she has to say about it all. There might be something pharmaceutical that is in the early stages that the last doctor wasn’t privy to.”

“She hasn’t charged me a dime. She’s my friend.”

“Friend? Since when are you two friends? And there are other ways of getting a baby. Adoption. Surrogacy.”

“You know I don’t have that kind of time or money. You know I need this now.”

“You don’t know what risk you are putting your body in by taking whatever she is making. For all you know, it’s rat poison.”

“No poison,” Cassandra said from where she stood, tired of Saint Anne’s assumptions. “I save that for the actual rats.” She looked pointedly at Anne.

Anne straightened in her seat.

Kassandra held her smile inside her mouth like a suppressed yawn and removed the pan of boiling milk from the hot plate. She poured the ground herbs into its whiteness. The liquid darkened like an overcast sky, bubbling into gray. She let the mixture sit. It needed time. She

“Go grab me another cup, would ya,” Cassandra said to Bathsheba. Bathsheba pulled one eyelid open and let a heavy sigh out of her nose before allowing the lid to fall back down.

“Now,” she said the way she often said it, loud and agitated at the small bundle of fur that more often than not appeared to have better things to do. “Or you’re out the door faster than—”

“I beg your pardon,” Anne said. “You have no right to speak to us that way.”

“I’m sorry?” Cassandra’s eyebrows kissed one another on her brow, then shot upward to

graze her hairline. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “I was talking to Bathsheba. She doesn’t ever listen the first time.”

“Bathsheba?” Anne asked.

“Her dog,” Georgie pepped. “She helps her around the store.”

“She talks to the dog?” Anne looked at the still unmoved Italian greyhoundYorkshire Dog, no bigger than two handfuls of fur.

“I was,” Kassandra said. “And I would like to not have to repeat myself.”

“Fine,” Bathsheba barked. The dog slowly stretched to her feet, performed a cow pose, and clicked her nails loudly on the hardwood floor.

“Sorry about that,” Kassandra said. “She can be a real bitch sometimes.”

Georgie smiled at Kassandra.

Anne had a pinched look on her face, Kassandra had seen it on Albie’s face when she made him try some new dessert she wanted to try. The look was normally followed by projectile vomiting.

“Here,” Bathsheba barked, carrying a mug by the handle between her teeth. “I don’t know if it is clean.”

“Perfection,” Kassandra said. She took the mug from Bathsheba’s teeth and pulled two prepared tea bags from her shelf. One AnxieTea in pale blue filter paper, one TidyTea in bright yellow filter paper. Georgie needed the latter for the mixture. She had had so much homeopathic medicinal as of late that Kassandra feared the concoction would be too much for her system. Anne, on the other hand, was a walking nerve. Kassandra was proud of the woman, here supporting her friend. She had expected less of her. Despite Anne making her disdain known every second, she sat in that chair, and in that chair, she remained, holding the hand of her friend.

It took someone strong to do that; to push aside their biases to comfort someone dear to them. Cassandra could paint a lot of ugly if asked about the woman who lived directly across the street from her on Dolorosa road, but she'd be sure to add this to the canvas. Everyone deserved a redemptive sky. It was then that Cassandra noticed how tired her neighbor looked.

At the last moment, Cassandra placed the AnxieTea bag back into its spot on her shelves and pulled an InsominTea down. She poured the mixture, now thickened like heavy whipping cream, into a mason jar and sprinkled it with brown sugar and clove to cut the bitterness. Cassandra had never drunk such a liquid, but she had heard from friends, from the few that had dared make this madness, that it tasted like hope. It seemed to taste better for those who it worked on, sweet and exciting, like happiness dancing on the tongue. For those it didn't work on, they described the liquid as bitter.

"Georgie," Cassandra said, walking over to the woman's side. "You must drink the tea first."

She handed her the yellow bag.

"Wait a day after consuming the tea. Eat nothing. Drink nothing after. You must be empty of everything. Then drink this." Cassandra placed the jar into Georgie's hand. "All of it. Don't spare one drop. Place it in your fridge. It's better cold, I'm told."

"Okay. Tea. Nothing. Cold. All of it. Got it," Georgie said, looking at the jar with such adoration a shiver raced down Cassandra's spine. This was what she was afraid of. The preemptive hopes that were twisting inside one of the kindest people she had ever met. Never had she met someone so desperate for a child. She didn't have the heart to tell her that children were not the answers to every marriage. Happiness could be made by adding another member to a shaky foundation. More people simply ended up hurt.

“You mustn’t let anyone drink this,” Kassandra said. “And you mustn’t be alone when you drink it. I am not sure how it fully works. I don’t want you to be alone.”

“What do you mean you don’t know how it fully works? You made it!” Anne said.

“Georgie, you can’t do this. This is madness.”

“I know what it will do, but I don’t know how it will work for her,” Kassandra said. “If she does what I say, she will be fine. It won’t hurt her physically.”

“Hurt her?” Anne asked.

“It is the emotion that is important here. Not the physical.” Kassandra said to Anne before turning to Georgie. She did her best to pretend the Saint was not staring holes into the back of her skull as she looked at the small figure of Georgie Andrews looking at her with trust she hadn’t seen since her husband left his body right in front of her.

“You know this is not one-hundred percent certain.”

“I know,” Georgie said. “It will work, though. I know it. I can feel it.”

Georgie smiled at Kassandra. “It’ll work.”

Kassandra watched as Georgie held the mason jar in both her hands like it was the most precious object in the world.

“Georgie,” Kassandra started. “I need you to promise me that you understand that this might not work. I need you to promise you will do everything exactly as I said.”

“I promise,” Georgie said with her unmoved smile. “And if it doesn’t work this time than then we will just do it again.”

“No. There is no again. You can only do this once. I cannot do this a second time. Consuming this a second time could ruin you. It could ruin any chance at all for conceiving. I have heard it driving women to madness. I won’t put you in that kind of risk.”

“It will work, so that’s okay. I won’t need this a second time.”

“George,” Anne said. “Maybe you don’t do this. Why don’t you go home and talk to Simon? I can go with you. But this. This sounds dangerous. I get it. I know you want a baby but—”

“No, you don’t get it. You have a baby. You had your baby. You have Marla. Wonderful Marla. I want that. You have no idea what it feels like to be so empty all the time. To feel empty all the time. To hate yourself with every negative or false positive that shows up on those stupid plastic sticks. You don’t know how badly Simon and I want a baby. It was all we could talk about in the first years of our marriage. But with every failure, Simon started talking less. He stopped communicating with me. Stopped touching me as if I was some fragile, broken thing that he wasn’t connected to anymore. He wants a baby as badly as I do. I’m the problem. We both know it. He just won’t say it. But he will. I think he’s starting to hate me. If he was the problem, I would hate him a little bit too.”

“You need to talk to one another. Adoption, Georgie. Your baby is out there. It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“We can’t afford it. We’ve done the math. It’s not plausible.”

“I can help you. I can loan you the money.”

“No, Anne. I could never ask that of you. I love you for offering, but you have to believe me when I say, this will work. I can feel it.”

Georgie held the jar close to her heart.

“My baby is in here,” Georgie said.

Kassandra watched as Georgie ran her thumb over the lid of the jar like a lover’s caress. That was when she knew, instantly, that no matter the outcome, the result would not be good for

anyone in the room.

“Perhaps,” Cassandra spoke. “It would be best if I kept it here until it was time to drink. That way, Simon will not question it? Hmm?”

By the tightening of Georgie’s hands, the barren woman didn’t like that idea at all.

“No, you’ve done enough. I’ll keep it. Okay? I’ll keep it at my house.”

Kassandra looked directly at Anne and waited until she returned the gaze.

“Perhaps that would be better,” Cassandra said.

“Yes,” Anne stumbled over the word like exposed tree root in the middle of her path.

“Yes, I think that would be best too. That way, Simon doesn’t accidentally drink it, and that way we can be together when it is time, so you aren’t alone like she said.” Anne nodded her head with every word as if reassuring Georgie of the plan as if convincing herself that this was the best thing to do.

“What about Marla? What if she gets into it?”

“She won’t. They don’t dare touch the fridge I keep in the garage with drinks for all the committee meetings.”

“Right. Anne will keep it in her fridge, and in twenty-four hours, you’ll go over to her house, and you will drink it. Not a minute sooner.”

Kassandra reached out to pull the jar from Georgie only for the small woman to pull it away further away from her.

“Georgie,” Kassandra said softly. “You see, I think you’re too invested right now. I don’t trust you to take this home.”

“Should I not be invested, then? How would that be better, Kass? This is my baby,” Georgie said while she looked down at the jar between her hands. “This is everything I ever

wanted.”

“I know, dear. I know.”

And she did. Cassandra probably knew it better than any other person in Erusa. She was the person who held Georgie early in the morning when she came into PropheTeas with red-rimmed eyes, a runny nose, racking sobs, and a negative test clutched in her fist. Cassandra and Georgie had been working together almost a year with homeopathic treatments to help her ability to conceive, Georgie’s desperation growing with each visit. It was Cassandra, on New Year’s Day that let Georgie in. Cassandra, who had found Georgie at the front door of her home on Dolorosa road just before dawn. Bathsheba was complaining about needing a walk, and when Cassandra wasn’t quick to her feet, the dog started barking the side effects of canine obesity and how Cassandra would be responsible for carrying her around at all hours of the day when her middle made it impossible for the dog to move her legs properly. Opening the door to the frigid and dark air, there she was. Georgie. Huddled in her coat and pajamas. She was carrying one of Simon’s dress shirts in her hands.

“It’s not mine,” she said. Over and over and over again. “It’s not mine. Red washes me out. I don’t wear red lipstick.”

Every day after that morning, Georgie had started to come to Cassandra for more than just teas and spells, as Georgie started to call them, simply stopping to say hello or bring a treat she saw at the store for Bathsheba. They, miraculously, became friends, despite the thirty-year age gap between them. It was a rare occurrence for Cassandra and any of her clients. Most pretended not to know her and denied ever using her service. Not daring to risk the reputation of believing in the hocus pocus of the witch of Dolorosa Road. Husbands and wives asking for romance spells pretended she was invisible at the supermarket when she pasted them through the

aisles. Hell, Cassandra had helped half the ladies of Saint Anne's church flock for various purposes, though not as extreme as Georgie's case, it didn't stop any of them from sticking their noses in the air when Cassandra walked past any of them on a public road.

While the friendship was unexpected, it was appreciated. Cassandra hadn't recognized the feelings of loneliness simmering in her stomach like butter in a skillet until the woman welcomed herself in, until that space taken up suddenly opened up in a perfect Georgie hole. It grew, too. They talked about everything and anything now. Cassandra told Georgie about Albie, and how she missed him and even when he visited her from whatever world he was in now. Georgie did the same. She told Cassandra about her childhood, how she met Simon, and it was love at first sight. Well, first kiss because she hadn't seen him at a darkly lit college party and her lips accidentally locked with Simon's instead of her date's. For almost three months, Georgie asked of nothing from Cassandra except her ear. Then, as if the idea came to her in a dream, Georgie came straight over, in the dead of night, and confessed, "Simon will stay if I have his baby. He'll choose his child and me over her. I know he will." So, like any good friend, Cassandra helped. She did everything that she could. She called friends. Researched. She even called her mother, which is something that she hated to do, more so after her mother died. Cassandra's mother, dying at an early age of ninety-five, preferred the life that she was living now. She was always short with Cassandra when she interrupted whatever it was that she was doing at that moment. Haunting someone, surely.

Regardless, Cassandra felt bad for thanking the stars that the woman had found her since their partnership sprouted from such dark circumstances.

"What she is trying to say, I think," Anne said. Her brows had scrunched as if she were confused. For once, both Cassandra and Anne were on the same side. "Is that you are too eager

to go home and do as she asked.”

“I promise. Why would I intentionally mess this up?” Georgie asked, though to who she was asking, was unclear.

“Well, then,” Anne said. “You won’t mind if I take it home then. If you were planning on doing as she said, then you have nothing to worry about it being with me. You won’t need it until tomorrow anyway,” Anne sat up straighter. “We already have plans too. The Dreams of Dolorosa committee is meeting tomorrow for lunch. You can come over first. I’ll be with you when you take it so that nothing goes wrong, and then we’ll have a pre-celebratory lunch since you are certain this will work.”

“perfect,” Cassandra said. “Anne will take this home, and you will drink your tea like you’re supposed to. Then, tomorrow you will be with Anne.”

“I’ll be fine,” Georgie said. “I can take it. It’s not big—”

“I won’t let you leave with it. Either Anne takes it, or nothing at all.”

That was how they left. Georgie, staring at the jar held tightly in Anne’s hands, as the two women walked their way down the street towards their cars. Cassandra watched with an unsettling feeling growing in her chest. If felt just like watching the weatherman point on the map exactly where the storm was and where it was going to go, but having no power at all to stop it.

“That’s a shit show if I ever saw one,” Bathsheba barked from her pillow bed.

“I know,” Cassandra replied.

Marla

Marla spent her morning drinking tea and sitting at Mrs. Henry's front window, staring across the street. At first, it was to catch glimpses of them, Anne. She'd watch as her mother left at the same time every day, a tumbler of coffee in her hand. She felt like she was at home, watching her. They always left before she had to be on her way to school. Her obsessive observations of her family living on without her started with selfish intentions. She wanted to see her mother suffering in their decision. She expected Anne to not leave the house for days, or to at least appear as if she had lost nights of sleep. Yet, here she was. Completing her daily schedule per normal. The house appeared darker to Marla, or perhaps it had always been that shade, and she was only privy to it at this altered perspective. Though, the windows seemed darker too. Never could Marla glimpse inside 2627 Dolorosa for it was too dark. Today, as she watched her mother leave the house, she noticed the grass appeared different. Everyone's was that brown sand color from the cooler, cloudier temperatures. You see a little bit of everyone's soil in the deadened strands of grass, wet brown bits of earth peeking through. The lawn of Marla's home appeared gloomier. Even the remaining strands of grass were shifting in tint, black.

+

She was nervous. Marla felt like a shaken soda, her insides fizzy and ready to burst as Gabe led her to his bedroom. She hadn't been in his room since they were at Erusa Elementary. Almost always, they chose his house over hers. It was always quieter, Mr. Pleasant would be in his study reading, and Mrs. Pleasant would stop by with pastries from Brother's Brew.

"It's so different," Marla said.

She was surprised that it was different than she remembered. She was expecting the bed frame that resembled a race car. Where were the plastic road signs that hung on his walls? Or the

stoplight with the green circle the brighter than the two above it on the outside of his door? Instead, what she found was brown walls, a bed frame, and dresser the color of sand, a short yet long bookshelf filled to capacity. It had been years since Marla had entered Gabe's bedroom. They both, unconsciously, seemed to agree that their bedrooms were their sanctuaries from the craziness of their lives. They were the only space each of them had that they could call their own. Neither one of them had been willing to break that boundary.

“Yeah, I got a little too tall for the race car. Back in fifth grade. I had to sleep with my feet hanging off the bed for almost a year until my mom noticed.”

“You shot up overnight. One day we were the same size. The next I needed a neck brace to relieve the pain from having to tilt my head back, I could see you.”

He had two photos on his dresser. Dropping his hand, Marla walked over to them. The first, inside a wooden frame, was of his family, his mother and father bookend for his ten-year-old self as they sat in a pew at Erusa Baptist. The second photo was of her and him. Both of them at their eighth-grade graduation, royal blue robes covering their pre-pubescent bodies with graduation caps topped with too large gold tassels on their head. Gabe had his arms wrapped around her middle, and hers were around his neck. If they weren't dressed the way they were, it would appear as if they were dancing. The frame was beautiful. Silver. Heavy. Oval in shape. Her eye kept getting pulled to it as the light filtering through his bedroom window hit the silver and made it glow.

“My mom found that photo saved on her phone. She sent it to me, and I got it printed. I stole the frame,” Gabe said.

“What?” Marla replied.

“I'm kidding. The only criminal in this room is you, Mary.”

“If I’m a criminal, then you are an accomplice.”

“Less jail time for me,” He replied, shrugging his shoulders.

Marla walked over to the bookshelf, reading the exposed spines for titles. For the longest time, the only books that Marla had ever seen Gabe read were comic books or graphic novels. Yet here was one hundred, possibly more, books filled with nothing but words. No pictures. She read the spines and found *The Odyssey*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, something called *Hag-Seed*, and an entire shelf full of Shakespeare. There was an entire row dedicated to thin multicolored playbooks.

“You’ve been busy,” Marla said as she pulled a mint green playbook to read the title. *The Children’s Hour*.

“I like being busy.”

“Why all the plays?”

“It’s all dialogue.”

“Isn’t that confusing? What about all of the other stuff. The good stuff.”

“The good stuff?”

“You know, like people’s thoughts and settings. The stories.”

“But that’s less important than the dialogue. What people say is the most important part of life, so why not just read what people say. A story can live without the other stuff.”

“Haven’t you heard the saying actions speak louder than words?”

“I disagree. Words are powers, Mary. What people say, no matter if they are lying or not, says so more about a person than what they do. Words define who we are. They always have. They are what make us human.”

Marla had always been a believer in actions. Look at the kind of parents she had. Words

meant less than a dollar in her home. Every promise she had been given broke. Actions, when some did what they said they were going to do, that meant something, especially when you have so little control over your own life.

That was the thing; her body no longer felt like it was just hers anymore. The only time that she ever felt like herself was when she was with Gabe. She didn't have any control over her body anymore. But she had control over this. She was making this decision. She would be the definition of action.

Marla grabbed Gabe's hand. They laced their fingers together. Gabe tugged her into his orbit. Side by side. Only a breath of space between them.

It started with a kiss. Gabe leaned down. He set his hands-on Marla's waist with the lightest of touch. Marla locked her body, scared to move, and let the sensation of his lips against hers explode in her brain. They had done this before. But this time felt different. It felt like those moments, the kisses before this kiss, were the previews before the film. They were good, exciting even, kept her interest, made her want to be a part of a longer version, yet they didn't have the arc of the film. There was no beginning, middle, or end. This, Marla thought, was just the beginning.

He moved them to the bed. It must have been him because she didn't know they were moving until the mattress hit her legs. They sat beside one another. Her thigh against his. Lips touching. Not a space in between. His hands cupped her neck. Her hands held his forearms. She needed something to keep her steady.

"Are you sure," he asked. His mouth was so close that his breath mingled with hers. "We can stop. We don't have to do anything that you're not comfortable with."

"It's okay. I want to. I researched it. It won't hurt the baby."

“Me too,” he smiled. “I was worried about that too.”

There was a pause—just a moment of them breathing each other in and out. Marla had never been comfortable in silences, they felt like chigger bites, a desire to scratch off the top layer of skin. Yet this could have lasted years, and Marla would not have scratched one bit.

“So we’re doing this?” he asked. “We’re really doing this?”

“Do you not want to?” Marla asked, her body suddenly seized up. She never thought that he might not want to do this. That Gabe was just a good friend. She wanted to curse Jane for telling her that boys want nothing more than to spend a night between our legs. It’s like their nature. From the womb, boys are nothing but sexual creatures. I read a book all about it. What a stereotype. Clearly, Marla was the one that was the sexual creature. She had assumed that he wanted her when she couldn’t have been more wrong. What was wrong with her? Was it the hormones? They would always be friends, but had she just pushed this too far? Marla knew she missed her chance, her window that she should have crawled through all those years ago when Jane had dared Marla to kiss Gabe at the fifth-grade dance. In front of everyone. She did what her brain told her to do. She turned as red as Dorothy Gale’s slippers and ran from the room. Her brain was telling her to repeat that moment of history just this very second.

“No, I want to,” Gabe swallowed. “I just want to make sure that you still want to. I don’t want to do something wrong.”

“Really? I mean, yes, I want to do this. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to do this.”

“Okay,” Gabe nodded. “Good. Okay.”

“Just pretend I am like one of the other girls that you have been with. If that helps, I mean. Don’t treat me differently because of,” she pointed down to her abdomen, “this.”

“Other girls?”

“Just you know how you do with it with the others. This doesn’t have to be special. It can just be—”

“What other girls?” Gabe pulled his face away from Marla’s. She could no longer feel the tickle of his breath against her lips.

“You know Truly and Heather and Natalie and Jorie an—”

“I haven’t been with any of them.”

“Lily Thompson?”

“No.”

“Whitney Colman?”

“No.”

“What about Jamie Logan?”

“No, she’s with Nick. Where did you get all of this from?”

“School.”

“You need better sources because I am pretty sure that Jamie and Nick are getting married once they graduate and have decided they’re moving to Louisiana. At least, that’s the rumor I heard. And I don’t even know a Jorie.”

“Jorie McGrew. 10th grade. She said you and her went out after ninth grade formal, and she lost her virginity to you.”

“Well, that would be difficult seeing as I am still a virgin, and I wouldn’t be if she lost her virginity to me.”

“You’re a virgin?”

“Yes.”

“You never told me.”

“Not something I like to talk about.”

“We talk about everything.”

Marla looked at Gabe. She *looked* at him. She took in the slight bump in the bridge of his nose and the three freckles on his left cheek. She looked at his impossibly long lashes, and his once again crooked front teeth from forgetfulness of wearing his retainer. His red hair that always turned brown in the winter. She could just glimpse under his lengthening strands. Nothing screamed virgin or awkward or unsure. When Marla looked at Gabe, she saw someone who knew who he was and where he was going to be. When she looked at herself, it changed with every glance. Some days she thought she looked smart, confident. Other days her thoughts swirled down a drain of doubt, the reflection looking back at her, never looking completely right.

“I didn’t think you would be one to question my virginity,” Gabe said.

“Sorry, I’m not. I promise I’m not. I’m just surprised is all. It’s just...” Marla trailed off. She didn’t know how to say it. The words weren’t coming. It was like they were stuck in traffic on the way to her mouth.

“It’s just...?” Gabe asked.

“You’re you. And we talk about everything.” Marla looked Gabe in the face as if that was all she had to say. As if those two words were the answer to everything.

“Yes. And you’re you. And there is no way we can talk about literally everything.”

“No,” Marla shook her head and holding his face in her hands, curving her palms along the edges of his jaw. “That’s the thing, Gabe. That’s it, though. You are you, and you are wonderful, so how can it be that you are you and you are here with me?”

The words rushed out of Marla like students at the two o’clock dismissal bell.

“I’m what?”

“You are you,” Marla said, slowly. “I am me.”

“I know,” Gabe replied.

“Does that not make sense?”

“Nothing about you makes sense.”

“You don’t get it,” Marla said, letting her hands fall.

“No, I get it. I am me, and you are you, and there is no place I would rather be.”

“Bu—”

Gabe stopped the sounds coming from her mouth with his lips. He didn’t move them. He didn’t try to open her lips or invade her space with his tongue. He kept his chapped lips on hers as she calmed the thoughts plaguing her head packed up and left her brain. He waited. A steady weight until Marla pulled her lips away and tilted her forehead against his.

“Better?” he asked.

“Better. But I’m not letting this go. You have a lot to tell me because you have been holding back.”

“Okay,” he swooped down and kissed her. “If you need me to stop, tell me, and I’ll stop.”

Marla nodded her head. She watched as her hands found his shoulders, and she pushed his jacket off. His lips went to her cheek, and she felt his mouth leave a trail of wet skin down to her jaw as he made his way to her neck.

“We’ll go slow?” Gabe said it as if it was a question.

“Slow,” Marla nodded.

And they did. The light filtering in the room through Gabe’s window had dimmed before they were fully unclothed and beneath the soft cotton sheets of his bed. Marla’s lips were sore. She didn’t even know that lips could be sore, so she made a note in her head to research it later.

She wasn't prepared to see him like this. Exposed. She saw him. His flat stomach that semi patch of hair trailing down his navel. She didn't expect the hair there. Why hadn't she looked up pictures or opened her anatomy book for a refresher? He looked at her, her breasts, the rounded swell of her abdomen. But when they both began to redden Gabe quickly recommend, they continue beneath the cover of the sheets. There was something about seeing it all happening that made it a little too much. Feeling was different than seeing. It was better in some way. She couldn't see what he was going to do, where she was going to feel the next touch. That was faith, Marla thought, waiting for something you can't see expecting that miraculous touch that will make everything okay. If she was going to have blind faith in anyone, it was going to be Gabe.

"Is this all right?" Gabe asked.

"Yeah," her voice was quiet. Marla wished for some kind of noise, a fan, a radio, anything to penetrate the silence and cover the sounds of her labored breathing.

She liked the way that the sheets felt against her skin. She had slept in the nude once, just to try it out, but it didn't feel right. It certainly didn't feel like this. A welcomed coolness as Gabe placed half his weight on top of her. He kept his top half balanced on his forearms and pulled away from her chest. Her body didn't know what temperature to be. Hot or cold. Her heart didn't appear to know what was happening either. It couldn't tell if it was thumping with excitement or fear.

"Gabe, I feel like my heart is coming out of my chest. I think I'm having a heart attack, and if I am going to die of a heart attack, I need it to be worth it. All right?"

"Okay?"

"I need you to touch me, so if I die, it will be worth it."

Gabe shifted. He balanced his weight on one arm and pulled on of her hands, covering

her naked chest to the place where his heart lay beneath. If Marla's heart was racing, Gabe's was sprinting laps around her.

"I'm nervous too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Gabe's hand touched her arm and moved to her waist. She felt his hips push the inside of her thighs further apart. She could feel him there. Marla looked up at Gabe. The sweat on his brow.

"Ready?" he asked, looking at her.

"Ready."

She felt him pull his hips back, trying to line up with her when the thought came crashing down upon her.

"Wait," she said.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Gabe stuttered as he distanced his skin from hers. "I'm sorry. What did I do?"

"Condom," Marla said.

"But, we, you. You're," Gabe shifted his eyes to her middle, "pregnant. So, you can't get *repregnant*, right? Or like double pregnant?"

"I'm a pregnant virgin. Do you really want to chance it?"

"Good point."

He reached across Marla to the bedside table before pulling back with a foil packet in his hand.

"One second," he said, ripping the packet open with his teeth. The foil fell to Marla's

stomach.

“Sorry,” Gabe said as he brushed the silver packet off of her. “Just one more second.”

“I can help, maybe,” Marla said, lifting herself on her elbows. “Here.”

She reached down, trying to be brave, trying to cover up her anxiety by attempting something bold. When she reached for Gabe’s hand, Marla didn’t take into account the sweat and shakiness of Gabe. Pulling in his wrist, Gabe lost his balance, tipping him forward and on top of Marla. Bright pain radiated in her skull as Gabe’s connected with hers with an audible thunk.

“Shit,” Gabe cursed.

“I’m so sorry,” Marla said, clutching her aching forehead. “I just wanted to help. God, that hurts.”

“Are you all right?” Gabe asked as he squinted his eyes from the pain.

“Yeah, I think so. My confidence is more bruised than my skull.”

Marla closed her eyes, trying to will the pain and embarrassment away. Gabe’s chuckle metamorphized into a full belly laugh. A laugh that shook his frame and, in turn, shook Marla’s as he was still halfway atop her. Marla couldn’t help but join in. If Marla was only able to remember one moment of this day, it would be this; the symphony of happiness filling the room while completely exposed to the one person in the world that she trusted the most. If she could imprint this image, Gabe red-faced, teeth exposed, freckles disappeared in the smiles line of his eyes and cheeks as he looked at her, she would sell a memory, rid her mind of her first dance or her first word or her first anything that didn’t truly matter to ensure she’d keep this one always.

When he leaned down and kissed her, Marla closed her eyes. Through the white-hot pain between her legs, Marla kept her eyes closed and saw his face, that smile, on the back of her lids.

Judith

Judith and Ari were dressed in black. Well, Judith had been dressed in her work scrubs until Ari saw her and made her turn right back around to her house to change. Anything else as Ari had so elegantly requested. Ari, dressed in black head to toe, headlamp included, looked more ready to mine a shaft than commit a criminal offense. Yet, not once during the extra trip home did Judith second guess what she was about to do. Step three of getting rid of the Witch of Dolorosa.

“We’re in,” Ari whispered over her shoulder. She had a bobby pin jammed into the lock and a credit card shoved through the lip of Cassandra Henry’s shop door. Cassandra Henry’s door that now stood open. Silent. No alarm was blaring in the middle of the night. It was, Judith thought, slightly anticlimactic.

Everything was dark. Shadows filled the motionless bird changes above their heads. Judith blinked to clear her eyes. For a moment, one of the shadows moved like the fluttering of stretched wings when a bird awakens and prepares for flight.

“Let’s be quick,” Judith said. “did you bring it?”

“Of course, I brought it. It was my idea.”

Ari pulled a lunch bag from the pocket of her jacket. Inside the transparent plastic adorned with prints of apples and pencils were pinky nail size pellets. Some no bigger than sesame seeds.

“What is it, and how were you able to get it?” Judith asked. “Wait, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.” She didn’t. She really didn’t want to know what lengths that Ari went for the plan that she was so incessant upon. The plan that Judith wanted to avoid at all costs. Judith was willing to cross lines. It wasn’t that. It was the fact that for Judith, her work, her pharmacy, was

more like a home than her actual home. For some reason, Judith felt as if she was crossing a more personal line that walking into Cassandra Henry's home while she was showering. Judith built her business. It was all her. Not her husband. Not her father's. Her's. It would be hard to stomach someone tampering with her baby. It would be over soon. It wouldn't matter soon, Judith thought. Cassandra will be gone, and she will never have to look at the face that caused a part of her to disappear in the dead of night. She pictured Georgie's face, then the face of Anne screaming at her. Judith could stomach doing this if it meant that she could finally move past the past seven months.

"One of the girls from Book Club has a mouse problem. I went over to help. When she went to the bathroom, I swiped a few *excreta*." Ari added an accent that Judith was positive didn't belong in a word that was referring to mouse feces.

"Let's leave it where she won't see it first thing in the morning. I'll call the board of health to make an anonymous tip, and everything will be right in the world once more."

"Got it, Susan B Anthony." Ari said.

"Why did you just call me a woman's rights activist?" Judith asked.

"It's a code name."

"We don't need code names. No one is here." Judith waved her arms around the room. She peeked back at the birdcages above her head. The shadows were gone.

"Everyone has a good name in the movies when they are stealing."

"You thought Susan B Anthony was appropriate? And what is your code name?"

"We are women. Standing together. Susan B Anthony. And me, Elizabeth Cady Stanton."

"We are women going against another woman. Not Susan B Anthony or Elizabeth Stanton. Did you even look them up?"

“No. I didn’t need to. And if that’s the way you feel about it, I’ll call you what I really wanted to call you. Marie Curie.”

“I’m going to stand by the door, keep an eye out. Just do the thing, and let’s go.”

“Carry away, Curie.” Ari said, climbing up the ladder that was resting against large apothecary that housed all of Cassandra’s magical teas.

Judith thought about opening a few of those tiny drawers. Peeking in. See if there was something else kept hidden in all of those components that told the truth. It’s wasn’t magic, just some type of homeopathic medicinal that Cassandra had been marketing as magic. A fraud. A front. Being something that she wasn’t. Cassandra had no right to help people the way that she was, Judith thought. She had no education in such a field. She was taking advantage of the people around her, using their emotions to make herself feel better about who she was. She probably had moved around the states, done the same thing with others, then packed up and left. Leaving those people high and dry, feeling worthless, abandoned, their one source of comfort no gone and on to the next best thing. He didn’t even care. He didn’t care that she was all alone with their son, raising Gabe all by herself. That was never a factor in their conversations. Judith’s single parenthood never seemed to be brought up, no matter how hard she pressed Peter. It was *miracle* this, *miracle* that. I helped someone today, he would say. She wanted to scream every time he helped someone. What did he know about God? He grew up in a secular home. He pronounced Leviticus as Levicus for years. He majored in marketing with a minor in hospitality. The only contact he had with a bible was when his college internship, when he was responsible for putting all the bibles in the bedside tables of the new hotel grand opening in Rapid Springs, Arkansas.

“Whatever is in this drawer smells delicious,” Ari said. Judith turned around from the

corner she had been standing in, the darkest corner to watch the occasional car drive past. Ari's nose was buried deep in the apothecary drawer that she had pulled open.

"It smells like joy and happiness and clean socks on a Sunday morning that you pull out of the dryer. Then slip them on in the empty kitchen before making a pot of coffee while everyone is still asleep. The house is quiet, and no one is making a sound. Not even the house. It smells like," Ari took another deep inhale, "it smells like life before children and husbands. You've got to smell it, Curie."

"Are you done, yet," Judith whisper yelled. "We aren't here to make tea. Hurry up."

"Sorry, it just smells so good. Where the hell does she get it? It smells unreal. Pure. Never has my nose been attacked so wonderfully. It's like you can't help *but* smell it. It must be smelt. Is that even a word?"

"I'm sure she buys it from someone from a made-up town in a made-up country."

"No way. Look, you won't believe me until you smell it. She's growing it herself."

"Ari, we need to go," Judith looked up at the ceiling. There was something about the shadows. Their sudden disappearance the moment they walked through the door that had unsettled her. She dared peek one more time at the static birdcages. There were shadows. Shadows that covered the walls and the women as a sudden bright blue light enveloped the store. Bright blue. Migraine inducing blue. Adrenaline pumped through Judith's heart. It roared into her blood and assaulted her mind. Judith's brain began a scenario of all possibilities of what would happen next. Images of handcuffs. Ari and Judith blaming each other. Judith's head pushed down as she slid into the back seat of the squad car that was coming for her. Fingerprinting. Mug shot, left, right, and center with the line of her five-foot-eight height marked behind her flashed before her eyes quick like the forwarding of a video. Fragmentary. Not

completely clear. The distance from point A to point B was missed in the mess of the motion. A chose-your-own-adventure, criminal record style. Fear fought its way up Judith's throat. Ari nearly fell off the ladder as she too froze. There wasn't so much as a breath in the air as the two women watched the blue lights, siren blaring, drive down the street, not stopping outside the shop. They weren't caught. Someone else had been. Someone else in Erusa was committing a crime. Judith would remember thinking this for years to come, and every time she would, the tightness one feels when the throat is closing up would recommence until she managed to walk out of the tangles of her mind and think of something else.

Ari began laughing.

"For a second," she continued mid-laugh, "I was pretty sure I was going to piss myself."

"Let's hurry up," Judith said. The fear lingered.

"Almost done," Ari said, pouring the contents of the bag around the apothecary, into open drawers, atop the bulking piece of furniture before placing the bag back into her jacket pocket. "All right. All done. Let'—" Ari's face turned white.

"What," Judith asked before whirling around to the direction in which Ari was looking.

There, in the doorway, stood Cassandra Henry in her past bedtime glory. Her feet were covered in gray slippers, the only element of her wardrobe that Judith would consider wearing. A nightgown adorned with what Judith thought were ducks but from another angle, could have been swans or even ostriches in mid-run. It was a monstrosity of blue and red and purple fabric that didn't know what it was supposed to be.

"Judith," Cassandra said.

She couldn't open her mouth. She couldn't move a fraction of an inch as she watched Cassandra's mouth move around the audible structure of Judith's name. She wasn't angry. Damn

he for not being angry, Judith thought as she watched her lips pucker around the J of her name for the third time. Damn her damn her damn her.

“It’s Gabe,” Cassandra said. It slipped through the layer of glass that Judith felt had begun to surround her. A protective layer from her and everything that was surrounding her.

“There’s been an accident.”

Later, months later, Judith will remember hearing that glass shatter.

Part Three

HonesTea

Ingredients: Lemongrass, ginger, peppermint, and chamomile

Boil all ingredients except peppermint in a copper bottom pot until ginger has disintegrated. Pour mixture into a cup beneath colander to remove remaining bits and stems. Place peppermint in tea while it is still steaming. Stir with an iron spoon.

Marla

He went to a show. That was all that Marla knew. Gabe's friend from the theatre was performing in a production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* as Puck.

"Everyone knows that Puck is the character in *Midsummer*. This is like winning an Oscar."

He asked her to go. Her feet were hurting more so than usual. She felt the pulse of her heart in her pinkie toe.

"We could catch a later show together. I can't tonight. Next time," she said.

"If you got an extra day of life every time you said next time, you'd live to be a thousand. I'm holding you to this one, though. They're going to start thinking that I'm making all of this up."

"You mean you have to give proof of this situation because no one for the life of them would believe that you were dumb enough to knock some sixteen-year-old up and ruin your life."

"I didn't say that."

It had been the center of every conversation that they had had of late. They circled it like vultures.

"I get it," Marla said. "This isn't your problem, and now you're stuck."

No matter how many times he refuted this claim, Marla couldn't help feeling the pain of its truth. He didn't know that she heard him call the admissions office of Boston University and told them to give his scholarship money to someone else; he wasn't attending come next fall. He chose her. He picked an inexplicable situation over his dream. The guilt Marla carried was twice the size of her expanded stomach.

Gabe didn't respond. Like Marla's feet, she knew he was tired of this dance. Instead, he kissed the top of her head then grabbed his coat from the back of the couch. His silence was worse than him arguing back, telling her that she was wrong and that her hormones were clouding everything around her, and that he was angry at her for not trusting him. Marla's last thought, before Gabe left Mrs. Henry's home, was how much longer he would stay with her. It was only a matter of time when an opportunity would appear ready to take him away, away from Erusa, away from Kansas, away from her. A part of Marla wished it would.

According to town gossip, there was a witness. A man. Someone who just happened to be traveling down the same road at the exact time as Gabe. He was a few feet behind Gabe's truck. No other car on the road. Everything was fine until it wasn't. The right wheel of Gabe's vehicle was there, and then it was gone. Popped. Loud. Loud enough that the driver thought a gun had been fired. It was fast. The stranger said he didn't process what happened until after it all happened. The tire blew. Gabe swerved. The truck struck a tree. Gabe was thrown from the cabin as it flipped over then skidded across Highway 281 like a metal hockey puck. Right on the line between Kansas and Nebraska. He went the speed limit, not even one point over, the stranger said. He slammed on the breaks, got out of his car, and ran over to the boy lying on the road like an animal who wasn't quick enough crossing the street. He said Gabe was too deformed; he couldn't trust the image of the boy's license, which he found in Gabe's back pocket, to be who it said this body was. The stranger couldn't see the skin of Gabe's face beneath all the blood. He thought it was all some kind of trick. He'd never seen a body or a face look like *that*. It couldn't be real. The stranger said he threw up gas station soda and the remains of three beef jerky sticks in the ditch.

Some said it was lucky that he was thrown from the truck. A quick death. He didn't

endure the pain of being thrown inside the truck like a pinball hitting side after side. Why wasn't he wearing his seatbelt? Others said it was by the grace of God that he hadn't hurt the poor stranger behind him. A man that, rumor had it, was responsible for a whole litter of children, and where would they be if he perished in this accident as well. What an accident it was. Nothing like it had ever happened before.

Now almost a week since it happened, and Marla still wondered if Gabe's friend, the boy worthy of being Puck, heard the news. Did he blame himself for asking Gabe to attend? Was he too wondering if he could have prevented this if he had simply asked him to stay? Was his sanity held together with a thin ribbon made up of the fact that Gabe, in his last moment on this earth, wasn't alone?

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Dr. Dae's house was pristine. That was the only way that Marla could think to describe it. The walls were what Marla's mother would call 'egg-shell.' The floors were polished, recently from the smell of the orange cleaner that Marla was all too familiar with. The mirrors throughout the front hallway, the furniture that Marla could see from where she was standing at the front door, the rugs, the baseboards, the air vents, all of it looked as if it had been cleaned with a meticulousness that would put Marla's mother obsessive cleaning habits to shame. It must have taken her all night, Marla thought, or longer. Perhaps she had people come and clean her house for her. She was a doctor. Surely, she didn't have enough time to be that and keep her house like this at all hours of the day. As well as she could see, and Marla never once needed glasses, there wasn't a speck of dust on any surface.

"The kitchen is just down the hall," Dr. Dae said. "Let's grab something to eat, and then we'll get started."

“Thank you,” Marla replied. “You have a beautiful home.”

“Yes, I do. It was the first thing I splurged on when I graduated from med school. I was one of the few that had parents that paid for school. They’re both surgeons themselves. So instead of tackling student debt, I tackled finding a place to call home. I have beef and spinach ravioli in the oven if you’re interested.”

“Very,” Marla said. Even though she’d eaten less than a handful of hours ago, she could eat again. She was finding it nearly impossible to go less than an hour without food. She wasn’t complaining. Never had Marla been more encouraged to eat in her sixteen years of life than these last months, hopefully, of her pregnancy.

The kitchen was just as clean as the rest of the house. The stainless-steel appliances shone. The glass plates that Dr. Dae pulled from a cabinet and placed one in front of Marla at the kitchen table were free from smudges. The two ate in companionable silence. Marla kept her attention on the spinach filled baked ravioli, not waiting for the crisp squares to cool before eating. The tips of her fingers with tinged pink from the heat. Her belly and body sufficiently warmed.

It was only two weeks since the accident, and Mrs. Henry insisted that Marla visit Dr. Dae for a check-up.

“You’re going through something that most people never have to experience,” Mrs. Henry said. “You lost your best friend. You’re pregnant. You’re only sixteen. Please, take the truck. I’ve already called and told her you were coming.”

“But, can’t you check the baby?” Marla asked.

“Unlike Judith thinks, I know when it is time that I step aside and let modern medicine intervene. Your body is going through a lot. Let the nice woman who has gone through a decade

of schooling check to make sure you are okay. For my sake, at least.”

Marla didn't know how to respond. Her body didn't know whether to be relieved or upset.

“I'm going to use the restroom,” Dr. Dae said. “I'll meet you in the den. I just need to run upstairs and get my spare med bag.”

“Sure. Take your time.”

Marla wasn't one for snooping, but she was told that she had a big nose. It was because of this that Marla couldn't help but note the empty picture frames that sat on end tables and were mounted on the wall as she made her way to the den. She wondered, for a moment, if Dr. Dae was like Mrs. Henry in some compacity. Marla stared at the empty frames waiting for the people of the photos they once held to walk back into their borders and say hello. Like in Harry Potter, any moment now a big, opera singer of a woman would appear and ask Marla what she was doing nosing around a stranger's home. This, of course, didn't happen, much to Marla's disappointment. Though, the missing photos reminded her of the fact that Dr. Dae had done exactly as Mrs. Henry had said. She removed all evidence of the man she wanted to forget from her home. Marla counted five empty frames and five that were full.

The first was on the bookshelf. A woman stood next to Dr. Dae. They were identical. Sisters or Dr. Dae's mother. They possessed the same skin tone and the same wide eyes. The next was of the doctor in a pair of scrubs. She held an energy drink in one hand, and a cupcake lit with a two and a six candle in the other. She appeared to be in the hallway of a hospital, completely comfortable environment. The third photo was on the coffee table. Another of the woman in the first, but with a man in the frame as well. Marla picked up the wooden frame.

“Those are my parents,” Dr. Dae said, coming from the far hallway. “It was their first

rotation together. They were dating by the end of the month.”

“They look happy.”

“They are. They live in Wichita. Still working at the same hospital.”

“Why don’t you work with them?”

“I pursued OB, not surgery.”

“They supported you but didn’t support you at the same time?”

“I guess you could say that,” Dr. Dae said. “But they still support me at the end of the day, no matter what my decision was and remains. They just try to get that small remark in every holiday. One of the perks of being an only child. Why don’t you move to the couch, and I’ll take a listen?”

Marla moved to the couch in which Dr. Dae pointed. Her body wasn’t prepared for the softness of the cushions and fell deep between two cushions.

“Here,” Dr. Dae said, reaching a hand towards Marla to pull her out.

Centering herself at the end of the couch, so she would have the armrest to pull her out, Marla was closest to the two picture-filled frames on the end table.

“This will be a little cold,” Dr. Dae said, placing the end of the stethoscope against Marla’s stomach. Marla watched as she moved it from one place to another.

“It’s okay. Thanks for doing this. It’s been hard getting to the doctor with my mom being sick.”

“It’s no problem. Anything for a friend of Cassandra’s, though I’m not sure why I feel the need to say that.” Delilah moved the cool disk further. “Strong heartbeat.”

“Yep, she’s a lively one.”

“She? You learned the gender.”

“Well, no. Gabe was insistent that it was a girl, so I just went with it. It stuck.”

Delilah’s stethoscope paused. “I heard about the accident. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. It’s okay not to be okay.”

Marla knew that was true. She had seen enough rom-com marathons with Jane to know that it was okay not to be okay. There was even a song about it. Yet, she couldn’t help the guilt that came when she admitted the fact that she was not okay. How did she have any right to not be okay when the mother of her best friend couldn’t even get out of bed? How could she grieve, yell out *woe is me*, hold a candle at his vigil when everyone thought she was carrying this last living piece of Gabe. The hope that the town was clinging too was a lie. Marla didn’t deserve to be not okay. She didn’t deserve the apple pies, the premade meals with the cooking instructions written on the aluminum foil, the flowers left on Mrs. Henry’s doorstep, the unsettling baby onesies that said, ‘my daddy’s my guardian angel.’ Marla turned towards the end table. The photo closest to her was of Dr. Dae and a man she knew. Mr. Cooper. He was kissing her cheek, his arms wrapped around her shoulders.

“You know Mr. Cooper?” Marla asked.

“Oh, how do you know, Hank?”

“He’s my neighbor.”

“That’s right. I forgot that you and Cassandra live on Dolorosa Road.” Dr. Dae placed the stethoscope around her neck. She placed her bare hands against Marla’s belly and began softly pressing against her skin.

“You’ve known him long?”

“Years.” Dr. Dae said. “He’s just a friend. Your baby appears to be in a good position.”

How far along are you again?"

"Seven and a half months."

The Coopers hadn't been in Erusa long. Less than a year. Marla knew hardly anything about them. What Marla did know was that Mr. Cooper was married to Mrs. Cooper. They met in Germany while Mr. Cooper took a soul-searching backpacking journey with the money he saved during high school instead of pursuing school. Mrs. Cooper, according to Marla's mother, said she fell in love with Mr. Cooper's love for breaking the rules and trying new things.

Mr. Cooper was most definitely not related to Dr. Dae because not only did they look nothing alike, but Dr. Dae admitted she was an only child.

"Where did you guys meet?"

"We went to college."

"Oh, Kansas State, right?" Marla asked.

"That's the one." Dr. Dae said.

Marla never knew what to do when she caught someone lying. Let alone an adult. If Gabe were here, he would have told her to call them out on it, to prove to them that she wasn't a stupid kid that was willing to shovel bullshit. But Gabe wasn't here, and she wasn't his brand of brave. It was hard to call a liar a liar when you were doing the same thing.

Marla reached for the second frame. It was smaller. A three-inch square frame with pale blue block letters across the bottom that read 'It's a boy,' contained what Marla knew to be the image from a sonogram. There was even the computerized red arrow pointing to the pinkie size dot of a fetus growing inside the womb. Marla wondered if she would've wanted such an image.

"I didn't know that you had a baby," Marla said.

"I don't," Dr. Dae responded. She was bent over her medical bag, pulling out an

electronic blood pressure machine, not noticing the frame Marla was holding.

“Then, who’s this?”

Dr. Dae looked up.

“Where did you get that?” she asked.

“It was right here, behind the photo of you and Mr. Cooper.”

“I have no idea who that is.”

“Then why would it be in your house?”

“I have no idea.”

Marla watched as Dr. Dae’s eyebrows furrowed in concentration as if she was trying to find the end of a stray thought to pull it forward. The thought hit Marla with the force of a thousand yellow whiffle ball bats.

This was who she was trying to forget all those months ago. Not Mr. Cooper. Not some mystery man that broke her heart, but her baby. A photo that she missed in her mission to remove all evidence, as Mrs. Henry requested, from her home.

“How strange,” Dr. Dae said. She smiled at Marla. “I’m sure that a patient gave it to me, and I just forgot all about it. Can you lift your arm?”

Marla complied. She remained silent as Dr. Dae slid the cuff up her arm and turned the device on. The tightening in her arm did little to distract her from the tightening in her throat.

Kassandra

Kassandra didn't plan on leaving until she couldn't fall asleep. She wasn't one to force her to sleep, so when her brain wouldn't power down, she powered right back up. At three in the morning, she put on her clothes, packed a bag, grabbed a coat, scribbled a note for Marla, and left it on the kitchen table before sliding into the front seat of Albie's truck.

She'd never been much of a driver. Just the occasional drive in and out of town when she lived in Alaska, but like Dolorosa, everything she ever needed then was within walking distance. Then she met Albie, and he had always insisted that he be behind the wheel. Only the wind knows why Kassandra knew herself to be an excellent driver.

"Now," she said out loud in the empty cabin. "Let's see if I can remember how to drive a clutch."

It would be like riding a bike, she thought, though it would help if she knew how to ride a bike.

Kassandra didn't take into account how loud the engine was. She'd once loved the sound. The roar of the pickup coming closer like stepping up to the edge of a waterfall, the louder it was the most exhilarating feeling. That was how she would describe her love for Albie, walking close to the edge, never falling, but letting the wind and everything and everybody try to.

Just as she started to back up out of the garage, the passenger side door flung open. In a pair of sweats and one of Kassandra's t-shirts, at least three sizes bigger than one Marla would have needed if she didn't appear to be smuggling a cauldron beneath it. Marla stared daggers at Kassandra with her red-rimmed eyes. Kassandra was glad that Marla was not her Aunt Ida. Aunt Ida could shoot daggers out of her eyes, or at least make the person she was staring down feel so. Marla was cradling Bathsheba in her arms. It had been almost a month since the accident, and

still, Marla cried in the bathroom after long showers. Cassandra couldn't blame her. It was sixteen years, and she was still triggered by someone with the same shade of hair as Albie's when she went grocery shopping or heard an old song on the radio that pulled a memory to the front of her mind, having forgotten that it was there altogether.

"What are you doing?" Marla asked.

"You need a coat on," Cassandra said. "It's freezing."

"Where are you going?"

"I just have to run an errand. I'll be back by tomorrow. No, go inside."

"Tell me where you are going."

"Just a quick trip out of town. No need to worry. You need to be off your feet."

"Well, then it would be okay if I came with you."

Marla placed Bathsheba on the passenger seat before she turned and walked back into the house, leaving the passenger door open.

"Why do I know that you are behind this," Cassandra said the dog.

"I'm not the one that woke up the whole neighborhood with this fossil," she barked back. She kept her eyes on the door that Marla had disappeared through.

"I'm pretty sure this fossil is a better companion than you," Cassandra released a heavy sigh.

Not but five seconds later, Marla appeared with a heavy winter coat on and a pair of sneakers on her feet. She didn't change from the sweats and baggy shirt, but her face was slightly pink from a quick wash, and her hair was combed and braided over her shoulder.

Balancing herself on the open door and the leather seat, Marla heaved herself into the seat.

She buckled her seat belt with a quick click and placed Bathsheba into her lap before turning to Cassandra.

“All right, let’s go.”

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One hour and thirty miles of frozen and snow-dusted land later, Cassandra and Marla were out of Erusa and headed west.

“So,” Marla started with a yawn. “What errands do you need to accomplish at four in the morning?”

“Hopefully, she was checking herself into a facility, and goodie for me, you interrupted,” Bathsheba growled.

“What’s wrong?” Marla asked the dog. “Are you okay?”

“She’s fine,” Cassandra said. “She gets car sick. We might have to stick her head out the window at one point.”

“Do it, and I will bite you.”

“Oh, should we turn back and take her home?”

“No. Knowing her, everything would have been peed on by the time we’d get back. I guess it is better since you are tagging along. She likes you. Which is rare for her.”

“Well, I like her back,” Marla said as she scratched behind the dog’s ears.

Bathsheba hummed in her throat and allowed her head to fall limp on Marla’s lap.

“Errands?” Marla asked after a few moments of silence and hum. “Where are we going?”

“Out of town.”

“There are many places out of town. Mind being a little more specific?”

“Colorado.”

“Colorado?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, and is there something particular there that you can’t get in Erusa?”

“Yes.”

“Really? Because I am pretty sure that this is the first time since I have known you to leave Erusa, let alone spent a night away from Dolorosa.”

“I have lived in places other than Dolorosa, Marla. Many, many places.”

“So why here? Was it Mr. Henry?”

“No, I met him and married him before we moved to Kansas. It was serendipity that we ended up where we ended up.”

“You believe in serendipity?”

“Sure. I believe in a lot of things. I believe that the world has a plan and place for everyone, and there is nothing we souls can do about it. We think we do because souls are stubborn, but we always end up where we are supposed to be.”

“You should make a SerendipiTea,” Marla said.

“Oh, high winds don’t give her any ideas,” Bathsheba barked, only opening one eyelid to look up at the girl.

“You like that idea, Battie?” Marla asked, scratching harder behind Bathsheba’s ears.

Kassandra turned to look at the girl. Her heart was tight as she watched Marla bend down and kiss the dog on the head. She had never been more grateful for someone in her life as she was right now. Kassandra had learned long ago when Albie died before they went to all the places they talked about seeing. Albie had always been big on India. He would bring home books for second-hand stores that centered on the topic. It was Albie who taught Kassandra that

loneliness came in many forms. She could be in a room surrounded by people, yet the crushing sensation of her ribs tightening around her heart would invade her chest.

It was Albie who taught Cassandra, no matter how beautiful the places that she went, or would one day go, they were always better, more beautiful when someone you loved was standing right next to you. While the dog resting on Marla's lap was a companion, someone that helped Cassandra feel a little less alone, she wasn't a friend. Yet, Marla, a girl, a simple girl whose life Cassandra had undeniably fucked up, was the closest thing to a friend. She caught Marla dusting the harder to reach places because Cassandra complained that her back hurt every time she used the ladder. Then at night, just before close, Marla was the one that was counting and balancing the till because Cassandra had once grumbled about hating numbers. The girl had started baking for Cassandra. Almost every morning since she allowed the girl to move in, Cassandra had found every kind of bake good on her kitchen counter wrapped in wax paper. It was magical. It was the only way that Cassandra could describe it. The girl knew what she was craving.

Kassandra had very few friends. It came as no surprise. Kassandra was a little hard to befriend, weirder than the average woman walking on the street. Kassandra was hard to digest, and over time, the world preferred the easy to swallow.

"I like that idea," Kassandra said. "We can work on it together when we get home."

"Which will be?" Marla asked. "I mean, I am all for missing school, but you were pretty adamant that I stay in despite my current situation. So, are you going to make a mystical note appear for class Monday?"

"You will be back before Monday morning. We will only be gone for the night unless you are willing to drive back at night. My eyes aren't good after a long day."

“I don’t have my license.”

“Really? Aren’t all the kids gung-ho about that kind of thing?” Cassandra looked over at the girl.

Marla was concentrating on the multi-hued strands of Bathsheba’s fur as if the words she was looking for were within them.

“I mean I was going to, but,” Marla released a heavy breath, “but then everything happened with my parents, so I guess I just hadn’t thought about it. I mean between school and work and this,” she waved her hands to her expanded abdomen, “which I guess I need to get it before this because what kind of mom doesn’t have her driver’s license. How am I supposed to get the hospital if something were to happen to him or her? What if I run out of formula or diapers or whatever else it’s going to need, and I can’t even drive to get to the grocery store. I can walk, but that takes like twenty minutes, and I am sure that I won’t have twenty minutes to spare with a newborn, and I can’t walk two miles in the rain or cold or hot or wind with a newborn. They could sick and then when they sick, I’ll have to take them to the doctor, but I can’t do that if I can’t drive. Land O Goshen, I don’t think that I can do this. Mrs. Henry, I know you said everything is going to be okay but how is that true when I am going to kill my baby because I can’t even dri—”

“Hey. Hey, Marla, look at me,” Cassandra said. “It’s going to be okay. I can show you how to drive.”

“I don’t think that is a good idea,” Marla said.

“Sure, it is. Albie taught me how to drive this truck, and I can teach you how to drive it too.”

“Mrs. Henry?”

“Yes?”

“You just ran a stop sign.”

“When?”

“Less than a mile ago. I was kind of distracting, so it was probably my fault.”

“Now, if I want you to learn anything, I want you to learn this. Nothing anyone does with their own hands is ever your fault. Not ever. None of this is your fault. None of it.”

They drove in silence. Cassandra was able to turn the headlights off as the sun shifted overhead. She didn't know Marla, or Bathsheba, for that matter, to prefer silence over a conversation. Marla always had a question she wanted answered. Looking over, she found her asleep. Marla's head laid against the window, and both her hands held Bathsheba still in her lap. The two's breath was steady and in rhythm with one another's. The sound of their breathing was the only sound in the truck beneath the purring of the engine. It made Cassandra's head go where she didn't want it to go. Roots of doubt that covered her mind like Irish ivy, latching on to anything it can get its vines on, taking hold, and sprouting further than its origins. Once, on a night not long after Albie departed, Cassandra's thoughts were overgrown with the uncertainty of who she was. She questioned what she had done with her life and what she should now do with her life. She was sure if she reached up to her ears, she would find the plant sprouting out of her eardrums and flowing from her head like earrings.

Kassandra was the type of person who made a mistake, then thought about it for fifteen years, trying to figure out why she did whatever she had done and how to live with the mistake as if it was a new roommate in her home. With Georgie Andrews, the mistake that was attached to her name every time Cassandra's mind headed in that direction was big enough to take up her entire house.

Kassandra thought of Georgie almost every time she looked at Marla Morrow. She saw the same kind of innocence that Georgie possessed. The Morrow girl saw wrong little often. She believed in the good of the world. She saw the turns of the world as pushing a person onward with their life, taking them where they were supposed to be, not as jarring rotation meant to throw a person off their course, to pull their feet right out from under them.

It was why she had to make this trip. She had to go right the wrong. It was simple, Kassandra thought. She would knock on her door and tell her she was sorry. That she should have been stronger for one of the few people that she was able to call a friend and hope that she could still call a friend. She didn't mean for any of this to happen. She would tell her that she shouldn't have made any of the teas, none of the drinks for Simon, the concoction for Georgie that Marla ultimately ended up consuming. She knew that it would result in nothing but disappointment. Kassandra knew it in her gut like she knew the day that Albie was going to die. She had had dreams about Georgie barren for all her days in Dolorosa, yet Kassandra went on and gave her friend hope. She knew it was the worst thing that a friend could do, give hope when there was none. It was the cruelest action a friend could commit.

Deep down in all the vines, she knew what she was doing was selfish. She was interrupting a person's life. Georgie was no doubt trying to move on with her life, trying to find a way to forget everything associated with Dolorosa road and work on her marriage. Yet Kassandra needed the image of Georgie Andrews pulling out of her driveway at two in the morning with her Ford Focus—a car she bought specifically for its child holding capabilities—packed to the roof, a bungee cord holding the overfull trunk semi-closed. Kassandra, standing in the front yard in her nightgown, locked eyes with her. She had started to walk over to her. They were only two yards apart. The road was quiet. Empty. It could be just like that first night when

Georgie knocked on her door, asking for help. It was just as late. Just as quiet. If it was thirty degrees cooler, Cassandra would have pinched herself and told her to wake up, that it was just a dream, her mind playing tricks on her.

But it wasn't a dream because Georgie saw Cassandra walking over. Rather than stop, roll her window down, talk to Cassandra about what she was doing, where she was going. Instead of Cassandra convincing Georgie to get out of the car. To park it over at hers and come over for a cup of tea. Georgie Andrews sped out of her driveway and down Dolorosa road. Cassandra stood with dew-covered feet in her front yard with her eyes wide and water rimmed as her friend drove away without saying goodbye. Without saying why.

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She needed to wake the girl up. Cassandra had put five hours of road behind them, and still, the girl didn't wake. It was a blessing, Cassandra knew. Marla looked every bit of tired she was the past few weeks. If this was the way to get her to rest, then Cassandra would condemn it a weekly trip. But she needed to eat. It wasn't hard to miss the fact that Marla was eating for two, and Cassandra could not recall the last time that she saw her eat.

"Marla," Cassandra said. She reached over and shook her shoulder. "Marla, you need to wake up and eat."

"What?" Marla stirred. "Where are we?"

"Not far into Colorado. You need to eat something. My bag is on the floor. I put some of the cinnamon raisin bread you made in there. Some bottles of waters too."

"What did you pack me?" Bathsheba barked.

"Nothing because you weren't supposed to be here."

"What did she say?" Marla asked.

“She asked what I packed her.”

“I wish I could understand her. That would be the coolest power to have.”

“Power?” Cassandra asked.

“Yeah, like a superpower. What you can do so many people wish they could do.”

“They say that, but they don’t know how annoying it can be.”

“I think it is you that is annoying,” Bathsheba barked.

“If that’s so, then perhaps you would like to start your walk back home, or perhaps find a new one.”

“Is it all animals that you can hear?”

“No, it depends on the soul. At least that is what I have been told and through experience. Only old souls can be heard.”

“Like reincarnation?”

“If that’s what you want to call it. Some I can hear and some I cannot. They don’t know anything except their name. I haven’t meet one that knew anything but that.”

“Do you know where you are from, Battie?” Marla asked, pulling the dog’s face close to hers.

“Tell her to put me down,” Bathsheba barked.

“She doesn’t know,” Cassandra said. “You might want to put her down. Car sickness will not be fun in this small truck.”

“So how did you end up with Bathsheba?” Marla asked, placing the dog back on her lap in a horizontal position.

“She was a gift.”

“From who? From Mr. Henry?”

“Eat girl,” Cassandra said. “I am starting to regret waking you up.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, just eat. We’re nearly there.”

Marla pulled the wide-enough-for-two slice out of the bag and peeled the wax paper off. From the side of her eye, Cassandra could see Marla take a wide bite. The girl hummed as she chewed. The sound of Bathsheba’s tail hitting Marla’s leg resounded in the cab of the truck. Cassandra watched as the girl pulled a chunk off and placed it towards the dog’s mouth.

“Don’t give her too much,” Cassandra said, “Or we really will have to put her head out the window when she gets sick.”

“Bite me,” Bathsheba barked through her full mouth.

“But she likes it so much,” Marla said.

“We’re here,” Cassandra said. She slowed the car in front of a house.

“Where is here?” Marla asked,

“Georgie Andrew’s home.”

It hadn’t been hard to find out where Georgie Andrew and Simon Andrew had moved. Magic was easy to follow, and Cassandra had used more on Georgie than she had anyone else. All Cassandra had to do was pull out a map, throw salt across the paper, and see where the particles gathered. It took all of five seconds for the majority of the granules to roll onto Fort Collins, Colorado.

“Wait, Mom’s Georgie? From Dolorosa?”

“Yes.”

“Does she know that we are here?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know this is it?”

Kassandra looked out her window and up at the wide one-story home. The siding was dark gray with a front door, the same shade as egg yolks. The front yard was flat and plain except for the two juniper bushes on either side of the garage door. There was no front porch; only a short gravel step jutted out from the yellow door. It was exactly the kind of house that Kassandra could see Georgie living. It was simple. Understated. Clean. She wouldn't have to worry about keeping the yard up, which was something that she always hated to do. If it took more effort than leaving a sprinkler on during the warmer days than Georgie found a way out of it. It was why every summer, teenage boys looking for work flocked to her house on Dolorosa for a chore to complete for extra cash. The house radiated Georgie. There wasn't an ounce of doubt in Kassandra.

“Because I know Georgie.”

Bathsheba chose that exact moment to open her mouth and throw up.

Marla

After they cleaned up the vomit, Marla, cradling Bathsheba in her arms, and Cassandra walked to the front door of what Cassandra thought to be their former neighbor's home. Marla still didn't believe that this could be Mrs. Andrew's home. Marla learned over time that it was best to just believe that Mrs. Henry knew what she was talking about, but that didn't mean it was easy to openly believe the unexplainable.

They walked up the short drive to the front door.

Kassandra hadn't even lifted her hand to knock when the door swung open as if pushed by a strong wind.

"I knew that was you!" Georgie Andrews said in the open door. She wore a bright green sweater dress with house slippers the size of pillows adorning her feet.

"Oh, great Mountains, your brought Marla. And Bathsheba." Georgie was practically bouncing in the frame of her doorway. One wouldn't be able to notice the slight movement of the petite woman if it hadn't been for the beachball like lump protruding from her belly.

Marla turned to Cassandra and found her jaw wide open as if silent words were flying out without her control.

Bathsheba barked.

Kassandra snapped her jaw shut with an audible click and glared at the dog.

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"Bu--," Cassandra stammered as she sat at Georgie's kitchen table. Marla had to help Mrs. Andrews led in through the house and into the room. Mrs. Henry's shock paralyzed her. It was, perhaps, the first time that Marla had seen Mrs. Henry authentically speechless. She had no control of the silence that came out of her open mouth, unlike the times when she chose silence

over piercing words. It was why Marla was unsettled. She had a feeling brewing in her belly that something was amiss. Something didn't feel right as she sat in the wooden chair beside Mrs. Henry as Mrs. Andrew placed a kettle on a stove.

"How?" Cassandra asked, finally rounding the word, and pushing it out of her throat with effort and apparent strain. "How is this possible?"

"Well, I hope I don't need to teach you the p's and the q's," Georgie said, cocking an eyebrow up to her low hairline as she turned the stovetop hotter. "From what I remember, you knew more about that than I ever did."

"This," Cassandra pointed to the moon orbiting around Mrs. Henry's middle. "This was natural?"

"As natural as natural can be."

"No doctors?"

"No doctors."

Marla sat and took it all in. She kept an eye on Mrs. Henry's paled complexion, but the color slowly rose back into the curves of her cheeks. Bathsheba's eyes were following the women's conversation just as much as she was. She couldn't help it. She remembered Mrs. Andrew. She was over at her house just as often as Mrs. Pleasant was. Marla would find Saint Anne and Mrs. Henry sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle of wine between them when she got home from school. Their heads bent close together in whispered conversation even though Marla was the only one home. Marla saw her crying once. Saint Anne held a box of tissues out to her life the church offering plates and stream after stream poured out of Mrs. Andrew as Marla tip-toed through the hallway and into her room. Neither one had looked up from the sound of the front door opening. Saint Anne said nothing to Marla that same night, and she said nothing the

next day when Marla asked her over a bowl of cereal what could be wrong with one of the nicest people on Dolorosa. It was as if it never happened.

Mrs. Andrews was the exact opposite of that afternoon. Never had Marla seen a smile stretched so wide as the one pulling Mrs. Andrew's cheeks away from each other, exposing her deep crater-like dimples. She was standing tall; one hand braced against her back as she stood over the kettle. The green sweater dress was accompanied by a cream-colored apron folded at her waist and tied together with the very end of the strings. Her belly required almost all of the length of the ties to wrap the fabric around her.

"You girls want something to eat?" Mrs. Andrews asked, already pulling boxes down from the cabinets above the stove. "You must be hungry, Marla Morrow. If your anything like me, you can eat every minute of every hour."

"I could eat," Marla said. "I think I should wash my hands first." The scent of vomit lingered. She knew if she didn't get rid of the stench of stomach acid, she'd upchuck the brown sponge and thick, wrinkled raisins just as elegantly as Battie.

"Of course, the bathroom is through the end and the first door on your left down the hall."

"Thank you."

Sitting Bathsheba down on the ground, she gave one last glance to Mrs. Henry. Her eyes didn't register Marla walking past. They didn't move one millimeter as she obscured her the object in which Mrs. Henry's eyes seemed transfixed. She walked through the passageway. The den was immaculately decorated. Her mother would love every single trinket, Marla thought. She pictured her mother stopping to pick up the three miniature churches made of wood that sat on the side table with affection. *Oh, Georgie*, her mother would say, *how adorable*. She'd

comment on the rug, the inch-thick material of kaleidoscopic designs would look good back home in her den. Well, not her den anymore, Marla thought, but her mother's den.

One wall, the wall closest to the kitchen entrance, was nothing but windows. A wide glass window. The curtains were drawn back so as not to obscure the mountainous view. And what mountains they were, Marla thought. The peaks were soft and rose higher and higher like plush, white steps up to heaven. She wondered what it would be like to be that high up, to touch the clouds with the tips of her fingers.

Across from the window was a wall full of pictures. A collage of family moments and landscape shots in mismatched frames. The first one was a couple. Older. The woman gracefully aged and what Mrs. Andrews most likely could assume to be her in twenty years. Then a dog, a large yellow lab, sitting in the bed of a truck. Above it, Marla's heart stopped. A horizontal image of her mother, Mrs. Pleasant, and Mrs. Andrew sitting outside Brother's Brew in Erusa. They wore matching t-shirts from one of the Dolorosa 5ks that they pulled together. Marla couldn't see what year the cotton had printed against it because of a slight blur to the photo. It had to have been over ten years ago. Her mother's hair was dyed with too bright highlights, strikes of blonde and cooper like racing stripes down the coffee brown of her hair. Saint Anne had gone out of her way to removing all photos that displayed that ill-advised choice.

Ten years ago, Marla's mother started charities. What was once a small once a month hobby evolved into the seven days a week career that consumed her days. It was the same year that she started dropping Marla off at the Erusa Baptist church for daycare, rather than spending her mornings and afternoons with her. Gone were the day trips to the park. The afternoons crafting and baking and hide and go seek on the rainy and too windy traditional Kansas days. Yet it wasn't the sight of her mother from a time that Marla cherished and dreamed about. It was the

lanky figure with short, cloud-shaped hair, the unmistakable yellow-orange shade that had Marla's breath stuck between her ribs. He was sitting right next to a young Marla. They could easily be missed by the quick eye just walking by.

It was Gabe.

She felt the hollow space in her chest expand again. The emptiness that swallowed everything inside of her like a black hole. Forgetting herself. She had no tears left to cry. Marla didn't know if she would ever be able to cry again. What would it take, how long would it be until the dried-out pores of her body were refilled? She looked one last time at the photo, at the two of them young and the only worry that had was when they could go to the comic bookstore.

Marla walked past the pictures, not knowing how she did it, but allowing her legs to tug her away from the smog of sadness surrounding her. She found the bathroom where Mrs. Andrews told her it would be.

Coming out, she noticed a room to the left of the bathroom. The only other room in the hallway. The door was slightly ajar. Through the crack, Marla could glimpse the barest sliver of a chair with a robin egg blue afghan thrown across the back. Stepping forward, she opened the door wider and found what was unmistakably a nursery. The room was small. A simple square of plush white carpet and freshly painted walls. On one wall was a crib that could only be described as antique with its iron bars heavily covered at the lip with frill after frill of lace and cotton. It reminded Marla of her mother's wedding dress. A poof of fabric so wide and thick that you couldn't see where her mother started or where the dress began. Next to the crib was a small stand with a lamp and a picture frame.

The photo was of Mrs. Andrews. It was recently taken from the apparent swell of Mrs. Andrews' middle. She was standing next to a man Marla had never seen before. Her arms were

wrapped around his waist, and his around hers. They both smiled at the camera as if they nothing to hide as if the happiness they were feeling was too overwhelming to allow their lips to close. He had dark brown hair and a long oval face, the opposite of Mr. Andrews's blond hair and sharp, square jawline. They were not of blood relations, Marla could tell. Their faces were too different, yet it was the way that they held each other that told her such. Marla had close friends and family that she hugged, yet the only time she felt happiness like that captured in the image she was holding, was when it was given to her by Gabe.

To the right of the crib was a changing table with the same amount of frill as the crib. On the last wall was the closet, open for Marla to see all the clothes that the baby had already. Two baskets of toys were nestled on the floor beneath two rows of onesies of various sizes and lengths and colors. Against the four cream-colored walls were stenciled animals a shade of camel brown. They curved and waved in the center of the walls in a single path-- elephant, lion, tiger, bird, giraffe, monkey, owl, gorilla, ostrich, bear, repeat—to march into the open door of a painted ark. The ark covered a solid third of the wall behind the crib. The front of the ark disappeared from the edge of the wall as if the ark was partly outside the room, and Marla had simply missed it as she walked in. If she had to guess, she would guess that Mrs. Andrews was having a boy. She was sure why she felt this way, the clothes revealed nothing, the walls revealed nothing, the afghan could be a hint, but she had had a blanket that color once too. At the same time that she recognized what Mrs. Andrew's baby would be, she was hit by the sensation, the realization that her baby would never have this. She'd never have this.

Marla was sure that she could blame half of the emotions that she was feeling on the hormones. The other half could be blamed on what so recently happened. The photo reminded her of what she had lost. These moments of uncontrollable sadness resembled the feeling of

being stuck in an elevator. The doors shut. She was stuck in the in-between of destinations, waiting for the ringing of alarms to stop, praying for blessed fresh air to enter into her lungs, for a hand to reach out and grab her and tell her that it was all going to be okay. Yet she knew in the moments of panic that it was never going to be the hand that she wanted to pull her out. Never again.

So, when these moments came, she let them happen. The elevator doors slid shut in her mind, and her lungs worked double to catch a breath before they completely closed. She made herself smaller. As small as she could be and let the thoughts take over her brain. Experience told her that there was no way to prevent them. It was best to just let them be so that they could eventually leave.

She couldn't catch her breath. She knew that she could breathe, but it was as if her body had suddenly forgotten how. She breathed in. Her lungs felt tight as if two fists reached in her chest cavity and squeezed each one. It was like being underwater and swimming towards the surface, not knowing how far away you are, knowing you are almost out of air; that hovering moment of wondering if you will break through and suck in the light essence of life with all your might or will you be just at the edge when your body betrays you and consumes water instead.

It was then that they found her. Curled on her side. Horizontal on the floor. Both hands wrapped around her belly. Face wet and drowning in tears. Struggling to breathe.

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“Marla? Dear? Can you hear me?” Cassandra said, her voice filtering through Marla's head like a frayed connection, slivers of words making their way to her but others lost to the unknown. She squeezed her eyes tighter, trying to block the light that encouraged a drum to pound in her skull as if it were conducting a rock concert.

“Mrs. Henry?” she asked, knowing the voice but needing to make sure she was really there.

She needed not to ask what happened. This has happened often enough that she already knew what happened. She couldn't catch her breath, the panic removing the logic from her brain that said she was capable of breathing as she was the second before the panic stopped by for a visit. She tried with all her might to get air into her lungs, and the too deep breaths and the staccato gasps for oxygen resulted in her brain deciding to take a quick visit out of town so that could remove itself from the uncomfortable position, resulting in a blackout state and Marla forgetting half of the thoughts that had seconds before plagued her head. However, this was the first time that a person had been witness to the attack, or the ends of it at least. She could tell when Mrs. Henry had entered the room. When she felt a slick ribbon of wetness moving across her face, she was only fractionally confused until she cracked one eye open and saw the shape of Bathsheba's head next to her own. Why the dog was able to cause Marla's lungs to balloon with light air, she wasn't sure, but she placed her hand on the dog's head as a thanks for the worry-free oxygen no able to enter her body.

“What happened? You were gone for so long that we got worried and came locking. You weren't in the bathroom. Then Bathsheba found you in here. On the floor. Hyperventilating.”
Kassandra said.

“Did you fall?” Mrs. Andrews asked. “Hit anything?”

“I don't think so.”

“Maybe we should call an ambulance just to be sure. We should probably get her checked out,” Mrs. Andrews ran her hand over Marla's hair.

Bathsheba sniffed Marla's body. Moving from her head to her stomach to her legs, the

dog pushed her wet nose against her and then looked up and barked a series to Cassandra.

“Nothing is broken, and the baby’s fine,” Mrs. Henry said.

“Thank the heavens,” Mrs. Andrews sighed. “Marla, what were you even doing in here?”

“I wasn’t,” Marla grunted, trying to wiggle her middle up to a sitting position. “snooping. I promise. I saw the chair, and I just wanted to look in.”

“So, you didn’t fall?”

No,” Marla looked directly at Mrs. Henry. “I didn’t fall. I’m okay. I promise.”

Marla felt that hand reaching in and tugging at her heart. She was and forever would be grateful for the day that Mrs. Henry came into her life.

“I just got overwhelmed.” She kept her eyes on Mrs. Henry as she spoke, willing her to not ask any more questions. She returned a look, her eyes a millimeter tighter at their edges. Marla could have sworn she saw Mrs. Henry give a small nod as if answering her plea, but her eyes, the way she held her head high and pointed directly at her, meant that this would not be the end of the questions.

“Let’s get you up,” Mrs. Andrews said. The two men grabbed one of Marla’s arms and helped steady her to her feet. “Now why don’t we get you something to eat, yes?”

Marla nodded.

“Good, I know just the place.”

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Thirty minutes, a bowl of pasta, and two double-fudge brownies with a thick layer of chocolate buttercream later, Marla had started to feel better. Chocolate had that kind of effect on her. They were sitting inside a small café, *Thyme and Ginger*, at the round iron table closest to the front window.

“Mrs. Andrews,” Marla said, between licking frosting off the plate with her fingers, “this is so good.”

“I know. When I found it, I introduced myself to the baker because they were going to be seeing a lot of me.”

“It looks like Mrs. Henry’s shop,” Marla said.

“No, it doesn’t,” Mrs. Henry said. She had Bathsheba in her lap. Despite the no pets sign posted outside the door, Mrs. Henry had pretended to shed tears and got louder and louder with her sobs until the waitress patted Mrs. Henry on the back and made her promise to keep the dog on her lap and away from the display cases. Mrs. Henry blessed the girl repeatedly, telling her that she was guaranteed a spot in heaven, which the worker seemed to believe from the blush that rose to her cheeks as she walked away. Every now and then, Mrs. Henry would wave at the worker and cross her heart much to Marla and Mrs. Andrews’ amusement.

“It does,” Marla said. “Just add the birdcages, and you could sue them if they sold tea.”

“It does. I thought so when I found it. Greg’s got a sweet tooth, so I have to stop here at least once a week. It works out well for me.” Mrs. Andrews rubbed her middle, “this one seems to like it too. Perhaps this one will pop out asking for a chocolate chip cookie.”

“Who’s Greg?” Marla asked.

Mrs. Henry and Mrs. Andrews looked at one another.

“Yes, Greg. As I was telling Cassandra, I met someone.”

“Mr. Andrews?” Marla asked.

“Lying piece of scum,” Mrs. Henry said over her cup of tea.

“Is no longer in the picture,” Mrs. Andrews said, pointing a look at Mrs. Henry. “And no one in this room will do anything to him. Correct?”

“Hmmm.” Mrs. Henry hummed.

Bathsheba barked.

Mrs. Henry choked a laugh and spat out her tea.

“So,” Marla said, waiting for Mrs. Henry to stop coughing the brown liquid out of her lungs before she continued. “I guess you are not Mrs. Andrews anymore?”

“No, I’m not. Papers were finalized a few months ago.” She smiled.

“What am I supposed to call you?”

“Georgie is fine. No need for formalities.” Her face turned a deeper shade. “I’ve known you since you were a little tot. I tried to get you to call me Gigi once, but your old soul wasn’t having it. I was Mrs. Andrews the moment you could speak it even when your Mama corrected you.”

“I’ve been trying to do the same thing,” Mrs. Henry said.

It was true. Marla didn’t find comfort in calling adults by their first name. It didn’t feel right coming off her tongue. She once saw Jane call one of their teachers by her first name at Brother’s Brew. Marla had had the same teacher third-grade year. Mrs. Patrick. She didn’t seem to mind when Jane half yelled it across the small shop. She waved back at the two before collecting her paper cup off the ready bar and left. Marla looked at Jane. Jane looked back. What, she said. We’re adults now. But fourteen didn’t feel like adulthood to Marla like it seemed to for Jane. To Jane, she wasn’t playing dress-up when she acted ten years older. She had held her head high as she shouted Francesca!, across the room. It wasn’t that she thought it was terrible disrespectful, Marla thought, she sometimes wished that Mrs. Henry’s name would come off her lips with ease rather than awkward and misshaped. When it came down to it, if she were completely honest, Marla had this dread that she would never grow up, that she would never feel

grown-up. Even now, experiencing the beginnings of motherhood, grief, broken ends with her parents, jobs, and worries about tomorrow, Marla still felt sixteen. She still felt like she should be told what to do. And a fraction of herself was okay with that. It took a little bit of the pressure building inside her off the stove.

“Are you married to this, Greg?” Mrs. Henry asked.

“Yes,” Mrs. Andrews said, turning a deeper red.

“What shall Marla call you? She won’t be able to call you anything until you tell her unless you prefer Andrews.” Marla watched a smile spread across Mrs. Henry’s face. “It must be a good name from the look of your face.”

Mrs. Andrews took a bite of brownie, and a name tumbled out of her lips like clothes in a dryer.

“What was that? I’m hard of hearing these days.”

“George,” Mrs. Andrews said.

“George?” Marla asked.

“Yes. His name is Gregory George.”

“So, you are—” Mrs. Henry started.

“Yes. I am Georgie George. Laugh it up, Kass.”

“I wasn’t going to laugh.”

Marla watched as Mrs. Henry held her hid high and straight. Her lips showed absolutely no emotion, flat like a playing card.

Then, like a bubble bursting as it gets too high in the air, Mrs. Henry’s face popped open and filled the café with a cacophony of cackles.

It hit Marla heavy like a boulder. She hadn’t heard Mrs. Henry, the woman who she spent

more of her day with than anyone else for some time now, utter such a sound. The weight got heavy when she realized she couldn't remember the last time she herself had made a sound like the one filling her ears.

Judith

She didn't know what day it was. She opened her eyes and found herself in her bed. She didn't know the time. Her drapes were closed, muting the color of the sky. She remembered doing that, though not how long ago. It could be early morning, the sun just rising, or it could be setting with the pale blue and orange hues coloring her white comforter pulled up to her neck. The alarm clock on her nightstand was gone. So was the lamp. All that remained was a bottle of Grey Goose with a knuckle of transparent liquid left.

Her body was stiff, like the patients she'd once worked with on hospice during pharmacy school. She had to bend their limbs for them. She was told to listen to the cracks to warm her when she had gone too far, the pop that would say stop. The patients laid there. Let her move them as if she was the one that had the authority to tell their body what to do. Her professors had told her that this happened when the body was no longer able to communicate properly. There was a severed phone line in the patient that prevented them from calling their legs and telling them to move. But Judith had never believed that science. She read the facts, sure. Studied the nerves that did just that. Yet, it still just didn't sit right in her belly. It had to be more than a loose wire that made this happened. She always believed that it wasn't a nerve that was down, but the brain clicking off, setting up a voicemail, and then taking that trip to Prague it had been putting off.

She wasn't in Prague.

She was on Dolorosa Road.

Her son still dead.

Despite not knowing what time or what day it was, Judith decided it was time to go back to sleep.

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Her head hurt.

That was what woke her. The pounding in her skull like ten thousand tiny drills. Her stomach growled. No, it roared from the unexpected hibernation. If her head would just stop trying to kill her, she could move from this bed and make her way to the kitchen. She couldn't even think what filled her fridge, most likely all of it gone rotten. The pantry was bare, she knew. She had planned her whole Sunday of grocery shopping to get what Gabe would want for breakfast for his last semester of high school that he would ever have. Belgium waffles with blueberries. She'd skillet burn a few slices of bacon that he liked to grab on his way out the door.

The first day of his final semester had come, and past and she made so such things. She didn't know if she'd be able to make them ever again.

She wanted sleep.

Why hadn't scientists, pharmacists even, discover some kind of miracle drug that could put mothers who lost their children to sleep for however long they needed. Some kind of system where the mother could pick a date to wake up and like magic, they'd open their eyes and enough time would have passed where the pain had dulled.

How did mothers live without their children, Judith wondered.

She closed her eyes as she knew she was not the first to ask such a question, and she wouldn't be the last, but most heart-breakingly she knew, there would never be an answer.

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She didn't know what to do. That was what Judith's thoughts seemed to circle around like a tornado. What was she supposed to do? How was she supposed to take her next breath? She didn't know.

So instead, she called Gabe. She sat on her couch with her knees beneath her chin and pressed his name in her phone. She let it ring. It rang, most likely in the bag of possessions that she still had not picked up from the hospital. She was the only person listed as his emergency contact in his phone, so the nurse had written her name on the clear Ziploc that held his clothes, his wallet, a tube of half-empty Chapstick, and his cellphone. That was all that could leave the hospital where his body laid upon a hard, silver bed in a cell of cold and emptiness. She wondered who was lying next to him, the people occupying the pull-out chambers like junk drawers in one's kitchen, full of contents with no pursue anymore but were simply too sentimental to throw away.

Fetal position on a sofa she didn't even feel beneath her, Judith listened to the single ring, the battery died, or someone switched the device to off before she heard Gabe's voice.

"I was either too busy to answer, or I didn't want to answer. It doesn't matter the reason; you're here. Leave me the secret to life, and I'll respond if I think you're right," his voice spoke.

"My beautiful, beautiful boy," she said as voice wrapped around her in a coat of calm.

It sounded younger than she remembered. She couldn't remember when he set it up. If it was the moment, she granted him the privilege of owning the device, when he was barely halfway through the seventh grade. Taking him to the cellular store and adding him to her plan and allowing him to pick out whatever he wanted. It was better that she relent and give him this thing she thought he was too young for. How else would she have been able to keep up with his whereabouts between school and practices and friends and whatever it was that he did when he was between those places. Did he change it recently? She never knew him to say things such as the secret to life. When did he grow up to ask such things? Where was she when he did?

The jarring peep, the prompt for her to open her lips and speak, sounded. Pulling the

phone away from her face, Judith pressed the red circle of her phone to end the message. She left nothing but silence. A silence that Gabe would never hear. Or was that all that he heard now?

The audible pulse of nothingness.

Without looking, her thumb pressed her son's name on the screen of her phone. She placed it back to her ear and waited for his voice.

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Her head hurt when she awoke again, yet it wasn't what woke her. She knew it was the same day. Her eyes hadn't formed that layer of crust that they did when she slept more than a few hours. Past the pounding in her skull, Judith heard someone in her kitchen. The unmistakable opening of the creaky pantry door sounded down the hall. The movement of feet against the tile floors of the kitchen. Moving her nose, she smelled salt. It was heated salt, the kind that laces the air as it broils in the oven or bubbles over on the stove. Something was cooking. Someone was cooking in her house that should have no one in it but what we remained of Judith Pleasant.

Her window was opened. Unfiltered light of morning covered the darkness of her bedroom. Someone had done that. Someone had been in her room and was taking care of her.

It was when the thought took over in her brain before she could stop it.

It was Gabe. Her son had returned. They had all be wrong. Her baby couldn't have died. It wasn't him that they found. Her Gabe was fine. He was home. Gabe was home. That was him. In her kitchen. She could see him searching the pantry for something to eat. Scrounging around like she often found him on afternoons after school because he was a growing boy. Growing boys needed to eat more than little boys more than men. She needed to get up. She needed to feed him. He was alive, and she needed to take care of her boy. Gabe was here!

Throwing the covers off, Judith stumbled to her feet. Black dots lined her vision and threatened to close around her narrowing vision, but she willed it away. Holding on to the nightstand, a bottle of empty gin clattering over, next to her feet. She steadied her breath before she propelled herself forward.

“I’m coming,” she tried to yell down the hall so that he would know she was there. “I’m coming, Gabe. Hold on.”

She was going as fast as she could. She was cursing herself in her mind. If only she wasn’t so quick to believe the doctors. She knew better than anyone that they could make mistakes. They could mix up who they found submerged in Gabe’s truck. The body. That body she went in and looked at before they quickly zip it back in its bag didn’t have to be her boy. She could have made a mistake just like the doctors. Hell, half of the doctors in this town asked Judith for help with what medications would best treat their patients. She never had to go to them. She never had to ask them for advice, so why the hell had she believed them so quickly? If she hadn’t listened to them, hadn’t accepted the words so quickly, she would have been taking care of herself, and she would have reached the kitchen by now.

When she made it to the kitchen, she held her breath before turning the corner. Her heart was a horse behind the gate, waiting for the gun to signal for her to go, go, go. She turned the corner, her lips pulling up.

“You couldn’t wait for me to fix something, as usual,” she said. His back was to hers as he stood in front of the stove. A plate half-filled with fried eggs with perfect orange domes of yolk and pieces of burnt bacon was to his left. Only Gabe could manage to fry an egg without breaking the yolk. No matter how many times he showed her, hers broke. Sometimes she did it on purpose. When she thought that she was going to be successful, she’d stick the edge of the

spatula just a little too hard to break the dam. She'd smile up at Gabe, saying *I did it again*. Over the years, the things they did together lessened. Yet she had this. Breakfasts with her son shaking his head at her with exasperation for not understanding such a simple concept. And she still had this, she thought. There he was. The proof she needed.

Her son was alive.

She reached up to touch his shoulder. She needed to feel him. The flesh from her flesh. She squeezed the muscle. She felt the pulse of life beneath her fingertips.

Judith let out a shudder of breath.

Peter turned around.

"Hey," he said. "How are you holding up?" He looked at her as if nothing was wrong at this moment. Those blue eyes like Gabe's staring back at her, but it wasn't Gabe's face that held those eyes. His face couldn't grow such a beard across his jawline. Judith was looking up at her husband, the man she hadn't seen in almost a year.

That was what she did it, Judith thought as her vision caved in on her once more. The thought that her son would never have the time to grow such a thing on his beautiful, beautiful face. She let it take her. The blackness was closing in around her eyes. The sound of static filling her head. The muffled yells of Peter saying her name over and over again as she felt her body sinking to the tiled floor. Judith gave in to it all. For how else did one greet grief than by falling down at its feet.

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"Judith," Peter said.

Judith felt her should shake. Peter's hands were trying to wake her up when that was the exact opposite of what she wanted.

She'd never once considered suicide. Not when she lost her mother to her a long battle of cancer. Not when her father followed his wife's departure with a heart attack. Not when Peter packed up his things for his trekking across the country. Not when she had her first and only miscarriage. Never. Never had the thought of opening her eyes seem so painful, so goddamn awful that she considered doing it. Ending it all. Wasn't that better than this? Surely hell would be better than this.

"Judith," he repeated. "Can you hear me."

"Yes," she replied. "Stop shaking me." She rolled onto her side and began the process of lifting herself off the floor. "What are you doing here? Why are you here?"

"How could you even ask?"

Judith looked up at the tone of his voice. She found shock written all over his face. She couldn't hold back the hysterical laugh bubbling inside her. She had to stop her progress from the floor. She was half crouched, her thighs supporting her shaky weight. She had to hold her side from the stitch that was forming from the unexpected burst out of her lungs.

"What is so funny?"

"How could I ask that?" she finally managed to speak. "How could I ask that?"

She felt the tears rolling down her eyes. Her body was so dehydrated that she was surprised she was capable of producing them.

"It's funny because you are so goddamn stupid."

"I know that this is hard--,"

"Hard? Hard? That's the word you want to use to describe all of this? Hard? The fact that you think this is just simply hard means you know absolutely nothing that is going on. Surely you have not been given the facts because I would not use the word hard to describe our son's

death. Excruciating. Unbearable. Unendurable. Agonizing. But hard? You can take your hard and get the fuck out of my house.”

She pulled herself to her feet.

“You have no right to be here. To be cooking in here,” she said, turning her back to him. What she was thinking was you have no right to have given me such hope to let me out of this nightmare for a second only to be plopped back in. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

“Last time I checked, my name was still on the deed of this house. *Our* house. And *our* son is dead. If you want to throw a word in my face, then here’s yours. *Our*. You have no right to keep me from here. To stop me from seeing *our* son’s room to see his...space. On my drive home, David showed me a verse that I had completely looked over. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Judith nodded her head. “I’m sorry.”

Peter smiled at her. He continued.

“I have a service in the works. Tomorrow afternoon at Erusa Baptist. They are opening their sanctuary for us, and I was going to start calling people and invite them. I am sure that there are many who wish to say goodbye.”

“Yes,” Judith replied. She looked at the clock. 11:45. She saw Peter’s keys on the counter next to the coffee pot. “You’re right.”

“I figured it would do his friends and teachers and loved one’s good to have some way to say goodbye. Then we should probably get his funeral together. I talked to Pastor David, and he said we just name the day, and he’ll be there.”

“Peter?”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind grabbing the newspaper from the driveway? It’s been a while, and I haven’t gathered them. I don’t want them piling up.”

“Already did,” he said, pointing to the pile of blue plastic covered papers. She counted four. She had been in bed for four days.

“Did you grab the mail?”

“No, I didn’t think about that. One sec.”

Judith followed him by three seconds. He rounded the kitchen, forgetting his keys as Judith knew he wouldn’t think to grab, and made his way to the front door. The moment he closed it behind him and flipped the lock. She raced to the back door and flipped that lock as well. She peeked through the window to verify that the garage was closed. She was instantly glad that Peter had never fixed the garage code pad that she requested for weeks before he left.

The front door shook from Peter’s attempt to get in.

“Judith?” he knocked. “I’m locked out. Can you let me in?”

“No. Leave.”

“What?”

“Leave.”

“You’re joking. This is my home. Where else would I go?”

“I don’t know,” Judith said. “Go plan your mourning with Pastor David for all I care.”

“Judith, let me in. I know you are hurting. I’m hurting too. I miss Gabe, too. Please, let me in.”

She listened to every word he said. She almost let him in with the crack in his voice as he said their son’s name. Her hand almost reached for the door.

“We have to remember that God would never give us a tribulation we couldn’t handle.

We need to stick together. God is our strength. Our son is with him. We should take comfort in that fact.”

He sounded as if he had written those exact words down. As if he had already practiced what he would say at Gabe’s funeral. That was what was important to Peter; what he would say in front of an audience about his son leaving this world. She moved away from the door, stepped away from the temptation, and headed towards her bedroom. She stopped to grab another bottle.

Peter knocked on the door. Harder.

“All we have is our faith,” he said.

Judith was halfway to her room, the bottle already open and close to her lips, when she reared back her head and shouted, “Fuck God. Tell him to give me my son back,” to the front door.

She closed her bedroom door and decided to lock that one too.

Judith

The thought exploded in her head like a grenade. Cassandra Henry, it seemed to say over and over in the aftermath of detonation. Cassandra Henry. She had to get to Cassandra Henry because that would save everything. Somehow, she was in the driver's seat of her car before her brain was able to process what she was even doing. The car was running in the closed garage.

“Shit,” she said, stabbing the device on her mirror visor to prevent suffocating herself on fossil fuels.

Despite being less than two hundred feet away, Judith parked her car in Cassandra Henry's driveway. She wasn't expressing irrational, she thought, she was saying herself time and if the woman wasn't here than she would need her car to drive to the woman's shop.

She was knocking at her door. She was doing this. She looked down as she waited for the sounds of movement. She wasn't wearing shoes. Sock covered feet against the cold concrete. It was too late to turn back, having already knocked on the door, she thought. She didn't care. She'd throw them away. What was the purpose of anything anyway other than to live than be thrown away? You exist, and then you don't.

She knocked harder against the door.

Nothing.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Kassandra,” she said. “Kassandra, if you are in there, I need you to open the door.”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“I know you don't like me, and you have no reason to open the door, but if you could just open the door. I need to talk to you. Kassandra.”

Judith waited. She waited and counted and lost count of counting and climbed back in her

car with a damn it beneath her breath, just on the tip of her tongue. The wind stole it away quickly, so quickly that Judith forgot what she even said.

She drove out of Dolorosa road and into town. Two stoplights. One right turn. DiviniTea.

Judith sat in her idling car. She looked at the dashboard for the first time. Eleven twenty-five in the afternoon. The stores beside Cassandra Henry's were in motion. A few customers here and there on the street walking to their destinations like any other day. Slowly, as if her neck would snap in two if she turned her head a second faster, Judith glanced at her pharmacy. It was dark. The open sign still flipped over, how she left it, how long ago that was, Judith wasn't entirely sure. Two notes were taped to the front door with a bold black handwritten script. The first: *Closed. Sorry for the inconvenience.* The second: *For prescriptions, please visit Bell Tower Pharmacy.* Beneath the second was a smaller scribble, most likely an address or phone number. She knew that script. Her husband. That Gordian knot of regret came up into her throat. She tried to push it back down. She didn't have time to deal with that either. She needed this.

Ari Mathea was the first to notice her. Judith stepped out of her car, leaving it running, and saw the woman approach her with a pace of click, click, click from the bottoms of her heels.

"Judith. Oh, Judith," she said. Ari was a block away from Judith, yet she raised her hand in the air and waved her down. The S.O.S Tom Hanks made out of sticks in *Cast Away* was more subtle. She wore what Judith would be wearing if Judith still gave a shit about the clothes she wore; black tailored pants, a cable knit sweater, a pair of winter boots with the right amount of heel, and pearl earrings in her ears.

Pretending not to hear her, Judith walked up the DiviniTea storefront, pressing her face close to the glass. A cloud of fog appeared, disappeared, and reappeared in the window from her hot breaths.

“Judith? I am so glad that I caught you. Did you get any of my messages?” Ari asked. “I left so many at the house. Peter stopped by the church. The things he said,” she shook her head. “I just want you to know that we are all thinking of you and if you need anything, anything at all, don’t hesitate to call. Okay?”

“Do you know where she is?” Judith asked the woman, not an ounce of care about answering her questions.

“Who?”

“Kassandra. She wasn’t at home.”

“I’m not sure?” she said it like a question as if she didn’t understand the words that Judith knew were coming out of her mouth.

She tugged on the door. It didn’t bulge. She knew it would be locked, but she still couldn’t keep her hand away from the handle to prevent it from trying.

“You’re asking for Kassandra?”

“Yes.”

“Kassandra Henry?”

She’d try other places in town, she thought. The grocery. The bookstore. A couple of restaurants. Kassandra Henry could be out for lunch. A cup of coffee. Out in a graveyard pulling up grass or soil or flowers for those teas that everyone talked about. She could be with a lawyer coming up with a case to sue Judith with. She could be right around the corner with that dog of hers at her feet.

“Are you all right? Do you need help with something?” Ari asked.

Ari’s eyes absorbed her. Taking her in from top to sock-covered toes. In the window front, just below the painted DiviniTea, Judith caught sight of her reflection. She didn’t feel

anything as she noted her matted hair, a hair tie close to the end of her should-length hair, most likely from rolling around restlessly in bed. Her white shirt was stained with various shades of brown spots; most were clustered around the neck like a necklace of hard liquor. The plaid pajama bottoms were not hers. She didn't remember putting her son's pants, but there they were, loose on her hips and dragging on the street. She knew that was her face looking back at her. The red-rimmed eyes harsh against pale, dry skin blinked when she blinked.

She looked like death. And for a fleeting moment, a tenth of a second, not even a full beat of her heart, did the thought sound pleasant before it went away.

"I'm fine," Judith said, forcing her eyes away from her broken self. "If you see her today, please call me."

She didn't wait for Ari to respond before she walked towards her car.

"But whatever for?" Ari asked, click, click, right behind her. "Judith, I think you need to talk to someone. Peter told us that you locked him out of the house. You shouldn't be alone."

She was near her car when Ari said her name with such authority that she paused. Ari enunciated the two syllables of Judith's name as linguistic leisure as if she had nowhere else to be in the world so she could take the time to say *Jud-pause-ith*. It was so unexpected that the bodies walking down the street paused. Everyone. Heads turned. Heads that Jude pause ith knew. They recognized her too. A couple were spin tops and spun around, directed themselves towards her direction. Another waved. A few stood where they were, no doubt mumbling words to the people they spoke to on their phones about what they were witnessing. One took a photo.

Though she couldn't hear them, she knew what they were saying. What a wreck. She's gone off the deep end. Poor thing. I'm glad that's not me. Maybe she needs help? What is she even doing out here? What is she wearing? Bless her. I need to pray for her. All the bullshit that

people say when their life is easier when they haven't had to endure the pain in her chest, the nails piercing her heart with every breath she took. But that was the thing, Judith thought, you were either them or her. There was an invisible line, a scrim curtain drawn around Judith that no matter how close she got to someone, it would still be sketched between her and them.

"I'm worried about you," Ari said, now standing next to her. Ari placed her hand on Judith's shoulder. "We all are. You're all alone in that house. You haven't talked to anyone. The pharmacy has been closed for two weeks. I think you should come over. We can talk. I can cook you something. Do you know when you last ate? Showered?"

Judith shook her head. She didn't. She didn't even know what day it was.

"All right, you can follow me, or better yet, I can drive to my house. I just went to the grocery, so you name it, I probably have it. Okay?" Ari said.

Judith was a rabid animal, and Ari was calming her down.

"Okay," Judith said. Judith nodded. "Okay, that would be nice. Thank you."

"And Joseph is at home so we can talk about the burial. We can take care of it all. You can put Gabe to rest. That's what you need to do to heal." She smiled. She squeezed Judith's shoulder.

No, she wanted to scream. No.

Judith yanked her shoulder out from Ari's hold.

"Judith?"

"You don't know what I need to do. Why don't you try pulling your nose out other people's asses and worry about your own life? Hmm?" Judith yanked the door handle of her car and slid into the driver's seat.

"He needs to be put to rest. You know I'm right. It's wrong what you are doing. You

need to start to move forward,” Ari said as her voice filtered in the closed door of Judith’s Subaru. Her face shifted color; beige to pink, from pink to red like a mood ring. “You’re selfish. He had friends. He had a father. Think of Marla Morrow and that baby that she is carrying. Gabe’s baby. They need to mourn too. You need to bury his body.”

Rolling down the window, Judith looked Ari in the eye. “That is the exact opposite of what I need to do, and you can go tell my husband that. Now move before I hit you with my car.”

Ari, poppy red, took two steps back as Judith rolled up her window.

“Bitch,” Ari said, no louder than a normal conversation. It slipped through Judith’s closing window just before she rived her engine.

She would pretend that she didn’t hear it, just as she knew Ari Mathea wouldn’t tell a soul that she saw the tears trickling down Judith’s face as she pulled away.

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She kept searching. When Cassandra Henry wasn’t anywhere in town, Judith went back to Dolorosa Road. Perhaps she was out for an errand and had been back home all day. When she found her neighbor still not home, she did what she told Gabe when he was younger. She stayed where she was and waited for Cassandra to find her.

She sat on Cassandra Henry’s front step for hours. She was there long after the sun had dipped down low, the sky a gray ombre, and the light posts blinked on. The street seemed to yawn. It was a pulse beneath Judith’s feet, a cue for the chorus of cicadas, the purrs of car engines, and the whispers of the winds all to quiet down. She sat, and she sat, and she sat even though her toes went numb in her boots, and her face became stiff. She sat despite the fact that she couldn’t feel the snot dripping out of her nose and staining the thighs of her pants. Secretly, she wanted to go home; to sit in the warmth of her kitchen with a mug burning the most outer

layer of skin from her palms as she warmed. She knew that that was the more reasonable thing to do.

Everyone watched their neighbors from the comfort of their homes. Judith couldn't ever recall seeing a neighbor, Anne, or The Coopers, or Georgie even, sitting on a concrete step in the middle of the night, a night of freezing temperatures, waiting for someone to come home. Yet, she knew that if she went home, if she sat in her kitchen, if she let her muscles relax in the heat pumping through the vents, she would start to feel. And that was the exact opposite of what she wanted to do, feel. So, the front step of Cassandra Henry's was where she remained until she heard the growl of a truck at just a little over midnight. She heard it before she saw it. She had never seen the truck before. It was wide, and the large tires brought the cabin of the truck a good distance from the ground. The cobalt blue paint was chipping on every edge and curve of the metal body. She closed her eyes as the headlights centered on her, the truck pulling into the driveway at a slow pace and stopped just before the closed garage.

Judith didn't move.

Out stepped Marla. Holding the graying dog in one arm and a crumpled McDonald's sack in the other.

"Juju?" Marla asked.

The engine died. The headlights clicked off. In the darkness, rounding the hood of the truck, Cassandra Henry stepped towards Judith.

"Judith?" Cassandra asked. "What are you doing out here?"

Though the words burned inside her from the moment she woke up yesterday morning, to every second that ticked away all day, Judith knew that they were her only option. This was what they meant when they said rock bottom, Judith thought, this is how addicts must feel when they

will do anything to get their next fix. She made a vow right then and there that she would never judge what a person did out of desperation because never did she ever imagine that she would be here, sitting on the front step of the town witches house, the woman who's life Judith had made more difficult out of anger, unjustifiably. If she had to, she would beg. She would rise to her knees and do anything that Cassandra Henry asked.

"Are you okay," Cassandra asked.

Her kindness was the worst part. Judith could hardly bear it. A geyser of guilt shot out of every one of Judith's pores. Cassandra Henry, despite Judith having rained hell upon her, was being kind. She didn't question Judith. She didn't yell. Didn't tell her to fuck herself and get the hell off her property. All of which Judith knew she would do if the roles were reversed, and that was the worst feeling of all, recognizing the ugly in yourself and knowing you are the sole reason it is there.

"I'm not okay," Judith said. "I need your help."

She watched as Cassandra looked at Marla. The long of confusion clouding both of their faces, clear even in the dark.

"Okay," Cassandra said. "Can I call you in the morning. We've had a long drive, and Marla needs to sleep. Perhaps this would be better after everyone has had a good night's rest?"

"Please. I can't wait any longer. You have to help me. You have to help him. Please."

"Who?" Cassandra said, stepping forward. "What's happened?"

"Gabe," Judith sobbed on the name. "You have to help Gabe."

"I'm confused." Cassandra grabbed Judith's shoulders. She steadied her racking frame. "You're freezing. How long have you been out here?"

"It doesn't matter. Say you'll help him. I'll do anything. Just help him. You have to help

him. I know I don't deserve it, but he does. He was just a boy."

"What are you asking?"

"I need you to bring Gabe back."

Kassandra

“It can’t be done,” Kassandra said for the third time to the silhouette of Judith. She couldn’t look at her. She couldn’t take on her hurt. It was too heavy. Judith was a shell. That was the word that popped into Kassandra’s mind when she looked at the woman hunched in on herself as she sat on Kassandra’s couch. She’d lost weight, Kassandra could tell. The hollowed in lines of her cheeks that used to be plump. Her teeth, yellowed. Her eyes appeared bruised from the darkening circles beneath her eyes. When Kassandra saw her eyes, those lightless eyes, she had to look away. That was what grief and death did. Once you were touched you, it would always be a part of you. Marla must have felt it too. The girl backed away from Judith, moving into the kitchen. She kept both hands on her belly moving in soothing circles. For her or for the baby, Kassandra didn’t know.

“You haven’t even tried,” Judith cried. “Surely there is something you can do. I’ve heard the stories about you. The things that you can do. Please. You have to try.”

“You don’t understand. That is not how life works. It’s not how this,” Kassandra waved her arms at herself, “works. I have never once tried something like this. My abilities are not of that nature.”

“But you’ve heard of someone doing it, right? Your cult or thing, surely someone knows what to do. Tell them I’ll pay them what they want.”

“I haven’t heard of any such thing. My family has never attempted to bring a person back from the dead. My lineage is of ground and soil. We use the earth to help those in need. Our abilities thrive with the fruits of life. We do not and cannot mess with the orders of nature.” Kassandra rubbed her temple.

“But other families? Are they capable?” Judith threw the question at her like a dart.

Kassandra felt a sharp stab with each one flung her way. The woman was desperate for something to stick.

Marla appeared in from the kitchen with three cups of steaming liquid on a tray. Kassandra could smell the lavender and chamomile. She held back a smile. She had known what was needed.

“Please ask them, maybe they’ve done something that you don’t know about.” Judith turned to Marla. “You have to convince her. That baby needs its father. You know that.”

“Juju,” Marla said. “Gabe and I, we meant to tell you bu—,”

“I’ll make the call,” Kassandra cut in.

Kassandra wordless told Marla to keep quiet. If Kassandra learned anything during the death of her husband, it was that truth was never helpful at a time such as this.

“Thank you,” Judith sobbed into her hands.

Grabbing one of the mugs from Marla, Kassandra walked over to Judith.

“I can’t promise anything,” she said as she placed the warm mug into Judith’s hands.

“Of course. I know. You just have to try. Whatever you learn. You have to try it.” Judith stared straight on at Kassandra. Kassandra couldn’t help but remember all the times Judith Pleasant stared her down. She knew, years from now, this was the one that she would remember most.

“I will. You have my word. Now drink.”

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Not even ten minutes later, Kassandra pulled two pillows and a throw blanket off her bed and placed them on the couch for her neighbor. Judith laid down with no resistance and pulled the blanket up to her chin before falling asleep. Marla, on the other hand, had a little more fight

to her.

“We need to tell her about the baby,” Marla whisper shouted in the kitchen as they rinsed out the now empty mugs. “She thinks that I’m having her son’s baby.”

“Not now.”

“I have to tell her. I can hardly look at her. She looks at me like,” Marla paused, letting the warm water run over her hands. “She looks at me like I have hope that I can give her when I have absolutely none.”

“I know,” Cassandra whispered. “But telling her now, when she hasn’t even come to the terms that Gabe is gone, is not the best time.”

Kassandra noticed that Marla’s hands still hadn’t moved.

Kassandra kept her eyes on the soapy water.

“Ask what you want to ask,” Cassandra said.

“Can you do it? Is there a way to do what she is asking?” Marla whispered.

“No, not that I am aware of.”

Kassandra waited until Marla pulled one of the cups out from beneath the water and pulled it under the flow of the faucet. Cassandra did the same. There was nothing more to say or do than to clean the mugs.

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Kassandra called her aunt, Tallulah, who hung up the phone as soon as Cassandra said hello. She was more offended that she picked up the phone to hang it up rather than let it ring. Tallulah always knew who was calling and why they were calling. She tried her other “aunts,” the women of her old coven with similar results. Three never answered, on two of the answering machines they specifically asked shunned coven members to not leave a message after the beep

because it would result in nothing but wasted air. Two asked her politely to forget their numbers. One pretended to not know who she was, though Cassandra had a feeling it was not a complete act. Bernie Bennet had always been forgetful, and she was well on her way to almost ninety years of age. Kasandra considered calling her mother. A conversation that would no doubt be spent with Cora reminding Cassandra that she had a life in the afterlife, so it was rude of Cassandra to assume that she would be at her beck and call.

The question that kept invading Cassandra's mind was why. Why was she going out of her way for a woman that caused her nothing but trouble? A woman who literally vandalized her for the exact thing that she was doing now. Why did she not just tell the woman to go to hell? She pictured Georgie Andrews standing at her front door in the middle of the night, asking Cassandra for her help. In the world of today, Cassandra didn't have the heart or the stomach to turn a woman in need away. Where would Cassandra be if it hadn't been for these people's kindest during her darkest days? Where would she be if all this hadn't happened? In this house. Alone. That's where.

Calling her mother was simple. She pulled a picture of Cora out of her bedside table. She clutched it in her hand, before sitting in the center of her bed, as she said her name over and over and over again in her head. She closed her eyes.

Kassandra heard a humming like the static of a phone receiver in her ear. The humming paused only to be replaced with shouting. Not shouting, laughing. It was as if Cassandra had placed her ear against the beginning of a party or concert. A mixture of voices all trying to be louder than the one before with the loud vibrations of bass speakers and something else. Was that sirens Cassandra was hearing?

A rule of Cassandra's coven, or her ex-coven, was that they didn't talk about death. More

importantly, they didn't talk about what came after death. Cora was the main enforcer of this rule, yet all the members of the coven accepted this decree with no argument. They all agreed. The afterlife was the afterlife and wondering about the after took away from living. Cassandra knew other members of other covens who spent their entire lives researching and studying the possibilities of what came next. They would call those who had past and ask a million questions. But no matter how many dead were called and answered, the result was the same. Everyone's afterlife was different, and no one knew while that was. The dead. The alive. Nobody had yet been able to connect the dots of why Dottie Waters, kindhearted Dottie who donated her gifts to children's hospitals and animal shelters to cure the ill, answered a call in a place that radiated heat. A place that sounded as if nothing but pain was pulsing through the connection. Dottie sounded hot but fine. Or why when Stella Jacobson, the real reason why the Salem trials even started, was called all the caller could hear in the background was ocean waves. No one talked about Marie Laveau, about the ringing and ringing and ringing that sounded when she was called. The ringing that made many listeners stand and do unthinkable things like walking in the middle of the street right as a car came down the road.

It didn't make sense. But did anything unknown ever make sense.

"Mother?" Cassandra said aloud. "Can you hear me?"

"What? Who is this?" More shouting ensued. A giant *HEY!* resounded in Cassandra's ear as if someone important just walked into a surprise birthday party.

"It's your daughter. Can you hear me?"

"This better be good. You won't believe who just showed up. Actually, no, I can't tell you. His body hasn't been found yet, so no one knows he's dead."

"Mother, I need to talk to you."

“Whatever for? I’m busy. I have a life, you know.”

“Yes, I know. This won’t take long.”

“No, I still don’t know who your father is,” Cora shouted. Away from the receiver, she shouted, “No, I’m not lying. Those were busy times the sixties.”

“That’s not what I am calling about.”

“What darling?”

“That’s not what I am calling about.”

“Well, there’s no reason to yell. Get on with it. Limbo starts in twenty.”

“What do you know about raising the dead?”

“Well, I don’t recommend removing them from their sleeping place. They wouldn’t like that one bit. But if you must, you have to be sure and use the same dirt from the original burial place. Otherwise, they are likely to haunt you.”

“No. Like, bring them back to life.”

“Now I’m not coming back there if that is what you’re thinking. I haven’t had this much fun since ACDC live in Nuremberg.”

“So, you can bring people back. And it isn’t you. It’s a child.” A chill danced across Cassandra’s skin. She straightened her spine.

“How dreadful. Virginia, I’ll be right there. Well yes, spiritually speaking. Once a body is detached from the soul, the body is no longer usable. It’s like a house fire. The spirit still exists, smoke in the air moving around for all of time, but the house where the spirit once lived is gone. You can’t relight a burned down house.”

“But you can bring back the spirit?”

“Yes.”

“How would I do that? Has it been done before?”

“All the time. How do you think we get those so-called ghosts or guardian angels as some like to call ‘em?”

“Coven members bring them back?”

“Anyone can bring them back. It’s tragic, really.” Cora said.

“What do you mean?”

“Hold my spot in line, Virginia. Worry about *Wheel of Fortune* later,” Cora shouted.

“Sorry, that old bat is serious about Pat. Spirits come back when they are never let go. When people who they were once attached to on the common world refuse to let go. The spirit gets pulled back and gets stuck. And once they’re stuck, they’re stuck for good. Cursed to live all of time there. Never finding peace even when the loved one moves on, passes on. It is the worst thing you can do to a person.”

“Is there a way I could send it back after I bring his spirit back to help her grieve? Could I send the spirit back?”

“No. Stuck is stuck is stuck. Hold my spot, Virgie! The best thing you can do is help her, whoever she is, help her let go. Her child will never be able to rest if she doesn’t. Dear, I have to go. Jenny and I are up next.”

“Thank you, mother.”

“Maybe next time just send a card or leave a message. I really am busy.”

The siren got louder in Cassandra’s ear before it faded away. A throbbing behind her temple began.

She released the photo of her mother from her hand.

How was she ever going to convince Judith to let go of her son? There wasn’t enough

magic in the world.

“Can you talk to Gabe?” Marla asked, causing Cassandra to jump.

The girl stood in her door, wearing one of Cassandra’s old nightgowns.

“Can you bring him back?”

Marla

Beneath the light covers of her bed, the fabric against her frame felt unbearably heavy. Marla had become a fraud. Certainly, there was going to be a reserved seat for her in hell. Here she was letting Juju care for her dead son's baby. No one who lied about carrying a dead boy's baby was on the escalator up. How would she tell her? How could she take this joy? This hope from that woman? She didn't deserve sleep. Moments away from this damned realty. She tossed from side to side, her body never fully settled when she heard Mrs. Henry's voice from down the hall.

"That's not what I'm calling about," Mrs. Henry's voice echoed into the room.

Marla raised up in bed. She waited to hear more, but when nothing came, she shoved her legs off the bed and made her way down the hall. Peeking through Mrs. Henry's bedroom door, Marla saw the older woman cross-legged in the center of the bed with her eyes closed. Her chin was tilted up as if who she was talking to was floating about her. She clutched a glossy photo in her hand.

"Can I send it back, after I bring his spirit here to help her grieve?" Mrs. Henry spoke to an empty room. She tilted her head to the right like she was catching a response that Marla couldn't hear.

Marla held her breath and watched the steady breathing of Mrs. Henry. She didn't dare alert her that she was there. This was more extraordinary than watching Mrs. Henry make tea. When she'd watched her before, Marla felt the herbs respond to Mrs. Henry as she blended them together into concoctions. She sensed the shift in the air when Mrs. Henry created a tea for a customer that fit their needs perfectly. But this? Mrs. Henry was taking part in something so strange, so unbelievable, so unlike anything that Marla had ever seen before.

“Thank you, mother.” Mrs. Henry said before she lowered her head.

She hadn't even known that the woman had a mother. Well, she knew that she had *a mother*; everyone had a mother. Mrs. Henry reminded Marla of the myth of Athena the more she got to know her. Mrs. Henry, to Marla, was this all-knowing warrior of Dolorosa that was so otherworldly that she could only be a manifestation from the brain. Plus, she had never met a woman so partial to olive oil in all her life.

Mrs. Henry dropped the photo from her hand and tilted her head up. When she saw Mrs. Henry open her eyes.

“Can you talk to Gabe?” Marla asked. “Can you bring him back?”

“Marla?” Cassandra said. She looked around the room as if forgetting where she was.

“How much did you hear?”

“I don't know what I heard but I heard you talking to someone who's dead. I want to talk to Gabe.”

“Sweetie, that's not possible.”

“I heard you. You conducted a whole conversation.”

“I know, but I'm different, and I was talking to my mother.” Cassandra moved off the bed.

“I know I can't do it, but maybe you can talk to him for me? Make sure he's okay?”

Marla wanted to hear his voice, but she could live with a second-hand conversation for the knowledge of Gabe's spirit or ghost or soul or whatever the hell it is, was at peace.

“I can't contact Gabe,” Cassandra said. “I can only call the gifted, hence my wonderful conversation with my mother.”

“Maybe your mom can find him over there, talk to him, then talk to you?” Marla asked.

“There has to be a way.” There had to be a way. She couldn’t let the last thing that she said to him be words of anger. That conversation played over and over in her head. Anytime she closed her eyes, she saw his face, the hurt written across it. She felt the flesh of his lips against her head. She watched him leave and never come home.

Now she was alone.

“It doesn’t work that way. Think of the afterlife like ships in the ocean. They cross paths a time or two, but the passengers of one ship don’t talk to the passengers on another. The gifted are on one ship, and everyone else is on the other.”

“There’s segregation in the afterlife? Aren’t we pass that?”

“Not segregation, the gifted spirits are more aware of their surroundings in the afterlife. They know they can order room service, whereas other spirits aren’t even aware they’re on a ship.”

“Meaning, your mother wouldn’t be able to talk to them because she’s on a different boat?”

“Meaning, if we tried to contact Gabe or if my mother tried to contact Gabe, all we would get is that loud screeching noise when you dial a disconnected number.”

“I just need to know.”

“From what I know of it, I would say that he is happy, where he is. Even if he doesn’t know where he is, I know there is peace when our souls leave our bodies.”

“I just don’t want him to hate me.”

“If I knew anything about Gabe, in the time I knew him, he could never hate you. He wasn’t capable of it.”

“But that was before.”

“What’s changed?”

“I’m going to have to break his mother’s heart.”

Judith

There wasn't much left to bury. At least that was what Peter told her when Judith told him she was ready. She asked to see Gabe even though she knew she waited too long. A whole week too long. She needed to see him one last time, only to find out that she couldn't.

"You don't want to see him like that," Peter said over the phone. It was funny how much she hated talking to her husband on the phone just weeks ago. Now she preferred it. His voice only made sense when it was being altered and pushed out of a receiver. "You don't want to remember him like that. Trust me on this."

She didn't.

It wasn't the fact that her son would be broken, ripped apart before her eyes, that made her so agreeable with Peter. It was the smell. She once had a rotation at a morgue during pharmacy school. She knew the scents that a decomposing body emitted. It was a smell that was unnatural, didn't belong on earth.

Judith couldn't connect that scent to her boy. No, he was sweat, rain scented laundry detergent, Head n' Shoulders three in one, one day too much cologne, the next none at all, mint deodorant, Juicy Fruit chewing gum hardly covering the leftover hints of black coffee in his breath, leather from his backpack straps that always managed to latch on to his clothes, aftershave, buttered and brown sugar-coated toast, sunshine, boy, boy, boy. Gabe. She wanted to remember the scent of Gabe.

When Cassandra told her that she couldn't bring her son back, Judith made fifty-seven pieces of toast. Buttered them. Dusted them with the brown sugar kept in the cabinet directly above the toaster. She placed the bread directly beneath her nose and inhaled until the heat was lost. Cooled in the chill of the kitchen. Judith's nose was pulling all the heat directly inside of

her. Then she'd toss the cold slice into the trash bin next to her. She'd do it all over again. She didn't care that the tips of her fingers were burnt, chapped from holding the hot bread too long. She didn't feel it.

If she condensed every thought she possessed of her son, all that would remain would be butter and brown sugar toast. Salt. Sugar. Warmth.

She wouldn't be able to eat them ever again.

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The funeral was on the first Monday of March. It was the coldest March in Erusa in ten years; this much Judith knew from the murmurs around her as she sat in the front pew of Erusa Baptist Church. Their comments of her hair pulled back from her pale face, on the black dress that Judith didn't remember putting on, rolled off her like loose peddle down a cliff.

Judith didn't hear the Erusa High School Choir singing hymns and an acapella version of Imagine by John Lennon, but she would never be able to listen to the song again without shuddering. She didn't hear or see Marla stand up before her peers and give a speech that consisted of all of Gabe's favorite plays, his favorite lines for a few weeks after the funeral she will spend hours in Gabe's room scouring for the lines that everyone appeared to understand her son's love for but her. Judith didn't hear Peter retell his favorite moments with their son, or Anne Morrow's prayer for the family, nor Kassandra Henry's comment of the character of Gabe Pleasant, but she would, days later, call her husband and ask her to tell that story all over again.

All Judith was capable of doing, at that moment, was staring at the white roses placed atop the chestnut coffin that would be where her son would remain for the rest of time. Gabe would rest exactly four and four-fifths of a mile from her home on Dolorosa, yet that didn't feel close enough. Exactly 25,344 feet from Judith's front door. 25,351 if she considered the seven

feet that Gabe would be lowered in less than half an hour. That was the number that kept bouncing around the walls of her head. She tried to count the petals of the eight-four roses, but 25,351 crept back in.

Yet it stopped, the numbers stopped the moment Georgie Andrews appeared at the chapel door.

Judith watched as Georgie maneuvered around the podium. Her bulging middle never once hindering her gracefulness. Georgie made her way to the front pew and sat beside Judith. Judith grabbed Georgie's hand.

"You're here," Judith said.

"I wouldn't be anywhere else," Georgie replied.

Georgie stayed beside Judith as a few others—a student, a teacher, a friend from acting class—read poems and spoke of their time with Gabe. She stood beside Judith as a handful of deacons, and Peter lifted the casket and carried it out of the church and into the black hearse and slammed the door.

It wasn't until everyone left, minutes after her son was lowered down, down, down that she turned to her friend and asked her the words she wanted to ask for months.

"Where did you go?"

"Away," Georgie replied. "I needed a new start."

Judith glanced at the protruding middle. There was more of her friend than ever before.

"How?"

"Later. I'll tell you all about it later. Right now, we need to get you home."

"I've lost the ability to say that word."

"Well, let's get you to Dolorosa."

“Not yet,” Judith said.

“Tell me when, and we’ll go,” Georgie replied.

Judith felt the warmth of skin against skin as Georgie’s hand wrapped around Judith’s. They stood three feet back from the edge of the machine dug grave bordered with the metal structure that clicked as the coffin was lowered with the simple twist of a handle. She didn’t expect the simplicity of such a task.

“A little longer,” Judith said, squeezing Georgie’s hand.

The grass was dead. The only color for miles was the artificial flowers scattered across the cemetery grounds. The sky was gray. The clouds were fat with precipitation, waiting to purge their contents down to the world below. Judith hoped it would hold off, move farther away. She knew those clouds held buckets upon buckets of infinite drops of rain, only to metamorphize into a million floating flurries. For the first time in quite some time, Judith prayed to God that he would hold back whatever power or ability that would release the gates of the sky. *Not today*, she asked over and over in her head. She couldn’t leave this place knowing that her son, even for just a few hours, minutes even, could be lost beneath the soft blanket of snow. That would have been too much.

Kassandra

Kassandra didn't expect the front door of her shop to resemble that of a blur days after the Pleasant funeral. Yet, more residents of Erusa entered Kassandra's shop and asked for a tea, some even requested a tea, to help the ache that wouldn't go away in their chests. She sent most home a standard herbal tea, strong with notes of peppermint and wintergreen leaves, nothing more than a cup to help them get on their way.

There were a few ones who lingered longer than the others outside DiviniTeas. Kassandra told them to sit in the chair at the front of the store and wait for her. She smelled the grief on them without the help of the enduring winter wind pushing it through the door. Most of them were students, members of the theatre club that Gabe spent most of his time. They all carried the same look. Emptiness. Eyes that left Kassandra feeling as if she peeked her head into the unnatural quiet halls of a mausoleum. Echoes of silence. Death was capable of doing that to the young, taking a piece of their souls, smashing it against a wall of hurt, leaving a crack so fine that nothing, not even air could fill it. For these few, Kassandra pulled a supply she kept tucked in the back of the supply closet. It was similar to what she used not too long ago when Delilah desperately wanted to forget that lover. This wasn't as powerful as that but addicting. Kassandra learned it the hard way weeks after Albie's death. She couldn't get out of bed without it. Hours of bliss where she transported to a place in her mind where grief could not cross the threshold. It was created with *Salvia Divinorum*. Sage of the diviners. She found the recipe in the back of her mother's book with a name written above it, Alice.

She pulled the jar of leaves out from her hiding place, tucked deep in the sink cabinet, to brew a cup for herself. Losing Albie was hard, the hardest moments of her life, but feeling the veil that remained after a soul left before their time was unbearable. A feeling that children, for

they were still children, should have to bear.

By the end of the day, Cassandra's fingers were pruned and darker around the edges of her nail bed. Her bones cracked, and her joints popped as she swept the hard floors. Even Bathsheba, who normally spent the day in her plush bed, was quieter than usual at the end of this day. The heaviness of the day appeared to affect her too.

It was at the twentieth hour of the day that Cassandra decided it was time. It was a thought that when it came, and it came many times in Cassandra's life, it was as light as ocean foam. And much like the tide, it was time for her leave to find another shore. If she were honest with herself, the thought started lingering the moment she stood in her front lawn as Georgie Andrews left Dolorosa for good. Yet, it was the girl, Marla Morrow, that kept her exactly where she was. Marla didn't need her anymore. Cassandra was no longer needed. She wasn't helping anyone here anymore, just putting off the inevitable. It wouldn't take her long. It never did. A week, two at most to pack up her home, those this time she wouldn't have Albie, and perhaps that was why she pushed the thought back into the nooks of her mind. The idea of leaving home, the last home that Albie ever shared with her, was as appealing as being thrown in front of traffic.

There was the sound of the door opening behind Cassandra. The chime, chime that signaled the entering of a friend. There stood Marla, bundled in layers, a cherry red knit cap on her head, at the front of the store.

"You're here late," Marla said.

"It's been a busy day," Cassandra replied, continuing her sweeping. Bathsheba stood up from her bed and slowly made her way to the girl. The dog scratched at Marla's leg.

"I can't bend over any more Battie, I'm sorry."

“Leave the child alone,” Cassandra said, looking over her shoulder. “You need to be at home. You can’t be catching anything in your condition.”

“You don’t normally work this late, I got worried.”

“Does Anne know you’re here?” Cassandra asked. She propped the broom against the wall, turning to face Marla.

“She drove.”

“Good.”

“She wanted to come in to thank you.”

“She shouldn’t do that.”

“Why, not? Marla asked, turning her body to look out the glass storefront. “I think she should.”

“Because an apology doesn’t change the past, doesn’t fix the future either. All apologies are capable of doing is filling a room with hot air. If she wants forgiveness, she needs to act. She knows it. That’s why she’s not in here, but out there.”

Bathsheba curled her body around the side of Marla’s boot, her head resting on the top of the brown, plush fabric covering the girl’s toes. Marla smiled down at the dog, her hands now resting on the swell of her stomach. She wanted to pick up the dog, Cassandra thought, she needed that comfort.

Moving to shorten the distance between them, Cassandra propelled her aching limbs across the room and grabbed Marla’s hands.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said.

“I told her that I still want to live with you,” Marla asked, her voice breaking as the last syllable left her mouth. “She said, I could, if you were okay with it, for now at least.”

“You know you always have a room with me.”

“I live there too,” Bathsheba barked.

“This isn’t about you,” Cassandra replied, looking directly at her.

“It isn’t about you either,” Bathsheba said.

“Of course, I see that you four-legged fuzzball. Today is not the day to push me over the edge.” Cassandra looked up. “What’s wrong?”

Marla went pale. Paler than pale. Cassandra could see the blue veins of her eyelids.

“Marla?”

“I heard her,” Marla said, her voice as thin as chiffon.

“What?” Cassandra asked. “Who?”

“She’s spent too much time with you,” Bathsheba said.

“That.” Marla said, “Battie said I spend too much time with you like I’m talking to you right now.”

“Oh shit,” Bathsheba said.

“Oh shit,” Marla repeated.

“Oh Shit, is right,” Cassandra said.

Epilogue

Dolorosa gave a heavy sigh, a ripple of wind through the grass of every lawn, as Judith Pleasant placed the last cardboard box into the back of the U-Haul. The cherry blossoms were pregnant with rose and lavender-colored blooms on this warm June morning. Peter Pleasant was in the passenger seat of Judith's Subaru, ready to go. Off toward another city, another town. Dolorosa could sense Judith's hesitation, could feel the pull pulsing through the woman telling her not to leave, to stay with her boy. But their boy wasn't here anymore, only bits and pieces of him that one day soon, wouldn't exist either. Dolorosa helped lighten her load, tried to place a little extra strength in each step she made. Judith couldn't feel it. She was too consumed in the grief wrapped around her like a coat.

Kassandra stood barefoot in her front lawn, like many of the residents, not barefoot per se but rather standing in their respective yards, not quite believing the event that was transpiring. Even Bathsheba stood transfixed in her canine form. No one thought the Judith and Peter were capable of leaving. Surely not after all of this. Peter had been home all month. He didn't so much as leave the house for groceries these days. The two of them were a consistent stop for those new Mercedes Amazon vans. Where could they possibly go, everyone murmured. How far away were they willing to go? It was the talk of the town. Not one person remembered the event of last week. Lara Cooper kicked out her husband, shouting profanities out their upstairs window in German. She threw out every article of clothing. Dry-cleaning pressed button-downs covered Dolorosa like the patches of a quilt. Not one person seemed to remember the laugh they shared that afternoon as onlookers watched the Cooper Corgi piss on all of Hank's boxer-briefs scattered on the lawn. No one seemed to remember to find out who Delilah was, the woman's name that Lara Cooper shouted at the top of her lungs when Hank asked why she was doing this.

“Go ask Delilah, maybe she’ll know the answer,” Lara said, though this was what the town assumed was being said as they missed most of the verbs in the layer of her accent.

Dolorosa wasn’t comfortable translating her actual words.

There was Anne Morrow, in her front lawn, already dressed for the day.

She waved at Judith.

Judith waved back.

Marla stood beside Cassandra. She held the swaddled baby against her shoulder. Light pat, pat, pat on the baby’s back. The moment they brought him home and spoke his name, a name that Dolorosa deemed fit, Dolorosa sighed. She fully awakened. She was able to stretch her limbs. The trunk of every tree swayed. She released a hearty laugh, and the winds whirled blooms and leaves off their branches and into a mid-air dance. She opened all her sights, every single eye that she possessed, and could see every street of Erusa. She saw Cassandra’s shop, Judith’s empty pharmacy, Erusa High School, and the cemetery. If she reached her stiff fingers, she could almost touch the base of the rough cement vault surrounding Gabriel Pleasant’s casket.

The baby cried against Marla’s shoulder. A high pitch wail of hunger.

“I need to go feed him,” Marla said. “It’s been a couple of hours.”

“Give him a minute,” Cassandra said, she ran the palm of her hand down the babies back.

“Let her see him before she goes.”

Judith walked to the passenger side of her car. She gave her house one last look before bending her body at the waist and sliding into the car. The U-Haul left first, roaring to life with a vibration powerful enough to pulse against Dolorosa. Peter backed out of the driveway of 2657 Dolorosa Road and followed behind the U-Haul. For a moment, just before Peter pressed the gas and leaving Dolorosa for good, Judith locked eyes with Marla Morrow, the girl she saw so much

more than just her son's best friend. Judith watched her soothe the baby against her shoulder in a way that was all too familiar to her. Dolorosa felt the internal click of Judith letting go, like the last turn of a key before the handle releases and lets the visitor in, Judith was able to move a fraction forward. The robe she was wearing just an ounce lighter, before being pulled away.

"Come on," Cassandra said.

Marla and Cassandra left the front lawn, as did all the other residents.

"You're coming over for lunch?" Anne asked from across the street.

Marla nodded her head.

"And you'll bring the baby?"

Marla looked towards Cassandra, who glanced down at the baby.

"He should be sleeping by then. It'll be okay," Cassandra said.

"Sure," Marla said toward her mother. "I'll bring him."

"Perfect. And Cassandra?" Anne asked. "You're welcome to come as well."

"Maybe next time."

Anne smiled, happy with the response, before walking into her house.

"She's making progress," Cassandra said. "She acknowledged me."

"You don't think it's too soon?" Marla asked. She placed the baby, who started his crying one more into the bassinet kept beside Bathsheba's bed in the living room. Cassandra was already in the kitchen, pulling the formula off the top of the fridge and dumping two scoops into a plastic bottle of warm water. Before she could test the temperature, the bottle flew from her hands and soared to the bassinet.

"At least he waited until I had the lid on this time," Cassandra said.

Dolorosa released a heavy sigh, pulsing beneath the curved legs of the bassinet. Rocking

the feeding baby until his eyelids closed.