SHALLOW BREATHING

by

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Abstract

“Shallow Breathing,” follows the journey of Dora, a young woman who embarks on a life-changing adventure as she marries the love of her life and relocates to a quaint, isolated town nestled in the hills of Tennessee—Morris Chapel. Eager to embrace her new life, Dora stumbles upon a haunting mystery surrounding the family who once inhabited her home. As the secrets of the past slowly unveil themselves, Dora becomes consumed by an insatiable desire to unearth the truth.

Morris Chapel, shrouded in mystery, holds dark secrets that have long been buried. Through Dora’s relentless pursuit of the truth, she discovers the tragic events that transpired in her new home, leading her to question the events that led them to this town in the first place. As the layers of the past unravel, Dora finds herself entangled in a web of deception, love, and loss.

“Shallow Breathing” is a tale of one woman's determination to uncover the hidden history of her surroundings, ultimately realizing that the past is not only a reflection of the town but a mirror reflecting the complexities of her own life. With every revelation, Dora must navigate the delicate balance between love and truth, and in doing so, she discovers the resilience within herself to face her fears.
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Chapter One

“What if, just once, things went my fucking way?” I whispered under my breath as I examined my face in the bathroom mirror, but the sound was hardly discernable over my wheezing—a hushed hissing sound like a snake slithering up my trachea. In private I could finally let out the terrible coughs I’d been suppressing all evening and spit up the evidence in the sink.

My engagement party was being held at this ritzy Asian fusion restaurant that just opened in downtown Nashville and I had locked myself in the bathroom, alone, to try and hide the fact that I was having an asthma attack from my guests, my fiancé, and his very important employer—a man who just so happened to be the mayor of Franklin, the wealthiest and most affluent county in Tennessee.

I didn’t want anyone to worry about me. Besides, this wasn’t a new feeling; the tug in my chest and in my lungs, my aching back from weeks of coughing and straining for a full breath, not to mention the burden of having to lug around the stark truth that one day my asthma would kill me, something that became an unavoidable fact I’d have to confront each time I contracted a virus. The common cold. Something most people could recover from with a little hot tea and honey.

I wished.

I’d struggled with my asthma since I was an infant. I was used to the disease interfering and ruining countless celebrations and events. But I wasn’t going to let it ruin this one. Not my engagement party. Isaac and all of our friends had put too much work into tonight. I couldn’t disappoint them. I wouldn’t.
Sweat was beading around my forehead and collar bone. My larynx pulled in, revealing a concave, shadowed circle in my throat each time I took in a breath. The outline of my lips were white and my eyes bloodshot. I felt like I was dying.

*Looke that way too.*

I dug through my purse and found a Ziplock baggy containing six ten milligram prednisone tablets, levoflaxin—a heavy duty antibiotic my specialist prescribed a few days ago when I told him that my wheezing had yet to improve and if anything had worsened, Sudafed, and a coughing suppressant and I took all of them. I swished it back with a bit of sink water and the bitter, chalky coating of the pills coated my throat. It used to make me gag but now it’s familiar and tolerable. I know it will eventually bring me relief, even if temporary. I followed the pills with three back-to-back puffs of my inhaler. My body buzzed with adrenaline, but my chest and head already felt a little lighter. I’d started to lose track of how true that really was or if that moment of relief was conjured from somewhere deep within me that desperately wanted to make it through the night I’d dreamed of my whole childhood.

My hair, pulled back in an intricate up-do that I was only able to achieve after painstakingly following a thirty minute long YouTube tutorial, was already frizzing, and coming undone from all the sweating. I shook out the pins and ripped the elastics out of my hair, along with a few strands of hair, and then I ran my hands under the cold water and tried to slick it back.

“Fuck,” I gritted through my teeth.

*Now I look like a wet dog.*
I pushed my hair behind my ears and tried to clip back the rest of my hair into a low hanging, loose bun. It would have to do.

A knock came at the door. It was Nia. I knew from the sound of her impatiently banging on the door. You learn those things when you live with someone long enough.

“Dora! Are you hiding in there? Isaac’s been looking for you. I think his boss and his wife just got here. Come on, let me in!” She wrapped on the door again and shook the handle.

“Yes, just a second! I’ll be right out,” I said. I took a deep breath and really looked at myself in the mirror. My chin quivered from all the medications pulsing through me and when I looked into my eyes, I struggled to fight against the urge to burst into sobs.

Why did everything always have to be so hard?

I unlocked the door and Nia stepped inside.

“Oh, shit. Girl are you okay?” she closed the door behind her. “I knew you weren’t feeling good when I saw you. Why didn’t you say something?”

“No, sorry. Everything’s fine. Just haven’t quite gotten over this cough. I’m okay though, really,” I said. Nia raised her eyebrows.

“No, sorry. Everything’s fine. Just haven’t quite gotten over this cough. I’m okay though, really,” I said. Nia raised her eyebrows.

“Do you have your inhaler? I could go get it for you if you left it.”

I knew she was recalling all of the times in our childhood I’d left my inhaler at home and had to wait around for someone to deliver it to me.

“You’d make the forty-five minute drive all the way to Murfreesboro and back for me?” I asked though I undoubtedly knew she would.

“You know it,” she said and smiled.
“Thank you, but I’ve got it. I just took it, actually. Just gonna take a few minutes to settle down.”

“Do you want me to go get Isaac?” she asked. “Maybe you guys should dip out a little early.”

“No, really it’s fine. I promise,” I said, smiling through the crackle in my chest. I tried to swallow the cough that tickled the back of my throat but was unsuccessful. I coughed into my elbow. “I told you I still have the cough. That’s it.”

“Okay. Just give me a sign if you want me to scoop you up and take you home. I don’t give a fuck.”

“I know,” I laughed. “And I appreciate you.”

“Let’s go.”

I followed her out the door and stepped back into the blue violet lit room. The staff had arranged the circular tables in the center of the space—each table appeared to be of equal distance apart and perfectly symmetrical. The crisp white table cloths turned a periwinkle shade against the lighting and the center pieces, crystal vases containing lilies and some kind of decorative green foliage sparkled as if they were underwater.

The room was filled with people I didn’t know. Most of them were within Isaac’s work circle, people that I had rarely, if at all, interacted with. They were wealthy donors, politicians, and business owners. People Isaac had met through incumbent Mayor Lane Adams. His position as Lane’s personal CPA landed him lots of well-paid opportunities with clients all across the middle Tennessee area over the last couple of years, which is how, I’m assuming, Isaac was able to afford to rent out The Sichuan Basin to celebrate our engagement.
He had to have planned this months ago or if not that than with Lane’s help. This was a busy area, a popular area, and we had the whole place to ourselves for the evening. That couldn’t have been cheap.

It was an entirely absurd and extravagant event. I was ashamed to admit that a great part of me found the whole thing incredibly exciting, but the side of me that grew up on McDonalds and La Ha Cienda on five dollar Friday’s shirked at the whole thing, as would my mom and sister if they’d actually come, I was certain.

We never would’ve gone to a restaurant like this growing up and now that my mom was doing a little better financially I still didn’t think she would. Though both Mom and Ida said they didn’t feel it was right for them to come and feign support over my decision to marry Isaac when I sent them an impromptu invitation after the proposal last night, I thought they would anyway. I never imagined doing this without my mom or my sister, but I supposed that was something I was going to have to start getting used to.

Our actual engagement happened in the privacy of Isaac’s apartment. He surprised me with a romantic picnic in his living room with wine and some spaghetti he’d made himself and against the glow of the candles he’d lit and placed all around the room and the television screen that had just finished playing Sweet Home Alabama, my favorite rom com, he asked me if I would spend the rest of my life with him as his wife. An incredible emerald cut, twenty-four karat diamond positioned in a black velvet box laid in his palm, and then after my shaky, exasperated yes, he glided the white gold band onto my ring finger.

It was magical. Exactly what I would have wanted though I’d never explicitly told him.
He was so good at that. I wasn’t sure if it was our age difference, just five years apart though twenty-seven seemed a million years away to me at times, or if it was my lack of experience in relationships that made me so poor in comparison. Isaac was always so patient with me. He never pushed me to unravel the parts of myself I was still trying to reckon with, he let me come to him on my own terms and when I was ready. He understood that my family was dysfunctional, his own background as an adopted child wasn’t what you’d call “functional” either, and so we supported one another and understood that we didn’t have great foundations for what romantic love was supposed to look like. We were both learning how to be good partners.

I followed Nia through the crowd and tried to shove down the part of me that found the whole evening gaudy and well, ritzy. It was a beautiful place, but I did feel like I stuck out like a sore thumb. There was a lot of pressure to look a certain way and behave a certain way—particularly in this crowd. I really had no idea what I was doing in this environment, though I had always dreamed of being able to live out a fantasy like this. Like the ones I grew up watching in the movies.

“Where is he?” I asked Nia. I squinted through the crowd, but the dark ambiance made it difficult to differentiate all the men wearing suits and ties.

She grabbed my hand and navigated me through the crowd to a table on the other side of the room up against the back corner.

Isaac spotted me and stood, gesturing dramatically for me to take my seat at the table with them. I smiled and reached for Nia’s hand. Whether she had been planning on hanging around my fiancé and the mayor’s table before she was now. I needed her.
Isaac’s dark hair was slicked back, glossy, and stiff. I was going to have to get used to this new look. He’d gone in to the barbershop just this morning and had the once loose waves that had previously hung over his face chopped.

I recognized Lane from the pictures and interviews I’d seen of him online. He was smaller than I’d pictured, almost petite next to Isaac. On his left, a woman, who I took to be his wife Penny, was latched around his arm. They all looked like they’d been plucked from the cover of Vogue or Vanity Fair.

I cleared my throat before speaking, the medicine had started to kick in and I felt my chest and airways loosen up a bit. “Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Adams. It’s so nice to finally meet you. We’re both so grateful for all of your support.”

“Oh, yes, of course! Please, please sit!” Lane said gesturing to the seat on Isaac’s left. There wasn’t a fifth chair placed around the table so I looked around to find one for Nia, but Lane interjected, “Dear, would you mind if I stole the bride-to-be for a quick private conversation?”

“Oh,” Nia said, looking back and forth between me and Lane. I nodded, even though I desperately wanted her to stay. “Okay. I’ll see you in a bit, okay?”

“See you,” I said, and then took my seat next to Isaac.

“Well, I think a few congratulations are in order,” Lane said, clasping his hands together on the table and leaning forward slightly. “On your engagement, of course, but I also heard you graduated recently.”

“Yes. Thank you,” I said.

“What is your degree in?” Penny turned to me and asked.

“Art history,” Isaac answered.
I nodded.

“Really? So interesting. What are you planning on doing with that?” Penny asked, leaning forward with one hand cupping her chin.

I sucked in a breath and had to clear my throat to try and cover my urge to cough vehemently. “I’m not sure, exactly. I was thinking of looking into some museums or galleries. They can be a bit competitive, though, so, we’ll see.”

“I’m sure something will come along,” Lane said. “Speaking of jobs and careers and whatnot, I hope you know how impressed I am with Isaac’s work and how much help he’s been over these last few years. He worked so much I was worried the man would never settle down. He’s really lucky to have found you.”

“Well, thank you. I feel very lucky and fortunate too.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Before you joined us, I had just finished telling Isaac about what I hope will be a prosperous next step in his career.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“I’m a stakeholder in this new bank that’s opened up in East Tennessee called South View Financial Holdings. It’s in a small town called Morris Chapel—you’ve probably never heard of it. It’s a beautiful little town with fascinating people. It’s really a unique place. There I go again, what I’m trying to say is I’ve been able to secure Isaac a job as an Executive Financial Analyst at South View.”

“Oh.”

“So, you see? I’d like for him to move there. He would still work for me as well, of course, but if he does well in this position it could open up a lot of opportunities for his career.”
“That does sound like an incredible opportunity. So, you’re moving?” I asked Isaac.

“Yes, dear. We’re moving,” Isaac said and reached for my hand across the table.

“Yes, sorry, that’s what I meant,” I said realizing I had slipped up majorly. Of course, I would have to move with him. I was his fiancé now, after all.

“How far is—what did you say the town was called?”

“Morris Chapel,” Isaac and Lane responded at the same time.

“Right, how far is it?” I asked.

“Tell her what you told me,” Isaac said, elbowing Lane.

Lane leaned back in his seat. “Yes, there’s a historical society there run by a small select group of academics. Well, I talked to the president of the committee, and they would be more than happy to have you come on board a few days a week to help manage their records.”

“Oh, wow!” I was in shock and stared at him a little too long with my mouth hanging open, unsure of what to say next. “That’s incredible, thank you so much. You’re like a job genie.”

“Please, it’s the least I could do. I take care of the people who work for me. Loyalty means everything and I believe those who share my values should be rewarded.”

“When do we need to leave?” I asked, turning to Isaac.

“He starts next month,” Lane answered.

This whole conversation had moved so quickly, I couldn’t even think of what questions to ask. All I could think about was my mom and Ida, everything else was static.
I supposed this happened, people grew up and moved away from their hometown all the time. Why did I feel so sad then? Like I was going to have to say goodbye forever.

“We found you guys a wonderful place. It’s in a beautiful little cul-de-sac with breathtaking views,” Penny said, sliding a folder of printed out photos of a listing for a house in Ruby Court. “It was built in 1855, see that turret, there’s an incredible little reading nook there. Its Victorian style, I thought it seemed like something you would like from what Isaac has told us about you.”

“Wow, yes, it’s beautiful. Is it available for rent?”

“Oh, sweetie. It’s yours,” she said.

I turned to Isaac quickly and searched his face to tell me that this was some kind of practical joke. “It’s ours?”

“Surprise,” Isaac said, and he interlaced our fingers on the table.

“I—I don’t know what to say,” I said, feeling the burn of three sets of eyes on my face. “Thank you, Isaac. I can’t believe you got us a house.”

Lane and Penny stood, and Isaac mirrored them, letting go of my hand gently. I followed them because it seemed like the right thing to do. Lane shook Isaac’s hand, solidifying the deal to our new lives.

Did all of that just happen in a matter of minutes? How long had it been since Nia dropped me off? Oh, god. What would Nia say? I dreaded the conversation, but even more so with my mom and Ida. They were certainly going to lose it.

Lane and Isaac headed off into the crowd of people, but Penny stayed back with me. I tried to think of what to say, but I was lost on how to relate to this woman who was dressed in a silk form fitting gown with pearls hanging from her slender neck.
“Should we join them?” I settled on.

“One moment. I wanted to talk to you away from the boys,” she said, rolling her eyes playfully at them. “It’s important for us to stick together and look out for each other. It’s not easy being married to men as ambitious as those like Lane and Isaac. They need people in their corner who can bring them down when their dreams become a little too fantastical. I want to stress how important it is that this partnership work out and that Isaac stays on track. As you know, we’re already prepping for Lane’s campaign in 2016, we can’t afford for anyone in his circle to step out of line. Do you see what I’m saying?”

I wasn’t sure I did, but I said, “Yes, yes, I think so.”

“I know you’ve probably always dreamed of a big wedding, but it’s important we go ahead and get your and Isaac’s marriage finalized as soon as possible. We have a certain image we have to protect and maintain for our constituents and clients. I can arrange for a beautiful small ceremony in just a few days, that way you can invite any friends and family you’d like before you two make the move to Morris Chapel.”

“A few days? But we were just engaged yesterday. I just didn’t think—”

“I know, I know, dear. We have to make sacrifices for the ones we love. Isaac needs you more than he may be willing to admit but Lane and I, we understand how important you are. If you play your cards right, you can have everything you’ve ever dreamed of. Lane can make things happen for people and he sees a lot of potential in Isaac and in you.”

“Does Isaac know that we will need to move up the marriage?”
“He does. He is going to ask you tonight, but I wanted to have a one-on-one girl talk beforehand just so you’d have another perspective to consider before making your decision.”

“I see. I will certainly consider it,” I said, knowing that that wasn’t exactly what she wanted me to say but I wasn’t going to agree to something so severe. I had no idea who this woman was. Not really.

Her lips stretched into a thin line, and she patted me on the shoulder before drifting off in the crowd.

Though it may come as a surprise to the Adam’s, if Isaac and I lived in his city, we’d never vote for him. We didn’t agree with Lane’s politics or policies. He ran on conservative values and both Isaac and I grew up with parents who held more progressive ideas about the world, but I knew better than to argue with someone who held the love of my life’s career in their hands.

There was a reason they were asking us to get married so quickly, I assumed. Maybe they were looking to smooth out any potential bad press and it would look better if the people closest to Lane at least mirrored his values for the public’s sake. This was business. Our feelings toward Lane weren’t important, but his toward us, that mattered.

“Dora!” a few people shouted as I forced myself across the floor. Most of the guests had abandoned the tables at this point and were standing around, swaying to the light jazz music playing in the background as people sipped on their fourth or fifth glasses of champagne. I wasn’t even sure where I was going or who I was looking for, but I made sure to give every unfamiliar face a polite smile, nod, and wave. I just needed to move. I needed to do something.
The air in the room was hot and in the center of the floor everyone’s various scents blended together and seemed to create a fog that I could smell even while holding my breath to try and keep from gagging on it. A few hands patted my arms and back as I made my way through. I reached the far end of the room and came out at the front of the restaurant.

Nia, with her boyfriend Miguel trailing not that far behind caught me at the door. “Dora, are you okay? Do you need to leave?”

“No, no. I’m fine. I just need some air. Go back to the party.”

“Dora—”

“Please, Nia.” I snapped. “I just need a minute, okay?”

“Yeah. Sure. Sorry.”

Miguel pulled her back and they walked hand-in-hand through the crowd and toward the back of the restaurant.

I stepped outside. There were a few people gathered in the parking lot, a mix of guests and staff, distinguishable by the amount of sparkles they were or weren’t wearing. I planted myself on a metal bench out front and took two slow deep breaths. My heart, racing from the albuterol and prednisone settled.

I wanted to go to sleep. I wanted to take my makeup off and the dress. None of this felt like how I imagined it would. There was no stopping my crying, I’d tried to bury the urge all evening and I felt I might explode if I held it in any longer. I let the tears run down my cheeks freely. No one would be able to see in the dark lighting of the restaurant if my makeup was a little smudged. No one was really paying that much attention
anyway. Only a few of them had seemingly put it together that I was the one who was marrying Isaac or that this was an engagement party at all.

I wished my mom were here to rub my back and make jokes about how I’d walked around at three years old—with the veil she wore when she married my father—covering my face, practicing for the day I got married. She’d given me some wild flowers that she gathered from outside and had me pose for photos. They were still framed and sitting on the buffet in the dining room the last time I was there. It’d been awhile since she’d invited me over. I hoped they were still there.

“Dora,” Isaac said.

“Oh, hey, sorry,” I said, wiping my face and trying to regain my composure.

He sat down beside me, leaned back, and crossed one leg over the other. “This kind of sucks, doesn’t it?”

“What?”

“This party. It was Lane’s idea, really to do it here. You were right. We should’ve just had a small thing with our friends at the Old Chicago.”

“Just ten minutes from your apartment.”

“Yeah. That’s a good point,” he said, laughing. After a pause he started again, “I was worried about you.”

“I’m sorry. Really I’m okay. I’m just emotional is all. I really thought my mom and sister would come.”

“I know. I hoped. But that’s not what I was talking about exactly, though, that is part of the reason this night sucks. I actually talked to Nia.”

“I swear I told her—”
“Don’t be mad at her. Really, I pulled it out of her. I told her you’d been telling me all day that you were fine—”

“Because I’m fine.”

“But you’re a terrible liar, Dora. It’s all over your face. You’ve got to tell me when you don’t feel good. I can’t help you or protect you if you’re pretending to not be bothered by something out of your control. You don’t need to be ashamed of it. Lots of people have asthma.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t look him in the eyes. “It’s embarrassing and hard to explain. Sometimes I just desperately want to experience things the way normal, healthy people do. I’ve gotten pretty good at fooling myself, maybe not you, but sometimes it’s hard for me to really gauge how serious things are. I don’t really trust myself, I guess.”

“Well, I trust you. With every fiber of my being, I trust you. I wish you’d give yourself some more credit.”

“I love you.”

He reached for my hand and kissed the inside of my palm, and then placed it up against his cheek. “Let’s go home.”

“Really? Are you sure? All of your guests and Nia and Miguel, shouldn’t we say goodbye?”

“Who’s idea do you think us leaving was? Of course, Nia wants you to get home and get some rest. Everyone else will be fine. They probably won’t even realize we’re gone. Besides Lane and Penny already left. We have no one else we have to impress.”

“I love you,” I said again.

If he drove me to a chapel, I think I’d marry that boy right now.
Chapter Two

The first time I saw No. 1 Ruby Court I thought it looked nothing like the photos my newly wedded husband had shown me. It was the same building, sure, but the lighting was all wrong. In the photos I’d spent weeks studying online, yellow light cascaded down the burnt orange brick, and there were rolling hills in the background. And there’d been a cherry blossom tree, pinky and puffy, in the front yard. But after a long drive up an impossibly windy road through Morris Chapel, Isaac finally pulled into Ruby Court, and to my surprise, I saw none of those things. Pine trees stretched up to the sky behind the house, I could see nothing past them—there were no rolling hills. The sun struggled to pierce through the thicket, and there was nothing left of the cherry blossom tree but the stump.

“What is it, Dora?” Isaac said, gently pulling me to him and kissing the top of my head. “You don’t look very happy. I thought you said this was your dream house?”

I stared into his bright hazel eyes. A little black freckle marked the iris of his right eye which seemed more green than brown at the moment. It was one of those small things about him that I’d fallen in love with simply because it was uniquely him like the scar—still shiny and pink—across the top of his hand. A cooking accident from years ago, he’d once told me. A knife had slipped from his mom’s hand and landed in his, sticking straight up. It was nothing serious. Superficial, he’d said. I’d memorized every divot of that scar.

“I do like it. It’s just a little different,” I said.

“Really? A little small for your taste?” He arched his eyebrow.
I rolled my eyes and bumped him lightly with my hip. He stumbled back and laughed, “Hey, come here. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Tell me. Please, what don’t you like? I want to know.”

I accepted his apology and placed his arm back around my shoulders. “I know you told me we weren’t moving into a normal neighborhood, that it was more private, I-, I wanted that too but…”

“But?” he pushed impatiently.

“You didn’t mention just how far away we are from town,” I said.

Our house, Victorian and dark, sat at the head of the cul-de-sac and our two neighbors’ homes, modern split levels with white siding wrapped all the way around, were the only other residencies I’d seen during the fifteen-minute trek up the hill known as Coffee Landing, as Isaac informed me after my second “are we there yet?”

The house I was now to call home seemed to be from another time. The old brick had chipped away in many places, particularly around the four points of the house. It had a stone staircase that led to the front door and was two stories tall with ivy wrapped around the navy window shutters that traveled up and disappeared in the gutters.

“It’s okay, it’s perfectly understandable that you would be nervous. This is our first home together,” Isaac said, rubbing my shoulder with the edge of his thumb. “This is where our lives can finally begin.”

He tilted my chin back and brushed his fingertips down the side of my neck and my heart rate calmed instantly. I took a deep breath and when I looked into his eyes I smiled and believed what he said. This was our beginning.
“No, you’re right. It’s nerves. I just can’t believe we really did all of this. Marriage and now homeowners. It all happened so fast.” I leaned my head against his chest and looked back at our new home. “Thank you for doing this for us. The house is beautiful. Really. Perfect.”

It’s true, what on earth could I possibly have to complain about? I had no right to question him and regretted how my initial reaction must have come across. It’s not as if he’d had anything to do with what I now realized were clearly photoshopped images online of the Ruby Court home. I suspected Penny was behind the facade. He probably hadn’t even noticed all the differences I’d already clocked.

The house was, in part, meant to be a surprise after all. And I’d agreed with him, after everything we’d been through, moving to a more remote location seemed like the best move. *Something private would be nice,* I recalled myself saying when we discussed the move last week. I’d wanted to start over, somewhere where the ghosts of our pasts couldn’t follow us to the grocery store. We both rationalized that it’d be nice to disappear. At least, for a little while.

“Wait here,” he said and rushed up the stone stairs and disappeared behind the front door but not before winking and flashing me one sultry smile.

*I should take some pictures,* I thought and turned, ambling back to the car to retrieve my phone. I reached for my purse on the passenger side floor, placed it on the car seat, and dug for the device. “Ah-ha!” I said when my fingers finally brushed the front of the silky screen. “Gotcha.”
When I unlocked my phone, I did my best to ignore the taunting red bubble over the text app that reminded me of the sixteen unread messages I had from my sister, Ida. I couldn’t bring myself to open the app to even clear out the notifications.

I knew my sister wanted to apologize for missing my wedding and for what she’d said the last time we’d seen one another but I wasn’t ready to forgive her. Her words had cut too deep and besides, my family had told me the rules. That much was clear. They didn’t want anything to do with me as long as Isaac was in the picture.

I had never imagined my family would give me such an ultimatum and most certainly never imagined I’d have to cut them off completely one day. But Isaac was right, I was happier now that I didn’t have to defend my actions to everyone around me. I was happier now that I was tied to the one person I knew loved me as much as I loved him.

My index finger briefly hovered over that red sixteen. Another time, I thought and moved on. Today was mine and Isaac’s.

I tapped on the camera app and walked back to the front of our house.

I snapped a handful of pictures, then turned around for a couple of shots of our neighbor’s homes, and lastly, one shot of the entrance into Ruby Court with the street sign in view. Coffee Landing and Ruby Court.

I heard some shuffling inside, and then a thud like something heavy was being dragged across the floor.

“Isaac?” I called out, tucking my phone into my back pocket.

“Hold on, hold on. Almost ready!” he shouted back.
Moments later, Isaac came down the steps carrying a rolled-up, pink satin handkerchief. “May I?” he asked.

*Another surprise?* This was a side of him I was still getting used to, a side that I hadn’t seen until the chaos with Lizzie began eleven months ago.

Lizzie was a childhood acquaintance of Isaac’s who’d developed, what he’d referred to as, an unhealthy attachment to him as he’d gotten older. It wasn’t until Isaac posted a picture of us on his Facebook page—about a month into our relationship—that I started to receive hundreds of messages from a multitude of fake accounts on both Facebook and Instagram.

At first, the account handles contained some version of Lizzie’s name but after Isaac and I filed the first police report, I only received messages from accounts that contained a series of nonsensical letters like *bhdrkdso* or *fwkdfnas321* from there on out.

These accounts were essentially untraceable. A detective looked into it once after I reported repeated incidents of harassment directed at both me and Isaac. We had to wait two months for the subpoenas to go through only for the detective to uncover that the accounts were created on public Wi-Fi networks. There was no way of proving who was sending out the messages without a name, I’d been told. There was nothing that could be done.

The first message I ever received was a vague sort of warning. “You shouldn’t trust him. He’ll use you up and spit you out,” Lizzie had written under a picture I’d posted on Instagram of Isaac and I celebrating Thanksgiving at his house with his dad last year. However, the messages quickly turned more threatening and hostile as our relationship continued on and progressed both in real life and online.
Two months ago, I decided I was finally worn down and wanted to be done with it all. Both me and Isaac settled on ridding ourselves of all social media platforms and now, neither me nor Isaac have heard from Lizzie in weeks, and I couldn’t be more grateful for it. I’m ashamed to admit that it was harder than I thought it’d be to detox from social media. I’d had a Facebook account since I was thirteen after all.

“Sure,” I said and closed my eyes. I bit my lip in anticipation.

He gently tucked my hair behind my ears and smoothed out the frizzy back so as not to get any of my curls caught in the knot he tied around my head. It was loose but my vision was blocked. I saw only darkness.

“I’ve got you. I’ll tell you when to step. Don’t worry.”

I trusted him.

The first thing I noticed as we crossed the threshold was the smell of aged wood and whispers of Lemon Pledge that still hovered in the air—the little droplets tickled my skin as they trickled down. Isaac guided me down what I imagined was the hallway leading to the living room (as long as the map in my head matched the pictures I’d memorized) with one hand on my lower back and the other in my hand.

The walls I envisioned were red oak paneling and sparkling with floors to match. An inset bookcase with glass doors lined the back wall. I planned to fill it with pictures of our wedding—whenever those finally came in—of my recent graduation, and Isaac’s family photos. One day, when it didn’t hurt so much, I’d put up my own family pictures.

“Are you ready to see your surprise?” Isaac said.
I nodded and I hoped that the inside wasn’t as different as the outside of our new home.

He removed the satin and—to my genuine surprise—it was all there. The paneling, the floors, the bookcase. My eyes welled up with tears, it was just as I’d pictured. I turned to examine the rest of the space.

“Ahem,” Isaac grunted.

I whipped back around and realized I’d glanced over him sitting in a rocking chair holding a crimson red bow between his fingers.

“Sorry,” I said, “The surprise?”

He cleared his throat. “It’s the rocking chair, actually,” he smiled but it was slight. He averted his gaze to the window as he stood and walked toward it. The chair lightly rocked in his absence and the sound soothed me like the soft sound of waves rolling onto a shoreline.

“Our neighbor over to the left here, his name is Rick Katz, his wife is Jackie, I believe. He owns a woodworking shop in town. When I came down here with the realtor last month to close I met him, and he agreed to expedite this chair as a home warming present from me to you.”

The chair was a lighter wood, like sand or khaki. The vertical spindles across the back were thin, spiraling from top to bottom. It was a large chair; two people could easily sit in the seat at the same time. Along the frame were hand-carved etchings of bearded irises and poppies—my favorites.
“Oh wow,” I said in awe. “Isaac, this is beautiful. Really, I can’t believe someone handmade this. Thank you. You didn’t have to do all of this. You’ve done so much already.”

I was cautious as I sat down, expecting the wood to creak or strain under my weight but it cradled and supported me instead. I kicked off the ground and the rockers sent me softly forward and backward.

“I’d do anything for you,” he said. He reached out towards me and on my next rock forward I stood and took his hand.

“I love you,” I said as I stepped closer to him.

He smiled and his chest lightly puffed against my hand.

“Should we stop by the Katz’ tonight when they’re home and say thank you?” I asked.

Isaac scanned the yard once more before turning back to me. There was something a little off about how he was looking at me, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was. Something in the eyes. They looked sad and heavy, though, he smiled brightly at me.

“I think that sounds like a great idea,” he said.

I waltzed down the hall and into the room just to the left of the front entrance. It was situated in the corner directly opposite the kitchen, where I could hear Isaac fumbling around with cabinets and appliances. The room was small, too small to be a dining room. A child’s room.
On the floor of the room, I noticed four, circular indentations in the shape of a rectangle. A scar from the bed that had previously sat there. As I got closer I saw scratches in the center of the rectangle, swirls, and rough jagged lines like someone had taken the rough edge of a stone and scraped something into the floorboard.

Music blared suddenly from the kitchen, and I stepped back from the drawings on the floor.

Isaac’s deep voice trailed up the hallway, singing along, I realized, to The Police. “Every game you play, every night you stay I’ll be watching you.” When he came into view he was dancing, doing a little side-step-touch and rolling his hands to the breezy music.

“I don’t think this song is as romantic as you think it is,” I said as he reached for my hands, placing them around his neck, and his hands around my waist. They fell into a light sway.

“Yeah, well, everyone’s a bit sensitive these days, aren’t they?” Isaac said, rolling his eyes.

“A song about a jealous man stalking his ex-girlfriend…are we hearing the same song? I mean, I’d think after what we’ve been through you’d find that particularly disturbing.”

At this, he dropped his hands and stepped away from me—scoffing. “I thought we agreed we weren’t going to do this here. You know how talking about her upsets me. Why do you always do this?”

I was startled by the tone of his accusation. I wasn’t trying to attack him. “I don’t mean to upset you. But what am I supposed to do? Act like what she put us through never
happened? Act like she hadn’t threatened to kill me just a few months ago? I just meant that the song sounds different to me now. I can’t separate it like you can.”

He leaned against the door frame, his head tilted, eyes glassy. He sighed and paused for several moments. “No, you’re right. I’m sorry. I—I forget, sometimes that you’ve been through a lot too. Because of me. She’s followed me for so long, you know, haunted my every fuck—,” he paused, “my every step…”

I looked down at my feet.

“Well, guess I see what you mean,” he said. His eyes welled up and a tear trickled down his cheek.

“Oh, Isaac. I’m sorry.”

I walked over to him and buried my face in his neck, kissing him lightly. “I’ll leave it alone. I promise.”

“Thank you,” he said with his cheek now pressed against mine.

The phone in his pocket vibrated against my hip and he wiped his eyes. “I hope that’s the moving company. I really don’t want to sleep on that air mattress again tonight.” He looked at the screen, and then quickly flashed it to me, an excited grin spreading across his face. I managed to read the name, Heavy Lifters before he pulled it away. “Let me take this,” he said and stepped away.

He walked out the front door and began pacing the small space on the front steps. It sounded like the movers had gotten a little lost on their way down. I heard Isaac say, “Oh, no, no, you’ve gone too far.”

I wandered back to the kitchen, where I caught Sting at the end of his ballad. A clock radio—that looked to be from the late 70s or early 80s—was inlaid in the wall over
by the sink. I jiggled the knob side-to-side but got mostly static until finally, I landed on a station that was playing instrumental music.

I turned up the volume and walked back up the hallway. I was eager to see the upstairs.

The railing was not in the greatest shape. In the pictures I’d seen, the wood had appeared smooth and there was a grand eighteenth-century styled carpet that went along the stairs. It was red with a floral motif and beautiful gold curved lines along the edges. In person, there was no grand rug trailing the stairs. When I laid my hand on the rail, I felt the whole structure wobble under my touch. I noted a few spindles were missing and a couple that appeared to be hanging on for dear life. I imagined I could lightly flick one and it would tumble down.

The stairs themselves were splintered and needed some sanding and a nice thick coat of wood finisher. When I reached the top, the hall stretched out in front of me. One door on the right, two on the left. It was dark up there and the air tasted stale—I clicked my tongue uncomfortably in my mouth.

I could see layers of dust covering the floor like carpeting, the cherry oak floors now almost white. Standing at the head of the staircase, I turned to the left and stared down the hall at the door I believed would lead to the main bedroom. The image before me started to warp. As if the hall just kept stretching and stretching, zooming in and out. My stomach dropped and I felt light-headed. I reached out for the wall beside me to balance myself but overshot it and stumbled forward. I just barely caught my footing. I suddenly realized I couldn’t hear the music downstairs anymore nor Isaac outside on the front steps.
“Isaac?” I called. “Isaac, can you come up here, please?”

My ears started to ring, and my stomach turned. To keep from getting sick I held my hand over my mouth and took deep breaths through my nose. I slid down against the wall and closed my eyes. The last time I’d felt like this was when I went out on Centerhill lake in a pontoon boat with my family two summers back. My mom was going to teach Ida and I how to water ski, but we ended up having to cut the whole thing short cause I couldn’t stop vomiting off the side of the boat.

“Isaac? Isaac?” my voice grew more panicky.

Moments later I felt his hands reach under my arms, lifting me. I hadn’t heard him come up the stairs.

“Shit, what’s wrong? Are you sick?” he asked, feeling my forehead for a temperature.

“I just,” I caught my breath, “I started to feel dizzy and, I don’t know, I think maybe we need to open the windows. It needs to be aired out up here. Do you think there could be mold?”

“No, no, no. I had an inspector come out and check for anything major before I signed any papers. No mold. Don’t worry, honey. Deep breaths. Like we talked about,” he said, smiling at me.

“Okay. Okay,” I said and took another deep inhale.

“Alright, come on now. While I’m up here, let’s take a look at that bedroom.”

I followed him down the hall. The sinking feeling in my stomach moved from my stomach to my chest with each step but the ringing in my ears hushed and the nausea, thankfully, paused. I couldn’t quite explain it, but I was afraid of what was behind the
door. Something in my gut pulsed and bubbled up like a warning in my throat. As Isaac
turned the knob, I held my breath, as if preparing for a foul odor.

He swung the door open. The room was bare but spotless. I turned and could see a
hard line of dust between the hallway and the bedroom. The overhead lights were already
on, a yellow-orange glow—I hadn’t noticed the light in the dark hallway somehow. It
was a long, rectangular space with two casement windows against the front of the house.
It wasn’t entirely clear online but there was no bathroom in the main bedroom. It was an
old home after all.

The feeling in my chest subsided as I started to imagine my life here with my
husband. I pictured where we’d put our dresser, the shoe rack with his work loafers and
my summer sandals, my little work desk with my stories and sketches stuffed inside the
drawers. And our bed with a brand new poster frame, and maroon duvet with at least ten
of those stupid display pillows that would likely end up scattered on the floor or in a box
in the attic one day. I imagined me and Isaac waking up here, morning after morning,
together. I imagined him kissing me, holding me, loving me. I imagined a little girl with
auburn curls nuzzled between us.

“You’re crying,” he said. “You hate it. I could tell when we pulled in. You’re
disappointed.”

“No, no,” I sniffled and wiped my eyes. “Isaac, this is perfect. It’s perfect.”

He smiled and motioned for me to follow him to one of the windows in front of
them. When we reached it, I wrapped my arms around his waist and closed my eyes,
breathing him in. I had never felt so safe before. What could my family have possibly
seen in him? Why couldn’t they see how content I was?
Isaac pulled back but held on to my hand. “Look,” he said, pointing toward the Katz house. A woman stood in the window of the second story. She held a mug in one hand and ferociously waved at us with the other.

“Hmm,” Isaac said. “Privacy may be a little harder to come by.”

“Oh, she looks excited.”

“Do you want to stop by and introduce yourself? I need to call the movers back anyway. I hung up on them when I heard you calling my name,” Isaac said and rubbed my cheek with his thumb.

“I’m sorry.”

He waved his hand like it was of no real concern. “They just got so mixed up, they’re still a good forty-five minutes away. I’m gonna try and help get them on the right track.”

“Alright. Yeah, I’ll go introduce myself.”
Chapter Three

Mrs. Katz was already standing in her doorway by the time I walked out the front door. A white balustrade enclosed my neighbor’s front porch. She had hanging flower pots strategically placed on both sides of the railing, though, it seemed a recent thunderstorms and the overall damp chill in the air had killed whatever had once bloomed there. From left to right the tin buckets gradually transitioned from a dusty baby blue to a shimmering cerulean. I wondered what plants my new neighbor had selected for each pot. Surely, they were all individual, unique, but still maintained a sort of cohesion. She seemed like a woman who knew what she liked.

Mrs. Katz was taller than I’d expected and had broad shoulders and hips. Her short and stark white hair was curled, possibly permed, it looked just like how my grandmother had once styled her hair. The white curls shone like a beacon in the dreary cul-de-sac as the sun sank lower and the sky settled into twilight. I crossed my arms over my chest to protect myself from the breeze that came through as I traipsed across the boundary from my yard and into my neighbors.

“Come in! Come in!” Mrs. Katz said, doing a little side hop dance to warm herself. Mrs. Katz stepped inside and held the door open for me.

“Thank you,” I said hurrying up the front steps and into her home.

The moment I entered, fresh chocolate chip cookies were the dominating aroma, it nearly knocked me off my feet.

*That’s the power of baking,* my mother used to say, *it covers everything in sugar,* *even life.*
It reminded me that I hadn’t eaten all day, which also could have been the source of my dizzy spell earlier. The smell of the cookies opened up the floodgates, though and my stomach twisted and tightened uncomfortably.

I turned to face Mrs. Katz. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Dora Landry.”

“Yes, yes, I know, of course. It’s wonderful to meet you too. I’m Jackie. My husband, Rick, and I have been so eager to meet you.”

I smiled and my stomach growled an octave higher. “Oh, my gosh, I’m sorry, that’s embarrassing. Those cookies. They smell—”

“Oh, please follow me into the kitchen! I have some waiting for you and some set aside for you to take back,” she said, taking my hand and leading me to the kitchen.

The Katz home was entirely different from my own. There was no wood paneling and the floors in the rooms appeared to be the same sort of default beige carpeting that came in most homes built in the early 2000s, apart from the checkerboard tile in the kitchen.

The walls were decorated with snapshots of her and her husband and what I imagined were images of their travels. A picture of white sands against the clearest sky I’d ever seen stood out to me. I wondered where it was, but Mrs. Katz moved so quickly, I thought I’d ask another time.

“Dora, I’m so happy to meet you finally! Rick was so thrilled when your husband requested to have that rocking chair built for you. It’s been a while since he’s gotten to take on such a project. The last several years he’s been stuck making signs with variations of the “Live, Laugh, Love” crap on it,” Jackie said, holding out a plate of cookies.
They were all different shapes. Some were the size of hockey pucks while others were nearly bite-size, only a little bigger than a half-dollar coin. My mother would never have approved of such a display, but I found the inconsistency refreshing. Something about it warmed my heart and I gladly selected three different sizes, popping the smallest in my mouth before answering. They were amazing, buttery, and soft.

I swallowed quickly and said, “Is your husband here? I’d love to thank him. That rocking chair is the most beautiful gift I’ve ever received.”

“Oh, no, sweetie. He’s still working. You should come by his shop sometime though and see what all he’s got. He’s there from the butt crack of dawn till the sun goes down most days, just fiddling, making all kinds of trinkets.”

“I’d love to. I wish I could make things like that. I’m not very crafty,” I said, thinking about the sketches hidden away in my work desk. They were just for fun. Not for viewing.

“Well, he wanted you to have something special. You and Isaac were just married, no?”

Jackie leaned against the island next to the stack of cookies, resting her chin on her fist like she was preparing for a juicy story.

“Yes, do you mind if I sit?” I asked, pulling out one of the bar stools.

“Of course not! What’s mine is yours,” she said adjusting herself quickly but resuming her former position.

“Our wedding was small, more like a party with just a couple of our closest friends and some family. It was a week ago today, actually. Really, I am very lucky.”

“How long were you two together before walkin’ down the aisle?” Jackie pressed.
I shifted in my seat. “Um, not long. We’ve been together for thirteen months.”

“Ah,” Jackie nodded.

I smiled and took another bite of the hockey puck cookie.

“So,” Jackie continued, “a whirlwind romance it sounds like.”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.” I cleared my throat and asked, “So, tell me about Morris Chapel. I couldn’t find much online. Any must-do’s?”

Jackie’s eyes lit up, but her voice lost that excited trill from before. “Well, I’m assuming your husband told you about the history of the house you just moved into, no? You know, people around here think we’re all nuts for living here in Miss Ruby’s Court.”

I was a little rattled by the shift in conversation and in Jackie’s tone which suddenly felt more serious. I hadn’t realized there was a history worthy of being mentioned regarding our new house. I’d known it was built in the mid-1800s, so, of course, that comes with history but what exactly did she mean, I wondered?

“I’m sorry, you said Miss Ruby’s Court? Was it named after someone then?” I asked.

“You don’t know about the Lewis’s?”

Growing a little agitated now, I sighed and said, “No, Mrs. Katz. I haven’t heard.”

She smiled and reached to pat my hand on the counter, “Oh, call me Jackie. Please, I insist.”

I nodded.

“Anyway,” Jackie began, “people in town feel a bit, er, superstitious about our cul-de-sac. My husband says it’s just a bunch of rumors and, well, I—, I mean, there are a
few different versions out there, I guess. People always have their own opinions about these kinds of things, don’t they? Their own interpretations and worldviews.”

“What do you mean superstitions? Like ghost stories?”

She nodded her head side-to-side, shoulder-to-shoulder. She was a little hard to read.

“The story I’ve always heard was that in 1855, Elmer Lewis built that home for his wife, Louisa, and his daughter, Ruby,” she pointed toward my house. “The incident happened just a couple of years after they settled in. Poor Ruby was only five at the time.”

“Please,” I said, feeling more nervous the longer Jackie delayed the story, “what happened?”

Jackie pulled her hand back and tucked it into her lap. Her eyes shifted to the center of the kitchen island, to the bowl with equal amounts of apples and oranges. “I’m sorry, honey. It’s not pleasant. I told Isaac about it when I saw him last. I figured he’d tell you. Elmer, well, he got rid of them. His wife and his daughter. And then offed himself. They found him in the kitchen, gunshot to the head.”

I suddenly felt sick and pushed the cookies away from me. The smell was now too heavy and saccharin, the aftertaste in my mouth turned vile and foul.

*Boom, boom, boom, boom.*

Someone pounded at the door, rapid fire, and Jackie jumped in her seat, hand to heart. “Oh, I bet that’s your husband.”

“Wait,” I said, reaching for Jackie’s arm as she stood up. “Tell me, what happened to the others? Louisa and Ruby? Were they found in the house as well?”
Jackie reached around and rubbed the back of her neck, her cheeks flushed. She looked at me and her eyes looked wet like she was holding back tears. Like she regretted mentioning it in the first place.

“Theyir bodies were never found. No one knows what happened to them. Though, Elmer’s suicide is considered confession enough to most. You know the type. Family annihilators are what they call ‘em nowadays. Everyone assumed he’d buried them somewhere out there in the woods. I mean, where would a woman with a small child have gone in the 1850s? Especially this far out?”

The knocking came again. “Dora?” I heard Isaac call from behind the door.

“You said that people in town think we’re crazy for living here. Why?” I pushed.


Jackie brushed past me and started heading for the door but stopped herself at the frame.

“Oh, I don’t want to worry you. Rick can hardly stand hearing anyone talk about it anymore. He says they’re just stories. Small town gossip, you know?”

The knocking had momentarily stopped and when I spoke next it came out in a whisper, though, I wasn’t entirely sure why.

“But do you believe it? The stories, I mean?”

There was a tap on the window at the back of the house, the one just above the sink in the kitchen, and it grabbed both of our attentions. Isaac had walked around and was waving at us, eyebrows raised impatiently.

“Dora, I can’t tell you how happy I am to meet you. You are welcome here any time and I’ll make sure to let Rick know you stopped by. He’ll be so happy to hear how
much you loved the chair. We’ll all do dinner soon. Whenever works best for you and your husband,” Jackie said standing up and signaling to Isaac from the window that we were heading back to the front door.

We walked through the house with Jackie’s arm around my shoulders and when she opened the door, Isaac was there, standing at the bottom of the porch with his arms outstretched.

“Honey,” he said, “our things have arrived.”

Behind him, I saw the massive moving truck containing all of our belongings parked out front.

Jackie’s story echoed in my head as I walked down the patio steps and into Isaac’s embrace which was warm and comforting, though I couldn’t help but notice my husband’s hand placement. His fingers circled the back of my neck.
Chapter Four

Since Isaac wasn’t expected to start at South View for another couple of days, we spent the day unearthing the rest of our clothes and frivolous knickknacks that we’d stored away in our remaining boxes. Our combined collection of cheap kitchenware that we both, admittedly, bought in our freshman years of college were able to fit in just one medium-sized box. We started there, and then slowly transitioned into the living room.

I had brought just a handful of the total amount of books that I actually owned—I brought only what I could carry from my mom’s house—but took my time arranging them by author’s last name in the glass bookcase anyway.

Though I’d spent more of my nights in Isaac’s apartment over the last year, rather than at the dorm I’d shared with Nia, there was a lot I seemed to be noticing for the first time as Isaac pulled things out of his boxes.

He owned a lot of CD’s. Three full crates worth, which seemed like a lot to me considering his car didn’t have a CD player, only an aux cord, and I’d only ever seen him listening to music on his phone.

“Do you even own a device to listen to these on?” I teased as I dragged two of the crates across the living room. “How about there?” I pointed toward the three sets of drawers that went about halfway up the inset glass case.

Isaac laughed but began unloading the crates where I’d directed him, filing the cases away. “Of course, I do. I have a CD player around here somewhere. Probably upstairs in one of my desk drawers,” he paused, holding the musical soundtrack to O Brother, Where Art Thou, in one hand, and Piano Man by Billy Joel, in the other. “My
dad had this booklet stuffed full of music that he kept in his car and during my summer breaks we’d go on these road trips. Just to different national parks, a couple of theme parks, but we never made it more than ten hours out in whatever direction we’d set off in. He’d always let me choose the music. Worked my way through every album he owned, eventually. My dad had a very eclectic taste. Turned into a bit of a collection of my own, I guess.”

I always felt Isaac’s relationship with his dad was complicated. Complicated in a way that I would never be able to understand, so I found it best to let him talk about Teddy on his own terms. All I’d been told about Isaac’s life before his adoption was that his birth mother had been unable to care for him and that his father was never in the picture. He said that his birth mother had relinquished her custody of him and sent him to a foster home when he was four years old. There had been no other family for Isaac to fall back on.

Isaac had relayed this information to me, as plainly as that, devoid of emotion except maybe indifference, early on in our relationship. I could tell he wanted to come off as unbothered by his past, but I sensed there were unresolved feelings still there. Once, I asked him what he remembered from that time of his life, and he got very quiet and still. The energy between us suddenly dropped and my stomach sank. I couldn’t read him. I wasn’t sure if he was going to burst into sobs or if he was going to yell obscenities to the sky. I clenched my jaw in anticipation, waiting for his reaction but after a few more moments he just smiled at me and gingerly said, “Nothing.”

I dragged the third crate over and lined it up behind the others. “I should get a boom box, so we can play some of these in the house.”
He nodded. “I’d love that.”

He sat hunched over the drawers, pulling out different CD’s, then smiling and giggling at whatever it reminded him of. He didn’t share but he didn’t need to. I was glad to see him reunited with happy memories. That was enough.

I had a strange first interaction with Isaac’s father Teddy. Isaac brought me to his childhood home for dinner a few months into our relationship.

After finishing a three-course meal that Isaac alone had prepared for the occasion of butternut squash soup, meatloaf with asparagus, and cherry pie for dessert, Isaac excused himself to the bathroom. Once the door shut down the long hallway, Teddy abruptly shifted the conversation to Isaac’s adoption. I thought he might’ve been afraid to bring it up while Isaac was in earshot, afraid it would bring him down but, as a father, he wanted to know how his son was coping. This seemed only natural to me.

Across the table, Teddy whispered, “I never was able to figure it out. Never got him to tell me. All of them therapists couldn’t get him to stick with anything long enough. Never broke through. Has he told you about her?”

I’d assumed by “her” he meant, Isaac’s mother. Teddy sat at the dinner table with his fingers interlocked and elbows resting on the surface, though his arms were trembling. Teddy suffered a stroke a year prior and had been struggling with his memory since. Isaac said he would often forget where he was, or who he was talking to, or why he started talking in the first place. He’d warned me of this, so I just nodded, and replied, “Yes, yes. He’s told me.” And this seemed to put Teddy at ease. He laid back in his seat, nodding silent reassurances to himself.
When I mentioned Teddy’s comment to Isaac later when we were on our way home, Isaac became defensive, insecure, even—which wasn’t something I was used to seeing in him. He was flustered, shaking his head and sputtering. He muttered grumpily about how his dad was obsessed with figuring everyone out. That he thought the worst of everyone but never looked at himself. I even heard a, “confused old man” slip out, which I thought was harsh but kept that thought to myself. We hadn’t spoken much of his childhood since then.

Over by the paisley couch that Isaac had picked up from a second-hand store sometime last week, was a box labeled, Isaac Work—underlined three times. I knelt down next to it and pulled at the tape across the top. As I lifted the first flap I saw what looked like a small stack of laptops.

“Hey,” he said, and I dropped the flap. “You can leave that. I’m just gonna bring it in and leave it at my office tomorrow.”

“You don’t want to put one of these in the office upstairs? You’ve got enough laptops for everyone in the cul-de-sac apparently,” I said, chuckling softly.

“For work,” he said evenly.

I nodded and smoothed the tape back over the box.

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Later, when we got to my boxes, Isaac dragged out two of the water color landscapes I’d painted in my first year of undergrad, before I switched from Art to Art History. I’d planned on stowing them away in a box with the rest of my college books and papers, but Isaac insisted we hang them up.
I protested, feeling embarrassed and said, “It’s childish. People will think we have horrible taste.”

He shook his head, but his eyes didn’t move from the paintings, he seemed to be analyzing them. “It makes me feel like I’m getting a glimpse into a secret part of your mind. The decisions you made, the colors you chose. It makes me almost sad, looking at them side-by-side. Like an image of hope, a bright new day, only to succumb to the night, the cold.”

Both canvases displayed a lone bearded iris planted in the middle of an open field, hay bales scattered about in the background. The sun was rising in the one he held in his left hand and the iris was in full bloom, vibrant purples and orange, pink’s bursted off the canvas. The second canvas, in his right hand, showed the same iris, the same background only in the dead of night, with nothing but the moonlight to highlight the canvas. The irises petals appeared frigid and shriveled in the harsh streaks of light, the hay bales only dark muddy masses. In both paintings the colors muddled together a bit in the center and around the edges, a mucky brown seemed to ooze and spill from the sky like rain captured just before it hits the ground.

“Sure, but if you switched hands, the message could be a bit different don’t you think? A lone iris that survives its worst night? A little happier,” I offered.

Isaac lowered the canvases and smiled but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “But that’s not how you intended it.”

It was a statement. Not a question, I realized.

I felt an urge to push back against his assumption but something in my gut said he needed to be right about this. About me. And anyway, I hadn’t put that much thought into
what those two paintings could mean when placed side-by-side one another when I originally drew them up. I’d just been playing with light and color. I could let Isaac have the win.

“No, it wasn’t,” I said and returned his smile.

I agreed to let Isaac hang them in the guest room. It’s not like we’ll be having guests over any time soon, I thought—thinking of Ida, my mom, and Nia.

Whatever mood I was worried Isaac was falling into quickly faded after we put the paintings away and finished unloading our last box together. I was determined to do walk through after walk through, to rearrange the furniture—a first draft of our first home together. I wanted it to be perfect.

He was so affectionate, so loving. He tugged on the waistband of the back of my jeans as I passed him by in the hallway, the living room, and the kitchen, pleading with me to stop. To take another break. To wrap myself around him again. The magnetism that had originally pulled us together seemed to return. All the stress from the days before were brushed aside. Forgotten. He was all I wanted.
Chapter Five

I woke up early the next day and tiptoed down the stair and across the kitchen tile floor. I eased the frying pan and spatula out of the cardboard box it was tucked away in and was careful not to make too much noise, I didn’t want to wake my sleeping husband. We didn’t have much in terms of food, just some eggs, milk, and bread but I wanted to make Isaac breakfast for our first morning in our new home.

I always envisioned marriage this way. Two people finding time to make each other feel important—special. I’d never felt very special before Isaac.

Isaac was more experienced than me in relationships and in life in general. He always seemed to be one step ahead of me: planning date nights, leaving romantic notes for me in my purse. I tried to keep up but everything I did always seemed miniscule compared to the way he loved me.

I hoped that after breakfast we’d explore Morris Chapel together. Though I was excited to see all that the town had to offer, I was most anxious to learn more about the Lewis’s and Ruby Court. Google had been, yet again, of no real help to me. All I could find online was a website for a Methodist church in Morris Chapel, a 2000 census, and an article about a tornado in 2008 that caused millions of dollars of property damage and even took a few lives. There was nothing about the formation of this town, nothing from the mid 1800s, and nothing on the Lewis’s. It was as if it’d been totally scrubbed from the internet.

I had managed to keep my many questions to myself as Isaac and I unpacked the truck and got situated for the night—I hadn’t wanted to interrogate him anymore about
the home he’d picked out for us—but my neighbors’ words never stopped circulating in my head.

I plated the scrambled eggs and crisp toast on two plates, and then carefully carried them down the hall and back up the stairs to our room. The nervous feeling in my stomach had gotten better the longer we’d been in the house. Isaac had been right. I’d been a nervous wreck yesterday. That’s all it was. Nerves.

When I opened the door, Isaac wasn’t in bed. I did a double take and saw him standing at the other end of the room by the windows.

“Oh, you’re up,” I said.

“You know I can’t sleep when you’re not next to me,” he turned to me, grinning.

“Ah, I’m sorry. You want to eat in bed anyways?” I asked.

He made a noise that was something between a chuckle and a sigh, but then nodded and walked back over to the bed. He pulled the sheets and comforter taught and all the way up to the top of the frame before sitting back down.

“I thought you hated breakfast,” Isaac said.

“I don’t hate it. It’s just not my favorite. But it’s your favorite and I wanted to do something nice. Even if it is a bit bland. We can go to the store later and stock up.”

“Thank you, love,” he said while piling eggs onto the slice of toast—making a sandwich out of it.

“Do you think we could stop by the library today?” I asked quickly, having barely swallowed my first bite of eggs.

His eyes widened like he was taken aback by my excitement. “Huh, I guess. That’s the first place you want to venture to?”
“Yeah. I’m curious to see if they have any records or old news articles about Ruby Court and, um, the Lewis’s,” I admitted, picking at my eggs with my fork.

“What makes you say that?” he asked.

“Talking with Jackie yesterday, she told me the story. About what he did, about the people who first lived here. I’m—, I’m not mad that you didn’t tell me. I understand, you didn’t want to scare me. It’s just I can’t find anything about it online. And not a thing about the rumors she mentioned. It just seems odd, you know?”

“Rumors? There aren’t any rumors,” his brows furrowed, and he set his breakfast back on the plate, pushing it away.

“Oh, well, she said—”

“Okay, I see. So, that’s what you two were doing in there when I was outside knocking on the door trying to get your attention? Y’all were gossiping about something horrible that happened to another family over a hundred years ago? Jeez, Dora. We’re a bit old for rumors and curses, aren’t we?”

“Curse? What curse?” I asked.

Isaac huffed, and then suddenly flipped over his plate of eggs onto the floor. His fork and plate clattered against the wood but somehow didn’t break. I jumped back and off the bed—startled—but Isaac just turned and sat on the edge of the bed with his back facing me.

“Isaac?” I shouted. “What the hell is going on? Why are you so upset?”

“You—, you’ve been pessimistic and negative since the moment we got here. Bringing up Lizzie, letting yourself get so hungry you nearly pass out in the hallway. You accused me of not having the house properly inspected, and now, instead of spending the
day together you want to sensationalize someone else’s tragedy. You’re always trying to find reasons to run away from your own problems, Dora. Those people are dead, okay? And you’ve got real issues you need to deal with.”

My whole body was quivering, tears rushed down my cheeks. How could he say those things? How could he talk to me like that? This wasn’t him at all. Something was wrong.

In that moment, I wished that I could call my sister. I wanted to hear Ida tell me that everything was going to be okay. That she’d be right over. I wished that Isaac would go back to being the soft, romantic, and nurturing man I’d gotten to know so well.

“I—, I’m sorry, Isaac. I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful or unappreciative, but there are things you didn’t tell me,” I sniffled and took one more breath to steady my voice. “The pictures you showed me of the house, for example. There are differences. It took us twenty minutes of driving in the woods before we pulled into this cul-de-sac. And no, you didn’t tell me our house was built by a family annihilator,” I snapped, stealing the term from Jackie.

Isaac stomped across the room and found some clothes in a box by the window and yanked them out. “Honestly, Dora, I really don’t have time for any exploring today. I have to go in to the office to meet with the supervisor, sign some paperwork, or whatever. It’d probably be better if you just took it easy today anyways and unpacked before going on a hunt to solve a one hundred and fifty-year-old mystery.”

“You’re going into the office today? You didn’t tell me that. I don’t have a car yet, what if I need something, we don’t even have any food in here.”
“Dora!” he yelled, whipping around to look at me with red eyes. “You’re not a child! If you need something, use your fingers to dial my number and call me. I can pick it up on my way home. Or go over to your new friend Jackie’s house. I’m sure she’d be happy to feed you. It’s not that big of a deal. Why are you acting so helpless?”

In all our time together, he had not looked at, or spoken to, me like this before. I didn’t understand why he seemed so aggravated with me. Since we’d arrived at Ruby Court yesterday, it was as if my mere presence put him off.

I thought about when he’d proposed to me. He’d told me that it would be better for me to hold off on getting a job until we figured out where we were going to live after getting married. He’d said, *a couple months out of the workforce won’t keep you from using an Art History degree, besides, every city has a museum, just hold off for a bit, I’ll take care of you.*

This seemed reasonable enough at the time. He wanted to take care of me and set us both up for the best possible future. It wouldn’t have made sense for me to have started a career in Murfreesboro or Nashville only to have to move a couple of months later. If I’d had known how far our new home was from town, though, I’d have insisted on getting my own car before arriving here.

I didn’t want to argue with him anymore, so I stormed out of the room and went to sit in the living room until he left.

He clearly didn’t want to talk to me anyways, I thought.

I sat in the rocking chair in the living room and listened to Isaac slam two doors upstairs before stomping down the staircase. He walked past me, plates in hand and into
the kitchen. Glass shattered and I recoiled in my chair, crying into my elbow, stifling my sobs.

This wasn’t right, this wasn’t how things were supposed to go.

Isaac went out the back door, started the car, and peeled out of the driveway. When the sound of the car speeding away dissipated, the house settled, creaking and moaning.

I struggled to calm myself, kept choking on my deep breaths which only made my chest hurt worse. I tried to focus again on the sound of the chair rocking. When it slowed, I kicked once more off the ground and the sound grew louder, more stable. It comforted me and after a few moments I was able to stop crying but the feeling was short lived.

When I looked up and out the window I saw a woman standing at the end of the cul-de-sac, staring at me. It wasn’t Jackie, this woman had short dark curls and was much closer to my age than Jackie’s. This must be my other neighbor.

What was her name again?

The woman continued staring at me and tilted her head sympathetically. I stood and walked towards the window to get a better look but as soon as I moved from the chair, the woman turned and rushed out of the cul-de-sac, taking a left and walking down the street, out of sight.

I realized I was wearing the wrong clothes for this mid-October weather about halfway down the cul-de-sac. Just a few hours away in Murfreesboro, warmth still clung to the air but here the air felt wet and frigid. I shivered in my cheap Amazon leggings and open toed sandals. I took the ends of my knit black cardigan and wrapped them around myself
tightly and picked up the pace. I’d hoped to catch up with the woman but when I made it to the street sign I looked to the left down Coffee Landing and saw no one, heard nothing but the rustling of old, heavy trees.

What was I doing? I thought and rubbed my eyes, wiping away the tracks of dried tears on the sides of her face.

My hair and teeth were still unbrushed, I looked an utter mess. I wasn’t sure exactly what it was about the woman that had made me rush out of my home like that. Maybe I wanted to explain to her why I’d been crying, the woman could’ve heard the glass shattering after all. She might make assumptions about me and my husband.

As I turned to head back, the wind picked up and I stumbled back a couple of steps, shielding my face against the cold. When I got my balance again, I heard what sounded like a child’s squeal echo down the street, in the same direction the woman had gone. Instinctively, I perked up and started jogging down the street, following the trill of the child’s voice. Maybe the woman had been looking for this child and had not been paying attention to me at all. Maybe she needed help.

“Mom! Mom!”

I came to a sudden stop in the middle of the street. The little voice was close but, upon first glance, I saw nothing unusual. I squinted, focusing my eyes and finally, camouflaged between the trees I saw a white building.

I hopped over the ditch between the road and the forest, my sandals squishing into the mud, and walked up the path to what now appeared to be a small, run-down chapel.

The woman I’d seen earlier was sitting on a bench reading from a small, pocket sized book in the field just to the side of the chapel and a little girl—the woman’s
daughter, I now realized based on the strong resemblance alone—was waving at me with a big clump of clovers clutched in her fist.

I waved back to the girl, though the woman had not yet looked up. When I felt I was close enough to her that I wouldn’t have to shout across the way to get the woman’s attention, I said, “Hello, I’m Dora. I just moved into Ruby Court with my husband Isaac yesterday. I—, I saw you earlier and just wanted to introduce myself.”

“I’m Leah Robinson! I’m five and that’s my momma,” the little girl interjected. “Will play fairies with me? I’m finding ingredients to make a potion.”

I laughed and thought that playing witchy fairies sounded like the most fun idea anyone had suggested in a long time.

“Hi, Leah. I would love to play but just one moment,” I said as I wandered around the bench and took a seat on the other side of my neighbor who had not responded or acknowledged our little exchange. “Excuse me? I don’t mean to bother you. You are my other neighbor, right? I didn’t just follow some random person into the woods, did I?”

The woman laughed. “Didn’t you?”

She shifted in her seat next to me, and then closed the book and set it in her lap. She didn’t look at me, she kept her gaze on her daughter who was hovering over a pink plastic pot with a twig serving as a makeshift spoon. I interlocked my fingers and picked at the skin around my thumb nervously.

“Yeah. I guess I did.”

“Marie. That’s my name. Enjoying Morris Chapel so far?”

I wasn’t sure what to say; I just smiled.
“They’ll treat you like a celebrity for a few weeks but once the excitement calms down, you’ll fade from their minds, don’t worry. Though,” she paused, momentarily glancing over at me, and then back to her daughter, “you are living in the house. It might take a little longer than it did for the rest of us.”

I thought this might be my chance to finally get a straight answer regarding the rumors surrounding Ruby Court. “Why would they treat me like a celebrity? Because of a murder that happened in that house all those years ago?” I asked.

“Well, Morris Chapel’s not known for much else.”

“Ah. What is it they say about those of us who live in Ruby Court? Jackie had started to say something yesterday. It’s not cursed is it?” I asked but shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. However, as soon as I asked the question, I realized just how afraid I was of the answer.

Marie zipped up her jacket and shoved her hands in her pockets. “Of course, that’s the first thing Jackie talks to you about,” she rolled her eyes and scoffed. “Has she asked for your weekly schedule and routine yet? No? Well, she’ll keep track, don’t worry. They’re always watching.”

I sighed, frustrated that yet again my questions were being dodged. And what did she mean they’re always watching? Though I hadn’t been introduced to Rick just yet, Jackie seemed harmless enough, maybe a little invasive but harmless.

Marie sat back and appraised me. After a moment she said, “Fine. Some people think that the whole court is cursed. That Elmer made some deal with the devil or something stupid like that before killing his family, and then himself.”

“Like he was a Satanist?” I asked.
“Yeah, like some satanic panic bull shit from the 80s. They were blaming everything on Satanists back then. Probably where the rumors originated from in the first place.”

“So, what exactly is the curse?”

“One of the stories I heard was that this deal somehow protects those who live on Elmer’s land. Protects them from harm, you know, like diseases, freak accidents, et cetera, et cetera. They think as long as you live out your days here, filling the space with life and love like Louisa and Ruby wanted, you’ll live a long happy life. But they say you can never leave. Ever.” She took a deep breath and fidgeted with the book in her lap then started again. “There are more people, though, that think it’s just your home that’s cursed.”

I twisted in my seat so that I was facing Marie now. “Leave? As in move away?”

“Move away, run away, escape. Take your pick.”

“What happens when people leave Ruby Court?”

Marie’s eyes widened. “Okay, I get the feeling that you might be taking this more seriously than you should. It’s nonsense. A fucking ghost story that lonely people in a small-town made up years ago.”

I nodded quickly but wanted my question answered. “I know, I know. I’m just very curious about it is all. What happens?”

“The answer you’d get from one of the locals would probably be something dramatic like, ‘you die,’ but I don’t think anyone else has actually died in any of these homes besides the Lewis’s. I did hear something about the last owner of your house, though. I think she got into a pretty serious accident twenty-ish years ago after she
packed up and headed out of town. But she lived so, I guess that’s just more proof that it’s all bull shit.”

“So, the house I just moved in to hasn’t been occupied in twenty years?”

“Correct.”

“It doesn’t make sense though. If the supposed deal Elmer made with the devil was supposed to protect him and his family, why did he kill them and himself?”

“Maybe Louisa tried to leave him, and he didn’t want her to.”

“And the deal backfired?”

Marie huffed and turned away from me. “Leah, I think it’s time to for us to go home!” she called out to her daughter who was in the middle of breaking more twigs for her pretend fire.

“I’m sorry, did I say something wrong?” I asked.

Marie stood and I mirrored her. “He didn’t kill them because of some curse or because of a deal with the devil. He killed them because he wanted to. Why do you think he moved them all the way out here in the first place? People are always looking for ways to excuse abhorrent male behavior. Maybe he was just a fucking monster.”

“I—, I wasn’t trying to excuse it. I’m sorry.”

“Dora, you seem young. You should know that stories like this are created for very specific reasons. To dissolve people of responsibility and to scare you into compliancy. You should be thinking more about why you’re here, rather than what’s already come to pass.”

Marie raised her brows, and, in that instance, I realized that Marie had in fact seen more than she was letting on this morning. Marie smiled at me, but I wasn’t so sure this
time that it was out of sympathy. Leah ran up to us and collided into her mom’s leg. She held out her arm towards me and said, “Here! For you!”

I squatted down to Leah’s level and held out my hand. Leah dropped a smooth white pebble about the size of a quarter in her palm. “What’s this?” I asked.

“A fairy rock! It will keep you safe in your new house.”

“Leah!” Marie snapped. “What did I tell you about eavesdropping on adult conversations?”

“It’s okay,” I started. “Thank you for thinking of me, Leah. But I feel very safe knowing I have sweet souls like you around me.”

Leah grinned and nuzzled her face into her mom’s hip.

Marie nodded once at me, and then they both turned to leave. I suspected that Marie’s patience with me had run out and that I should let them get a little ahead of me before heading back home myself.

When the two of them reached the edge of the woods, Marie looked back and said, “Their plaques are just over there,” and pointed behind the chapel. “If you wanna pay your respects.”

I waited for them to get halfway down the street before turning and walking to the back of the chapel. The ground was soft and patchy. Big splotches of mud cratered the ground every few feet or so and despite my attempts to carefully cross the courtyard, mud had seeped into the soles of my shoes causing me to slide around uncomfortably in my sandals. I held my hands out for stability as I approached the markers.

In front of me, was a metal post like one of those historical markers but it was as if the top half of it had been slashed in two. It was a rusted, sharp, jagged tip—pointed like a
stake or a serrated carving knife. I wondered if the sign could’ve been ripped apart during one of the many storms I’d read about online. Maybe a brief history of the Lewis’s or a memorial had once been there, I wondered.

On one side of the post, I saw two plots laying side-by-side, one plaque read Louisa Lewis, the other, Ruby Lewis. Just the years they were born and the year they died were shown underneath their names, no note or acknowledgement of who they were to one another was mentioned. On the other side, to my left, sat Elmer Lewis’s plaque—alone, with his birth date and death date listed as well. I could see the rectangular outline the foliage and clover made on his side versus the flat, sparse ground on his wife and daughters’ side. Then I remembered, his body was buried here, there’s weren’t. They were never found. Those plaques were just markers, a reminder that Louisa and Ruby had existed once.

Standing there looking over them, I felt ashamed by my behavior. The way I’d interrogated not only Isaac but my new neighbors about this family’s murder/suicide story like it was some hot new topic. I was so worried earlier about what Marie thought of me, if she’d seen me crying, or heard me fighting with Isaac, and went and embarrassed myself anyway. You seem young, Marie had said. And she was right, I was acting like a child. Marie saw it, my mom saw it, hell, even Isaac saw it this morning. He must feel totally dejected. Maybe even betrayed.

As I turned to walk back towards the road, my phone buzzed in my back pocket. “Please, be Isaac,” I mumbled. “I’m so sorry.”

I stopped and leaned against the side of the chapel. It was a text message from an unknown number. Just three words.

Don’t tell him.
That was all it said and yet, despite the many weeks of silence, I was sure I knew who it was from. The only person I ever received messages like that was from Lizzie. Don’t tell him? Tell him what? I had begun typing my memorized script that the police officers in Rutherford County had told me to send back to any and every unwanted message or fake account; *Do not contact me via text, email, Facebook, or in-person. I do not wish to—*

Another text came in.

*I need your help. Please. Call me when you can.*

I erased what I’d started typing. I just wouldn’t respond this time. I could do that, I thought. Just leave it be for now. Lizzie was probably getting bored, just wanting to start things up again. She probably caught wind of our marriage and wanted to make up for some lost time. But she didn’t know where we’d moved to. No one did except for Isaac’s father.

I stared at the two messages on the screen for a few moments, still leaning against the chapel but shifted so that my back was now flat against it. My eyes focused on the screen like I was afraid something more was about to happen. Like Lizzie might write back and say, she’d found us, that she knew where we were. Like Lizzie might pop out on the other side of the chapel and say, “Surprise!” And this would all have been for nothing.

Little bubbles popped up on the screen to show that she was typing again, and my stomach twisted in a knot. I’d never met Lizzie in person or even directly responded to any of her threats or messages except for what I’d been instructed to say by others.

This behavior really didn’t make much sense to me. How could someone have the time or energy to spend obsessing over what other people were doing with their lives? It
wasn’t just Lizzie’s behavior though that was befuddling, the police’s protocol for handling these types of situations seemed, to me, in the early stages. In other words, not fully realized or executed. Clearly, *not engaging* hasn’t been as affective as they’d said it would be.

And now I’ve waited too long. I should’ve sent Lizzie that message by now. Just as I started to type it out for a second time, the phone shook again, but this time it was Isaac calling. A selfie I’d taken of us at our wedding popped up on the screen. His sweet smile always took my breath away. In the photo, I was looking at him in complete adoration. I was so lucky.

I closed the text app and answered the phone.
Chapter Six

~One Year Ago~

I waited for Corbin at the bar. The warm, red-orange glow from the overhead lights at the Old Chicago lulled me into a trance. I stared at my hands clasped around a glass of Fireball—neat—a veil of sunset red cast over me.

He’d texted me just a little before seven—when we were actually supposed to meet up—and asked me to order the two shots at the bar for us. He said he was running behind but promised he would cover that and the next round to make up for his lateness.

It wouldn’t have been my choice. The brand of whiskey reminded me of bad times and bad decisions. My stomach tensed at the strong odor of cinnamon. The drink was spicy and made the back of my throat rough and gritty. I’d taken all of three sips before deciding to just occasionally swirl it on the table, feigning interest. It kept the waitress at the bar from stopping every couple of minutes to say, “Still doing good over there?”

It was seven forty-five now and Corbin was still nowhere to be found.

“Stupid, stupid,” I muttered under my breath and pushed the glass away.

Nia had convinced me to join Tinder last month. Everyone does it now. And so, what if you see someone you know online? You can’t just sit around waiting for someone to swoop in and be everything you’ve ever dreamed of. You’ve never had a boyfriend, Dora and you’re twenty-one now. You’ve gotta go out there and find it like the rest of us, Nia had said as she passively swiped through profiles on her own phone as if browsing through a catalogue.
Nia had just broken up with her boyfriend of three years and wanted me to join in on her search for love online. To become part of the culture, I supposed.

Look what good that’s done me.

The second glass of whiskey I ordered for Corbin forty-five minutes ago was now diluted and sweating. You’ve been stood up, the empty seat next to me seemed to scream. Even still, I couldn’t bring myself to get up and walk away.

It was not the walk of shame I’d been hoping for.

I’d sent Corbin two messages checking in and so far, no response. I had my finger hovering over the send button, contemplating sending a third. We’d had such great conversations over the last week. He was funny and asked me questions about my dreams, my aspirations, and my fears. He wanted to know about my favorite painters, Degas, Monet, and Pissarro. It was an astonishing change of pace from the more common interactions I frequented on the app—a quick, ‘hello, how are ya?’ followed immediately with a dick pic or the equally disappointing, ‘DTF or nah?’

Straight to the point. I could give them that at least.

I was thinking of deleting the app when Corbin matched with me and messaged me. He changed my mind.

But of course, this had been too good to be true. I’d been stood up. I downed the last bit of whiskey left in my drink and scrunched my nose as it painfully slithered down my throat.

“Excuse me?” My head jerked to my right. A man with long dark curls was leaning against the counter—not Corbin, someone else, a stranger. He wore a white button down tucked into a pair of black slacks. The first button of his collar was undone,
tie loosened, and sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. I always thought that particular
aesthetic was just something the movies conjured up to tell the audience that some man
had had a particularly long and hard day of work. Or that he just lost a lot of money at a
casino, though there wasn’t one of those nearby.

He smiled and slightly raised his brows. After a beat, I realized he was waiting for me to respond.

“Oh, hi. Hi, sorry. Can I help you with something?”

“I was just wondering if I could buy you a drink. Something you might actually enjoy,” he laughed as he fidgeted with the cuff of his sleeve, sliding it up even further.

Maybe he did have a hard day at work.

“I saw your face from across the room,” he gestured to a booth in the back corner, a few rounds of something were scattered about the table but that was all I could see.

“When you took your first sip of whatever that was, it looked painful.”

I laughed a little uncomfortably, and then playfully shielded my face with one hand over my eyes. “Oops. Caught me. Not that much of a whiskey fan.”

“If you’re waiting for someone else, I’ll fuck off, I swear,” he took a step back and threw his hands up.

I glanced over my shoulder once more, as if still uncertain as to whether or not this man was really speaking to me. “Well, it looks like I’ve been stood up, so have a seat.”

I patted the stool next to me.

He quickly turned and glanced towards the main entrance, and then back at me—eye’s widened as if in disbelief. “What an idiot.”
Our eyes met briefly, and I felt my cheeks flush. He made me nervous, but I liked it. There was an instant connection, I’d never felt one this strong before.

The stranger caught the bartender’s eye and waved her over. “What would you like?” he asked me.

I picked at my fingernails underneath the bar top. I could try to impress him. Order a martini or a Manhattan—something classy like out of Sex & The City or Gossip Girl. But he’d approached me. He was trying to impress me. Right?

“A mojito,” I said.

The waitress looked back and forth between me and the man who sat next to me now. Her eyes were squinted at him as if she were puzzling something together in her mind.

“One for me too,” he said. He shot the waitress a quick glance and her furrowed brows relaxed a bit as if pulled out of a trance.

“Right,” she whirled around and started towards the bar top. “Coming right up.”

“So,” I turned back to the man, “you like to spend your free time here, alone?”

“Sometimes. It’s close to where I live. It’s Friday night,” he lightly shrugged his shoulders. “Decent pizza.”

I nodded along. “Ah, I wouldn’t know. Maybe next time I’m here I’ll grab a slice.”

“Oh, well that’s a shame. I could order us both a slice right now. Kitchen’s not closed yet.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” my cheeks lit up as I pulled my cardigan tighter across my body. “It’s okay. Really. I’m not hungry,” I lied.
“You’re sure?”

“Positive. Thank you, though.”

He smiled and nodded at me, accepting my response. “First date?”

“What?” I asked, feeling flustered, and then remembered that he was asking about the guy who stood me up. “Oh, yeah. It was supposed to be. I’ve been too embarrassed to accept defeat and just leave.”

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about. He does—that self-centered, prick. You probably dodged a bullet. You know if you ask me.” He pursed his lips and tugged on his tie. The tension loosened up between us and I felt more relaxed. We laughed together.

“You’re probably right,” I said, nudging his forearm with my elbow.

The waitress, whom I had not seen coming, plopped the two cocktails on the table in front of us, startling me. “Two mojitos.”

“Thank you,” the man already had a twenty in his hand held out for her. “The rest is for you,” his eyes narrowed in on her name tag on her front pocket, “Mallory.”

“’Preciate you. Enjoy and let me know if I can get a tab started for you guys.”

Mallory started to move away but did a double take over her shoulder—the same puzzled look from earlier on her face—and then in two strides she was in front of us once again. “I’m sorry. You just look really familiar. I can’t shake it. Both of you, really. Have I seen you guys here before?” she asked. Her eyes shifted back and forth between us.

“I’m afraid this is the first time I’ve been to this location, Ms. Mallory,” the man said as he rested his right hand over his left, lightly massaging his knuckles with his thumb.
“Yeah. First timer as well,” I said, holding up three fingers—scouts honor.

Mallory looked down. “I’m getting déjà vu, I think. Sorry.” She shook her head as she walked away.

The man inched his body a little closer to me once Mallory was out of earshot.

“I’m Isaac by the way. Isaac Landry.”

“Dora. Dora Boden,” I said, mimicking his voice and sticking out my hand like we were about to make a business transaction or settle a deal.

He laughed and took my hand. His smile, bright and effortless, a dimple on the right side, made my stomach drop. “Alright, Ms. Boden. It’s nice to meet you.”
It turned out that Rick’s shop was only a block away from Isaac’s new office. My husband pointed out the square-shaped bank as we passed by it. Out front there was, what I could only describe as an abstract, modern steel statue, with what looked like ribbons or rope woven together at the base, and then frayed in all directions at the top. It was situated in the flowerbed outside the front entrance. It was like someone had sawed through a thick rope from the top and now the whole structure was unravelling. I thought the sculpture was intriguing, though, out of tune with the rest of Morris Chapel.

I could still see remnants of South View’s recent renovation. There was a large dumpster truck full of paint cans and plaster in the back lot and orange and white striped safety barricades stacked on the curb. The building was very modern; the front wall was full-length glass with silver paneling wrapped around the back. I briefly glanced into the lobby as we drove by which was arranged with red velvet chairs in a half moon circle around a coffee table, a man in a navy suit stood near the front window, and a woman in a similar shade of blue ran up the walkway towards the door waving her hands in the air. The woman caught the man’s attention but by the time he turned around Isaac and I had already driven out of sight.

“How big is the staff at South View?” I asked.

“Just me, my supervisor, his assistant, and a couple of tellers, I think. I don’t know all their names just yet. Why?” Isaac laid back in his seat a little more, steering with one hand on the bottom of the wheel. He was relaxed. Cheery, even.
“I was just thinking maybe we should invite your boss and his assistant over sometime.”

He reached over and took my hand in his and I felt my shoulders relax a bit at his touch. “Absolutely. That’s a great idea. I’ll run it by them soon.”

Isaac had been in a much better place since our fight yesterday morning. He’d driven all the way into town but turned back, after stopping to pick up a bouquet of flowers, and came home to me to apologize. I’d just made it home myself after my first meeting with Marie at the chapel, when he pulled into the driveway.

When he came inside he explained how he’s been overwhelmed with the move and career shift. But it wasn’t just that. He broke down and sobbed into my shoulder. It frightened me to see him so upset.

How had I not noticed he was hurting this much?

He admitted that he still worries sometimes that I might leave him one day. And this surprised me. He’d never expressed a concern like that before. I thought it was obvious how important he was to me. I spent all of my time with Isaac. We were married now. Where was I going to go?

He’d said, “I couldn’t shake this feeling that you were disappointed by all of this, and I just shut down. I just thought there was no way life with me would ever be good enough.”

Isaac never knew his birth parents. Despite having a seemingly decent childhood and relationship with his adopted dad, I understood that that particular wound may never fully heal and that he may need reassurance from me occasionally. I accepted his apology and promised to be more attentive. I’d try harder.
As we approached Rick’s shop, Isaac told me a little more about South View. How it was originally known as Nimrod Financial Holdings before South View Credit Union bought them out only last year when Lane swooped in.

“Locals had named it after Nimrod Morris who’d first founded the town, Morris Chapel, years ago but South View thought “Nimrod” sent the wrong message, so they came in, and shaped the place up. You gotta ease a place like this into the future, you know?” he said as he turned off highway 69 into a strip-mall.

“How’d you find all that out?” I asked, remembering my many failed attempts to find information about Morris Chapel online.

“Lane. Of course.”

“Right, right. Sorry.”

Rick’s shop was located in the center of three different stores, and it seemed to be the only business still operating. Dust coated the windows of the two other vacant spaces and was so thick I couldn’t make out much of anything inside. Heavy-duty chains were wrapped around both sets of door handles. Although Rick’s front door and shop windows were in slightly better condition, I wouldn’t have known it was open if it weren’t for the neon “Open” sign hanging over the veranda.

Isaac hugged me close to him as we walked through the front door and a bell announced our arrival.

“Rick?” Isaac called out into the, at first glance, empty store.

There was a shuffle, and then a clank like something metal and heavy had dropped to the concrete ground just to our right.
“Hey!” Rick hollered and jumped upright. He had been crouched behind the front counter and both me and Isaac jumped back a couple steps in surprise. “Apologies. I promise I didn’t mean to scare y’all,” he said, though laughing in a way that made me think that was exactly what he’d intended to do.

I first noticed Rick’s hair. It was salt and peppered with thick stripes of white along his temples. He didn’t have a very full beard, but his grey stubble was connected all the way up to his side burns and around his mouth.

“Well, you do seem a little pleased with yourself,” I joked.

“Jackie suggested we stop by,” Isaac started.

I looked up at him because his voice suddenly sounded more serious than it had moments before.

“Did she give you a heads up?” Isaac asked.

Rick’s eyes widened and he shook his head like Isaac had asked him something outlandish. “Just not in her character to do something like that. She likes to keep me on my toes, she does.”

Now this got Isaac laughing. He even chortled a little bit there at the end. I raised my eyebrows at him, questioning. He shook his head, still laughing, and shrugged.

“You know,” I interjected. “You two work so close to one another, you could meet up for lunch on occasion.”

Isaac’s soft laughing stopped short, and he made a grumbled sort of “humph” sound. Rick returned with a similar throaty noise.

“Do you mind if we take a look around?” Isaac asked.

“Lord, go right ahead. I don’t have nothin’ to hide,” he replied playfully.
Isaac split away from me and walked over to the far-left wall that was crowded with a series of ten-foot-tall, four-feet-wide rolling shelves maxed out with boxes of trinkets and carved out signs like the ones Jackie had told me about. These rolling shelves wrapped all the way around the back wall, bleeding into the far-right side as well.

The shop was actually quite large but overflowing with product. I wondered if Rick had busted through the walls and extended his shop into the other two stores on either side of him. There were shelves and bins filled to the brim with hand carved birds, flowers, leaves, fish, dogs, cats, and miniature boats all around the perimeter of the store. In the center sat his larger works. Chairs, benches, long kitchen tables, bookshelves, and night stands.

It was a bit chaotic, I thought. No real sense of organization to any of it. And there was sawdust everywhere from his workstation in the right-hand corner of the shop. I kept clearing my throat feeling as though particles of the stuff were lodged in my trachea. I ignored the tugging feeling in my lungs that signaled it could be something else.

I left my inhaler at home. Nothing I could do about it right now.

“Thanks for inviting us. And, again, for the rocking chair. Really, it’s stunning,” I said.

Isaac half shouted from across the room, “A true craftsman. Tell me again, Rick, how long have you worked with wood?”

Rick walked around the counter. He was quite thin but did not appear weak or frail. In his right arm he carried a beige stool with what appeared to be ivy—stained a deeper brown than the rest of the stool—carved all the way up and around the four legs. They stood out nicely. There was still some sawdust on the top and as he approached, he
brushed it away then placed it next to a dresser on the center floor. He was wearing jeans and a plaid button up under a black smock with his name embroidered—in perfect cursive—on the front pocket. I imagined with a brim hat and boots he’d look like a proper cowboy.

He dusted his hands off on his smock, “Hmm, about twenty years now. As long as I’ve lived here. I started when I was forty-six or so. Not very long, I guess, compared to some, though I do alright.”

Twenty years. I remembered Marie had said a woman had lived in our house twenty years ago. That she’d left but had gotten in a pretty serious accident. Maybe Rick and Jackie had known her.

No, the rational voice in my head shouted—reminding me to leave it alone.

I closed my eyes for just a moment, taking a quick breath in and out to refocus. I’d promised myself and Isaac that I would let all that go. It wasn’t right to worry so much over people and stories I’d never know or understand. I would keep the question to myself.

“Well, I’d say so. Better than most actually. We’ve never owned a piece of furniture so beautiful. Yes?” Isaac said, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. His tone reminded me of those door-to-door salesmen or telemarketers. He spoke like he was trying to sell Rick something. It made me want to cringe but instead, I nodded my head. He must be nervous. I’d leave him be about it.

“Well,” Rick began, “I’m glad y’all liked the rocking chair. I don’t make pieces like that very often. Awful nice of your husband there to plan something like that. All custom and everything. Don’t get that very often out here.”
“I bet you make wonderful things for Jackie,” I said.

Rick laughed. “Oh, she comes in here and takes what she pleases.”

“Ha!” Isaac snickered. “Sounds about right,” and then winked in Rick’s direction.

I scoffed and turned away from Isaac.

What was that about?

I walked over to a dining room table just a few feet from where Rick had placed that stool. As I passed Rick, I rolled my eyes but grinned, so he’d know I wasn’t all that mad. Though, Isaac’s comment and weird chuckling seemed riddled with misogyny, I didn’t want to appear too serious. Didn’t want to make Rick uncomfortable.

“Yeah,” Rick began with furrowed brows, “I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant she knows what she wants. I mean, this is all for her anyways, really.” He gestured out in front of him, panning across the room. “Anything she wants.”

“See, you’re a romantic, Rick,” I said.

He waved me away, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Isaac walked around to the back wall. His phone was pressed up just inches from his face. He was making these little tutting sounds and flaring his nostrils. I could tell he was irritated with something.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

He huffed. “Can’t count on anyone. Have to do everything yourself. Excuse me,” he said, pointing to his phone as he made his way across the room and out the front door.

“I’ll just be a moment.”

Rick and I stood in silence for a few moments after the bell dinged again. I cleared my throat to fill the stillness and because the tickle had returned.
“Do you want to see my work station? I’m in the middle of working on a coatrack. It’s my first one, surprisingly. Someone came in a few weeks ago asking for one. I’d never thought about it. Didn’t know people still wanted things like that,” Rick said.

“Yeah. I’d love to see what you’re working on.”

We moved towards the back right-hand corner where his bench, electric table saw, and piles of different colors of wood sat. A thin sheet of dust and wood chips coated the floor and his work table. I wished I’d had a mask to keep from breathing it all in. The tickle was starting to feel undeniably like a wheeze, like someone had wrapped a rubber band around my lungs.

“Here it is,” he said, dragging it out of the corner. The wood was a deep reddish-brown with beautiful variations of the color in striated lines up and down the piece. It was in the shape of a thin, bare tree. Short little limbs poked out along the sides and the stump was a tangled mess of roots that climbed their way up the rack.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “I bet that guy who came in inquiring about a coat rack would have never expected something like this.”

Rick laughed. “Yeah, probably not. I don’t know. I’m tryin’ to make that stump work, but it gets more messy each time I touch it.”

“It’s funny how that works, huh? The more we pick the more complicated everything gets. Freshman year of college, my professor told me I had a habit of ‘working my portraits to death.’”

“Ah, what do they know? So, you’re an artist? Where’d you go to school?”
“Just a state school back in Murfreesboro. I only graduated five months ago now with a degree in Art History. It’d turned out I wasn’t very good at leaving things alone. I wasn’t meant to be an artist. Not like that, anyway. I’m not sure how I’m going to be able to use that degree out here, though.”

Rick moved the coat rack back where he got it from then turned and leaned against the wall. “It’s not art exactly and there’s certainly no history worth mentioning but Jackie’s been telling me I needed to hire someone to freshen this place up. If you want something to do while you’re looking around, you could give her a shot.”

“Really? I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“I’m not looking for a great transformation. Just something more presentable, organized, I guess. I’m all over the place, as you can see.”

I thought about it. I was completely unqualified for such a task. Where would I even begin? I wondered, glancing over my shoulder at the mounds of furniture stacked on top of each other sporadically about the place. If he wasn’t asking for a great transformation, a little organizing would take me what, a week, maybe two at the most? But I guessed any amount of money was better than none.

“I don’t have a car. My husband will need it during the week. I won’t be able to...” I started to answer.

Rick straightened up and crossed his arms. The way he looked at me reminded me of my mom. I thought of the time I ended up in the ICU for my asthma a few years ago, how she’d pursed her lips and furrowed her brows while I’d tried to explain why I hadn’t told anyone I needed help.
There was a period of time, when I stopped taking nearly all of my asthma medications. My allergy pills, nose sprays, corticosteroids, and prednisone—I quit it all. But not my albuterol inhaler. I knew there was no lie I could tell myself that would allow me to cut that out completely. I’d just take my inhaler five or six times an hour if I was feeling bad, a treatment every three hours, followed by a steaming hot shower and tell myself that this was easier than before.

I’d just grown tired. My whole life I’d been tied to this strict regimen, having to suffer the side effects of a heap of medications I felt half the time didn’t help me. Not enough, at least. The weight gain, the insomnia, the mood swings, I’d just wanted a break from it all. Unfortunately, my alternative lifestyle only lasted a few months before I got very sick. My determination to train my body to heal, as my healthy friends did, nearly killed me. It was stupid. A part of me had always known that. I’d lost the weight though and for a while, that had made it worth it. Rick looked at me now as my mom had that evening in the hospital.

“Well, I can drive you. We’re neighbors after all,” he said.

I stepped back and looked over at the front door. Isaac was standing just outside. It looked as though he was yelling at someone over the phone. He held his free hand out flat and struck down into the air multiple times like he was chopping something into pieces.

“Sorry,” Rick interjected gruffly. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable or nothin’. I know you don’t know me and my wife very well yet. You can think about it all, of course. Take your time.”
“I promise,” I said, picking at the now loose thread on the sleeve of my cardigan, “you have not made me uncomfortable. The opposite really. I’d love to give it a shot. Maybe I should talk about it with Jackie first? She might have some ideas. And Isaac, of course. I should run it by him, and let him know.”

“Sure, yes. Jackie will have many ideas and suggestions,” Rick chuckled then quickly brushed past me, heading back to the front counter. “I was in the middle of looking for something Jackie had asked me to give you when y’all got here. I’d gotten it out this morning, I thought, but have already misplaced it. Told ya I needed help,” he joked.

I followed but edged closer to the front door where Isaac stood. I’d hoped to catch a name or some kind of identifying information. I wanted to know who he was so angry at.

“Oh, but you guys already gave us the rocking chair,” I protested.

“Yeah, well, your husband paid me for that, didn’t he? This, I wouldn’t sell to anyone I called a friend.”

Outside, Isaac’s voice was garbled. He shouted, “No, do not talk to me like that. I’ve told you what I have. And if you—”

He glanced over and saw I was staring at him and immediately halted the conversation.

“This is done,” he said, hanging the phone up. He walked back inside, his eyes locked with mine the whole time. The frown had turned to a smile as he crossed through the doorway, but his eyes were strained, distant.

“Everything okay?” I asked.
“Oh, yeah, yeah. The caterer from our wedding sent me an email saying they’d misplaced our check and couldn’t find a copy of it on file. I got it straightened away though. I sent them my bank statement showing that the check was already deposited by *them*. Their mistake.”

Isaac leaned against the counter and brushed his fingers across his forehead, a habit he’d developed after years of letting his wavy hair grow out. He was still getting used to the new look too.

“Whatcha got there?” Isaac asked.

“Oh,” Rick said, and then walked back around the counter. “It’s a joke actually. Jackie thought you would find it funny, Dora.”

He handed me a wooden plaque about six inches wide that read, *Live, Laugh, Love.*
When I was eight years old, my mom signed me up for our neighborhood swim team—The Holly Hill Commodores. My sister, Ida, had already competed on the team for two years by then and was a strong swimmer, always placing in the top three of whatever category she was in. Even though Ida was nearly three years older than I was, all of the girls in the neighborhood practiced at the same time each morning—Monday through Friday—over summer break. The boys would immediately follow us. It was a small neighborhood, no need to separate them out any more than by gender it seemed.

I had enjoyed going to the swim meets last year but mostly because I enjoyed having the three-foot section of the t-shaped pool to myself for three hours every Saturday morning. I never got used to that alarm though. That quick but deafening blare that signaled the beginning of each heat like a crow’s angry cry. My body never adjusted to the sound.

I knew I was going to be an awful swimmer.

“I don’t see why you’re being so negative,” my mother said as she handed me a towel and my drawstring bag—a red sac with black spots like a lady bug. “You haven’t even tried it yet.”

My mom was tall and athletic like Ida. In truth, they looked so much alike. I always thought that in a few years, they’d get mistaken for sisters more often than Ida and I would. Their hair was golden brown and straight with slight waves at the ends—effortlessly beautiful and seemingly resistant to the summer humidity. I resembled my
father with dark brown curls and a heart-shaped face. We shared chestnut eyes, while Helen and Ida shared a silvery green pair.

It was not lost on me that my dad had not been home in several weeks, which was about the time when Mom’s interest in having me join the swim team began. It was the longest “work” trip my dad had ever been on, and I was starting to get worried.

When I brought it up to my sister a few nights before our first swim practice together, Ida told me that our parents were probably getting a divorce.

In a haze of fury and fear, I protested, “You’re such a liar, Ida! Stop lying!” I screamed this at my sister as I ran to the bathroom across the hall from our shared bedroom with my fingers in my ears. But my sister only teased me more from the other side of the door. “Come on,” she said, “don’t be such a baby. A lot of my friends’ parents are divorced. They get twice as many presents on their birthday’s and on holidays. Could be worse.”

Though I tried to deny it with all my might, my sisters words stuck with me for days. I couldn’t get the thought out of my head now that the horrible thing had been said out loud and as much as I didn’t want to admit it—something had been off between our parents for months. An uncomfortable silence had fallen between them at the dinner table that I had sensed but hadn’t known what to do with. Their only interest seemed to be in what Ida, and I were up to, not in each other.

After begging my mom to tell her the truth the night before practice, Mom finally admitted that they were taking some time apart but that my father promised to be back by the end of the month. A temporary separation, she’d said. Nothing to worry about.
“I already know how to swim,” I huffed. I swung the bag over one shoulder and copied my sister by draping the towel around my neck.

“I know you know how to swim, smarty pants. But you haven’t, you know, competed before. You might like being on a team. Make some new friends.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’ll be great,” Ida interjected. “But we’ve gotta go or we’ll be late! Coach will make us stay after for extra laps if we don’t hurry.”

I scrunched my nose at Ida but got on my bike, tiptoes balancing me on the ground.

“Besides, the doctor said this would be good for you. That it could help strengthen your lungs. You were so sick this past year, we’ve gotta try something new. Yes?” Helen said.

Or it’s just an activity to keep me distracted from your crumbling marriage, I thought bitterly.

My mother twirled the end of my ponytail and smoothed out the wispy bits around my ears. It was a habit of hers, fiddling with my hair like that and though, in public, I would swat her away or shirk her off, I actually found it quite soothing and would often fall asleep in my mother’s lap this way at home.

“But I’m too slow. I won’t be able to keep up,” I whispered.

“You’ll get faster. Now, go on. Have fun!” she gave me a nudge forward on my bike and my sister and I sped off.
The clubhouse was only a half mile bike ride from our house. When we turned on to Riverwood Drive, we approached a two-story colonial building with black and white, skull and crossbones flags plastered to the four windows across the second floor.

Magnolia trees lined the road all the way to the parking lot out front and yellow-green leaves the size of my shoes coated the ground underneath me—they were wet and slimy from the recent bout of storms. I felt my wheels spin under me a couple of times as we veered off the road and parked our bikes next to everyone else’s under the shade of the trees.

“Alright, now. Hurry up. All the good kickboards will have been taken by now. Might be able to find one with only one set of teeth marks in it.” Ida dropped her bike on its side and the chain vibrated against the frame.

Ida was confident, you could see it in how she walked. She carried an aura of wisdom, of power. And she only laughed when she thought something was funny, she didn’t bother in the coaxing of anyone’s ego. Though some would call my sister rude, I found that Ida’s bluntness often drew in the good ones and pushed away the bad ones—a trait I often wished I had. A radar for good and bad people.

I never was able to emulate my sister’s confidence, but I did feel we shared a similar sense of humor. I thought the most obvious sign that we were related was the sound of our honking laughter. When we’d get real worked up, it would come out in huge snorts of the same octave—definitely sisters despite our different appearances.

I followed Ida but stopped in my tracks when we got to the top of the cement staircase leading down to the pool. The girls on the Holly Hill Commodores were sitting around the edge of the pool with their feet in the water, all wearing the same swim suit,
red and black with swirls like smoke across the belly. Some were different shades of red or pink—bleached by the sun and the sour stink of chlorine coming from the crystal water.

“I’m scared,” I admitted, feeling like I wanted to cry suddenly.

I couldn’t help but notice how at ease all the other girls seemed sitting hunched over the pools edge like that. I looked down at my own body, a rounded tummy, plump thighs, and chubby arms. I saw no one out in the crowd who looked much like me. The biggest girl out there was still smaller than me.

I had started to become aware of my size after Clyde Abernathy, from my second-grade class, told me that I should try Weight Watchers like his mama. He shared this bit of information with me after I failed to connect every finger with my thumb around my wrist in front of the whole class—Clyde’s ultimate fat or skinny test. It was the first time someone had called me fat without directly saying the word. I suppressed Clyde’s words and laughed along with everyone else like I was in on the joke. I wanted to distance myself from that memory as quickly as possible.

“Scared? Why on earth would you be scared? Don’t be so dramatic, it’s just swim practice. And like you said, you already know how to swim. It’ll be a piece of cake,” Ida said reaching out for me to take her hand.

The blood rushed to my cheeks, and I wrapped the towel around my waist, wanting to cover my bare legs. Before taking my sister’s hand, I picked at the straps of my suit, trying to adjust it so that none of the fat around my back or armpits spilled out. I wanted to flatten myself.
My mom said that the many rounds of prednisone I’d been on over the past few years was what caused me to gain so much weight, but I’d been bigger than the girls my age for as long as I could remember. I had just started to get to an age where it could no longer be excused as “baby fat.”

Though my mom always offered words of encouragement each time I got anxious or upset in a dressing room after a pair of jeans failed me, I never felt understood or comforted by my mother’s words. “You’re beautiful as you are. You’re not fat. You’re too hard on yourself.”

My mom could hardly relate, I often remembered thinking, having always fit the bill of whatever beauty standard was most prolific at the time and skinny was always in style.

“Ida, Dora!” a woman in a green visor and a Holly Hill Commodores tie dyed shirt yelled as we stepped through the gate. “I was getting ready to call your mom. Hurry up! Grab a board, pick a lane!”

Ida grabbed her swim cap and threw the rest of her stuff on the pool chair near the entrance. Her friends waved her over to the lane furthest to the back and Ida fast-walked to them—heels first and arms bent up like wings, swinging side to side. Ida put on her swim cap in one quick and easy stroke. Her friends waved a kickboard in the air, it seemed they’d saved her one.

I undid my lady bug bag to find a pair of pink goggles, a zip lock baggie of Gold Fish, my inhaler, and finally a swim cap of my own. I put it up to my forehead, but it snapped back at me right away, stinging my palms.
“You don’t have to wear it for practice if you don’t want to,” a little girl behind me said, wearing one of the sun-bleached swimsuits. “They give me a headache. I only wear them for the meets.”

I laughed. “Thank you.”

“Wanna swim in the same lane? You’re Dora, right?” the girl asked. I recognized her. We were in the same grade but had never been in the same class.

“Yeah, thanks. You’re Nia?”

She smiled and nodded.

I turned to put the cap back in my bag and just in case, I took two quick puffs of my inhaler. I did that a lot before doing any kind of physical activity. The extra puffs were like security. A way to buy some extra time before my airways started to fill with mucus and make it impossible for me to keep up. Probably improper use of the rescue device but I didn’t care. I needed all the help I could get.

I reluctantly abandoned my towel on the chair with the rest of my sisters’ things and followed Nia to the small stack of kickboards left over by the three-foot. They did, indeed, all contain little nibble marks on them. Two of them even had a couple chunks missing.

“Are people snacking on the boards or something?” I asked showing Nia one with a piece taken out.

Nia placed it back on the ground, holding it between her pointer finger and thumb like it was a soiled diaper and picked up a less mutilated board. “My mom calls people like that Nervous Nelly’s,” and she imitated nibbling at an edge.
She grabbed my hand and led me to lane two, closest to the front gate. I recognized many of the other girls in our lane, we were all about the same age, in the same grade. As I looked around, it seemed that everyone had naturally separated themselves by age anyways—via swimming lanes. Youngest to oldest.

The woman in the visor trotted over to us, bullhorn in hand. “Alright, girls!” she shouted into it, “I’m Coach Beth, over on the other side of the pool is my assistant, Coach Viola. She’s gonna be my right-hand lady this summer.”

I hadn’t noticed her before. The woman on the other side of the pool was much younger than Coach Beth but likely too old to be on the neighborhood swim team anymore. Maybe high school or college age. She wore neon pink volleyball shorts over her red and black swimsuit. She waved and everyone cheered back, “Good morning, Coach Viola!”

Coach Beth clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention again. “Come on. We’re gonna warm up on the boards. One-hundred meters, four laps! Let’s go!”

She blew on the orange whistle around her neck, and everyone took turns jumping into the pool, waiting about three seconds before falling into line.

Before I knew it, Nia was up. “Just kick hard,” Nia said, turning to me before jumping in and splashing away like everyone else. She must have seen the panic on my face.

I waited too long before I started counting to three and the coach started blowing her whistle again. “Come on, Dora. Go, go, go!”

Another girl from my grade, Chrissy, was behind me.

“Ugh!” she groaned.
I closed my eyes and jumped into the pool. When my head poked above the surface again, water lapped back into my mouth and the chlorine seared the back of my throat. I coughed and spat up the water as I steadied my chest and stomach on the kickboard.

I did what Nia had said, I kicked really hard and the water bursted behind me like firecrackers, getting bigger and bigger the harder I kicked, yet somehow, I didn’t seem to be going very fast. Already, Chrissy was right at my heels. I panicked and suddenly stopped and pressed myself up against the rope on the right side so that Chrissy could pass me.

I should have gone last, I thought and was embarrassed.

“You don’t stop in the middle of the lane, are you crazy? I can pass you just fine,” Chrissy shouted over her shoulder.

Chrissy and I had just finished up the second grade together—Mrs. Walters class. Chrissy had seemed nice enough at first. Had even called me smart once in a group project which made me uncomfortable but in a good way. It was unexpected. I always assumed that if my fellow classmates used any nicknames to describe me that they would’ve been much more unkind. “Thank God we have someone like Dora in our group, am I right?” Chrissy had said to the rest of their group as she handed me a poster board and container of markers. It became clearer later on in the year that Chrissy’s flattery might have had more to do with her wanting me to bear the brunt of responsibility on group projects than kindness. It was pathetic but I didn’t mind so much. I could pretend that Chrissy’s words were genuine.
I heard the whistle blowing again and Coach Beth’s garbled shouting. The water roared in my ears and though I couldn’t make out anything she was saying, I was certain it was I who was being yelled at again. Chrissy was already at the other end of the pool, lap one completed, I was only halfway there. On my left, Nia was coming from the opposite direction, on her second lap now. She waved over at me.

“Like this!” Nia said pointing back towards her legs. She held them together, straight, flat, and underwater—barely making any waves.

I straightened out my legs instead of bending them at the knees and beat them underwater as Nia had done and immediately I picked up speed. My chest perked up and my arms felt more solid on the board. By the time I finished my first lap I was starting to feel more comfortable. The first girl in line had been on track to lap me just moments before but now I was just a few feet behind Chrissy again.

I looked to my left and watched how the other girls passed each other in that middle section between the right and left side of the lane if they were going faster than the person in front of them. Like what Chrissy had done earlier. I kept kicking, trying to maintain my speed, but was suddenly inches from Chrissy. I was going faster, could pass her even. Something in my gut warned me against passing Chrissy, but it seemed everyone was doing it. Not a big deal. I never imagined I’d be able to keep up. I wasn’t even feeling out of breath yet. The extra puffs of my inhaler had done what they needed to.

I directed my board a little to the left and inched forward. When I was an arm’s length in front of her, Chrissy leaned over and smacked me in the arm with the foam
board. It knocked me off and the board I was on shot into the air, landing in the next lane over, only barely missing an even younger swimmer’s head.

I treaded water in the middle of the lane and felt utter panic creeping into my chest. My heart raced and hot tears rushed down my cheeks. People were moving so quickly around me and the sloshing water was so loud and my board was in the other lane just floating there—I didn’t know what to do.

Coach Beth moved over to the side of the pool closest to me. There was just one lane between me and Coach now. “Dora! Dora!” she called, waving her arms way above her head to get her attention. “Get your board, and then just swim to the end of the lane and wait there!”

I looked around and saw that the older girls in the lanes next to me had already finished the warm up. For a moment, I met my sisters gaze and I thought for a moment that Ida might jump out of the pool and drag me out, but she just pointed back to Coach Beth as if to say, *do what she said.*

I waited until Nia, and then Chrissy passed me on what was their final lap now and popped over into the other lane to grab my board. The welt on my arm throbbed and I reached up for it instinctively, a knot had already begun to form.

When I made my way back into my original lane, board in hand finally, I was petrified by the sudden silence. Everyone had finished. And they were waiting on me.

The idea of being the only one kicking and splashing down the lane with all eyes on me was nauseating but I couldn’t very well get out of the pool any other way, so I got back on my board and kicked, doing my best to not make any noise and suffer any further embarrassment.
“Hey!” Coach Viola shouted to everyone as I approached the end of the line and settled behind Chrissy. Coach Viola must have circled around the pool sometime during the chaos. “Take a minute, return your boards, and then we’re moving on. Next is breaststroke for fifty meters, followed by freestyle for another fifty.”

A chorus of thuds sounded as everyone tossed their kickboards out of the pool and onto the cement floor. I passed mine to Nia who threw it over the edge for me. I couldn’t risk throwing it and it landing somewhere it wasn’t meant to or worse, accidentally hitting one of the girls. I thought I’d die.

I wanted to get out with the boards and go home. How could I go on for another hour after what just happened? I looked over at Ida, who had been watching me like a hawk since she’d finished the warm up, and mouthed, I wanna go home. Ida’s shoulders sank and she shook her head, pointing to the clock on the front of the shed behind the diving board and mouthed back, we just started.

“Excuse me,” Nia said as she tried to move past Chrissy. “Can I get behind you?”

Chrissy looked back at me, her eyes landing on the arm she bruised before meeting my face again. “I guess so. Dora needs all the help she can get, huh?”

The other girls in the lane snickered, looking back and forth between me and Nia.

“It’s just the warm up,” Chrissy started, turning to give me a pat on the shoulder, “you’ll get the hang of it, Dory. Don’t worry.”

I looked to Ida who quickly pulled her goggles over her head, and then got into position at the front of the line. One hand behind her gripping the edge of the pool wall behind her.
I always wondered if Ida had heard this interaction or if she’d seen Chrissy hit me. If so, she never mentioned it and I never brought it up to anyone. It was too embarrassing at the time.

“Alright, everyone,” Coach Beth began, “Three, two, one!” She blew hard on her whistle again, signaling the beginning of the next round.
Chapter Nine

Isaac had been quiet, careful, and hadn’t disturbed me on his way out for his first day of work. I awoke, an hour later to a text from him: Good morning, beautiful. There’s a dress in a plastic bag hanging on the back of the closet door. Your favorite color and Nia approved (surprise!). I picked it up a couple days before we moved, I just couldn’t decide on the right time to give it to you. It could be fun to dress up for dinner tonight, but I’ve saved the receipt in case it doesn’t work out. No pressure. I love you more than life. Truly, I don’t know what I’d do without you. Text me when you wake up.

Rick and Jackie invited us over for a “welcome to the cul-de-sac” dinner. I supposed tonight we’d wind up discussing Rick’s offer to let me organize his shop for an indeterminate amount of money and time. I hadn’t really talked about it with Isaac yet, the logistics and all, but he seemed indifferent to the idea. “Whatever you want to do, I’ll support,” he’d said briefly in the car ride home after the trip to Rick’s shop.

I read through his message again. He’d reached out to Nia for advice on a dress? I had a hard time picturing them interacting on their own. They had only met a handful of times before and always with me there to mediate the conversation. I felt as though they were from two different worlds, different lives lived—not meant to collide.

I hadn’t spoken to Nia since the wedding and before that it had been months since we’d hung out just the two of us. When I started seeing Isaac last September, and then shortly after Nia started seeing Miguel, we sort of fell out of touch. There was no fight, no betrayal. Things were just different. I had been happy to see Nia again last week (god was it just last week that I was married?) but there was something between us now. An
oppressive silence, though, the voice in my head had been loud enough—why can’t you talk to her? talk to her, say you’re sorry, talk to her, talk to her.

I wasn’t even quite sure what I felt so sorry about, but guilt weighed heavy in my stomach when I locked eyes with my childhood friend across a picnic table full of mini quiches and pastries. I could think of nothing to say to her which was jarring. It was a problem we never used to have but seeing her there had felt a bit like saying goodbye, like a chapter of my life had closed. And like children again, like we were back on the Holly Hill Commodores, we simply waved to each other. Nia ushered a quick congratulations, and then she and Miguel were gone. It hadn’t felt like the ending a fourteen-year long friendship deserved.

I pushed myself out of bed and shuffled across the floor quickly, my slippers slapping against the wooden floor.

Our closet was in the left-hand corner of the room which I assumed must have been renovated by one of the previous homeowners based on the exposed caulking and wood filler still cracked and exposed in the crevices of the walls.

A shoddy job.

The back wall of the now walk-in closet seemed to extend into the hallway bathroom on the other side of the wall. The bathroom was a little cramped now, only room for a shower, a toilet, and sink with vanity. The previous owner must have decided that was worth the sacrifice for a more spacious closet. I’m not sure I totally agree. I was pretty sure there used to be room for a tub before, and I loved a nice tub. It would’ve had to be gutted and closed up in order for the closet to take its shape.
When I opened the door, I heard the crinkle of plastic first as the dress slid against the door. The dress was plum purple, a baby doll dress with a square neckline that met the top of my knees when I held it against me. It was chiffon material with long mesh sleeves that puffed out slightly at the shoulders. It really was perfect. The kind of dress I always wanted but never had the courage to buy for myself.

“Please, fit me,” I whispered as I pulled at the plastic around the hanger.

I took a deep breath and flipped over the label. While I was grateful he had picked out the right size, because at least I would not have to suffer the embarrassment of one of his gifts not fitting me, my cheeks flushed red at the thought of him going through my clothes to determine my size. I would never be long and thin like Ida. Or Isaac.

Was he secretly disappointed? I often wondered.

Isaac had witnessed me struggle with both my asthma and my body this past spring after getting put on two back to back rounds of high milligram prednisone—a drug with vicious short and long-term side effects. I’d gotten sick with a persistent and enduring virus and gained a significant amount of weight in just over a month’s time—compliments of the lifesaving medication available to me. I suppose I should be grateful, though it might kill me one day anyway. I couldn’t be sure how much weight I’d gained, I’d avoided scales at all costs, but I’d had to buy a new pair of jeans.

I never explicitly told Isaac it had gotten to that point. He’d supported me and comforted me when I was overcome with flashbacks from my childhood and consumed with resentment toward my body. He pretended not to notice any of it for me. I was still carrying some of that weight. I knew it and I’m sure he did too, whether he would admit it or not.
I carried the dress out of the closet, with my phone still tucked away under my right arm, the bag dragging on the floor behind me. I went over to the floor length mirror we had laid against the right-hand corner wall of our bedroom and held the dress in front of me once again, this time snapping a picture for Isaac.

*I love it and you, I wrote. Can’t wait to see you tonight.*

I went to the texting thread between me and Nia next.

It was nice to hear that she and Isaac had been getting along, though. Maybe Nia would want to come and visit me after all. Maybe the door wasn’t completely shut.

*Thank you, Nia, for helping out Isaac and thank you for coming to our wedding. It was so great to see you. And then I started to type, *I miss you*, but erased that part. I didn’t want to pressure Nia. She was living her own life now, too.

We all were.

My phone buzzed in my hand, startling me. I hadn’t expected a text back from Isaac or Nia that quickly. But it kept buzzing. I threw the dress on top of the unmade bed and looked at the screen. It read: UNKNOWN CALLER.

Before I even answered, I felt certain that it was Lizzie calling. When in doubt it always seemed to be Lizzie behind unexpected calls, texts, and requests. I was hardly surprised anymore. More annoyed than anything.

“Why didn’t I block you?” I whined, rubbing a circle along my right temple. If something more happened, and the harassing messages started up again, the police would wonder why I hadn’t told Lizzie to stop contacting me after that first text message the other day. The one I didn’t even bother to delete. They’d want to know why I’d kept it from them and from Isaac for so long.
I thought if I ignored Lizzie, there would be no need to bring it up, no need to put any more stress on our fresh marriage, and no need to deal with police reports again. But I should’ve known better than to think Lizzie would stop there. I needed to put an end to this.

“Hello?” I said, just above a whisper.

On the other end of the line, I heard what sounded like a screen door slamming shut, and then footsteps pounding on a wooden floor. It was several moments before another voice responded back—and out of breath—with, “Hi.”

“Um, is this …?” I stammered.

“Lizzie. Yeah. You didn’t block me,” she said and let out a sigh of relief.

“What do you want?”

“Look, I—, I know what you’ve been told. What you think of me. But Dora, I really need to talk to you, and I need you to listen.”

Her voice was not what I expected. Based on all the hateful messages I’d read in the screenshots Isaac saved over the years—and the ones I’d seen pasted on my own online profiles—I assumed there would be no trace of kindness in Lizzie’s voice, that she’d be gruff and abrasive. But the way Lizzie said my name made me feel something else. Something I couldn’t quite name. She felt personable. She sounded like any other woman I knew. Like my mom. Like my sister. Like Nia. Like she was happy to hear from me.

“You have to leave us alone, Lizzie. I really shouldn’t be talking to you. Isaac just wants to move on from all this. He doesn’t want to continue to file reports and press charges but if you keep pushing he will,” I said.
I considered reminding Lizzie of the time she was arrested and charged with distribution of revenge pornography when Isaac was still a minor. That would either scare her off or enrage her further. It was hard to determine her next move. Granted, the charge hadn’t entirely stuck on her record as far as I knew since she’d also been a minor when it happened, but still, she was convicted and had to complete community service.

“You don’t understand,” she pleaded. “You don’t know Isaac. You’re in danger.”

“In danger? Why would I be in danger?”

“He sent me something. And” she paused, clearing her throat, “I think it’s you in the picture.”

Now I started to feel doubtful about the hint of sweetness I’d heard before in Lizzie’s voice.

“He’s always showed me the messages you’ve sent him through those fake accounts. He only ever told you to stop contacting him. I’ve seen all of it. Why on earth would he go behind my back to talk to you, just to send you a picture of me?” I asked.

I glanced out the window and saw Jackie sitting in her rocking chair on the front patio. When I looked in her direction, Jackie waved. I wiggled my fingers back at her and quickly stepped out of view.

“That’s not true. It’s not—Dora, I need you to meet me somewhere. Where are you?”

“How can I believe anything you’re saying? For all I know, this picture might not even exist. Isaac and I are married now, Lizzie. There’s no reason you should get yourself in so much trouble over a guy you once liked in high school. Especially one that doesn’t like you back.”
My cheeks were flushed red and hot. I knew I was being cruel, but my mind was suddenly flooded with all of the threatening and mean messages Lizzie had sent me and my family over the last year and I was angry.

I thought back to the first time Lizzie commented a death threat on one of my Instagram photo’s. It was a photo of Isaac and I out with my family for Ida’s twenty-fifth birthday dinner. She’d written in the comments, “If I see you out with him again, I’ll kill you and anyone standing in my way. Hi, Ida.”

Since the account that left the threat hadn’t contained Lizzie’s name or any other identifying information on the page, there was no way for me to prove it was Lizzie who’d threatened me, my family, and Isaac. Even still, everyone knew it was her. Even the officers I spoke to when I was filing out the report thought so. There was a pattern of behavior. The laws just hadn’t caught up to the seemingly boundless parameters of social media.

Though the police provided me and my family with protection on those three days following the threat, they couldn’t arrest Lizzie or charge her with anything. My mom was furious at me for this. She’d declared that I’d put her family in danger by sticking beside Isaac. That I should know better than to believe Isaac was innocent in all of this. She said it was all too weird. Nonsensical. That I was naïve.

I hated that word. Naïve. It always felt so fucking condescending.

I agreed with my mom and Ida that the situation was strange but how could I ignore all the times I’d seen Isaac suffer because of Lizzie’s dominating presence online. Each time he heard from her, it was like she reopened a wound within him. He’d lay low for several days after an incident and had told me on multiple occasions that he didn’t
feel he deserved to be with me or with anyone at all. Not if being with him meant the
people he loved had to go through all this. He felt guilty. But he never got angry. Never
yelled or lashed out at Lizzie. Never even got frustrated with the cops who demanded
quite a bit from both me and Isaac but never were able to offer up any solutions to the
problem themselves.

I often thought that Isaac felt bad for Lizzie. Like he blamed himself somehow for
her behavior.

Nothing ever came of the threat Lizzie made online and she never attempted to
confront me in person, nor Isaac. Eventually, the different threats Lizzie hurled at me
began to feel empty. I was worried and unnerved by the influx of messages in general but
felt Lizzie was someone who had a lot more confidence behind a keyboard than in
person. That made the whole thing a bit easier to swallow. And now that I’m off social
media entirely, it was easy to forget about. I wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing.

There was something, though, that I couldn’t shake now that I was finally
speaking with Lizzie. This woman, who’d been like a phantom for so long was suddenly
real and something felt off. Wrong. I didn’t fear Lizzie the way Isaac seemed to.
Skeptical, yes, but scared? No.

“The last time Isaac messaged me from an account that had his real name in the
handle I was fifteen,” Lizzie said. “But I know it’s from him. It always is. And I can’t
send you the picture. You know why I can’t do that. He’d put me in jail for certain if he
ever found out.”

“Jesus. What? More revenge porn? Well, how am I supposed to confirm whether
it’s me or not? And how can you prove that it was Isaac who sent it to you?” I asked.
“Meet with me. But you can’t—Dora, you can’t tell him that I called you. You can’t tell him that you’re gonna see me.”

“I haven’t agreed to anything. I trust Isaac. I married him. Lizzie, there’s a digital footprint. For ten years, you’ve harassed and stalked Isaac online. Threatened his past girlfriends, their friends, and families. My friends and family. How do you expect me to believe anything you say?”

“Dora, please. I don’t know anyone else that’s ever been this close to him. If you won’t listen to me, I’ll find another way.”

“So, you go right back to threatening me after just a little bit of pushback on your story?”

“No, that’s not what I—”

“I shouldn’t have answered the phone. I should’ve blocked you. Don’t call me or text me again. Next time I’ll tell Isaac and we’ll go to the police.”

I hung up the phone and tossed it on the bed. The hair on the back of my neck rose, tickling me, and my head jerked back to the front window. I suddenly remembered Jackie. I moseyed back over to the window and peaked over the curtain. Jackie was still out there, in the rocking chair, but she wasn’t looking in my direction anymore. Not now, at least.

I closed the curtains. Maybe Isaac and Marie were right. Privacy might not be as easy to come by as I’d originally thought.
Chapter Ten

At seven o’clock, Isaac and I were dressed and ready for dinner with the Katz’s.

“How do I look?” Isaac asked, stepping out of the hall bathroom, walking towards the bedroom.

I was standing in front of the mirror, wearing my new dress, and pinning half of my hair back with two plastic flower clips I’d found dumped in one of my old purses yesterday when he stepped into view. He was wearing a black blazer, matching slim fit pants, and a white button-down tucked in. He looked handsome. And happy—it made me feel even more guilty about the conversation I’d had with Lizzie. That it was a secret between us now.

Would he forgive me if he ever found out I went behind his back? Would I forgive him if the roles were reversed? I wasn’t sure—so much was uncertain—and that scared me. I ought to tell him everything. I knew that. If I didn’t, Lizzie likely would, and I’d have no cover for my betrayal—there would be no excuse. I had hoped that our phone call might be enough to give her the closure she needed but it was clear from the way our conversation escalated that that wasn’t going to be the case. Lizzie seemed determined, forceful. She wasn’t going to give up easy.

I would pick a better time to come forward with the truth though. Not tonight. I didn’t want to ruin our evening. But I’d do it sometime soon. Isaac was all I had now. I had to make this work.

“You look incredible,” I said turning around to face him. “Like a movie star.”
He walked further into the room, until he was just a few feet away from me. He tilted my head back and kissed me softly, once on the lips, and once on my cheek.

“You ready for this? Making friends with the neighbors? Our neighborly duty?” he joked.

“I am. I really like Jackie and Rick.”

“Yeah, I think Rick really liked you too.”

“Oh, quit.” I nudged him. “He reminds me a lot of my mom, actually. They have a similar demeanor, I guess. I don’t know, maybe that’s weird.”

“Yes, well, we don’t really know him. And you should tell me if he ever makes you uncomfortable. About anything. You don’t have to take that job if you don’t want to. I told you, I’ve got you.”

“I know you do but I’m strong too. If there’s a problem, I’ll tell you. I swear.” I tried to keep my face straight as I pushed Lizzie into the far corner of my mind.

He moved one of his hands from my shoulder to the back of my neck, brushing his thumb across my jawline.

“I know you will,” he said and kissed the side of my neck.

“Okay, easy now.” I pushed him back playfully with two fingers on his lips.

“We’re gonna be late.”

“Alright, alright,” he groaned. He backed up slowly and leaned against the doorframe. “What do you say we have a shot of that tequila my boss sent me home with before we head over?”

I gritted my teeth and recoiled slightly at the idea.

He held his hands together, as if in prayer, and pouted his lips.
“I don’t know,” I started. “I got so sick that last time we drank. I haven’t really been able to think about it since without getting nauseous.”

“Come on. Just one. Please. Take a shot with your husband.”

I rolled my eyes, but my cheeks flushed at ‘your husband.’

“Ugh, why so pushy?”

“I’m not pushy. Why does anyone drink, Dora? To relax, have fun. Plus, you’re different with a little alcohol in you,” he said, a slight grin inched across his face.

I cocked my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“You’re more…” he trailed off, thinking of the right descriptor, “wild.”

“Wild?” Not the word I would have ever used to describe myself.

I really couldn’t remember much from the last time we’d drank together. It was about a week before our engagement, and it was the first time I’d ever gotten so drunk I blacked out. I couldn’t remember anything except my first drink that night. The waitress, dressed in a beaded flapper dress to match the twenties theme of the bar Isaac had taken me to brought me a lemon drop cocktail—her recommendation. I woke up in my bed that next morning with no recollection at all of how I’d gotten home and the worst headache of my life. I wasn’t too keen to relive that.

“Yes. You weren’t worrying over every little thing, you lived more in the moment. It was nice to see you let loose like that.”

But I don’t remember.

“You think I worry too much?” I asked instead.

He raised his eyebrows as if to say, are you serious?
I placed my hands over my eyes but was careful not to smudge any of my makeup.

“Okay, fine,” I said, dropping my hands down to my side. “But I want to remember the night this time. So just one.”

I held up my pointer finger for emphasis.

Isaac fist-pumped the air as he turned to grab the bottle and shot glasses downstairs. But just before he reached the end of the hall, he spun around, facing me.

“Forget something?” I teased.

The lights were off in the hall, I had not yet replaced the busted bulb in the overhead fixture. Isaac’s face was shaded, only the light from the bedroom kept him from being lost in the darkness. He raised his hands, his pointer fingers, and thumbs in the shape of L’s, framing his face.

“Click,” he muttered, as he slightly bent one finger, and then turned and continued on downstairs.

Rick and Jackie’s home was pristine—as I remembered and expected. It smelled of lavender scented candles and clean linen upon entry but as we followed Jackie into the kitchen, it was pleasantly replaced with the warm aroma of butter, heavy cream, garlic, and something savory. I let out a satisfied sigh and hugged Isaac’s arm a little tighter. The light buzz from the shot of tequila had already begun to reach my head. A light airiness. It was nice—maybe he’d been right.

Rick and Jackie put together a whole three course southern meal. Deviled eggs were placed evenly around a two-tiered tray on their oval shaped dining table. A roast
chicken with steamed cabbage and carrots on silver platters and a ceramic bowl full of creamy mashed potatoes sat in the middle of the table. At the far end, a chocolate cake for dessert was set on a glass stand.

I hadn’t had a meal like that in so long. My mind played tug of war. On the one hand, I was eager to shovel down two bowlfuls of those potatoes and enjoy Jackie’s homemade cooking, but I could already feel traces of guilt bubbling in my stomach. I would follow everyone else’s lead—not eating any more or less.

“This is incredible. You made all of this today?” I asked as I took my seat at the table between Isaac and Jackie.

“Baked the cake last night, decorated it today. But yeah, everything else…” Jackie trailed off. She reached over and patted my hand.

I smiled in return.

“Like Christmas dinner,” Isaac added.

“Anyone want a glass of wine? We’ve also got tea, water, and, you know Jackie’s got that cherry Kool-Aid in the fridge,” Rick said, standing in the doorway between the kitchen and dining area.

Isaac dropped my hand and walked over next to Rick. “Oh, please, let me pour you all some wine. It’s the least I could do. I should’ve brought a bottle myself, but we’ve been a little busy unpacking. Haven’t had a chance to do a full grocery run.”

“Hey, no worries. But by all means, pour away, son. Skip me, though, would ya?”

“You sure?”

“Sure,” Rick said as he carried the pitcher of Kool-Aid over to the table and set it in front of his plate.
Rick sat across from me as Isaac walked around with the bottle of wine. He started with Jackie.

“A healthy pour,” Jackie said, clapping her hands together.

“Of course,” Isaac replied. He finished up and shuffled over to me, holding the bottle, neck tilted and hovering over her glass, waiting for me to give him the okay.

I hesitated, glancing once at Jackie who was already sipping on her glass, and then nodded.

Isaac grinned ear to ear. He filled his glass last and took his seat next to me once again.

“Please, dig in.” Jackie waved her hands at both Isaac and me, urging us on.

My stomach ached at Jackie’s invitation, but I decided to wait until everyone else’s plates were full before taking my first bite.

“Thank you,” I said, as I delicately sliced my food into smaller pieces. “It’s incredible.”

“Well, it took me all day. Blood, sweat, and tears, and all,” Rick said as he cut into the chicken on his plate.

Jackie gasped and threw her napkin at him. “You damn, old liar.”

Rick looked up and smiled at me. “I like to get her all riled up.”

“I see that,” I said and laughed.

“So, Jackie,” Isaac began, a piece of cabbage dangled from his fork, “did Rick mention the job he offered to Dora the other day?”
“Yes, yes. I think it’s a great idea, of course! As long as she wants to do it. I have lots of suggestions, of course. He won’t listen to me but when someone else say’s it.” She held her hands up like she was at a loss for words but winked at me.

I took my first sip of wine. A Malbec, deep, velvety. It made my tongue feel furry and my belly hot.

“I don’t have anything else lined up right now,” I said as I placed the glass back down on the table. “I told Rick, I’m not equipped to transform the space. If you want something extravagant you’re better off hiring a professional.”

“Listen, I don’t want to pour thirty-thousand dollars of our retirement into renovating that store when he should’ve sold it years ago anyway. If you can help him clean that place up, I’m happy enough with that. I could use some assistance with the shipping side of the business as well.”

“Come on, Jackie. You’re gonna go and make me mad now,” Rick interjected.

She rolled her eyes at him playfully.

Isaac cleared his throat. “She doesn’t have a car, so will one of you be taking her in then? My schedule at the bank is going to be pretty hectic, I can’t say I would be very reliable transportation for her. The plan is obviously to get another car at some point, but we’re a little strapped for cash right now. I’m sure you can understand.” He’d already finished his first plate of food and was reaching across for seconds.

The room went silent apart from the sound of the tongs he held scraping the platter as he dug for more chicken.

I took another swig of wine and picked at the sautéed carrots on my plate. There was a shift in the air as Rick stiffened, straightening up in his chair.
“I’ll take her. Or Jackie will. It’ll be no problem,” Rick said looking at Jackie with furrowed brows.

“What do you say?” Rick directed his question at me, avoiding both Jackie and Isaac’s gazes. “Start on Monday? A hundred dollars for every day you come in?” His wine glass of crimson Kool-Aid rested at his chin, staining his grey beard a mucky red.

I looked over at Isaac who nodded and lifted his glass. I mirrored him as did Jackie, and then Rick.

“Deal.”

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After dinner, Jackie invited everyone into the living room. One plateful of Jackie’s cooking and two glasses of wine later and I was delightfully dazed. I plopped down next to Isaac on their white, plushy sofa that was set with its back towards the front door. Rick and Jackie sat across from us in matching accent chairs.

Isaac started talking about his first day at South View—which I instantly realized he’d shared very little of when he’d gotten home earlier this evening. He spoke kindly of his boss and colleagues and seemed excited by all the new opportunities working at a smaller company seemed to offer him.

“I think Dora mentioned you were an accountant when she stopped by the other day. Did I get that right?” Jackie asked, looking back and forth between Isaac and me.

“Yes, I’m a CPA,” he answered. “I’ll be managing some of South View’s largest accounts.”

“How is ‘ole Lane?” Rick asked, forearms resting on the tops of his thighs.

“You know Lane?” Isaac let his arm fall behind my shoulders.
“Of course. He’s new. Not as new as you. But it’s a small town and I’ve been ‘round here a little while.”

“Right, right. Well, he’s great. Real good guy. Got a baby on the way.”

“Penny’s pregnant?” I asked incredulously.

Rick nodded. “Great, that’s great news. I was just curious. Hugh Perkins, I’m sure you’ve heard of him, told me Lane was asking about buying his business off him again. That cemetery of his has been in the Perkins family a long time now. He’s not gonna give that up easily. Perkins Memorial brings in more money than anything else in this town. I’m sure you know that, though, now that you’re taking care of South View’s largest accounts.”

“You know, he hasn’t discussed any of his personal ventures with me. But if Lane or your friend, did you say his name was, Hugh?” Rick nodded. “Well, if either of them would like any financial counseling, I would be happy to discuss the different options available to them.”

Rick was about to respond when the doorbell chimed, interrupting him. Everyone, including myself, jerked back a little in their seats as our heads snapped towards the front door. Rick and Jackie looked back at each other with puzzled looks on their faces—they hadn’t expected another guest this evening.

Jackie shifted to stand but Rick jumped up first. “I’ll get it. You sit.”

“Sit,” Jackie huffed, crossing her legs and arms simultaneously but her broad smile gave her away. I hoped that me and Isaac would remain that playful in twenty years.

Rick opened the door and everyone’s attention shifted.
“Well, hey, Leah,” Rick said. “Whatcha got there?”

“It’s for Dora!” The little girl ran past Rick and into the house. She was carrying a small cat, nuzzled in the crease of her elbow, its back legs dangling. The cat’s back appeared dark grey, but its face, paws, and belly were snow white.

Did Leah say it was for me?

“For Dora?” Isaac asked as if reading my mind. He craned his neck, trying to look past Rick to see who else might be behind the door, ignoring the little girl in front of him.

“Yes,” Leah said, matter-of-factly. She turned to face me and held the kitten out in front of her for me to grab.

“Oh, um, who’s it from?” I asked as I reached for the small animal, cradling its legs with one hand, and stroking its head with the other.

“Your sister. She’s outside with my mom. She came to surprise you!”

My eyes popped. If I’d had any liquid in my mouth, I would have spat it out.


Rick stepped to the side and to my bewilderment, my sister walked through the door, and Marie trailed just behind her.

“Dora,” Ida said just above a whisper.

“How did you know where to find me?” I asked.

Ida looked different. Her hair was cut shorter, more layered, almost shag-like. But mostly I noticed the dark circles under my sisters’ eyes. Normally, Ida took great care of herself. Always got her eight hours in, exercised regularly, maintained a rigid schedule. But now, she looked utterly exhausted. Something I had not seen before in my sister.
“I called your dad, Isaac,” she said tight lipped as she glanced in his direction. Isaac’s hand lightly gripped my shoulder and when I looked over at him he was glaring at Ida disparagingly.

“You mean, you took advantage of a disabled man,” Isaac began. “He gets confused. What did you tell him to get him to give out our private information?”

“ Took advantage,” she scoffed. “Interesting that you say that. But no, I didn’t lie to your father. I told him who I was. He seemed relieved to hear that I was coming to check on you guys. Apparently, he hasn’t heard from you since you left.”

Isaac shook his head. “I told you. He gets confused.”

The kitten had curled into a tight ball in my lap. I could feel it purring, a soft rumbling. I didn’t want to disturb it, so I carefully scooped it up with two hands and handed it back over to Leah who was sitting on the floor over by the unlit fireplace.

“Watch her for me, will you?” I asked the little girl.

She held out her hands eagerly to take the small kitten. “I will, I will,” she murmured.

Rick walked back into the living room. “Could I get anyone anything? Leah? Want a piece of cake?”

Leah jumped up, anticipation bursting in her eyes. She jostled the kitten who mewled in protest to the sudden burst of excitement.

“That okay?” Rick turned to confirm with Marie.

“Guess so. Looks like you guys had a real nice dinner,” Marie said, glancing over at the dining table, an eyebrow slightly raised.
Rick awkwardly bobbed his head as he walked past Marie and followed Leah as she led him into the kitchen.

“Will you grab me another glass of wine, Rick?” Jackie yelled after him.

“Yep, yep,” he replied.

I felt torn in two. There was a part of me that couldn’t help but feel relieved, excited even, to see my sister. Ida was always the coolest person I’d known when we were growing up. I looked up to her, was always hoping to impress her—even now, despite everything, I wanted to impress her. But Ida had made it clear where she stood during our last conversation. She was done with me. And Isaac, he was so angry with Ida. He seemed to feel betrayed by her presence or at least protective over our new lives. I didn’t want to have to choose between them and especially not in front of all of my neighbors.

“Ida,” I began, “what are you doing here? Did you bring me a kitten?”

“Yeah.” She smiled. “Someone was selling them out of a truck bed on the highway. I don’t know, I saw her, and I thought of you. I’ve got everything you need in the car. Litter box, food, a couple toys. Had to drive ten miles out to Adamsville just to find a Dollar Store, though.”

“But why did you come?” I asked. My sister didn’t come all this way to give me a cat, I knew that much.

“You wouldn’t return any of my calls or texts. And you’re my sister. I missed you.”

I didn’t know what to say. I stood there, feeling frozen. My head began to throb uncomfortably from the wine.
Isaac stood. “If I remember correctly, you told her you didn’t want anything to do with her as long as I was around.”

“I was wrong to say that. I shouldn’t have.” Ida looked back at Marie, and she stepped forward so that she was standing next to Ida—shoulder to shoulder.

Did they know each other? They seemed well acquainted and comfortable with one another.

“I have a spare room,” Marie said. “Already made up and everything. I think it’s best if everyone takes the night to cool off. We can regroup in the morning.”

Isaac huffed and started walking toward the front door. My stomach sank. I was nauseous and jittery. I felt the mixture of alcohol and southern cooking swirling in my belly.

“Yes, we’ll discuss the length of your stay in the morning,” Isaac said with his hand gripping the door knob, other hand reaching out for me. “How ‘bout you keep that cat until we have a chance to discuss things over. Quite the gift to surprise a newlywed couple with. A lot of responsibility.”

“Fine,” Ida said, crossing her arms. “But I’ll see you in the morning, Dora. First thing.”

I nodded. I kept my head down as I walked past Ida and Marie. Just before I reached the front door, I turned to thank Jackie once more for the dinner and added, “I’m sorry if we made you uncomfortable. Tell Rick and Leah I said goodbye, please.”

“Of course. And no need to apologize. We don’t get a lot of visitors out here. It’s interesting company,” Jackie said reaching across to pat Ida’s hand.
“Alright,” Isaac said, moving his hand to my lower back, and leading me out of the Katz’s home. “Time to go home.”
Chapter Eleven

“I don’t believe you right now,” Isaac said, his hand was covering his mouth and occasionally going up to brush through his hair. “I can’t believe we are having this conversation right now. What more do I have to do to prove to you that I love you? I’m the one that’s been here for you. You are my family. Why is that not enough?”

“Isaac. She’s my sister and she came all this way. Shouldn’t I hear her out? Yes, you’re my family, my husband, and I love you but she’s my family too. You don’t think I should even try to repair things? Why does it have to be one or the other?”

After Rick and Jackie’s dinner party, we all went our separate ways. Ida with Marie and me with Isaac. Isaac was furious at me for not seeing how my sisters’ actions were nothing more than my family’s attempt to manipulate and influence me. He couldn’t believe I was even considering inviting my sister into our home after how she disapproved of my relationship and marriage to Isaac.

“I’m going to have to be the one to piece you back together when things don’t go your way,” he started. “You do everything to please everyone else. You have no spine.” Isaac was leaned up against the kitchen counter. He shook his head, and then reached for his keys hanging on a hook by the backdoor. “I can’t do this right now. I need to leave.”

“Leave? What do you mean? You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I can’t talk to you when you’re like this. This whole deer in the headlights look that you have. You always make me feel like a villain, but I’ve given you everything! I married you, I accepted you, I bought you a fucking house, Dora! I—I have
to go,” he hurried to the door and instinctively I ran after him as if a rope were tied around my waist and he was holding the other end.

“No, wait. Please. Please, Isaac! Don’t leave. Don’t leave me,” I was sobbing now and chasing him out the backdoor.

“Dora, get away from me.”

“Please. I want to talk. I want to talk to you. I love you. Don’t go,” I begged as I plastered myself against the driver’s side car door.

“I’m getting in this car. I need to drive,” he said.

“Let me come with you. Please, Isaac. I want to keep talking about this.”

His eyes were locked on me, his face was red, and his forehead was wrinkled in tight anger.

“Fine. Get in.”

He waited until I was in the car and buckled in before he opened his own door. He was silent and tense and I was whimpering. A fear took hold in me and my whole body shook like when I first stepped foot onto the second floor of our house. Something was unsteady. I tried to stop it. I could tell I was infuriating him. I tried to hold my trembling hands and pressed my lips together to keep my sobs from increasing in volume. His hands wrung around the leather steering wheel so hard I could hear it squeak.

When my breathing finally calmed I started again, “Isaac, I—”

“No, don’t start,” he interrupted. “You see, this is how it always goes. I’ve poured everything into you. I uprooted my life and moved us here so that you could have the chance to figure out who you are, away from your family. Away from the same people you were just saying last week never supported you. You cry and tell me these sob stories
about how you were the fat, sick girl, and your mom and sister never understood you.

You’re so whiny. My father had a stroke two years ago, he might not remember me for too much longer, but I moved for you. I did that for you. You’re a fucking child, Dora.’

He was right. I’d sent myself into such a state of a panic, chasing after him, and for what reason? Because he wanted to step away? Because he was upset that I was considering letting someone back into my life who’d repeatedly hurt me? He cared about me. He wanted to protect me.

“I—I understand, Isaac. I’m sorry. You’re right. You’ve been through so much with your father and, and with Lizzie. I’ve made all of it about me. I’m sorry.”

He huffed. As he straightened up in his seat I felt the car lurch forward. A quick jolt then a steady incline in speed. The road he’d taken toward town had straightened out a bit but in a half a mile there was a very sharp left turn. It was dark and there were no street lights. The dashboard shone bright, and I watched as the speed dial quickly moved from fifty miles an hour to sixty, then sixty-five, and increasing.

“Isaac, please slow down. We’re going to crash. There’s a drop off on the other side of you. Please, Isaac!” I reached for the grab handle above me and closed my eyes tight.

“I can’t live without you,” Isaac sneered. His voice was filled with so much anger that I didn’t recognize it at first, a deep, visceral growl. My eyes shot open. His eyes were locked ahead but his face was utterly expressionless. The wrinkles on his face smoothed over, there was no scowl or frown, no smile or smirk, just nothing. “You can’t leave me. Not like everyone else. You promised me. I told everyone I could trust you,” he said flatly.
“Isaac, I’m not going anywhere. Please, slow down. The turn is coming up. Please. I’m sorry, Isaac, okay? I’m sorry. I love you. I promise I won’t leave you!” I couldn’t hold back my sobs anymore. Fear writhed in my stomach, and I lurched forward and was sick on myself and the floorboard of his car.

“Fuck,” he said and slammed on his breaks. We came to a stop in the middle of the road. It was dark. It was silent. We were alone. No one would be driving down Coffee Landing this late at night. “Fuck!” he shouted and slammed his hands against the steering wheel.

“I’m—” I started.

“Don’t.” His voice was soft now, exacerbated. “Don’t say you’re sorry.”

He went very still. I was unable to speak. I was petrified. I did not feel ill anymore. It was all just blank.

“It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have been driving so fast.” He looked at me and the sight of his eyes, bloodshot red and filled with tears, struck me in her chest—as if I could feel his pain and his sorrow. Suddenly, he looked like a little boy—desperate and terrified. “I’m a terrible person, Dora. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I don’t deserve you.” He cradled his face in his hands and began to cry.

I sat with my hands held up in front of me. The purple mesh sleeves of the new dress he’d bought me were covered in vomit. I was shaking all over and felt dizzy with exhaustion. I opened my mouth a few times to try to speak but couldn’t find the words. I wasn’t sure where Isaac was at. I didn’t know how to console him or how to remedy the situation.
“You’re right,” he said, wiping away his tears with the back of his hand. “Ida should stay. If you think it would help, she should stay."

I nodded slowly, shakily.

“Just promise me that you won’t let her manipulate you into doing anything you don’t want to do.”

“I—I promise. I promise.”

There was a long pause between us. Nothing but the light sound of the heat blowing out at our feet and Isaac sniffing.

“Are you going to leave me?”

I hesitated. My hands and feet wreeked of sour bile and Jackie’s garlicky mashed potatoes. It frightened me to admit that I had believed, even for a moment, that Isaac might kill us. Me. By accident or on purpose, I wasn’t sure. Something seemed to flip when he saw Ida walk through that door.

“I want to be able to fix this Dora. Can we fix this?”
I’d promised Isaac we would fix things. I promised to stay. And the truth is I loved him still and I knew how that made me look. How it made me sound. I knew what category of “woman” that put me in and that was why I knew I could tell no one what happened. Especially Ida.

I refused to believe Isaac would intentionally hurt me, but Ida would not understand. I wanted to give the man I loved, my first love, the chance to rebuild what we had. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

While I fretted over how to organize the mound of Rick’s wooden-carved trinkets in front of me, I was conscious of the sound of a car engine revving and sputtering in the back of my mind. It distracted me, filled my mind until I was frozen in an almost catatonic state like the figures before me.

This had been happening periodically over the last few days. A memory was pressing against my present, attempting to pull me under. my eyes glazed over as I pushed the car ride with Isaac from two nights ago further into the depths of my mind, until it was only a soft murmur.

Ida sat on the front desk with her legs dangling over the counter’s edge, eating from a bag of trail mix that Rick brought in earlier that morning. She looked quite comfortable as if there wasn’t a giant non-wooden, metaphorical elephant sitting in the space between us.
Rick was out running errands while Ida and I worked on my first task. First, to organize Rick’s eclectic collection, and second, to install new, floating shelves for storage.

I still couldn’t believe my sister was there. Couldn’t believe that any part of this past weekend had been real.

“How do I begin?” I asked.

I twiddled my fingers and looked up at Ida who was preoccupied, scrolling through her phone with one hand and digging through the bag of trail mix with the other. She hadn’t heard me, hadn’t noticed me.

I looked down at what had to be close to a thousand little figurines sprawled out on the concrete floor in front of us. There were miniature animals captured in a leisurely state with half-smiles etched onto their faces. My hands grazed over pigs, roosters, llamas, and bears. Mixed about them were palm-sized Christmas trees, a star carefully carved on top of each, a couple of Cinderella-eques slippers, an absurd amount of doll-sized furniture, desks, wardrobes, chairs, sofas, lamps, and a whole collection of various musical instruments.

I narrowed my eyes. Underneath an African lion and a morning dove were these little circular pieces of wood, about the size of a medal, with lines chiseled into the surface.

Are those zodiac signs?

Rick didn’t seem the spiritual type, but money is money, I supposed.
I didn’t think there was enough of one trinket to group them by “type.” My first instinct was to section them out into specific themes or categories, but my mind was drawing a blank. I could think of nothing.

“Hello?” I said, waving my hands in the air to grab Ida’s attention.

Ida’s head jerked towards me. “I heard you; I heard you. I was just thinking.”

My sister considered the pile on the floor for a moment before zipping up the bag of trail mix and jumping down from the counter to appraise the mess a little more closely, leaving her phone face down on the counter behind her. “I’ve got it. Easy. We’ve got zoo things, a painfully early Christmas, fantasy, and boring. I don’t know,” she laughed and gently kicked my foot with her black boot.

“Come on, Ida. He’s paying me to help. I’m glad you’re here but if you’re gonna insist on coming with me every day this week you could at least help out.”

“I am, I am. I threw out a few good ideas, I’d say,” Ida said.

I pursed my lips. “I suppose I could start with holidays. That should narrow it down.”

Ida handed Dora the first container, a 24” by 16” inch, clear plastic container that I would have to figure out how to mount onto the wall at some point and got to work placing any trinket representing the holiday spirit into it.

“Would you create the labels? I’ll work on getting these hung up soon,” I said.

I had recommended Rick use clear storage bins and containers, rather than using the wooden boxes he previously used to store his stock, so that his customers might actually be able to see what he had available. He joked that I was going to “modernize” him but insisted I do what I thought was best.
“Just send Jackie the links,” he’d said dismissively.

He was able to pick up all the new equipment me and Jackie ordered from an Office Supply over in Adamsville this past weekend. Adamsville was the only place in a 50-mile radius where we could get anything from a chain restaurant or franchise business, and even then, the town was very limited in what it had to offer. In Morris Chapel, almost everything was locally owned and made. Stock was limited.

“What do you want for dinner tonight?” I asked as she worked. Ida sucked her teeth uncomfortably, made a clicking sound with her tongue.

“What? You’re gonna back out of dinner with us now?”

“Well…”

I shot Ida an irritated glance. Ida’s hands, palms forward, went up in self-defense. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I just—, I think I’m going to stay in and have dinner with Marie and Leah tonight, since they were nice enough to let me crash, you know? I’d like to do something nice for them. Plus, Isaac has not been super happy with me. You have to admit that. I don’t wanna rock the boat any more than I already have. We could use a little break from each other, don’t you think? Besides, I have some time. Used all of my PTO to come out here.”

I had given Ida no hints into the trouble her arrival on Friday had caused in my marriage. We all went on as if nothing had occurred and pretended that Ida was staying at Marie’s for the rest of her visit because I had not had the time to set up the guest room, not because of Ida’s disdain for Isaac and vice versa.

On Saturday night, Isaac had gone out of his way to cook Ida’s favorite meal, eggplant parmesan, with the hopes of calling a truce, of which Ida accepted with almost
no hesitation. I had never known Ida to back down or retract her beliefs once her mind had been made up. Her eagerness to accept Isaac’s apology and move on was jarring but also comforting. I hoped it was true. The promise of an easy weekend had settled my aching stomach. However, I wasn’t certain their cease-fire was entirely sincere, I also wasn’t sure I cared.

Was it possible to receive forgiveness in such short amount of time?

Isaac had been agreeable with Ida all weekend. Well, he mostly kept quiet during Ida’s nightly visits, but I appreciated his attempts to get along with my sister, nonetheless.

I had started getting better at compartmentalizing all of the horrible and ugly parts of the last few weeks into their own shiny, clear boxes in my mind. I’d already begun to feel disconnected from the fear I’d felt so strongly that night in the car. Like it wasn’t my own anymore. A figment of my imagination.

I thought I could probably make myself believe almost anything.

“I thought you and Isaac were getting along better these last few days,” I remarked.

“We have been,” Ida’s smile wavered and shook. “Well, I’m trying, Dora. Really. I’ve been as nice as I can possibly be these last few days and it’s killing me. I need a break. And Marie has been so nice to let me stay with her while I’m in town. Besides, I can see how anxious it makes you to have to juggle the both of us in the same room. You need a break too.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I paused, waiting for Ida to continue but she was avoiding my gaze. “So…” I began again, “you and Marie seem to be getting along really well.”
I remembered the way Marie hovered around Ida at the dinner party. Almost protectively. There was something there between them that night, but Ida had been careful to avoid discussing her unexpected living arrangements with me over the last couple of days. When I asked how everything was going the other night, Ida said nothing more than, “Good, good,” before shifting the conversation quickly.

Very out of character for Ida unless there was something she was trying to hide.

When I finally met my sister’s eyes a smile spread across her face, her cheeks turned hot red. Ida reached for her cheeks like she was trying to force them down into a frown. “Yeah. We’re getting along very well.”

“Oh, lord, Ida. You know that’s my neighbor, right? Like I have to live next to her probably forever cause who the hell would ever buy either of our houses?”

Ida chuckled. “Dee, come on. It’s not that big of a deal. We’re grown women. We can behave. Or misbehave.”

“Whatever. Just don’t, you know,” I shrugged.

“What?”

“Be all Ida, with her.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s just, you get all giddy like this, and then as soon as it turns into something real you bail. And ghost. You’re a ghoster.”

“I am not a ghoster!” Ida protested, mouth agape in feigned shock.

I stopped organizing briefly to stare Ida down.

“Okay, fine.” She threw up her arms up again. “I have been a ghoster. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to do that to Marie.”
“To Marie and Leah,” I corrected.

“Alright, alright. I get your point. But I do really like her, Dee. And I think she really likes me. She writes revenge poetry in her free time.”

I fiddled with a wooden bell, knocking the wooden clapper back and forth.

“That does sound like you. I’m happy for you, Ida. You seemed not quite yourself when you first got here.” Ida’s tired eyes and pale complexion from the other night flashed in my mind. There was more warmth in Ida’s cheeks today.

There was a pause, and then Ida let out a light, “hmm,” in what I assumed was agreement.

“We haven’t really talked about it yet. The night you showed up.”

Ida shuffled back over to the counter, her clunky boots echoed against the concrete floors, and perched one hip against the edge. “I told you. I wanted to find you. To apologize. I missed you.”

“But what took you so long? You haven’t really spoken to me in months, except to tell me I’m a rotten sister and daughter for agreeing to marry Isaac. What did I even do that was so bad to you? To mom? I never understood.”

“Come on, Dora. Do you really want to do this right now?”

“Yeah, I kind of do.” I let the plastic shelf that was now halfway filled with holiday themed trinkets drop to the ground. “I’m mad at you still. At all of you. And you come down here in the middle of the night, with a kitten, and act like everything is all okay. I just don’t understand any of it.”

“I admitted I was too harsh on you, and I told you I was sorry for that. I shouldn’t have talked to you the way I did. And I mean that Dora, but…”
“But?” I repeated sharply.

Ida huffed. “You have refused to see what everyone else has seen from the beginning. I don’t know what he did with or to Lizzie, but I know she couldn’t have been the only one behind that whole cyberstalking fiasco. It didn’t make sense. I mean, think about it! Dora, my life was threatened. Your life was threatened! Cops had to patrol my house for two days. I didn’t know if someone was going to break into my house or if someone was following me. And when the police left I sat in my living room for days, terrified that something might happen to me. I don’t think it was Lizzie that threatened me. I don’t even know if she’s real. But I know he is. And it all started right after you met him.”

I hadn’t realized just how frightened my sister had been. She’d never told me any of this before. To be paralyzed by fear; that was something I understood.

I was hit with flashes of Isaac’s face as he drove the car down the street, closer and closer to the drop off, the anger in his eyes, and the way he gripped the steering wheel. Behind my lids I watched as the dial on the speedometer quickly rose as he pushed harder on the gas pedal. I took a shaky breath before speaking again and forced the images out of my mind.

Put it in the box.

“It’s my fault, Ida. I knew she was watching our every move online. I didn’t take it seriously enough and I shouldn’t have posted that picture with all of us in it. I was trying to make a point. I thought I would show her that I wasn’t going to let her interfere with my life. That I didn’t care.” Ida shook her head and started to interject but I cut her
off. “Don’t. It is. And it wasn’t Isaac who threatened you. I talked to Lizzie over the
phone just the other day. She’s very real.”

“She contacted you again?”

“Yes. I didn’t tell Isaac about it. Don’t look at me like that,” I interrupted when
Ida looked like she was preparing to make a smart comment. “It’s okay. I handled it. I
promise.”

“And you haven’t heard from her again?”

“No. I told her I’d report her to the police if I did.”

“That didn’t really stop her before.”

“Well, it did this time.”

Ida took off the olive-green parka she wore and set it next to the register. She
looked uncomfortable in her skin as she fidgeted with the fringe around her face and
seemed to gnaw on the inside of her cheek as she contemplated what to say next. When
we were little girls, Ida was always quick-witted, fearless. It was hard for me to see my
sister struggle to find the right words now.

“What about Mom?” I asked. “Why hasn’t she reached out to me?”

“Do you remember the last time you were home? Without Isaac?”

I remembered. It was just a few months before graduation. I’d come home for the
weekend during my final spring break as an undergrad, and we were all getting ready to
watch a movie in the living room—some stupid rom-com I can’t even remember the
name of now. I’d been hiding my relationship with Isaac from my family for nearly two
months at that point. They’d all been so happy when I told them me and Isaac were
taking a break back in January after the threat Lizzie made against me and Ida. They had no idea that the break only lasted a few short weeks.

My family believed Isaac was damn near evil for reasons I had never understood. The police never presented me with any evidence that they believed Isaac was lying about Lizzie so why should I? Wouldn’t they find information like that important enough to share? I could admit that I let the lie about our relationship go on longer than I’d intended—and longer than Isaac had liked as well—but it was nice to have all of them back in my life at the same time. I knew Ida and Mom would be disappointed when they found out. I knew they wouldn’t understand, and then I’d have to let someone go again.

It was always a matter of time. That’s how it felt now.

“Yeah,” I said. “You told Mom that you’d seen me out with Isaac again and that I’d been lying to everyone. She told me she couldn’t trust me and asked me to leave. She never reached out again and never responded to my engagement announcement or my wedding invitation. I never expected her to abandon me like that.”

“Dora. I’m not saying that we did everything right or that our actions were justified but I don’t think you realize how this whole thing has affected us too. You broke our hearts. We’re scared of you, and for you.”

“I broke your hearts because I fell in love?”

“No, Dora,” Ida’s voice hardened. “Because you chose him over everyone else. That much was clear from the beginning. You quit hanging out with your friends after him. I mean, when’s the last time you saw Nia without Isaac present? It was like pulling teeth to get you to spend any time away from him. We had to get on board, or you were going to leave us behind. Either way, we were going to lose you. I’m not saying that it
was right for us to kick you out or for us to go this long without trying to make amends, but I don’t think it’s fair to say that you played no part in how things went down either.”

I wanted to fight back, to tell Ida she was wrong, but I wasn’t entirely sure about that. I had prioritized Isaac, but he had been there for me and loved me when it felt like everyone else had turned cold and critical. I thought my family’s love would be unconditional, but that kind of love doesn’t exist. I realized that now. Everyone has conditions. It was a childish dream.

“‘I’m sorry I hurt you, Ida. I didn’t want to choose anyone over anyone. That’s not how I wanted it to happen. I just don’t want to be alone, and I’m scared. I feel like I could lose everything and everyone in the blink of an eye.’”

I started to cry, and it was like letting loose a hurricane that had been building and growing inside of me. My arms and chest shook uncontrollably, and I nearly collapsed but not before Ida rushed across the room and grabbed onto my elbows. Ida slowly made it down to the floor with me and cradled me, petting my head in the way my mom often did to calm me down. After a moment, I realized Ida was crying too.

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We spent the rest of the afternoon putting together one walls-worth of storage units with cheap mini allen wrenches that came in plastic bags and rubbed the edge of my pointer finger raw. Somehow, we’d managed to organize a pretty great portion of Rick’s impossible mound of knickknacks in just a few hours.

Only three more walls of trinkets to go.

I figured we could set up multiple sections of the same category throughout the store since dumping all of Rick’s creations onto the ground at one time wasn’t really an
option. Not if we wanted to have somewhere to walk. And soon it would be time to move on to Rick’s bigger items of which I had absolutely no idea what to do with or where to display.

Ida had plugged her phone into Rick’s radio and played the last two Taylor Swift albums all the way through while we worked because I had never listened to them in chronological order before. *It was a different experience*, my sister adamantly claimed.

I liked it. Yes, the albums but I liked that Ida was excited to share something with me again as well. We hummed and sang and danced all afternoon as we worked.

“This little town doesn’t seem so bad. I could get used to this, I think,” Ida said while looking out the shop window. The soft chorus of “Wildest Dreams” playing in the background. “What a strange name for a town though, Morris Chapel.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It’s different. I’ve had a really hard time finding much information about it online, too. No historical documents, no news articles, or crime reports, even.”

“A town with no history,” Ida said, flourishing her hands dramatically.

“The only thing I did find was a link to this website with data from a year 2000 census. Something tells me that a town that’s ninety-four percent white has *some* history.” I walked across the space to peer out the window with Ida. “Maybe there’s some history they want to keep buried.” I shrugged.

Ida closed her eyes and nodded her head slightly like she just came to some kind of realization.

“What is it?” I asked.
“Marie told me that she’s had to limit her outings to once a week because she couldn’t stand the ogling eyes. She said that they treat her differently because she lives in Ruby Court. But now I’m wondering if it could also have something to do with her being a queer, Hispanic, single mother living out on that mysterious hill all by herself.”

“It certainly doesn’t scream ‘progressive’ out here, does it?” I turned my attention across the street and Ida followed my gaze.

On the other side of the highway, there was a large and lone wooden cross—at least five feet tall, maybe larger—placed in the middle of the patch of grass. It was facing Rick’s shop. I hadn’t noticed it before, but it looked old and rotten. The grass was overgrown around it and the woods on the other side of it lightly camouflaged the spectacle. It was as if it appeared just to emphasize my point.

“No, it does not,” Ida replied.

Rick pulled into the strip in his black pick-up truck and parked out front. He looked disgruntled as he got out of his car—muttering something furiously as he made his way to the front door like he was in the middle of a passionate argument.

Rick pushed the door open with his boot. “Hey,” he grumbled as he shuffled past me and Ida, heading for the counter.

Here we go.

“Hey, Rick. Everything okay?”

Rick pulled out a pile of mail from his inside jacket pocket and let it fall to the counter with a thud. “Oh, just great. Real great.”

“Oh, really? It sounds like everything is really great,” I said. I grabbed Ida’s hand and followed him over to the counter.
Rick sighed, and then looked at Ida with raised brows. “She always so nosey?” He pointed at me.

Ida laughed and gave me a light shove. “The nosiest.”

“I’m perceptive and you’re just jealous.” I shoved Ida back.

“Well, I just had lunch with my friend Hugh.”

“And that makes you mad because,” I lead.

“Hugh owns the Perkins Funeral Home and Cemetery. Everyone in this town has been buried out there on their land for over two-hundred years. Shit, Jackie, and I even have plots out there reserved for when we croak. I mentioned Hugh to your husband the other day at dinner actually.”

“Right.” I crossed my arms and shifted my gaze to the floor. I didn’t want to think about that night anymore today. “Lane. Is he still pressuring him about his business then?”

“Not just pressurin’ anymore. A couple years back, Hugh took out a loan against the cemetery to upgrade some equipment. He’s not been late but one time a few months ago when his son lost his job. What was he supposed to do? Let his son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter starve?”

“No, of course not. Surely, he couldn’t be in that much trouble over one late payment.”

“The branch manager sent him an email this mornin’. Didn’t even have the decency to say it to his face. Told him that South View is freezing all of his accounts. Both business and personal. Said there’s been suspicious activity and they’re launching
an investigation into his financial history with Nimrod and now South View. No way Mr. Mayor Lane didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Suspicious activity?” Ida asked.

“A bunch of horse shit. Lane’s trying to send a message. Trying to scare Hugh into selling him the business and property. Fucking pricks like him think they’re invincible, that they can buy everything. The people of Morris Chapel have done without his kind of wealth for generations. Hugh cannot be bought. He’ll see.”

“It doesn’t sound like Lane’s trying to buy him out. Sounds like he’s trying to push him out,” Ida said.

“Yes, well, Hugh plans to push back. He’s reached out to his lawyer to see if Lane can even do this.”

“Why does Lane want to buy a cemetery so badly?” I asked.

Rick broke a slight smile at that. “Why indeed.”

“What else do you know about Lane? You seem to have a history with him.”

Rick pulled out a rolling chair from under the counter and plopped down. He sighed again, looking down at his feet as if contemplating where to begin.

“’Bout a year ago, he came in here, asking if I could make him an executive desk for his office. Said he wanted somethin’ hand-crafted and local, but he wanted it made from ebony. It’s one of the most expensive woods out there, not the kinda thing I typically keep in stock. I told him I’d have to order it. I mean, it cost me over a thousand dollars for just five slabs of the stuff. I warned him of this. Told him with labor it would cost him twenty-five hundred. He agreed. Said it was no problem. But when I called him
to tell him it was ready for pick-up he told me he’d changed his mind. That he’d already purchased a new desk.”

“Couldn’t you just sell it to someone else to make your money back?” Ida asked.

“That’s not the point,” I interjected. “He made a promise.”

“What’s that Maya Angelou quote? When someone shows ya who they are, believe ‘em the first time?”

Me and Ida looked at each other, slightly wide-eyed in mild bewilderment that Rick knew Maya Angelou and quoted her poetry.

“Hey!” Rick interjected. “I read. Don’t look all surprised like that.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” I said. “We’re sorry.”

“That son of a bitch hasn’t had the guts to look me in the eye since. Fucking coward. ‘Scuse my language.”

“No need to excuse yourself, Rick. He sounds like a real weasel,” I said. “I’ve actually only met him in person once. He’s not my cup of tea either.”

Rick and Ida exchanged a momentary glance, brief, but enough for me to notice and sense a shift in energy. Like they were sharing a silent inside joke.

“So, Rick,” Ida began, changing the conversation, “we’ve been here all morning and afternoon, and no one has come in. What’s up with that?”

“Yeah, well, most of our business is online. Don’t ask me about it. Jackie deals with all that. Comes in here once a week to gather the orders and ship ‘em out. I don’t like to mess with shit online. But I had to make the switch a couple years back if I wanted to stay in business. These days my shop is more for storage than for in-person selling.”

“And now it all makes sense,” Ida said.
“Yeah, well,” Rick trailed off. He jumped up suddenly and looked over at the wall Ida and I had spent all day transforming. “Oh, wow. Y’all really got a lot done. It looks great.”

“It’s coming together. Ida measured everything and I mounted all the boxes to the wall,” I said.

“Well, since Ida drove you in this morning y’all are free to go. No need to hang around.”

“Thanks,” I began. “Ida is still insisting on bringing me in and helping out this week. But I’ll see you in the morning?”

He nodded and grumbled a, “Mhmm,” as he skimmed through the pile of mail he brought in.

Ida hooked her arm through mine and hurried toward the door.

“Oh, wait!” Rick called after us. “I need to pay ya.”

I pulled away from Ida’s grasp and met Rick back at the counter. He pulled out a wad of cash from his back pocket and counted out five twenties. The bills were crisp, fresh. He’d probably just stopped by the bank on his way back from his lunch with his friend Hugh. I wondered if he’d seen Isaac there but was too afraid of his answer to ask.

“Score,” Ida said after he handed me the hundred dollars. “Let’s go blow it all in one place or something. See ya in the morning, Rick!”

Rick waved them out, but I caught a smile underneath his speckled beard and mustache when I glanced back at him.

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I sat on the cold, beige, stone tile, knees up, and with my back against the locked bathroom door. I’d barricaded myself in there with Mira, the name Leah bestowed upon my new little kitty, shortly after Ida dropped me off that afternoon. I kept replaying the conversation I’d had with my sister earlier that day and before I knew it, I was hyperventilating and sobbing. In my anxious state, the bathroom seemed like a safe space to break down in.

Ida was right, I thought. It was my fault that she, my mom, and my friends disappeared from my life. I had chosen Isaac over everyone. I could sense the pain Ida was in from the burning pink glow of her eyes as she told me this hard truth. No wonder they all stepped aside.

I held my phone inches from my nose. I searched through my camera roll until I found the last photos I’d taken with my family before I’d ever met Isaac. We were on this rental fishing boat, wearing neon orange life vests. The white cast of sunscreen still caked on our noses. We’d burned anyway, I remembered.

I zoomed in on my mom’s face. Her light brown, almost blonde waves were in complete disarray from zipping around on the boat all afternoon. She was bent over from laughing, leaning on mine and Ida’s shoulders for support.

What must my mom think of me now?

I never imagined that this was how my life would turn out. I never imagined that my mom and I would become strangers.

Isaac wouldn’t be home for another couple of hours. He’d called, said he was working late. Something about trying to get through the last of his online training exams. I had checked out as he talked. I heard myself responding, mhmm’s and okay’s, just
enough so that he’d think I was listening, that I was engaged. I felt my head nod as he consoled me and whispered sweet apologies about missing dinner tonight. When the other end went silent I knew he was waiting for me to respond. My eyes refocused and I said, “No worries, sweetie. Ida will keep me company. Thanks again for letting her stay this week. I feel much better.”

He said something like, *anything for you,* or *happy wife, happy life,* or some other miserable cliché. I’d begun to notice that about him more. How often he adorned me with flowery words and phrases like out of a movie. I used to think it was charming. But this time, I couldn’t help but notice how it made my skin crawl.

I wasn’t sure exactly why I lied to him about Ida coming over. There was a part of me that didn’t want him to feel bad about working late, a part that believed him and loved him and wanted to support him, but there was another part of me that wanted him to feel comfortable taking his time getting back home tonight. A part that craved solitude. There was something I felt I needed to do, and I could do with some extra alone time.

Mira weaved in and out of my legs and pawed at my sock. I pet the top of Mira’s head and felt her purring under my hand. I’d never had a cat before. I was surprised at how quickly I connected with Mira. How I already felt protective of her, loved her even.

My thumb hovered over my phone screen, but this time, over the number Lizzie had last called me on.

This was a bad idea. I should leave it alone.

*If I reached out, there’s no taking it back. If it was true that Isaac was totally innocent, I risked losing him forever. Reaching out to Lizzie would completely betray his trust. But I also needed answers and I couldn’t ask him. Not after his recent outbursts.*
There was something he wasn’t telling me. He wasn’t acting like himself and as much as I wanted to forget what happened the other night, I could feel it in my gut, something bad was on the horizon. Something was wrong. Maybe I could help him, save our marriage, and repair my other relationships along the way. Maybe I could make everything right again.

It was true, what Ida said. All the online harassment, the stalking, even the story Isaac had told me about why and when Lizzie began all of this in the first place didn’t feel complete. There were holes missing that now seemed impossible to ignore. What was Lizzie’s motive? What was her endgame? If it was true that Isaac had hardly ever engaged with her online and their relationship had never gotten past the “talking stage,” why would she continue to stalk and harass him and his significant others nearly ten years later? Though, I also couldn’t imagine why Isaac would make any of it up or how he could possibly keep the charade up for a decade.

She’s obsessed with him or he’s diabolical as reasonings seemed to simplify what I felt, intuitively, was a much more complicated situation. He was behaving so out of character. I didn’t want to anger him again if I could help it and he would be distraught if he ever found out that I called Lizzie. I was certain of that.

Mira rubbed her whiskers on the side of my knee then lurched forward and rubbed her face on the side of my phone.

“Okay,” I whispered to Mira. “I’m gonna do it.”

I pressed down on the number that Lizzie had called me from last week and on the third ring someone answered.
Chapter Thirteen

When Lizzie’s soft yet uncertain voice answered, “Dora?” on the other end, I blanked. Panicked. All I could think about was how upset Isaac would be if he ever found out. I’d told him I trusted him. I’d promised. He’d be so hurt if he knew I went behind his back. I’d stuttered as I tried to come up with an explanation for calling her then finally, I said, “It was a mistake. A butt-dial. Sorry,” and hung up.

I blocked Lizzie’s number after that. It’s what I should’ve done days ago. Whatever was going on between Isaac and I, I needed to find another way to fix it. I needed to give Isaac a chance to explain it all to me. A chance to come clean about anything from his past. Anything he might’ve concealed or minimized to me. I trusted him enough to marry him nearly three weeks ago, I should trust him enough with this.

The next morning when Ida knocked on my front door to drive us both to Rick’s shop for another day of work, I asked if we could stop by the thrift store we’d discovered yesterday on our way home from Rick’s. It was located on the side of the highway at the intersection just before we turned left onto Coffee Landing. I was hoping I might find a boombox for Isaac to play all his music.

Though Ida rolled her eyes and made a snorting sort of noise at this request, she agreed. There was a Dollar General just a block away from the thrift store, so Ida offered to grab a list of groceries for Marie while I searched.

The thrift shop was actually just a little white house—small, square, but quaint and alluring. Green moss, vines, and weeds weaved up and down the siding like it’d weathered through one too many storms and hadn’t been touched up in several decades.
Potted pink and orange flowers were scattered along the porch. I’d mistaken it earlier for just a regular house perched on the side of the highway like so many others but while stopped at a red light yesterday, I’d had a little more time to observe my surroundings. Looking out the window, I noticed the little wooden sign hanging from a nail on the front door that said, *Nonie’s Souvenir Emporium*.

Just from peering through the windows, which were heavily decorated, it looked like the owner had quite the eccentric taste. A maroon coat with purple fuzz sticking out at the wrists, a set of clubs in a Miami Dolphins caddy, a cordless house phone (still in the box), and a vintage television about the size of a microwave with silver lining and little knobs in the top right-hand corner. I thought that if anywhere in town might have a CD player or a boombox I could purchase it would be a place like that.

Isaac said that the player he’d had must have gotten lost during the move when I asked him about it again this morning. Though he didn’t seem to be in a rush to replace it, he had such a collection of CDs, it seemed a shame to me not to play any of them. I thought that if we could listen to the music from his childhood together that it might be a nice reset.

While I hated to admit it, it was clear that there was a part of Isaac that I didn’t know as well as I thought I did. I wanted to bring back that ease we had at the beginning of our relationship. Back to when Isaac couldn’t seem to get enough of me, and we’d spend hours talking about our future, and laughing. Since we’ve been here, he’s barely touched me. I had to do something. And fast. Before everything I loved slipped away from me forever.
When we got to Rick’s shop, I requested a power drill and that cut the time it took to install the storage boxes on the wall in half and saved my fingers from any more unnecessary wear and tear. Why I hadn’t thought to ask for a drill yesterday, I wasn’t sure and was too ashamed of the slip up to linger on it any longer.

The very back wall of Rick’s shop was at least twice as wide as the 20-foot side wall Ida, and I conquered the day before and the wooden boxes stacked on the rolling shelves placed along the wall were overflowing with trinkets.

This would take a little longer.

The idea of having to sit in the house all alone, waiting for Isaac to get back from work day-after-day terrified me. That’s never been the kind of woman or partner I expected to be. I always thought I would have a career or something purposeful and meaningful to build off by now. Something of my own, something I could be proud of. I wanted this gig with Rick to last as long as possible. I wanted to stay out of the house as much as possible. I vowed right then and there to drag this job out as long as I could. I would tell Rick that after this week he wouldn’t even have to pay me. I just needed a routine until I could find something more stable.

As I started sorting through Rick’s boxes, I wondered how old some of the items were. Rick said he’d been whittling wood about twenty years now. Based on the amount of dust and crumbled pieces of wood I found at the bottom of each box, I thought some of them might have been around long enough to completely disintegrate in the wooden crate. Until there was nothing left but wood shavings and detached limbs and heads. I found myself having to set more items aside for Rick to examine later and decide whether or not he was going to put another price tag on them or give them a toss. There were
boots with broken off spurs, alligators with missing tails, and mugs with cracked handles. About every fifth item looked like it needed some extra attention or disposal.

As Ida and I sorted through the new piles, I tried my best to suppress the guilt I felt in the pit of my stomach for calling Lizzie behind Isaac’s back yesterday, but it gnawed at me still. My phone call with Lizzie had been brief, in fact, I wasn’t sure if it could even be counted as a conversation.

“Hello?” Ida said while waving her hand in front of me and dragging out the ooo at the end. “Where were you?”

“Sorry. Did you say something?”

“Yes. A few times. But you didn’t answer my question.”

“I was nowhere. I just haven’t been sleeping very well. Just feeling a little spacey is all. What were you trying to say to me?”

“You asked for more details from last night. Jeez, Dora. Take a nap when we get home,” Ida said jokingly but with a hint of suspicion in her voice. “I was telling you that Marie and Leah are from Chicago. You know I’ve always wanted to go there. I still can’t quite figure out why she’d want to move from a city like that to a place like this. Just seems like quite the adjustment. Definitely a change in pace.”

“Wow. Chicago. Why did she move out here? Did she say?” I realized that already my sister knew more about my own neighbor than I did. I would ask Ida and Marie if they’d all like to come over tomorrow night, I resolved. I was pretty certain I remembered seeing the game Candy Land shoved in one of the tubs we stored in the attic when Isaac and I were unpacking the other day. Maybe Leah would like to play.
“Not really. Just that she was trying something different. It’s not a bad gig. She works as an English teacher online. She can work from anywhere in the world and in her words, ‘Ruby Court is just cheap enough and has just enough beautiful sunrises to make the isolation at the top of the hill worth it.’ I don’t know. I got the sense that she’d like to go back to Chicago but maybe can’t.”

“Why do you say that?” I almost asked if Marie was worried about the “curse” that dooms all who live on Elmer’s land but then quickly remembered my first meeting with Marie at the old Lewis Chapel. She’d found the town gossip distracting and deluded.

She had a point. Ghosts were not the things haunting me at No. 1 Ruby Court these days.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t so much what she said. It was what she wouldn’t say, I guess. It was the way she avoided talking about her friends and family. All the people she left in Chicago. I just sensed something taboo about the whole thing and that she was homesick. She’d shift the conversation at just the right time though and never answered any of my questions about what she did before she left.”

“You think maybe she ended on bad terms with someone up there?”

“Something like that. But she doesn’t really owe me any explanations at this point, I suppose.”

“So, other than that you guys are getting along?”

“I really like her.”

“That’s great, Ida. I’m happy for you. Do you think you’re going to ask Marie on a proper date soon then?” I asked.

“I already did. And wipe that look off your face. Don’t look so surprised.”
“Sorry, sorry.” I reached out and rubbed her sister’s shoulder lightly. “When are y’all going out? You’re only here a few more days, right?”

“Until Sunday. But maybe a little longer. We’ll see. I have to get back to work at some point, I guess. But anyway, we’re going out on Friday. Still working out all the details.”

“That sounds great.”

“Yeah, which brings me to … do you think you could watch Leah Friday night while we’re out? I told her I’d ask.”

“Sure. No problem.”

Ida sat on the floor with a carved, yellowish snowflake in her left hand and a small golden-brown sail boat in the other. She looked out at the stack of at least seven different piles she was working through and categorizing and seemed unsure of what to do with the two items. She was smiling to herself—distracted, enamored—her mind anywhere but on the task at hand.

My eyes suddenly rimmed with tears. Just a few days ago, I thought I had lost my sister forever. That I would never have this back. That it would never be this easy again. Now here I was, watching Ida fall in love before she even realized it.

Even though I knew all along that my sister could only stay until Sunday, it didn’t stop me from imagining Ida staying here in Morris Chapel forever, working at Rick’s shop with me every day, and then coming back to Ruby Court at the end of the day where we’d meet for dinner with our partners. With the corner of my sleeve, I soaked up the few tears that attempted to sneak out.
Things were changing, within me and Ida but this time it didn’t feel like we were being pulled apart. My sister would come back for me. I felt assured of this. I wouldn’t be alone. It gave me hope that one day I could visit home again. Maybe see Mom. Though I exerted a lot of energy every day trying to avoid thinking about her, being here with Ida brought back so many memories. For the first time in weeks, I desperately wanted to hear my mother’s voice.

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“You sure it’s okay if I head to the store? I can go in with you,” Ida said parked outside of Nonie’s Emporium.

“Yeah. I don’t need anything from the store and this way, we can kill two birds with one stone. I don’t mind waiting for you to get back. It’s just right there,” I said, pointing to the Dollar General sign just down the street.

“Okay. I’ll be fast. Call me if you think of anything you need.”

Ida pulled out of the gravel drive, and I watched until she pulled into the lot of the Dollar General.

Now that I was up close to the souvenir shop, I noticed all of the intricate details displayed in the breakfast nook window. A table with baseball and Pokémon cards laid out on a lace doily. Books stacked up along the walls to mimic descending stairs. Beads and chimes and shining clear crystals hung from strings against the window frame. The front door to the shop was painted, a picture of a cerulean blue sky and big fluffy clouds. The way the paint still shined underneath the dust and dirt that had caked onto it over the years, I thought it must have been done in acrylic.
The smell of sweet citrus swirled around me as soon as I shut the door behind me. It was light, pleasant. Four round clothing racks of odd and multicolored clothing were placed in the center of the room and formed a sort of square. A long rectangular table lined the back-left wall with jewelry towers and woven baskets—each completely filled with trinkets and shiny beads and broches.

It was a small space. The living area, which had been converted into the storefront took up most of the space in the house but as I peered down the hall I could see two other rooms, one on either side of the short hall. One of the doors was open and I could hear boxes being dragged from here and there. It seemed that if the owner of Nonie’s had any electronics—as displayed in her window—they weren’t being kept out here on the main floor.

As I walked through the main room and approached the hall, I heard a woman’s voice groan as if she’d lifted something too heavy. “God dammit!” she shouted followed by a loud thud.

“Well, I told ya to wait for me,” a man’s voice said in a thick country drawl.

“And I told you to watch who you’re talking to like that,” the woman retorted back in a similarly thick accent.

When I rounded the corner, I wrapped on the door frame a few times before stepping into view. I hoped to avoid startling them, but the woman’s shocked, open-mouthed expression and hand on her chest told her that I had failed.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what they always say, ain’t it?”
“’Scuse her,” the man said, bent over a cardboard box filled with magazines. “She doesn’t play well with others.”

He was tall and had curly auburn hair that looked like it had been pressed into a permanent helmet from the persistent use of a hat. It flipped up around the sides of his face. He couldn’t be much older than me. His boyish grin might’ve convinced me he was a mischievous teenager giving his grandmother a hard time, but his stature and presence told me otherwise.

The woman appeared to be around the same age as Rick and Jackie. She was wearing a black and red floral sweater that came down to her knees and black leggings. Her brown hair was teased at the front and pinned up with ruby red clips that matched her lipstick. She wore these dangly, tortoise shell earrings in an abstract shape that weighed down her earlobes, though, it didn’t seem to bother her. They bobbed and swayed to and fro as the woman made her way across the room and over to where I stood in the doorway. She traversed cardboard boxes full of CDs, computer hard drives, desktops, and DVDs.

“Hi, dear. I’m Noni. And this is my grandson, Joseph.” He waved at this quick introduction and mouthed, Jo behind his grandmother’s back. “Was there something I could help you with?”

“Yes, actually. I was wondering if you might have a boombox or stereo of some kind? Something that will play CDs.”

“Oh! Yes, I’ve got several of those.” The woman inched past me and stood before the closed door on the opposite side of the hallway. Jo went back to busying himself with stacking boxes and didn’t follow us out of the room.
The sound of keys jangled as Noni rifled through her pocket. “Gotta keep this door locked these days. Kids kept coming in here to fiddle with my gadgets and kept breaking off antennas and pulling off knobs and knocking things over.”

“I understand,” I said.

“The stereos I have left are stacked in that back corner.” The woman waved for me to go on while she fiddled with a cardboard box by the door full of a mix-match of cords. How anyone might find what they needed out of there, I wasn’t sure.

The room was filled with antiquated technology. Relics from the last thirty, maybe forty decades took up nearly every inch of the floor and walls. There was a small path where you could walk, one foot in front of the other, in a circle around the room.

“Thank you, Noni. I’ll be very careful.”

She nodded sternly as if to say, yes, see that you do.

“Nanny, you’re just going to let this woman play Tetris with all of your junk? Why don’t you go help her?” Jo said while leaning over his grandmother’s shoulder and peering inside the room.

“Well, good grief, son, be my guest and offer your assistance. Can’t you see I’m busy?” She held up the jumble of cords in his face for emphasis. His lips pursed in a tight line like he was holding back a laugh. His eyes met mine briefly and I had to fake a cough in order suppress my laugh.

Once I rounded the corner and came upon the back wall where Noni said her remaining stereos remained, I waved Jo on over.

There were six options in front of me which was about five more than I was actually expecting to find. The stereos were stacked one on top of the other. The bottom
two were giant, four feet wide at least and bright orange and red, apart from the layers of
dust that dulled their color only slightly. The paint must be radioactive. The top four were
significantly smaller. Much more manageable for me.

I thought about which one Isaac might choose for himself. Would he decide by
color? By size? Would he know the individual brands, and which one was better?
Probably.

Jo stumbled forward, tripping over a metal box on the ground that jingled
dramatically.

I whipped around quickly and held up my hands as if I expected to somehow
catch him despite our nearly ten-inch height difference. Lucky for us both, he stopped
himself from falling on top of me by reaching through the small clearing of junk between
him and the sturdy windowsill just to his right. He hovered over me for a moment and
was close enough for me to catch the scent of cinnamon and oak on his clothes. Both of
us paused in breath and voice as if to speak would trigger an avalanche upon us.

“Sorry,” he said, after a moment, breaking the silence and carefully securing his
feet flat on the ground.

I blushed and shook my head, feeling embarrassed and nervous. I shuffled further
to the left to make room for the both of us.

“So,” he began, appraising the stack, and adjusting his shirt sleeves, “one of
these?”

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t know which to pick. Which is,” I hesitated, “the right
one.”
“The right one? Well, it’s just a CD player. Or boombox, as you say. Any of ‘em would do. Do you always worry this much over things?” he asked with a teasing grin.

“Do you always interrogate your grandmother’s customers?” I retorted back quickly.

“Only the worrisome ones. Are you new here?” he asked. “Or just passing through?”

“I live here. With my husband,” I paused for emphasis. “Just moved down about a week ago.”

“You’re Dora Landry,” Noni said from the doorway. I had almost forgotten that the old woman was still there. There didn’t seem to be any surprise in her expression or voice, it was very matter of fact. I wondered if she’d known the whole time who I was.

“I am. How did you—”

“Small town. We like to keep tabs on our Ruby Court residents.”

Dora turned to look at Jo whose eyes were now pointed at the ceiling. Suddenly I felt cornered and trapped in a maze of Noni’s meticulous design.

“So, I’ve heard,” I said, slightly agitated, and still fixed on Jo’s avoidant gaze.

“Guess I have the Lewis’s to thank for that?”

“Now you’ve done it,” he whispered so only I could hear it.

Noni readjusted herself against the wall as if to prepare herself. “You know, my family has lived in Morris Chapel for six generations. And I mean no offense by this, but not a single person born and raised in this town would ever live in Ruby Court. It’s too damn far and there’s not nearly enough flat land to do much of anything up there. No use. Ruby Court isn’t interesting because of the Lewis’s, no matter what nonsense you hear
about a curse. Those are just campfire tales. There’s no proof that anyone who’s lived there has ever actually died apart from the Lewis’s. Only body they ever found was Elmer’s. For all we know, the wife and the daughter could’ve survived, and we’d have never known it. Sure, wouldn’t have been as interesting if they had, no?”

She raised her brow as she shifted the weight in her feet, and then continued.

“Ruby Court’s gotten its reputation because of the people who move great distances to live all alone on the top of that hill. They bring their own histories, their own ghosts.”

I didn’t like that I had thought the same thing just a day ago.

“So, you’re saying the people who live in Ruby Court move there because they have something to hide?”

The woman’s cheeks flushed, and she took a few steps out of the small room.

“Not saying anything about you or your husband. Just something we all started to pick up on, you know. The internet tells you just about everything you want to know these days anyways.”

I had nothing to hide, though I wasn’t sure if I should take that as a threat or not. There wasn’t much to find on me or Isaac online anyway, especially since we’d deleted all of our online profiles.

I crossed my arms and felt a surge of confidence jolt through me.

“It’s weird then that I couldn’t find anything online about Morris Chapel, don’t you think? Forgive me, I’m a bit of a history nerd and I’m curious. I’ve never lived anywhere so,” I paused a moment, trying to think of the right word, “faceless.”
Rick and Jackie have been in Ruby Court for over two decades, was Noni talking about them when she said people bring their own ghosts to Ruby Court? Was she talking about Marie? I felt defensive of my neighbors.

So, this is what it’s all about. People who live in Ruby Court are outsiders as far as the people of Morris Chapel are concerned. Drifters meant to pass through their lives that they can view and judge from a distance, projecting fabricated personas onto people they have no interest in really getting to know.

“Social media has turned everyone in this town to grubby gossips who think they’re entitled to everyone’s business. Like the rest of us don’t have our own secrets,” Jo said turning away from me and his grandma.

Noni chuckled and took a few steps back into the room. She didn’t appear offended or defensive. Maybe she had just mastered the art of tuning out her grandson’s remarks. The tension dissolved and Noni’s soft countenance appraised me.

“The library or the cemetery would be a good place to start if you want to know more about Morris Chapel,” Noni said as she pushed desktop monitors and plastic tubs full of devices and CDs further against the wall, widening the walkway to the door a bit.

“Hugh’s cemetery, you mean?”

“Yeah. You know Hugh?” She stopped fidgeting to look back at me. Her earrings sway ed side-to-side.

“Rick has mentioned him a few times.”

Assuming Noni doesn’t know it already, I thought it best not to mention Isaac or Lane seeing as how South View was currently trying to procure Hugh’s land. I wasn’t
sure how much Noni knew about my husband’s involvement with the bank or the current
state of Hugh’s financial affairs.

“Actually, if you want, I’ve got his phone number. He’ll talk your ear off about
our history any chance he gets if you’re interested. I know bits but he knows more. And
he tells our stories better than anyone I know,” she said.

“I was going to stop by the cemetry tomorrow,” Jo interjected as he pulled down
a Sony stereo, chrome blue and light weight with silver knobs and sharp edges and passed
it along to me. The handle was made of a thick plastic painted the same as the rest of it, it
felt good and solid in my hand.

Jo continued, “The last storm that came through tore up the grounds. I need to
clean up Ma and Daddies headstones. I can take you down there tomorrow if you’d like.
He's likely gone home by now.”

He kept his gaze on his feet, his hands resting in his denim pockets.

I was hesitant to accept. I thought Isaac would certainly disapprove of the whole
ordeal, but my curiosity outweighed my fear of what Isaac might want in that moment. I
wanted answers from someone, and I didn’t expect any from Isaac anytime soon. I was
still working out how to approach him anyway.

“Ohay. Yeah, I’d appreciate that,” I said.

“Meet me here around 1?”

I nodded and lifted the stereo he’d selected for me. “Thank you.”

Noni spun around and walked back into the room across the hall and Jo turned to
follow. Before he made it out the door, I caught up with him and caught his arm.

“I’m sorry. Do you think we could keep all of this between us?”
He lifted his hand to mimic locking his lips with a key. “I know who your husband works for. Don’t worry, Noni doesn’t have any idea who Lane is or what he’s been stirring up. It’ll stay between us. I promise.”

I believed him. If I wanted answers about my new home, I needed to make friends.
“Well, what should we christen it with?” Isaac asked as he set the stereo up on the end table over by our living room window.

I’d Windex-ed the glass bookcase when I’d gotten home from the store earlier in the evening, and it shined and reflected the crescent moon back at me now. Sitting cross-legged in the rocking chair that Rick carved and whittled for me, I thought about the music my family and I used to play on rotation in the car when I was little. I used to have the track numbers of my favorite albums memorized.

“Play number 11, Maroon 5!” I would cry out, still trying to catch my breath after rushing to beat Ida to the car in order to get first dibs on the radio. A puff of my inhaler would likely follow and all would be well again, as long as I was victorious, of course. Spotify and iTunes killed that particular skill of mine.

“Do you have anything by Aretha Franklin?” I pondered. “I’ve got a song stuck in my head.”

“Which one?” he asked, opening up one of the drawers of CDs in the bookcase.

“Oh, wait. No, let me guess.”

I sat back in my seat and giggled as I watched Isaac excitedly dig through his collection. He’d been so happy to see me this evening. Had hugged me and kissed me as soon as he returned, and he brightened even more so when I told him that it would be just the two of us again for dinner tonight. Ida was cooking for Marie and Leah and would not be joining them as she’d done most nights this week.
I had spent too much time at the thrift shop that afternoon and barely had time to prepare something for us to eat before Isaac got home. I was happy to have found a box of macaroni in the pantry and he seemed satisfied enough with that along with my promise to put together something heartier for dinner tomorrow when Ida, Marie, and Leah joined us, of which he seemed less enthusiastic about. Marie seemed to share Isaac’s hesitancy when I invited all of them this afternoon, but Leah chimed in and excitedly accepted the invitation for all three of them before Marie or Ida could respond. The little girl was desperate to see the kitten again.

Isaac was in his pajamas now, flannel pants and a snug black tee. I thought he looked like he’d lost some weight as I appraised him from a distance. The move was too stressful. I wish we’d had more help from my family during this time. Isaac’s dad was too weak from the stroke. He could only do so much. I thought I might have actually gained some weight and was feeling self-conscious. I held a plush pillow over my stomach and lightly kicked off the floor in my rocking chair for comfort.

“Aha,” he said, pulling out a case from the drawer but held it under his arm so that I couldn’t see. “Now wait right there.”

He opened the player and placed the CD inside. A hushed whooshing sound began as the CD spun, preparing to spit out the first track.

At the first twang of the guitar, I knew which album and which song he had guessed. And he had guessed correctly.

Aretha’s raspy voice chimed out, “Chain, chain, chain.” Her gospel crooning called out to us both and we couldn’t help but sway back and forth at the first sound of her voice.
“Well?” Isaac asked. “Was I right? Isn’t this the one you told me you sang at full volume in a Walmart with your mom when you were little?”

I was surprised he remembered the story and the song. I had mentioned it only once before early on in our relationship when it happened to come on the radio. These days I rarely allowed myself to reflect on the memories I shared with my family let alone speak about them out loud with my husband. There was so much I wished I’d done differently.

“Wow. So, you were listening?”

“Always,” he said.

He held his hand out and though I wasn’t quite ready to abandon the protection of my pillow, I cast it aside and took his hand.

He spun me around and held me close to him. I intertwined my fingers with his and leaned back into him. I felt the tip of his nose trace the back of my neck, and then his lips. It was sweet. Soft. Like he was in the beginning. My heart lurched and yearned for him and the way we used to be. Before we moved into this house with all of the baggage that came with it. Before all the stress and the ultimatums. Before the isolation. I missed him, I realized. Missed his touch, missed his voice, and the way he used to make me laugh so easily. With just a look, really, because he made me nervous.

He let go of one hand and spun me out. He led me to twirl under our arms and then guided my hands around his neck, his went to my waist. We didn’t speak, our eyes met, and suddenly he kissed me eagerly. We backed up into the wall behind me and I slid my hands under his shirt.

“Oh, shit!” Isaac shouted and stumbled back.
I recoiled but shook it off with a nervous smile when I realized I hadn’t done anything wrong, he was startled by something else.

Little Mira, guilty and proud, trotted down the hall and poked her head back around the corner. “Mow,” she cried as if asking a question, testing the waters.

“Oh, sweet thing,” I said following her into the kitchen. “I forgot to put her kibble out. Did she get ya?”

“Yeah, well, sweet thing has some killer claws,” he said, inspecting the back of his leg where she’d attempted to climb up the length of him. “Really nice of your sister to bless us with this. Remind me to thank her again tomorrow.”

The sarcasm in his voice was thick but light. He wasn’t entirely unhappy with the kitten, I noticed. I’d seen him sneaking her treats and giving her chin rubs on his way out the door the last couple of mornings.

I listened to his steps as Isaac traipsed further down the hall, stepping to the beat, in the opposite direction. I doled out a handful of the kitten kibble my sister had purchased into a bowl and set it in front of Mira. She ate and purred, a successful cat with a plan.

As I turned to meet Isaac where I’d left him, I caught a glimpse of my phone on the kitchen counter from the corner of my eye and stopped in my tracks. With this song playing and my sister being in town, I was suddenly overcome with the urge to break the silence between my mom and me. I missed her desperately. The thought picked at me and grew hot in my stomach, my hands itched and sweated. Before I lost my nerve, I unlocked the screen and clicked on our chain of messages. I had not received a message back from her in five months.
The next track on “Lady Soul” started up and an image of my mom singing harmonies with Aretha in the car flashed in my mind and I quickly sent, “I love you,” then placed the phone face down on the counter again. I would deal with the consequences of that in the morning.

I found Isaac waiting for me by the staircase.

“After you,” he said. Clearly, he had not forgotten where our dance had left off.

I woke to the sound of my alarm clock that next morning feeling like everything was finally falling in to place. Last night had brought back energy into my relationship with my husband and I felt light and hopeful again.

Guess the trip to Nonie’s was worth it after all, I thought. Just have to hope he never finds out about my communication with Lizzie this past week, though I didn’t feel too concerned about that. I had deleted the messages after all and blocked the number. As long as Lizzie didn’t reach out to him with any screenshots of our brief text conversation, I was in the clear.

I was starting to feel safe again in Isaac’s arms and in this house. There was hope again that I might be able to rekindle some of the abused and abandoned relationships I’d left neglected for so many months now. My mom, Nia, maybe even my old friends from college. Isaac would be hesitant about this but after seeing how he’s tolerated Ida being here these last few days, I think I could convince him that letting all of them back in my life would be a good thing for both of us.

Isaac left for work a little over an hour before I’d woken up and now, I laid in bed, staring up at the ceiling with a smile on my face, excited for the day and night ahead.
of me. Ida would be here soon to take me in to Rick’s shop. I’d have to think of an excuse to sneak off to meet Jo this afternoon at Nonie’s without raising any alarm bells.

Ida was so good at reading me. It would be hard to lie to her, but I couldn’t stand feeling lost and confused in this unfamiliar town any longer and the fewer people that know about my plans with Jo and Hugh the better. It unsettled me to think that so many people could know more about me than I do them, as Noni suggested yesterday at her store. Seems only fair that I get some of my questions answered.

As I confronted my fears and my guilt a little more each day, I began to feel more like myself again. Today I felt clear-headed and energetic. However, I still needed to see if I got any kind of response from my mom.

Oh, God, I thought as it suddenly dawned on me what I had done.

I jumped out of bed and rushed down the stairs. Mira trailed behind me in a mad dash for the kitchen to see what I was up to, or ready for breakfast more likely.

My phone was face down on the kitchen counter, in the same place I’d left it the night before. I took a deep breath before picking it up. “It’s going to be okay,” I whispered to myself. The phone lit up when I turned it over. I stared, open-mouthed at the screen for a good thirty seconds before it fully registered with me that there was nothing there.

No new messages.

I could feel the energy I’d felt this morning start to dissipate. My shoulders and chest sank until I needed to rest my elbows on the counter in front of me.
I unlocked my screen so I could investigate further, as if I could will a response to appear. Maybe I hadn’t immediately locked my phone screen after sending the message last night and my mom replied before it could lock again, I told myself.

The text thread with my mom was still up. Mostly blue, unanswered messages from me filled the screen. I slowly scrolled up until I landed on the last message I’d received from my mom five months ago. After Ida told my mom the truth about me and Isaac, my mom sent me just one message later that night after she’d asked me to leave.

*I wish you’d told me the truth,* was all it said.

After that, nothing.

Nothing when I said I was sorry the next morning. Nothing when I invited her to my engagement party. Nothing when I asked her over for dinner. Nothing when I sent her the wedding date and location.

I scrolled up a little further and something I hadn’t noticed before struck me. Underneath the blue bubble of text that I’d sent my mom just before her last message to me was a note in grey text that said, “Delivered.”

I scrolled down and examined all of the other messages I’d sent to my mom since that night.

There was no receipt of delivery.

I wasn’t entirely savvy with technology, so I took to Google right away.

What does it mean if you stop receiving a “delivered” notification in your texts? I typed anxiously.
The searching icon swirled a couple of times around and then the screen settled and at the top of the page, in bold letters it read, **The recipient opted out of messages or blocked your number.**

“What? Blocked?” I whispered out loud and then set the phone back down.

Mira whined in response and rubbed her face on her ankle.

“Breakfast. Right.”

I moseyed over to the pantry where the cans of wet food sat and grabbed the seafood medley flavor. At the pop of the tin lid Mira chimed in delight. I set it on the floor for the hungry kitty without taking the time to place it in a different bowl. There were no complaints on Mira’s part.

Who else have I not heard from recently? I wondered. Did Nia ever respond to my last message when I thanked her for helping Isaac pick out that dress? I didn’t think so.

I unlocked my phone screen again and searched for the different threads of messages. None of my recent texts to Nia had been delivered either. Would they all have been mad enough to block me? To completely cut ties like I never even existed in their lives? I didn’t want to believe that could be true.

What could this mean then? I wondered. If they didn’t block *me*, could they have been blocked on my phone? No. Because that would mean that someone went into my phone and blocked specific people from my contacts without telling me. What reason would anyone have for doing something like that?

I’d had to block a few numbers in the past, back when Lizzie was sending me harassing messages through a texting app with non-traceable numbers, but I’d never
blocked my family or friends. No matter how much they hurt me, or I hurt them, I loved them. My line would always be open, surely they knew that.

With a pit in my stomach, I went to the settings on my phone, and then to “Blocked Contacts.” The names weren’t listed but the numbers were. It was a long list but at the top I recognized four, the most recently blocked numbers. On my phone, my mom’s, Nia’s, and Lizzie’s numbers were all blocked. Only one of those I had been responsible for.

“What the fuck?” I exclaimed, startling Mira.

I apologized and gave Mira a few pets which seemed to satisfy her as she went back to eating.

Would Isaac have gone as far as blocking my family and friends’ phone numbers behind my back? Even if his motive was to protect me? A month ago, these thoughts would have never even crossed my mind, but after his reaction to seeing Ida last week, what he said about my family and the way I let people treat me, I felt certain he would.

He did.

Next, I re-downloaded the Facebook app and signed in to my old account. The blocked list there was a bit more extensive. My eyes narrowed in on the small screen in my hand, and as I read each name I felt as though the ground was pulling away from me until I was gripping onto the countertop’s edge as if my life depended on it.

*Helen Boden*

*Leon Boden*

*Nia Lawson*

*Miguel Ginez*
My family, my friends, Isaac’s boss. Everyone was blocked. And then, of course, there were the multiple accounts with variations of Lizzie’s name and ones that were unidentifiable that I was instructed to block by the police last year when the cyberstalking began. There was one name though that I didn’t recognize at the bottom of the list.

Donovan Carmichael.

When I clicked on the page, I saw that the account had no profile picture nor any details about who this person was or where they were from. They didn’t appear to be following any accounts or friends. Or maybe it was private.

Who was this person? And why would Isaac make sure to block them on my account?
I brought up my mother’s page and just before pressing the “unblock” feature next to her name, the image of that box of laptops Isaac brought into the house when we were unpacking flashed in my head and I decided to wait. I’d thought it was strange at the time, but I’d dismissed it. Like I did so many things.

“Something’s not right,” I said aloud, and Mira chirped in response to the sound of my voice.

Before I could confront him, I needed to gather as much information on my own as possible. The night of the dinner party and Ida’s return showed me that he could be dangerous, I couldn’t risk setting him off again. I didn’t know what he was capable of anymore, but now I do know he must have wanted me to feel isolated. Like everyone had forgotten about me. That is what he always said, after all—they’d forgotten me.

I could imagine how it might go if I brought my phone to him and showed him what I’d found. He’d console me, feed me lines about how much he loves me and how cutting the people I care about out of my life was what I needed to heal and grow. I’m always the one with the problem. The one who’s never strong enough. Brave enough. Skinny enough. Grateful enough.

No. I’m getting answers. Today.

I stormed down the hall and up the stairs. I had barely spent any time in Isaac’s office since we moved in but that seemed like a good place to start.

His office was on the opposite side of the hall from their bedroom, doors parallel to one another. That half of the hall was dark and shady, even with the overhead light on. I tried to open the door, but it was locked. Of course, it was. I kicked the bottom of the door in anger.
“Ugh!” I screamed.

In a fury, I rushed into the main bedroom and tore up the room looking for any sign of the laptops, a key to the office, or anything that would tell me more about who the fuck I had married. After searching under the bed and mattress, his nightstand and mine, and rifling through the chest of drawers against the side wall, I took to the closet. I grabbed all the clothes on the floor and in the hamper and scattered them onto the floor at the foot of the bed. When there was more space, I got on my hands and knees and felt around the floor for anything hidden or strange but came up with nothing.

I gathered his shoes in one big sweep with my arms and started going through them one by one to make sure nothing was inside.

He had six pairs of the same brown, glossy dress shoes, all empty of clues. I threw them aside and they landed with a hard thunk. I reached for his tennis shoes and yet again, nothing. The last were a pair of hiking boots. I grabbed them and the first shoe was empty, but the second shoe had something. I felt it rattle when I picked up the boot. I tipped it over and a sleek, black flip phone fell out and on to the floor.

“What are you doing?” Ida gasped.

I jumped back. When I looked up, Ida’s face was scrunched in horror at the scene around me. Marie stood behind her with one hand covering her mouth as she appraised the room I’d torn apart.

“You were right. All of you were right,” I tossed her the phone. “I don’t know who he is.”
Ida sat across from me on the floor of my bedroom, twiddling the phone in her hand as I recounted the events of this past week, including the night that she showed up at Rick and Jackie’s. Her ash-colored hair was twisted in a claw clip at the back of her head and with her hand posed under her chin, she looked authoritative and methodical as she processed what I was telling her. Surprisingly calm.

“Dora, we need to leave. We can go home. I’ll call mom right now and tell her everything you told me. She’ll understand,” she said very seriously.

“No! No, Ida don’t tell anybody. Not yet.”

“But you can’t—”

“No, Ida! I’m married to Isaac. I can’t just run away. I don’t know why any of this is happening. I need to know why he would do this. Or what he’s trying to do. No, we’re going to do this my way or no way.”

Ida stood and paced in a circle a few times.

“She’s right,” Marie said, speaking for the first time.

“What do you mean? We need to get her out of here. He’s dangerous. You heard how he nearly killed her on some kind of psycho joy ride just last week. We can’t wait around for things to escalate,” Ida said, sounding defensive and frantic.

Marie reached for Ida’s hand and met my gaze with soft eyes. “Like she said. We do this her way or no way. We should get our ducks in a row before he finds out we know anything. If we know anything at all. So, we found an old cell phone in a shoe. He could have that for all kinds of reasons.”

“It’s probably what he uses to manage all those fake accounts,” Ida said.
“But we don’t know that for sure,” I said. “I just feel like there has to be an explanation for all of this.”

“There is,” Marie said. “You might not like the answer though. You know that, right? Once we start digging, there’s no telling what we may find. I need you to be prepared for that. Your sister and I will be here to help you.”

“I know. But I have to face him. I have to know the truth.”

“I don’t know,” Ida interjected. “I don’t feel good about this, Dora.”

“Hand me the phone,” I said. “Please.”

Reluctantly, she tossed it my way and I caught it with two hands. The front of the phone was scratched, and I could feel the back battery wiggling loosely in my hand. It was old.

“Is it a burner?” Marie asked.

I flipped it open, and the screen lit up.

**Enter four-digit code.**

“Fuck,” I said. “There’s a password.”

“Maybe this is a sign that we should stop,” Ida said.

“We should keep looking for those laptops. Put that back where you found it, Dora. Let’s put everything back,” Marie said.

“Yeah, you’re right.” I stood and began to frantically shove the contents of the closet back where I got them.

Ida and Marie started re-folding the clothes I’d pulled from the dresser while I tried my best to put everything from his nightstand back in order.

“You have to trust me. I have a plan. Kind of,” I said as I shut the drawer.
“You already have a plan?” Ida asked.

“I was intending on going alone but everything’s changed now. There’s someone we’ve got to meet,” I said.

She shook her head but smiled. “I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

I texted Rick on our way down Coffee Landing that I wasn’t going to be able to make it in today and he responded promptly that all was well, and he’d see me tomorrow. Jackie was home and happily agreed to watch Leah while we were out “running errands.” To my surprise, she accepted our vague plans for the day and began to list a number of activities that she and Leah would do while we “shopped” instead of her usual interrogation.

I thought Hugh would eventually tell Rick about our meeting, but I would deal with that another time. I’ll be getting to Noni’s a little earlier than Jo and I had discussed but it was urgent, and I didn’t have his number.

“So, you met this guy yesterday and he offered to take you to a cemetery, and you thought, hell yeah?” Ida asked from the driver’s seat.

“Why do you always make things sound so sinister?” I asked, half-jokingly. “Rick is good friends with Hugh. I trust him. Besides, it’s a small town. If something bad happened to me, it wouldn’t take long for it to be known.”

“Exactly,” Marie interjected in the passenger seat. “Have you thought about what might happen if and when Isaac finds out that you made plans with Jo Lonigan? Everyone here knows the Lonigan’s and almost nothing goes unnoticed. Why do you think I rarely leave my house? Can’t give them anything to talk about if you’re never around.”
“He promised to keep it secret,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Nothing stays secret, Dora,” Ida said. “Maybe you should stay with me and Marie tonight. Tell Isaac we’re having a girl’s night, sleepover, or something. Just in case. I don’t want you to be alone with him tonight in case someone lets anything slip to him.”

“Yeah, maybe. Let’s just take it one step at a time,” I said.

Next, I texted Isaac to let him know I wasn’t going into Rick’s today. What with him working at the bank just next door, the chance of him walking over to check on me only to find that I’d called out without telling him was not something I wanted to risk. I decided on telling him that I opted out of work today to spend some time with my sister, Marie, and Leah. I tacked on a thought that we might even try to set up a picnic over at the Lewis Chapel, as long as the weather stayed nice, to try and sell my story even more. I hoped it would work. It had to.

Once we pulled up to Noni’s I felt the reality of everything that had transpired begin to sink in. My hands felt tingly, and my heart raced. My vision narrowed, almost hyper focused like I was looking through a fisheye lens. It made my stomach twist and took my breath away.

“Hold on,” I gasped. “I just need a second.”

“What’s wrong?” Ida asked, looking back at me like I was a bomb about to explode.

Maybe I was.

“Take deep breaths,” Marie suggested. “Slow and long.”
She demonstrated, using calming hand gestures that went up and down with her chest.

Though, my first meeting with Marie had been rough and rocky, I felt nothing but sympathy and compassion from Marie now. Maybe it was the teacher in her. Or maybe she knew what I was going through, had been through her own version of Isaac before. She was so cool and calm. Wise.

After a few minutes of this, I felt more at ease. Sturdy. I could do this.

“Thank you,” I said and reached over and held Marie’s hand for a moment.

Ida looked at the both of us with a tear in her eye. Her cheeks were slightly puffed like she was holding her breath or holding back a sob.

“Let’s do this,” Marie said, opening the passenger door and stepping out into the midafternoon glow.
Chapter Fifteen

Ida, Marie, and I walked up the stairs to the small front patio of the thrift shop. There was no sign to signal whether or not the shop was open or closed. Though the lights were out, I jiggled the door handle anyway to see if it was open but with no luck. Ida knocked on the door in rhythm of threes a couple of times, but nothing stirred inside. I shifted to the left by the breakfast nook window with the staircase books and knickknacks and peered through but could see no sign of movement within. I looked down and realized we had disturbed a line of something white and powdery by the entrance. Our dusty footprints were scattered about the patio.

Marie seemed to notice at the same time as me.

“Flour?” I asked.

She picked up one foot and looked at the bottom of her burgundy Keds, coated in a layer of white powder and laughed. “Her security system, you think?”

“Interesting,” Ida said, though she didn’t look very interested, she looked mildly disturbed and a little bewildered.

“Well,” Marie started. “What now?”

“I don’t know. Do you know where the Lonigan’s live?” I asked.

Marie was fiddling with her hair, trying to pin a flyaway curl behind her ear. “I think so, but I don’t know if I wanna accost them at their house unexpectedly.”

“Why?” I asked.
“Because people in towns like this are protective of their space and land. Some are just waiting for a reason to pull their triggers, and especially if they look like me,” she said.

The weight of my ignorance settled in my stomach, and I felt like an absolute fool. I hadn’t even thought about how dangerous all this was for her.

“Well, I don’t much like what you’re insinuating,” Jo suddenly said, leaning against the left side of the house with a black trash bag full of what appeared to be dead grass, twigs, and weeds.

Marie wasn’t startled or flustered by his appearance. “Yeah, well, I don’t much care. I can’t afford to take the risk. Not that you would understand.”

He pursed his lips, in thought, and after a pause said, “Certainly, there are rotten eggs everywhere you go. Even in Chicago, I hear. I can’t speak for everyone in Morris Chapel, but my friends and family out here aren’t so bad. I suppose we would need to prove ourselves, though. Towns like this don’t always get the best reputation. I understand.”

Marie nodded sternly but I felt her stance soften ever so slightly.

“I’m here unarmed and at your service. How can I help you ladies?” Jo said, trying to lighten the air between them.

I traipsed down the steps of the front porch and stood before him. His eyes met mine and a frown replaced the grin that had been there moments before.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m a little earlier than we’d planned, and I know I didn’t ask you if I could bring guests to meet with Hugh, but I need your help.”
He dropped the bag and took a few steps forward. “No apologies necessary. What do you need?”

“We need to see Hugh right away. I have some questions for him, and it really can’t wait. And,” I hesitated, worried and wondering what Jo must be thinking, “we need to be as discreet as possible.”

“Move Marie’s car to the back behind that brush of trees. We’ll take my truck. No one will know, I promise. I know this place like the back of my hand and Hugh is a trustworthy man.”

I wanted to believe him but because of Isaac’s connection to Southview and Lane, I didn’t know what to expect from Hugh. Would he really be happy to help the wife of someone who is trying to take possession of his business and land?

Certainly not. I don’t know. But I have to try.

To get to the cemetery, Jo took us down Highway 96 in the opposite direction of Southview and Rick’s shop which lowered our chances of being seen traveling together by someone in town. Before reaching the road that would take us to Adamsville, we took a left and went uphill along a small road overgrown with weeds and vines for several miles.

The grass along the sides of the road were tall. So tall that I might’ve missed it if I’d tried to find the famous cemetery on my own. When Jo pulled into the driveway, I saw a small chapel, though, a little bigger than the Lewis chapel that was just down the street from my own home. Behind the church was a sea of grey, white, and black headstones, obelisks, and memorial benches. The yard was better maintained than the
barrier of overgrown brush alongside the road, though now I’m wondering if that was intentional. A cheaper form of privacy, perhaps.

Ida, Marie, and I were all crammed in the back seat of Jo’s truck and hadn’t said a word for the entire drive up. When Jo turned the car off, Ida broke the silence, “Dora, are you sure this is going to help us? How exactly is a history lesson going to help us figure out,” she glanced over at Jo suspiciously and whispered, “our problem?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling I have. Something awful happened in the house I live in, and he never told me about it. I want to know why. Why Morris Chapel, why Ruby Court? Why am I here? It feels important.”

Jo cleared his throat. “There’s no need to worry. Hugh is a good man. He’ll be pleased to meet y’all and more than willing to answer any questions you may have about Morris Chapel. To the best of his ability, of course.”

“Well, then let’s get started. I’m starting to get claustrophobic,” Marie said, opening the door and stepping outside.

We followed Jo up to the chapel and met a dark mahogany double door with ornate gold handlebars. I hoped Rick would be proud of my recollection. It really was beautiful work.

Jo rapped on the door with his knuckles three times and stood back. I heard quick footsteps, and then a struggle to unlock the door. Suddenly, it was flung open and a short, stout man with a scruffy white beard and matching head of hair stood before us. His soft green eyes were captivating and his rosy cheeks and smiling face settled my nerves. He really did look happy to see us.
“Oh, my goodness! Could it be? The residents of Ruby Court have come to pay me a visit,” Hugh said, excitedly, and then stepped back to make way for us to enter.

“Please, come in, come in.”

I hurried inside first, and the rest of my support group quickly followed behind. The ceiling was much higher than I expected it to be, and the light wood paneling captured and accentuated the natural light coming in from the many windows that lined the four walls. There were only three sets of four rows of pews facing the front where services must be held. Images of the Stations of the Cross wrapped around the church walls and a cross was positioned in the center just behind the podium.

“Welcome!” Hugh said as he stepped around Ida, Marie, and Jo to make his way to the front of the group. “Who all do I have the pleasure of meeting?” he asked, though I suspected he already knew all of our names.

Everyone went around and introduced themselves by name and Hugh listened attentively.

There was a pause in conversation, and I was unsure of how to begin. What with everything going on with Hugh and Southview, it seemed insensitive to bypass the obvious tension in the air.

“Hugh, I just want start by saying how sorry I am about…” I trailed off, not sure what to say or how to say it.

“Dear, you have nothing to be sorry for. You’re not the one trying to force me out of a business that’s been with my family since the foundation of this town in 1832.”

“I’m not, but I’m married to someone who is.”
“Lane is doing this. He’s been after me and my property for years now. Your husband is just a cog in his well-oiled machine. But anyway, since little Jo brought you here with a congregation, I assume there’s something I can help you with.”

I nodded. “Among other things.”

Hugh walked past me and over to the back left corner of the church and dragged a fold out chair over to where we all stood.

“Go ahead and take a seat,” he said, gesturing to the pews next to us and we all followed suit. Ida, Marie, and I sat together, and Jo took the bench just behind us.

“I was hoping you could clear up a few things for me. And I know, given what you’re going through, how it must sound, but I was hoping we could keep this meeting under wraps? I don’t want…He wouldn’t…” I stumbled over my words again.

Ida held my hand, and I took a deep breath.

“No one will know,” Hugh said. “You have my word.”

I told Hugh about how Isaac had bought the Elmer House in Ruby Court as a surprise wedding present after accepting a position with Southview soon after we were married. I told him how he had described the area that we would be living in to me and my surprise after getting here and realizing how far up in the hills we actually were. I told him how Isaac had hidden the tragic story of the Lewis’s and the rumors of a curse. I didn’t mention Isaac’s escalating behavior. I didn’t want to put Hugh or Jo in an uncomfortable position. I didn’t even know exactly what I was accusing Isaac of or why I felt a sudden sense of urgency. I just couldn’t sit around and wait for answers anymore. I had to start somewhere.
Hugh nodded and hummed as I spoke. His face was free of judgment as he took in all the information, but I heard Jo shifting around uncomfortably behind me.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I can’t say I blame your husband for keeping the violence that took place in your home a secret. It really is an awful tragedy that people of my generation and older are quite ashamed of. It’s the younger ones that started all these stories about curses and bad luck. Just over the last fifty years but even more so over the last twenty. Hmph,” he grunted and shook his head disparagingly.

“So, there’s nothing to it? The curse, I mean,” I asked nervously, looking down and biting the inside of my cheek.

“Well, I suppose that is a bit complicated innit?” he said, posing his question over my shoulder at Jo who sighed in response. “Shall I just start at the beginning with the Lewis’s?” Hugh asked.

“Yes, please,” I said.

Everyone settled. A collective shift into place in preparation for Rick to uncover the past in his charismatic, jubilant way. A collective deep breath. We all like a good story, I thought and crossed and uncrossed my legs twice.

Hugh was serious but not intensely so. “In 1832, a group of travelling nomads and farmers settled here, including my great-great grandma and grandpa. A deal was set with the Natives of the area that in exchange for corn and cotton, the new settlers would be granted the land that is now known as Morris Chapel, named after Nimrod Morris, our founder so to speak. He’s the one who did the negotiating. Only about 200 people lived here at first, nearly all of them farmers and all of them Methodist.” He gestured around the church they currently sat in.
“There was harmony for many years as the residents of this town kept their word.
It wasn’t till about 1855 that Elmer purchased that land on the hill and moved his family out here. He was looking to invest in some land and real estate after inheriting some money from Louisa’s folks after they passed, but the locals warned him against doing any kind of construction up on that hill. It was quite the surprise even then that anyone would want to live out there. The wildlife at the time was dangerous and the land was baren. They told him no one would be able to afford to live that far from town. But Elmer was set on his decision. He was a pretty skilled craftsman and built the three houses out in the cul-de-sac that stand there now. Not all of them original, of course,” Hugh said, nodding to Marie whose eyes shifted uncomfortably back and forth.

“So, he moved his family out there for a business opportunity?” I asked.

“What exactly do you know about what happened to Louisa and Ruby?” Hugh asked, looking directly at me.

“I know that their bodies were never found but were assumed dead. Murdered, I mean. I know that Elmer was found in the dining room with a self-inflicted gunshot wound,” I said, thinking back to my first conversation with Marie at the Lewis chapel. It was hard to believe that that was only a matter of days ago. Sitting on that bench, she criticized the rumors of curses in this town or any town as a way to ‘absolve men of consequences for their bad behavior.’

Though I’m back where I started, asking questions about the possibility of a real-life curse, I have no intention of absolving anyone of any consequence. I won’t be ignorant this time. I want the truth. I need to know what I missed, what I’m still missing. And this time it seemed I had Marie on my side. I had a feeling she had questions too.
She listened attentively, patiently with her hands cupping one another delicately in her lap. Worlds different from our first conversation about the Lewis’s. Louisa didn’t get her resolution, Ruby paid the price. Maybe something in their story, in their past, can help me understand my present.

“Yes. You see, Elmer was in a bit of a pickle. He had built these properties but couldn’t get any tenants out there. Not for any significant amount of time that is. Just a couple of stragglers who needed a place to stay for a few days if the motel in town was full. He was hemorrhaging money, but he kept spending. Louisa was very religious, a devout catholic, and was struggling with the isolation and change in lifestyle. At the time, there were no catholic churches out here, you see. So, Elmer built her a chapel, her very own place of worship as a last-ditch effort to encourage more residents to travel up the hill and to please his wife, I suppose. According to the rumors, you have to remember that this was a long time ago and we have very few records. What we know about the Lewis’s has been passed down orally over nearly two-hundred years. It was said that a man began visiting Louisa in the chapel and that Elmer found out and was enraged. So enraged that he—”

“Killed his whole family, including his 6-year-old daughter, and then himself. If he can’t have her no one can. Right?” Marie said, her eyes fixed on him.

“That’s what they say,” Hugh said, nodding. “And then, fifty years later, two of the homes in the cul-de-sac were picked apart and rebuilt when a real estate company purchased the land with the hopes of expanding the court and building more houses in the area surrounding. However, they left Elmer’s house alone, hoping to preserve it as much
as possible and market it as a historical home. They never got around to the expansion though.”

“You didn’t they?” I asked.

“Because the same problems from 1832 are still mostly relevant today. It’s far, rocky, hilly, and mosquito ridden. There aren’t a lot of people that can afford to live in the middle of nowhere, even now. And then the unlucky things started happening to those who lived in Ruby Court, but only after they decided to leave for good. The rumors about a curse first spread like wildfire when I was a young boy. It became too costly for that real estate company to maintain those homes, so they sold the property back to the bank—Nimrod Financial Holdings. Of course, now known as—”

“South View,” I interjected.

“What kind of unlucky things?” Ida asked.

“Well, there were the Hendrickson’s back in 1952. Arthur and Sally had a little boy named Henry, about 5 or 6 years old. The family moved into the Lewis’s home in the summer and were out by the spring. Turns out they moved to Ruby Court under assumed names to avoid paying back on some debts. Husband was a failed lawyer or something. They said he couldn’t pass that test.”

He waved his hand in front of him dismissively as if to say moving on and continued. “Eventually the little boy let it slip to his teacher that his name wasn’t really Billy Hendrickson but Tommy Bristol. He’d told her his name and said he wanted to go home. She informed the authorities out of fear that the little boy was in some kind of trouble which revealed the family’s deception. Someone gave the Bristol’s a heads up that the authorities were coming to arrest them for fraud, so they fled.”
“So, they escaped?” I asked.

“I’d say so.”

“Would others disagree?” Ida asked.

“Of course. Several people claimed to have heard a loud crash along various roads in the area and along the highway. Many people believed the official story was that the Bristol’s died in a car accident on their way out of town. But there was never any evidence of that being true. Apparently people call in false reports and tips all the time for various reasons, I’ve been told.”

“What I’m trying to say is they never found any sign of the Bristol’s. Never found the car, never found any bodies, none of the things from their house that they brought with them. A search party was sent out with every tip they got. It’s considered a closed case now, I reckon. They either got away with it or there was some kind of tragedy that we were never able to uncover.”

“What do you think happened?” I asked.

“I think that momma got her baby out of here,” he said flatly.

Marie uncrossed her arms and placed her hand lightly on Ida’s.

“I didn’t know them really. But my mom was friendly with Sally, or Jinny, I suppose is her real name. Ma always said that there was no way they were involved in any accident. She said it was like you could feel Jinny’s aura cradling Billy like a protective shield. She was certain they got away, the whole family, and lived a happy life elsewhere. I was only a baby when all this happened so, I only know what my mom has elected to tell me.”
“That was in 1952? Were there more cases of mysterious things happening to past residents of Ruby Court?” I asked.

“Certainly. I’ll get to it then. Like I said, a real estate company came in and revitalized your home, Miss Marie, as well as Rick and Jackie’s home in the early 60s. Soon after that, a young couple moved into your home,” he nodded to Marie again. “It’s unclear as to what made them decide to leave just six months after they moved in but the day they put their house on the market the husband suffered a heart attack. He was only 32 years old. He didn’t make it. He’s buried out here actually. I was barely ten years old at the time, but I remember his funeral. My father took over the arrangements and his wife showed up with all of her things loaded in her car. From the funeral she left and never returned. Not sure what came of her, honestly.”

“But things like this happen all the time. People lie and people have heart attacks sometimes. It doesn’t mean that there’s a curse haunting this town or Ruby Court,” Marie said.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, dear. I agree with you. I’ve never been one to give much to superstitions. These days it really only seems to be teenagers on Halloween and old timers like me that put any stock into the old tales and rumors. Growing up in a funeral home has taught me a couple things about people. One, people need someone to blame for their misfortunes. Two, money, sex, and power have an insidious grip on each and every one of us. And three, the answer is almost always a lot simpler than people would like you to believe,” Hugh said.

“What about Anna?” Jo asked, speaking for the first time since Hugh started.

“Yes. Anna.” Hugh shifted uncomfortably in his chair and crossed his legs.
“She’s the one who most recently lived in my home, right?” I asked. “Rick and Jackie mentioned it a bit ago. Said something about a pretty serious accident. But that she lived, right? Was it a car accident?”

“Yes, yes. She lived. Though, it wasn’t no car accident she survived. She was seven months pregnant when she decided to break her lease and move back in with her mother. She was only renting, you see. Anyway, she slipped one night while getting out of the shower, hit her head, and passed out. She lived alone so it was mighty lucky that she had made plans to host a ‘farewell dinner’ with Rick and Jackie at her place later that evening. She was set to leave the very next morning actually. They found her shortly after and just in time, the way I hear it.”

Hugh scratched his chin and shifted his gaze to the tall ceiling before beginning again. “Anna was okay, but the fall had caused her placenta to detach. They had to do an emergency c-section. They saved her baby boy, and quickly checked him into the NICU for the next several weeks, prolonging Anna’s stay a little longer than she’d intended. Eventually Anna and her baby healed and were discharged. Anna left with her baby that same day and never came back. That was twenty years ago, now. Hard to believe that much time has gone by. I’m not online but Jackie said that Anna’s gone silent now. Deactivated all of her accounts. Couldn’t say how they’re doing now.”

I could tell how much the memories affected Hugh. They must have all really cared for her—Rick, Jackie, Hugh, even Jo. I could feel it around me each time she was brought up. They must have been scared when they thought they might lose them both—Anna and the baby.

They still did lose them, I guess.
“So, she slipped? What makes everyone believe that a curse had something to do with that?” Marie asked.

“Eh, well, about that,” Hugh said, scrunching his face uncomfortably. “Jackie said that when she found Anna on the bathroom floor that evening, she’d come to for just a moment and whispered in her ear, ‘It was him. He pushed me,’ before passing out again. When we asked Anna about it the next day, however, she had no memory of having said that or what she could’ve meant.”

“Do you believe in the curse?” I asked. I wanted an answer. Once and for all. Even Marie looked to Hugh with hopeful, watchful eyes.

“No. Never have.”

“Well, you’re an awfully good storyteller,” Ida said. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“The best,” Jo said.

“Why do you suppose there are so many unfortunate events attached to the court then?” I asked Hugh.

“I have a theory.” Hugh shifted his gaze away from mine and looked towards a window to his right. “It seems to me that the area in which Ruby Court is located is appealing to a certain kind of person.”

I stiffened. I’ve heard a version of this before. From Jo’s grandmother yesterday. But hadn’t Jo protested this notion? Why would he offer to take me here if this is what Hugh believed.

“I thought you said that was just small-town gossip?” I turned and asked Jo directly.
“I think it’s more complicated than they make it out to be. But I know it’s true that Ruby Court has an appeal to people that might want to lay low for one reason or another. I mean, can’t you see it? The connection?”

“What about the young couple? The one who died of a heart attack. Were they trying to hide something when they chose to move to Ruby Court?”

“Yes,” Hugh answered. “We didn’t find out till after he passed but allegedly, he had engaged in an inappropriate relationship with a minor at the school he was teaching at before he and his wife moved down here. He was asked to leave the district, but his license was not revoked, and no arrest was made. He was going to teach here too. Died a week before classes were set to start up again.”

Ida and Marie scoffed.

“And Anna,” he continued, knowing I was going to ask next, “Well, she escaped an abusive relationship, the way I hear it.”

“Did she meet the father of her child here? Was it her ex’s kid?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” Hugh shrugged, his eyes lingered on Jo before shooting down to his feet abruptly. “She never did tell us.”
Chapter Sixteen

The drive back was quiet and tense. Jo, in the driver seat next to me, sat tight lipped and mopey with one hand on the steering wheel and the other pressed against his temple. He looked like a scolded child, though I wasn’t entirely sure why. He’d barely spoken the whole time we were at the chapel with Hugh. Hadn’t he grown up hearing those stories? It couldn’t have been news to him.

The air circulating in the car was warm with the scent of lawn clippings, sweat, and a hint of pine blowing in from the open window. The church wasn’t equipped with proper A/C. I left feeling sticky and depleted.

Maybe Ida was right. Maybe it was a waste of time chasing ghost stories. After all, what did I learn? That people who lived in my house and cul-de-sac before me had complex and chaotic lives? Couldn’t the same be said for everyone who’s ever lived? Now I was left with a heavy, empty feeling in my stomach. There was still so much unresolved. Unknown. So much left to face and I was scared.

“I’m sorry,” I said, breaking the silence.

“For what?” Ida asked.

“You were right. We shouldn’t have wasted our time there. I don’t know. I think I just didn’t want to deal with the real problem. Now I have to go home and cook dinner like nothing is wrong. And you all have to act like nothing is wrong. I’ve made such a mess. And I still don’t even know what it is he’s done. If he’s done anything.”

“It wasn’t a waste,” Marie said. “It was a start. I told you. We do this your way or no way. You’ve been living in a house with a dark history. Ghost or not, that’s a lot to
carry. You needed to get clarification, especially since that option was stolen from you to begin with.”

“I still feel so lost. I miss my mom. I miss my friends. I just want to understand why this is happening.”

“There isn’t a curse. You’re not cursed,” she paused, emphasizing this point. “We can let that go. We can’t control the past or the dead. Now we investigate the living. We find something tangible.”

“Is someone gonna tell me what’s going on?” Jo said, keeping his eyes on the road.

I held my breath. The car went silent again. I didn’t know what to say. I was afraid but I couldn’t say why. Since this morning I was overwhelmed with a feeling of panic and fear that trembled in my bones. Paranoia had washed over me as the day went on. Images flashed in my mind, one right after the other. The burner phone. The locked office. The laptops. The sudden move to Morris Chapel and my surprise wedding gift. Lane. Southview. And Lizzie. I had nothing to go on but intuition. He’d call me crazy if I told him all this. A bunch of random points and events tied together by my own speculation. He’d agree, what a waste of time.

“It’s nothing,” I lied. “I got it in my head that there was something haunting my house. It’s not true, of course. I just freaked myself out.”

“You said you still don’t know what he’s done. Did you mean your husband?” he pushed.

I stumbled over my words, trying to think of a way to smooth things over. Once I found my footing I shrugged, trying to appear breezy. Like I was just being dramatic.
“Oh, yes. It’s embarrassing, actually. I thought that he might be cheating on me, so I wanted to hear more about this town and its history. Particularly in Ruby Court. It seemed significant to me, I don’t know why. I thought it might give me some answers or might even absolve my husband of any wrongdoing.” I stole Marie’s word.

“Like he was possessed or something?” Jo asked.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

He laughed. Satisfied with my response. Lucky he was so young. He still had that boyish naiveté. If he was a little older, he might’ve seen through me. Read my body language a little differently. Had follow up questions.

When we got back to the court, I invited Ida, Marie, and Leah to join me for dinner whenever they were ready. I promised to put things on the back burner for tonight and put on whatever show I needed to in order to satisfy Isaac. I pleaded with them to do the same, it felt important that we keep our plans for tonight even though everything was a mess. Truthfully, I didn’t want to be alone, and I was trying to put that off as well. I needed more time before I approached him with any accusations. Marie was on board. Ida, hesitant. I could tell she didn’t want the answers. She didn’t need an explanation. She wanted me to leave. She didn’t have to say it. I could see it in her eyes. Feel it emanating from her.

Leah waved at me from the three-panel bay windows in Jackie’s living room. She had a stuffed cat in her right hand, black and white just like Mira. Jackie must have gotten it for her. I mouthed, see you soon and gave her my best “princess wave” before I turned and headed back home. The old Victorian house looked taller and darker in this
new light. It protruded eerily against the cold, grey sky. I walked the rest of the way with a pit in my stomach and anticipation in my heart.

I hadn’t checked my phone since that morning when I’d called Isaac to tell him I wasn’t going into work. Panic bubbled up inside me as the sound of Isaac’s worried and paranoid voice shouted in my mind. Where have you been? How could you worry me like that? Do you even love me at all?

But when I tapped on the screen, awakening it from its slumber I saw only one missed call and one voicemail from Isaac. No text messages. The call had only come twenty-minutes ago too. I could make up an excuse for a twenty-minute delay. I pressed play on the voicemail and put it on speaker.

“Hi, babe. Surprised I didn’t hear from you today. I have some bad news about dinner tonight. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to make it. Lane needs me to stay late to help prepare a proposal he will be presenting later this week. I hope you, your sister, and Marie have a good time. Don’t wait up for me but do call me back as soon as you get this.”

Okay, okay, I said to myself reassuringly. He’s not mad. He doesn’t suspect anything. He just wants out of our dinner plans. Good. Good. I’ll tell him I was cooking, preparing the house. Yes. That will do.

I pressed his contact under “missed calls” and the phone began to ring. On the third ring he answered, almost breathless.

“Dora? What have you been doing all day? Since when are you so busy you can’t call and check in with me? I was getting a little worried. Almost came looking for you.”
His tone surprised me since his voicemail was so calm. “Isaac. I—I’m sorry. I missed you today. I’ve been in a cleaning and cooking frenzy all day. The time got away from me.” I bit my lip.

He laughed. “You really have been so scatter-brained since your sister got here.”

“Yes. Well, she’ll be gone in a few days and things will go back to how they were before,” I said.

“Right.” He cleared his throat before speaking again. “Anything else exciting happen today?”

The question stopped me in my tracks. He was pushing. Did he suspect me? Did he know I was lying? I wasn’t good at this. There were so many opportunities for him to find out about my trip to the cemetery with Jo. There was Noni, Jackie, and anyone who might’ve seen us driving through town. We did our best to move through town conspicuously but did we? Jo said I could trust him, but would his grandmother keep my secrets too?

Finding out that the reason my mom never responded to me all those times I tried to reach out was because she never got my messages to begin with left me with a mix of emotions. It meant my mom hadn’t necessarily given up on me. It meant there was still a chance I could get her back. My heart ached because all this time, she must’ve thought I blocked her. That I cut her out. That I didn’t want her in my life and that thought broke me.

Isaac lied to me. I could feel this truth in my gut, and it hurt to know that someone I’d been ready to spend my life with would make such a drastic decision, to cut my family and friends out of my life, without discussing it with me. And yet, there was a part
of me that wanted to tell him the truth. To please him. I’ve always been that way.

Overexplaining myself, begging people to understand me, believe me, trust me. I hated how the sound of his voice made my brain go fuzzy. I felt like putty in his hands.

“Exciting? What do you mean?” I asked.

“Just not used to going this long without talking to you. Cleaning and cooking doesn’t normally entertain you so. Thought maybe there was something else.”

He knew. He knew me. One last try. “No, sweetie. Like you said, I’ve been scatter-brained. What time should I expect you tonight if you’re not going to make it for dinner?”

“Why? You got a boyfriend coming over?”

“Isaac, please.”

“I don’t know. Late.”

“Oh, I miss you. I love you and I’ll see you tonight. Hope Lane doesn’t ask too much of you.”

“See you soon.”

He hung up the phone. I passed the test.

The girls came over a half hour later. Marie brought a pack of store-bought blueberry scones and a pitcher of lemonade. Leah ran in, cat still in hand and embraced me in a tight hug like we were the best of friends. I squeezed her back.

“I have something for Mira,” she said.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked.
“Yes, apparently Jackie took Leah to the Dollar General while we were out shopping,” Marie said and pursed her lips disapprovingly.

Leah pulled a little stuffed mouse out of her pocket. It squeaked when she shook it.

Mira trotted in at the sound, tail up in the air in the shape of a question mark, searching eagerly for the curious noise.

“Mira!” Leah squealed and the kitten ran back into the kitchen from where she came. Leah trailed her, zooming past me, hoping to coax her out again.

“Be careful, Leah!” Marie called after her. “Don’t scare her!”

“So,” Ida started, shifting from boot to boot uncomfortably, hands balled up and shoved deep into her denim jacket pockets, “when does he get here?”

“Actually, he’s not coming. I think the amount of feminine energy in this house at one time scared him off,” I said. “He is staying late at the office, though he wouldn’t tell me exactly when to expect him back.”

Marie moved over to the couch and plopped down. “What do you want to do, Dora?”

“I guess I’d like your help looking for something. Anything that looks intentionally hidden. Couldn’t tell you what though. I’ve got a lasagna in the oven. It should be ready soon.”

“Where do you want us to start?” Ida asked, looking cross. Her lips taught and shoulders slouched.

I felt shaky. Like I was walking a tightrope hundreds of feet in the air. One misstep and everything would be over. Everything would change forever. I wasn’t used
to being in charge of anything or being the one who called the shots. This was all unfamiliar territory for me.

“I guess I’ll start here in the living room. Do you guys wanna just pick one of the other rooms down here?”

“Sure,” Marie said, standing up and stretching her arms high up in the air. “I’m going this way,” she yawned and pointed towards the kitchen where Leah had wandered into moments ago.

“I’ll be in the spare room, I guess,” Ida said flatly.

“Thank you,” I said, though she didn’t respond.

My plan was to inspect the glass bookcase and look through the drawers of CDs Isaac stored away. Each drawer was carefully organized, with each CD facing spine up so that you could read the names of the albums. I wasn’t sure what I might find in there. Maybe a key to his office. Maybe nothing. Hopefully something.

It worked out that I took the living room. That way one of us was able to keep an eye out for any sudden headlights or the soft purr of Isaac’s car. As I went through each drawer full of CDs, I frequently popped my head up to glance out the window. I felt this pressure on the back of my neck like eyes on me. Like I was racing against a clock that was counting down to something only I didn’t know what.

“Dora! Could you come in here?” Marie called from the kitchen.

Ida rushed out of the spare room, and we nearly collided into one another on our way to meet up with Marie.

“What is it? Did you find something?” I asked.
She held up a piece of unopened mail and dropped it in my hand. “Do you know someone named Donovan Carmichael?”

I knew that name. Where did I know that name?

“My Facebook,” I said, suddenly remembering. I pulled out my phone and went to the list of blocked contacts. There he was. Donovan. With no profile picture and no information. “I don’t but he’s here. He’s one of the names that Isaac blocked on my phone.”

Ida reached for my phone and Marie leaned over her shoulder to get a look for herself.

“And you don’t know him?” Ida asked, brows furrowed tightly.

“No idea who he is,” I said.

Leah was crouched in the corner dangling her stuffed cat over Mira’s head. Mira jumped and twirled as Leah let it sway from side to side. “Mom! Look at this! Watch!”

I walked over to the pantry where I kept all of Mira’s food and toys and grabbed the wand with a long string attached to the end. “Here, Leah. You wanna try this? She likes this one.”

Without missing a beat, she grabbed it out of my hand and then took off down the hallway, whipping the string all about. Mira took off after her.

“I just need a minute,” I said, feeling overwhelmed and confused. “Would you mind taking the lasagna out in ten minutes or so?” I asked Ida.

“Sure. No problem,” she said.

I went back into the living room and plopped down on the floor beside the inset bookcase, feeling the weight of the day settle in my body. I was exhausted. Weak. I
wondered what my mom was doing. If she was worried about me or about Ida. I didn’t even know what all Ida had told her up until today. I hadn’t even asked Ida how mom was doing yet. In all honesty I was terrified of the answer. Is she still working at the clinic? Is she still watching episodes of the Bachelor and the Bachelorette every Monday evening like it’s her religion? She loved love but wasn’t interested in finding it for herself anymore. She saved that energy for reality television. Stories that were well thought out and manipulated by the producers to ensure that it would be entertaining and emotional each week. She relied on me so much during those first years after dad left. We were so close. And then I met Isaac and it’s like someone else took over my body. That sounded like a copout, even in my head, but it’s how it felt. Everyone I cared for before him felt so far away.

I’ve never suffered this kind of loneliness before or been so lost in the world. It was like I was hovering hundreds of feet above the ground, waiting for gravity to thrust me back down at any time it seemed fit.

Leah trotted up the stairs and her tiny voice trilled, “Come on, kitty! Follow me!”

I pushed my hands down on the floor and scooted so that my back was up against the front wall but slipped, slamming my elbow against the metal handle of the bottom drawer in the bookcase.

“Fuck,” I spat through gritted teeth.

I rubbed the spot on my elbow till the pain subsided and looked back down at the drawer. I pulled it open to reveal another two rows of CDs. But the momentum caused something small and light to slide and catch on the back row. I could only see one side of it from my current angle. It looked like a small notebook. I reached my hand in, and then
pulled out a little notepad with yellow paper. It was one of those cheap pads you could get in a sale bin at any grocery or super store.

I flipped the cover up. The first page had Lane’s name, number, and address listed. There were a series of other numbers listed underneath this but no identifying names to go along with them. I started to turn the page but before I could the edge of a polaroid photo slid out of the pad, about halfway into the notebook. At first I saw a pair of feet in black heels, ankles crossed. I pulled it the rest of the way out. And before I could even fully register what I was seeing my eyes went blurry and my breathing stopped. It was me. I was lying down on Isaac’s bed back at his apartment in Murfreesboro. It was just a bit after we were engaged. He’d bought me that outfit. A black camisole dress with a lacey skirt.

I was asleep in the photo. No. Blacked out. This was the night I drank too much, and I lost time. The night that Isaac always seemed tight-lipped about. I didn’t remember anything that happened that night. Isaac always said that I’d gotten “wild” and then crashed hard. He never really would elaborate much on what “wild” meant but the look in his eyes nearly said it all. One of the straps of my dress was pulled down, the top of my left nipple was exposed, and my skirt was lifted just enough to see a sliver of my white cotton underwear. I was posed for this photo. I don’t remember any of it. I don’t remember. Why does he have this hidden away?

I felt myself sobbing and trembling, but I did not feel connected to my body or its emotions in the slightest. I rifled through the notebook in a frenzy. Pages full of initials and P.O. box numbers across the country and even some overseas.

“Dora!” Ida rushed over to me and reached for my hands. “Dora, what’s wrong?”
At her touch I realized I was nearly screaming. A sharp pain in my chest and stomach surged through me and I threw my head into my knees.

“Go! Please, just go! I need to be alone!” I shouted.

Marie shuffled into the room and quietly stood beside Ida, placing an arm around her waist.

“Dora, what did you find?” she asked.

“Leave! All of you! Please. This was a mistake. I don’t want this. I don’t want to do this anymore!”

“No,” Ida said defiantly and sat down in front of me.

Marie shooed Leah back upstairs. “Go wait in Dora’s room. I’ll be up to get you in a second.”

Her quick steps resounded in the quiet between us as we waited for the click of the bedroom door upstairs. The door squeaked as it swung open and then again as it closed.

“What did you find? What do you have?” Ida said craning her neck so she could see what I had burrowed in my lap.

She reached for it as I tried to slip it under me. I was quicker.

“Dora! What is it?” Ida shouted, her face was flustered and her eyes watery.

“Ida, wait. Just give her a minute,” Marie reasoned.

“No!” she shook her off. “You don’t understand Marie. She needs to stop all of this. This is fucking crazy!”

Marie looked taken aback. “I don’t understand? All I’ve done is try to be understanding to you both. Why are you being aggressive?”
“All you’ve done is made her feel comfortable settling into this fucking nightmare! All day you’ve encouraged her and done everything she’s said like she’s your daughter. She’s a fucking adult now and she needs to start acting like it. I’m sick of this.”

Marie looked out the window for a moment, at first I thought it was rage building up in her, making her cheeks turn red but then she looked back at me softly, avoiding Ida’s gaze. “I’m sorry, Dora. I’ll be right next door if you need me, but I need to go. I need to take my daughter home.”

I was frozen. I could not speak. I could not move.

Marie gathered her daughter and quietly made her way out. Ida and I did not speak again until she was gone, and once she shut the door behind her, it went eerily still in the house.

Tears continued to stream down my face in steady falls, but I didn’t make a sound.

“We’re going home now, Dora. Enough is enough. Mom misses you. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? Don’t you care about us anymore? You’ve barely asked about her since I’ve been here, apart from your self-absorbed interrogations about why we stopped reaching out to you when you know that’s not the whole story. It never was.”

“Ida, you have never understood. And at this point, I don’t know if you can. I love mom and I love you. But I’m not fucking okay and I’m so fucking scared. I want to reach out to mom, I want to go home with you, but that won’t make all of this go away. You may not be able to see that, but I’ve been in this, on my own, for months now. I can’t just pretend that I didn’t make these choices. I won’t bring mom into this. She doesn’t deserve to be put through anymore and I truthfully don’t know what the next move is. I
should never have brought you into this either. I should have told you to leave the first night you got here. This has all been a mistake.”

“You know what? You’re right. This is your mess. I’ve done all I can, and I won’t feed into this game of yours anymore. If you wanna stay with him, fucking stay with him. I hope you two have a happy marriage.”

She turned away from me before I could react or respond. Her boots stomped, heavy and furiously, against the hardwood floor. On her way out she slammed the front door as hard as she could, enough to shake the ground underneath me. I could hear her boots clunking all the way down the street, then a car door opened and shut, and tires squealed as she pulled out of Marie’s driveway and sped out of the cul-de-sac.

I have never felt pain like this before. Like my stomach was being hollowed out, like a fire was lit in my chest. Coals that would burn forever and ever.
I was standing in the living room of my childhood home. There was a persistent knocking at the front door and though I couldn’t hear anyone speaking on the other side, I knew it was my dad. Intuitively. I could feel him standing there, though I barely remembered his face anymore. Not the creases in his skin, whether or not he had calluses on his hands, nor the shape of his smile. Was it crooked? Were his teeth straight or did the front row of bottom teeth overlap each other like mine? My mom’s figure stood in the hallway before me, shrouded in darkness. I could just barely make her out.


“He could open the door if he wanted to,” was all she said.

“If he wanted to,” I repeated under my breath.

The hallway suddenly extended backwards, further into darkness. My mother was thrust backwards like she was on a moving walkway until she was a speck, and then nothing. An empty hall.

I called after her, “Mom, mom, mom…” and on the last “mom” my voice faltered. I couldn’t open my mouth, and then I couldn’t breathe. I looked around the living room for my inhaler but couldn’t find it anywhere. My chest burned and my throat itched as the wheezing intensified.

Out the open window to my left, I heard the song, “Every Breath You Take,” by the Police trickle in and I stopped in my tracks.
“Stop playing that song!” I shouted, the words barely audible through my barred lips. “Stop! Stop playing it!”

Accepting that my inhaler was gone, and that help wouldn’t come for me, I held my hands over my ears and crouched down on the carpet.

“Dora,” someone whispered in my ear. “Dora, wake up.”

My eyes shot open, and Isaac was leaning over our bed, his hand on my shoulder.

“Isaac? What time is it?” I asked groggily.

“Late.”

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay?” Even in the dark room, I could see the intensity in his eyes.

“I don’t know. Is there something you wanted to tell me?” he asked.

He knew I’d lied to him. There was no question.

“I—, I just didn’t want you to worry. I know how upset it made you when I started asking questions about the Lewis’s and this town. I just couldn’t stop thinking about it. I really needed to speak to someone who knew more. And Hugh is a really good friend of Rick’s. I knew I would be safe.” I thought about mentioning that Ida, Marie, and Jo tagged along with me, but I thought it might be better to see what all he knew before I brought anyone else into this.

“I think there’s something else you’re forgetting,” he said.

In the hallway, I could hear the song that pierced my dreams lightly playing in the background.

Sleep still lingered in my voice and my eyes. My brain couldn’t keep up. I was afraid to speak. Afraid to say the wrong thing and set him off. There was still a slight
tickle in my throat that the anxiety from the dream triggered. I reached for my inhaler on
the nightstand and took a quick puff. Isaac ignored me.

“You know what? Just follow me,” he said and stepped out of the room. He didn’t
wait for me to get up out of bed.

I sat up and realized I had fallen asleep in the clothes I’d worn out earlier that day.
An emerald, green pollo and black slacks made from a stretchy material similar to
leggings. The sickening polaroid of myself unconscious and exposed was folded and
tucked into my back pocket for safe keeping until I knew what to do with it next. I pulled
the comforter to my nose and held it close to my chest. It smelled of fresh detergent and a
hint of eucalyptus. I didn’t want to stand or walk out of that room. I knew it was time to
lay it all on the line. I would have to decide whether or not this was a marriage I wanted
to save or destroy.

On the foyer table pressed up against the hallway, closest to the staircase, sat the
blue and silver stereo I’d picked up from Noni’s. It was plugged into the wall and
wrapping up the last bit of the Police’s hit song.

“I need you to be honest with me,” Isaac started. “Do you know how hard I’ve
been working, trying to create some stability and security in our lives? This is a small
town, with small town values. My boss, in particular, is very traditional, as far as
appearances go. I thought you knew this, I thought we had an understanding. Did you
really think no one out here would see you cozied up in that Lonigan’s car?”

“Wait. It wasn’t like that,” I said, desperately grasping for his reassurance. “I met
him and his grandmother Noni yesterday. People say little things to me all the time like
they know something about us because of where we live. He offered to introduce me to Hugh. Said he could explain it to me. There’s a pattern.”

He walked back towards the other end of the hallway, and then back, pacing. I chewed on the inside of my cheek. Like most days since our wedding, I couldn’t read him. His face was relaxed but the tension between us was hot and stifling.

“What pattern? You always do this. You always read into every little thing. This is the exact reason I asked you to let all this go when we first moved in. But you never think of me. That much is clear now. I really don’t think you live in the same reality the rest of us do. Everything is always so,” he paused, searching for the right word, “overinflated.”

“Don’t you have any desire to understand what happened here?”

“I know exactly what happened here. Some bitch fucked around on her husband who gave her everything she ever wanted, and she got what she deserved. Don’t you know? That’s what they’re all saying in between whispers. That bitch got what she deserved.”

“Isaac, please stop.”

“What else happened?” he asked, bringing us back to the original argument.

I moved over to where the stereo was plugged in and pressed pause.

“What else?” he snapped.

I stared back at him, the polaroid burned hot in my back pocket. My hand itched for it, but I wrapped my hands around my torso to keep from revealing it.

“Um—” I started.
He interrupted anyway. “I’ll get you started. I know Ida and Marie were with you.”

“They just wanted to tag along,” I lied. “They wanted to hear the stories too.”

“What else?” he asked again. He stopped pacing and faced me.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what else to say.”

“You don’t know what to say!” he shouted, his face just inches from mine now. I cowered and gripped onto the banister behind me.

“I know about Jo. I know about his family. A bunch of white trash whores and gossiping loons. You think I don’t know what you’re doing behind my back with that fucking farmer boy?”

“Isaac, that’s not it. He know I’m married. He didn’t try anything! Marie and Ida could tell you!” I cried.

“I wouldn’t believe a goddamn thing that’d come out of either of their mouths.”

“Isaac. This has to stop. I’m not the one lying here.”

He sucked in his breath and bit down on his upper lip. “What are you saying?”

“I was…” I trailed off as I tried to come up with a lie to fill in the spaces, looking for a CD in the drawer’s downstairs and I found something.”

He started to smile, and then he started to laugh. I was more afraid than I’d ever been.

“Oh, Dora. Please, tell me. What did you find?”

I swallowed hard, trying to force a second set of tears, and sobbing back down. “I found the picture,” I whispered.
“What?” he asked sarcastically. “I didn’t hear you? You’re gonna need to speak up.”

I looked at his face twisted in a sick sort of glee and suddenly my decision was clear.

“I FOUND THE GOD DAMN PICTURE!” I shouted back at him, taking my hand off the banister railing.

He backed up a few paces until he was aligned with the small stereo. He looked down at it and traced the silver lining with the tip of his finger. “So? You asked me to take that picture. Not my fault you can’t remember. It’s mine. You gave it to me,” he said.

Each word settled in my stomach like a five-pound weight. A day ago, I probably would’ve believed him. Probably would’ve caved and begged for forgiveness. Would’ve felt guilty for betraying his trust. But now, I just wanted to be heard. I wanted relief.

“I didn’t, Isaac. You know I didn’t tell you to take that picture. I couldn’t have. That was the night I blacked out. I’m unconscious in the photo.”

He scrunched his nose and looked back and forth from me and the stereo a couple of times before speaking again. When he looked back at me, he wore a casual smile. “So, what? You were my girlfriend. We drank too much, and I wanted to snap a picture of you.”

“I was your fiancée,” I clarified.

“Whatever.”

“If that’s true, why did you hide it?” I asked.
“Where are my things?” he asked and took a step towards me. I was distinctly aware of the open staircase directly behind me.

“I put it all back,” I lied. “I just want to understand what happened that night and why everything has changed.”

“I’m only going to tell you this one time,” he said. “You don’t have any idea who you’re dealing with. You and your little bitch pack need to settle down. Not another outing. I need you here. We’ll tell Rick in the morning that you need to step away from the shop. I think it’s about time for Ida to head home. She can take the fucking cat too.”

I didn’t know what to say. I felt like I was dangling over the edge of a cliff with my back exposed to the long fall of stairs behind me. Isaac seemed aware of my fear. He glanced behind me and smiled teasingly.

He patted the stereo, and it began to play again. “Why this stereo?” he asked. “Surely, Noni has an extensive collection in that shit storm of a store.”

“I don’t know. Jo said it was in the best shape out of the ones they had in stock,” I said.

I realized instantly that this was a mistake. Isaac let out a loud huff and started pacing back and forth again. “You’re kidding me right?”

“I—”

“You brought something you picked out with him,” he spat that word like it was acid in his mouth, “into our home? And gave it to me as a present?”

“Isaac, you’re being irrational. He works there! He was doing his job!”

He tightened his fists and punched a hole through the wall and then picked up the stereo on the table and chucked it right at me.
I stumbled backward and ducked to the left to avoid being hit by the flying object. There was nowhere else for me to move. I was cornered up against the edge of the staircase. My right foot slid on the corner of the top stair. For a moment, I hovered, balancing on the heels of my feet for what felt like an inordinate amount of time, and then I was falling.

My butt slammed on the hard surface first and as I tumbled down I kept both hands wrapped around my head. The edges and sharp corners and splintery wood shredded the skin on my arms like paper. My left knee hit the ground at the bottom of the staircase hard. I felt my jaw unhinge, as I cried and moaned in pain, but I couldn’t hear my voice. I wasn’t sure if any sound was coming out at all. My ears rang and my vision went dark. Everything shadowed and blurry.

With my face against the slick, cold floor, my arms outstretched on either side of me and my legs bent uncomfortable under my weight, I felt as though I was sinking into the floor, like the dark hallway from my dream. On a moving walkway, that was taking me further into the darkness.

My eyes shut, and the ringing died down in my ears. I heard shuffling above me, and then the soft shut of a door.
Chapter Eighteen

When I heard the front door shut and the sound of his car zipping out of the neighborhood, I pushed myself off the ground, steadily, cautiously. I wasn’t sure if I could walk at first. Every joint hurt and had stiffened throughout the night. I moved slowly, wiggled my toes and legs and arms. All was accounted for. Nothing noticeably broken.

To leave was the only option laid before me. In my gut and in my heart I knew what would happen if I stayed here. I was overcome with a level of clarity I hadn’t felt since the days before I knew Isaac. My mind, sharp and alert, took in every detail around me. Like everything was magnified or hyper focused. I noticed the dust particles dancing and swaying in the light like glitter pouring in from the window. Felt the stillness around me now that I was finally alone. The wind rustled the trees outside, a little whistle on the edge. I’d been alive long enough, had seen enough documentaries on Netflix and Dateline to know how this would play out if I waited for him to come back. He would say it was my fault I fell. That I shouldn’t have ducked. That he wasn’t even aiming for me.

I crawled back up the stairs. It felt safer this way. When I made it to the top, I grabbed my inhaler, threw on my hiking boots and made my way out the front door. I wouldn’t bring a bag. It’d be too heavy, and I was too weak. I just needed to leave this place. And to hurry.

I stumbled out of the front door, leaving it wide open. The air was brisk and chilled, it burned my aching face and nipped at my exposed ankles and arms. My knee, swollen and stiff, slowed me down, but my mind raced, pushing logic out of my mind,
pushing reason to the side. I had no car. I had no one I could call. What did I have to lose?

My boots snapped against the pavement, the sound echoing the torturous silence of the isolated cul-de-sac. My phone buzzed in my back pocket. The vibration was jolting. The knots in my stomach twisted, a cold sweat tickled my hairline, and a sharp pain pierced the left side of my face as I tightened my jaw. I caressed the tender, hot skin—the throbbing of my heartbeat pumped wildly underneath. The phone buzzed again, and my pocket grew heavy.

Don’t look. Keep going.

When I’d come to this morning, Isaac had been hovering over me. He hadn’t said anything at first, he just watched, like I was nothing more than a decaying deer carcass on the side of the road. He slicked his hair back and stepped over me. On his way out the door, he said, “Answer when I call.” And then he was gone.

I glanced up at Rick and Jackie’s house as I stepped onto the road. Normally, I could count on Jackie lurking from a window overhead like a vigilant owl, stalking, waiting for me to step outside so she could snatch me up. Jackie loved to take advantage of any opportunity to lure me into her home—always with the promise of cookies and Kool-Aid. Always chocolate chip. And always cherry flavored.

Buzz.

Their house was dark. Empty. Good, I thought. That’s good. I can just keep going then. No one will stop me. I kept my head down as I hurried down the street, determined to make it past the circle of three houses.

Buzz, buzz.
I stopped walking when I got to the edge of the court and was about to turn onto Coffee Landing. To my right I heard a quick, but loud tap, tap, tap on glass. From the corner of my eye, I saw Leah, jumping and beaming out the window of her living room. But the little girl’s smile quickly fell when I turned to face her. Leah’s hands went to her face, then to cover her eyes as she burst into tears, falling to the ground. 

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

I thought for a moment that I might get sick. What must I look like? Horrifying enough to make a child cry. Where could I possibly go? I looked in Marie’s driveway and realized it was true. Ida was gone. 

*Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz.*

The pocket holding my phone felt hot against my backside. I broke into a run, or more accurately, a clumsy hobble. I needed to make it out of Ruby Court. Then I’d be able to think clearer, at least that’s what I told myself. 

Once I made it far enough along the road and I couldn’t see the court anymore, I slowed into a brisk walk. My chest pulled fast, my sore ribs twinged and ached with each harsh breath. I needed to disappear. That was the only thought running through my head. I needed to disappear like Louisa and Ruby did. Like the young woman who lived in Marie’s house all those years ago. Like Anna. 

*Buzzzz, buzzzzz, buzzzzz….*

He was trying to call me, I realized. My phone shook so hard in my pocket I thought it might shimmy out on its own accord. 

I quickened my pace again. I needed to hurry. The image of his eyes glinting behind his long dark hair flashed before my eyes—the whites bloodshot, his irises dilated
to black. Like a movie, racing through my mind, I saw his smile—slight and hungry. I saw myself screaming and clutching the air in front of me, reaching towards my husband for help right before I fell. My backside twinged and I whimpered as I remembered. I reached around to feel the lump already forming on my tailbone.

By the time I made it to the Lewis Chapel, I was wheezing, no longer able to run. My knees buckled and I fell forward, catching myself on the choppy asphalt. It cut my hands. My palms punctured and bleeding with bits of the black road caked in the crevices. The sound of a car zooming down the road caught in the wind. The trees swayed and I knew he was coming. He was close.
Chapter Nineteen

I sat crouched against the back wall of the small chapel. The sound of tires crunching across the driveway rang in my ears and I grit my teeth despite my throbbing jaw. I closed my eyes and pulled the collar of my shirt over my face, as if that might make me disappear, as if my green shirt didn’t stand out against the white chapel walls like a smear of paint or slime or snot.

The car inched closer. In my head I pictured it like a lion in the grasslands stalking me, getting ready to pounce on its prey. Wet earth and mildew clung to the air and swirled around me and made me nauseous. More nauseous. I pressed my cotton shirt over my nose to filter out the smell and to stifle my harsh, ragged breathing.

A car door clicked open.

_I hoped Leah would take Mira._

A car door swung shut.

She knew where her favorite toy was.

Footsteps ground against gravel.

_Marie would understand._

“Dora,” a voice said.

My head snapped up. When I opened my eyes, my sight was blurred from tears I could not feel rushing down my face. And suddenly like I’d been splashed in the face with cold water, I felt the cold breeze pierce the trailing tears and I began to tremble. It was not the voice I had expected.
Rick stumbled around the corner, nearly tripping over a rogue tree limb cast in front of him. Brush was scattered all along the edges of the roadway and across the front yard of the chapel I assumed from the storm last night. I suddenly recalled the light sound of rain tapping on the front porch from the bottom of the staircase early this morning.

Rick’s face looked pale, aghast. I briefly wondered if he might have the flu. It was the right time of the year for that to be going around. He held his palms out like he might have to wrangle me or like I might spontaneously combust. “Oh, Dora.”

I couldn’t respond. Couldn’t move. The dead quiet rang like a dog whistle in the brisk air between us. Rick shifted closer to the chapel and leaned one arm against the side, as if he was the one who’d just run half a mile down the road in late October with short sleeves and leggings on. He tugged on his earlobe uncomfortably and his eyes would only focus on the space just above my head. As if the sight of me was too much.

“Rick?” I asked. Still in disbelief that he was standing before me.

“Isaac called me,” he said.

My head instinctively jerked down at the sound of his name. My jaw twinged at the quick motion. “Does he know?” I asked.

“Yes. His car was still in the parking lot at Southview when I left, but he could be on his way for all I know. He’s definitely looking for you, Dora.”


Rick could only nod.

I rubbed my bare forearms, and then my ears to warm them up. It felt like my heart was rattling against my chest. Each thud like an electric shock.
Rick took off the flannel he had on and draped it over me. I wrapped it tightly around my shoulders and was soothed—just slightly—even though the movement made my whole-body ache.

“Thank you,” I said.

“We need to hurry.”

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

Rick pulled out his phone out of his back pocket and glanced at the screen. His brows furrowed and he moved the phone first closer to his face, then farther away as if trying to change the focus.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

“Do you have your phone with you still?” Rick asked, looking puzzled.

I did. I’d gotten used to the sound.

I reached behind me and winced as something clicked painfully in my shoulder and pulled out my phone.

“Do you know how to turn the location off that thing?” Rick asked.

I unlocked the phone and went to “Location and Privacy” and switched it off.

“And maybe power it down for the time being. I listened to a special on the radio a couple months ago about all that tracking spyware shit a couple months ago,” Rick suggested. “I don’t think they can track you if your phone is off.”

I followed his instructions, as if on autopilot. I couldn’t keep my train of thought. My brain went fuzzy every few seconds and I couldn’t think of what to do next. Now that Rick was here I wanted to surrender and let him take care of everything for me. I’d let
him take on a father-like role in my life over these last few weeks. I’d had no other
models growing up. This was the closest and safest relationship with a man I’d ever had.

“What do I do?” I asked on the verge of tears again.

“I’m gonna get you a motel room for the night. Somewhere in Savannah,” Rick
said.

I nodded and used the wall to push myself up to a standing position.

“Okay,” I said.

Rick led me back around the chapel and to the passenger seat of his dark red Ford
truck. It was a four-seater. Big and spacious, still smelled like new car.

Rick bustled to the other side, and then hurried into the driver seat. “Jackie and I
will get you somewhere safe tomorrow. We’ll figure something out,” he tried to smile, as
if to reassure me but he still couldn’t make eye contact with me.

He drove on, away from Ruby Court. The barren limbs of the unyielding maple
trees and bunches of yellow poplars, waved limply, behind. The trees slowly faded in the
rearview mirror, as they blew lightly in the bitter wind.

Rick took me to the first motel off the interstate of the next town over. I sat in the car
while Rick checked me in, under an assumed name I supposed, though I wasn’t sure. I
hoped. We hadn’t discussed it on the way here. We hadn’t said a word in fact. We were
both focused and intent on not getting caught. To speak seemed to jinx the slim chance
we already had. And besides, what was I to say to explain this?

The old motel sign at the front entrance made this buzzing sound that seeped
through the car windows and the light flickered on and off at inconsistent intervals.
I want to sleep, I thought.

Rick finished up in the office and motioned for me to follow him to the room. I got out begrudgingly. My body tensed when the outside air hit my face, as if I were exposed without the comfort of six walls of containment. I kept my head down and followed Rick’s boots in front of me until we reached room number twelve around the side of the building, hidden from the main road by a cluster of trees and bushes. I wondered if Rick requested this room.

In my room were two twin beds with grungy floral comforters that felt like rough plastic against my skin. There was a little box T. V. on a nightstand at the head of the bed that the management was trying to pass off as a dresser, and the bathroom light was covered with this orange plastic sheen. The cast from the light turned Rick’s skin a peachy, rose hue. He tried to pull off the plastic covering, but it was screwed into the ceiling.

“I’ve got some tools in the bed of my truck. I can take this thing off,” he rapped on the plastic with his stubby fingernails. “Does it bother you?”

I shook my head. I liked it actually. The light in the room was warm and soft.

Rick nodded to himself and shuffled uncomfortably out of the bathroom and took a seat in the rolling desk chair by the window—blinds drawn.

“You said he called Jackie first?” I asked for the second time now. Rick told me that Isaac had only called him once. I had no reason to think he’d lie to me, but I wasn’t sure I believed him either. I thought maybe he was trying to protect me from the truth.

“Yes and immediately after, he called me. Probably close to an hour ago now,” he said.
“I still don’t understand why he didn’t he just come after me.” It wasn’t something I expected Rick to know the answer to, but the questioned burned inside me. Why let me go if he was tracking me? Why put out the signal to our neighbors that I wasn’t answering the phone today of all days?

“I suppose he might’ve seen your location moving and was afraid Jackie or I saw you when you took off. Something I was wondering about too till I saw your phone with you. And…well, you know…”

I wasn’t sure how much of that was judgment in his voice or if he was just trying to put the pieces together like I was. “What did he say? To Jackie and to you on the phone?”

“He said you weren’t answering your phone and that you were not well. He said that you slipped halfway up the stairs last night after some drinks with the girls and that he’d found you asleep on the floor and that when he tried to help you, you pushed him away and said something about how it was Elmer that pushed you and that the house was haunted. He was insinuating that you were having some sort of break. He told Jackie that he just wanted to warn us in case you wandered off and asked us not to call the cops if we saw you. He claimed he was worried they’d take you away and he knew you didn’t want that.”

“Oh my god,” was all I could muster.

“Dora, he is not the first person we’ve met that’s tried to use that dead old fuck, Elmer as an excuse. I know you. And believe it or not I know him too. He’s just a carbon copy of all the others.”

“But you didn’t say that to him did you?” I asked.
“No. We told him we would let him know if we heard anything.”

Jackie was more superstitious than Rick. And the story Isaac told him sounded exactly like something she would latch on to. Isaac crafted that for a very specific audience.

I wanted to believe that Rick wouldn’t have brought me here if he was planning on handing me over to Isaac or the psych ward, but there was a small amount of doubt that lingered in the back of my mind. I remembered Leah’s face when she saw me through the window. I certainly must have looked insane. There was nothing I could do though. I was at Rick’s mercy. I had to have faith that he wouldn’t betray me.

I walked over to the twin bed closest to the bathroom. Farthest away from the door and lay down.

“You should get some rest. I’m just gonna step out, right out front, and make a quick phone call. Gonna check on Jackie. I don’t want her hanging around the house without me there.”

I nodded and curled onto my side. The sound of cars whizzing by on the interstate just across the way filled the room and then was cut short when Rick closed the door behind him. The absence of noise was jarring at first. I didn’t like the pressure of being alone with my thoughts. I wanted a distraction but was too exhausted to attempt to turn on that vintage box TV at the head of the bed. Patrons of Noni’s Souvenir Shop, perhaps? I wondered briefly. But then I remembered I was in Savannah now. Not Morris Chapel. They probably had their own local shops. Probably franchises.

I pulled the rough, scraggly comforter over my head, a musky, mildewy odor grew hot and loud in the confined space, but I pushed it to the background. I wanted to
hide from the light streaming through the crumpled-up blinds that still clung to the
windows—by mere strings now. It was late afternoon now, and that grey, dull sky that’d
hung over Morris Chapel all morning turned silvery as the sun finally began to set.

I wanted to sleep. I tried to imagine I was in my childhood bed, in my childhood
home, with my mom sound asleep in the room down the hallway from me. Like my life
now was just a nightmare I’d gotten stuck in, and my real body was frozen in the past,
waiting for me to return.

I hoped one day I’d find my way back.

Half an hour later, there was a knock at the door that jolted me awake. My eyes flew wide
open, and I sucked in my breath.

“It’s just Jackie, honey. I’m sorry,” Rick said rushing to the door. But still, he
checked through the peephole before opening. I couldn’t shake this feeling that I was
being watched. That Isaac knew exactly where we were.

Jackie was cocooned in an oversized raincoat with the hood pulled up over her
head and a pair of black sunglasses. She hurried in with a brown grocery sack cradled in
each hand.

“No one followed me. I made sure,” she said breathlessly.

The getup must’ve been her disguise so that she could move through town
conspicuously, but really she looked as if she were an amateur spy in some comedy
blockbuster where the lonely housewife gets recruited by Arnold Schwarzenegger to
solve some mafia-level crime. Maybe she just wanted me to know she’d been careful,
though she did have a proclivity for theatrics. It was hard to tell.
She set the bags down on the second bed beside me, and then settled on the mattress with her knees facing me. “Oh, Dora. I—I don’t really know what to say. I’m just so sorry.”

I was still holding the blanket close to me, covering my mouth and chin. The skin on the lower half of my face felt stiff and stretched taught after my nap. I tried to open my mouth to speak but could only manage to part my lips. As Jackie pulled out items from the grocery bags, I pulled the blanket down and scooted back so that my back was resting flat against the headboard. “Thank you,” I said, whispering between my teeth. “Truly.”

Jackie winced. She pushed her hood down and discarded the glasses. Her eyes closed as her hands came to rest over her nose, as if in prayer.

“He didn’t hit me. This was more my doing, really,” I said instinctively because I wanted to console her. I had to bite my tongue to keep from doubling down on this statement that kept rising and flashing in my head—my fault, my fault, my fault—just so she would stop looking at me like that. I could’ve thrown up right there, easily, but I swallowed it back.

“Oh, dear. He didn’t hit you? I mean, is that even important? Look at you. Dora, you didn’t do this to yourself. You have to know that.” She delicately touched the side of my face, the side that wasn’t bulging, and smoothed a stray hair behind my ear.

I did. But what did she expect? How could I look at myself in the mirror ever again if I admitted that? How could I be in this position in the first place when I’d been warned of this position my whole life?

I said nothing.
“I grabbed a change of clothes for you while I was out shopping,” Jackie said, clutching onto one of the brown bags. “It’s not the best quality, but it will do for now. I’ll grab some nicer things from my house and bring them to you tomorrow morning. They’ll be a bit baggy on you but hopefully a bit comfier. I couldn’t risk driving back to the court today and wasn’t sure what all you might need right now.” She glanced over at Rick accusatorily.

Jackie laid out the clothes on the bed beside me. A cowl neck black sweater, the threading was thin and scratchy against my fingers, and black trash bag jogger pants that made a whooshing sound when Jackie pulled them out of the bag.

“It’ll be just fine,” I said.

It’ll be too small, I thought, looking at the items with dread.

Rick grunted uncomfortably, as if to remind us that he was still there with us.

“When did Ida leave?” he asked.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Last night.”

“I thought she was supposed to leave on Sunday. She in a hurry?” he asked.

“Yeah. She was. We got in a fight,” I said.

Rick nodded. “I can call her for you. She’s not all that far, right? Nashville? Murfreesboro? Something like that. Only three hours away. She could come get you and you wouldn’t even have to stay the night here.”

Jackie shifted a little closer to me and reached a hand across and placed it over my hand. “She’ll forgive you. For whatever it was.”

“No,” I pulled my hand away. My shoulder twinged but I tried to suppress it. “I fucked it up. She won’t want to hear from me right now.”
“Oh, please let me talk to her. She doesn’t know what you’ve been through,” Jackie insisted.

“It doesn’t matter! She knows. The whole town fucking knew who Isaac was the second I moved here. They knew who I was, too. I’m just like the rest of them. Following right in their footsteps. Chasing men up Coffee Landing, on Elmer’s hill, like a fool.”

“But Ida—” Jackie started.

“I don’t want to talk to her right now! Please, just let it go.”

She sunk back and leaned away from me, her palms resting flat against the mattress. “Then what are you going to do?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll figure it out,” I said. That was rude. They’d been kind to me, I should be softer to them. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’ve made all the wrong choices. I just need some time to think.”

"Of course, Dora,” Jackie said. “Whatever you want.”

“We should be heading back soon,” Rick said. “We’re usually home around this time. I don’t want Isaac to suspect anything.”

I wanted them to leave and yet I was also terrified to be here by myself. I didn’t have any of my emergency medications with me. I had no transportation. I couldn’t turn on my phone or else Isaac would find me here and bring me back to Ruby Court. I tried to fix my face so that I looked confident or at least reserved but based on the way Jackie and Rick hovered by the door, as if they were the ones who were afraid to take those first steps outside, told me that I was failing.

“Will you be okay here by yourself till morning?” he asked.

I have no idea.
“Yes. I’ll be okay. I’m going to take a hot shower. That’ll help. I’ll see you both tomorrow,” I said. My jaw was a little more relaxed now, warmed up. My voice didn’t falter.

“Do you—, should I inform the police? You could file a report and they could watch over you,” Rick suggested.

“No, no, no. Please, no. I don’t want to talk to the police right now. I can’t.”

I remembered the looks on the faces of the different officers I’d spoken with over the last year. They all had the same stern, business-as-usual scowl on their face. My story was nothing surprising to them. After all, no one had tried to kill me yet. This was a “non-issue” to the officers in Rutherford county. They suggested I just delete my social media presence like it was my fault I was getting harassed in the first place. They spat advice at me like I was just another dumb, superficial girl who couldn’t stay off her phone long enough to make the bullies go away. But please, they’d say, come by anytime you have any questions.

The police were the last people I wanted to speak to.

Rick took a step back and threw his hands up, “If you say, no, then it’s no. I left my number on the desk. Call on the room phone if you need anything.”

“It’s okay.” I couldn’t wait to sit in the hot shower.

“If we learn anything new, we’ll let you know,” he said.
Part II:

Lizzie
“Have you run the report for the phishing exercise?” Stephen asked in his slow, gritty drawl that always set Lizzie’s teeth on edge. They only had to meet once a week over Skype to touch base on their quarterly goals but that was still one too many for her. He always wore this clunky headset like one you might see on a pilot.

_He wished he was so important._

“Yes, Steve.”

“And?” he pushed further.

She thought it was only fair for her to find little ways to waste his time if he was going to waste hers. “I told you we needed to update our training modules. Guess how many of our team members failed?”

Stephen grunted impatiently and lit another cigarette. “I don’t know, Lizzie. Half?”

“Eighty percent.”

“Eighty percent,” Stephen scoffed. “How have we managed to avoid these cyberattacks they’re always warning us about if eighty percent of our staff fall for the most basic of scams?”

“Because you have me and I’m phenomenal at my job,” Lizzie said. She leaned back in her rolling chair and interlaced her fingers around her shin.

Her office was set up in her grandmother’s old sewing room in the back of her trailer. She’d been living here and working for Dell Technologies for two years, ever
since she was expelled from the School of the Art Institute and her career in Graphic Design came to an abrupt end.

Stephen took another long drag of his cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke into the camera. He never let his face show anything. He was hard and brutish, but Lizzie knew how to work him. She knew she was his favorite, even if his expression rarely ever changed from that of a mopey hound dog.

“I suppose so. When will the new training material be ready?” he asked.

“Already done. Sending you the link,” Lizzie typed fiercely and dramatically, “now.”

The ping that meant he’d received her email came through her speakers.

“Oh alright. Well, I’ll take a look at it and if all is well we’ll plan to re-schedule our divisions training in detecting malware and phishing by the end of the week. Prepare an email to send out informing your colleagues of the results of our test and that they will now have to take part in this semi-annual training.”

“Yes, captain Steve.”

He blew another cloud of smoke, his face stern. “Yeah, alright,” he said, and then clicked a button on his headset that ended their video call.

The heavy silence that fell over her after each conference call ended always haunted her. There was a stillness around her in her makeshift home office that reminded her that she was alone. She wasn’t a part of the company, she didn’t have colleagues. Not ones she spoke to or saw regularly. She didn’t need to in order to do her job and it was cheaper for Dell to keep her remote. It was as if she could feel this ominous pressure weighing down on her in those first few seconds of silence. Her past threatened to creep
in her mind, all of the things she used to want, used to have. She pushed them aside and
opened up her iTunes tab on her computer and pressed play on the playlist she had been
listening to just before answering Stephen’s phone call.

“Lizzie!” her grandmother called down the hallway. “Are you done with your
meeting?”

Clearly she already knew the answer. Had been listening and waiting for the call
to end so she could ask Lizzie for help with something as she often did.

She paused the playlist again before the singer even had a chance to speak.

“Coming!” Lizzie shouted back. She swirled around in her chair once before
getting up and clunked down the narrow hallway leading to the open living room and
kitchen set up at the heart of the trailer.

Her grandmother was leaning against the stovetop with a can of dog food in one
hand and a can opener in the other. Her hands, extended slightly in front of her, shook
slightly. The dim light streaming in from the window above the sink on the adjacent wall
and the overhead stove behind her painted her skin beige, slightly yellow, the veins on
her hands protruding and purple. Her white hair was pinned back with little black clips.
They looked like arrows pointing towards the back of her head.

“Can you help me?” she asked. “Betsy has been begging for an hour. I finally get
my ass up and in the kitchen and I can’t get the damn can open. They make these things
too hard to open now!”

Lizzie’s grandmother had this funny habit of blaming systems and technologies
that have been around, and stagnant, for decades for making their products harder to use,
rather than acknowledging the fact that getting older is the real culprit behind her inability to open cans, medicine bottles, juice cartons, etc.

“Of course. Where is Betsy by the way?” she looked around for her grandmother’s wiener dog. The little gremlin, eighteen years old and still wobbling around, cheating death. Lizzie had bet on her kicking the can two years ago. She had to give her dad fifty bucks.

Betsy was blind in one eye and unable to jump up onto the couch anymore—arthritis had eaten away at her hip joints. She’s had to use these cushy steps they ordered off of amazon in order to get up and down on her own.

“Well, I don’t know. She’s probably still staring up at my food tray in the living room over there.”

Lizzie stepped into the living area and walked around the half sectional. Sure enough, Betsy was exactly where her grandmother predicted. Squinting out of her one good eye, she was zeroed in on the food tray set up in her grandmother’s spot on the couch.

“Come on, Betsy,” Lizzie said, guiding her gently by her lower back out of the living room, which she realized was a bit like a maze for a dog in her condition.

“You gonna help me or am I just gonna stand here like a bump on a log?” Her grandmother shook both hands up at Lizzie, showing that she was still waiting on her to open the can of food for her.

“Nan, can’t you see I’m coming? What are you in a rush for anyhow? You waited an hour to feed her in the first place,” Lizzie teased.

“I had to wait for you to get off all those computer calls or whatever.”
“Ah, so I was the one holding you up.” Lizzie smiled and took the can and can opener from her grandmother’s outstretched hands.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Of course.”

Lizzie punctured the lid with the blade, squeezed the handles together, and began to turn the mechanism. The sound of the metal scarping against the countertop reminded her of the sound of something heavy being dragged across a rocky ground. A bag of gravel maybe, a barrel, a body. That last thought made her pause.

*Where did that come from?*

Then the putrid smell of beef and gravy clouded everything else. “Ugh, come here Betsy. Here’s your disgusting breakfast.”

Betsy’s nails clicked on the ground, her nose, sniffing fiercely, followed the scent of the food. She dove into it as soon as it touched the floor. Sometimes Lizzie wondered if the dog had selective seeing like she had selective hearing. Over the last few years, she’d stopped responding to a few very specific commands. “No,” “come here,” and “sit” were all but lost to her but somehow she still understood “want a treat?” just fine.

“Pilot Steve giving you trouble?” Nan asked.

“Nah, he’s harmless. He only looks at me through that screen to watch himself puff a cloud of smoke. At least I only have to talk to him once a week.”

“You know your grandpa could make these rings with smoke. You think he can do that?” she asked.

Lizzie laughed. “Not a chance, Nan.”
Her cell ringtone sang the tune of “Hello” by Adelle. The sound trickled down the hallway, a little more than a soft whisper by the time it reached the kitchen, but she heard it. Not her grandmother, of course.

“I’ll be back. My phone,” Lizzie said, knowing she’d need to clarify this for her.

She’d been waiting on a call back for this new position in forensic cybersecurity. It was, after all, what she’d gotten certified in two years ago. She’d been working this job at Dell in IT ever since, trying to gain the experience she needed in order to climb the ladder. She’d had one interview with the IRS a week ago. She should’ve heard back by now if they’d chosen her. They probably ran her background check. They saw the reports filed against her. The arrest. Didn’t matter that it was five years ago or that it was bullshit. The charges stuck.

Her phone was still sitting on her desk. It took her a minute to process the name she saw on the screen in bold letters. It wasn’t the IRS.

Dora Landry.

Lizzie was surprised to realize it was anger that bubbled up in her gut at first. She’d wanted to help, to do something for so long, but her word, her words, were never enough. Her words were used against her. By Dora and by him. She wondered how long Dora would stay on the call this time before blocking her again.

Fifty bucks, Dad, she thought to herself.

_She’ll last twenty-seconds._
Chapter Twenty-One

She found the motel off route 57 just where Dora had said it would be. It was a boxy little place, beige cement, and a dusty sign out front like it was frozen in the 1970s. She still wasn’t sure she believed Dora was really there. She only came out to prove it to herself, one way or another. Anyway, if Dora stood her up, then she’d wasted two hours of her day on the drive down and back. But if Dora was actually there, well, then things were about to get interesting.

Nan had hollered after Lizzie on her way out the door, demanding to know where she was going and when she would be back. Lizzie was in a frenzy to get out the door and shouted back with her keys, wallet, and water bottle all balanced in one hand, “I’ll be back soon! Just stay here, Nan. You’ve got snacks in the cupboard and frozen dinners in the freezer.”

Lizzie could hear her voice go up an octave, attempting to argue something back but she closed the door behind her before her grandmother could say anything more. She’d be fine, Lizzie told herself. Nan had been on her own most of her life. She was older now, maybe had a touch of dementia, but she wasn’t senile.

She’d leave a message with her neighbor just in case.

Lizzie sat behind the wheel of her cherry red Subaru, parked in the lot just outside the door to room number 12. The radio was blaring some overplayed song from the summer, warm air blew her ashy brown hair back, and dried out her eyes. Dora was on the other side of that door. Or wasn’t.
“Fuck,” Lizzie said out loud, and then turned the car off and stepped outside.

She approached the door, paused to gather her thoughts, and prepare for whatever came next, and then knocked twice.

The click of two different locks being turned, back-to-back, sounded from the other side immediately after she knocked. Like there had been someone waiting on the other side this whole time. Watching.

Shit, she thought. Could this have been a trap? Some scheme she and Isaac cooked up together, because ruining her life as she knew it wasn’t enough. Maybe delusion had finally gotten to them, and they were finally ready to take it to the next level. She hadn’t even considered that as an option, but it certainly was one. Who knows what a couple of bored snoots might do to keep themselves entertained?

Her gun was at home, unhelpful and useless in her safe.

*Fucking amateur.*

She should have thought about this more before rushing after a girl who may or may not want to be saved. One who’s filed multiple reports against her for claims of stalking and harassment and once, threats against her and her sister’s lives. This looked like a place where you fucking murder someone, not save someone.

Just as she was about to turn and run back to her car, the door swung open.

“She,” Dora said.

The woman before her was not at all like she had expected. Not like the pictures she had seen up on her social media accounts when they were still up and active a year ago. This woman was much shorter than she’d imagined. Fuller around the hips and thighs but with a small frame. Her hair had lost the volume and curl that had once been
present in so many of her older selfies. Lizzie still had them printed out and in a folder somewhere in her office. Now her waves were clumped together, and the top layer of her hair was frizzy and staticky as if she’d just rubbed her hand over one of those balls of electricity Lizzie had played with on a field trip once to the science center. Her face was bruised, cut, she’d been bleeding. Her arms and hands shook even pressed against her stomach as she waited for Lizzie to say something.

“What happened?” Lizzie asked, matter-of-factly, trying to keep her voice even. She no longer was worried that Isaac was waiting for her inside. That much was clear by the look in Dora’s eyes.

“I need your help. I didn’t know what to do or who to call. I just know,” she trailed off, “I know now, that you know more about Isaac than I do. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Stop,” Lizzie looked over her shoulder to make sure there wasn’t anyone loitering about outside. “Let’s just step inside for a moment.”

The room smelled of sweat and mildew. The air blowing in through the vents was almost wet against her skin. Her clothes instantly felt heavier and sticky. She pulled at the collar of her shirt uncomfortably.

“I have to get out of here,” Dora said. She sat on the edge of the bed closest to the back wall. “He’s looking for me and I don’t know what to do. I know how that sounds. Me asking you for help now. I have a lot to explain.”

Lizzie grabbed a brown paper bag that was left on the desk behind her and started putting discarded items from around the room inside. “Get the rest of your things. Let’s go.”
In the car, they didn’t speak another word to each other until they were ten minutes down the highway. Lizzie wanted to focus on getting out of town first, she kept one eye on each car that merged onto the highway until they got off or passed her. She was always hypervigilant, a skill she’d fine-tuned and crafted over decades of learning, or needing, to read people’s body language. A defensive driver, a defensive survivor.

She thought three steps ahead. She didn’t have to learn the rules of chess to understand the importance of strategy. What might happen if the person driving in front of her suddenly came to a stop? Would she have time to swerve? Would she veer off the road into the grass? Would she crash straight on? You move through the world as if there are players set in front of your path trying to knock you down—her Nan taught her that.

It seemed Dora understood this unspoken plea of quietude and kept her head down and body still until Lizzie broke the silence between them.

“You called me,” Lizzie said, unsure of where she was going with this.

Dora’s head jerked in her direction. Her eyes were wide like a goddamn deer. She knew Dora was in various kinds of pain and was finally trying to fight back, and for that Lizzie was impressed and also willing to help, but god did it piss her off to see her sitting there all small and meek like she was some damsel in distress from a fucking Disney movie.

“Yes,” Dora said. “You said something to me a couple weeks ago. That first time we spoke on the phone. You said something about a photo…of me.”

“You found it?”

“You’ve seen it?” Dora retorted back with more nerve than Lizzie was expecting.
“Yes,” Lizzie said seriously. She didn’t think it would do Dora any good to sugar coat this information. “Well, a photo of you. He sent it to me once. On one of those fake accounts with my full name in the handle.”

Dora’s hand went to cover her eyes then moved down to her mouth. She took a moment, a deep breath, and then placed her hand back down in her lap. “It was him. It was him the whole time?”

She asked this last question like she was hoping Lizzie would absorb some of the blame. Like she still didn’t fully believe her. Lizzie knew she was embarrassed, and she was sympathetic to Dora, but she also needed her to understand how destructive her behavior had been over this last year—moving out to the middle of nowhere with someone she hardly knew. This was not the behavior of someone who loved themselves or even liked themselves.

But she understood this more than Dora knew. It was disappointing, it was frustrating, but it wasn’t her fault.

“Yes,” Lizzie answered.

“But why? It doesn’t make any sense. He always went with me to file those reports with all of those different officers and detectives. Why would he do that if it was him? Wouldn’t the cops have found something? Said something to me?”

“Because he knows how flimsy the laws are when it comes to social media, harassment, and privacy. He’s been running this game for a long time, Dora. All he has to do is go to a Starbucks and use their Wi-Fi to create a fake social media account and that makes it essentially untraceable. If it’s untraceable, then no matter how many times you go to the police there’s nothing they can do. There’s no real person connected to that
account or accounts to arrest—not that they’re aware of, at least. Now, if the account can be linked to a person through a name, like in the user handle, or through identifying details embedded within said harassing messages, only then might you be able to get a restraining order. Not even a charge. And maybe not even that.”

“Those accounts, they said horrible things about me, my body, my character, and my family. If he,” she stumbled over her words as her breathing quickened, “if he hated me so much, why did he marry me? Why do all of this?”

Lizzie reached across the seat and placed her hand over Dora’s.

“I don’t know.”
Chapter Twenty-Two

Lizzie pulled into her gravel driveway. The trailer, alone on her Nan’s plot of land, was surrounded by trees with trunks that went up, up, up. It was disorienting if you started at them too much. The mobile home looked much smaller on the outside than it was on the inside. Or maybe it was just because it was juxtaposed against the colossal Cypress trees.

*Nan was going to be pissed.*

“Don’t tell her the house looks fine or good or whatever. She’ll want to complain that I didn’t give her enough time or notice for guests. She’ll call you a liar if you say otherwise,” Lizzie said.

Dora nodded and reached in the back for her sack of belongings.

“Are you sure it’s okay?” she asked.

Lizzie laughed but she hadn’t meant to. It just suddenly hit her how much she had longed for this moment. To finally talk to someone who *knew.*

Dora looked concerned.

“Follow me,” Lizzie said.

They found Nan in the living room with Betsy curled up in her lap. Blankets, socks, and cans of half-empty Diet Pepsi’s were strewn about the place. The place smelled of hot cardboard and gravy from some frozen dinner that Nan must have microwaved not long before they got here. A paper plate and a black plastic tray sat on the coffee table in front of her as proof.

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Lizzie. You couldn’t have called and told me you were bringing a guest over?” She moved to gather up the trash around her in a frenzy, startling
Betsy who waddled away from her and plopped down on a cushion a few seats away, looking dejected and annoyed.

“This is Dora Landry,” Lizzie said.

Nan dropped the plate back down on the table in front of her and squinted her eyes as if to get a better look at her.

“Oh, dear. You look like hell, sweetheart.”

Dora smiled and both Lizzie and Nan laughed.

“Yeah, I do. I feel like it too,” she said.

“I hope you’re ready. Lizzie’s a storm.”

“Speaking of which,” Lizzie interrupted, and motioned for Dora to follow her down the hall.

The space in the back of the trailer was in complete disarray, though Lizzie was quite used to this. Worked better in chaos of her own design. There were work binders and loose papers everywhere, books scattered about on the floor, and there was an overflowing trash can in the corner. An old banana peel at the top of the pile had turned brown and black and permeated the room with its ripe, sweet smell. She probably should’ve taken that out sooner, she thought.

“Take a seat,” Lizzie said, pointing at her rolling office chair.

Dora did as she was told, dusting off the seat before planting herself there. She winced a bit but didn’t complain of any pain.
Lizzie plopped down on the floor with her knees bent at an angle and wrapped her arms around her shins. “Before I tell you what I know, can you start at the beginning. From the day you met Isaac. I want to hear your side first.”

Dora gave her the highlights, shakily but coherently. From the day they met at the bar top in that Old Chicago, and he ordered them two mojitos, the story he told her about Lizzie being an obsessed stalker of his from his youth, the screenshots of all the harassing messages she had sent him over the years, the fall out of her relationships with her friends and family, the quick engagement and move to Morris Chapel, his job at Southview, and of course, what she found in the bookcase the night before. Lizzie could see the shock on her face when Dora said, “last night” like she couldn’t believe so little time had passed since the discovery.

“That’s pretty much everything, I guess,” Dora said.

“Can you go back to the day you met at the Old Chicago? Why were you there?”

Dora looked skeptical and scrunched up her brows. “Well, I had made plans to meet a date there, but I got stood up.”

“A tinder date?” Lizzie asked.

“Yes?”

“And on the night of, he texted you and told you he was running late?”

“Yes.”

“He asked you to order two shots of Fireball for the two of you at the bar to take once he got there.”

“I’m confused. How do you know all of this?”
Lizzie turned and reached behind her, stretching her arm as far back as it could go without getting up, and opened a drawer in a filing cabinet placed in the back corner of the room. With ease she grabbed a purple folder, left the drawer open, and then handed it to Dora.

In black sharpie on the front cover read, Operation Fireball.

“What is this?” Dora asked. Her face was flushed, and her hands shook.

“Research that I and various Redditt users have gathered over the last five years.”

“What does this have to do with me and Isaac?” she asked.

“Open the file. There are dozens of women who have reported the exact same story all across the country as well as in the U.K. and Brazil. It’s almost always the same in essence. A girl matches with a boy on Tinder or Bumble, they make plans to meet at an Old Chicago, a Chili’s, or Texas Roadhouse, boy tells girl he’s running late and asks girl to go to the bar and order two shots of fireball and never shows. Then, just before the girl is about to give up and head home, prince charming swoops in and saves the girl from embarrassment.”

“I don’t understand. What does this mean?”

“I first heard this story from Isaac’s last girlfriend. Her name was Renee.”

Lizzie’s eyes shot down and she swallowed a lump in her throat. Dora didn’t notice. Her eyes were glued to the folder. “Did Isaac ever tell you about her?”

“No, I don’t believe so. He only ever mentioned you and one other girl in undergrad. But he said they hadn’t dated all that long. But I don’t really know anything anymore. How did you find all of this? Just off that story she told you?”
“I thought it was strange. Too coincidental. Too organized. I’m skeptical of anything that put’s Isaac in the position of ‘hero.’ When I was expelled from school and lost my internship, I decided to get my certification in cybersecurity. Thought if I wanted the job to get done right I better learn to do it myself. It was somewhere to start at least. I learned how to follow online trails and navigate the internet using code. I know how to access the dark web, though I don’t often need to venture down that road to find what I’m looking for. I tracked down and interviewed most of those girls in that file. None of them were ‘saved’ by our Isaac. They had their own.”

“You mean this is some sort of scheme?”

“Yes. Renee, she started me on this path. She’s the one who dubbed it Operation Fireball.”

“But what do they want? Isaac dated me, married me…Did any of these women marry their ‘Isaac’s?'”

“No. Right now, you’re the only victim I know that’s married someone involved in the operation. That doesn’t mean there aren’t others out there. I only know the stories from the survivors who have posted their stories on various Redditt threads.”

“So, what do they want? What’s the goal then?”

“The girls I’ve spoken with have slightly different stories. Some don’t remember anything after leaving the bar with them and going back to their apartments. They’d wake up the next morning and the guy would already be gone. They were able to leave, but something felt wrong or off about the whole thing. They just couldn’t remember all that had happened until they started coming across similar stories online. Some remember being asked to do things that made them uncomfortable once they were alone with them.
The men asked them to pose for pictures and when they said they were unsure or didn’t want to they’d say the pictures were for the women, not them. That they would give them to them before they left. Two girls from two different experiences in different states said the same thing to me when I asked them about this. The men had said to them, “I just want you to see how beautiful you are.”

“But they never were given these photos?”

“No. So, this is my theory. You ready?” Lizzie asked, wanting to give Dora a moment to prepare. “I believe these men are selling nude and compromising images and videos of women without their knowledge or consent. They’re likely working a larger scheme for someone, like an MLM scam or something. They use alcohol and drugs to make these women compliant or unconscious, use and manipulate their bodies in front of a camera for a particular clientele, and release them back into the world for profit.”

Dora leaned back in the chair and the folder fell from her lap to the floor, spilling the contents of the file everywhere. “Fuck,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

She bent over to pick it up one handful at a time. She was sniffling and breathing quick, shallow breaths and Lizzie suddenly realized she was crying.

“Dora, it’s not your fault.”

She jerked her head up and threw her hands up still clutching onto fistfuls of papers. “What do you mean? Of course, it is. I didn’t ask questions. I thought having a boyfriend or a husband would make everything in my life better. My whole life I was certain that was the thing that would finally bring everything together for me. Finally give me some goddamn validation that I was worthy of something! Love, I guess. I don’t
know. He was my first boyfriend. First everything. I looked past all of the signs that something was wrong. This is my fault.”

“This is what people like him do. They prey on the young, the insecure, the marginalized, and people without strong support systems. People they know they can trick by giving them everything and then taking it away once they’ve got you trapped. You fell for his tricks. That’s all. But that’s not your fault.”

“How can I face anyone ever again? I mean, look what I’ve gotten myself into?” Dora said, looking down at all of the evidence Lizzie had collected. “This is going to follow me forever now.”

Lizzie turned her head away and focused on the door and thought about her Nan on the other side. She should check on her soon. It’s getting late. She’ll need help getting her pills in order.

“Lizzie?” Dora asked.

“Hmm?”

“You said you were expelled. And fired, right?”

She nodded.

“What happened? What did he do to you?”

Lizzie clicked her tongue and took a deep breath. “Isaac shared a nude photo of myself that I’d taken and sent to him when I was eighteen during our senior year of high school with the dean of the graphic design school I was going to, as well as to all of my professors that semester. He used an account that looked like mine and since the dean and advisory board couldn’t go on anything else but what was presented on that page, they chose to expel me for improper conduct. They thought it was best for everyone. When the
company I was interning with found out, they agreed that I should find work somewhere else.”

“Jesus. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re not the only stupid one.”

“You were just a kid.”

“Not according to the Rutherford County police department. After I got expelled I tried to file a report for revenge pornography or whatever they’re calling it now. They told me that there was nothing they could do. Said I shouldn’t have sent the photo and that I’d hopefully learned my lesson. They called me the ‘girl with the boyfriend problems.’”

“You were his girlfriend?”

“No!” Lizzie snapped, looking horrified. “I was never his girlfriend. We’d been friends in school. Had flirted a bit senior year, but when he asked me out I turned him down. I started dating someone else soon after and he never forgave me for that. Said I humiliated him.”

“So, you’ve done all of this,” she lifted the folder up, “to try and build a case against him or this group? The Operation Fireball.”

“I don’t expect justice. I just want to arm these women with as much ammo as I can. My voice alone isn’t enough. It never was. People aren’t inclined to believe just one woman with accusations. But two, three, ten? It’s hard for them to ignore.”

“That’s why you were trying to reach out to me.”

“Yes.”
“Why couldn’t Renee help you? Should we call her? Maybe she could help us now.”

“No. We can’t. Renee’s not here anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“She overdosed a little over a year ago now.”

“Oh my god. When?”

“September. Early September.”

“When I met Isaac. Do you think…do you think he was replacing her when he chose me?”

“Yes. That’s what I think exactly.”

They didn’t speak for several minutes. The sun had almost set and the weak light coming through the blinds turned the room an ashy grey color. Neither of them stood to turn on the lights.

Dora moved first to pick up the rest of the papers, resting one knee on the floor now on the same level as Lizzie. She started rifling through them in an attempt to reorganize them.

Dora suddenly fell to both knees. “What is this? Why do you have this?” she asked. Her voice was sharp and stiff. It jolted Lizzie from her softened position on the floor.

It was a copy of Isaac’s birth certificate that Lizzie had found online in the Georgia state records—not entirely legally. She wasn’t sure how that would resonate with Dora. It’s not a great look, but Lizzie wanted as much information as she could get.
“It’s his birth certificate,” Lizzie decided on saying. She wouldn’t make eye contact with Dora though.

“What do you mean? That’s not his name. His name is Isaac Landry.”

“Right. Isaac was the name he and his father chose after he was adopted. Donovan Carmichael was his name before.”

“Oh my god. Lizzie, I’ve seen this name before.”

“Where?”

“He blocked a Donovan profile on my Facebook page and there was a piece of mail in my house addressed to this name too.”

Lizzie held her head in her hands and rubbed her temples. She felt drained. She wanted a drink.

“Lizzie,” Dora pushed, “what are we going to do? How can we stop him from doing this to other women?”

“We have to find proof that Isaac is collecting and distributing images of women without their consent. Can you think of where he might hide sensitive information? Does he have a safe?”

“His office is locked with a key. I don’t know where he keeps it. There might be something there. What about that piece of mail?”

“What about it?”

“I didn’t open it. What if it could tell us something? I don’t know why he wouldn’t tell me about his birth name if it was nothing.”
“Yeah. Maybe. We should lay low for a couple of days, though. Isaac is sure to be on high alert right now and pissed off that you left him. Let’s wait till his guard is down, and then we’ll go back to Morris Chapel.”

Dora agreed, though she looked anxious, skeptical.

“You’ll be safe here. Don’t worry. He can’t track me.”

“I’m sorry, Lizzie. For not believing you. For reporting you to the cops. I don’t deserve your help.”

“It’s okay.”

She yawned and rubbed the side of her swollen face.

“Come with me,” Lizzie said. “Gotta get my Nan some meds and you need an ibuprofen.”

“I need a drink,” Dora said.

“Now you’re talking.”
Chapter Twenty-Three

~Two Weeks Later~

Dora was tucked in beside Lizzie in her full-size bed. They laid underneath her grandmother’s handsewn quilt that had been passed down to Lizzie on her eighteenth birthday. A soft blue hue with turquoise and diamond shapes etched into the cotton fabric with silver thread. It was just large enough to cover the both of them. Lizzie and Nan didn’t often have visitors. Not a lot of spare blankets or pillows to go around, but they’d made do given the circumstances while Dora was there. The two girls laid straight on their backs, limbs stiff, and wide eyes glued to the popcorn ceiling above. Though they hadn’t spoken a word, Lizzie could feel Dora’s tense and awake body, electric, beside her. They lingered in the silence as if that might delay the day ahead of them.

At some point in between dusk and the full rise of the sun, Lizzie had faded. It wasn’t what she’d call sleep but more like a forced, momentary shut down. She woke, in a slight panic, in a dream-like haze, unsure if she had truly snapped back to reality or not. Dora wasn’t beside her anymore, but an indentation was left in the mattress which proved she had been there.

Her room, as well as her office had been turned in to an amateur detective’s nightmare. Papers and plans and pictures were scattered about in slightly organized piles that Dora remembered better than she. They were just missing the corkboard and red string to complete the image.
Lizzie jumped to her feet, blood and energy rushed to her face. She was alert. They had planned this out for weeks now and though there were things about Lizzie that Dora didn’t know or understand yet, the two women had developed a strong bond.

Dora, little by little, opened up and seemed to transform from this meek, fragile girl into a more vibrant woman who told the best jokes, had strong political opinions that sometimes clashed with Nan’s but always in a playful way, and who missed her cat more than just about anything—maybe not quite as much as her mom and sister, though. She ogled over photos of Mira every morning, ritualistically.

Lizzie would never have imagined that the two of them would come together in this way. She had given up on that idea after what happened to Renee and had resigned to the reality that this was a battle she would have to fight alone. But now she wasn’t, and she was having a hard time adjusting to that. Lizzie had almost considered telling Dora the truth about her own motives last night as they went over their plan for the hundredth time but couldn’t bear to speak the words into existence. That was the first time she’d realized she’d never verbalized this fantasy of hers. And maybe that’s all it was. A fantasy.

She supposed she would find out shortly.

Nan sat on the sectional in the living room watching the News, her hand deep in a bag of walnuts. Her thin, white hair was plastered to the left side of her face.

“Morning,” Lizzie said.

“Morning.” Her eyes didn’t shift from the TV.

“Where’s Dora?”
“Outside with Betsy. Had to stop her twice from trying to make me a breakfast casserole. It’s just engrained in her, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Maybe. But maybe you should have let her. Would be nice for you to have extra meals to heat up.”

She threw up her hand and motioned like she was pushing Lizzie away, out the door maybe. “I can take care of myself just fine.”

“We’re leaving today. Remember what I told you?”

“Yes. Y’all have been all secretive but I know what y’all got planned. In theory, at least. I can see it in your eyes.” She still wouldn’t look in Lizzie’s direction.

“If you don’t hear from me before you head to bed tonight—“

“I’m not worried. You’ll be fine. You both will. Do what you need to do.”

“Thanks, Nan.”

Dora sat in a folding chair in the middle of the lawn. Betsy was sprawled out before her. Though it was a bit frigid, they both appeared comfortable, acclimated to the biting wind.

“How’d you sleep?” Lizzie responded, though she knew the answer.

“Hmm.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“I’m afraid of what we’re going to find.”
“We might not find anything.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

“No.”

“Is this the right thing to do? Trying to solve a crime that really is way over our heads. I mean, we’re not professionals. Don’t they say in movies all the time that interferences like this tamper with investigations? What if what we do today makes it impossible or too difficult for future victims to bring forward their own cases? What if we do something wrong?”

*If things go according to plan, Isaac won’t have any future victims ever again,* Lizzie thought.

Lizzie squatted down next to Betsy. She didn’t want to plant herself there on the ground as the morning dew was still thick and wet. “Dora, you know we can’t bring this to the police. I’ve told them, maybe not about Operation Fireball, but I’ve told them my truth. Renee tried to as well. They don’t care enough or just don’t have the manpower to put together a team to investigate possible trafficking schemes online. They’re not investigating this. There’s no case to interfere with.”

“I don’t want to get hurt. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Dora’s wounds had mostly healed. Her face was significantly less swollen and the cuts and bruises on her arms and legs and back had faded to a slightly bluish-green hue.

“Nothing is going to happen to us. We’re going to be in and out, just like we’ve planned. We won’t linger.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”
They left in Lizzie’s little red Subaru hatchback at seven thirty A.M. By then, according to Dora, Isaac should’ve already left for work—as long as he was still in Morris Chapel and at Southview, but they had no reason to believe he’d left. They’d get to Morris Chapel an hour later which, in theory, should give them time to get in and out of Ruby Court unnoticed, this had been the plan Lizzie and Dora had cooked up over the last few weeks, at least. Only, Lizzie didn’t intend to go entirely unnoticed. She felt terrible for lying to Dora. But she hoped one day she’d understand.

A message to Isaac was scheduled to go out at nine A.M. She planned to send him a picture, from an account Lizzie had created using her local library’s Wi-Fi—she was taking a page out of his book. It was one she had of Isaac from high school, junior year, when they’d met. He was goofy looking. Greasy hair, bulky glasses, and an oversized hoody that swallowed him. He was one of those guys who wanted to be “skater” but never was able to get the hang of it.

Underneath the photo would be a message, Bet you wish you could go back now.

It hadn’t taken long for him to turn on her, but when she’d first met him they’d gotten along well and that’s what she remembered most when she’d looked at that photo. They’d had a similar taste in humor, liked watching Nicolas Cage movies unironically, and discovered the metal band “Bring Me the Horizon” at the same time. It was only when she turned down his romantic advances a few months later that everything turned for the worst. He was every stereotype of a sad boy who didn’t feel understood by
women and demanded reasons Lizzie refused to give him. She just wasn’t interested and that wasn’t satisfying for him.

That was when it all started. Soon after that, Instagram accounts with her name in them started going around, harassing other girls in school, then future girlfriends of his. He’d encourage them to file reports against her each time they received a message from an account with her name.

It was then that Lizzie understood him finally. He wanted to punish women. And he wanted to be the reason why.

After all this time, ten years later, she couldn’t let him get away with it. She wouldn’t. After all, he’d had her arrested for what the judge called distributing child pornography. Dora had tried to talk to Lizzie about this arrest a few times, but Lizzie still had a hard time discussing it with other people. They didn’t understand. Not exactly a conversation that people want to have, including her.

It was a photo she had taken of herself when she was just seventeen and had sent to her boyfriend at the time. Somehow, Isaac had gotten ahold of it and sent it to everyone on his contact list—including people over the age of eighteen. The account that sent out the photo couldn’t be traced back to one person, but it had Lizzie’s name in the username and that was all they really needed at the time to make the arrest.

Thankfully, she wasn’t a legal adult yet, so she didn’t have to live with some sexual offender charge on her record for the rest of her life, but she did have to complete community service in order for the charge to be dropped. And everyone around her knew what she had been accused of. Regardless of the circumstances, people don’t respond well to those accused of distributing something as severe as child pornography.
It had been years since Lizzie had responded to any of Isaac’s advances or reached out to him in any way, she thought ignoring him might slow him down, thought that didn’t really seem to make much of a difference. He would know the photo of him looking all emo and innocent was from her. She had taken it. He would remember. And he’d know that she was on to him, and he would come looking for her. For Dora. He’d try to cover his tracks.

“One more time,” Dora started. “We are looking for the piece of mail addressed to Donovan Carmichael, a possible key to the office, and then any corroborating evidence that proves Isaac and Lane are a part of Operation Fireball. We’ll stay no longer than an hour and if we see anyone or anyone sees us, we leave.”

“Yes. He’s gotta have something incriminating out there. He’s not that smart. And you said you’d already found something once, that polaroid and the list of addresses.”

“You’re right. Something’s there.”

“If we can find proof of Lane’s involvement, that he’s been recruiting young men to help him maintain his clientele all this time, that might be how we get them. How we get something to stick.”

Dora searched through the backpack they’d packed with copies of some of their most important documents regarding Isaac and Lane.

Last week, Lizzie had thought to look up Lane Adams in the Southern Exchange Commission database and found that there were multiple licenses in his name, as well as variations of his name, with holds on them for bankruptcy, unpaid fees, and possible fraudulent activity. Based on the history she’d found, and her own speculation, it looked
like he was starting different businesses, using them to wash money, and then closing them and canceling his licenses as soon as they were flagged.

It seemed Donovan Carmichael and Isaac Landry were also connected to similar business scams. Lizzie called the Department of Commerce and Insurance to ask why a proper investigation into Lane had not been opened. They obviously weren’t willing to admit their own culpability in allowing scams like this to wreak havoc on unassuming customers and people, but essentially Lizzie was able to gather that the department was understaffed and could only bring forth a charge if they had his address, full legal name or social security number, and there would still need to be solid evidence of him committing a crime which could take years to prove. Letting his license expire or cancelling it was not a crime. Their resources were saved for bigger names. Bigger fish.

“I don’t know what I’m doing.” Dora shuffled through the copies of Redditt threads, emails, pictures, and business licenses weakly.

“Well, I do. I’ve been waiting for this.”

“Okay.”

“You should probably get in the back now. Lay down flat. We’re almost to Savannah.”

She parked her car behind the Lewis Chapel and halfway into the woods, with only the butt of her car sticking out, as directed by Dora. The yellow and orange leaves camouflaged the car nicely. The chapel was smaller than she’d imagined it to be. The dark history of the Lewises was large and far reaching in her imagination, as it had been in Dora’s, but reality was always a bit more disappointing. She understood how Dora got
wrapped up in the history. There was something here that seemed to draw her in, the possibility of malice and vengeance pinched at the backs of her ankles.

The building was only a little bigger than a shed, with white paint that hadn’t been touched up in decades, if not longer, and loose shingles that slapped against the roof as the wind whistled and blew through the trees.

So, this is where they buried him, she thought.

“Can you show me? Before we go…” Lizzie asked.

“They’re just over there.” Dora pointed to a flat plot of land to the left of the structure. Three plaques just barely stuck out of the ground, almost entirely swallowed by the wet, sinking earth.

Elmer Lewis. Louisa Lewis. Ruby Lewis.

“It’s strange to think that he’s really down there,” Lizzie said.

“I don’t know. Doesn’t seem so strange anymore.”

“Should we go?”

Dora didn’t respond, she turned and started walking towards the road that would lead them to Ruby Court.

It was jarring to Lizzie how quiet and still it was up on this hill. Dora had told her, but it was nothing like actually being here. The pressure in her ears and head felt full, slightly off. It was like they had stepped into a plane where no one could hear them or see them. Shrouded from eyes and maybe even a layer of reality.

But that wasn’t true, nothing more than an illusion that her own fear and anxiety brought forth. She couldn’t let herself get lost in that feeling. There were threats all
around them and she had a plan, maybe slightly different than Dora’s but she didn’t want to risk anyone or anything slowing her down or interfering.

“There’s not exactly a clear path through the trees this way, but it’s the best way to get to the court without being seen,” Dora said.

She’d crossed the street and stood before a slight opening in the woods. The ground looked slippery with wet mud and leaves. Someone was certain to fall.

By the time they made it to Dora’s back door, they were both soaked and covered in brown sludge with leaking wounds and itchy ankles.

“Fuck,” Dora said. “He locked it. He never locks the door.”

“It’s fine,” Lizzie said, looking around her feet for something small but hefty.

“What do you mean? How are we going to get in? We don’t have a lot of time.”

“I know.” Lizzie picked up a fallen branch, it was a good five inches in circumference and sturdy. With no hesitation, Lizzie shattered the glass window in the center of the door. She used the branch to knock out as much glass as possible so as not to cut herself when she reached through to unlock the door from the outside.

“Lizzie!” Dora hurried to the side of the house to look out at the front of the cul-de-sac. “Jackie’s car is here. If she heard she’d definitely call the cops.”

“Then we better hurry.”
Chapter Twenty-Four

Lizzie stepped through the threshold first, carefully sidestepping the shattered glass dispersed about the floor. A strange feeling came over her, as if she were entering a church or some sacred land. The space demanded they whisper. She slowed her breathing and took in her surroundings.

The kitchen looked lived in, crumbs on the stovetop, a coffee mug in the sink, and yet some things seemed too tidy. Almost staged. The kitchen towel draped over the oven handlebar was perfectly squared and centered. The labels on all of the spices and oils were facing forward on a rack on the counter. The cooking utensils were splayed like a blooming bouquet in a vase. It smelled like lemon pledge and something else. Something a little less recognizable—musky and woody. Maybe it was Isaac’s cologne, she thought and cringed.

“He’s moved it,” Dora whispered. She was standing by a small wooden shelf that only reached her waist in height beside the backdoor.

“What?”

“The mail. He always put’s it here.” She patted the top of the empty shelf.

“It’s fine. It’s somewhere else. We’ll find it.”

“Something’s not right.”

Dora hurried down the hall past her and rushed up the stairs. Lizzie looked around once more to check that no one was coming to investigate the noise she’d made, and then followed Dora.
“He’s moved some things,” Dora said from the bedroom at the end of the hall.

“Do you think he’s left? Or is getting ready to?”

Lizzie stood at the top of the staircase. “He might be getting ready to, but I don’t think he’d leave until … I don’t know …”

“Until he’s tied up all his loose ends, you mean?”

“Did you find anything in there?”

“Still looking.”

Lizzie scanned the top floor of the house. There was a bathroom ahead of her and at the other end of the hall, parallel to the bedroom Dora was in, was a closed door. A third room. The office Dora had told her about.

The overhead light, dim and dull, didn’t reach that side of the hall, so it wasn’t until she was just in front of it that she noticed the doorknob; old, original most likely, and ornate. Tarnished over time, it blended in with the darkness.

The handle rattled in her hand at her touch and when she turned the knob, she was startled to find that the door swung open.

“Dora.”

“Just a minute!”

Lizzie stepped through, switched on the light, and found an empty room. She could only make out the shadow, the imprint, from where a desk had sat in the center of the room and where a couple of bookshelves or filing cabinets had been placed along the walls. The dust had settled and crusted in the shape of whatever object had previously laid in the room, like in all lived in homes but these reminded her more of those chalk
lines police officers drew around dead bodies. Not a picture hung from the walls. He’d cleared, whatever it was he’d been hiding here, out.

“Lizzie, I found it. I found one of the letters with his birth name on it. He was hiding it in his dresser.” She stopped in her tracks. The sound behind Lizzie was like that of tires coming to a sudden halt. “It’s open.”

“It’s open.”

She rushed in beside Lizzie, their shoulders touching, resting on one another.

“What does this mean?”

“He’s moved the evidence. You were right. Something was here. But first, what did you find?”

“It’s an electric bill,” Dora said, still staring at the empty space before them.

“For here?”

Dora looked back down at the paper, flipped it over, and then back again. “Wait. No. It’s for the Lewis Chapel. Look at the address.” She handed the bill and the envelope to Lizzie.

“What time is it?”

Dora looked down at the watch she’d borrowed from Lizzie. “Nearly nine. We should probably go soon.”

“We need to get back to the Lewis Chapel. We need to run.”

Lizzie rushed out of the room and down the stairs. She didn’t respond to Dora’s questions and requests to slow down. She wanted explanations that Lizzie couldn’t give her just yet. They were so close but running out of time.
“Just move quickly. Don’t look back!” Lizzie called behind her as she ran through the front door and out into the open cul-de-sac.

Dora was breathing heavy and hard behind her, and Lizzie felt bad and hoped she’d brought her inhaler with her. She didn’t know what she’d do if she started having an attack in the middle of all this.

“Lizzie, we need to go. We said we’d leave in an hour and time is almost up,” Dora huffed as they turned out of the cul-de-sac and started back down Coffee Landing towards the chapel. Lizzie heard the hiss of Dora’s inhaler behind her. Thank god, she thought. “There’s no telling whether or not Jackie or Marie have seen us now. I couldn’t see Marie’s car, but she usually parks in the back. They wouldn’t tell Isaac, not directly at least, but you know how these things work. We’ll come back.”

“No, we almost have him! I can’t leave now Dora.”

Lizzie stomped across the gravel driveway of the Lewis Chapel—Dora a few paces behind her, silent and sullen—and rushed to the front door, expecting to find it locked but was still pissed when her assumptions were confirmed.

“Dammit!”

She ran around to the back door just to double check, but it was bolted shut too. She met Dora around the right side of the building and peeked through the slated boards nailed across the open and broken windows of the chapel.

“Help me pull some of these boards off! We can get through that way!”

Dora didn’t move and the air of tension between them tightened.

She suspected her, Lizzie thought.
Things weren’t going according to plan. She was going to have to think of a way to comfort her, assure her that everything would be okay.

Fuck it. What did I know anyway?

“Dora. Please. Please, help me.”

Dora avoided eye contact with her. Lizzie had to bite her lip from spilling her guts to this woman that she had opened up to and began to trust over these last few weeks together. Even still, she moved forward to help Lizzie pry some of the boards off.

*I’ll keep us both safe*, Lizzie thought and brushed the revolver tucked into her waistband behind her back. She didn’t forget this time.

Two of the boards were loose enough that the nails holding them to the frame came flying off after a few good tugs from the both of them.

“I can give you a boost, and then I’ll climb in after you,” Lizzie said.

“No, I should give you the boost.” Dora wrapped her arms around herself uncomfortably. Lizzie recognized that look, it was that of someone wishing they could shed their skin for a new one or that gravity might release them from where they stood and become light and weightless.

“Let me help.”

She closed her eyes and sighed heavily but stepped forward and accepted Lizzie’s assistance. Lizzie got down on one knee and interlocked her fingers. She instantly realized she should’ve cut her nails that were already digging in her skin uncomfortably from her tight grip alone.

“On three, okay?”

Dora nodded.
“One, two, three.” She hoisted Dora up with relative ease and only minor damage to the skin covering her knuckles. She was able to get Dora halfway through the window, so it was easy for her to climb through the rest of the way on her own.

“I’ll go unlock the back door.”

Lizzie ran to the back, eager to get inside. She found Dora already waiting for her with the door open when she got there. Her face was glum and distant.

“It’s here.”

“Come on. Let’s go,” Lizzie said.

Dora stepped aside and Lizzie rushed up the small set of stairs and into the chapel.

Lizzie noticed nothing else, but what sat in the right-hand corner of the room.

There, was a warm, chestnut brown executive desk like the one’s she seen in the offices of college professors in movies, big and official. A black room divider was set up in front of the window the desk was placed up against—an extra layer of privacy and protection. A closed laptop was carefully placed in the center of the desk, a long cable connected the laptop to a hard drive, a small rectangular box perched on the upper left-hand side of the desk. It was all here. She knew it deep inside her that they would find what they were looking for.

Dora reached in her bag and pulled out a flash drive. “Here, let’s wipe it and get out of here.”

Lizzie thought it looked as if there was more Dora wanted to ask or say. Instead, she walked over to the desk and Lizzie followed suit.

The chapel was bare except for the desk, Isaac’s rolling chair, and two lawn chairs that were covered in cobwebs and caked with dust. The floorboards creaked threateningly
under their weight and the air burned her throat. She couldn’t imagine what it must feel like to Dora to breath this air in.

“Okay, let’s get started.” Lizzie sat down at the desk and plugged the flash drive into the USB port and opened the laptop. As she suspected there was a password to get in, but she was prepared for this. The IDE program she used to write code for work and other extracurricular activities was already taking effect. Using the algorithm she created, it ran different combinations of passwords—if it was weak it would take less than a second to crack. A stronger password would still only take her algorithm up to a minute to identify. It’s like what she always told Steve, she was good at her job. Had to be.

The black screen and blue and green text blew across the screen in a blur, and then suddenly it all came to a halt. She’d done it. The password was even more ridiculous than she’d imagined it would be.

_IssacTheGr3at_

Dora’s face lit up at this. The sheer arrogance and gall of this man was comical, they couldn’t deny. How on earth had he been able to pull all of this off unscathed for so long?

She put in the password and then triggered the next pre-programmed algorithm to take effect. Wipe and copy everything stored on the hard drive.

While that got to work, she poked around. There were encrypted files that she was easily able to break through. Immediately one file stood out more than the others.

_r/RateMyWife_

It was the title of a Redditt thread. Or at least structured the same as one. When she clicked inside she saw other individual files stored in a similar format.
She clicked inside Sleeping Beauty and found more folders, except these were all marked by numbers, one through eight.

“I don’t know what I’m about to find, Dora.”

“You do.”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“It’s fine. Let’s just get this over with.”

She started with the folder labeled number eight. It contained twenty images of a girl both in clothes and out of clothes. It wasn’t Dora nor Lizzie. She didn’t want to linger on it out of respect for the woman in the photos, but Dora gasped.

“Wait! Click on that one.” She pointed to a picture of the girl sleeping, or something of that nature, on a floral couch. She was wearing a blue blazer and nothing else, though her breasts were covered you could still see the bare pink skin going all the way down her stomach.

“I think I know who she is.”

“You do?”
“I don’t remember her name. But I saw her once. Isaac and I were driving to Rick’s shop for the first time after moving down here and we passed by the bank. I saw her running up to the front doors and asked Isaac how many employees they had working at the bank. I asked about her. I thought she was pretty. Even from a distance.”

“I’m sorry, Dora.”

“Do you think she knows?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. She looks young.”

“She’s number eight?"

“Yeah.”

“Who’s number seven?”

Lizzie exited out of the young woman’s file and clicked on the next one.

It was Dora. Two-hundred and eighty photos of Dora sleeping. Some clothed, some half-clothed, some not at all. Lizzie felt as though a hot iron had been placed on her chest. Tears welled in her eyes as she scrolled through photos of Dora.

“Please, let me see.” Lizzie got up and let Dora take control. “Oh my god. This was the night of the dinner party at Rick and Jackie’s. He’d bought me that dress as a surprise.”

“You’ve seen the Redditt threads. The kind of clientele Lane and Isaac reel in. A client probably bought that dress and asked to see pictures of you in it,” Lizzie said and wanted to smack herself for letting that come out so harshly.

Dora laughed but not as if she really found anything funny, it was dry and hollow. “He’d threatened to kill me that night. He didn’t say it explicitly with words I guess, maybe he did, I don’t know, but he nearly drove us over the side of the hill after I agreed
to let Ida stay in town for a bit. I thought I might die that night. I don’t know why I stayed. Why didn’t I leave right after that?”

“Dora, this isn’t your fault. You were trying to survive. Isaac knows what to do and say to make sure you don’t and can’t leave. He was trained for this. It’s chemical, you give love and take it away enough times you make a person desperate and starved for affection and validation. This was not your fault and you never deserved this. None of us did.”

“I sent him some of these pictures myself back when we first started dating. And he’s sending these to strangers for money? I can’t look at this anymore. This is fucking embarrassing.”

“It’s fine. I’ve got this.”

Dora stood to make room for Lizzie but when they locked eyes, it was clear to Lizzie that she was feeling trepidatious. “Is it almost done?”

Lizzie couldn’t look at her. Didn’t know what to say.

“Maybe you should wait in the car. Lie down in the back like you did when we drove through town.”

“Lizzie, is something going on? This isn’t what we planned.”

She clicked on folder number six. The woman in the photos had long dark hair, a DIY haircut with choppy layers that looked almost like bangs. She was smiling, laughing, and pushing the camera out of her face. Was Isaac the one on the other end? There were sixty other photos, but Lizzie couldn’t scroll any further.

“It’s Renee.” Lizzie looked away but left it up for a moment for Dora to see.

“She looks so young and happy.”
“She was. She didn’t look anything like this by the time she’d reached her breaking point. I almost didn’t recognize her.”

“Do you think he has us grouped in numerical order? Renee was just before me, right? The girl from the bank is my replacement.”

“So, I’m number one,” Lizzie said, knowing it to be true before even opening the file.

She clicked it and all the photos that had haunted her over the last ten years flooded the screen. It was all here. The proof she’d hoped to find for so long. She started to cry.

“Lizzie, I’m sorry. Maybe we shouldn’t look at all of this right now. How much longer does the algorithm need to wipe the hard drive?”

“I’m not sad, Dora. I’m fucking thrilled.”

Footsteps sounded from the backdoor against gravel and then against the wooden steps at the backdoor. Lizzie felt Dora stiffen beside her. She checked the status of her hack, it was almost done, everything was being transferred to her private server. There was nothing he could do.

“Someone’s here,” Dora whispered through gritted teeth. She looked over at Lizzie and understanding seemed to wash over her. “It’s him, isn’t it? You told him where to find us.”

Lizzie stood in front of Dora but didn’t respond.

“How could you?”

The door opened and Isaac stepped through.

"Oh, Dora, I'm so glad you’re okay.”
Chapter Twenty-Five

“Stay right there, Isaac,” Lizzie said.

He wore tight fitting slacks and a white button down under a black blazer. He looked like an insurance salesman. Still a try hard.

“Dora,” he said. “I don’t blame you for falling into Lizzie’s trap. I’m sure she’s told you all kinds of things about me. But you know me. You’ve seen what she’s done. You married me.”

“Don’t talk to her,” Lizzie commanded.

He ignored her. Didn’t even look in her direction. “Please, honey, you said we could fix this. That we could fix anything. I’ve missed you so much.”

Lizzie stepped forward. “Isaac. Are you out of your mind? We know everything. What do you think we’re here for?”

“Oh, I can promise you Liz, you don’t know everything.”

“We know enough. It’s too late. Nothing you can do. I’ve already duplicated copies of everything on that hard drive and have had them sent to a private server.”

“Man, Lane is really not gonna like that. Though, you’re not the first person to think they nailed Lane.” He shifted to the side to try and meet Dora’s eyes. “It’s really disappointing. You could’ve been a part of this with me, Dora. We could’ve built a real life and family together, with the freedom and the money to do whatever we wanted. That’s what I’m doing with Lane. Taking advantage of a market that already exists. But I should’ve known you would betray me, just like all the others. I will say, I didn’t think you had it in you to meet up with this one.” He pointed to Lizzie.
Dora stepped forward. “I have never been disgusted by anyone or anything like I am by you right now.”

Isaac laughed. “Oh, I like that, Dora. Where was that fire before? You know, if those girls didn’t want their pictures to be used, they shouldn’t have sent them in the first place. Besides, legally, I own those pictures now. I can do whatever I want with them. The internet is forever baby. I guess you could say that Lane and I are here to teach that lesson.”

Dora stepped up next to Lizzie. “Most of those pictures we saw were of girls unconscious. How can you justify that? How do you live with yourself?”

“Oh, come on. You think those girls didn’t freely take whatever alcohol we paid for or whatever drugs we offered? I’ve never forced a single one of them to take anything they didn’t already want to.”

“Kind of like how you didn’t pressure me to drink even when I told you I didn’t want to? What about Renee? She’s gone and it’s your fault. Her blood is on your hands. You can’t keep doing this to people.”

“It’s too bad really. I told Lane that you two were up to something. I let him know just before walking in here that I’d found you. He’s sending Daryl. Now, you haven’t met him Dora but let’s just say Daryl is Lane’s fixer. And the way I hear it, there are two empty plots just outside.”

Lizzie pulled out her gun from her waistband.

“Lizzie!” Dora shouted.

“Then we don’t really have a lot of time. Step outside for me, Isaac. I don’t want to make a mess in here.”
“Oh, come on Lizzie. You’re not gonna kill me.”

She cocked the hammer back. “Actually, it’s all I’ve thought about for ten years. Now, I’m only going to tell you one more time. Step outside.”

“Oh, okay.” Isaac backed up and out the door as Lizzie approached with the gun raised at eye-level.

She could feel Dora hanging back, in shock. It all snapped into focus for her. She knew Lizzie had lied to her and that this was why. She was going to kill Isaac.

She guided him over by the plots. “Stand there, on Elmer’s grave.”

“Dora, you’re not going to let her do this are you? You’re not a killer.”

“No, I’m not. But she’s going to do what she wants. I’ve never had control over anything in my life. You better pray. Or beg.”

“You won’t get away with this. Your buddy Rick reported you missing, Dora. People have been out looking for you. Your sister, Marie, your new bo Jo. They’ve been hanging around Southview, following me around town. They think I killed you. I was thinking of mentioning that to the police after taking care of things here. They seemed more than willing to consider you a runaway after I told them about your behavior over the last few weeks. Lane had some interesting things to say as well that I think swayed them in my direction. How’s it going to look if they find you here and me dead? And Lizzie, you’re already a criminal in the eyes of the law. The porn you sent to all those unsuspecting minors and adults, all of the harassment and stalking reports on your file, those scandalous emails you sent to your professors.”

“I don’t care. I’m sick of men like you getting away with everything. You treat women like we’re disposable cash cows. Everything I dreamed of for myself when I was
a kid has been destroyed. I’m not the same person anymore, Isaac. I’m a survivor and I’m going to choose how I leave this world.”

She rushed forward until she was face to face with Isaac. His mouth dropped and his eyes drooped. There was that sad little boy from high school, hiding just under the surface. The slicked back hair, gold watch, slim fit clothes, nothing but a facade.

“Come on. Please, Lizzie. I can fix things for you. Lane has connections. He can repair any relationships you need. You wanna go back to school? We can make that happen.”

Dora pressed her hand against Lizzie’s lower back. “Lizzie. Don’t do this. Let’s go home.”

Lizzie turned to glance at Dora. Her cheeks were flushed, and tears streamed down to her collar bone. “I’m sorry, Dora.”

In the few seconds that Lizzie had let down her guard, Isaac lurched forward and grabbed the gun in Lizzie’s hands. Dora rushed backward as they struggled with the small, matte black Glock and it fired once up into the sky. He elbowed Lizzie in the chest, and she stumbled back. With the gun in hand, he leaned over and smacked the butt end of the gun against the side of Lizzie’s head. She fell on to her back, not entirely unconscious but seemingly unable to get up.

“Get over here, Dora,” he said, pointing the gun at her and directing her over to the Lewises plots.

Dora moved slowly, without urgency. She looked down at Louisa and Ruby’s plaques and smiled.
“This is what you’ve always wanted isn’t it? To be a part of some tragic tale. To be remembered as the woman who died for love. The victim.”

Lizzie groaned and shifted to her side. Behind her and Isaac, she watched as two women quietly and steadily approached. One was quite tall, with long wavy auburn hair, she had the same resting face as Dora; brows furrowed, eyes narrow and tightly focused. She trailed behind the other woman with dark, short, curly hair—bat in hand. They simultaneously pressed a finger to their lips as Lizzie turned her head in their direction ever so slightly.

She looked back at Dora who’s eyes were fiercely locked on Isaac.

“I would never die for you, but I would die for the people I love.”

The woman with the bat was a couple feet away now. They were careful with each step, trying not to make any noise as they approached.

Isaac cocked the gun again and aimed at Dora’s chest.

“Don’t need to wait for Daryl now.”

The woman behind him suddenly lunged forward and cracked the bat against Isaac’s knees. The gun went off again as it flew out of his grip. The bullet whizzed right past Dora and connected with Lizzie’s hatchback.

Isaac screamed as he held his right knee to his chest. It was certainly broken.

“Ida! Marie!” Dora shouted. “You came back.”

Marie didn’t take her eyes off of Isaac. “Grab him,” she directed Ida.

They picked him up, one on each arm, and dragged him forward. He screamed and cried, a guttural, animal-like plea for help. It was music to Lizzie’s ears.
Just behind Elmer’s plot was a post, broken and jagged. It had once been a marker, destroyed by time or nature. Marie and Ida lifted him up and held his face over the sharp point.

Ida shouted, her face inches from his ear, “Come on. Beg!”

“You wanna be like him? Wanna be like Elmer? You know what happened to him, right?” Marie asked.

“No! I don’t want to be like him!”

“Yes, please! I’m sorry. Put me down!”

“Fine,” Ida said. Her and Marie looked at each other, and then tossed him onto the ground just beside the post.

He crumpled into a ball, shaking like a coward.

Ida rushed over to Dora and embraced her. “Oh, my god. I’m so glad we found you. I was so afraid.”

Dora shook her head. “Ida, I’m so sorry for everything.”

“Me too,” Ida whispered.

Dora released Ida and walked over to Lizzie. She reached her hand out. “Come on, let’s finish this.”

Lizzie pulled herself up with Dora’s help and they walked over to where Isaac laid. Dora broke off and picked something up off the ground just a few paces away. It was her gun.
Isaac looked at Dora in horror. “No. Dora. Don’t do this.”

“I’m not,” she said, and then handed the gun to Lizzie.

Lizzie looked at her incredulously and Dora nodded, giving her permission.

“Come on girls. You’ve crippled me. What are you gonna tell the police when they find me like this? You can’t say I’m a threat right now.”

“Sit up right,” Lizzie said.

He shifted onto his backside, agony in his face with every movement. His legs spread apart, his right knee bent at a slight angle to the left.

“Men like you should be a lot more afraid of women like me,” she said and without hesitation shot three time between his legs, only narrowly missing his fragile bits.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Both doors to the front of the Lewis Chapel were held open by a pile of bricks the brigade of officers on site found scattered about the property. Lizzie stood at the top of the staircase leaning in through the doors and directing the officers inside as to where to look and what they would find.

Officer Nolan, a tall woman with a silver eyebrow piercing above her left eye hung back and proceeded to ask Lizzie questions in between her commanding interjections to the officers as they handled all of the sensitive computer equipment. Also, her equipment.

“So, tell me again,” Officer Nolan started, “Operation Fireball is what, exactly?”

“It was just a theory at first. I believe, more or less, there’s a man, multiple men, multiple people, take your pick, running some sort of MLM incel starter kit online. You’ll see in my own files and in what you find on that hard drive in there, evidence that there are people online that seem to be singling out young men. They feed into their egos and their fears and get them to do their bidding. Fall guys, so to speak.

“People like Lane get these men to run this Tinder Fireball scheme for them, which is meant to make the women they target feel more vulnerable and insecure after getting stood up or berated or belittled—depends on the tactic used it seems. Then the saviors lurking around the corner take these women home,” Lizzie could tell that Officer Nolan was getting ready to interrupt. “How they get them home is up to you to find out. I can only speculate. When they get them alone, they take pictures, and then send them back to their bosses or whatever you want to call them. I have records of messages
between various Redditt users as well as private emails that show people using code
names, requesting certain poses, certain clothing, lack of clothing, locations, really the
list goes on. Renee was the one who warned me about it. She’d found the thread first and
came to me for help. I didn’t believe her. Told her it was crazy.”

“I can understand why you’d feel that way. The whole thing seems a little far-
fetched, though, I’m becoming less and less surprised by the day. How did you secure all
that information?”

“Threads I found online. Most of them are still up and active. But concerning
anything else … I plead the fifth.”

“Hmm. Okay. So, after Renee passed away, you did all of this work? All by
yourself?”

“No. Not by myself.”

Lizzie looked over at the ring of police cars and ambulances parked in the front
lawn. Dora sat in the back of an ambulance with her arm draped over her sister. Their
heads rested against each other, Ida’s eyes were closed, her breathing slow. To her
surprise, Dora was looking back at Lizzie with soft eyes. She wasn’t sure if that softness
was because the adrenaline was finally dipping down or if it was pity. As if reading her
thoughts, Dora waved lightly, smiled slightly and Lizzie suddenly felt close to tears.

Maybe this didn’t have to be the end.

“Why did you do it?” Officer Nolan asked.

“Do what?”

“Help her. Do any of this. As you say, you were used as a scapegoat for a decade
and whether she knew it or not she played a part in that. When Ida and Marie first came
to me to tell me about their suspicions into Isaac’s and his part in Dora’s disappearance I started digging into both of the Landry’s pasts and quickly realized that there was a third person intertwined in their relationship. I’ve seen the reports filed against you over the last several years. I can’t figure out why you’d risk picking her up from that motel.”

“All this shit about Redditt theories I’m swinging your way and that’s what you can’t figure out?”

“Touché. But still, I’d like to know.”

“I don’t know. Wanted to help myself as much as I wanted to help her. Probably more.”

“That it?”

Lizzie shrugged. “Still figuring it out.”

“Okay. So now, about what happened here today. There are bullet casings everywhere, yet no one was shot. Who had the gun?”

So far none of the officers she’d spoken to seemed all that curious as to how Isaac knew where to find them. There were too many possibilities, she supposed. Like Dora said, in a small-town things got around quickly. That seemed to work in her favor here. Lizzie knew they wouldn’t be able to trace the message she’d sent out to lure him here back to her. Not anytime soon at least. No name, no case, as she’d been told many times before when she tried to report the fake accounts that threatened to ruin her life. She simply played the game they taught her.

“Me. I brought it. I carry for protection. I have a permit. It’s in my bag in the car. I can get it for you.”

“Later. Who fired the gun?”
Marie had been standing at the bottom of the staircase, keeping her distance, Lizzie assumed, so that Dora and Ida could have a moment alone. She walked up a few steps and intercepted the question.

“I saw the whole thing. It was no one really. Isaac had taken the gun from Lizzie and was threatening Dora with it. We all wrestled it away from him and the gun went off a few times in the chaos,” she said.

“Okay,” Officer Nolan said. “But when we pulled up, Isaac was in a heap over at that Lewis plot and there were three bullets that had been fired right into the ground in front of him. That was from the same altercation that made the bullet hole in your car?” Nolan asked, directing the question at Lizzie.

“Yes. It’s as she said.”

A tan Mazda pulled up. Officers approached it like a magnet, one hand held up at the driver and passenger, one hand on their belts, warning them to proceed with caution. Dora and Ida jumped up immediately. Dora’s face turned bright red as a flash of adrenaline came rushing back into her system. A woman with ashy blonde hair stepped out and though she couldn’t place her right away, it came into swift focus once Ida collided into the woman’s embrace. It was Dora’s mom.

She came back for her.

Lizzie didn’t often think about her own parents. She tried not to. When she was sixteen, her dad had a pace maker put in to control the arrhythmia of his heart but there was a complication after the surgery. It got infected and because it was so close to his heart, it killed him swiftly. Her mother passed away just a few years later from stage IV colon cancer. Both of her parents were gone forever before she turned nineteen. She
would never feel their embrace, roll her eyes at their scolding, sit around a dinner table with them, hear their laughs, or see them cry ever again.

They would never know that she won. But Nan would and that was enough for now.

Lizzie watched as Dora’s mom kissed every inch of her face. They didn’t say anything, they only cried and hugged each other close.

“You two go over and join them. I’ve got all I need from you right now,” Officer Nolan said, and then stepped inside to help with the clean-up crew.

“In just a minute.”

Marie took Lizzie’s hand, and they sat together at the bottom of the staircase. The air was cold, and Marie’s hand was warm, almost hot. They leaned in to one another and Lizzie could feel both of their bodies trembling as they silently cried.

It had been a few hours since the officers left the scene and had taken Isaac away in the back of a cop car. They all sat now, shoulder-to-shoulder on the front porch of Dora’s home. It had been silent for some time now as they picked at the plates of lasagna the woman who’d been in the passenger seat of the Mazda with Dora’s mom doled out for them on paper plates. This was Jackie. Lizzie had expected cookies and Kool-Aid from the woman after all Dora had told her, but her empty stomach was much happier with the hot and hearty lasagna that Jackie had conveniently made just last night.

Ida sat with her head in Marie’s lap. She stabbed at the lasagna she’d placed on the front top step and took small bites as she slowly lowered the fork to her lips. Marie had already had one plate and was on her second, though she’d placed the half-eaten
second slice to the side and was petting Ida’s head. Her daughter, Leah sat in Jackie’s lap. She’d spilled most of her food on the ground as she squirmed and giggled with Jackie, mostly oblivious to the events of today. Marie was a good mom.

Lizzie sat towards the bottom of the stairs with Dora and her mother just above her.

“What do you think will happen to them? Isaac and Lane?” Marie said, breaking the silence.

“They’re going to jail,” Helen said.

“Maybe,” Lizzie responded.

“You think they might get off?” Marie asked.

“If Isaac’s smart he’ll take some kind of plea deal. Testify against Lane. The evidence against his boss is pretty extensive, most of it falls on him. The evidence I was able to gather on Isaac isn’t as solid as the evidence against Lane.”

“So, what does that mean?” Ida asked.

“It means that Isaac may get out. Soon. But his reputation will be destroyed.”

“Do you think you two are still in danger?” Helen asked.

“No. Not from Isaac. He’s not as tough as he tries to make himself out to be. He crumbles easily. He’s not a ring leader, he’s a follower. This was about exposing the operation as much as it was about taking those two down,” Lizzie said.

“Not exactly what we wanted to hear,” Marie said.

“Only time will tell. It still has to go through the legal process. Maybe now that the detectives and officers are looking at the evidence I gathered seriously they’ll find something more on Isaac that will persuade a jury to pursue charges.” Lizzie shrugged.
This was all common knowledge to her after studying court cases and true crime for so long. This was how these things worked. Can’t get your hopes up too much that justice will be seen through where the law is concerned.

“I have some news,” Jackie said, changing the subject.

Lizzie looked up at Dora who seemed just as anxious as she felt. Helen placed her hand on her shoulder and smiled knowingly. Lizzie directed her attention quickly back to Jackie.

“You all know about the Lewises by now, I assume.” She looked at Lizzie, the only one other than Helen that hasn’t lived in Morris Chapel before. “Right?” she asked.

“Right,” Lizzie responded.

“This has to stay between us, okay? Ruby Court survivors only. Understand?
What I’m about to tell you cannot leave this porch.”

Lizzie and the other women locked eyes with each other, nodding. Yes, Lizzie thought. An understanding amongst them all.

“Over the last few weeks, I did some digging and I found Anna. Looked her up online and found a phone number. I can’t take all the credit, though. Ida here showed me how to look up someone’s number on this website I had to pay twenty dollars just to use one time.” She rolled her eyes but continued on. “I called her and told her about what had been going on down here. That Dora was missing now, and we were desperate. I wanted to ask Anna what she thought now about a curse and about the Lewises and what’s been going on in this town for centuries now that she’s been away for so many years.

“She told me that after she left, she fully believed she’d been cursed by Elmer Lewis and that that was why she’d had the accident. She was afraid of what might happen
to her and her baby after she left so she hired a genealogist to help her piece together the Lewises family tree to try and understand their past. She thought maybe if she knew who they were and what they’d been through she could do something to help break the curse. In her search, they found a record of two ferry tickets purchases from a port in Virginia to New York in 1864. The names on record were Louisa and Ruby Heart and they left exactly a week after Elmer was found dead in this house.”

Dora stood suddenly. “They’re alive. I mean. They survived. They weren’t lost out here?” Lizzie could hear the sobs beginning to rise in Dora’s chest.

Jackie held Leah tighter and closed her eyes. “They lived.”

Something relaxed between the women who sat on that porch, like an exhale.

Lizzie didn’t feel a part of that release. There was still something unanswered.

“But what about Elmer? He was found dead inside, right? Was it … ” Lizzie trailed off, looking at Leah because she wasn’t sure how much the little girl knew and didn’t want to traumatize her with the word suicide.

Jackie smiled. “I asked Anna that very question. They were able to track down a descendant of the Hearts’. Ruby’s great granddaughter. She told Anna that her family knew the truth. Louisa and Ruby had documented everything for their family. They wanted them to know what they had been through and how they’d gotten there. Part of the stories they tell here in Morris Chapel are true. Elmer built this house, built the chapel, and he believed the rumors that Louisa was having an affair. She wasn’t, of course. Things boiled over one night and he tried to kill them. Louisa was able to settle him down somehow, prepared him this elaborate dinner. Just after he began eating, she excused herself to the kitchen, asked Ruby to help her with the dessert, and went and
grabbed a shot gun that she had pre-loaded and cocked. She snuck up behind him and, well, you know the rest.”

Leah smiled to Lizzie’s bewilderment. “She was protecting Ruby.”

Lizzie supposed that was true.

“Yes, she was,” Jackie said.

Dora crumpled into Helen’s arms. “They made it. Oh my god, they made it. And they had a family? They were able to start over?”

Her mother answered instead. “This was not the end for them. This place will not be the end for you either.”

“I can come home?” Dora asked, tears flooding her eyes and streaming down her face.

Ida spoke up. “Dora, not a single one of us here would let you stay another second in this house alone. You’re coming home.”

Dora reached down and placed her hand on Lizzie’s shoulder. “Would you come with me?”

Lizzie was taken aback, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes burning. “It’s okay. Gotta get home to Nan, remember?”

Dora nodded. “I’ll see you again, won’t I?”

“Sure. Guess we’re all Ruby Court survivors now. Gotta stick together.”

Lizzie stood, preparing to head back to the chapel to get in her car and drive back home. Dora pushed herself off the ground and rushed down the steps. She wrapped her arms around Lizzie’s neck and buried her face in her shoulder. Jackie, Helen, Ida, Marie, and Leah followed suit until she was blanketed in the women she’d just met.
“Give Nan and Betsy my love. Tell them I’ll visit soon,” Dora said.

Everyone pulled back and took their seats back on the steps.

“I will. Thank you for your help,” Lizzie said.

Dora shook her head. “No. You saved me.”

“You saved me too.”

Lizzie turned and started the trek back through the court. The sound of the women’s crying and laughing followed her all the way to the chapel.

When she made it to her car, she got in and closed the door. The silence overwhelmed her, and she let out a guttural scream that burned the back of her throat.

There was nothing left to do but go home. The fire that had been lit in her for so many years had subsided. Something else took its place, something unidentifiable and unfamiliar to Lizzie. She sat in the silence until her heartbeat slowed. She smiled and turned the ignition.

Once more she glanced over at the empty plots, a cover for Louisa and Ruby. A resting place for their past, for a life left behind. Not a death, but a rebirth. They were defined by something other than the deepest and darkest parts of their lives.

They survived.

Lizzie tapped on the pedal and backed out of the drive. She was ready to go home.

THE END.