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Terms and Conditions

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“Terms and Conditions”

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Abstract

This thesis, titled “Terms and Conditions,” is a collection of five short stories. Although there is a mix of realist and speculative fiction, there are themes as well as other similarities that these stories share. All the characters in the following stories feel a lack of something that they desperately want, and in most cases that is love in the form of a parent, a sibling, or a friend. These characters not only uncover the harsher side of life in their search for a real connection, but they also reveal who they are as a person. Dr. Kruegler wants a chance save her sister, but she has to make a choice that questions her ethics. Kay also wants a chance to be reunited with her sister and thinks that opportunity presents itself at what she believes is a haunted drive-in. This obsession frightens her parents and prevents her from being able to move on from her sister’s death.

These characters are faced with the fact that nothing is as it seems. For some of the characters, that means that those closest to them are not who they thought they were. Although very different characters, Jamie and Brad both struggle with their friendships because of the idealized vision they cling to of their best friends. In addition, Deidre has her own assumptions about her grandma, her parents, and her brother, but everything she’s believed about them is ripped out from under her.

Overall, the stories in this collection explore the idea that when we go in search of what we want, we sometimes discover something about ourselves and our environment that’s harsher and darker than we ever expected. It’s the decisions we make when presented with these moments that make us who we are—fragile and flawed.

Alexa ripped the bottom half of a lightning bug off and stuck the still-lit abdomen on her finger. As a child, I was fascinated at the nonchalant way she tore the bug apart, like the sticky yellow-green guts didn't bother her at all. I remember trying to hold back my disgust when she caught another bug in the air and did the same to my finger.

"It's magic," she said, holding her hand out to admire her work. She smiled, revealing an almost toothless smile. She wanted to meet the tooth fairy, as she told me often when she insisted on taking any of my teeth that fell out. I stared at the glowing bit on my finger, amazed by how it still glowed despite being separated from the rest of its body.

Alexa and I spent the night catching as many lightning bugs as we could. We put them in mason jars that Alexa had stolen out of a neighbor's garage. We stayed in my backyard for as long as we dared before it was almost too dark to see.

"I should go. I wouldn't want to get eaten by any bears or werewolves," Alex told me. Despite how dark it was, I could still see her pale face, and the white of her eyes glistened like small wet eggs. The glow of lightning bug bits on our fingers was almost completely gone—just a pinprick of yellow-green.

"Don't werewolves just come out on full moons?" I asked, holding my jar tightly to my chest.

Alexa shook her matted head of curls. "That's just what werewolves want you to believe. That's how they trick you," Alexa explained. "Monsters are everywhere, but especially at nighttime because they know you want to go to bed. It's easier to eat you if

you're tired.”

“Oh,” I said, eyeing the porch door. I fought the urge to run to it and escape the darkness. If Alexa could walk alone several blocks to her house, I could stand to wait a few minutes to walk a couple feet.

“Bye bye!” Alexa waved, and took off running, as she always did when she wanted to go somewhere. She told me once that she loved to run because she knew that at any moment, she was going to finally sprout her wings and fly away.

I waited until Alexa was out of sight, and then ran up the steps and locked the porch door behind me.

In the morning, the lightning bugs in my jar lay in a thick, black pile on the bottom of the jar. I immediately twisted off the lid and shook them out onto my pink dresser. I thought that if they could just get some air, they might be fine. I poked one with an index finger, and then slowly picked it up. I hadn't looked at one so closely before, especially in the daylight. Its antennae had curled into two spirals, and the legs were pulled close to its body. I ran my finger over the black shell of its body, admiring the hint of orange on the back of its head and the subtle yellow on the edges of its wings. I gingerly set it down on the dresser with the rest of the bug corpses, and I left for the kitchen.

As I was eating breakfast, Mom asked me if I was excited about 2nd grade. I used to be thrilled at the idea of starting school again: I loved to pick out school supplies and new clothes, and I enjoyed the activities I did in class. This changed when Dad disappeared. He took off in the middle of the night, and left most of his things behind. I

thought maybe it was something I did; maybe it was because I never cleaned up my messes or maybe my grades weren't good enough. I thought it had to be something I did wrong, or perhaps something Mom did wrong. I didn't understand until I was older that it was for many reasons beyond my mom's or my own control, and one of them just happened to be that he wasn't ready for a life with a child. I met Alexa at the beginning of the summer, just a couple weeks after Dad left. It was perfect timing for me. She showed up in my backyard, pulling the slender leaves off of our willow tree. Alexa was older, wild, and everything I wasn't. She was maybe around ten years old, but she never told me her age. She immediately started telling me stories involving creatures I'd only read about in fairy tales. Alexa made me feel happy and made me forget that Dad was gone, even if it was just for a little while. I wanted our time together to last forever.

"I got you a new folder yesterday," Mom said, setting a bright pink folder with cartoon bunnies next to me. Their watery blue eyes bulged, ready to pop out of furry, oversized heads. "Cute, huh?"

I glanced at it, and went back to my cereal. Mom sighed heavily, and then sat next to me. I knew she was staring at me, but I focused on swirling my cereal around with my spoon.

"Jamie," Mom put a hand on my shoulder, "Why won't you talk to me anymore?" We did this ritual almost every day since Dad left. She talked, I didn't.

I watched a purple marshmallow drift to the other side of my bowl. I shrugged, as was my typical response to Mom.

She felt my forehead and my cheeks because she wanted to believe that my behavior was the result of being physically ill. Physical illness was something Mom felt

she had control over, but she was never any good at what couldn't be seen. Sighing again in a way that deflated her whole body, Mom got up from her seat and walked to the sink to wash some dishes.

I heard a knock at the door, and before Mom could object, I left my cereal bowl behind. I swung the door open, and there she was, Alexa, in the same exact clothes as she had been wearing for the past week: an oversized black t-shirt with a faded logo for Jose Cuervo. Mom always kept a bottle of it on top of the fridge. Alexa's t-shirt was so large on her that I couldn't tell if she was wearing shorts under it or not.

"Stay where I can see you!" Mom shouted as Alexa and I ran to the backyard. Mom always said this to me, but I knew it would be a matter of time until she slinked back into her bedroom to either cry or do some work online for her at-home job.

Alexa grabbed my hand and led us to our favorite tree. The weeping willow took up a large part of our yard. It was a fountain of sage green with limbs so thick you had to pull them aside like a curtain. Behind this curtain of leaves was our own secret room, away from adults and the rest of the real world. It was dark and cool under the willow tree, and soft grass and moss grew around its base. As we sat cross-legged, I noticed one of Alexa's hands was clasped shut.

"I have a present for you," Alexa announced with a smirk. My heart immediately jumped. I had a special box in which I kept everything that Alexa gave me. Anyone else who looked in the box would think it was nothing but junk: a broken piece of green glass with edges smooth from creek water, a chicken bone with some dried meat still stuck to it, dead daisies with petals always on the verge of falling, hardened balls of mud painted to look like marbles, and so on. Everything she gave me came with a story. The chicken

bone was not from a chicken; it was a goblin's finger bone. The green glass was from a dwarf's discarded broken goblet. The daisies were stolen from an elf's garden. Spirit children that lived in the forest made the marbles.

Alexa held out her fist, and as her fingers rolled outward, I saw a pair of beautiful butterfly wings. The wings were blue, black, gold, purple, and yellow. They were shimmery and yet looked almost fuzzy from a fine layer of powder.

"Butterfly wings?" I said, although I should have known better.

"No, no, I got these from a fairy last night!" Alexa exclaimed. "You wouldn't believe how hard it was to get these. Fairies are very fast and very mean. But I'm faster *and* meaner."

I frowned. "Are you sure these are from a fairy? Because I thought they were supposed to be nice." I bent my head closer to the wings. They were in perfect condition, almost as though they were fake.

"You don't know anything," Alexa told me for the thousandth time. "Fairies are one of the meanest creatures out there. Yeah, they're pretty, but they will eat your face off! Everybody lies about fairies. Everybody lies about everything."

I sat in silence, still staring at the wings.

"Well, do you want them or not?" Alexa asked, sticking her palm closer to my face.

"Yeah, give me 'em!" I said quickly. I picked up the wings with my fingertips and set them on a pile of rocks we'd collected earlier in the summer. I wasn't going to pass up a chance to have my very own fairy wings. I tried to picture Alexa sneaking up on a fairy and ripping off their wings before they even had a chance to react. And then she would

run so fast that her feet barely touched the ground, the fairies chasing after her. The fairies would quickly give up because, well, it was Alexa. Alexa never got caught; Alexa was always the heroine in my mind.

“When are we gonna go to the forest?” I asked. “Or just have our own adventure somewhere? You always get to do stuff, and I’m always here. It’s boring.” It was less of a forest and more like a thick cluster of trees with the creek in the middle of it behind our subdivision. It separated the houses from a nearby grocery store. It wasn’t much, but to seven-year-old me, it was every forest I’d ever read about. For the most part, though, Alexa and I ended up staying in my yard.

Alex looked down at the moss and started picking at it. “It’s pretty scary. I don’t think you’re old enough yet.” Alex often pointed out that she was older than me whenever she wanted to win an argument.

My eyebrows knitted together. “But I *am* old enough! I’m going to be in 2nd grade,” I whined. I crossed my arms and bit my lower lip. “I could help you.”

“Help me what?” Alex scoffed. She leaned back onto the trunk of the tree and placed her hands behind her head. “You’re too little to really do anything.”

“Nuh-uh!” I shoved her shoulder as hard as I could, but Alexa hardly moved. Because of how thin and short I was, I was often mistaken for being much younger.

“You get mad too fast,” Alexa answered as she rubbed her shoulder. “You don’t know how to be quiet. Plus, your mom wouldn’t like it.”

“I don’t care,” I snapped. “I won’t tell her.”

“She’ll find out. Parents always do.”

I pursed my lips together and crossed my arms even tighter. I’d asked Alexa to

take me with her when she went on these journeys, but every time she turned me down. I had my box of Alexa's treasures, and now I wanted to start finding my own. I thought about going alone, escaping out of my window at night after Mom went to bed, but I had no idea where to go. I barely knew anything about the suburbs we lived in, let alone my way through the forest.

"I don't feel like playing today," I said. I picked up the wings and stood up. Alexa tried to stop me by holding onto my wrist, but I twisted out of her grip.

"Aw, c'mon, Jamie, I'm not trying to be mean," Alexa insisted as I left the shade of the willow tree. I knew that she probably wasn't trying to be mean on purpose, and I hoped, as I left her behind, that she would come after me to say she changed her mind. Instead, when I had my hand on the door handle and looked back, I saw that she was already gone.

The day went by slowly. Since I'd spent almost every day that summer with Alexa, one afternoon without her was an empty eternity. Mom tried to get me to eat dinner with her, but I took my plastic plate to my room and ate alone. I tried coloring and playing with my dolls, but I kept thinking about what would happen to a fairy once its wings were removed. I thought of the lightning bugs—which were still on my dresser—and how I wished that I glowed with magic like they once did. How wonderful it would be to have the power to fly anywhere you wanted without fear of the dark. You could always light your way. I found the treasure box under my bed and looked at each piece. I replayed each story in my head except with me in Alexa's place. I placed the wings in the box next to the chicken bone, and I lay down on the carpet with my arms encircling the box. I closed my eyes and envisioned myself with huge fairy wings and my body aglow

with yellow-green light, warm from magic.

When I woke up from my nap, something was tapping on my window. I sat up as my eyes adjusted to the darkness in my room. Moonlight shone in through the window and illuminated a pallid figure that I didn't recognize at first. Then, as I stepped closer to the window I saw the familiar smirk and gleam of her eyes. Alexa knocked on the window again and asked me to let her in. I hesitated because I was still upset with her for excluding me again, but I missed her and was eager for any attention from my friend. I lifted the window, and she crawled in.

"I'm sorry," she said, giving me a tight hug. I breathed her in, and she smelled sweaty and musty, like how your palm smells when you hold a bunch of pennies in your hand for too long. "Are you still mad at me?"

I remember staring at her face when she asked me this. She looked so desperate for me to tell her that no, I was no longer angry, that it was impossible for me to really stay angry with her. All she had to do was give me this look that was both sheepish and mischievous, and all was forgiven.

"No, not anymore," I gave in. It upset me a little that Alexa had that power over me to make me forgive her because I didn't want to be weak. I wanted to be treated like a big kid, not someone that still occasionally wet the bed.

She smiled. "Good because we're going on an adventure! First, we need to pack a bag," Alexa explained. She grabbed my backpack off of a hook on the wall. It was brand new—it was intended for school—and had neon-colored ponies on it. Mom put it there to encourage me about school, but I hadn't touched it.

Alexa left for the kitchen and came back with some apples, rolls, and butter

knives. She explained that the knives were going to be our weapons, and, since she believed they were pure silver, they would also protect us from several kinds of monsters who hated silver. Alexa also brought garlic powder for the vampires, and salt for any ghosts or other evil creatures. She showed me a chocolate chip cookie which she said could be an offering to any elves or fairies to let us go if we happened to be caught. She quickly packed everything and handed me the bag.

“It’s heavy,” I complained, almost tipping over from the weight.

“If you wanna come with me, you’re gonna have to be the one to carry our stuff,” Alexa said with a butter knife in hand. She slipped it into the front pocket of the backpack.

Normally I would have questioned why, but I wanted so badly to go with her that I kept my mouth shut. Alexa helped me out of the window, and we ran towards the street. As I approached the end of my block, I turned around and looked at my house. For a moment I considered turning back because I knew Mom would realize I was gone and she would be very mad at me. I also knew it would make her sad to realize I was missing. This was the farthest I’d been from home without Mom’s knowledge. But then Alexa tugged me away by the elbow, and I forgot about all of that. Instead, I thought of monsters and how I hoped I’d see one tonight.

After we walked a couple blocks, the thrill of my personal rebellion had already started to wear away as a sudden full bladder threatened an accident. The backpack was already rubbing into the skin on my shoulders, and I knew I had to take a break. I figured that we had to be somewhat close to where Alexa lived. “Can I go pee in your house?” I asked as I set the backpack down on the sidewalk.

Alexa winced and shook her head. “No, it wouldn’t be a good idea.” Alexa avoided my eyes and picked up the backpack. “I can carry it for a little bit—”

“Please just let me go pee,” I begged. I didn’t realize how badly I had to go until we stopped walking. Alexa never invited me over to her house to play; it was always assumed that we would hang out at my house. She didn’t talk about her home, or her family at all for that matter.

Alexa groaned. “Can’t you hold it? Or can you just go pee behind a bush or something?” she suggested. “That’s what adventurers do. They pee in the bushes.”

I grimaced as I envisioned myself squatting in public with my shorts down behind someone’s hedge. I had to go so badly that I almost agreed to it.

“Come on, Alexa, I’ll be really fast.” I rubbed my knees together and squeezed my thighs. Anything to avoid peeing my pants in front of Alexa. I knew I’d never hear the end of it from her if I did that, and, worse, she’d probably insist that our adventure had to come to an end.

“Fine,” she snapped, “but you have to be very, very quick. And don’t say or touch *anything*.”

I nodded and followed behind Alexa as she led me down the street. I wondered how late it was because most of the houses were completely dark. The only sound I heard was the buzzing of the streetlights and the occasional cricket or dog barking in the distance. Lightning bugs twinkled in the air, and I smiled because I knew magic was around us, protecting us and showing us the way.

We stopped in front of a house with peeling white paint. Behind the paint was shabby, grayish wood. The grass was very long and the yard was covered in dandelion

poufs. As we walked through the yard, the perfect, white dandelion spheres exploded, sending tiny little umbrellas into the air. Alexa told me once that if you could blow all the seeds off a dandelion with one breath, you'd be granted one wish.

Alexa walked up the three crumbling concrete steps and put her ear to the door. She listened for a while, and then nodded to herself. She looked at me and put a finger to her lips. "Quiet," she mouthed. Slowly, she turned the doorknob, being extra careful not to make any noise. Alexa stepped inside the darkness, and then beckoned me to follow her. I carefully went up the steps and entered her home.

It took my eyes a minute to adjust. Once they did, I was startled by what I saw. Soda cans littered the carpet, as well as animal hair and waste. I tried not to step on a pile as I followed closely behind Alexa. The few pieces of furniture had stuffing poking out of the split seams, and I noticed a crooked couch missing one of its legs and a cushion. The blinds on the windows were yellowed and disheveled and allowed for moonlight to shine in and light our way. However, it also created shadows everywhere I looked, and I snatched the back of Alexa's shirt below the backpack so I wouldn't lose my way. She looked back at me, but didn't push me away. The smell was almost enough to make me forget that I needed to use the bathroom. The stench reminded me of the trashcans in front of my house as well as sour milk and cigarettes. I squeezed my nose shut between my fingers.

"This way." Alexa whispered so softly I almost didn't hear her. She pushed a pile of newspapers, junk mail, and dirty clothes out of the way, and we entered a hallway. The hallway was filled to the ceiling with more stacks of newspapers, wrappers from fast food restaurants, and overstuffed cardboard boxes that threatened to tip over at any moment. I

tried to shrink into myself as much as possible, making little steps and keeping the hand that wasn't holding onto Alexa's shirt curled against my chest. Eventually, she stopped and pointed to a wooden door. The door was missing its top hinge, and the bottom corner was raw and splintered, as if an animal had been chewing on it.

"Bathroom's in there," Alexa muttered. "Hurry."

I swallowed and took a deep breath through my mouth, which I instantly regretted because I swore I could taste the odor of the house. I let go of Alexa's shirt and tiptoed into the bathroom. I attempted to close the door behind me, and when I flipped on the light switch, the light bulb flickered and struggled to stay lit. The tile floor had thick grime that caused me to slip a little, but I held onto the sink for support. A single toothbrush lay on the sink, its bristles splayed and yellowed. Dots of black mold covered the walls, and the shower curtain was a sickly gray plastic. The toilet's lid had all sorts of stains and the inside had a thick, brownish-yellow ring around the water. I almost changed my mind about using it, but I knew Alexa would be mad at me if we went all the way here, and I didn't even use the bathroom. I did my best to hover over the toilet, trying not to touch anything.

Just as I was almost done, I heard a voice within the house yell: "Alexa! Alexa, get in here now!" Before I could pull my panties up, Alexa burst into the bathroom. Her eyes were wide and she was even paler than usual. I, on the other hand, turned bright red and hurried to yank my underwear and shorts on. I felt uncomfortable that I hadn't used toilet paper, but the only paper available were the used bits scattered on the floor.

"We gotta get out. Now," she urged. My embarrassment quickly dissipated when I realized that Alexa was frightened. In the short time I had known her, I had never seen

her scared. She was always the brave one, and I thought she was invincible. If Alexa was scared, I knew that something very, very bad was coming.

We left the bathroom, and I struggled to follow after Alexa. She seemed to know exactly where to step without tripping on the many obstacles around us. I heard someone muttering in another room, as well as the sound of cans and glass being pushed aside. “Alexa!” the same voice bellowed.

Alexa reached the front door and yanked it open. She waited for me to run outside, and then she closed it behind her. I stopped for a moment at the bottom of the steps. “Go! Go as fast as you can!” she said as she sprinted across the yard. I tried to keep pace with her, but she was so much faster than me. She was already at the end of her street by the stop sign when I had barely left the yard. The door hinges creaked, and I lay flat on my belly so fast that I hit my chin on a rock. I peered above the tall grass at the door, and I saw something waiting in the shadows. It was a very thin old man, nearly toothless mouth agape in anger. He stared off in the distance, and, as if he suddenly forgot what he was looking for, his face morphed into a look of confusion and sadness. He stepped back into the house and closed the door.

I was alone. I ran to the stop sign and waited. I put my hands on my knees and drew in deep breaths. When my heart finally slowed, I stood up and moved around in a circle, looking for Alexa. I called her name a couple times, and, again, I waited. I touched my chin tenderly, wiping away some blood and dirt.

“Alexa?” I shouted. My voice wavered as I fought off tears. She’d left me, I figured, for that man to find me so she could get away safely. Just when I was beginning to get really angry, I saw her hiding behind some silver trash cans at a nearby house. She

held her knees to her chest, and her forehead rested on her arms. I watched her for a moment because I almost didn't think it was her. It wasn't like her to cower and to run away defeated like this. If Alexa ever ran away, it was because of some victory—an act of taunting. She was smarter, faster, braver, and more clever than anything she came up against, no matter how magical they were. And yet, as I approached Alexa, there she was, curled into herself, silent.

I put a hand on her shoulder. When she didn't move, I sat down next to her and draped my arm across her shoulder. I heard soft sobs coming from behind her knotted curls. Another first. I didn't know Alexa *could* cry. Although I had so many questions, I held them back. I'm not sure how long we sat there, but when Alexa finally lifted her head, I saw someone as small as I was. She was a kid, like me, who cried. She was normal.

"Your chin's all scuffed up. I shouldn't have let you in there," Alexa said as clear snot dripped from her nose to her lips.

"No, please, don't be sad," I said as I embraced her. "I should've held it. I'm sorry. And my chin's okay. Just a scratch."

Alexa shook her head, and she hurried to wipe her tears away with dirty fingertips, leaving long brown streaks on her cheeks. "It's not your fault. You didn't know that I lived with a troll."

A shimmer floated behind the tears in Alexa's bloodshot eyes. The brave girl I knew was slowly coming back to me. "A troll?" I asked.

She nodded as she lifted up her shirt and wiped her nose with it. "That's why it was so messy," Alexa explained with a snuffle. "Trolls are really gross. They hate doing

chores. That's why they usually live under bridges."

I had no idea trolls also lived in houses in the suburbs. "But why are you there? You're not a troll," I said.

"Because," she said as she leaned in closer to me, "I'm a princess. I was stolen from my parents when I was a baby by a group of trolls, and the one in that house is supposed to watch me."

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. "No way. You're not a princess. We don't have princesses here," I told her. I remember how disappointed I'd been when I learned in Kindergarten that the U.S. never had kings and queens, and, therefore, no castles and no kingdoms.

Alexa stretched out her legs. "Of course there are. You just don't know about them. You're just mad because *I'm* the princess, and you aren't." She pinched my arm playfully, and I smacked her back.

"Well, if you're a princess, why don't you leave and go back to your mom and dad?" I asked as I dug my finger in the pea gravel around us. I fantasized about discovering that my mom wasn't my *real* mom, and that somewhere out there, I had a mother and a father that wanted me. They'd be rich and always happy, and one day, I swore, they were going to show up at my fake mom's house and take me out for ice cream. And here was Alexa, my dream incarnate and even better.

"They can't find me. And I can't find them," she said as she watched me push the pea gravel around. "You're lucky your mom is normal. Sometimes I don't know how much longer I can take it." Alexa avoided my eyes by tugging at a hangnail.

I shook my head. "She doesn't even know I'm there sometimes, though," I said. I

picked up some of the gravel in my hands and then tossed it back to the ground.

“She’s just sad, that’s all,” Alexa said. “Since your dad’s gone—”

“I don’t wanna talk about my dad,” I interrupted. I had to deal with the aftermath of my dad’s absence every day, and I hoped that if Mom and I could forget about him completely, our lives would get better. Alexa and I sat together without saying a word for several minutes. While the trashcans weren’t exactly pleasant to sit next to, the smell was nothing compared to Alexa’s home. There was a light breeze that cooled the little beads of sweat on my forehead. What started as an incredibly exciting night had quickly turned into something that made me sick to my stomach. I replayed the image of the thin old figure with his wide mouth and couldn’t believe how close I’d been to a troll. His anger terrified me, but there was something inherently pathetic about him that made him seem human. While I did dream about leaving my life for something glamorous, I didn’t envy Alexa’s living situation. I side glanced at her dirty t-shirt, her hair that, from what I remember, never once looked cleaned or cared for, her grimy fingernails bitten to the quick, and I was overwhelmed with helplessness. I had nothing to offer her. I was no princess, I didn’t know anything about the evil that lived around us, I didn’t know how magic worked or even where to look for it—I couldn’t even keep lightning bugs alive for one night.

Alexa wiped her nose on her arm. “We can still keep going. Let’s find the forest,” Alexa said as she stood up. Alexa slipped the backpack on and extended a hand towards me. I waited a moment, and then allowed her to help me. She smiled her gapped-tooth grin at me and put her hands on her hips.

“See, I knew you’d still wanna go,” Alexa chided. She gestured for me to follow

after, and we walked down the sidewalk.

I couldn't explain it to myself, but I knew something felt off. The energy and enthusiasm that Alexa and I had at the beginning of the night had deflated. My eyes followed her sneakers along the concrete as we walked from block to block. From time to time, Alexa stopped to look at a street sign with a puzzled look on her face. We walked halfway down one street until she changed her mind, and we had to turn back around. We made so many lefts and rights that I had absolutely no idea how we got to where we were. I knew some of the neighborhood from looking out the window in my mom's car, but we were in an area where the houses were completely unrecognizable to me.

The arches of my feet ached and my shoes rubbed my skin raw on the backs of my heels. Not only was each step gradually more painful, but also I was getting very tired. The thrill of the night was completely gone, and all I wanted was to be back in my bed and underneath the blankets. When Alexa stopped again, I took off my shoes. The backs of my socks were red where my shoes had been digging into my skin.

"Alexa, can we just go home?" I said. I winced as I pulled off one of my socks and looked at the torn and blistered skin on my heel.

Alexa scoffed. "You wanna give up already?" she asked, crossing her arms. "You gotta be kidding me. We're almost there, and *now* you say you don't wanna do it anymore?"

I tucked the bloody sock into one of my shoes and began to take off the other one. I tried to lift my ankle to show her the damage. "My feet hurt, and they're all bloody. Please. Can't we try again some other day?"

Alexa rolled her eyes. "Your ankles aren't that bad. A *real* adventurer—"

“No, I don’t want to hear about what real adventurers do!” I interrupted. I waved my hands at the houses around us. “Look! There aren’t any trees here. I think we’re lost.”

“We’re not lost. I know where we are!”

“No, you don’t. And now we’re lost, and no one’s gonna find us ever again!”

Alexa shook her head. “I said we’re almost there. Why can’t you just believe me?” she snapped.

“Because we’ve been walking forever! We’re going to get eaten, or—”

“No one’s gonna get eaten! We just gotta walk a little bit more, that’s all. I promise, Jamie.”

“Alexa,” I said as grabbed a bloody sock and shook it at her face, “No. I’m done. I’m going home, and you’re gonna to show me how to get there. *Now.*”

Alexa grabbed my hand with the sock and tried to pull me along with her. With my other hand, I dug my nails into her arm, and she recoiled away from me. She rubbed the red half-moons I’d left on her skin and glared at me. The light from the streetlamps heightened the paleness of her skin and deepened the shadows her curly hair created around her face.

“I *never* should have let you come with me,” she hissed. “You’re just a big baby.”

I wanted to hit her. I wanted to shove her so hard that she would fall over onto the sidewalk. Instead, I said something I knew would hurt her more. “I’m the baby? All you ever do is tell stories. Even if I’m a baby, at least I’m not a liar. You don’t know where we are because you made the whole thing up, like you always do. There’s *no* forest. There aren’t any elves or werewolves. You’re not a princess who lives with a troll. You’re a total fake.”

I watched as my words transformed her in front of me. Her shoulders dropped, and she became the girl I saw behind the bushes. Weak, small, afraid and, now, angry. Although I got what I wanted, I instantly regretted what I'd said. I knew I crossed a line that I never had before, and I could never take back my words. I'd gone too far.

“You think I'm lying?” Alexa shouted. “You know nothing, Jamie. You've always had someone who loves you—someone who will take care of you. You have tons of toys, a nice house, a mom that makes you food all the time—and you don't care about any of it!”

“That's not true—”

“No, it is! Oh, boo hoo, you're dad's gone. Well, get over it. You aren't the only one whose parents don't want them.” She poked my chest hard. “You know *nothing* about what's real. You're just a spoiled little brat.”

The lights went on in the house near us, and a dog began barking. Alexa pulled off my backpack and tossed it on the ground. We stared at each other, each of us waiting for the other to say something. I wished I had, but I didn't know how important that moment was at the time. I remember wanting to apologize, and I knew this was my chance to do that, but there was no way I was going to admit that maybe I was wrong. Our standoff lasted only a couple of seconds, but those seconds were filled with so much anger and frustration. Alexa balled her hands into fists, and then took off running down the street. Her hair bounced as she ran, and the tips of her shoes barely hit the pavement as she sprinted away from me. Alexa turned a corner and was gone.

I picked up my shoes and the backpack and hurried down the sidewalk. A couple of the houses around me had their lights on, and I wondered if anyone saw or heard the

fight I had with Alexa. Even though I had no idea how to get back home, I didn't want anyone to see me and call my mom. I ended up dragging the heavy backpack by one of the straps, and it rolled and twisted behind me. I was already regretting that I hadn't gone after Alexa, and I hoped that she would find her way home like she always did in her stories. My broken blisters burned and the bottoms of my feet ached from walking on the scratchy concrete sidewalks. My throat tightened as I realized that I might never make it back home, and I imagined myself as some child of the street, as dirty and wild as Alexa.

As I turned onto a new street, I saw an elderly woman standing in a yard filled with plastic deer. She wore a long, pink nightgown with frills around the collar and wrists, and she held a plastic bag in one hand and a leash in the other with a dark brown Yorkshire terrier at the end of it. I was reluctant to tell her I was lost, not only because she was a stranger, but also because I wanted to prove to Alexa and myself that I wasn't a child, that I could do this on my own. My exhaustion and hunger took over, however, and I shuffled, defeated, towards the woman with my backpack trailing behind me in the grass.

The terrier noticed me before she did. The little dog yanked the leash as it ran towards me. The woman held the leash tight as the dog struggled against its collar to greet me.

"Oh!" the woman exclaimed when she saw me. "My goodness, what are you doing out so late, little girl? Are you lost?" Crow's feet wrinkles extended all the way to her temples, and the skin under her chin swayed slightly when she talked. When I tried to answer her, all that came out of me were gurgled and jumbled words between loud sobs.

"Don't cry, dear," the woman said as she patted my back. "We'll call your parents

and get this mess all settled, okay?”

I nodded, still unable to say much without hiccupping from crying so hard. The image of me digging through trash cans and sleeping outside faded away as the woman held open the door to her home.

When I called my mom, I braced myself for an angry lecture, but instead she sounded as upset as I was. She told me we’d talk about this later, but for now she was happy that I was safe. I gave the phone to the elderly woman so she could give my mom directions, and I sat on her floral couch with her dog next to me. The woman helped me clean and bandage my chin and heels, and she offered me some snacks while I waited. Before I knew it, Mom arrived, and I’d never felt so relieved. I thanked the woman, and soon I was in the backseat of our car and on our way home.

Mom kept looking at me through the rearview mirror, as if she were afraid that if she looked away once, I’d be gone.

“Jamie, do you have *any* idea how worried I was about you?” she finally asked.

I shrugged and stared at my feet. She probably thought I was running away, but really, all I wanted was a little peek at Alexa’s world, and then I would go back to my own.

“You’re lucky that Mrs. Schumacher found you, and not some—some creep that could have—” Her voice broke, and I listened to her as she took several deep breaths. I knew this was her routine for trying not to get too upset.

The car ride back home was quicker than I thought it would be. I’d been sure that Alexa and I walked pretty far. Mom carried my backpack and shoes for me, and she

locked the front door behind us. She made sure I put on my pajamas and waited for me to get comfortable in bed. I noticed that the dead lightning bugs on my dresser were gone, and the window was shut tight. Later that week, my mom would tell me not to keep bugs in the house, and she would also install a lock on my window.

She sat on the edge of the bed next to me, and her eyebrows further deepened the permanent wrinkle above the bridge of her nose. I wanted her to brush my hair behind my ear, to lay next to me in bed and hold me like moms did on television, to even yell at me and tell me I was grounded. Instead, she stood up and left the room without saying a word, shutting the door behind her.

I watched the door for a while, hoping she'd come back. When she didn't, I flipped onto my back and put my hands behind my head. I pictured Alexa running through a thick forest weaving around ancient trunks with leaves in her hair and her mad, gap-grin on her face. I knew she would eventually forgive me, and tomorrow or perhaps the next day, she'd find me, and taunt me about the adventure I'd missed out on.

Just as I was about to close my eyes and go to sleep, I saw something crawling around on the ceiling above me. It glowed yellow-green in slow, rhythmic beats and flew around the room. So one had survived after all.

I waited for Alexa every day for the remainder of the summer. After I ate my breakfast, I sat under our willow tree with my knees tucked to my chest, and I watched the road. I colored pictures that I planned on giving to her when she finally showed up with the words "I'm sorry" or "I miss you" written in several different colors at the top. I left them by the tree in case she showed up while I wasn't there. By the middle of August, there was a thick stack of coloring book pages and letters faded from the

weather.

One day, I overheard Mom talking on the phone about a girl's body that'd been found. She didn't think I heard her because she was in her room and her door was shut, but she also didn't know that I could hear everything through the vent that connected our rooms. The body was found in a creek bed wearing nothing but a torn, oversized t-shirt. I knew it wasn't Alexa because Alexa always got away. Yet, I stopped writing notes for her.

The day before school, I waited one last time under the willow tree with the box of treasures next to me. I dug a hole with one of Mom's rusty garden trowels and opened the lid of the box. I ran my fingers over the collection, and I picked up the fairy wings. The wings had lost their shimmer, and one of them was slightly crumpled from being crushed by the other items in the box. I ran my fingers over the ruined wing, hoping to smooth it out. A corner of the wing broke off, and I put it back in the box. I closed the lid and covered it with dirt and moss just as Mom called my name for breakfast.

I sat next to one of the few rusted speakers that had survived through the years. Weeds grew between the cracks of the concrete, and the old screen was yellowed and faded. I tenderly pulled at the speaker and its cord to free it from the metal pole. I held the speaker to my ear like a conch and stared at the screen.

I went to the Roanoke Drive-In every Saturday after my parents fell asleep, found my usual spot close to the concession stand, and stayed there for hours. Sneaking out was easy because Mom's pills knocked her out for at least ten hours, and nothing could ever wake up Dad, the heaviest sleeper in the world. Sometimes I explored the concession stand, looking for lost treasures left behind years ago. Often I went from speaker to speaker, wondering if—maybe—one of them was still working.

Nothing played on the screen, but I often made up my own movies. I imagined whole worlds played out: princesses with dresses of gold, dinosaurs that talked, a superhero whose best friend was an alien, and so on. This time, however, I did not picture a story on the screen. I was waiting.

I pressed the speaker to my mouth. "Annie?" I whispered.

I immediately put the speaker to my ear. When I heard nothing I spoke into the speaker again.

"Annette? Annette Pierce?"

While I knew this was silly, hoping that my sister would communicate to me through a drive-in speaker, I had a feeling that Annie would have done the same. We used to have séances in the attic of our old house because we were convinced it was

haunted. We believed, especially Annie, that ghosts were real. “If angels can exist, why not ghosts?” she asked Mom once. She’d made the mistake of asking if she could borrow a BBQ lighter and some candles for our séance instead of just taking them when Dad or Mom wasn’t looking. “Wouldn’t you want us to find a way to communicate if you were still here, haunting us?” Annie asked. The question upset Mom so much that she hid all the candles, lighters, matches, and anything flammable. Annie, though, was able to find the hidden stash. “In the suitcases in the garage, where they keep the Christmas presents,” Annie explained to me when she showed up in our room with an armful of fat, heavy candles and the BBQ lighter dangling from her finger. Annie and I didn’t have much luck contacting the spirits of the attic, but we both assumed we just hadn’t called out the right name.

“Please, Annie, please,” I begged. I dragged my knees up to my chest. Sweat caused my glasses to slip down my nose. The drought the area had been experiencing was only slightly more tolerable at night than it was during the day. The concrete beneath me was still hot. I held the speaker between my hands and wiped off the sweat I’d left on it.

I squeezed the speaker as hard as I could, almost wishing I could break it. I’d tried Ouija boards, séances in the attic all alone, saying Annie’s name at mirrors, praying to God, everything I could think of. The Roanoke Drive-In had to be what was missing from all my other efforts—it was a place where we—Mom, Dad, Annie, and I—loved to go, especially Annie. Before the company that owned the drive-in went bankrupt, we went there regularly. Dressed in our pj’s, Annie and I would sit on top of the folded seats in the car and eat sour gummy worms from the dollar store as the movie played. If I ever fell asleep during a movie, Annie was the one to pinch me and tell me I’d better wake up, or

I'd miss something important. If there was a way to contact Annie, it had to be through a place Annie felt connected to while she was alive, and that place was the Roanoke Drive-In. It *had* to be here; it *had* to happen. There was no way Annie would ignore me.

And yet, there was nothing.

I clenched my jaw and slammed the speaker into the concrete. I did it again, this time while screaming. Orange sparks jumped off the metal as it collided with the concrete. I expected the metal to break or at least dent, but all I'd done was remove a little bit of rust.

Sweat collected in my armpits, making them itch. I normally explored more of the drive-in after investigating the speaker, searching for Annie. But it was hotter than it had been for the past couple weeks, and a combination of the heat and lack of contact wore on me. Defeated, I picked up the speaker and set it back in its place on the pole. I pushed myself up and brushed off the little bits of gravel, dirt, and grass on my knees and hands. And then, as I started to walk away, I heard it.

Static. Coming from the speaker.

I scrambled to pick up the speaker again, dropped it, and then grabbed it as quickly as I could. I shoved it against my ear and listened. Nothing. I shook it like a spray-paint can and listened again. The static was gone, and had lasted only a couple of seconds. It was enough, though, to persuade me to wait in that same spot for hours, hungry for just another second of static.

We went to church that Sunday as a family for the first time in a year. Mom insisted it was time to start attending First Tabernacle Church again because the

community had been so supportive of Annie's death. "It'll be good for us," she insisted. Dad said nothing for or against it, but that was just the way he was now.

As I sat in the car on the way to church, the news of the static felt like it could kill me. I couldn't find the right time to tell my parents. The last time we went to church was for Annie's funeral. I felt as though I was being smothered by some unspoken tension between us all, and I couldn't take it any longer.

"Annie talked to me last night," I blurted.

Mom's hands gripped the steering wheel tighter. Dad let out a sigh.

"Kay, come on, not this *again*," Dad said. "Not now."

I knew this was coming. Annie used to call them "close-minded old farts" behind their backs. "Well, maybe not really *talked*, but she tried to reach out to me!"

"Have you been watching those ghost hunting shows again, Kay?" Mom briefly glanced at Dad. "I thought I told you to get rid of all that *stuff*, Carter."

I grinded my teeth. *Stuff* meant my Ouija board, the ghost story collections, the dousing rod I'd made from an old hanger. Mom had told Dad to block the channels with the ghost shows I watched regularly, but unlocking those channels was easy since Dad typically used his birthday or Mom's for his password on everything.

"I did," Dad said. They both had that tone that was usually my cue to leave the house and find something to do outside. Since Annie died, the fighting between them had grown more frequent. Unfortunately, I was stuck in the car, though I wondered if I could successfully open my door and tumble out to safety.

"It was at the drive-in," I continued. "Last night, through the speaker—"

“Damn it, Kay, you know you aren’t allowed to leave the house at night!” Mom said, her voice hovering slightly above a shout. “How many times are we going to have to tell you—”

“God, I *know*, Mom, but it worked this time, really!” I interrupted. It didn’t help Mom and Dad’s paranoia that Annie was my age when she died. It’s like they thought I was a ticking time bomb, as if I was set to die at thirteen just because Annie did. A teenage expiration date. “I’m capable of taking care of myself.”

Dad turned around in his seat and pointed a finger at me. I stared at the pink, shiny scars that wrapped about his hand and disappeared into his dark sleeve. The tissue still looked delicate, as if it would tear if touched. I remembered when his hands and arms were bandaged, and I thought once the bandages came off, he’d be like new. I hadn’t known the new flesh would be such an angry pink-red, hairless and hard to look at.

“Show your mother some respect!” he growled. “I’m so tired of this constant battle with you, Kay. We’ve had this discussion a million times, and, for some reason, you can’t get it through your thick skull of yours—“

“You just want to forget her!” I snapped. “I’m the only one who freaking cares anymore.” I watched as the anger in Dad’s eyes melted away, and he withdrew his hand to his side.

“That’s it, as soon as we get back from church, you’re going straight to your room!” Mom said.

I leaned back in my seat and chewed on the inside of my cheek. Being sent to my room was my parents’ go-to punishment these days. They’d taken away my television, my books, and the video game systems I had, leaving my room feeling bare. All of

Annie's toys, pictures, and clothes were still in the storage shed Mom and Dad rented months ago because Mom never upheld her promise that she would donate most of it. They had nothing left to take from me.

Mom pulled into the church parking lot, and my parents shared the same look they always had when I brought up Annie. Whenever Mom or Dad talked to someone in the grocery store or the post office, those people would wear that look, too, like everyone was borrowing the same mask. But those people never said Annie's name. It was always: "How have you all been? Are you settling into your new home alright?" Or, "If there's anything you all need, anything at all, we're here for you." The same lines, over and over.

Church was more or less the same sort of experience. After the service was over, which I hadn't paid any attention to at all, my parents were bombarded by people I'd never seen before in my life, and yet they knew my name. Some of them handed my parents brightly colored ceramic dishes that smelled the same to me: cheesy and salty. While Mom and Dad were distracted, I made my way toward a group of kids a little older than me. I thought I recognized them from my neighborhood, or maybe school, but I didn't know their names. I figured maybe they'd been Annie's friends; she had so many, and everyone knew her. I wished I could make friends as easily as she could. I didn't mind being alone—I was used to it—it would've be nice to have someone to talk to, someone who wasn't Mom or Dad.

They all stopped talking when I entered their circle.

"Hey," I said, waving a hand briefly. "Pretty boring service, right?"

One of the girls giggled, and a boy next to her elbowed her in the ribs.

“You guys want to go to the playground?” I offered, cringing a little at how childish it sounded when I said it. “I think I saw a kickball under the slide,” I added quickly. Anything to get away from the church. Everything still felt the same from the last time was I there. There were fewer flowers, and people were dressed in brighter clothes, but it wasn’t as different as I hoped it would be. I felt as if, at any moment, I’d blink and be transported back to the funeral, in front of Annie’s closed casket.

“Nah, it’s too hot,” the giggly girl said.

“We’re getting ready to go anyway,” the elbower said.

“Oh,” I muttered. I looked down at my feet, not sure what to do next.

“Hey, you’re the weirdo that’s always walking around at night, aren’t you?” one of the older boys said. He smiled smugly, and some of the others laughed nervously.

My face flushed and my ears burned. Why, I wondered for the millionth time, did I bother talking to others? I was better off alone. If Annie were here, she would have laughed in his face, would probably even do something nuts on purpose because, unlike me, she really didn’t care what people thought of her. Me, on the other hand—my brain was so jumbled up that I couldn’t think of a single word to say.

“Come on, Marcus, leave her alone,” the elbower urged. “You’re being a jerk.”

Marcus scoffed and looked me up and down. “I’ve seen you talk to yourself and run around the streets like some kind of freak,” he continued. “You know only crazy people do that, right? My mom almost called child services on your parents. They shouldn’t let someone like you out of the house.”

I punched Marcus as hard as I could, right in the throat. He fell to his knees, coughing and gasping for air. Everyone in front of the church stopped what they were

doing to stare at us. Before I knew it, my mom's hand clamped on my upper arm, and I was dragged away from the group. She yelled something, but I didn't listen. Marcus glared at me, and I felt a sense of satisfaction when I saw how red his throat was. The rest of the kids, though, had that same look, that mask adults wore around me. I thought about screaming at them, breaking free from Mom's grip and really, *truly* acting crazy just to scare them. Anything to get that look off their faces. Instead, I let Mom lead me out of the church and toss me into the car. I rubbed my arm and noticed that little bruises had formed where she grabbed me.

"Do you understand me, young lady?" That was always my cue to tune in again.

"Yes, Mom," I answered, inspecting my hand. It ached a little from hitting Marcus, but I didn't mind.

She shut my door, and I stretched out on the back seat.

"I mean it, Kay," she said.

I nodded like I knew what she meant and listened to the crunching of gravel under her feet as she finally walked away. I thought about rolling down the windows, but I decided to let the heat sink into my skin. It was nice after an hour and a half of ice-cold air conditioning and the constant humming of fans. I imagined myself as being viewed through a thermal camera, like the ones used on ghost hunting shows. I closed my eyes, and pictured myself changing from blue to red-orange as the warmth sunk deep into my skin.

Did it feel like this at first for Annie? Was her death fast, or was it slow? I'd asked myself these questions so many times, and I knew I couldn't change the past, no matter what the answers were. I wasn't even there when it happened. Mom and I were at

the grocery store, and Dad was at the next-door neighbor's house helping her paint her living room. She was an old lady with arthritis, and Dad often helped her with something. Annie was in the house. Dad was gone for about half an hour before the neighbor looked out her window and saw the fire coming from our attic. He burned himself badly trying to find Annie, digging through what was left. The fire destroyed half of our old house, taking Annie with it.

I hurried to roll down the windows, and a breeze like a warm sigh greeted me.

When we got home from church, I spent the rest of the day in my empty room. Mom and Dad didn't know I had a ghost story book under my mattress, and I began to re-read it. It had stains on it from the time Annie spilled her chocolate milk. I remember that I yelled at her when she told me, and I threw the book at her. It slapped against her skin like a wet towel hitting the floor.

The book was hopelessly wrinkled and still reeked. I held it close to me, breathing in the sickly old milk smell. I had to go to the drive-in. I had to try again.

A knock at my bedroom door interrupted my thoughts, and I hid the book beneath a blanket just before Mom came in.

She sat on the edge of my bed, and I scooted as far as I possibly could from her.

"Kay..." Mom grabbed one of my extra blankets on the bed and folded it. She set it on her lap and placed her hands on top of it. She opened her mouth as if to say something, and then hesitated.

"I don't want to talk about church," I said quickly. "And I'm not sorry for hitting Marcus. If he talks to me again, I'll hit him then, too."

Mom sighed. “You know better than that. That’s not how you should have handled the situation.”

I wanted to tell her what he said about me, how it triggered something in me, and I couldn’t stop myself from hitting him. Like a reflex. But how could she possibly understand that?

“Your dad and I, well, we’re worried about you,” she began. I immediately cringed. I’d heard this line before, again and again. “We miss her, too, you know. I think about Annie all the time, Kay. Every day, in fact.”

“Then why don’t you want to talk to her again?” I said.

“We’ve talked about this. You can’t keep searching for her like this,” Mom said. She reached out her hand towards mine, but I hid my hands underneath my legs.

“I’m not searching for her—she’s looking for us,” I explained. Clearly my parents did not understand how ghosts worked.

“Why would she be looking for us, Kay?” Mom asked.

Because her body couldn’t be buried properly, I wanted to tell her. The casket had been closed, but it hadn’t mattered because it was mostly empty. Through overhearing conversations between my parents, I learned that most of Annie’s body was destroyed in the fire. It made sense to me why Annie would haunt us if she wasn’t at peace due to scattered remains, but no matter how many times I tried to explain this to my parents, they just didn’t get it. And although I’d never admit it to Mom or Dad, deep down, I also felt like maybe it was silly, this faith I had in ghosts. But if it meant that I could reconnect with Annie, I had to hold on to that faith as much as possible, and it didn’t matter what anyone thought about it.

“You know why, Mom,” I answered.

Her shoulders slumped. After a minute or two of silence, she set the blanket aside.

“Tell me what happened at the drive-in,” she said.

I paused for a moment, wondering if this was some kind of trap to get me into trouble. I looked at Mom’s face: at the faint wrinkles around her mouth that disappeared when she laughed, and then under her eyes where I knew there were dark circles, hidden by concealer. Mom was tired, I could tell. She was worn-out from all of this, like we all were. Maybe, I thought, she was finally starting to see my side of things.

“I went to the Roanoke Drive-In around midnight,” I began. “I said Annie’s name into a speaker. I was mad that nothing was happening.” I left out the part that I was frustrated because I’d been doing this same ritual every night with no success. Mom didn’t need to worry about that. “So I slammed the speaker into the cement, and then I heard static coming from it.”

“Wait, so you didn’t hear Annie’s voice?” Mom asked. “Just some static?”

“Well, no, I didn’t hear her, exactly,” I explained. “But the static *had* to have been her. If it had lasted just a little bit longer, I bet she would have said something.”

“Oh, Kay, it was probably just a loose wire or something,” Mom reasoned.

“Maybe the speakers are still hooked up to an old generator, or—“

“Mom, come on. That place has been shut down for years; there’s no way there’s any power left.” Why did she have to be so closed-minded?

“Then maybe you imagined it. It was late, you were tired. Or maybe you just spooked yourself into hearing it, like when you hear noises in the house after everyone’s asleep.”

Here it was again, the old “It’s Just Your Imagination” argument my parents loved so much. “I *heard* it, Mom. I swear.”

“No, Kay, you didn’t,” Mom said, her voice shaking. “Annie’s not here anymore. She’s gone, and you’ve got to accept that.” She stood up quickly and left the room before I could say anything more.

I pulled the book out from under the blanket and ran my fingers over the wrinkled cover. I wasn’t going to give up on Annie as my parents had.

Later, Dad brought me a plate of pizza and placed it next to me. He waited for a couple of minutes in my room while I stared out my window. I wanted to tell him that they would be so much happier if they would just listen to me and give the drive-in a chance, but I was angry with them for treating me like some kind of idiot. He left without saying a word. I put the pizza on the nightstand, refusing to eat Dad’s peace offering.

Both Mom and Dad stayed up pretty late, and occasionally I heard them walking in front of my door to check on me. Mom even opened the door a couple of times, but I pretended to be asleep. Later, when I heard them arguing, I leaned against the door to hear them better. Mom was suggesting that I go to therapy. I hated the idea of talking to a stranger about my life. I didn’t want to share my belief in ghosts with anyone because I knew I’d get that look like I was crazy.

“This is just how she’s processing what happened,” Dad suggested.

“She needs to talk to someone about it. She won’t talk to us,” Mom said. “And this isn’t ‘processing.’ She thinks this stuff is real, Carter.”

“She’s not going to get anything out of it if she doesn’t want to go by choice. She’s just a kid, and kids do this kind of thing—”

“She’s too young to make that kind of decision. She needs a push.”

“Mona, she’s 13.”

“So, what, we’re supposed to just let this sort itself out on its own? Jesus, this isn’t some kind of flu, or cold. Things like this don’t just go away. They need to be confronted and dealt with. This is Kay’s future here. This is the kind of thing that can scar her forever.”

“And your solution to confronting this is to hand her off to someone else and hope that they figure it out? A few sessions, and bam, she’s back to normal? How’s that any better?”

I could tell Mom was crying. She always did when she got angry.

“I don’t know what to do with her anymore, and she’s getting worse,” she said. “I feel like I’ve been trying to deal with this all by myself. I can’t do it alone. You never want to talk, and when you do, you turn it into a fight.”

“I turn it into a fight? You’re the one that keeps picking at this—”

I buried myself under pillows and blankets until I couldn’t hear them anymore. Was I tearing this family apart?

It was around one in the morning when I heard my parents finally go to bed. I waited another half hour or so just in case, and then I cracked open my door.

If they didn’t want to believe me, fine. I could have Annie all to myself.

Our new house was much further away from the drive-in than our old house was. It took me a couple of hours to walk to the drive-in now, but I didn’t mind. I thought of Marcus and wondered where he lived, how often he’d seen me at night, if he

were watching me now. It seemed to me that most people were like Marcus—anything different was wrong. Mom and Dad were that way, too. Sometimes I thought about pretending to be like everyone else. Life might be easier, and, at least, Mom and Dad would fight less. Before Annie died, it was easier to be myself. I kept to myself at school, and it didn't matter because I always had Annie to talk to and hang out with. I didn't want to be somebody else, but sometimes I thought maybe I could pretend. If Annie were here, she'd probably tell me not to care about what anyone else thought of me, not even Mom and Dad. But Annie had no idea what it was like to be me. She wasn't here. At least, not in the way I was here. Stuck and alone.

No matter what, though, I knew I at least wanted to try to contact her again. Even if it was just one word.

My tank top clung to my body, and my shorts rubbed my inner thighs raw. The hair that escaped my ponytail was stringy and kept falling out of place behind my ears. I tried to think of air conditioning, ice, Antarctica, anything cold, but nothing helped. As I wished for rain, I thought of when Mom and I got back from the grocery store the day Annie died. The firemen were still there. Thick streams of water sprayed the house, and I was reminded then of when Annie and I played with Mom's garden hose. If you moved the hose in circles, the water that came out would continue to circle, like a lasso. We felt like we could control the water, and when we were done, we'd take turns drinking from the hose. I could still taste the rubbery flavor if I thought about it really hard. The water from the firemen's hoses, though, scared me. The hissing sound the water made as it hit our home was unforgettable. The stream caused bits of the house to crumble and fall to the charred grass, as if it had been made of soggy cardboard instead of wood. When I

didn't see Annie anywhere, I remember screaming at the firemen, saying they were going to drown her, and that they needed to stop before they made it any worse.

I turned the corner, and a familiar rush swept through my body. There it was, Roanoke Drive-In. I broke into a run towards the speaker I used last night, despite how hot and tired I was. The heat rash on my thighs burned. My heavy breathing and the sound of my tennis shoes hitting the concrete seemed unbearably loud compared to the quiet of the drive-in. I stopped right in front of the rusted pole and gently lifted the speaker from its holder.

As I sat down carefully, I suddenly found myself at a loss of words. Here it was, the chance to talk to my sister again. I cupped the speaker in both hands, as if it could disintegrate at any time. What could I possibly say to Annie now that I had this opportunity? Mom and Dad fight all the time, I miss you so much, and I wish it'd been me instead? I was so focused on trying to reach her that I hadn't really planned this next step.

A flash of headlights caused me to turn around, and I almost dropped the speaker. As I partially shielded my eyes from the light, I immediately recognized the car as my parents', and I knew there was no running away now. Horrified, I braced myself for the lecture that was bound to happen as soon as Mom and Dad got out of the car. They parked in the space next to me, and, to my surprise, said nothing as they opened their doors.

"I'm not going home," I said, unable to stand the silence anymore. "I'm not leaving until I hear something."

They looked at each other, as if they were trying to read each other's minds. Mom pursed her lips and leaned against the side of the car. Then, Dad walked over to me, and I held onto the speaker as tightly as I could. I didn't want them to take this from me, too.

"Is that where the static came from?" he asked, pointing to the speaker.

"Yes," I answered cautiously. I was still waiting for them to yell at me.

Dad nodded and peered over his shoulder at the tall, white screen. "Do you remember the last time we came here?" he asked. "When we saw that animated film?"

"Yeah, I think so," I said.

"You, Annie, and your mom fell asleep within the first half hour," he said, chuckling. "You even still had your hand in the your bag of popcorn, Kay."

I smiled. "Oh yeah! Annie and I were so mad that we missed the movie," I said. "We were going to go again the next weekend after that, right? But the drive-in had already closed down."

"That's when you girls decided to recreate the movie yourselves," Mom chimed in. "I still have the costumes we made in the storage unit somewhere." She pushed herself away from the car and stood next to Dad.

"I'll never forget that," Dad said with a sad smile. He paused a moment before continuing. "It's memories like those that I hold onto, Kay. That's how I remember Annie."

I drew the speaker in close to me. Suddenly, I knew what all this was about. "I'm not making this up," I said, gritting my teeth.

"We're not saying that you are," Mom tried to explain. "We just think that, well, this isn't *healthy*."

“Healthy?” I repeated. I replayed the argument I’d overheard between them. Was it too late to make a run for it?

“Since Annie passed away, you’ve been obsessed with trying to find her,” Dad said. “You hardly talk to us at all, you barely eat any food, you sneak out of the house all the time—And now, with the violence—”

“We’re scared for you,” Mom finished. “This ghost nonsense is taking over your life, Kay. You’re just a thirteen-year-old girl; you should be out playing with friends, not trying to talk to the dead.”

What friends, I wanted to say, but I didn’t want to add to their idea that something was wrong with me. “It’s not ‘nonsense,’” I seethed.

Mom and Dad gave each other *that* look, the one I hated so much. I stood up, ready to run and leave them both behind. I still held the speaker in my cupped hands as if I had trapped a bug. The cord dangled between my fingers.

“You have to stop this, Kay,” Dad begged. “Please.”

I shook my head vigorously. A drop of sweat trickled down my lip and into my mouth. “I can’t! How else will we talk to her?” It was our only link to her; it was all we had left. “She’s my sister—your daughter!” I answered.

“If you did hear static, how do you know it was from Annie?” Mom tried to reason. She wiped the perspiration on her forehead with the back of her hand. “Let’s say it was supernatural. Who says that it is Annie trying to reach you?”

“I—well, it *has* to be her,” I stuttered. “I said her name into the speaker. You aren’t even giving this a chance. If you had the choice to talk to her again, wouldn’t you?” I looked from Dad to Mom, hoping that, at least, would convince them.

“Give me the speaker,” Dad said, holding out his scarred hand.

I held the speaker so tightly that its grill dug into my skin. I didn’t trust him. I didn’t know what he was going to do, but I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be something good. “Please, don’t take this away from me, too,” I begged. “Just let me have this one thing. Please.” I looked at Mom, waiting for some kind of mercy from her.

“She was born too early,” Mom said, her voice strained. “I didn’t think she was going to make it, but I tried to spend as much time with her at that incubator as I could even though I knew it was going to hurt more if I lost her. She was so strong, stronger than I ever knew, and she fought for her life. I’ve never felt so happy than the time I brought her home from the hospital. And even though she’s gone now and we’re all hurting, I’m so grateful for the time we got to spend with her. Like your dad said, we hold onto the memories of Annie to get by. You can do that, too, Kay. Please, let go of the speaker.”

“I can’t,” I choked.

“This has gone on long enough. Either hand it to me, or set it down, and get in the car,” Dad ordered. “Now.”

Dad ripped the speaker from me, and I screamed and clawed at his hands. My nails caught on the softness of his scars, but he didn’t seem to notice. I fell to my knees and the concrete scraped against my skin. I waited to hear the sound of the speaker being destroyed, or for my parents to yell at me. I could hardly hear anything outside of the blood beating in my ears.

I finally looked up to see what Dad had done, but he was still standing there, speaker in hand. And then, that's when I heard it: the static. It was only there for half a second, much quieter than the first time. But it was there: the faintest crackle.

"See? I *told* you," I said, looking from Mom to Dad. Finally. There was no way they could deny it now. "That was what I heard yesterday. She's still here!"

"Kay, what are you talking about?" Mom asked.

"The static! Just now—it came from the speaker, like before!"

The color washed out of Dad's face except for the pink scars that snaked up his neck. He dropped the speaker, and I hurried to grab it.

"Maybe if we wait a little longer, she'll do it again," I said.

Dad was shaking his head, and Mom looked like she was going to be sick. "It's okay. It's nothing to be scared of," I explained. I was happy for the first time in a while. They never would have had this chance if it hadn't been for me, and now everything was going to get better. "Just sit here with me and wait."

"Oh honey," Mom said, almost inaudibly. Dad wrapped an arm around her.

"Sit with me," I repeated. I reached out, one hand holding the speaker, the other outstretched towards them. Slowly, they sat next to me on the hot pavement, Mom on one side of me, and Dad on the other.

Brad arrived at Animikeeg Lake several hours before dawn. Charlie was already waiting for him, scratching at his orange and blond beard with both hands. Charlie handed Brad a hatchet, and they went to work cutting a hole in the ice for their decoys. They said nothing as they worked; it was hard to hear anything other than the *crack crack* of their rhythmic hacks at the ice. It was a sound Brad loved to hear—it brought back memories of his first duck hunts. He was fifteen then, and had hardly any upper body strength. He'd been sore for days after that. Now, each blow was solid and powerful, and the faster he got it done, the faster Charlie and he could set up the decoy spread and wait in the blind for the ducks to arrive.

Once a hole started to form, Brad stepped into the edge of the lake. Even with waders on, three layers of clothing, and Hot Hands stuffed into random places under the neoprene, he felt the cold. He reminded himself that the chill wouldn't last long; he always found himself sweating under all the layers. Brad submerged himself to his knees, which was as far as he could go with how much ice they'd broken, and continue to smash the frozen lake with his hatchet.

By the time they were finished, Brad's face was covered in a layer of sweat. His body heat brought out the smell of his waders and the hoodies he wore. He reeked of body odor, dry grass, mud, and waterproof spray—smells built up from previous hunts.

Brad patted Charlie on the back. "I think that was record timing!" he said.

Charlie nodded. "Yeah, thanks to me. Your swings hardly did anything, you pansy-ass!"

Brad punched him on the arm and smiled. Charlie grinned for a moment and rubbed the spot where Brad hit him.

The two drudged through the lake and unloaded the large mesh bag with the plastic decoys. As they worked, they argued about the best way to arrange the plastic ducks. Brad had recently purchased a motorized duck decoy, which he named Daffy, for about \$150, and he wanted to use it in the spread that he'd planned out earlier in the week.

"Too many hens," Charlie said, gesturing at the pile of plastic ducks on the snow. "You always bring way too many. There will be hardly any room for them to land."

"It's not going to look realistic if we don't have a decent amount out there. Plus, with this baby," Brad picked up the motorized duck and tapped at the wings, "we'll be bringing in so many that they won't have time to land!"

"Whatever. We'll do it your way, but don't get all pissed off later when all they do is buzz us," Charlie said. He scooped several decoys up into his arms and headed back to the hole in the lake.

Brad knew he had annoyed Charlie, but he'd been hunting longer than his friend. Brad knew what he was doing, and he was sure Charlie was aware of that fact as well. Brad didn't drive two hours to get here for Charlie to mess it all up. He grabbed the motorized duck and as many decoys as he could hold and followed Charlie to the lake.

The two set the spread quickly. It looked better than Brad imagined. Daffy's wings spun, and although Brad knew it was a fake, he could see how, at a distance, Daffy would look like a duck about to land on the water. It was perfect.

“See?” Brad said, nudging Charlie as they settled down in the blind. “You have to admit that looks good. Daffy will bring ‘em in for us.”

“Hmm. We’ll see.”

Brad held his shotgun close to him and looked into the sky. Time always seemed to pass quickly at Animikeeg Lake, and the sky was already getting lighter. Before long, Brad hoped, the ducks would arrive.

“So, was Kat okay with you getting that?”

“Getting what?”

“You know what. That expensive robot bird right there.”

Brad shrugged and set his gun against the blind.

“You didn’t tell her, did you?” Charlie said, shaking his head. “Please tell me you didn’t use her credit card again.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Kat’s my friend, too, Brad. We talk sometimes. About you, mostly.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad my girlfriend and my best friend know what’s best for me now.”

“Come on, Brad, it’s not like that—”

“I don’t see why I have to tell her every little thing I buy,” Brad said. Since Brad was fired from his job, Kat agreed to give him a \$50 allowance to spend monthly if there was enough left after bills. How was he supposed to do anything with so little? “Daffy is an investment. I’ll be bringing home duck, and maybe goose. Fewer groceries for her to buy. Besides, man, it’s none of your fucking business.”

“Whoa, sorry,” Charlie said, raising his hands up. “I didn’t mean to strike a nerve or anything. I was just curious since I know that sort of decoy doesn’t come cheap.”

Brad took a moment to let his anger fade before answering. No point in turning it into something bigger than it needed to be. “Nah, it’s okay,” Brad said, shrugging. He was still sweating from breaking the ice. Everything felt damp underneath his waders. He wondered if it was getting warmer, or if he was just that out of shape.

Charlie scratched his beard and stared out at the water. “Everything good with her?”

Brad shrugged again. He appreciated duck hunting over deer hunting for many reasons; one being you didn’t have to be as quiet. He couldn’t stand sitting in a tree in silence for hours. However, he didn’t feel like talking about Kat. Their relationship had been perfect in the first year. Kat had to travel a lot because of her job, and they’d get together for a day or two when she was in town, and they always had a lot of fun. He’d never had a serious girlfriend before—some flings, but nothing that meant anything. It made sense for them to move in together after she got a more permanent job near him, but he didn’t realize how hard it was going to be to live with someone, especially after he was fired. It was like they were both different people now.

“You know, if you need to talk about it, Brad—“

“I didn’t come here to talk about relationship bullshit like a bunch of high school girls,” Brad said. This was his break—his little getaway. Ever since Charlie started dating Evelyn, a counselor, several months ago, he’d been acting different. Charlie had always been a smart ass with an occasional anger problem, but Brad liked that about him. However, Charlie was changing. It seemed like his friend’s identity was fading away,

replaced by something Brad didn't recognize at all. It was hard to get Charlie to come out to hunt anymore. Brad practically had to be him to come out today.

Brad pulled out the duck calls and pressed one of them to his mouth. Charlie did the same with his own calls, although he didn't have nearly as many as Brad. The two alternated duck calls, mainly for drake and hen mallards with an occasional wood duck call. Before long, the sun started to rise, and there was no sign of the birds. Snow seemed less likely as the sun rose, and Brad knew warm weather meant less chance of flocks heading their way. He blew harder into his duck call, making his lips buzz.

"Evelyn and I want to have you and Kat over for dinner next week," Charlie said, letting his duck call fall to his chest.

Brad alternated covering and uncovering the end of his duck call with his hand to change the sound.

"How about it?" Charlie asked, louder this time.

Brad lowered the call. "I don't know."

Charlie's shoulders slumped. "Come on, Brad. I've been trying to get you to meet Evelyn for three months now."

"I just don't know if Kat will want to do that," Brad said. "She's been really busy—"

"You're going to have to meet her eventually," Charlie interrupted. "I think you'd like her, really."

Brad kept his eyes on the sky as Charlie kept talking. The clouds were starting to break. They'd be lucky if they saw any ducks today. When he looked up the weather online, it didn't say anything about a warm front coming in—

“Did you even hear a fucking word I’ve said?” Charlie asked.

Brad looked at Charlie. The last thing he wanted was to have dinner with some yuppie. Brad figured Evelyn was just something new to fuck, another type to add to Charlie’s growing list. Brad never bothered to learn their names because almost as soon as Charlie told Brad about them, they’d be gone for one reason or another, out of Charlie’s life permanently.

“Yeah, man, sorry,” Brad said. He pointed at the sky. “It’s the middle of November. What the hell is this?”

Charlie sighed. “It’s Missouri. What do you expect? Below freezing one day, summer the next.”

Brad duck called again, and Charlie eventually joined him. Other than their calls and the whirring of Daffy’s wings, Animikeeg Lake was quieter than usual. The morning hours passed, mostly in silence. Brad’s legs were falling asleep, and the energy drink he’d chugged on the drive here was wearing off.

Charlie set his shotgun down and started to leave the blind.

“Hey, where are you going?” Brad asked.

Charlie looked over his shoulder. “I’ve got to piss. We’ve been sitting here for hours—“

“You’re going to miss them!”

“I guess that means you’ll beat my count this time,” Charlie said.

“I’m *already* ahead of you this season!” Brad shouted back as Charlie disappeared into a dense area of the woods. He readjusted his legs, hoping to get some feeling into them and placed one of his duck calls against his lips.

Just as he was about to blow, he heard them. Ducks.

But where were they? Brad scrambled to grab his shotgun, and surveyed the lake, and the tree line. No sign of them at all. He glanced at the woods to see if Charlie was coming back yet. There was no time to go look for him. Brad wasn't going to miss out on this, not when they hadn't shot at anything all day.

Although his jaw and lips were sore, Brad blew on his duck call as loudly and accurately as he could, hoping to bring the ducks in, wherever they were. He held his gun in his other hand as he called, scanning the sky.

And then, they appeared: a flock of about five ducks headed Brad's way from the far end of the lake above the tree line. From what he could tell, they were mallards, and they were close. Brad imitated a loud hen mallard. He watched the flock fly closer and prayed their wings cupped in preparation for a landing. Brad held his breath as the flock flew over him, passing by the spread in the lake. They were too high to shoot, and Brad knew he would have to be patient. He watched the flock's movements, hoping again they'd turn around. Brad gave the hen mallard call again, and just when he thought there was no way the flock would return, the birds turned back towards the lake, flying much lower than before.

Brad dropped the duck call and aimed, following the flock movements as it circled back.

"Come on, you bastards," Brad whispered, his finger on the trigger. The ducks headed towards the spread and began to drop. As one, they cupped their wings. The ducks locked in, ready to land amongst the spread. Everything was happening quickly,

and Brad knew he had to act before the perfect moment passed him by, whether Charlie was there or not.

When the ducks were seconds away from landing on the water, Brad stood up, aimed his gun at the head of the closest one, and pulled the trigger.

He missed. He barely clipped one of them, but it was enough to warn the rest of the flock. All of the ducks, with the exception of one, immediately swooped up into the air, awkwardly flapping and quacking in a hurry to get away. The injured duck briefly splashed on the water before gaining enough momentum to get back into the air. Brad ran out of the blind and towards the spread, hurrying to focus on the wounded duck. The bird zigzagged through the air, steadily gaining altitude despite its damaged wing.

Brad knew if he didn't hurry, it would be gone. It headed towards the woods and was almost out of range. He ran into the lake as far as he could. He lifted the shotgun, aimed at the swerving mallard, and fired.

Breathless, Brad watched as the duck fell into the woods, one wing spread and the other crumpled against its side.

“Fuck yeah!” he yelled as he pumped the air with his free hand. A sharp, high-pitched ringing muffled his words. The shot left him a little deaf—he'd forgotten to put his earplugs in. He turned around in the lake, and saw Charlie standing a few feet from the edge of the water, arms crossed.

“See what happens when you go to take a shit?” Brad said, trudging through the water. He stopped beside Charlie to catch his breath. “The first flock all day, and it happens when you leave. Your luck is fucked, man.”

Charlie winced and took a step back from Brad. “You’re yelling, Brad, take it down a notch,” Charlie said. “That was a shit shot, by the way. I can’t believe you still shot at them with how high they were in the sky. You could have killed that bird on the first shot if you’d waited a little longer.”

“Hey, I got a bird, didn’t I?” Brad said, staring at the area of the woods where the duck fell. “We should probably go get it before something else does.”

“*We*? It’s your bird, man. I’m not going to miss out again,” Charlie said as he walked back to the blind.

“Seriously? Come on—”

“What am I supposed to do? Hold your hand and lead you through the woods? You’re a grown-ass man—you figure it out.”

Brad was taken aback by Charlie’s response. Brad was a pretty decent hunter compared to Charlie, but Charlie was better at navigating the woods; they both knew that. He usually helped Brad track a shot duck. He watched as Charlie slipped something out from beneath his layers of clothing and glanced at it before hiding it again: a cell phone. That explained why he was gone so long. Most likely what’s-her-name. Couldn’t Charlie last at least half a day without talking to her?

“You don’t have to be here if you don’t want to be,” Brad muttered, setting his gun against the trunk of a tree.

“What did you say?” Charlie asked, fiddling with something—Brad guessed the phone again—behind the blind.

“Nothing. I just said I’m going to go find the duck,” Brad said, heading in the general direction of where the bird fell.

Charlie said something in response, but Brad was already heading through the beginning of the woods along the lake. He dug his fingers in his ears, hoping to make the ringing go away. He could barely hear the faint snaps of the thin branches and twigs he stepped on. Brad saw squirrels hop from limb to limb, causing what dead leaves were left on the trees to fall. Everything was muffled, like the time when the sound was going out on Kat's old TV, and she insisted on using closed captioning instead of buying a new one. That was back when Brad and Kat recently moved in together; he thought, at first, it was quirky and resourceful that she did that, but eventually he grew to hate reading every word on the bottom of the screen. Kat was angry when she found Charlie and Brad installing a new flat screen into her wall, and demanded Brad get her old TV back. He remembered how Charlie dropped the drill onto the floor and left as Kat yelled about Brad's selfishness, and how everything he did, he did for himself. That TV was *hers*, she'd said, and what were they thinking, drilling holes into the wall when her lease explicitly stated that doing so wasn't allowed? Brad didn't understand. He was just tired of reading his shows instead of watching them. Holes could always be fixed. And why wouldn't she want a better, updated TV?

Sweat dripped onto his lips. There was hardly any snow left in the woods; it was significantly warmer than it had been back in the blind. He attributed it to the densely packed trees and to what Charlie had said earlier about unpredictable weather in Missouri. There was no sign of the mallard, and Brad was considering heading back to ask for Charlie's help again if he didn't find it soon. He noticed that the rubber boots of his waders were sinking slightly. The ground was getting progressively muddier and softer, and the trees were starting to thin, until Brad arrived at a small bog. Brad figured it

might grow into a murky pond in spring when it rained. He saw on a map once that the area around Animikeeg Lake was dotted with ponds. The bog was mostly covered with leaves so Brad couldn't quite tell where the bog began or ended. Halfway sunken into the sludge, he saw a small, dark lump about ten feet from the edge of the bog. The duck.

Brad stepped forward, testing the muddy ground with the tip of his boot. His foot sank a little, and he put more pressure on it until his boot stopped a couple inches below the surface. He put his other foot into the mud and tried to balance himself. Brad pulled one of his legs out of the bog, and slowly made his way towards the duck, each step making a squelching noise loud enough even for Brad to hear. It was as if the earth was sucking at his legs. The closer he got to the lump, the harder he had to work to yank his legs out of the mud. Brad found himself breathing heavily as he moved forward.

The bog's thick sludge rose past Brad's knees. Brad knew that cleaning his waders would be a pain in the ass, but he wanted that bird. Panting, he tried lifting his left leg, and almost fell backward into the mud. He rebalanced himself and attempted to raise his leg again, but his leg was either stuck or he was too tired to lift it. Brad glanced at the bird. It was still out of reach, and with every step he made, he sank further into the bog. He pushed his sleeves to his elbows, and dipped his fingers into the mud, which was surprisingly warmer than he'd expected, until he could get a hold of his calf. Brad pulled at his leg until it was finally out of the mud, and he repeated this process with each leg until the ground beneath him dipped suddenly. Brad sank another foot and a half, submerging him to the hip.

"Shit!" Brad shouted. He tried to move his legs, but the mud was much too thick. Brad could pull his arms out at least, and realized he was close enough to *maybe* reach

the duck. He'd worry about getting out later. The lump sunk so far that only a small part of it was exposed. Brad reached for the bird, stretching as far as possible. It was half-covered by pine needles and rotting leaves so it was difficult for Brad to get a decent look at it, but there was something off about it. The small part exposed was very dark, too dark for a mallard. Brad was sure he shot a mallard, but he guessed it could have been a black duck, or maybe even a coot. He stretched his fingertips just a little further, enough to barely reach the lump.

The part Brad touched sloughed off beneath his fingers, revealing slick bone.

Skin. It was *skin* he touched, not feathers.

“Jesus Christ!” Brad recoiled back. Before he decided to step into the bog, he was absolutely positive the lump he saw was the bird he shot. Now that he was so close to it, he'd no idea how he could have thought that. Whatever it was, it clearly been dead a long time. He could identify bird better than anyone he knew, and yet he didn't realize that this thing wasn't a bird from less than a couple feet away?

Brad contemplated yelling for Charlie to pull him out of the bog as fast as possible. But he knew he'd never hear the end of it if Charlie found him stuck in some mud. There *had* to be a way to get out by himself, even if it meant moving one inch at a time. He tried to lift his leg, but even trying to pivot his foot was impossible. It was as though he was encased in stone. Brad was afraid the combined weight of his waders and the extra layers of clothing along with the pressure of the mud was too much to handle alone.

He looked at the dead thing. He wondered how it ended up in this mud. Did it try to crawl out? It was small, whatever it was. How long had it been dead, and had it been

uncovered by the freak weather as the snow melted away? Brad couldn't tell what kind of animal it was; he wanted to get a closer look. He didn't really understand why he had this urge, but nonetheless, he reached out again to the lump, momentarily forgetting the sense of urgency he felt earlier for escape.

Brad had to know what it was, even if it meant sinking a little further into the mud. He leaned his torso far forward enough to where his chest dipped into the surface of the bog. His hand hovered above the lump, and then he peeled off the leaves and pine needles stuck to it. As Brad plucked off the debris, one of his fingers snagged on something more substantial than leaves or skin, and although it was caked in mud, he had a feeling it was some sort of cloth. He rubbed the cloth between his fingers to remove some of the dirt and revealed a faded, multi-colored polka dot pattern. He pinched the cloth and pulled, causing the lump to rise out of the muck. The cloth tore a little, but within seconds, Brad freed the lump.

The cloth, he discovered, was an oversized onesie. The arms were so small, and although they were badly decomposed, the lump was unmistakably human. Its hands were curled into tiny fists against its chest. Brad thought at first it only had one leg, but the other leg was just shrunken and disfigured. The skull, which had been the part Brad initially touched, was the most decomposed part of the entire corpse. It was only when he looked at its face that it occurred to him what he was doing, and what was before him.

Brad yelled and pushed his torso off the surface of the mud. He tried to move his legs, but had no luck. He dug his hands into the bog in an attempt to grab the outside of his waders to pull his legs, but stopped, fearing his arms would get stuck as well. What

the hell had he been thinking? How could he have been so stupid, so goddamned determined to get himself trapped in this bog with a dead baby?

“Charlie!” Brad screamed, no longer caring about the barrage of humiliation he’d undoubtedly receive. He pulled out one of his duck calls and blew hard into it, hoping, at least, Charlie would hear that. He hoped he hadn’t gone so far in the woods that his friend wouldn’t hear him.

When he heard nothing back, he glanced at the corpse. He didn’t know what to do about it. Its hallowed eyes stared at Brad, as though waiting for him to do something. Animikeeg Lake was miles from the nearest town, which meant whoever left it there must have planned it. He didn’t remember hearing about a missing baby. Brad couldn’t tell if it died in the bog or otherwise—other than the fact it was mostly decomposed, he didn’t see an obvious signs of trauma. Brad wasn’t sure he could tell Charlie about what he found. Charlie might say something to his new girlfriend, and Brad didn’t know what would happen after that. He certainly couldn’t tell Kat; she would completely freak out. He imagined her begging him to call the police, to describe every last detail of it, to search the web for hours for missing child reports. Imagine how the parents must feel, she’d say. If it were *our* baby, wouldn’t you want to know? That would be just like Kat, letting it eat her upside until she just had to take control over the whole situation. She’d think that she was doing it for the parents, unable to see Brad’s side of it—that maybe it was the parents to begin with, and it was better left alone. He’d have to talk to the authorities, and it would turn into a giant mess. Maybe he would tell Kat it was most likely an accident, or better yet, the baby was stillborn. Yes, that was probably it; clearly, the baby hadn’t fully developed, and maybe it was doomed from the beginning. There

were probably no mourning parents wishing they knew what happened to their child—they knew *exactly* where it was. Brad couldn't see why it would be his job to tell anyone about it, let alone Kat. She would never be able to let it go until it consumed both of their lives. Brad figured reporting it wouldn't bring it back to life anyway, and would bring more harm than good, so why bother? Besides, he'd be known as the one who found the dead baby in the woods, and that wasn't something he'd want following him around forever. No, he definitely couldn't tell her.

Whoever did this, Brad concluded, did so purposefully and with the intention of forgetting.

He scooped his hand into the bog and began to cover the body. He kept adding layer after layer of mud until it was gone, nothing more than a small brown bump, once again hidden by pine needles and leaves.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Brad stopped and looked over his shoulder. Charlie stood at the edge of the bog with a smile on his face.

“Can you just help me get out of here?” Brad asked, feeling sick to his stomach.

“Oh no, I want to revel in this moment. The Mighty Duck Hunter, stuck in a giant mud pie!”

“Please shut the fuck up and help me!” Brad snapped.

“Alright, alright. But you owe me. If I get you out of here, you have to go to dinner with Evelyn and me. No more excuses.” Charlie tried to stifle his laughter as he searched the ground around them. He found a fallen limb and extended it towards Brad, who immediately grabbed onto it. Once Brad was close enough, Charlie grabbed Brad's

arm and pulled him out. Brad took a couple of steps and collapsed to his knees. He was drained of all his energy and extremely dehydrated, but grateful for Charlie's help. If Charlie hadn't found him, he wasn't sure what would have happened.

"Thanks," Brad said.

"What did you say?" Charlie asked, the smirk on his face again.

"You know you heard me the first time," Brad said, in no mood to joke around.

"What were you doing in there, anyway?" Charlie asked, helping Brad get to his feet.

Brad stared at the lump, breathing heavily as perspiration fell off the tip of his nose. It looked insignificant and normal. No one would be able to tell what it was, if anyone bothered to go back this far in the woods. Soon, it would sink to the bottom of the bog.

Charlie waited for an answer. His friend's face was still red from laughing. In that moment, Brad felt connected to Charlie again like they used to be, like brothers. He should tell him about it. Yet, Brad knew that just as the moment was happening, it would soon end. They'd be back at their respective homes before the end of the day, duck hunting gear shoved to the very back corner of a storage shed or garage. No, Brad decided, nobody was going to know. It would be forgotten, like it was meant to be.

"Just trying to find a duck," Brad answered.

Charlie looked at him skeptically for a moment, and then swung an arm across the back of Brad's shoulders. "We'll do better on our next hunt," he said.

Brad nodded, although he wasn't sure when or if that was going to happen. As he followed Charlie back to the lake, Brad rubbed his fingers and palms vigorously, trying to rid himself of the mud that had caked into the chapped cracks of his hands.

It was dusk when we saw him emerge from the hidden interior of his floating-forest-like island. The trees looked as if they could flip upside down at any moment, like a canoe. William and I had wandered too far in our adventures on the land owned by our grandma. We'd never been to that part of the lake before, and the floating island seemed to call to us, or at least to me. Just as we were about to leave because of the growing darkness and mosquitoes, we saw him. He crept out of the shadows of the island, hairy and wearing some sort of loincloth. He didn't seem to notice us as he stared into the sky. I remember looking into the sky, too, trying to see what he saw, as my brother tugged on my arm.

"Let's go," William urged.

I shushed him and pulled him closer to me, further behind a bush.

The stranger turned towards us, and I was worried he'd heard William. The stranger dove into the water and didn't resurface for a long time.

"Is he drowning? Should we call 911?" William asked, trying to whisper. We didn't have our cell phones; Grandma always took them away from us when we visited because she said it made us "disconnected" with the world around us. We'd have to run back to the farm to use Grandma's landline phone. Just as I was wondering if we should do that or if I should try to dive into the lake myself, the stranger came out of the water. His head bobbed up out of the water gently and then disappeared again, like turtles do to catch a breath of air before returning to the depths. Then, moments later, he rose out of the water again and floated easily on his back as if there was a board supporting his body.

He put his hands behind his head and drifted, hardly making any sounds at all. I squinted and tried to focus my vision in the steadily deepening darkness, but I couldn't get a good look at the stranger. I couldn't help feeling as though I was interrupting something. Like I was a peeping Tom, trying to share a moment that wasn't meant to be shared.

"Come on, William," I whispered, "Grandma's expecting us. We've stayed out longer than we should have."

We got back to Grandma's house later than I had hoped. My stomach shriveled to the size of a bean when I saw her standing on the porch with her shotgun propped against her shoulder. She was tiny, like most of the women on my mother's side of the family, but she had a force inside of her that wasn't to be messed with. At eighteen, I towered over her, but the scowl on her face made me feel like I was as little and as young as eight-year-old William.

"Where in the hell have you been?" she asked, leaning the shotgun against the side of the house. "I was about to go looking for you!"

"We got distracted catching fireflies," I said. "We ended up a little lost, too." I knew William wouldn't tell the truth. The stranger was *our* secret.

"You've got to be careful," she replied, her face softening from anger into worry. "Fireflies are—"

"The lost souls of the dead," I finished. I had heard this many times before from her when I was a child. "I know."

"You didn't harm any of them, did you?" she asked, a hand over her heart.

I walked up the porch steps, William close behind. “Of course not. I know better than to do that.” I smiled at her and bent down to give her a hug. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

She pursed her thin lips and gestured us inside. Before closing the door, she grabbed her gun. She locked all three locks on the door. Without saying a word, William ran off to the guest room he was staying in. Grandma and I both gave each other the same look we always did when we didn’t understand William’s actions. It was a look that said we were frustrated by his strange behavior and helpless to understand him.

Together, Grandma and I worked on cooking a late dinner—salad and pasta with vegetables from her garden. I could feel the tension between us, and I knew she probably hadn’t believed my lie. Even though I sometimes questioned her sanity due to her strange beliefs, she always had a knack for reading others and predicting their behavior. She wasn’t surprised when my mom and dad dropped me off with her for long periods of time, or when they were often late in picking me up. Eventually, I started spending my entire summer with Grandma often without receiving a single call or letter. I don’t know why I was surprised every summer when my parents didn’t contact my Grandma or me. Sometimes they were late with picking me up so that I’d miss the first couple days of school. Grandma predicted it. “They’ll be late getting you this time,” she’d say to me, and even when I told her that I didn’t think they’d do that again, they did. Eventually, being let down like this led me to start expecting it all the time. After William was born, he was sent along with me for the summers with Grandma. William was the only exception for her. She told me once that she knew when my mom was pregnant with me

even before my mom did, but she said that William was genuinely unexpected, the first surprise she had her entire life—or so she claimed.

“I think it’s good for William to get out of this house,” Grandma said, breaking the silence. She chopped several different colors of carrots—orange, purple, yellow—into tiny slices. “And I know you are nearly a grown woman, and that I have to let you do things of your own free will. But the area around here isn’t the safest when it’s dark.”

I waited for the barrage of stories I had heard many times from her about things that go bump in the night, but she didn’t say anything. When she was done cutting the carrots, I helped her scoop them into a giant ceramic bowl.

“I know, Grandma,” I said, thinking of the man we had seen earlier. I was unsure about telling her about him. I didn’t want her to freak out, but it was probably important for her to know that some weirdo was on her land. He was real, unlike the tales she told, and even though I didn’t feel he was any kind of true threat, there was something about him that was unsettling. “Can I ask you something?”

Grandma paused in the middle of digging through the fridge. She held a Tupperware container of homemade dressing in her hand. “Oh, Deidre. I know that tone—”

“Now don’t flip out,” I interrupted with my hands up, “I just want to know something about your land.”

She placed the dressing on the counter and shut the fridge behind her. “Alright, what is it, then?” she asked.

“What do you know about the island?”

Grandma sighed and crossed her arms. “So *that’s* why you two were so late in coming back. You went too far. What if you got lost or hurt?”

“We’re *fine*, Grandma, it’s no big deal, really,” I reassured her. “It’s just that, well, we saw someone on the island, and—”

“Damn it.” Grandma smacked the counter, causing me to jump. “He didn’t tell me he was going to be here.”

“Who is he?” I asked, my curiosity peaked.

She sighed heavily. “His name is Coleman. He’s harmless, but a bit unstable. I let him stay on my land from time to time, but never while you two are here. I haven’t seen him in years, though.”

“Unstable?” I remembered how peaceful he looked in the water looking at the stars. “What do you mean?”

“Look, it’s just best that you two stay away from Coleman. End of conversation.”

If anything, Grandma’s warning made me want to see Coleman even more. These summers with her had grown increasingly harder to enjoy the older I got, and the mystery of Coleman was new and exciting. I still loved Grandma and was grateful for the support she’d given me my entire life, but I was going to college soon, and I wanted to spend my summers my own way. Being with her wasn’t enough for me anymore.

I told William about the conversation with Grandma that night, but he wasn’t as excited as I was.

“I don’t want Grandma to get mad at us,” William said as he chewed on a fingernail. “And what if this guy could hurt us?”

“She said herself that he was ‘harmless,’ William,” I told him. I shrugged. “You don’t have to come with me if you’re scared.”

“Hey, I’m not scared!” he exclaimed as he punched me on the arm.

I punched him lightly back and chuckled. “Alright, alright. Fine. Then you can prove it by coming with me to see Coleman again.”

William rubbed his arm and smiled, revealing a missing baby tooth.

We decided to wait at least a week before trying to see Coleman again. I didn’t want Grandma to be suspicious, and when we left the house, she didn’t even mention the island or Coleman. I figured maybe she thought the talk we had was convincing enough. Pleased that she didn’t have a clue, I walked quickly with William by my side. I knew doing this scared William, as much as he pretended it didn’t, but he followed me anyway as if he had something to prove. He was a coward, and he caught a lot of shit at school for it, so I was proud of him for trying to overcome that. I wasn’t going to admit that I was also a little scared, but it helped that I had stolen one of Grandma’s spare kitchen knives—the kind with its own protective cover. “Harmless” or not, I felt better knowing that it was in my pocket.

It took about two hours to find the island again. By the time we arrived, my feet and legs ached, and I was already not looking forward to the trip back. But what mattered was that we had found the island again, and soon, I hoped, we would see Coleman.

“What are we going to do if we see him again?” William asked as he crouched next to me behind several large bushes.

I hadn't really thought of that. "*We* aren't going to do anything. There's no way I'm going to let you do anything stupid."

"Who says it won't be you that does something stupid? You do dumb stuff all the time, Deidre!"

"Shhh!" I placed my hand on top of his mouth. "You're being way too loud." I felt William lick the palm of my hand, and, repulsed, I pulled my hand away and wiped it on my shorts. "Ugh, God, you're disgusting."

William looked like he was about to say something, but then he grabbed my arm and pointed to the island. Coleman sat on the bank, legs crossed, facing us. Because it was already dusk, his face was obscured by shadows and hair, but I could have sworn, like the first night we saw him, that he knew exactly where we were. I told myself I was just being paranoid, and kept as still as I could. I watched as Coleman scooped some of the earth along with several sticks and leaves into a pile in front of him. Mesmerized, I continued to watch as he cupped his hands around the pile, and seconds later there was a spark. When Coleman removed his hands, I saw that the pile was on fire. The flames burned steadily. I didn't understand how the pile could have caught so quickly. I didn't see a lighter. There was no rubbing of sticks or flint or anything of that sort. Just a simple covering and uncovering of the dirt.

"Let's go talk to him," William whispered. "Maybe he can show us how to do that!"

For a moment, I almost agreed. We could swim the short distance easily, and then Coleman could reveal the secret of the fire to us. But as I looked at my brother, I realized he was probably saying this to show me he could be brave. He wanted so badly to show

that he wasn't a little boy anymore, even though I knew he wasn't the type to pursue the unknown unprovoked. He preferred the safe and the comfortable. William was trying to disprove this, but I knew he wouldn't dare leave Grandma's house unless I was with him.

"No, I think we're better off over here, well away from him." Grandma hadn't defined what she meant by "unstable," but it was probably best that we kept a safe distance. Coleman was clearly out of his mind—what kind of man lived on an island alone, wearing something that hardly qualified as underwear? "We don't know who he is."

"But look at him—don't you think he's lonely?"

I had never seen William like this before. He never talked to me about wanting friends, but I figured a kid that spend most of his time either by himself or with his older sister had to feel lonely from time to time. Our parents signed him up for something new each year: soccer, karate, book club, and so on. I assumed they did this in the hope that he would make friends on his own and socialize. But he'd cry and scream and fight it every step of the way, saying he was sick, which hardly ever worked, or that the kids picked on him too much and he couldn't take it anymore, or that he simply hated it and was miserable. Once, William hid on the morning of a karate match, and it took me hours to find him. Since our parents were often out of town, it was usually my job to take him to these extracurricular activities. Being particularly small, he found the perfect hiding spot in the cabinet beneath the sink. In addition to kicking and screaming, he dug his nails into my arm when I pulled him out. Without thinking, I slapped him. Hard. I'd never hit him like that before, and William was just as shocked as I was. We didn't go to karate that day, and instead we watched cartoons together in silence over our bowls of ice cream.

I glanced at Coleman. He hadn't moved from his position in front of the small fire. "Lonely or not, I don't think Mom or Dad would approve of your friendship with a man in a loincloth," I said, grabbing his hand.

"They don't have to know," he muttered. "They don't care about us anyway."

I ignored him and looked back at Coleman.

Coleman waved.

"Come on, we have to go *now*," I said as I pulled William back the direction we came.

We hurried to get back as fast as we could to Grandma's house. I knew that she was going to be angry again with me getting back so late. I hadn't anticipated that it would take so long to get to the island; the first night we found it, it seemed so sudden and quick. Coleman's wave replayed again and again in my head. He knew we were there, just like I thought. I kept my hand on the pocket with the knife as we made our way through Grandma's land, just in case. We'd just reached the fields past the forest when I heard someone behind us. I tried to pull the knife out, but instead manage to stumble on my own feet, and I fell to the ground.

As I struggled to stand, I saw Grandma, shotgun in a carrying case on her back, scowling at me. William cursed under his breath.

"Do you think I'm stupid, Deidre?" Grandma asked. Her hair made a frizzy halo around her face, and she was sweating heavily. I couldn't tell if her face was red from being angry or from the heat.

"No, we were just—"

“Don’t bullshit me, young lady,” Grandma said, pointing a finger at me. “I told you to stay away, and you just couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

“But we’re fine—”

“Did I say I was done talking? You wait until I’m finished. You, too, William,” she said, glaring at him. He looked down sheepishly. “I followed you the whole way, and you didn’t even know I was there. What if I had been someone or something else? Evil lurks everywhere, you know.”

“Is Coleman evil?” William asked.

I thought Grandma would snap at him for talking out of turn, but instead she pursed her lips and shook her head. “He’s a haunted soul, but he’s not evil,” she answered. Grandma looked at both of us and sighed. “I’m sorry for shouting. I’m just concerned for you is all. Let’s get back to the house.”

After we returned, I waited until William was asleep and found Grandma in the living room with a book on herbal remedies on her lap. Her reading glasses rested on the tip of her nose, and she placed her head on the palm of her hand. She looked completely drained, and I thought maybe it was best that I just go bed.

“I see you there, Deidre,” Grandma said without moving her head. “If you want to talk to me, talk.”

I walked over to a chair near her and sat down. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

Grandma closed her book and took her glasses off her nose. “I never should have said to stay away from him. You’ve always been the type to do the exact opposite,” she said.

“I wasn’t doing it to be some kind of rebel, Grandma.”

“Whatever the reason, I should have handled it better.” She placed the book on the table next to her.

I nervously chewed at a piece of loose skin on my lip. “I want to know more about Coleman. I know you might not want to talk about it, but I’m an adult now. I can handle it. And I won’t tell William if you don’t want me to.”

“Turning 18 does *not* suddenly make you an adult, Deidre. You’re only just beginning to get a taste of the world.”

“How am I supposed to be an adult if nobody treats me like one?”

“It’s something that’s *earned*, not guaranteed,” Grandma said as she shook her head.

I wanted to tell her that I’d felt like an adult for several years; taking care of William forced me into that position. But that was a conversation I didn’t want to have. “Please, Grandma. Remember before William was born, and we’d talk for hours every night? I miss that. Can we please talk about this?”

She looked at me with a small, sad smile. “Oh, Deidre.” Grandma leaned back in her chair and looked even more tired than before. “I’ve known Coleman since he was a child. He was quiet, awkward, and kept to himself a lot. I substitute taught a few times at the school in town, and when one of the teachers left for maternity leave, I had the opportunity to teach her class while she was gone. Coleman was in that class, and often he’d show up bruised and dirty. When he came in with a bloody nose one time, I felt obligated to talk to him about it. I asked him what happened, and he refused to tell me. But when I asked if someone in his family had hurt him, he had this *look* in his eyes, and I knew my guess had been right. I gave him some crystals to help promote spiritual

healing, and I said that I would do everything I could to help him. So I called child services anonymously, thinking it would help. But Coleman disappeared from school completely. I asked around for him, and I even went to the police station to report him missing, but they didn't take me seriously. They said Coleman was a troublemaker, and that they were tired of dealing with him. If he was gone, they were glad for it. I felt at a loss. What could I do?"

Grandma paused and pulled a blanket over her shoulders. "Deidre, you *have* to promise me you won't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you. Not William. No one."

I nodded and leaned in. "Of course. I promise, Grandma. This is just between you and me."

She decided to continue. "Well, a few nights later I found Coleman in the fields on my land. He was bloody and beaten so badly I almost didn't recognize him. All he had on him was a pair of dirty and torn basketball shorts and the crystals I'd given him. I tried to get him to tell me what happened, but he couldn't stop sobbing. He was broken. Not just skin and bones, but from the inside out. Coleman refused to go to the hospital, so I took care of him. Put a splint on his arm, cleaned and bandaged his wounds, fed him. He hardly said a word to me during those couple of days. And then I heard that his father's body had been found dead under a bridge. That's when the cops finally started to look for Coleman. I told Coleman he could hide on my land for as long as he needed to."

I had no idea what to say to Grandma. So she was harboring a potential killer on her land. I was completely stunned.

"The police came and talked to me, and they searched for Coleman in town, on my land, everywhere they could think of, but they couldn't find him. And eventually,

everyone forgot about him. And that's the way it should stay, Deidre. He wants to be forgotten. He likes to be alone."

"I thought you said he was harmless."

"He is, dear, he is. But even so, darkness like that in a person can rub off on others. The less people that interact with him, the better."

"So I should just ignore the fact that a possible killer is living on your land?"

"You want to be an adult? Then you have to accept the fact that sometimes life isn't black and white, good and evil. Life is a blurry thing that we never see clearly. We get through it the same way we came into it: kicking and screaming."

Grandma stood up and grabbed her glasses. "I'm trusting you, Deidre. Don't let me down." She walked to her bedroom and left me alone in the living room. My insides felt like a mess of thick, twisted knots.

For several weeks, I turned down William's requests to visit the floating island. The images of Coleman with the fire, floating on his back, younger and covered in blood were constantly in the back of my mind. Any time I allowed my thoughts to drift, I'd see him. William begged me daily to see Coleman. He was trying to convince me that we should try swimming to the island to talk to him. I felt sick with the weight of what Grandma had told me, and I was running out of new reasons to tell William why we couldn't go. That it wasn't allowed wasn't enough for him. I tried to occupy him with other activities, like feeding the couple of chickens Grandma had, playing various card games, and exploring different areas of the land well away from the island.

Grandma could tell that William was restless, and she offered to drive both of us to town for lunch and a change of scenery in the morning. I normally took advantage of the opportunity so I could get out of the house and use the ancient computers in the town's library, but we went the week before, and I wanted some time to myself. I slept in until ten, and then moved to the sofa in the living room. Grandma's phone, plastic and yellowed from age, was screwed into the wall near me. Despite wanting to be alone, I also wished it would ring. How many times had I stared at that phone as a kid, pretending as though I could will my parents into calling me if I just wished for it hard enough? I always knew that wasn't possible, but I did it anyway for many summers. They were both busy with their jobs—they worked as photographers for a big name nature magazine—and didn't have time to contact either William or me. I would have called them, but their schedules were crazy, and oftentimes they were in areas that didn't have any phone service. But I remember how desperate I was to hear anything from them to let us know that yes, they were thinking of us, and yes, of course they loved us and missed us. I knew that was pretty unlikely, too. My mother told me once that she didn't tell me she loved me because that word, "love," was worn out. Overused to the point where it meant nothing anymore. She said saying those words would be nothing but wasted breath. She asked, What good would it do? I didn't know how to answer.

The last time I saw them, we'd had a big argument. I explained that this was my last summer before college, and I wanted to spend it with my friends from high school because I wasn't sure when I'd see them again. Grandma would understand, and I'd been on my own with William for a while now. I didn't need her anymore.

Not everything's about you, Dad explained. Sometimes you have to do things that you don't want to do for the good of others. That's what it means to be an adult.

I told them that I wasn't going to be able to watch William anymore, and it was better to do a clean break now. I'd sacrificed so much of my time for him. I always put him before my own needs; how could they ignore that like it hadn't meant anything?

Mom said this wasn't about William, or me. It was about Grandma.

She needs you, Mom insisted.

We fought for a little longer, but ultimately I decided to stay with Grandma again for one last time. She was one of the strongest and most bizarre women I'd ever known, and she didn't need help from anyone, let alone me. But it didn't feel right saying no to another summer with her after what Mom said. I found myself thinking about the first time I stayed at Grandma's when I was about five years old, when I learned about tools for the first time.

In Grandma's red, rusted truck was a huge, old toolbox. Grandma kept it strapped to the inside of the truck bed with bungee cords. It belonged to her husband who died before I was born. I remember that Grandma was trying to fix the truck to take us to town for some popsicles. It was around 90 degrees that day, and I'd been watching her from inside the air-conditioned house. She'd been working at it for over an hour, cursing and talking to herself, and when I saw her throw a large wrench at the truck, I decided to go outside. I asked her if she needed any help, and at first she yelled at me and said, no, she learned a long time ago how to do things on her own, and what good could I do? Fighting off tears, I ran towards the porch, and then she called me back. She apologized and asked me if I knew anything about tools. I shook my head, and Grandma told me everyone

should know the basics of how things work. She opened the toolbox and told me what everything was and what it was used for. Grandma said that these aren't the only tools we can use, and she led me to the kitchen to grab some herbs hanging in the kitchen. She explained that it was sage, and it was useful for cleansing. But tools are just tools until we know what to do with them, she said. It takes a special person to use them right, and I was, she said as she handed me the sage, the best person for the job. We went back outside, and Grandma lit the sage from a lighter in her pocket. I said I didn't know what to, and I was scared of holding something on fire. I remember staring at the dried sage as the tip slowly turned into ash. You just have to do what feels right, Grandma said, and don't be scared of it. I waved the sage in the air slowly as I spelled "Deidre" in smoke letters in front of the truck.

I pulled away from the memory as I heard Grandma's truck pull up on the driveway. I stood up to slide on my flip-flops and help her carry in the groceries.

"Sorry it took me so long!" she said as I opened the door for her. I hadn't realized it, but she came back at least an hour later than she said she would be. "That store has six checkout lanes, but never more than one cashier at a time!"

Grandma walked towards me with plastic grocery bags hooked on her arms, and I took the bags from her. The bags left deep, red gouges like claw marks.

"Grandma, why didn't you let William help you with these?" I asked. I squinted through the screen door at the truck, looking for my brother. "Where is he?"

"Isn't he here with you?" she asked. "He said he changed his mind about going today because he had a stomach ache. Last I saw him, he was on the porch, unlocking the front door. He's here, isn't he?"

I felt as though all my insides were contracting at once. If he was here, I hadn't heard him at all.

"Oh God," Grandma muttered, placing a hand on her stomach. "He didn't go back in, did he?"

I immediately ran to his bedroom and swung open the door. No William. I ran to the bathroom, to my bedroom, and back out to the living room. Grandma was shouting his name up in the attic. I ran to the cramped basement and called for him with no luck. I went back upstairs and found Grandma trying to load her shotgun. Her hands were shaking.

"Grandma—"

"I know where he's going, and I'm going to go find him," she said. She dropped a shell on the floor, and I picked it up.

"Why the gun?" I asked, handing her the shell.

She set it down and fingered the crystal necklace she always wore around her neck, which she told me once was supposed to protect her. "To keep us safe."

"Against what? Coleman? Do you think he has William? Shouldn't we call the police?"

"No! No, Deidre. We can't. He's just misguided, and if we call the police, he would get arrested. I can't do that to him."

"Then why are you scared of him?"

"I don't think he would take William, but he's been alone for a long time in that forest. It can play tricks with your head, especially for someone as sensitive as Coleman. He was a very angry and tortured young man. I don't know what he's like now."

“Well, you’re not going alone.”

“Deidre, you’re *not* coming with me.”

“This is my brother, Grandma! Please, let me help. We’ll find him faster if we do this together. You shouldn’t do this alone.”

“Absolutely not. This is *my* problem. I should have made sure he was inside!”

“You know that I’m not going to back down. And we’re wasting time by arguing about it. Please, Grandma.”

Her hands were still shaking as she held the gun. I’d never seen her so upset. She walked to the front door and opened it. “Put your shoes on, then. We need to hurry.”

We made our way to the forest, trying to keep an eye out for any evidence of William. Grandma was much better at tracking than I was, so I let her lead the way. At one point, she found a shoe print in some mud, and I recognized the pattern. It had a lightning bolt and zigzags, and I’d seen it before on the soles of William’s shoes.

“He was here not too long ago,” Grandma said. “But this is the only one I’ve seen. I think he’s purposefully trying to avoid leaving a trail.” She pointed to another print nearby that was smudged. “He slid a bit here, possibly from trying to jump and avoid the mud.”

We continued on, yelling for William, but having no luck. I was scared sick. William was almost always by my side or nearby. At the very least, I had an idea where he was, whether that was at school, or an extracurricular activity. It suddenly occurred to me that even though we found a footprint, it didn’t mean that we would find him. I felt incredibly helpless wandering the woods with my grandma. We couldn’t be sure that we

were on the right track in finding him, and I hated that uncertainty. Would Coleman hurt William? My brother was a gentle person, but if Coleman wasn't psychological sound, there was no telling what could happen. Besides, Grandma didn't know exactly what happened with Coleman. How could she be so sure he wasn't dangerous? Maybe he should have been locked up all those years ago.

"Grandma, we should go back and call the police," I insisted as I pushed a branch out of the way. "We haven't seen any evidence of William for a while."

She continued on as though she hadn't heard me.

"Grandma," I said as I grabbed her shoulder. Her face was pale and her eyes were wide, like a scared animal. "I know you want to protect Coleman, but my brother is more important right now. Let's go back."

"We're almost there," Grandma said. "Just a little farther, and we'll reach the lake. He could be there. Please, let's check that first. Just a little longer."

She shrugged away from my hand and kept walking. I hurried my pace to match hers.

"I don't understand you," I said, a little out of breath. She was surprisingly quick for her age. "Calling the police is the right thing to do. He deserves to be put away."

"And what then? He would be locked up and miserable for something he did as a teenager to protect himself? Doing that would only make everything worse. It can't change the past."

"Don't you realize how naive you're being? I can't believe you've put us at risk during all these years."

Grandma stopped and faced me. “You and William were *never* at any risk. I made sure of that.”

“Oh, what, by protection charms? A ring of salt around our beds at night? Coleman is a real threat, Grandma. Not a spirit or whatever it is you believe in. He’s the evil you should be looking out for, not this made-up stuff.”

“Don’t speak about something you know nothing about!” she said, pointing a finger at me.

“I know that you’re frightened of him. And why else would you bring a gun if you aren’t prepared to use it?”

“Because I’m not as stupid and naive as you think,” she spat.

“What are Mom and Dad going to do if something’s happened to William because of what you’ve done? They would have never let us stay with you if they would have known about Coleman!”

“Your mother...” She hesitated and ran her fingers through her hair. “Deidre, she knows about Coleman.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe it. Mom knew, and she was still okay with us going over to Grandma’s every summer?

“Your mother and Coleman were close friends. They grew up together. She was the first one to find him in my fields, not me.” Grandma avoided my eyes and continued to walk through the forest.

“I don’t understand,” I said, feeling winded. I took a couple deep breaths and followed after her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because some secrets are better kept from those that could be hurt by them,” she said. “Your mother begged me to protect him, and we both agreed that it was for the best.”

At that moment, we arrived at the lake. My heart dropped when I didn’t see William. I was so sure that he’d be here, waiting for Coleman. I’d hoped that Grandma and I were overreacting, but it was starting to sink in that something had to be very, very wrong.

“William!” I screamed. I waded knee-deep into the water, which was colder than I’d expected. I looked over my shoulder at Grandma. “We’ve got to go back, now, before it’s too late. I’ll call the police, and they’ll get dogs out here, and we’ll find him.”

Grandma’s eyes darted to the island, and I turned to see what she was looking at. Coleman stood at the edge of the island, and, seconds later, dove into the lake, and resurfaced by a nearby bank. He was an incredibly fast swimmer. I hurried to get out of the lake so I could chase him down.

“Give me the gun,” I said. “Now! I have to go after him!”

“No, Deidre! William’s not here—”

“Yeah, and I bet Coleman knows exactly where he is.”

“This isn’t the right way to go about this. Just listen to me!”

Realizing that she wasn’t going to give up the gun and that I was losing time, I took off toward the bank just as Coleman disappeared into the woods. I heard Grandma trying to follow behind me, but I didn’t slow down. If she wasn’t going to give me the gun, fine, but I wasn’t going to let him get away.

I could just barely see him ahead of me. I struggled to keep up and not lose my footing as I ran through parts of the forest I'd never been before. While I was unable to recognize where I was, I realized that Coleman wasn't heading deeper into the woods. He was going in the direction of Grandma's fields, which made no sense because he would be out in the open. Vulnerable. Which meant I had a higher chance of catching him.

"Deidre! Deidre, wait!"

I ignored Grandma's shouts and pushed myself to run faster. I was catching up to him, either from adrenaline or what, I wasn't sure. I almost had him.

Then, I heard a yelp, followed by a gunshot.

I felt white-hot pain as though the back of my left calf had exploded. I fell face-first into the mud, and I was sure my leg was somehow on fire. I couldn't stop myself from screaming over and over as the pain snaked up the rest of my leg. Then, I saw Coleman running towards me, and I remembered what I'd been doing. I had to get away. I tried to roll over onto my right side to push myself up. Too slow. Everything was moving like it was trapped in honey, except for him.

And then he was there, kneeling in the mud beside me. I tried to fight him as he ripped off one of my sleeves, but it was useless. I felt as though my muscles and strength had melted away into a pool of blood beneath me, and all that was left of myself was fear and pain. My vision went in and out of focus, making everything seem like thirty-second snapshots. I vaguely felt something tighten around my leg, and I yelled again, weaker than earlier. And then my body rose into the air, and I wondered if I was dying. If this was what it was like. I moved through the forest and then into the fields, and I didn't understand how. And then there was Grandma's house, and was that—?

William sat on the porch and stood up when he saw me.

So he was dead, too? I was angry, and then sad, and I was pretty sure I was crying. Fine, I was dead; I didn't care, but William? He was just a kid.

My body lowered to the ground in front of the house, and when I moved my head I saw Coleman. He brushed some of my hair off my face, and suddenly the pain came back in full force.

“Get away from me!” I screamed. “Get away!”

He opened his mouth as if to say something, and then Grandma and William tried to restrain me as I reached out to attack Coleman.

“Stop!” William yelled. “Deidre, you're just hurting yourself more!”

“What's going on?” I asked, still feeling incredibly light-headed. So I was alive? Coleman stood up and backed away from me. He was covered in blood, but I couldn't see any wounds. A crystal necklace twinkled around his neck.

“Coleman carried you here,” Grandma said, crying. “I tripped. Out in the woods. And my gun went off. Oh, Deidre, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have been so careless.”

“I don't understand. Why is William here?”

“I wanted to find Coleman,” he said. “And he told me to come back here, to where I belong. That I was lucky to have people who loved me, and that I shouldn't make them worry.”

“You're safe?” I asked, wincing. “He didn't hurt you?”

“Yeah, I'm fine, but that doesn't matter right now. We need to get you to a doctor!”

I looked down at my leg and saw that my sleeve, soaked with blood, was tied tightly around my calf. Did Coleman do that, too? Did he save me? I wanted to say something to him. I had so many questions, but I couldn't seem to get any words out. I stared at Coleman, and suddenly I understood why Grandma wanted so desperately to protect him. I had his eyes. Before I could say anything, he turned around and took off into the fields.

I fought to remain conscious as Grandma sobbed next to me. She held her crystal necklace in her hand, rubbing it between her fingers. William ran inside, and I heard him talking to someone on the phone. 911. I grabbed Grandma's hand and held it with mine, the crystal between our palms. I didn't know what was going to happen next, but I knew Grandma needed me right then, and that's what mattered. We were in this together—William, Grandma, and me—and I wasn't going to let go.

I can see him through the one-way glass: 1050X. He sits on a leather recliner, staring at his nails. There are dark circles under his eyes. His sandy hair is stringy, and his greasy skin shines in the yellow light from the hanging stained glass lamp. 1050X vigorously scratches his beard. I hold his file in my hands—he is my first case as a counselor. My supervisor, Dr. Obermeiss, is next to me, her floral perfume flooding my nose.

She glances at her watch and sniffs. “I can only observe for half an hour. Got it?”

I nod, trying to look confident. Not that I’m *not* confident, but this is *the* Dr. Obermeiss. She’s great with Donators: warm smiles, all the right words—I’ve even seen her give a Donator a hug. This is against protocol, but it seems to work for her. Dr. Obermeiss never gets in trouble for touching, though, because she’s had a 100% success rate. I’ve studied her work for years, read all the case studies she published, and watched every video on the Internet I can find about her.

“Alright,” she says, looking at her watch again, “you’re up to bat, Kruegler.”

“Thank you!” I say, just a bit too shrill. I clamp my mouth shut to grind the embarrassment between my teeth as I open the door to the Counseling Lab.

As I close the door behind me, I feel as though I’ve burst into someone’s cozy living room. NeoCorp’s Counseling Labs are designed to make Donators feel as comfortable as possible. The floor has thick, tan carpeting, the walls are painted bright yellow, and dark, ornate wooden shelves are filled with books that look like they’ve never been touched. On the yellow walls are many kinds of abstract art. In the middle of

it all is 1050X, slumped in the recliner, staring at me. I can smell him from where I stand: a thick scent of fecal matter and maybe French fry grease. I taste vomit at the back of my throat, and wish that I didn't have such a strong sense of smell. I try to remember that I need to make him feel welcome, that he can trust me.

“Hello, my name is Dr. Kruegler. I'm going to be the counselor for your donation process,” I say as I take a seat in an overstuffed leather chair near 1050X. The smell is almost too much to take, but I try to focus on the task at hand. I cross my legs at the ankle and place his folder on my lap and take out my paper tablet to take notes on. 1050X stares at the paper pad.

“That's surprising,” he says. His voice is deep, but not as gruff as I had expected it to be.

“Excuse me?”

He gestures toward the pad. “That. The paper. I can't think of the last time I saw someone as young as you using one of those things instead of an electronic tablet. I half expected my counselor to be a robot in a place like this. And yet here you are, with paper on your lap. Do you have a pen behind your ear, too?” he asks.

His question catches me off-guard. At first, I wonder if he's being sarcastic, mocking me, or if he's genuinely curious. I hesitate, and he waits patiently, grimy hands on his knees. I remember that Dr. Obermeiss is watching, and refocus on the task at hand. I find a pen I buried in the folder and uncap it.

“I prefer paper because it helps me remember what I'm writing,” I explain. I tuck some of my hair behind my ear, and I notice 1050X's eyes following my fingers. I clear my throat, and he looks at me, slowly. We are looking eye to eye, yet I can tell he is

somewhere else, somewhere dark.

“I’m going to ask you some preliminary questions. Please answer them as honestly and as completely as you can,” I say, looking at the clock. 24 minutes left.

1050X is still, and I decide to begin the preliminaries.

“Are you fully conscious and prepared to answer my questions?” I ask.

His eyebrows twitch. “Well, what do you mean by that?”

“Are you of a clear state of mind in which you can answer my questions properly? You aren’t under the influence of drugs, sleep deprived—”

“Yes, yes,” he interrupts, waving a hand at me.

I pause, and then go on. “Did you agree—”

“I’m going to save you some time, Dr. Kruegler,” 1050X says, leaning towards me. “Go ahead and say ‘yes’ to all these nagging little questions of yours. As a favor for both you and me.”

“This is a very serious process,” I respond. “We aren’t like those other companies where anyone can become a Donator. We care about the people we work with, and that’s why I’m here. For you.”

“Yeah, I know, I read the pamphlet. I’ve seen the videos. I know that NeoCorp is the ‘most prestigious’ of *all* the suicide institutions, blah, blah, blah,” 1050X says. “I’m ready, so let’s just get this over and done with as quickly as possible.”

“It’s not that simple. There’s a process, certain steps, certain counseling methods—”

“You and I both know that the real reason *you* are here is because of the Humane End of Life Bill. Not because you care, or because this is your dream job, or whatever

floofy reason you've conjured up for yourself. You are here because NeoCorp understands the importance of covering their own asses."

I lean in towards 1050X, trying to breathe out of my mouth to relax. I know what he's doing. I've seen it before in other Donator observations. "I'm not asking you to be my friend," I begin. "And yes, I'm aware that part of my place in this company is to follow regulations. But I will *not* be intimidated or insulted by someone who really knows nothing about the importance of my job, especially by someone who needs my approval to get what he wants. This isn't some body factory. You have to be serious about this, otherwise you are not only wasting my time, but also the time of people who are out there waiting—praying—for NeoCorp to save their lives or the lives of the people they love. So you cooperate and respect me, or get the hell out of here."

1050X's face is blank, unreadable. I wait for him to move, to blink, to do anything. Without even looking at the clock I know we are pressed for time, and I've hardly accomplished anything.

Finally, 1050X speaks. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disrespect you," he says. "I just thought it would be better if we were more honest with each other."

"You shouldn't assume why I'm here just as I can't assume the same for you," I tell him. I readjust and switch crossed feet. "Now, have you discussed your decision with your family members?"

"No."

I make a note, and then continue. "What about any friends? Have you talked to them about your choice?"

"No."

“Okay,” I say, scribbling at my pad. “What about a significant other? A wife, girlfriend, a partner of any kind that you’ve talked this through with?”

1050X pauses. His hands tighten and release, tighten and release around the arms of the chair.

“What about a significant other?” I repeat.

“I heard you the first time. No, nobody,” he answers. His fingertips start to pick at the chair’s leather.

Just as I am about to ask the next question, a red light next to the clock flashes on and off, signaling to me that the time is up. I set down my pen, defeated. I haven’t accomplished anything. The counseling session has been a failure—a total bomb. I nod at 1050X.

“Thank you for your answers,” I say, gathering the folder and my notes. 1050X does nothing except claw away at the chair, as though I hadn’t been there at all.

I clench my jaw and leave the room. A rush of adrenaline hits me at the same time that my stomach plummets, making me nauseated. Dr. Obermeiss doesn’t acknowledge me; she is typing away at her tablet. I stand as patiently as I can, wishing that I could see the screen. I’m worried that because of my failure, I’ll be let go. And where would I go? I certainly wouldn’t want to go to one of the body factories.

I’m sorry, Sydney. I’m the weaker sister. Always have been.

Dr. Obermeiss taps the screen twice, and lifts her head to look at me. Her thin lips pursed so tightly that I can barely tell they are there.

“Dr. Obermeiss—”

She holds up a hand. “It seems that you let him get to you,” she says. “The goal is

to be calm and professional at all times.”

“I was doing what I thought was best,” I answer. “He was testing me.”

Dr. Obermeiss glances through the 2-way glass at 1050X. A young man in scrubs comes in through a different door of the Counseling Lab and tells 1050X that he can go back to his room. 1050X gets up and follows the man out. “You cannot assume anything about 1050X because you know nothing about him,” she says. “It’s our job to follow the rules and to ensure that the people that come here are suitable Donators.”

“He wasn’t respecting me,” I explain. “How am I supposed to have an effective counseling session with someone like that?”

“It’s supposed to be a *conversation*, not boot camp, Dr. Kruegler,” she says. “Did you or did you not go to an Ivy League school? What about all the training NeoCorp paid you to undergo? You aren’t one of those moronic, vapid types that just looks good on paper, are you?”

Stunned, I try to think of how to respond. Dr. Obermeiss starts tapping at her tablet again before I can say anything, and I don’t know if I’m just supposed to leave, or wait for her to be done with what she’s doing.

“Regardless, I know that this is a very tough job, and many become burned out on it quickly. Although you are unorthodox, I know you are committed, and those are the kinds of people we need here.”

“Oh, thank—”

She holds up a hand again to stop me. “I wasn’t finished. I will give you one more session with him to see how you do. Got it?”

I nod my head, and before I have a chance to try and thank her again, she exits the

room without another word.

I am left feeling both deflated and incredibly relieved. One more chance.

It's about two in the morning. As soon as I got home, I reviewed as much as I possibly could about 1050X. Since he signed a release and consent form, I was able to have most of his files directly emailed to me. I sip a glass of white wine as I scroll through it again.

The first page had very basic information. *Male. 5'10", 180 lbs.* He seemed shorter and heavier than that to me when I met him. *30 years old.* And older, too. Attempted suicide when he was twenty, and admitted himself into a psychiatric ward at twenty-one. Broke his leg falling out of a tree when he was 15. Allergic to peanuts. *No to being sexually active. Current Employment: None.*

His current address was out of state. I looked it up online. It was a very small apartment complex in a town I had never heard of. It wasn't completely abnormal for people to come to NeoCorp from far away, but those were the types that weren't typically like 1050X. They were docile, complacent, and eager to help. I know from my training that potential Donators can be guarded and very difficult, and this attitude could signal that they are not ready, or that they are simply so depressed that they are deflecting. I know that it is crucial in handling someone like 1050X to ensure that he is fully committed to his donation.

The fact that he has tried to kill himself before tells me that he could be serious about this decision to become a Donator. Nearly all successful Donators have tried suicide. Then there are those who are just going through a rough patch and back out, or

those who have been dropped off at the door because their families can no longer take care of them. There are other reasons, too, for rejected donations, but these are the most common.

I click through the files, trying to see if there's any detailed information on how 1050X attempted suicide, or what psychiatric ward he admitted himself to, but there's nothing more to be found. I'm not sure if this is a clearance issue, or if the paperwork is still processing. Both of which are very possible. Even with a consent form, I'm just a low-level Counselor. NeoCorp determines what I get to see.

The attempted suicide by 1050X is promising, but other than that I don't feel as though I've learned anything more about him that can help me discover his motives. I shut down my computer, finish my wine, and sit on my couch in front of the television. It's been on since I got home, buzzing in the background as I did my research. I know there's not going to be much on, but this is what I do every night. Ever since I lost Sydney, this has been my habit. I read up on the current literature concerning NeoCorp from the time I get home until I'm too tired to think. After that, I watch television until I fall asleep on the couch. I roll my neck around, listening to the cracks and pops, as I flip through the channels.

I stop at a NeoCorp infomercial. It's one I've seen before. Some B movie actress is interviewing a family in a suburban home.

"Our Sarah wouldn't have made it. Not without a Donator," says a middle-aged woman with bobbed hair. She cries without wiping away her tears.

An older man pulls her closer to him. The actress pats their linked hands and smiles at the camera, tears in her own eyes. The scene cuts to the man and woman sitting

on a set of bleachers amongst a crowd of other happy people. They wave, and the camera shows a young woman in a wheelchair receiving a diploma.

“We thought we were going to lose her forever. NeoCorp gave us hope,” the middle-aged woman narrates.

The scene fades to white, and the actress is there, again, but this time in an all-white living room with a huge vase of flowers on a table near her.

“We have tried to find a cure for cancer, and yet we can’t even figure out how to end the common cold,” the actress says. As she speaks, a montage sequence appears. Brightly colored text on the bottom of the screen warns viewers that the following images are graphic. It shows a sort of illustrated timeline of disease and maladies, all the way from the Black Plague up to the Jemison’s Syndrome epidemic a couple of years ago. I find myself looking away, although I’ve seen the images before on various news channels. Jemison’s Syndrome caused mass panic. People were dying by the hundreds every day. At first, it was from the disease. Then, people started to kill themselves to avoid the painful and traumatizing death by Jemison’s Syndrome. It was NeoCorp’s founder, Isaac Jemison, that discovered a way to prevent it, but this didn’t happen until after the Humane End of Life Bill was put in place. “NeoCorp cares about you and your family, and it is thanks to the combined efforts of the dedicated scientists at NeoCorp and selfless Donators that many medical conditions and diseases have been eradicated, such as asthma and lupus.” The infomercial doesn’t need to mention the fact that without NeoCorp, or rather, Jemison, many more of us would be dead.

The commercial cuts to a young child playing with a kite at Donator Memorial Park. Soft music plays in the background. “Give your future to someone in need. Contact

one of our representatives today to help you plan a safe and peaceful end process.”

The infomercial went on to more interviews, this time with the families of previous Donators. Their voices fade into the background as I think of 1050X. He thinks my job is some pointless formality. 1050X is a know-it-all who wants this process over and done with as quickly as possible.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I will reach him.

I wait outside the observation room for Dr. Obermeiss. 1050X is already in the Counseling Lab. His head is shaved, as is his beard. The circles under his eyes are just as dark as yesterday, but he does appear to be less tired. He could probably be attractive if he got a decent amount of sleep. I remember from my manual that the first day a Donator is accepted at NeoCorp for processing, he spends his time in “comfortable solitary confinement after a brief conversation about his or her decision with a counselor.” The rooms Donators stay in, I’ve been told, are fairly nice to make them feel “at home.”

The observation area door creaks open, and Dr. Obermeiss appears. She doesn’t greet me, but when I don’t make a move, she gestures impatiently toward the entrance of the Counseling Lab.

I consider saying something to her, but the look on her face tells me it’s a bad idea. I turn around and enter the Counseling Lab.

1050X immediately looks up at me. The rank smell from yesterday is gone, replaced by sharp spearmint and pine. He’s showered.

“Hello, Dr. Kruegler,” he says as his finger flicks at the edges of the chair.

I sit down in the same chair as yesterday. “Hello. How are you doing today?” I

ask as I flip my pad of paper to a clean sheet.

1050X shrugs. “I’m here to donate my body to science, so I suppose I’m doing as well as I can be,” he responds.

“Well, I’m glad you’re doing well. You look more refreshed today,” I tell him.

He blinks and shrugs again. I decide to jump right into the questioning. Every second is crucial, and I know that this could be my last chance to show Dr. Obermeiss that I’m capable at my job.

“First of all,” I begin, “I want to apologize for my attitude yesterday. I was rude to you, and that wasn’t right. This is a delicate and very difficult decision to make, and I should have been more understanding.”

1050X raises his eyebrows, but says nothing.

I lean forward. “With that in mind, today I want to talk about why you’re here.”

“You know why I’m here. To be a Donator,” he answers.

“Yes, I know that. But you didn’t just wake up one day and decide that,” I explain. I wait a moment, and then set aside the pad of paper on the nearby table. “This isn’t a simple matter, and to treat it as such wouldn’t be fair to you. Like I said yesterday, this isn’t a body factory where you would be hacked apart for your usable organs and distributed like some sort of livestock. We don’t take just anyone, and we take great pride in the people we select. We treat them like human beings. If you wanted this to be an easy process, you could have just killed yourself. Or, you could have gone to a body factory. It’s your right, after all, to decide how you will die. But you chose NeoCorp.”

He taps his fingers on the arms of his chair, his eyes downcast. “Do we have to talk about this?” he asks. His tone is different from before—vulnerable, almost fearful. I

decide to keep pushing.

“Yes, if you are serious about being a Donator,” I answer. “I cannot imagine how hard this must be for you. You're very brave.”

“Brave?” His eyes snap up at me, and I can almost see the vulnerability slipping away. I have to try a different tactic.

“Let's back up a little bit,” I suggest. “Why don't we forget about why you made this choice for now. Let's just have a conversation. Forget the rules and regulations for now.” I feel a little rush of adrenaline after I say this. This could be a very bad decision, and I can only wonder what disapproving faces Dr. Obermeiss is making behind the mirror. But just as I say this, I can already tell that 1050X seems a little more at ease. He's still tense, but his fingers have stopped moving.

I smile. “Let's start over, shall we?” I suggest. “My name is Dr. Kruegler, and I'll be your counselor.” I hesitate for a moment, and then hold out my hand for him to shake it. I know touching is against protocol, but surely a handshake wouldn't hurt, right? After all, Dr. Obermeiss hugs Donators. I can't imagine myself embracing 1050X, but a handshake could have a similar effect.

The corners of 1050X's mouth twitch a bit, and I can't tell if he's fighting off a smile or a frown. “This is kind of cheesy,” he comments.

“Ah, come on,” I say, still holding out my hand.

He sighs, and then grabs my hand firmly. His hand is rough and warm, but not sweaty. “I'm Mark,” he responds.

I try not to cringe as I hear his name. All potential Donators are assigned a number to keep counselors from getting attached. While I recognize that this doesn't

exactly match with what I said earlier about treating Donators like humans, I understand why it's done that way. Counselors can't get attached because it could interfere with our evaluation of the potential Donator. So, we're trained to think of them by their assigned codes rather than their real names. Am I further damning myself or starting to make progress?

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Mark," I say, trying to sound as natural as possible. I glance briefly at the light above the door. It's not flashing, and we still have time left, so I assume that whatever I'm doing isn't terrible enough to pull me out of the Counseling Lab early. "Why don't you tell me a little bit about your life? Do you have any hobbies? Any pets or friends?"

"I like to paint," he answers. "But I stopped doing it a couple of years ago."

"Oh, really? What did you like to paint?"

"Replicas of famous art. But I always change something about them. The angle. The expression. Sometimes the background. That sort of thing."

"Why do that? Why not paint something completely your own?"

"People are blind to the things they see every day. How many times in your life have you seen the image of Mona Lisa? How many times a day do you pass an elderly woman and not even think twice of her? But, I combine the two—make Mona old and twist her smile, and suddenly people pay attention. I combine the overused and ordinary and make an original from it."

A painter. I never would have guessed that about 1050X, or, rather, Mark. To think that those twitchy fingers held a paintbrush makes me curious to see his work in person. "But you said you stopped painting," I say. "Why?"

“I’d rather not talk about it,” he says curtly.

Careful, careful. One wrong word, and I could lose any progress I’ve made today.

“What about you?” he asks.

“I don’t really have any time for hobbies,” I say.

Mark scoffs. “Of course you do. Everyone does.”

“No, I really don’t,” I tell him. “When I’m not here, I’m reading the latest articles and information relating to my job or NeoCorp.”

“Why? Why do you do that?”

“It’s part of my counselor responsibilities.”

“There has to be more of a reason than that,” Mark says. “It takes a special person to make this her entire life.”

I pause, and think about how to respond. No one has ever really asked me that question before. Who would I talk to about it? “I’ll tell you,” I say, “if you tell me why you stopped painting.” I watch Mark carefully, and he picks at the couch. He’s silent, and although I know time is ticking away, I remind myself to be patient.

“Only if you go first,” he says, finally.

Progress. A step in the right direction. I brush some of my hair behind an ear and clasp my hands. I don’t even know where to begin. I think of Sydney’s smile, of her laugh. Laughter always came so easily to her, and this infectious attitude made her popular with everyone she encountered. Despite her popularity, she always made time for me. “I’m here because of someone I love very much. Everything I do, I do for her,” I answer. Mark stares at me with a softened expression, as though he didn’t expect to hear this from me.

“Who is she?” he asks.

“My twin sister.” I think of her now, in the hospital miles away, close to where my parents live. I haven’t seen her in weeks. I can’t stand visiting her. I hate that I despise the weekends I go to see her with my father and my mother. But I do. I hate those weekends. I sit there in one of the stiff, scratchy hospital chairs as my parents tell her what they’ve been doing for the past week. She lies there, eyes wide open but not seeing, with a face that looks like a contorted version of my own. My mother always on stand-by to wipe the drool away from Sydney’s chin, the same chin that I have. The few who survived Jemison’s Syndrome are hospitalized like Sydney.

“What happened to her?” Mark questions. I suddenly realize that he has moved closer to me, and we’re sitting less than a foot apart. He waits for my answer, and I stare at him, wondering if mentioning Sydney was a mistake. Now, all I can think about is her, and I fight to keep my focus.

I shake my head. “No, I’m afraid it’s *your* turn, Mark,” I say. “I want to know why you stopped painting.”

Mark watches me for a moment, and then runs his hands over his shaved head. “Fair enough,” he replies. He nods at the folder underneath my pad of paper. “I’m sure you’ve read my file. You know that I tried to kill myself years ago.” Without waiting for a response from me, he continues. “I had this overwhelming sense of loneliness, and I felt like I was a burden to everyone in my life. Do you know what that’s like? To feel you like are just a waste of space?” He stops, and then I realize that he’s waiting for me to answer.

“I suppose I’ve felt lonely from time to time—”

“No, it’s more than that.” The whole time he talks with waving and moving his hands with his words, almost like they are keeping time with what he says. “It doesn’t go away. The feeling may not be as strong for a while, but it’s always there—” He smacks the table, and I jump. “Waiting to take over when you’re at your weakest.”

Mark leans back in his chair. “And so I overdosed. I was found by a roommate, and taken to the hospital. They saved me, if you want to call it that. I agreed to be committed to a psych ward because I was tired of feeling the way I did. That’s when I discovered painting. It was my way of distracting my mind. It worked for years.”

He pauses, and his eyes focus on the carpet. I glance up at the clock and see that it is at least fifteen minutes past the allotted time, but the light hasn’t flashed. I wonder if this is a good or a bad sign that the session hasn’t ended yet. Regardless, I’m getting a lot of good information from Mark. I’m surprised that he is telling me so much, but I take it as a good sign. He is, I think, starting to trust me.

I have never truly considered killing myself, although the loneliness is something I know better than I care to share with him. Sydney is, or rather, was my best friend in addition to being my sister. I was never any good at making friends, but Sydney understood me. Whether I was going through a tough break up or feeling lost about my purpose in life, she knew exactly what to say. That person is gone, and in her place is a body kept alive by tubes and wires. A breathing corpse. I push her to the back of my mind.

“If it worked so well, why stop?” I ask.

Mark clenches his jaw a couple times, visibly struggling with whether or not to tell me what’s on his mind. My heart races. I know we are on the edge of a breakthrough.

This man, who I thought was standoffish and rude, has opened up a part of himself to me, a total stranger. I can't help but feel a sense of exhilarating power. Finally, I am doing something right.

His fingers are back to picking at the chair. He manages to pull a little piece of leather off of the arm. He scrapes a nail at the edges of the hole. "I thought I was getting a really bad flu. My vision was off, like I was seeing double sometimes, you know? My muscles started twitching. It wasn't enough to make me unable to work at the restaurant because I was just a dishwasher, so I kept showing up every day. I didn't bother to go to the doctor. I don't have health insurance. I didn't think whatever I had was a big deal. But then I started forgetting things; little things at first, like my address or my phone number. Then I would remember, and it was fine."

Oh my God. There's no way he had it. There's no way. He wouldn't be able to be sitting here, talking to me, completely functional.

"There was a day when I woke up and didn't know who I was, where I was. I felt like every inch of my body was on fire, somehow I dragged myself into the shower. I lay on the bottom of the shower on the coldest setting for hours, extremely confused and disorientated. I barely remember it, but I do remember that the last coherent thought I had was that I was going to die in that shower." Mark stops and looks up at me. His eyes are full of pain and fear. I've seen that look before on Sydney. "But I survived. I woke up with vomit and shit pooled around me. The shower had clogged. I was dizzy and had no idea how long I had been out, but I didn't have a fever. I lived. I *lived*, Dr. Kruegler, and I was happy about it. Happy, of all things! I swear I didn't know...I didn't know I was going to kill all those people."

Mark runs his hands over his shaved head again. He's shaking. I don't know what to do, so I do nothing. I'm not prepared for someone who has survived Jemison's Syndrome with no obvious physical problems. How could I be?

"I infected everyone at the restaurant," Mark continues. "They all got it. The other dishwashers. The waiters and waitresses. The cooks. My boss. Who knows who else? They all died. All of them. So I stayed home. I was horrified by what I had done, and even painting couldn't distract me anymore. I'd always a hard time holding down a job, but this time had been different. I was getting to know the others that worked there. We had started hanging out. I felt like I had friends for the first time in my life. Do you have any idea what it's like to feel like you've murdered an entire group of people? And, despite all of it, you feel *grateful* to be alive?" His voice breaks, and he places his trembling hands over his face.

I can't move. This man had Jemison's Syndrome and *lived*. And he's not just alive, but actually functioning. Normal, at least relatively. Why *him*? And now he's here to give up his life for science? He's valuable, I know, but he's not even going to take advantage of what he has, what I wish Sydney could have? I should be excited, happy even, that I am talking to the one person who successfully survived Jemison's Syndrome, if he's telling the truth. A damned miracle is sitting across from me, our knees almost touching. All I can think of is how I want to reach over and snap every one of his shaking fingers, or maybe slap him so hard that he comes to his senses.

The light starts flashing. I've been with him an entire hour, and I haven't even noticed. I have to get out of here. I immediately start gathering up my pad and the file when Mark reaches out and grabs my arm.

“I don’t know what to do,” he says, his voice a harsh whisper.

The light is still flashing, and I know I need to leave. His hand holds my arm gently, although he is still trembling. I’m torn between wanting to tell him to get the hell out of here to live his life, or trying to calm him down and remember why I’m here in the first place. I wonder what Sydney would choose to do.

“You didn’t know,” I finally say. “I’m afraid our session is over. Maybe we’ll talk more tomorrow, Mark.”

His hand slides down my arm and falls into his lap. I turn around and leave the Counseling Lab.

When I enter the observation area, I’m surprised by the group of people in lab coats that have gathered around the two-way glass. I recognize some of them as other counselors I’ve trained with. They’re talking excitedly to each other, and Dr. Obermeiss is actually smiling, which I’ve only seen when observing her work.

“Dr. Kruegler, fantastic job!” she says, and some of the others chime in as well. She walks up to me, and pats me on the back. “I have to admit, I was pretty concerned when the session first started, but you really pulled it off!”

“I—um, thank you,” I say, confused. Shouldn’t I be happy?

Dr. Obermeiss can’t seem to stop smiling. She pats me on the back again. “Don’t you see what this means?” she asks. “1050X is exactly what we need. You’re in the middle of making history, my dear!”

I look back at the glass and watch as Mark is escorted out of the Counseling Lab. I can still feel the warmth of his hand on my arm.

Dr. Obermeiss pulls me aside from the small crowd. “This is what Jemison

dreamed of: finding a survivor of Jemison's Syndrome. He found a way to prevent it, but never a cure. 1050X could be that link!" she explains.

I shake my head. "But I'm not entirely sure Mark—I mean, 1050X—is fully aware of his decision. I can tell that he's emotionally unstable right now. It's my responsibility to ensure that he's completely ready and mentally qualified to be a Donator—that this isn't just a momentary crisis of faith or a temporary decision. As part of the Humane End of Life—"

"Dr. Kruegler, if we waited until we were 100% positive that someone was sound of mind before admitting them into the program, nothing would ever be accomplished," Dr. Obermeiss says. "Sometimes, they just need a little push in the right direction."

I'm at a loss for words. I am aware that my job exists because there are people who sacrifice their lives for the betterment of mankind. But those people truly want to die, and *they* make the choice to donate their body to science. We evaluate, not persuade.

"What will happen to him?" I ask eventually, although I know this is not necessarily any of my business. I haven't been told specifics on what happens after a Donator is approved, other than that he or she is used for various experiments and testing.

"It's hard to say," Dr. Obermeiss explains. "His brain will need to be studied—they might remove the brain and preserve it so they can study it for as long as possible. Or, I suppose he might be induced into a comatose state so they can keep the brain alive for testing. But, who is to say for sure? That's not up to us."

Dr. Obermeiss is right. Mark could lead NeoCorp to the cure, or, at the very least, we might have more of an understanding of Jemison's Syndrome. It would be madness to let this opportunity pass by. Then there's the fact that he's responsible for the deaths of

all his coworkers and, presumably, many more. If I were him, I couldn't live with that kind of weight on my shoulders. This is his chance to make up for that.

Then why do I feel so terrible?

"I know this is hard. The first one always is," Dr. Obermeiss says with that unfamiliar kindness usually reserved for Donators. "But we can't let this one get away. He's too important. Surely you, of all people, must understand why. And if you aren't up to it, someone else will be. This is your chance to make a difference, Dr. Kruegler. Don't let it pass you by." A noise comes from her tablet, and she swipes her finger across its screen. "I've got to go. Tomorrow, Dr. Kruegler." She leaves me behind in the observation area, and I feel hollow. Others give me their congratulations, but I barely hear them. I clutch Mark's folder to my chest.

On my bus ride home, I think about Mark. What has happened to all his paintings? Was he any good? Did he ever make any money doing it, or did he even show his work to anyone? Does he miss it? I took an art class ages ago, but I dropped it because I didn't have the knack for it. Sydney was the more creative one anyway. She was always making something, always creating.

Maybe Mark just needs someone to talk to—a friend, or maybe someone on a more professional level, like a psychiatrist. The way he opened up to me with just a little bit of the right prodding...

Surely you, of all people, must understand.

Mark *wants* to die. He wouldn't have come to NeoCorp unless that was the case. I'm not a psychiatrist. It's not my job to put people back together. I evaluate. I know that

Dr. Obermeiss is right. If I don't do it, another counselor will take over where I left off, and I'll probably be fired. And then all the work I did to get to this point will have been for nothing. This is my chance to be a part of something that could help Sydney.

But it's not guaranteed. Didn't the doctors say that her brain was ruined beyond repair? The disease causes the brain to shrink and deteriorate until there's nothing left. Brain matter drips out of the nasal passages. We were lucky, the doctors said, that my parents and I had already been in the quarantined sections of the city early. Sydney had been going to college out of state.

Lucky.

I pull the lever for the bus to stop.

The next day, a bigger group is watching in the observation area. Dr. Obermeiss, for once, doesn't have her tablet. When she notices me, she hands me a stapled form with "AUTHORIZATION" printed in bold lettering at the top. I add it to the top of Mark's file, and take a deep breath. Everyone's waiting for me to begin.

I make my way to the door of the Counseling Lab and enter. Mark sits in his usual chair, and his face, if it's even possible, looks more tired than ever. The purple under his eyes is darker, almost like bruises. He hasn't shaved today, and there are food stains on his t-shirt. But when he notices me, his face lights up, and the tiredness melts away.

I sit across from him. Although I can't see them, I can feel them watching us. Mark, though, waits patiently for me to talk, as though I'm the only person in the world that matters to him. Even his hands are still.

I think of Sydney and wish that I could ask her what I should do. I think of the

times I was alone in her hospital room at night, the hours I spent debating whether to yank the IV's out of her arm. How easy it would have been. I tried to convince myself that I would do it for love. My parents would hate me, but they would understand eventually. I would sacrifice their love to spare all of us. They needed someone else to pull off the band-aid, but, in the end, I couldn't do it. I stopped visiting her, and accepted that Sydney was dead.

“Are we going to talk today?” Mark asks me, and I realize I've been silent for three whole minutes.

I see the word “AUTHORIZATION” sticking out of the manila file. I nod. “Yes, we are, Mark.”