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A Moment of Obvious Joy

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A Moment of Obvious Joy

Lauren Wiser

M.F.A. Thesis

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Abstract

A Moment of Obvious Joy is a collection of realist short stories that explores the difficulties of living lives that fall short of our expectations. These are stories about wanting and longing for things that elude you – for Scott, in “Sleeping with Insects,” it’s the methods of dealing with a shattered family; for Andi, in “Drowners,” a chance to prove herself as a young adult, as someone worthy of responsibility; for Brooke, in “Remains,” it’s how to escape from the shadow of her unsatisfying relationship with her father; and for Hannah, in “A Moment of Obvious Joy,” it’s learning to cope with dramatic change in a group that clings to stasis. These stories examine the ways in which we try, and often fail, to communicate these desires to others, how, in times of crisis, we instinctually take the burden of improvement upon ourselves rather than reach out to others, how that so often breeds more isolation and dissatisfaction. However, these stories are also about how, despite daily disappointments and heartbreaks, we find the resilience to move forward: we promise to do what is possible, we breach the surface, we focus on what we’ve created, we settle into new lives. We find moments of joy that give us strength. We are constantly stumbling, taking two steps backward, and yet, ever aware of our slow progress, we forge ahead.

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Sleeping with Insects

As soon as Scott sees the bites on his arm, he knows they're from bed bugs. He thought the first one on his leg was a mosquito bite, until he found more on his stomach, then his upper thigh, his collarbone, and now, this line on his arm – three in a row, small and red, like pimples. *Bed bug bites often appear in a unique, linear group of three or four*, one website confirmed when he first started researching, just curious, just to rule it out, nothing to be nervous about yet. He scratches the crook of his elbow, then winces at the sudden bloom of red under his fingers. He'll have to start wearing long-sleeved shirts, though the weather is still too warm.

"Scott, hon?" Donna calls up the stairs, and Scott curls his hand over the tender flesh in the bend of his arm. She emerges in the doorway dressed for work, pressed grey pants hugging tight to her hips, the frayed tip of her heel catching on carpet fibers. "What are you doing?"

Scott glances at the clock. It's 7:23 am. "Do you have an appointment today?" he asks. Donna is the oldest pharmaceutical sales representative in her division. Between business trips, she prefers to lounge in sweatpants and t-shirts until well after the kids leave for school.

"At Barnes-Jewish." She smooths a hand over her hair, down her high ponytail. She looks put-together, sleek and professional, and for a moment, Scott wants to tell her about the bites. *Look, sweetheart*, he'll say, *it doesn't mean anything. People who travel get them all the time. It doesn't mean we're not clean.*

"I made breakfast," Donna says. She tucks a foot against her calf and rubs it up and down. Scott wonders if she has a bite there. He can't imagine she does. She would've

been frantic, stripping the beds, calling exterminators, scrubbing her limbs red and raw. She wouldn't have researched, or waited.

"I'm not really hungry, babe," Scott says.

"Scott. Dylan's eating with us this morning."

"Downstairs?" Dylan stopped eating breakfast in the kitchen days before he ran away. Since he returned home two weeks ago in the back of a squad car, he's been sneaking food into his room before anyone wakes, oranges and apples and kiwis disappearing from the refrigerator three or four at a time. Scott goes to the grocery store every afternoon, after Donna leaves for work and the kids for school, to restock their fruit supply, ensuring Dylan's favorites are never absent from the crisper drawer.

Donna smiles and nods. "He's sketching, too."

Scott sucks in a long breath through his nose. "Okay. Good. Okay, I'll be down in a minute."

Donna pecks him on the cheek, her lips rough on his stubbled skin. Her hand brushes his arm, ghosts over one of the bites, and he shivers. "Hmm," Donna murmurs, kissing his lips and trailing her nails up the back of his neck.

Scott leans in, nips at Donna's bottom lip. They haven't kissed like this in weeks, and Scott wants to keep her in the bedroom for a few moments longer, make silent promises against her skin. The cotton fabric of his t-shirt rubs over the bumps on his stomach, though, and he pulls back. "I'll be right down," he says, a hand firm on Donna's shoulder. "Make a plate for me?"

Donna blinks, and frowns. "Sure." She smooths her hands down her sides. "Fine."

As soon as Donna leaves the room, Scott rifles through their closet, searching for something loose fitting, a long-sleeved shirt that won't call attention to itself in the late autumn heat. He finds a thin henley and tugs it over his head, pushes the sleeves up his forearms, just high enough to hide the bites. He runs his hands over the bedspread, searching for specks in the wake of his palms. Bits of fuzz and threads of hair tangle between his fingers. He'll need to do a more comprehensive search, but only when the house empties. The four of them have been building toward a tentative peace, not returning to life as usual, but mimicking it accurately enough. Breakfast together feels like a breakthrough. No need to mention anything without evidence. No need to shatter that façade just yet.

Downstairs, Donna is still frowning, scooping eggs onto a plate, her heels kicked off to the side of the kitchen. At the table, Dylan is drawing in his sketchbook, shading something with the side of his pencil while Grace watches, pausing every so often from inhaling her breakfast to lean over and examine Dylan's work. When she does, Dylan stops and waits, patiently, for her comments: "Nice" or "that bottom bit looks good" or "her right eye's a little wonky."

"Here." Donna drops Scott's plate to the table without looking at him.

"We need to get going," Grace tells Scott around a mouthful of toast. "I don't wanna be late for homeroom again."

"I can drive you to school today," Donna says. "Let Dad stay home and work. I have a meeting, anyway, so I'll be out."

“Don’t want you to be late,” Grace says. She stands and nudges Dylan’s shoulder. “C’mon, kiddo.” Dylan takes his bowl of cereal to the sink, sets it gingerly among the others. Grace waits for him, leaves her plate on the table, covered in yolk.

“I don’t mind,” Donna says. “Really. You can wait a few minutes for me.”

“It’s cool, Mom.” Grace slings her bag over her shoulder and kicks Dylan’s sneakers over to him.

“It’s fine, Donna,” Scott says.

“It just makes more sense for me to take them,” Donna says.

“I want Dad to take us,” Dylan says, his eyes on the floor.

Donna’s mouth tightens. “Oh. Okay.”

“We’ll be out in the car,” Grace says, and leads Dylan into the hallway.

“Right home after school,” Donna yells after them. She imposed the new rule on Grace after Dylan ran away, on both after he returned. No car. No after-school visits. No late nights. She insists it’s not grounding, but a way of keeping a closer eye on them until everything settles. Until they’re sure everything’s back to normal.

“You can take them,” Scott says, “if you really want.”

“They want you.” Donna grabs Scott’s plate and dumps his eggs in the trash.

They ride to Dylan’s middle school in silence, save for the low rumble of the van’s engine and Grace’s breathy humming from the passenger’s seat. Scott’s eyes stray often to the rearview mirror. He watches Dylan pick at his backpack’s frayed strings, and decides to buy him a new one that afternoon, along with the fruit.

He drops Dylan off at the front entrance. “Have a good day,” he says, but Dylan remains seated. Grace leans back and smacks Dylan’s knee, and he fumbles in his backpack, retrieving a folded yellow piece of paper and handing it to Scott.

“Here,” he says, zipping his bag and staring at his fingers. “I’m supposed to give this to you and Mom.”

“What is it?” Scott asks, though he assumes it’s a note from the school counselor. She’d called their house the day Dylan returned to school, requested a meeting so they could discuss his “extended absence.” This is likely the date and time, set in print. He wants Dylan to say it aloud, but Dylan hunches his shoulders and slides out of the van, slamming the door behind him. Scott hopes he might turn and smile, or wave, like he would when Scott dropped him off at elementary school, bouncing up the steps on his toes, but Grace says, “Let’s go, Dad,” and Scott hands her the note, pulls the van back out onto the main road and starts the extra mile toward her high school.

“It’s a note from the counselor,” Grace says, without unfolding the paper.

“I figured it was something like that.”

“Dylan wanted you to see it first.”

“Why not Mom? She knows what’s going on.”

Grace shrugs. “She’s just so...” She tenses her shoulders and sucks air through her teeth. “Crazy about the whole thing, you know? If Mom quit asking so much, I think he might talk about it.”

Scott wouldn’t call his wife crazy, but Donna has been persistent. In the days after Dylan returned home, both Scott and Donna begged Dylan to talk. “What were you doing?” they asked after the police revealed he’d walked to the next town over, that

they'd found him in a gas station buying a Mountain Dew. "Why didn't you say anything? Where were you going?" But Dylan would shrug, or shake his head, or say, "I just wanted to," and retreat to his room. Scott figured he needed time to sort through his thoughts, and stood down. But Donna still leans up against the wall next to the bathroom while Dylan brushes his teeth before bed, saying, "Baby, it's alright. I'm not mad, I'm just worried about you." Or, "Dylan, does that help you?" while he's doodling in his sketchbook. Or, sometimes, she'll sit outside his closed bedroom door and shut her eyes and dig her fingertips into the carpet while she murmurs, "Goddamn it. Goddamn it."

"We're all walking on egg shells a little here," Scott says to Grace.

"Haven't we always been, with Mom?" she says.

"Grace," Scott warns.

"Besides, he's not going to do it again."

"You don't know that."

"Sure I do. It's just a thing he needed to get out of his system. Kids do it all the time, you know? Threaten to pack up and leave."

"You never did."

"Well, I'm the good kid."

But Grace and Dylan were both good kids, with good grades, never got into trouble, talked back only behind smiles, the edges softened. Scott and Donna once felt proud they had the sort of kids they didn't need to hound about their schoolwork, check their report cards, sit up late nights worrying about their whereabouts. They bragged about raising two confident, self-sufficient teenagers, who made their own breakfast in

the morning, who lounged with them in the living room as they did their homework, who yelled goodnight as they settled into self-imposed bedtimes.

Weeks before his disappearance, though, Dylan's tone sharpened, traces of happiness vanishing like a sudden lack of oxygen to Scott. Then, Dylan was gone, and their once-unwavering belief system crumbled beneath them. They'd been questioned by the police, acutely aware of being suspects in their own son's disappearance. Neighbors came with condolences, delivered in mixed tones of pity and distrust. Rather than cowering from suspicion, Donna sprang into action. She spent the first night of Dylan's absence calling every contact in her phone: relatives from Arizona and Pennsylvania, doctors and reps she hadn't worked with in years. The second night, she wandered the streets of their subdivision, bellowing for Dylan like she had something to prove, returning at two am, after she'd searched the shallow woods between their neighborhood and the town proper, with shaking hands, the hems of her jeans caked with mud. "If he hitchhiked," she babbled, "he could be over the state line. What am I saying? Halfway to the coast by now." She was missing her left shoe.

Scott, ordered to stay home in case Dylan returned, spent those evenings in the backyard, sitting cross-legged in the grass, watching the lights in the neighbors' houses extinguish one-by-one. The house was suffocating without Dylan, his presence heavy in the chewed pencils between the couch cushions, the browning apple core in the bathroom trash, the B- science test on the coffee table. His absence mocked Scott, as if Dylan might be waiting at the top of the stairs, grinning, like when they used to play hide-and-seek and Dylan would tire of hiding. "Found you," Dylan would say, like he'd been the one searching all along.

Grace barely left her room, emerged, blank-eyed and silent, only to eat and attend school. But the night Dylan returned, after he was tucked away upstairs and Donna and Scott and Grace piled onto the couch, fearing any movement might chase him away, Grace pulled her knees to her chest and began a steady stream of low murmurs in which she admitted her worst fear: that Dylan had been taken from them. “Like that Smart girl,” she said, biting the skin around her fingernail, “or those boys in Missouri. Some guy made them live in his basement, told them he’d kill their parents if they ran, called them his sons, probably raped them, and we should take Dylan to the hospital, to make sure,” and Scott’s breath stuttered in his chest, hearing the things he’d barely allowed himself to think spoken so calmly, so impassively. He agreed with Grace – they really should get Dylan checked out – but couldn’t bring himself to voice his assent, to let his daughter’s flat confession dictate their next actions. The weight of that could crush her.

“Right now,” Scott said, “we should – ” and Donna stumbled to her feet and hit Scott across the face. Grace blinked but remained still.

“Don’t you dare agree with her,” Donna snarled. “Your own son. How could you?”

“You’re being irrational,” Grace said evenly, staring at the wall. Scott shivered.

“Shut up.”

“Just because you don’t want something to happen doesn’t mean it won’t. Grow up.”

Donna grabbed the base of Grace’s ponytail and pulled her to her feet, buried her nose in her daughter’s hair and growled something in her ear, a low, angry sound that rumbled through Scott, though he couldn’t decipher the words. Scott expected Grace to

pull away, to yell or struggle, but Grace only nodded, returning to her silent vigil on the couch after Donna pulled away with a clenched jaw. Scott saw the fingernail marks on Grace's arm, and knew he'd never know what Donna said.

At Grace's school, Scott pulls the van around to the back and parks in the last spot in the lot, so Grace can pretend she drove herself.

"Was Mom pissed?" Grace asks.

"Yeah," Scott says. "Let her take you to school tomorrow, okay? She likes to, when she can."

"Fine. If you all stop worrying so much." Grace smiles at Scott, shuts the door, and strolls up to a group of girls near the entrance. They hug and laugh, but Grace lags behind, looking bewildered, as if she doesn't recognize her surroundings. When the distant ringing of a bell signals first period, she hunches her shoulders and slinks through the door with a timidity Scott's never seen. From this distance, she doesn't look like his daughter. As Scott drives away, he scratches at his neck, digs a fingernail into a small bump at his collar.

Back at the house, after replenishing their fruit supply and buying Dylan a new backpack – navy blue canvas, with thick black straps and a large front pocket, room enough for Dylan's sketchbook – Scott strips the sheets from the bed. Breakfast turned tense, but Scott remains optimistic. Hope urges him along. Revealing the bugs now would only be a distraction, a setback. He won't let this hinder their tentative progress. He needs to start sketching his designs for the St. Mary's Parish Center renovation, but he won't be able to concentrate until the linens have been cleaned and scoured for specks.

He forgets what temperature the water in the washer should be for bed-things – he typically washes everything on cool – but sets the dial to hot. Boil the fuckers, he thinks with a small smile.

In the bedroom, he digs into the mattress creases, running his nails along every seam. He lifts the mattress off the box-spring and shines a flashlight into each crevice, searching for smudges like those on the picture he printed from the internet – shells and shit and eggs and the things themselves, flat and blood-filled with bulging, alien eyes. He unzips Donna's suitcase and shines a light into its dark corners and pockets.

Next, he searches under piles of Grace's dirty clothing, turns down her turquoise comforter and skims her brown sheets. He scoops small crumbs of food into his hand and inspects them until he's satisfied they won't crawl away. In Dylan's doorway, he pauses, surveying the blank walls. At five years old, Dylan wanted to be a zoologist, and covered his room with posters of tree frogs in exotic reds and greens, great white polar bears stalking in the snow, a lion lounging in Savannah grasses. Dylan's walls are blank, now, his sheets pulled taut and wrinkle-free. The only thing amiss is a Geometry book lying open on the floor. As Scott reaches down to pick it up, apprehension shudders down his spine. What would Dylan think if he knew Scott was in his room? That Scott was searching for something – drugs or alcohol, perhaps – that he didn't trust Dylan. Scott wished he knew Dylan's problems extended only to drinking, peer pressure, a bottle passed between friends on a Friday night, something Scott could fix with a conversation on the couch, a weighty hand on his son's shoulder. Something born of curiosity and rebellion. Something temporary.

He picks up the book, anyway, shuts it and sets it on Dylan's desk. Under a blank notepad, Scott catches sight of a few sheets of drawing paper, crinkled at the corners, and tugs them out, smooths them with his palm. The top page is covered in miniature doodles: aimless swirls; shaded squares and triangles; three copies of Dylan's own signature, looping and thin; an aborted sketch of a horse, scratched over with heavy blue ink; and, in the bottom-right corner, a bird being struck by lightning, a cartoonish curl of smoke rising from its tail, Xs in place of its eyes. Scott runs his thumb over the wings, marvels at the amount of detail Dylan put into the intricate ruffle of each feather.

The next page is separated into orderly boxes inhabited by sketches of people, some fully-formed and shaded with colored pencil: a girl with curly red hair and a wide smile, a boy with a pale complexion and shaggy hair and a tiny, mischievous smirk. On others, the crosses and pencil strokes used to form their faces are still visible. A floating head near the middle of the page appears to have some of Grace's features, the freckles and the low ponytail, the corner of her bottom lip tucked between her teeth. The torso of a man fills most of the bottom-left box, just a t-shirt and a pair of clenched fists; no legs, no head. Speech bubbles hover near the sketches, all empty save one, above the headless man, which has two smudged, blurry question marks inside, as if Dylan had erased and rewritten them again and again.

Donna thought drawing might be Dylan's way of venting, and Scott knows he should be looking for clues in these pages. The answer, the key to Dylan's sadness, could be in front of him, hidden in an eyelash, a fist, a bolt of electricity, a dead thing. When Dylan was young, he and Scott used to sprawl out on their stomachs in the living room with notebooks and colored pencils and construct elaborate murals, bright and frenzied,

Dylan drawing half a figure and Scott sketching right where he left off, making a whole together, an illustrated round robin. They stopped playing when Scott turned to building designs, leaving little time to freestyle. Scott realizes he hasn't shown Dylan his own sketches in years, hasn't taken the time to compare his razor-straight lines and rigid dimensions with his son's soft swoops and elegant curves.

He places Dylan's sketches back on the desk and goes to his drafting table, stares at his St. Mary's floor plans, the rooms he drew with a straightedge. No smears of ink. No excess lines. Still, he gave this to Dylan, shared this talent for making his visions tangible, and that feels like a hidden passage back into his son's labyrinthine mind. Scott picks up his pencil and works.

Donna gets home early, before school lets out, and tells Scott she's quitting her job.

"I had to take two new hires to my appointment with me," Donna says, her brown hair hanging limp around her shoulders. She always wears her hair down after work, and Scott used to think it was her way of showing off for him. Now, he knows about the headaches she gets from wearing her ponytail so tight, the unbearable tension along her scalp she succumbs to in order to fit in with the younger reps. "Straight out of college. Former cheerleaders. The past five new hires have all been cheerleaders. Dr. Ober says that's the trend now, for drug reps. All enthusiasm, all smiles. And I'm so damn sick of smiling."

"What about Kentucky?" Scott asks, scratching absently at a bump on his wrist before tugging his sleeve over his knuckles. He hadn't thought about the bugs since he

started sketching, but dread starts carving a new pit in his stomach. He'd planned to use his wife's business trip as a chance to get some professional help, or bug bomb the house, at least. But now, of all the things he should be worried about – his wife's impulsiveness, his children's happiness, their finances – Scott thinks, *she'll find the bugs before I can*.

"I'm not going to Kentucky," Donna says. "They're keeping me local. I've already turned in my two weeks."

Scott nods.

"You're being awfully calm about this," Donna says.

"Do you want me to be angry?"

"No. No, I don't want you to be angry. But aren't you even curious, why I'm quitting?"

"Because of the cheerleaders."

Donna laughs like tires on a freshly oiled backroad. "It's not the cheerleaders. It's not the fucking cheerleaders."

"You're not happy," Scott says.

"I'm not sleeping. I can't eat. I'm never home. And my son ran away from home, Scott. Our son, and I have no idea why. Do you? Have you even asked him lately?"

"Donna."

"I'm going to keep asking." Donna stands, her chair wobbling back on two legs.

"You won't do anything about it, so I will."

"Donna, wait." Scott grabs her arm, but she doesn't move toward the stairs like he anticipated. He lets her wrist dangle in the circle of his fingers. "I talked to Grace today. She thinks, maybe, we should just give him some space about this."

“Grace is sixteen,” Donna says.

“Maybe she’s right, though. She doesn’t think he’ll run again.”

“How does she know?”

“She doesn’t. But they’re close.”

“She’s sixteen,” Donna repeats. Scott tugs at her wrist, and she moves into him, drops her forehead to his shoulder. Her arms hang at her sides, so Scott cups his hands around her elbows.

“You’re not happy,” he says against her temple.

Warm breath leaves her nose in a sharp whoosh, moist against his arm.

“But I wish you would’ve talked to me about this. Will you get another job?”

Donna shrugs, her shoulder bumping Scott’s chin. “Probably. Eventually. But right now, I need to be home. I don’t even know...” She swallows. “We’re okay for now? If I don’t?”

Panic and resolve fizz in Scott’s head, making him dizzy. He can get rid of the bugs, but he’ll have to do it quickly. He’ll have to be better to keep moving them forward. “We’re okay,” he says, all he can manage, and presses a kiss to Donna’s stale hair.

Donna goes upstairs to shower, and Scott picks the kids up from school, enduring another silent car ride, another exile into their rooms. Scott grabs the floor plans he’s been working on all day and heads to Dylan’s room, stands before his closed door, fist poised, ready to knock. Fear seizes his muscles, though, a sudden realization that he couldn’t handle Dylan’s indifference to this offering, wouldn’t know where to go from

there. He sees Grace's open door, finds her cross-legged on her bed, *A Tale of Two Cities* open on her lap.

"What's up, Dad?" she asks, closing the book and smiling at him. Scott remembers how easy Dylan used to smile, how beautiful he was as a child, deep dimples and crinkled eyes. Grace is beautiful, too, athletic, with long strawberry-blond hair. But Dylan was breathtaking. Strangers stopped on the street to stand over his stroller and coo.

"Just working on these," he says, waving the drawings. "Was going to show them to Dylan, but he seems busy."

"Hmm," Grace says, nodding. "Probably."

"You guys talk anymore today?"

"About what?"

Scott shakes his head. "Grace." He crosses his arms over his chest, irritating a few of the bites on his upper arms, though he refrains from scratching. For the first time, Grace's composure feels off to Scott, like apathy rather than confidence. "If you know something else about Dylan, we need to know about it."

Grace picks up her book again. Her smile disappears. "What about him?"

"You know what," Scott says.

"I told you. He won't do it again."

"You can't just say that. You don't know."

"Yes, I do."

"Did he tell you that?"

"No."

Scott nearly groans in frustration, but stops himself before he lets out more than a small grunt. Grace catches the noise anyway, glares at him over the pages of her book.

“Grace,” Scott says. “This is serious. If Dylan’s unhappy, we need to know.”

“He is.”

“Why?”

Grace shrugs. “That’s not the kind of thing we ask each other.”

“Don’t you think,” Scott says, sitting next to Grace on the bed, “it’s probably time to start asking?”

“No,” Grace says. “We get unhappy about stuff. We get over it.” She claps her book shut and rubs her hands across her scalp, a gesture he’s seen mirrored on Donna countless times. “It’s probably about a girl. Or a bad grade. Maybe he’s scared of going to high school next year. Or maybe he just wanted to do something unexpected. I don’t know, Dad, but he needed this, and now he’s back, and we’ll figure it out. We always do.” She bows her head, picks at the plastic end of her shoelace. “We don’t need you guys to do it for us.”

She says it softly, almost sadly, but Grace’s words feel like a shot of fire to Scott’s blood. The urge to yell thrums through him. He wants to grab the book from Grace’s hands and toss it against the wall. He always admired Grace’s calm, her confidence to laugh and smile and take control. Now, he’s on the outside of some private joke between his children, some secret sadness they share. Before he can speak, though, Grace scratches a bright red bump on her arm. Scott hurries from the room, shutting the door behind him.

They eat another silent dinner, Donna rattled from her resignation, near tears beside Scott; Grace, sulking on the far end; Dylan, still and tense across the table. Scott tells Grace to do the dishes afterward – his anger cooling, congealing, but still present – and she clears the table without protest. Dylan slips back up to his room, Donna close behind, and Scott sits, exhausted, the tension between them tapping his energy and letting it drip away.

“You’re asking the same questions,” Grace says from the sink, “doing the same things, over and over. Don’t you get it? It’s not helping.”

“Then what do we *do*?” Scott says, surprised at the desperation in his voice. He looks over to find Grace elbows-deep in suds, blinking out the window above the faucet.

“I don’t know,” she says, her voice thick. “I don’t know. Okay? I don’t know. Why do I have to...” She takes a deep breath. “Stop asking. Just try something different.”

So Scott heads upstairs, where Donna is curled into herself in front of Dylan’s door. He takes her hands and tugs her to his chest, and she nuzzles her nose between his neck and shoulder. “Not tonight,” he murmurs, and kisses her on the forehead, the lips, places her hands on the back of his neck, where her nails pressed into his skin this morning. He knows she needs this reassurance tonight, this promise that not everything is bad and broken, that she hasn’t let everything fall to pieces, and leads her into the bedroom, nudging the door closed with his foot. He might need this, too, if only to ease the pressure in his head for a while. He cups his hands around her cheeks, leaning in to kiss her, but she starts undoing his belt, watching her own hands with the detached determination of someone learning to knit a scarf. He starts to pull away, to slow her down, but she leans forward and touches her mouth to his neck, and he forgets to protest.

They fall to the bed, and Scott nudges a leg between Donna's knees and pins her wrists above her head, the way she likes it, the way she finally asked him to after years of dating and marriage, of hesitant touches and tentative questions. He finds the spot behind her ear, the one that makes her shiver, and scrapes it with his teeth.

Donna pushes at his arm, though, and Scott realizes she wants to be on top of him. In a wave of lust, stronger than any he's felt in years, he grabs her, flipping her over so fast she nearly loses her balance. She straddles him, and he rubs his hands up her thighs. She looks distant, unsure, so he tucks his hands under her shirt, strokes her sides, runs his fingertips up her spine. She shudders and leans down to kiss him, and Scott flattens his hands against her lower back. He feels something under his fingers, a small bump, rougher in the middle than on the edges. A bite, one that's been scratched. Scabbed. As she pushes her tongue into his mouth, he feels along her skin for more. He counts them – one, two, three, four in a row, more peppered across her shoulder blades.

He pulls away, lightheaded. "Stop," he murmurs. Donna jerks back and blinks at him, as though someone flipped on the lights in a dark room. He wants to push her down on her stomach, rip off her shirt and see the bites themselves. He wants to know how many, how long.

"Off," he croaks, and she lifts her hands from him, quick as if she were burned, scooting down to the foot of the bed. He retreats to the bathroom, braces his arms on the sink and stares at himself in the mirror. He listens to the bed creak, and suddenly wishes her gone. Heat rises into his face; he hid them from her, but it never occurred to him she might do the same.

Back in the bedroom, Donna is staring at the floor, her hands clenching and unclenching the comforter. Scott sits beside her, though he wants to run into the yard, take a deep breath of cooling dusk air, and yell and yell until he figures out what to do with the pieces of his family that won't fit. Instead, he takes Donna's hand and says, "How long have you had those bites?"

Donna frowns at him. "Bites? Is that why you –"

"Your back." Scott runs a hand across her shoulders. "They're from bed bugs."

"I know." Her shoulders sag. "I know they are."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought I could handle it," she says. "And I knew you wouldn't..." She shakes her head. "I didn't know what you'd do. But I've been sick about it. The thought of those things makes my skin crawl. They could be anywhere. Everywhere."

Relief empties Scott out, leaves him hollow. The irony does not escape him, though: he thought she would do too much, take on the problem with an energy she didn't possess. She thought he would do nothing at all.

"It's alright," he says. He doesn't show her his own bites, doesn't take off his shirt and let her count the ones on his stomach, soothe those on his back with cool fingers.

"We'll do something about it. Call an exterminator. Tomorrow."

Donna takes a shuddery breath. "I thought it might be my fault. That's really why I didn't tell you. The websites say they can travel from hotels, in suitcases."

Scott kisses her ear and tries not to smile, but he feels giddy, the tightness seeping from his chest like air from a punctured inflatable. "We'll check the kids' beds, too."

Donna's hand tightens in his. "It can't be the kids."

“We don’t know what they pick up. One of Grace’s friends, on their clothes. Or Dylan.”

“It wasn’t Dylan.”

“Donna. If he was camped out in some flea bag motel for a night or two, he might’ve brought them home.”

“He wasn’t at a motel.” Donna presses the heel of her hand to her forehead.

“Where would he have gotten the money for that? Christ, Scott, he’s a child.”

“We can’t keep assuming it’s not this or that,” Scott says. “We have to get rid of them. Wherever they came from.”

Donna squeezes his hand again, and nods. It feels like something different.

When Scott wakes the next morning, the sudden calm of the previous night has vanished, replaced by a nervous sort of energy, a buzzing desire to act. Donna has already left to discuss her sudden resignation with her superiors, though she vowed to call the exterminator before her meeting started. There’s nothing to do, not yet, so Scott makes breakfast, but neither Grace nor Dylan comes downstairs in time to eat. At 7:45, he goes upstairs and bangs on their doors, yells that they’ll miss homeroom if they don’t hurry. He waits at the kitchen table, tapping an anxious rhythm on the wood surface, until he hears footsteps on the stairs. Dylan wanders into the kitchen and heads straight for the refrigerator, grabs an apple and bites into it, chewing loudly, smacking his lips. When he sees Scott, he flinches and lowers his eyes, and Scott feels a rush of affection for his son, a sudden desire to wrap his arms around him and squeeze Dylan until he shrinks small enough to carry in his palm.

“I got you something yesterday,” Scott says, grabbing Dylan’s new backpack from the counter. He hands it to Dylan, who holds it reverently, running his fingers along the zipper. “I noticed your old one was getting sort of ratty. This is a good brand, I think. If you don’t like blue, we can exchange it for something else.”

“No,” Dylan says. “This is a good one.” He unzips the main compartment and looks inside. “I have a lot more books this year. They weren’t really fitting in my old one.”

“Good,” Scott says, finding it a little hard to breathe. “There should be enough room in there for your sketchbook, too.”

Dylan blinks at him. “Thanks,” he says. “Thank you.”

Grace comes down a moment later, sinking into a chair without grabbing any food. She rests her chin in her hand and stares out the bay window, avoiding Scott’s eyes, ignoring the kick Dylan gives to her shins. The sudden silence in the room is a palpable thing Scott feels he could roll into a ball between his palms. He mumbles something about grabbing his keys, though he knows they’re in the basket on the counter, and backs out of the room. He takes a deep breath on the way up the stairs. Just today, he thinks, just one more day, and their bug problem will be on the mend. He sinks down to the bed, and sees, in the middle of the mattress, a small brown speck. Scott lowers his face close enough to see six legs, two antennae, a body shaped like an apple seed. His heart thrums, and he plucks the thing between two fingers, the evidence, the proof. He cradles it all the way to the kitchen and slips it into a plastic bag. Grace eyes the baggie in Scott’s hand. Dylan watches, too, and Scott feels the need to do something drastic, before this moment slips from his control.

“Get up,” Scott says. “Upstairs. Help me out with something.”

Grace checks her watch, sighs like the sullen teenager she’s never been. “We’re already running late.”

“How about skipping a day?” Scott says. “Everyone plays hooky once.” Grace looks scandalized, but the corner of Dylan’s mouth lifts in a tiny, mischievous smirk, and Scott’s resolve fortifies. He leads them to the bedroom and folds the sheets back, starts hefting the queen mattress off the box-spring. He balances it on its end and pushes it toward the doorway. Dylan yelps when the mattress almost tumbles on top of him, but when he catches the corner, he’s smiling. Dimples and all.

“What’s going on?” Grace says, bracing herself in the doorway.

“We’re having a little bug problem. Help me get this outside,” Scott says, already tugging the mattress down the staircase. It starts to slide on its own, and Scott moves out of the way in time to watch it bump down the stairs, knocking into the wall and toppling onto its side. Dylan laughs.

“Christ, Dad,” Grace says. “There’s a guy to call for this kind of shit.”

Scott is too focused on the task at hand to reprimand her for her language, or to reassure her that professionals have already been called. Finding the bug felt like an open window before the storm, a breeze laced with rain, and now Dylan is sweating and grinning, helping Scott load the mattress into the back of the van. But Scott knows it’s only temporary. They have to hurry, before the window shuts.

Donna’s SUV pulls into the driveway as the kids climb into the backseat of the van. Her eyes are red-rimmed and puffy, and her gaze narrows at the sight of their mattress protruding from the van’s open back doors. “Scott?” she asks.

“I found one,” Scott says, grabbing her hands. “One of the bugs, on the mattress.” He catches the slightly manic tone of his voice, tries to slow his speech. “If we have one, we have more. An infestation. So I’m getting rid of it.”

“Scott, someone else can deal with this,” Donna says. Her eyebrows furrow, and she sniffles. “We’ll have to get rid of the mattresses, but not right this second.”

“Why not? Do we want the kids sleeping with insects? It’s dirty. It’s no good for anyone.”

Donna resigns more than agrees, sighs and shakes her head and climbs into the van with the rest of them, leaning her temple against the window pane. Her mouth sets into a tight line when Scott pulls out of the subdivision.

He drives them a few miles out of town, to the old schoolhouse where groups of teenagers gather to drink and smoke pot on the weekends. He glances at Dylan for signs of recognition or unease, but Dylan stares blankly out the window, silent and bewildering as ever. Scott parks by a dumpster near the back entrance.

“You guys will have to help me with this,” Scott says.

“Okay,” Dylan agrees for the three of them.

Together, they unload the mattress, each lifting a corner, stumbling and swaying. They heft the mattress over their heads and into the dumpster.

“We’ll go back and get yours next,” Scott says to Dylan.

“Where are we gonna sleep?” Grace asks, kicking at the gravel under her feet.

“We can stop and get some new mattresses on the way back,” Scott says.

“They’re expensive,” Donna says, wiping dust from her hands on the side of her pants.

“Then we’ll sleep in the living room. In sleeping bags,” Scott says.

“Like a slumber party,” Donna says.

“This is stupid,” Grace says, but she laughs, and so does Donna, as the two of them make their way back to the van. Scott stands with his hand on the dumpster for another moment, staring down at the mattress. Dylan mirrors him.

“Best to just get rid of it,” Scott says.

“Can we set it on fire?” Dylan asks.

Scott barks a laugh, then clamps his mouth shut so quickly his teeth clack together. But Dylan smiles at him again, a small smile, one that crinkles the corners of his eyes.

“Why not?” Scott says, and Dylan pulls a lighter from his pocket. “Do I even want to know why you have that?”

“Probably not,” Dylan says, and he sounds so much like himself – like Dylan before the chaos – that Scott can do nothing but smile back. Dylan stands on his tip toes and holds the flame to the mattress tag, which ignites and starts to burn.

“I was wondering why I itched so much,” Dylan says, after a few moments of staring at the flames. He runs a hand up the back of his neck, lifting the curls of hair there. Scott puts his hands on his son’s shoulders and turns him, inspecting the skin at his nape. There are bites, tiny ones, smaller than his own, but more numerous, like a rash. Scott runs his thumbs over them.

“We’ll get rid of them,” Scott says, but his tongue feels thick with the lie. He knows they won’t find them all. He watches the flames, unease seizing his muscles. Bits of ash flit around Dylan’s hair, and Scott brushes them away, catching the ghost of

Dylan's smile and the flicker of firelight in his eyes. Dylan looks simultaneously serene and wild, the hope in his expression closing around Scott like a vice. Scott will never find them all. They are in every nook, every crevice, the places Scott won't go looking, the places he doesn't know exist. He would have to set the house ablaze, send every bug popping into the ether. "We'll do everything we can."

They head for home, the smell of smoke lingering among them.

Drowners

The summer I turned seventeen was my second year lifeguarding at the Village Pool in Millstadt, Illinois, and I still hadn't saved anyone. Kurt Zoller claimed he saved someone, once – a young girl trying to reach the bottom of the twelve-foot – but Kurt was in college and had worked there much longer. I mostly just sat around on the stand, blowing my whistle at kids running for the diving board and feeling the sun burn my nose and the skin of my forearms, my upper arms still pale and tender under the t-shirt I wore over my one-piece.

I wanted to save someone, though. That's why I took the job. Swim team members got first run of available spots, and Dave, the manager, practically handed me one after I broke the state record for the hundred-meter-back at regionals. That whole first summer, I was knotted up with anticipation, waiting for little sun-tinted heads to disappear below the surface, counting the seconds until they reemerged giggling and oblivious. It was overwhelming, trying to keep up with all the splashing, trying to separate adolescent boasting – *bet I can hold my breath longer than you can* – from the actual drowners. I spent entire shifts hunched forward, my feet curled and cramping, waiting for the moment I could spring off my toes, dive from the stand in a long arc and feel the jolt of cold water when I hit the surface. At home after work, I could barely eat dinner, I was so tangled inside.

"I bet you could work at that pool twenty years," my mom would say, "and not have to save a single person. So calm down."

And by the beginning of my second summer, I did calm down. Kurt kept me distracted – if Dave wasn't around, we'd toss one of those squishy water balls between

our stands, glancing down every so often to make sure everything was in order. But by mid-July, the summer was hotter, stickier, the heavy kind of heat that makes it hard to move. Kurt got restless, eager to return to school. I got bored.

So I started hoping people would drown a little. Not die, obviously, but wander out of their depth, inhale a mouthful of water, lose a pool baton in the twelve-foot and chase it too far, too long. I wanted to wrap my arms around someone's stomach, squeeze him, drag him to the concrete and rub solid circles on his back while he belched chlorine. I didn't want to give anyone CPR, though. I had taken the classes, but wasn't very good at it.

Tucker and Kyle McPherson showed up one Friday while I was watching for air bubbles. The thin sound of music from the snack bar radio had nearly put me to sleep, in spite of my itch to be in the water, and I almost toppled off the stand when I felt someone tap my ankle.

"Whoa, Andi," Tucker said, one hand up by his face in an awkward wave. He was wearing a pair of aviator sunglasses, so I couldn't see his eyes, but the crease between his eyebrows suggested he was uncertain about approaching me. "Alright, there?"

"Yeah, of course," I said. Tucker came to southern Illinois from some magnet school in Indiana midway through our sophomore year, though I didn't know much about him except that he moved up a grade in math and science. I hadn't even realized he knew my name. He didn't seem to travel in any certain circle of friends; he played soccer, but didn't go to parties with the rest of his teammates. I'd never been invited to those parties, because the soccer players and their friends seemed to be afraid of anyone who used their brain for things other than sports. Tucker was smarter than me, but I thought about

everything, noticed things and analyzed things, and people didn't like it when they caught you with that faraway look, the squinted gaze and the slack jaw. They wanted you thinking about them, but not too much.

A pair of blue, Hawaiian-print swim trunks sat low on Tucker's hips, and he had a mess of shaggy brown hair that made him look both wild and casual – not at all how I'd imagine someone that smart to look. Because he didn't fit the stereotype, the smart kids seemed as wary of him as the soccer players. That made him interesting to me: even outsiders typically had a group of their own. I wanted to say something teasing and fun, something I could giggle along with that would make Tucker grin, but I didn't have the air of effortless flirtation so many of the girls at school seemed to, the ability to touch or smile and know exactly what kind of effect it had, and I knew if I faked it, it would sound just as forced as it felt. So, instead, I focused on the pale, skinny kid next to Tucker. He was maybe thirteen, and stood with his arms folded against his chest, his toes curling against the hot concrete. He looked more uncomfortable in a swimsuit than anyone I'd seen all summer.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"My brother, Kyle," Tucker said. He put his hand on top of Kyle's head. "We're just a pair of wanderers, looking for adventure."

It sounded like Tucker was quoting something, some sophisticated piece of literature, but I couldn't figure out what. "Not much adventure here," I said, and though my response sounded horribly inadequate to my own ears, Tucker smiled. "How's it going, Kyle?" I asked. Kyle jerked his head, dislodging Tucker's hand, and glared up at me. I squirmed in my chair. His anger was radiating off of him in waves.

“Hey, knock it off,” Tucker said, spinning Kyle around by the shoulders and giving him a shove. “Go get us a spot, you little weirdo.” He took the towel from under his arm and threw it to Kyle, but it unrolled in the air and floated a few feet to the right, spreading out and landing softly in the water. Kyle stared at it, then glared at Tucker as if daring him, *Go ahead. Ask me to get it.* Some kid in the pool swam over and balled the towel up in his hands, tossing it into the air and yelling, “Catch!” The sopping towel dropped at Kyle’s feet.

“Friendly,” I said as Kyle kicked the towel around to the other side of the pool.

“Jesus.” Tucker rubbed a hand against the back of his neck. “That kid’s gonna kill me.”

“Is he alright?”

“He’s just pissed at me. He’s been pissed at everything since we moved here, but me especially.”

“What’d you do?”

“It’s always something. I’m either ignoring him, or I’m bothering him. Can’t do anything right by him these days.” Tucker smiled, tried to play it off as a joke, but I could hear the frustration in his voice. “Today? I took him to a pool, and he can’t swim. He hates me a little extra for that.”

I tried to think of something clever, but all I could manage to do was swallow and say, “That sucks.”

“Yeah,” Tucker said. “I’ve offered to teach him how, but he doesn’t want anything to do with that. I don’t get it. I don’t want to him to have to deal with the teasing

and shit. I don't want him to end up..." Tucker shrugged. "I'll get out of your hair, though, let you get back to work."

"Oh, okay," I said. A bead of sweat slid from the back of my neck, down my spine into the waistband of my shorts. Tucker was staring at the ground, and I couldn't help but feel like he'd come for a specific response that I'd failed to provide.

"See you around," he said, scratching at his lower back as he made his way over to his brother. Kyle was standing at the edge of the pool, watching the water, and as Tucker got closer, he inched forward, bending his toes over the lip. He looked over his shoulder at Tucker, his chin tipped up, defiant, clearly ready to jump, and a sick wave of adrenaline rose into my throat. I tensed, coiled to leap out of my chair, until Tucker yanked Kyle back so hard, he might've fallen and cracked his head open if not for Tucker's fingers pressing into his shoulder. Kyle stumbled, his chest heaving as he reeled from the edge. He looked so furious, I thought he might hit Tucker, but he lowered himself against the chain-link fence surrounding the pool and pulled his knees to his chest. Tucker clenched his fists before grabbing the wet towel and spreading it out, a dark shadow of water seeping from its edges.

A long, low beep sounded from the speakers on either side of the bathrooms, signaling a rotation change for the lifeguards, and I exhaled a shaky breath. Kurt, who I knew had been watching my exchange with Tucker, flicked his sunglasses from the top of his head down over his eyes and slid off the stand gracefully, noiselessly, as only someone with practice could. When he got to my stand, he nudged me, his damp elbow sliding against my knee.

"Got yourself a boyfriend there?"

“Shut up,” I said.

“Gonna ask you to prom?”

“He was just being friendly. It’s not like that.”

“Oh, Russell,” Kurt said, shaking his head. “So naïve.”

Kurt was the only one who called me by my last name, and though I usually liked the nickname, the familiarity between us, I suddenly felt young, teased and condescended to. I always saw the way Kurt interacted with people, how he treated everything like a transaction, how his favorite line to use when he flirted was, *What’s in it for me?* But I never guessed he’d wanted anything from me, always figured I was the exception. There was nothing I could give him. There was nothing I could give Tucker, either, but the thought of him expecting something sent off hum of jittery anticipation through my limbs like a current. I crossed my arms over my chest, my skin tight and red, my hair stinking of suntan lotion. I closed my eyes and listened to the pool noises, the splashing and squealing, the slap of bare feet, but I still felt them watching me – Tucker, and Kurt, the other lifeguards, everyone. It was suffocating, like the humidity. They were all waiting for me to do something. Anything.

When I opened my eyes, Kyle was staring at a group of boys his age dunking each other in the middle of the pool, his whole body curled toward them, his shoulders hunched up around his ears. I wondered if he would try and jump again. I watched him, and I waited.

The next Friday, when I hopped off the stand at noon for my break, Tucker was there, sitting at one of the snack bar tables with two slushies. He was balanced on the

back two legs of his chair, his fingers drumming an erratic rhythm on his stomach. He wasn't looking at me, but he was tense, alert, and I could tell he knew exactly where I was and what I was doing. I snuck past him into the snack bar, his nervousness repelling me like the matched ends of a magnet.

"Chicken," Kurt said as he loaded a new box of push-pops into the freezer.

"No," I said, leaning against the wall so I could look out the ordering window without being seen. "Just not interested."

"Bullshit. You're sixteen. Of course you're interested."

"Seventeen." Kyle was sitting in the same corner as the week before, but closer to the pool, one leg pulled against his chest and the other dangling in the water, submerged to the knee. Tucker had his chin in his hands, picking chunks of styrofoam off the top of his cup, the other cup sweating across the table, poised like a bartering chip. I pushed myself off the wall.

"There you go," Kurt said. "Go get him, kiddo."

I sat across the table from Tucker, who stayed perfectly still, his focus somewhere out near the kiddie pool. "For me?" I asked, bumping the slushie cup with my knuckles.

"If you want it."

I grabbed the drink and sucked hard on the straw. The frigid liquid hurt my back teeth. "What's it for?"

Tucker finally looked at me, his face pinched with confusion. "What do you mean? It's not for anything." He glanced out toward water again. "Just being friendly."

His ambiguity sent a shock of irritation through me. I got a little bold. "Well, you're not very good at it." I pushed my chair back.

“Okay, wait,” he said. He was staring down at his hands, chewing on his bottom lip. I wondered what would make anyone nervous around me, what Tucker could want that was so hard to ask for. A date? A friend? Not help with homework, certainly. Or did he want what every other soccer player wanted after games on Friday nights, in the woods behind the field when the crowds left, in a ring of truck headlights and swarming summer moths, alcohol soaked and frantic and secret?

“I saw that you offer swim lessons on the weekends,” Tucker said.

Surprisingly, disappointment dropped heavy on my shoulders. I might’ve been wary, but I’d felt the thrill of it, a little, the tingle of bloodrush and the churn in my stomach of mixed anxiety and excitement. “Yeah,” I said, grabbing the cup and taking another drink, desperate for something to do with my hands. Heat tickled the tips of my ears.

“It’s just, Kyle’s having a rough time with the move,” Tucker said. “It’s hard enough being the new kid, you know? The swimming thing just makes him stand out even more.”

“They’re not asking him to join the swim team.”

“But I’m sure you know how kids get when they find out shit like this. They’re brutal.”

I tried not to flinch. “And you can’t do it?”

“He won’t let me. I keep offering, but he doesn’t want me showing him anything anymore. So I thought if I brought him here, he’d get so uncomfortable he’d have to learn.” Tucker laughed weakly.

“That’s really mean.” I stood, my chair nearly tipping over behind me. “Classes are \$35. Dave can sign you up at the window.”

“Wait.” Tucker reached out for my hand, then pulled his arm back into his chest. He looked as humiliated as I felt. “That’s why I wanted to talk to you first. He won’t take a class. Not with the little kids. He wants to teach himself.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, then.”

“Could you talk to him, maybe? See if he’ll sign up?”

“What would I say to him?” I looked at Kyle, who had both legs in the water now, kicking slowly, mesmerized by his own wake. “I don’t even know him.”

Tucker shrugged. “That makes two of us.”

Something like pity lumped up in my throat, and I walked away from Tucker, afraid he might start begging, might say “please,” and I’d never be able to look at him again. I shuffled over to where Kyle was sitting, the hot concrete scorching the pads of my feet. Kyle reached back and pulled a towel around his shoulders as I approached, and I lowered myself next to him, slipping my burning feet in the water and shuddering with relief.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he said, and I realized it was the first time I’d heard him speak. His voice was lower than I expected, stronger, jarring when compared to his scrawny frame and the way the towel swallowed him in soft fabric. He had a brush of freckles across his nose, same as Tucker.

“Your brother wants me to give you swim lessons,” I said. His legs looked elastic in the water, soft around the edges, and I kicked mine in time with them.

Kyle snorted. "I know he does."

"Look," I said. "It's not that bad. Lots of people don't know how to swim. It's not something you should be ashamed of." I nudged my foot against his, wanted to tuck it around his ankle, to placate him, but he shrugged away from me, his foot skittering behind his calf.

Kyle locked his elbows and scooted himself to the very edge of the concrete, his grip white-knuckled on the lip.

"It wouldn't take more than a couple of weeks," I said.

"I don't need you to teach me." He balanced forward on his arms. His neck looked hot to the touch, though I couldn't tell if it was from sunburn or a blush. "I can teach myself."

"No, you can't," I said, but I had the urge to push him into the water and see if he could. I sucked in a breath, guilt seizing my lungs. I knew what would happen if Kyle tried to swim. I remembered, vividly, the first time my dad took me swimming, how he dropped me in the water and I sank straight to the bottom, arms flailing as I sputtered and gasped. My head had felt ready to pop, my legs useless, too slow, my chest tightening against the fear and the lack of oxygen and the struggle to remember what, exactly, I was supposed to be doing. I was shivery and weak when my father pulled me above the surface, and when he whispered, low and close to my ear, "You have to *swim*," shame spread warm through my veins.

The beep signaled the end of my break, and I pulled my legs from the pool silently, shaken. "It's your call," I said to him as I got to my feet, remnants of childhood fear a feverish buzz under my skin.

Back at my stand, I slumped low in the chair and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to will Tucker and Kyle away, to forget they had ever been there, wanting just me and Kurt and the pool, the summer as it had been.

“How’d it go?” Kurt’s hand tugged at my ankle.

“Go away,” I said. My voice was a warning. I shook my leg free.

Kurt was silent, and I imagined his face contorting into an annoyed scowl. After a moment, though, he patted my leg and said, “Fine, fine. Don’t bite my head off,” sounding more amused than exasperated. I relaxed a little, and when I opened my eyes a few minutes later, Kyle and Tucker were gone. For a moment, I could pretend they hadn’t existed at all.

When neither McPherson showed up the next Friday, or the Friday after that, I started to settle down a little. School was only two weeks away, and I soaked in the warmth of the late-summer sun, tipping my head back into it, occasionally stripping off my t-shirt and reveling in the sheen of sweat on my arms and legs. It was the perfect place to be, balanced in those last moments of freedom. I breathed easy.

But on the second Friday in August, Kyle McPherson came slinking out of the bathroom, alone. I tried to ignore him, focused instead on the moms in tankinis holding their toddlers in the kiddie pool, the elderly man in the red Speedo with his *Men’s Fitness*, Kurt and the girl in the strapless bikini he was chatting up next to his stand. I couldn’t help but watch Kyle, though, who was spreading out his towel and gazing at the swimmers with familiar dejection. I was on guard with him around. I wondered , if the

water made him as uneasy as Tucker claimed, why he would be there without his brother. I wondered if I had anything to do with it.

A few boys Kyle's age snuck over to him. I couldn't hear their conversation, but Kyle's lower lip was tucked between his teeth, and he was rubbing his hands up and down his legs, watching the boys' feet as they laughed and nudged each other. *They're brutal*, I remembered Tucker saying, and felt myself tense and still. When they finally walked away, Kyle kept staring at the concrete. He sat motionless for a few long moments, then pushed himself to his feet, marched over to the side of the pool, and, with the posture of a sharpened pencil, jumped straight into the twelve-foot.

I curved forward, focused, unblinking, on the rippling circle of water where Kyle disappeared. I watched for an air bubble or a glimpse of hair, but another kid moved into my line of sight and Kyle was gone. With the forced calm of my lifeguard training, I grabbed the whistle around my neck and blew. The shrill, dying-bird sound echoed in my ears, startling me, and I toppled into the pool, hitting the surface knees-first and inhaling a nose full of water. My sinuses felt near to bursting, my eyes stinging, but I pushed downward to get to Kyle, whose head was tilted back, his eyes shut in painful-looking slits. His legs were still, but his hands were frantic, clawing at the water like a dog digging at a patch of parched dirt. I reached out and grabbed his arm, and his glassy eyes opened.

Just then, an arm circled my waist, and I gasped, all the air expelled from my chest. I was yanked above the surface, and I tried to take a deep breath, but the air was stuck in my throat, no room for it with all the water in my lungs.

“Nice rescue,” Kurt said close to my ear, and I gagged. “Whoa, hey,” he said, and squeezed me around the middle, dragging me to the side of the pool where I coughed and hacked, water dripping from my lips. “Breathe.”

“Where,” I croaked, and Kurt gave me a few pats on the back. “Kyle.”

“There,” Kurt said, and I saw Kyle a couple of feet down the side, his head buried in his arms, another lifeguard’s hand on his hitching back.

“Is he?”

“He’s fine. Come on.”

Kurt heaved me out of the water and pushed me toward the supply hut, both hands on my shoulders like he thought I might make a run for it. I wouldn’t have gotten far, had I tried. My knees felt loose, like someone had removed the strings that tied me together.

In the hut, Kurt grabbed a towel from a shelf and shoved me down on a crate of lifejackets. “Sit,” he said.

“I’m fine,” I said, gripping the edges of the towel with shaking fingers.

“Okay,” Kurt said. “Catch your breath.”

“Is Kyle alright?”

“He’s fine, I told you. Jesus, Russell, calm down. Give yourself a minute, would you?”

“I’m *fine*.”

“Then humor me.” Kurt sat on a milk crate next to me.

“You didn’t have to save me,” I said. “I didn’t need to be saved.”

“You took a nosedive right off the stand. What was I supposed to do?”

“I had everything under control.”

“Didn’t look like it.” Kurt sighed. “I was just worried, alright? You were down there a while.”

I rubbed my nose on my knee. “Now everyone thinks I fucked that up.”

“Hey, kiddo.” Kurt cupped a hand around the back of my head. “You blew the whistle.”

But this was my job, the one I was trained for, the one I nearly went crazy wanting. And in front of Kurt, and Kyle, and everyone, I’d frozen. I’d screwed it up. I needed to talk to Kyle to set this right, so I shook Kurt off, ignored his murmured “Goddammit” as I pushed the door open. A brief scan of the still-tittering crowd, and Kyle was nowhere to be found.

The lifeguard who rescued Kyle – a girl Kurt’s age, named Jenny – was in the snack bar, filling out an incident report, her dripping hair pulled back in tight, unruffled perfection.

“Jenny,” I said. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” Jenny said. “A little spooked, is all. He’s sitting out front. We called his mom and she’s coming to pick him up.” She looked up at me and smiled like a receptionist, professionally friendly. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Sorry. About all that. I really did have him.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “We’re all a little unsteady our first year.”

I pulled the towel tighter around my shoulders and went into the bathroom, stopping to look at my reflection in the mirror, at my red-rimmed eyes and the tangle of blonde hair matted to my head. I looked like a child, wandering into her parents’ room after a nightmare, searching for comfort. With a growl, I dropped the towel and ran my

fingers through my hair, pulling the knots loose and smoothing them over my scalp, but that didn't much change my appearance. I looked just as I knew everyone saw me – small, and incapable, and very young.

“Come on, Russell,” I said. “Get it together.”

Because there was no reason I couldn't salvage this. I could swim – I was an excellent swimmer – but more importantly, I *knew* more than Kyle. More about the water, yes, but also more about watching from the fringes, living with a clear sense of distance, being afraid, being apart. If anyone could help Kyle, I could.

I attempted to untangle my hair again, and when I was satisfied enough with the result, I tucked the towel around my waist and went out to the front of the building, where Kyle was sitting. I sat on the bench next to him.

“Sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“Drowning.”

I laughed. “You did a pretty awful job of it,” I said, and Kyle smiled. “Although I did a pretty awful job of saving you, didn't I?”

Kyle laughed, his voice hoarse. “You did alright.”

“Those boys,” I said, tucking a knee up beside me on the bench and scooting toward Kyle. His smile disappeared, and he wrapped an arm around his stomach.

“They didn't think I would jump,” Kyle said. “I'm not some loser, you know. I have friends. My friend Ross lives right over there. I go to his house all the time.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You think I'm a loser.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re in love with my brother.”

I laughed again. “Definitely not.”

“I bet you are. Everyone’s in love with my brother.”

“Well I’m not.”

“He does everything right and I just....” Kyle turned toward me so his knee bumped mine. “I can do stuff right, too, but it’s not the same. Tucker gets all the credit for teaching me how to do things, but *I* actually do them.”

I felt a pang of sympathy for Kyle. “Let me give you lessons, then,” I said.

Kyle shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“It won’t even have to be during pool hours. I have a key.”

“You’ll get in trouble.

“No one will know. You’ll impress everyone when they think you taught yourself.”

A large, red van pulled up in front of the pool building. “I gotta go,” Kyle said.

“Think about it, please,” I said, and Kyle nodded before climbing into the van. I watched them drive away, and the knot in my stomach tugged taut. I knew I could help him if I got a second chance. I could get in the water and do it right, this time. I could.

At close the next evening, while I was in the supply hut shrugging back into my shirt, Kurt came to the doorway and said, “You have a visitor,” and I saw Kyle’s brown hair peeking over Kurt’s arm. My eagerness must’ve shown on my face, because Kurt raised his eyebrows.

“Alright?” he asked, and I nodded. “You sure?”

“Stop asking me that,” I said. “That’s about all you’ve asked me lately, you know that?”

“As long as you know what you’re doing,” he said.

“I’m just helping out, okay?” I rolled the hem of my t-shirt between two fingers.

“I can do that, can’t I?” I hadn’t meant it to sound like a question, but my voice hitched at the end.

“Andi,” Kurt said softly.

“See you tomorrow,” I said without looking up, certain I’d see pity in his eyes.

Kurt bumped my shoulder with his. “Bye,” he said, and left me alone with Kyle.

“Hey,” Kyle said. He was wearing a hoodie, though it was still in the 70s, and his hands were buried deep in its pockets.

“Change your mind?” I asked.

Kyle shrugged. “Tucker thinks I’m at Ross’s. He’s coming back in an hour, so it’s gotta be quick.”

“Sure,” I said. “Little stuff, today. How about just getting in the water?”

Kyle’s whole body stiffened, but he said, “Okay.”

“You might want to take the hoodie off, first,” I said with a smile, and Kyle smiled back, pulling one arm out of his sleeve. I pulled my shirt off and watched Kyle struggle with the sweatshirt, clumsily tugging it over his head and emerging with ruffled hair and pink cheeks. A wave of fondness swept over me, and I wondered if this was what I should’ve felt for Tucker, what made girls confident enough to touch boys

whenever they wanted. Maybe the secret to it all was just to know you were better at something than someone, and have them know it, too.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing Kyle’s hand and pulling him to the edge of the pool. He resisted a little, so I let him go and dove into the six-foot. I floated underwater for a moment, running my hands through the hair fanned out around my head, relaxing into the cocoon of cooling water. When I popped back above the surface, Kyle was still standing at the edge of the pool, staring at me. “Just sit on the edge,” I said, and he lowered himself to the ground, slipping his legs into the water, shivering at the cold bite of it. “It’s better if you jump in fast, get it over with. You did it before,” I said, but he shook his head, his teeth chattering. “Okay then. Just watch for a minute. Watch how I do it.”

I started swimming laps around the pool, my strokes long and fluid. My body felt lean and tireless, exhilarated by the pair of eyes I knew tracked my every move. At that moment, I was extraordinary, something elegant and admired. A surge of joy swelled outward through my limbs, propelling me forward. I lapped the pool again and again, and when I finally stopped to catch my breath, I saw Kyle in the shallow end, arms stretched outward for balance, slowly and carefully making his way toward me.

I laughed and met him halfway, cupping his elbows in my palms, my thoughts pattering to the surface like a hard rain: he was fearless. We would learn how to tread first. I would slowly pull him to where his feet couldn’t touch, and he would trust me. He already trusted me. And we would start small, just learning how to keep yourself afloat, because, really, once you could hold your head above water, there was nothing you couldn’t do.

“Kick your legs,” I said as I pulled him into the six-foot, his eyes widening, his hands vice-like on my upper arms. “Relax. I got you.”

He jerked his legs, his big toe catching the side of my shin. “Slower,” I said. “You’re not trying to go anywhere, just floating.” I tugged him toward the twelve-foot.

“Wait,” he said, pulling back.

“If you can float in the six-foot, you can float in the twelve-foot,” I said, and he nodded. He closed his eyes, loosening his arms, and it hit me hard, the realization that he would let me pull him anywhere, put himself in my hands and trust me to keep him safe. The weight of it, the responsibility I’d always wanted, hit me hard in the chest, knocked the air from my lungs. I tilted forward, lightheaded, my forehead resting against his.

“Andi,” he said, his nails digging into my shoulder blades.

Suddenly, my knees locked, my chin starting to sink into the water, and I accidentally released Kyle’s arms, a knee-jerk reaction, throwing my hands out to push my head back above the surface. Kyle disappeared below the water, his own arms flailing, and I grabbed for his hand, yanked him up and over towards the side of the pool. He yelped, a terrified sound, before gagging and scrambling up my arm. I swam him over to the ledge, and he crawled up the ladder and dropped to his knees on the concrete, coughing and trembling.

I climbed out and put a hand on his back, but he rolled away from me and sat hard on the ground, dropping his head between his legs. “I’m sorry,” I said. “You just lost your balance. Everyone gets a mouthful or two of water. Get your breath, and we’ll try again.”

“No,” Kyle said, still inhaling air like it was hard to come by. “I don’t want to.”

“It’s alright. It won’t happen again.”

“Yes it will.” Kyle scratched his fingers over his scalp. “I almost drowned yesterday, too.”

“No you didn’t. You weren’t going to drown. I was there.”

“You didn’t do anything,” Kyle said. “Someone had to save you, too.”

And that was the truth, and I knew it, though everyone had been telling me otherwise. Kyle took a deep breath, exhaling slowly through his nose, steadying himself. He looked at me in a way that made me feel very small and foolish to think there was anything I could teach him.

Kyle dried himself off, put his hoodie back on, called Tucker from my cell phone, and waited for him on the bench out front. I sat at the edge of the pool, staring at the reflection of the streetlamps on the water, rubbing my palms against the concrete until they felt raw. I heard Tucker pull up, the crunch of gravel under tires, car doors slamming and murmured voices, and a minute later, Tucker was standing next to me, arms crossed over his chest.

“He almost drowned?” Tucker’s voice was low with anger. “Again?”

“No,” I said. “He just panicked a little. I had him. He’s not going to want any more lessons, though. Not after today and yesterday.”

“Jesus, Andi.” Tucker ran his hands through his hair. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“You wanted me to give him swim lessons.”

“This screwed everything up, you know? He’s not gonna go anywhere near the water, now.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Tucker shook his head, swallowed. “See you around,” he said, and I knew we would probably never speak to each other again.

I waited until they drove away before pushing myself up and swaying to my feet by the side of the pool. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, kicked my shoes off, and jumped in, my arms stiff and legs straight, the way Kyle had jumped the day before.

I sank quickly to the bottom, and opened my eyes to nothing but blue, borderless water, no walls as far as I could see. I thought, then, that if I stayed down there long enough, held my breath long enough, the water would expand, flow outward over everything and wipe it clean. I could lose myself for a while, and when I returned, I could start over, go back to that first summer and be ready to save someone. But the longer I stayed below the surface, the darkness pressing in on every side, the more I felt like the young girl of my first swim lesson, floundering, my father’s breath hot on the side of my face – “You have to *swim*.” So I closed my eyes and breathed out through my nose and pushed my feet against the bottom of the pool, propelling myself upward. I extended my arms and let myself float up, and up, and when my head breached the surface, I filled my lungs with as much air as I could manage.

Remains

After the wake, all Brooke wants to do is sleep. But her sister-in-law, Morgan, made a meal while Brooke and her siblings were gone – spaghetti and salad and garlic bread – and insists they all sit down at the kitchen table together.

“Comfort food,” Morgan says. “You’ll all sleep better tonight with something warm in your bellies.”

“Actually,” Brooke’s sister, Kate, says, “eating after ten pm gives you indigestion and nightmares.”

Morgan’s smile tightens, but she starts dishing out food anyway.

Brooke prefers to eat her noodles as her five-year-old son Tyler does, lightly buttered with a little salt on top. But before she can make her request, Morgan dumps heaping spoonfuls of marinara sauce onto everyone’s plates. She circles the table like a merry vulture as they eat, dishing out more as soon as anyone’s had a few bites. Brooke’s spaghetti is nearly inedible, but she twirls a forkful and shoves it into her mouth. She doesn’t want to play the bad guest. Kate has that covered already.

The conversation between her siblings turns to flower arrangements, who sent the biggest, the most expensive, who sent nothing at all. Brooke tunes them out, focuses instead on Tyler, sitting at her feet on the kitchen floor, coloring a picture of Spiderman. She cups a hand around the back of his head, burying her fingers in his blonde curls.

“I’m surprised you let Tyler attend the wake,” Morgan says loudly, as if she’s interrupting, scooping more sauce onto her husband, Ronnie’s, plate.

“Hmm?” Brooke mumbles around a mouthful of noodles.

“The kids, they’re just so young,” Morgan says. “A bit too young, I think.”

“I don’t see a problem with it,” Kate says. Flakes of mascara crust around her eyelids, and the neck of her shirt is wrinkled, where she kept crumpling it in her fist during the service. “Kids have to learn about death. Better when they’re young.”

Ronnie and Morgan’s two children don’t like spaghetti, so Morgan made them a special meal of hot dogs and macaroni and cheese. Caleb is chasing Christine around the living room, among the flowers, tossing pieces of hot dog at the back of her head. Christine has macaroni and cheese in her hair. Every time a piece of hot dog bounces off her scalp, she shrieks, and Morgan smiles, as if to say, *you know how it is*. Tyler had already finished his spaghetti, sauce and all, and asked if he could be excused before he left the table. He eyes the living room warily when Morgan’s kids squeal or stumble, pressing his shoulder into Brooke’s leg.

“Oh, we explained it to them,” Morgan says. She slathers more sauce onto Ronnie’s food without looking, almost dumps a spoonful onto the tablecloth. “We told them grandpa’s heart got tired and he wouldn’t be around anymore, and they took it rather well.”

“Thanks, hon,” Ronnie says, his voice hoarse from the loud sobs he tried to muffle behind his knuckles earlier. Angry divots pepper his skin, where he bit into his hand. He pushes his spaghetti around, damming the noodles off to one side so a soupy, red river runs under his fork. “This is delicious.”

“But I just can’t imagine explaining cremation,” Morgan says. “Children are so curious. If they went to the service, they’d ask how grandpa got in that jar, and I think they’re a little young to know about the ovens and all that, don’t you? It’s so morbid.”

She shudders, then smiles at Brooke again. “It’s a shame Nate couldn’t come, though. At least to keep an eye on Tyler, give you a bit more room to grieve.”

Kate glares at Morgan, and Brooke takes another bite, pushing the food around with her tongue, the lump in her throat keeping her from swallowing. Morgan always knows just the right thing to say to keep Brooke on edge, an undercurrent of shame humming whenever she’s near. Brooke doesn’t come to visit Ronnie and Morgan much for that reason. She won’t tell Morgan that she called her ex-husband as soon as she learned of her father’s death, because she knows Kate will yell at her for it.

Brooke hadn’t even thought of asking Nate to accompany them. Kate and Ronnie liked Nate well enough in the beginning; in fact, the only family member who hadn’t liked Nate was their father. But when Brooke asked for a divorce, they turned on Nate with shocking abruptness. Brooke knows she should’ve been flattered by their loyalty, but she felt lied to, as though they’d always hated Nate, or were exaggerating how much they hated him now. Nate was charming and warm, hard to dislike, and Brooke couldn’t understand how her siblings, especially Kate, could turn on him with such fury. He wouldn’t have been welcome at the funeral, and Brooke couldn’t have handled him saying no, if she’d asked him to come.

But Tyler hadn’t seemed all that curious about the box of ashes, anyway. While Brooke and her siblings made arrangements with the funeral director – a thin man with white hair and pinkish skin, skin so delicate, Brooke thought if she touched it, she could tear a hole right through his cheek – Tyler sat in a chair in the back of the room, swinging his legs and singing softly to himself, making elaborate gestures with his hands. Brooke recognized them as part of a song Tyler learned at Kindergarten a few weeks earlier, one

about animals at the zoo and the noises they make. He'd begged Brooke to take him to the zoo, and Brooke promised they would go this weekend. She wonders if he remembers that promise, if he wishes he were at the zoo with Nate instead of here with her.

"Personally, I think putting someone in the ground to rot is morbid," Kate says.

"But that's just me." She takes a bite of spaghetti.

"More sauce?" Morgan asks.

"Jesus, no," Kate says. Morgan frowns, her ladle poised above Kate's plate.

A scream echoes from the living room, followed by a crash and a long wail from Christine. Morgan puts the pot down on the stove. "I think the kids are ready for bed," she says, winking at Brooke. Brooke can never tell what these winks mean, if they're an acknowledgement of shared maternal woes, or if Morgan is passing some veiled judgment, a nod at their mutual failings as mothers.

Tyler stops coloring and jerks his head up, his wide eyes pleading. Brooke smiles at him and shakes her head, and he returns to his picture.

Morgan corrals Christine and Caleb upstairs for a bath, trailing dirt from a broken flowerpot behind them, and Kate drops her fork into the middle of her plate. "You think I can get more sauce on this?" she asks Ronnie. Brooke can't help herself – she laughs.

"Oh, knock it off, both of you," Ronnie says. "You know, I could've just picked up drive-through. But I thought you'd enjoy something home-cooked. My mistake."

A loud thump shakes the ceiling fan above their heads, and they all look up.

"Your kids are out of control," Kate says. "Really, I know Morgan's not a big fan of the discipline thing, but she's got you by the short and curlies, and if you don't do something –"

“Christ, Kate,” Ronnie says. “Shut the hell up, okay? We’re doing the best we can.”

Brooke is surprised to hear the exhaustion in Ronnie’s voice. Though Kate vocally disapproves of Morgan, and Brooke sees Morgan as a rather irritating enigma, she always thought Ronnie could so easily ignore their criticisms because of how solidly *he* believed in his marriage, his family. Brooke envies the way they make their family work, make it fit, despite Morgan’s flightiness and Ronnie’s constant anxiety, despite anyone’s protests. But, though she could assume Ronnie was tired from the ceremony, Brooke knows her brother well enough to diagnose his weariness as an ongoing concern, something that’s been wearing him down for far longer. She sees it in the casual slump of his shoulders, the thinning of hair around his forehead, his fingernails, bitten to nubs.

“Look, we need to talk about the ashes,” Kate says, mostly to Brooke. “We need to decide what to do with them.”

“We should bury them next to Mom,” Ronnie says.

“We can’t,” Kate says. “His will says he wants to go back home.”

“But we don’t even know when he wrote that. I can’t imagine he wouldn’t want to be buried here. *This* is his home.”

“Kansas City is Mom’s home. It’s your home. Dad never wanted to leave Michigan in the first place. We can’t just ignore his last wishes.”

“Husbands should be buried next to their wives. That’s how it works, Kate. Mom’s here, so Dad should be, too. It would be wrong any other way.”

Brooke also thinks her father would want to be buried next to their mother, if only for the symbolism of it, the idea of an eternal resting place next to the woman he gave his

life to. There was never any doubt Brooke's father loved their mother, but he was also diligent about keeping up appearances. He would cry dedication to anyone who'd listen, would turn a stern eye on Brooke and her siblings if they said or did anything to make him look less of a father, on his wife if she made him look less of a man.

Brooke knows if she speaks up, though, she'll be expected to take the ashes back to Michigan with her, where she lives five miles from her childhood home. Also, she enjoys watching Kate and Ronnie argue. Neither has cried since they left the funeral home, and Brooke thinks perhaps they've grieved themselves back to normal. She feels off-balance around them, as if the inability to cry has banished her from the natural order of things. A lump builds in her throat, and she blinks rapidly, but no tears form in her eyes. She wonders if this counts, if this is close enough.

She tried to cry during the service, if only for her siblings' sake, tried thinking of the saddest things she could – the private plane that crashed out in Waterford Township last month, killing two little girls but sparing their father, the pilot; the sight of Paddy, her childhood Spaniel, opened up on the roadside, birds picking at his insides; Nate, alone in the living room in the dark, fiddling with his ring; the last phone conversation she had with her father, his smoky, distracted voice detailing the weather. *Getting hotter here. Should be getting cooler, but it's not. I expect a cold front any day now.* In one desperate moment, she even pictured Tyler's small body, lifeless in a casket, his face the color of chalk, but that made her nauseous and shaky, not sad. She pulled Tyler to her then, grasped him so tightly he whimpered and wriggled away.

"We could get an urn," Kate says. "I flipped through a catalog earlier, and they have some nice marble ones."

“No,” Ronnie says. “No one’s setting Dad above the fireplace like he’s part of the goddamn décor.”

Brooke silently agrees with Ronnie. She doesn’t understand why people keep urns in their home, why they feel the need to look at the dead every time they go to watch TV, or show the dead to their houseguests. *And here’s that lovely painting we bought in France last summer, and that’s Dad in the jar up there, next to the decorative candles I made in my weekly women’s arts class.*

“Then I think we should scatter them somewhere,” Kate says. “Don’t you think that would be nice, Brooke?”

“Honestly,” Brooke says, and the word emboldens her, seems to excuse anything she says next. She sits straighter, pleased with the sound of her own voice, the strength in it. She’s been anticipating this moment since the wake. “I don’t particularly give a damn.”

Kate closes her eyes. “Goddamn it, Brooke.”

“Of course you don’t,” Ronnie says. “You hate the man.”

“I don’t hate him,” Brooke says.

“Could you try to give a damn, then? It won’t kill you. Don’t you think you owe him that much?”

Brooke thinks about her father’s tentative hand on the back of her head, his brief, unsure caresses before he enveloped her in the same sorts of hugs he gave Kate and Ronnie – sweeping, dramatic embraces, spinning them around, lifting them from the ground, kissing their hair over and over, before he climbed into the car and disappeared for weeks at a time. Brooke’s siblings assure her she’s exaggerating, and paranoid, but

Brooke had a lifetime to study her father, to recognize the subtleties in his affection, to try and understand the hollowing in her chest that followed his touch. She was the child her father didn't quite love, the one he might have wanted, but never understood. He questioned everything she did: why she got a C on her math test instead of an A; why she chose to quit softball instead of pursuing a scholarship; why she went to nursing school instead of getting a "real degree," like business; why she married so young, had a child so early. Brooke could make any excuse, give any answer, and he would be disappointed. Ronnie and Kate lit up like firecrackers around him; Brooke could only hover near, catching their residual bursts of warmth.

"Mom." Tyler tugs at her sleeve, one edge of the colored Spiderman picture crushed tight in his fist. Brooke notices a deep red groove across Spiderman's head, where Tyler must've dug the crayon in too hard. His shoulders are tense, strung like a bow.

"Tyler," Brooke murmurs. "Tyler, sweetheart, are you tired?"

He nods, and she runs a hand through his hair, placing the pad of her thumb against his temple and pushing, stroking. "Do you want to go to bed?" He nods again. She stands and leads him into the hallway, gives him a push in the direction of the bathroom so he can brush his teeth and pee before he sleeps. She goes into the guest bedroom and pulls down the blankets, smooths the cool pillows under her hands and sits for a while, her eyes closed, her back to the box of ashes.

Tyler enters the room singing, nearly whispering, his nose buried in the crook of his elbow. "You can hear the elephants trumpeting at the zoo," he sings, to the tune of "She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain," waving his arm wildly, squeezing his lips

together and attempting to make the elephant noises Nate taught him last weekend. Soft, whining squeaks fill the room.

“Tyler,” Brooke says, circling her fingers around his wrist, tugging him sharply to the side of the bed. “Quiet. Not now. This is still serious time.”

“Sorry,” Tyler says, bowing his head. “I forgot.”

Brooke releases his wrist. “It’s alright, honey,” she says. She wishes she could look as sad as Tyler just then. She knows if Nate were here, he could put on a façade of grief so convincing, she could feel something in response. They could lie together on the bed, a sad little family again. But Brooke knows Tyler’s sadness doesn’t stem from the funeral. Tyler did not know his grandfather well, and Brooke’s father had little interest in Tyler, apart from a rough hug and a quick ruffle of the hair when Brooke brought him around. He’d tried to love Tyler, but disapproved of him since Brooke first announced her pregnancy. It was hard to love something tangible when you objected to the very idea of it.

Tyler curls up in the middle of the bed, and Brooke stands slowly, pulls the covers up around his chin and shuts the door without another word.

Back in the kitchen, Kate is scraping spaghetti from the plates into the trash with a fork, and Brooke can feel the squeak of metal on porcelain in her teeth.

“Sorry,” Kate says as Brooke sits down at the table. “We didn’t mean to upset him.”

“You didn’t,” Brooke says. “He’s fine.”

A thud rattles above them, followed by a pair of high-pitched giggles.

“Ronnie’s been called in for backup,” Kate says, setting the plates on the counter and sitting across from Brooke. “Those kids of his are going to grow up to be little shits. I don’t even like visiting because of them. I hate to say that about my own niece and nephew, but I swear.”

“Hmm,” Brooke says.

“Is Tyler doing okay? How’s he holding up?”

“He’s fine,” Brooke says again, with a touch of annoyance. At first she’d been afraid the long drive would leave Tyler listless and fidgety, but the trip from Michigan to Missouri had been relaxing, like a vacation. They sang along in the car to Brooke’s Carole King CD and spent the night in a Holiday Inn in Joliet with an outdoor pool. Tyler’s eyes lit up when they pulled into the parking lot, and Brooke let him swim in only a pair of his Iron Man underwear, because she had forgotten to pack his swim trunks, and no one else was around.

“He seems quiet to me,” Kate says. “Does he understand what’s going on?”

“As much as he’s going to,” Brooke says.

“Has he cried at all?”

“No.”

“Have you?”

Brooke listens to the low whirr of the fan blades above them and bites the inside of her cheek.

“He just seems quiet, is all,” Kate says. “It worries me, when kids get too quiet.”

The humid breeze is too weak to unstick the hair sweat-matted to Brooke’s forehead. She wants to go lie down in the cool dark with Tyler.

“Did you call Nate, just now?” Kate asks.

“No,” Brooke says. “I haven’t talked to him since we left Michigan.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Why is that good?”

Kate shrugs. “You could use the distance. You’ve been talking to him a lot lately.”

“How would you know?”

“I can tell these things. But he’s not the best influence, you know? On you or Tyler.”

“He’s Tyler’s father.”

“Right,” Kate says. “Tyler could use a real father, though.”

“He has one,” Brooke says, but knows her words aren’t true. Nate had wanted to be a father, once. He assembled cribs and changing tables, painted the bedroom walls pastel green. He carried an ultrasound photo in his wallet and would look at it for long moments, smoothing his thumb along its creased center. He cradled an infant Tyler’s head in the palm of his head, near tears, so afraid of dropping him.

As Tyler grew, though, Nate’s excitement morphed into a nervous sort of energy, a jittery need for motion that resulted in him bumping into walls, taking corners too fast and knocking his shins against coffee tables. He would hold Tyler too tight around the middle, and when Tyler cried, Nate would close his eyes and take deep, shaky breaths through his nose. He started disappearing each night after dinner to help neighbors with broken lawn mowers and clogged gutters, returning home after Tyler’s bedtime with

heavy limbs. Brooke would argue with him until they both dropped to the bed, or Tyler awoke.

And then she found him in the middle of the night, a week before Tyler's fifth birthday, on the couch in the dark, his head in his hands, his wedding ring clutched in one fist. He said, "I love you, Brooke," over and over, his voice shattered, each word a shard in Brooke's heart. He repeated it, again and again until he broke, admitted to Brooke how miserable he was, how it wasn't her, never her, but that he didn't know what he was doing, felt everything he did was wrong, everything he tried failed. He said he needed time, space, to figure out how to love Tyler better.

"I just don't want you thinking about going back to him," Kate says.

"I'm not," Brooke says.

"He left you."

"I know."

"And I know it's tough. Tyler spends too much time at that day care, and you look so tired."

"I have to work," Brooke says. "I don't have a choice."

They sit quietly for a moment, staring at the table.

"I think we should scatter the ashes," Kate says. She pulls her arms tight against her stomach. "Somewhere he liked. Somewhere important to him."

"I don't care," Brooke says, the sting of bitterness on her tongue. She doesn't regret saying it, though the betrayal on Kate's face turns her gut cold.

"You have to care," Kate says.

"I don't, really."

Kate takes a deep breath. “I’m trying. I’m really trying, Brooke, to include you in all this. I want you to be a part of it.”

“I know.”

“I’m trying not to be angry.”

“Thank you.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“It’s not important.”

“He was a good father.”

“To you. To Ronnie,” Brooke says. Tension sparks along her nerves. This anger is not the grief she wants to feel, but she lets it build, lets the words flow without thought or resistance. “He called you all the time and wanted to know how you were. I talked to him once a week, for five minutes, and I always had to call him.”

“Brooke.”

“He had all the kids he wanted by the time I came around.”

“That’s ridiculous. When he was home, did he ever miss one of your softball games? Or my debates, Ronnie’s concerts? He came to everything he could. For all of us.”

Brooke closes her eyes and inhales. Absence does not bother Brooke. She’d have preferred him not to be at her softball games, to nitpick, to critique her every move. But he was always there – at games and graduations, weddings and births. He insisted on being a part of everything, with his ubiquitous critical eye. It followed Brooke everywhere, and would’ve followed Tyler, too, from kindergarten to high school, through

loves and fears and each decision. Brooke feels a sick sense of relief that her father will no longer be around to do so.

“I know,” Brooke says. “He was always there.”

“Then stop whining,” Kate says, flattening her palms on the table. “Stop acting like a child. You need to get over this. He loved us. All of us. He never hit us, never walked out on us.”

“Is that the bar we’re setting for good fathers these days?” Brooke asks, and Kate pulls her hands off the table, as if she’s been burned. “I’ll take the ashes to Michigan like he wanted, and I’ll scatter them, like you want, but I just....I won’t care.” The anger deflates, leaving Brooke with a shivery feeling in her joints. “You should know that.”

“What is it you want from him?” Kate shakes her head. “The man’s dead, Brooke, he can’t give you anything else. It’s selfish to ask more of him now.”

“I don’t want anything from him.”

“Then what?” Brooke hears tears in the thickness of Kate’s voice. “What *do* you want?”

“I just don’t want to act this out anymore. I’m not the good, faithful daughter weeping over his casket, and I’m not going to pretend to be. He pretended all his life, and it hurt.” Nate pretended, Brooke thinks, and it hurt.

“Not everyone’s trying to fake you out.” Kate runs a hand over her eyes. “Not everyone’s trying to hurt you. You can only do so much for someone who doesn’t want you. You need to grow up.”

Brooke leaves the kitchen silently, pads down the hallway and pushes the guest bedroom door open. It squeaks on its hinges, and she watches Tyler, waits for him to stir,

but he sleeps on, his body curled into a comma under the blankets, his small breaths rattling on the edge of a cold.

In the darkness, she can see the outline of the box of her father's ashes on the nightstand, where she set them after the wake. She crawls over Tyler and takes the box in her hands. She pushes her thumbs against the lip of the lid, snaps the box open to reveal a small, red velvet bag, tied tightly at the top by a thin, white cord. With shaking fingers, she tugs the string, unravels the bow, watches the knot slip loose and the opening of the bag expand. Slowly, she pulls the mouth of the bag wide and slides her fingers inside. She feels softness, a pile of powder, and disappointment slams into her. She shoves the rest of her hand into the bag and scoops a fistful of ashes into her palm, squeezes fiercely. Sharp edges of bone fragment bump against her knuckles, press into her palm, and she yanks her hand back. She doesn't know what she expected to feel, but nothing this delicate, this fragile. Her father, reduced to a few shards of bone and the infuriating fineness of dust.

Tyler coughs and wriggles and Brooke snaps the lid closed without tying the cord, sets the box back on the nightstand and feels the prickle of her father on the back of her hand, like spider legs. She toes off her shoes and crawls into bed next to Tyler, sliding under the covers and wrapping an arm around his waist. He snuffles, turns, and pushes his nose into her neck. She grips a fistful of his hair, fills her hands with it. It feels substantial, and whole.

The first thing Brooke notices when she wakes is the darkness of the room. Ronnie's bedrooms are all outfitted with blackout shades, and the only proof Brooke has

of morning is the thin, pale strip of light near the bottom of the window, where the shade doesn't quite meet the sill. The next thing Brooke notices is the emptiness in her arms, the wide expanse of bed, the cool wrinkle of the sheets where Tyler should be. She pushes herself out of bed, rubs at her tired eyes. The blackout shades have tricked her body into thinking it's still night, and she stumbles, bracing her hand against the doorframe as she moves into the hallway.

Ronnie is in the kitchen, spreading mayonnaise on a piece of toasted bread and poking at a few sizzling strips of bacon. Plates are still stacked next to the sink, where Kate left them.

"Morning," he says. "How'd you sleep?"

"Fine," Brooke says. She glances into the living room, where Tyler sits cross-legged on the floor, watching an X-Men cartoon. He is singing and flapping his arms like a bird.

"Brooke," Ronnie says, setting his knife down. Brooke leans against the wall. She knows what kind of conversation he wants to have by the tone of his voice, the older-brother overture. "Kate told me about the fight you guys had last night."

"I don't want to talk about it," Brooke says. She remembers last night's words like she would remember something she said drunk – with shame, and regret, but nevertheless, as truth.

"We need to, though," Ronnie says. "This thing, with Dad. It's gone on long enough."

"We're all dealing with this in different ways," Brooke says. "I'm dealing with it. Just let me. Please."

Ronnie shakes his head. “But you’re not. You never have. You can’t accept him, but you have no idea why, do you?”

Brooke’s eyes narrow. “I can’t accept the fact that he wasn’t being honest. It would’ve been better if he ignored me. He didn’t approve of a thing I did. You can’t just pretend to love someone if you don’t.”

To Brooke’s surprise, Ronnie laughs. “Sorry, but that’s bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“He wasn’t being dishonest. He was trying to help you, to do what he thought was best for you. He was loving you in a way you didn’t understand. But you can’t love everyone the same way. You can’t just be a parent. You have to become one. He was learning.”

“He should’ve had enough practice with you two.”

“But you’re not me, or Kate. You think he didn’t feel bad about the way he couldn’t connect with you? He tried, you know? These past few years, especially. He tried.”

Brooke shakes her head. “Too little too late.”

“Maybe,” Ronnie says. “Probably.”

“I loved Tyler from the moment I saw him. I’ll love him whatever his decisions, about anything.”

“And Morgan couldn’t look at Caleb for three months after his birth. You do what you can, and you try and make up for the rest. Dad was trying all his life.”

For the first time all trip, Brooke feels the prickle of tears at the corners of her eyes. “But it wasn’t *enough*.”

Ronnie shrugs. "Then you do what you can." He grabs a mug from the cabinet above his head and pours Brooke a cup of coffee, sets it in front of her. "Morgan's taking the kids to the park today, if you'd like to get out of the house. I'm sure she wouldn't mind the company. I can make an extra sandwich."

"You're not going?" Brooke asks, discreetly thumbing at her eyes.

"Nah," Ronnie says. "Morgan likes her Mom-time with the kids." He grabs a tomato and a piece of lettuce, sticks one to each slice of bread. "I know you don't like Morgan."

"I do," Brooke says. "Kate doesn't."

"I know you think she's a bad mother," Ronnie continues, as if Brooke hadn't spoken, his eyes softening, glowing. "But she really loves those kids. She does. She'd do anything for them."

Brooke always assumed Ronnie's ardent defense of Morgan was rooted in her role as the mother of his children. But now, it's as if Brooke's only just realized Morgan is Ronnie's wife. Ronnie loves her. He loves her because she had his children, but also because she is Morgan. She is not just a mother; she is a partner. He is not just Brooke's brother; he is a man in love. Her father was a father, but also a husband. A son.

Tyler's voice drifts into the living room. He's singing about lions. Brooke imagines his hands up by his face, his fingers splayed wide, like a mane. "Excuse me," she says to Ronnie. She goes back into the guest bedroom and grabs her cell phone off the nightstand, avoids looking at the box. She slips into the living room and out the front door onto the porch, lowering herself to the ground and leaning back against the brick exterior of Ronnie's house. She pulls her knees up to her chest and dials Nate's number.

“Hello,” Nate mumbles after four rings.

“Hi,” Brooke says.

She hears the squeak of bedsprings, imagines Nate lifting himself into a sitting position. “Hey,” he says. “Hey, Brooke.”

“Were you sleeping?” she asks. “Did I wake you?” She squints back through the window, trying to read the clock in the kitchen, before remembering she woke just moments ago, as well.

“No, no,” Nate says. “I’ve been awake, just lying around. Is everything alright?”

“Sure,” Brooke says. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Nate yawns. “I just thought, if you were calling.”

“I think Tyler and I are going to head home today.”

“Okay. I thought you weren’t leaving until tomorrow.”

“We weren’t.” Brooke drops her forehead to her knee. “I can’t stay here. I don’t want to be here.”

“Okay,” Nate says. “It’s alright. Just come home.”

“Okay.” Brooke takes a deep breath, nods against her leg. She likes the sound of *home*, the comfort it brings, though his home and her home are no longer the same.

“Okay.”

“Alright?”

“Yeah,” Brooke says. “I want to take Tyler to the zoo.”

“I bet he’d like that.”

“We’ll be home by Saturday night, so we can take him Sunday afternoon.”

“Oh,” Nate says. Brooke hears him shift again. “Brooke, listen. I didn’t know you guys were coming home so soon. I wouldn’t have made plans if I knew.”

Brooke feels frozen, a shiver traveling from the top of her head down her spine, like ice water. “Cancel them. You have two days.”

“I can’t,” Nate says. “Dale’s landscaping his front yard. Me and Steve and Jack, we’re all going to help out.”

“Landscaping,” Brooke says. She stretches her legs out in front of her, grips the fabric at her knee, the same denim she wore last night. Nate is a husband, a father, but in that moment, Brooke knows he’s also a great many things she’ll never understand. He cannot pretend to be otherwise. “Okay.”

“Hey, now,” Nate says. “Don’t. Don’t do that. I didn’t know you were coming home. You said you weren’t coming home until Monday. You took off work, you took Tyler out of school. How was I supposed to know?”

“You weren’t,” Brooke says. “I never asked you to.”

“No,” Nate says. He sounds like he’s gritting his teeth, and Brooke knows he’s probably standing, pacing, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. His cheeks are probably flushed pink. “You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to put this on me.”

“I’m not. I won’t. This is your decision.” She cradles the phone between her ear and shoulder and shoves the heels of her hands into her eyes. She does not want to cry, now.

“Hey,” Nate says. “That isn’t fair. You can’t just call me up and expect me to drop everything, especially when I didn’t know. I didn’t *know*, Brooke.”

“I know. I don’t expect anything, Nate. I just....wanted to try.”

“How long are you going to hold this over me?”

“You were the one who left me.”

Nate’s voice sounds shaky, and thin. “I’ve said sorry and I’ve done everything you asked. I made a mistake and I’ve been making up for it ever since. I want you back, Brooke. I love you, and I thought we were getting over this, we were talking again, we can put things back the way they were.”

“We can’t,” Brooke says. “There’s no use thinking that.”

“How long are you going to stay away, Brooke? How long before you realize – ”

Brooke pulls the phone from her ear and hits *End*. She turns the volume all the way down until she feels the phone vibrate in her hand, and slides it into her pocket. She takes a breath, then another, and stands, brushes off the seat of her jeans and goes back inside. She sits down behind Tyler on the living room floor, puts a leg on either side of him and tugs him back against her chest.

“Hi, Mom,” Tyler says.

“Ready to go home?” Brooke asks, and Tyler nods, tipping his head back far enough to look up at her. “Wanna go to the zoo when we get there? Just you and me?”

Tyler grins and jumps to his feet. He starts singing the song again, the verse about monkeys, bouncing around, waving his arms.

Brooke smiles. “Let’s get ready to go, then.” The phone vibrates against her thigh. She ignores it.

Together, they pack their things. Tyler folds shirts into messy little bundles, and Brooke places them in the suitcase unaltered, though she knows they’ll need to be ironed before he wears them again. She keeps his jacket out, stuffs it into his travel bag with his

fruit snacks and coloring books. She picks up the box of ashes off the nightstand and briefly wonders if she should pack it in her suitcase, nestle it between bras and jeans and socks. Instead, she wraps an arm around it, holds it against her hip, and takes Tyler's hand.

Ronnie is upstairs, helping Morgan ready the kids for their outing, so Brooke and Tyler leave the house unnoticed. Brooke hefts the suitcase into the trunk and buckles Tyler into the front seat. She puts the box in the backseat, has the urge to buckle it in as well, and folds over at the waist, suddenly lightheaded, imagining the box tipping over and the ashes spilling across the seat, wafting through the air. She takes the box back into her hands and carries it with her to the driver's seat.

Tyler is already opening a juice box, fumbling with the straw wrapper. He doesn't seem to mind that they didn't say goodbye to Kate or Ronnie. Brooke knows this should worry her. She watches Tyler struggle, his fingers pulling at the plastic. His forehead creases, and he grunts, frustrated tears already forming in his eyes. She thinks about moving him to the backseat. It would be safer, she knows, no looming threat of air bag decapitation, and she wants to be alone with the road, long Missouri highways stretching out in front of her, nothing but emptiness beside her. She could drive south instead of north, down through Arkansas, out into the big Oklahoma sky, navigate the plains of Texas where no one knows her, no one cares beyond a smile and a wave, no one can criticize her and her son and the imperfect life they've created. Or she could imagine, just for a while, that she was back a few years, her marriage whole, her son a distant idea, her father that pit in her stomach, everything laid out in front of her. Just for a while.

But, looking over at Tyler with his juice box, Brooke suddenly thinks of her mother. She remembers them on a humid June day while Brooke was pregnant, sitting cross-legged in the front lawn, drinking sticky-sweet root beers while they swapped pregnancy horror stories and soaked rays of sun into their tanned legs. She does not remember where her father was, but she remembers her mother's raspy laugh (a product of emphysema, she didn't know then), the feel of her mother's palm on her tight, swollen belly, the way her mother's eyes filled with tears when Brooke told her the names they'd chosen – Sarah for a girl, Tyler for a boy.

“Don't tell anyone, though,” Brooke had said. “I don't want to hear if they don't like it.”

“Oh, screw what anyone says,” Brooke's mother replied. “This belongs to you. If you're happy, that's all that matters. This baby's your world now, not theirs.”

Brooke takes the straw from Tyler and hands him the box of ashes. He barely notices, nestles it safely between his knees, his small hands curling against the box's sharp edges. Brooke looks away, bites the tip of the straw wrapper and rips it off with her front teeth. She puts her lips around the straw and blows. The wrapper hits Tyler in the forehead, and he giggles. She reaches out, touches her thumb to the middle of his brow and strokes down his nose. Then, she sticks the straw into the juice box and hands it to Tyler, who watches out the window as Brooke backs out of the driveway, humming as he drinks.

A Moment of Obvious Joy

Olivia woke as Drew was putting on his leg. A sliver of sunlight shone between the heavy motel curtains, illuminating the dusty room with an eerie half-glow that gave her no notion of the time. She shifted and stretched, rolled over when she heard the soft *pfft* of air as Drew worked the liner over his residual limb.

“Still sounds like a fart,” Olivia murmured, rubbing the heels of her hands into her eyes.

Drew laughed, though the joke was familiar. She propped herself up on an elbow as Drew slung the remains of his leg – traumatic amputation above the knee – up onto the bed and tugged two socks over the liner. Olivia wished she had woken earlier; she liked seeing the scar.

“Two socks today?”

“Stump shrunk since I got the leg,” Drew said. “It keeps slipping off and I don’t get the permanent one for a few weeks.”

“With the eagle and anchor print?”

Drew scratched his chin. “Decided on a plain one. Nicer than this monstrosity, though.” He nudged the fiberglass socket beside him, graffitied with signatures, like a cast – *Get well soon, bro* and *praying for you!!!*, as if he broke his arm or was terminally ill, and, circling the socket in bold sharpie letters: *NON SIBI SED PATRIAE*. Drew tipped back onto the bed and blinked at the ceiling, which was yellowing in circles of leaking water. “Hey, get me a sticker, though, and maybe I’ll slap it on there.”

Olivia crawled to the edge of the bed and suspended herself over Drew, her naked breasts hanging above his chest, her hair dangling into his face. He crinkled his nose and

she smiled, shaking her head so the tips of her hair brushed along his cheeks. He was military-handsome under his full beard, sharp and strong-jawed, but the grey light from the outside morning – early afternoon? Olivia still couldn't tell – softened his features, his eyes half-lidded and bright. Olivia closed her eyes and tried to imprint Drew's face on the back of her eyelids, in case this was the last time she saw it like this.

No, she told herself. This is the last time you'll see Drew like this.

The thought slammed the breath from her, and she rolled onto her back, resting one arm over her eyes and the other on her uneasy stomach. She needed to get dressed, get going. There was so much to do before Rob's plane arrived – straightening the house, finishing the decorations with Hannah, picking up the keg for the party – but the thought of busywork soothed Olivia. There was still *so much* to do. A whole day ahead of her. She reached out and grabbed her ring from the nightstand, the one Rob had given her thirteen months ago on the tarmac at Scott Air Force Base, and worked it back over her knuckle. *Keep it on*, Drew had said the first time they came to this hotel in the city. *We're not having an affair. There's nothing you gotta hide from me*. She'd left it on the beginning, but it never felt right, the way the diamond caught and scraped against Drew's skin.

"It's only 8:30," Drew said, scooting back to the edge of the bed. "I know that look. You have plenty of time."

Olivia groaned. "Then why aren't we still asleep?" But her legs tingled restlessly, her kneecaps tightened. She needed to get going. She couldn't linger. She shouldn't.

She heard another puff of air as Drew's leg suctioned into the socket. "I need to get home. Hannah's probably up already," he said.

Olivia swallowed. She forced herself to laugh, though the sudden tightness in her voice mirrored that in her chest. “Hannah’s probably at my place already. You know she can’t sit still when there’s shit to be done.”

“Yeah.” Drew stood, fitting a baseball cap onto his head and tucking his hands into the pockets of his gym shorts. “Listen, can I be honest about something?”

“Oh no.”

“I was about to leave,” Drew said, rocking back and forth on his good leg. “I was gonna sneak out while you were sleeping.”

“Ouch.” Olivia slapped a hand over her heart in mock outrage, though she knew waking to an empty room would’ve hurt much less than watching Drew walk out the door now. “You wound me.”

Drew’s lips tugged at the corners, before his face smoothed serious again. “But that wouldn’t have been fair to either of us.”

“Christ, can we skip the dramatic goodbye?” Olivia tugged the sheet over her head, blinked hard as the off-white cotton blurred around her. She rubbed her face into the pillow. “It’s not like we’ll never see each other again. I’ll see you later tonight.”

“But it won’t be the same. You know that.”

“Of course I do. That was the point of all this.”

“I guess I just wanted to say thanks.”

“Wow. Quite the charmer, you are. Leave the money on the dresser on your way out, would you?”

“Liv.”

Olivia curled herself into a ball as Drew pulled the sheet back from her face. “Go away. I’m sleeping.” She squeezed her eyes shut.

Lips brushed her cheek. “Just, thanks. For getting us through this.” Drew’s nose nudged hers, and they kissed.

Olivia opened her eyes as they pulled away. “Sure thing. Give me a call when you lose the other leg, and we’ll do it again.” Her gaze roved Drew’s face. She would feel his *thank you* when there was nothing else she would let herself feel.

“I’ll see you at the airport,” Drew said, grabbing his keys and wallet from the nightstand. He leaned his hip against the bed and looked down at Olivia. “Rob’s gonna be so happy to see you.”

“We’ll see about that,” Olivia said. “You better shave that beard off, or he won’t recognize you at all.”

Drew grinned. “Fuck off,” he said, and turned to leave.

Olivia rolled onto her stomach and twisted the pillow in her fists, tried to savor the warmth of relief as the door shut and left her alone, though she was already shaking.

In high school, Drew Pfershy and Olivia Garcia had been one of those couples destined for failure the way only teenagers could be – extravagantly, and luminously. They were the varsity soccer captain and the student council president, the brightest things in the room at all times. Their relationship was made for makeouts in empty classrooms, furious fights in the hallways, backroads at midnight in a Jeep with a sixpack, always pushing and pulling, no calm, no pause. Olivia loved the way Drew’s voice rose above the crowd; Drew loved the way Olivia could silence with a look. They

were both jealous, and clung, even when they were shoving the other away. They burned hot, and seemed destined for an implosion.

To everyone's surprise, their relationship ended, not in a burst of chaos and destruction, but in a slow dimming, a deliberate cooling. By the beginning of senior year, Drew was dating varsity volleyball player Hannah Obreg, a lean, athletic girl with a big smile, who'd harbored a crush on Drew since freshman year. She was quieter than Olivia, but not shy, gentle in a way that evened Drew out, soothed his temper and quieted his temperament. Olivia ran into the arms of baby-faced Rob Sweeney, a trumpet prodigy whose knack for getting into trouble was matched only by his charm. Together, they were wild and loud, made people flinch away rather than stop and admire.

The four of them stayed friends as hardly anyone does after high school: with no promises to keep in touch, no exchanging of new addresses, no plans to visit this or that campus, only a slow transition of the same group into a new set of rules. Hannah wanted to apply to university, but started working as an aide at the local day care until she could decide what to major in. Olivia, with no plans for further education, immediately moved in with Rob. Drew took classes at the community college. Rob started a jazz band. They both enlisted, Drew in the Navy, Rob in the Army.

They spent two blissful years in love with one another, and with themselves.

The year after that, the Navy took Drew away.

The arrangement had been her idea, so she couldn't be jealous. That's what Hannah told herself again and again. And it's over now, she thought, standing on one of

Olivia's kitchen chairs and tying a banner over the doorway that read, "Welcome Home, Rob! USA!" This stupid little experiment is over.

But the stupid experiment had worked, though Hannah was loathe to admit it. Drew came home from his nights with Olivia invigorated, smiling and laughing, pressing casual kisses to Hannah's temples, her cheeks, her lips. He was nearly the man Hannah remembered before Afghanistan, before the IED and the hospitals, before Hannah couldn't touch Drew without remembering the bundle of raw nerves beneath his scar, how the first time Hannah brushed her fingers over it, Drew flinched so violently they sat on opposite ends of the room for the rest of the night.

Hannah knew she wasn't the saintly military girlfriend she often read about. Those nights Drew was off with Olivia, she scoured the internet for article after article about men with far worse combat wounds – quadruple amputees and facial disfigurements and debilitating PTSD – and the women sitting by their hospital beds, updating blogs, assisting with rehab. Always a hand to hold. Always smiling. Hannah was not that woman. She'd never been squeamish, never got nauseous at the sight of blood, never flinched away during horror movies or medical TV shows. But Drew's injury spiked a revulsion she couldn't hide. When Drew was in chronic pain, barking and spitting at nurses and visitors, curling into himself in misery, she stood away, let others comfort him. She took him to rehab and picked him up afterwards. When he touched her the first time after the hospital, slipped a hand up under her shirt, she thought only of the leg – not the scar or the stump, but the expectations. He was now the wounded warrior, a symbol of courage for town and country. And was she to be the loving supporter, a fount of womanly affection and loyalty? Only that, forever?

It was shameful not to want that, she knew. Drew wanted it – smiled for photos with veterans and gave talks on leadership at their high school, showed children how to pop his leg on and off as they squealed with delight. And she wanted Drew. She had always wanted Drew. But she'd balked at that sort of commitment – Drew's injury would shadow them for the rest of their lives. And Hannah wanted Drew now, but what would she want in five years? Ten? Would she be allowed to want anything more? Drew was already so many things to so many people. He could not be everything to everyone, and everything to Hannah, too.

"So I need time," she'd told him. "With all that's changed, I need time to adjust."

Drew was angry and, Hannah knew, scared. They tried to make love, but Hannah shuddered at the scar and Drew could only ignore so much. They stopped touching, kissed goodmorning and goodnight with tense, closed lips. They barely spoke. Their hearts froze to one another, as if preserving their affections for the future. There was the promise of warmth, but they only felt the chill.

Hannah suggested Olivia out of desperation. Drew smiled around Olivia, was comfortable and quick to laugh in her presence. Hannah convinced herself that a reminder of what he'd once been – even if that reminder was as distant as high school – would allow Drew to thaw a little, increase his awareness of how hard Hannah was trying. She knew it was stupid, and risky, and probably destined to fail, but Hannah was convinced she needed something dramatic to prove her affections to Drew.

She hadn't actually expected it to work. But Drew was becoming Drew again. And Hannah, slowly but surely, was learning to want this life.

The front door clicked open, and Hannah stepped off the chair, surveyed the banner as Olivia shuffled into the kitchen.

“I told Drew you’d be here,” Olivia said, slinging her purse to the floor and dropping to the chair with a sigh.

Hannah brushed imaginary dust from her hands and smiled. *I am not jealous. This was my idea.* “Just thought I’d get started. There wasn’t much else to do this morning but wait.”

Wait for the homecoming, Hannah meant, but Olivia’s eyes narrowed, and she grimaced in the way Hannah hated, as if she could read the pain on Hannah’s face. But Hannah knew her pain was less obvious. It was a low thrum through her limbs, a small catch of breath when she woke in the morning and a throb in her chest before she fell asleep. It was the tightness around her mouth she smiled through, the heaviness around her neck she shrugged away.

“What’s the itinerary, boss?” Olivia rubbed her hands over her thighs. “Let’s get busy.”

“We need to finish decorating,” Hannah said, happy for a distraction. “Pick up the cake at 11, the keg at noon, get our hands on some red, white, and blue balloons – ”

“Really? Balloons?”

“Get your hair done at 3 – ”

“My hair? For the love of god, Hannah.”

“I booked you an appointment at my salon. It’s the first time you’re going to see Rob in over a year. Don’t you want to look nice?”

Olivia scratched at her scalp. “He’s seen me on Skype. He’s not going to be fooled into thinking I’m someone new.”

“That’s not really the point, is it?”

Olivia shrugged.

“Okay, spit it out.” Hannah pushed herself up onto the counter. “You’re stalling, and you want to talk about something. We have fifteen minutes before we leave. So go on.”

Olivia dropped her forehead to the table. “I haven’t talked to Rob in two months.”

“He hasn’t been able to call?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t tried calling him. No letters, no Skype, no emails.”

“In two months?”

Olivia shook her head. “He called me last.”

Hannah remembered that phone call. Or, rather, remembered the aftermath. Olivia had stumbled into Hannah’s apartment at four in the morning, sobbing, tequila on her breath, barging past Hannah like she was invisible and tripping into the bedroom where Drew was waking, rubbing his eyes. She begged Drew to fuck her. She dropped to her knees and clawed her hands into his shirt and babbled, pushed and pushed at him, pressed her open mouth to his knees, his stomach, his neck, and for a sickening moment, standing in the doorway and hugging her arms to her chest, Hannah thought Drew would say yes. He had a glint of determination in his eyes, the look that meant he knew how to fix the problem before him, and Hannah expected Drew to take her by the elbow, lead her gently into the hall, pull her close and whisper, “Hannah, she needs this. You agreed to this.” He would ask to break Hannah’s one rule: not in their bed.

But Drew pried Olivia from the carpet, sat her on the kitchen floor with a piece of bread and a bottle of water, and together, Drew and Hannah coaxed the story from Olivia. Rob's phone calls had been decreasing in frequency, their conversations getting shorter, Rob always sounding distracted and uninterested. He missed a few of their weekly Skype sessions, leaving Olivia to fear the worst until she'd receive a terse email from Rob explaining how he'd been too busy to chat. Olivia had been getting more anxious and frustrated with each passing week. And that afternoon, Olivia said, Rob called, told her about a raid in the middle of the night, an explosion that deafened him for a few hours, the heat he felt radiating through the walls of his bunk. It wasn't the details, though – Olivia had heard combat stories, could handle a little danger, a little blood – but the way he told her, the coldness in his voice, how he'd pause every so often and ask, "What d'ya think about that, Liv?" like he was asking her to inspect a new paint job on his motorcycle.

"I'm worried about you, babe," Olivia said, and Rob laughed and said, "You should be. Next time, those bastards probably won't miss."

Drew seemed devastated, but Hannah wasn't surprised. Olivia had told her much more, how Rob kept so much of the war a secret at first, then told her more and more with less and less emotion, shutting her out in entirely new ways. It was another part of the reason Hannah agreed to the arrangement in the first place: Drew needed the touch, the strength, but Olivia needed to be vital to someone, to see the emotions she caused, to feel someone feeling her.

"I haven't spoken to my fiancé in two months," Olivia said. "And I still don't have anything to say to him."

“It’s always going to be rough at first,” Hannah said.

“Don’t give me that bullshit. You know this is different.”

Hannah shrugged. “I don’t know anything.”

Olivia growled and pushed herself from the table, rubbing her hands across her face and pacing the length of the kitchen. “I don’t want this. This party, and the cake, and the damn balloons. The fucking cameras at the airport and the sappy reunion hug. I don’t...I don’t want to see him right now, Hannah. I don’t want to marry him.”

“What do you want?” Hannah dug her nails into the underside of the counter. She wanted Olivia to say it. She wanted Olivia to admit the whole experiment was a failure, that she’d gone and done it, what she promised not to do, that she’d taken what she couldn’t have because she needed it, and Olivia Garcia always got what she needed. She’d thrive in the kind of life Drew would provide, the constant attention, the easy support, the attempt to ignore what had changed.

Hannah wouldn’t ignore it.

“I want things back the way they were,” Olivia said.

“You can’t have that.” Hannah stood. “That’s not an option.”

Olivia twisted her ring, pulled it over her knuckle. “I don’t want to marry Rob.”

“Then don’t. Or do. Or wait a few years and figure it out. But stop wanting things you can’t have.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t wish for things. You wish for Drew’s leg back, I know you do. You wish you wouldn’t have had to let him – ”

“Stop.” Hannah gripped the back of the chair and watched Olivia’s face furrow in surprise. “I don’t wish for that. I deal with it, and I deal with you, because you’re here, and it’s real, and if you pretend it’s not, you’ll go insane.”

Olivia blinked. “Hannah.”

“It’s time to go pick up the cake,” Hannah said.

“I don’t want the cake. Hannah. I’m not going to marry him. ”

“It’s not for you,” Hannah said. “It’s marble cake. Rob’s favorite.”

Drew bought a ring for Hannah before he left for Afghanistan. He’d planned to do it, the whole “take a knee on the tarmac” thing. He and Rob even discussed it, agreed if they ever got the call, they’d make their promises to these women they were crazy for. What Rob didn’t know was that Drew was ready to propose to Hannah well before he shipped out. He felt he loved her more than was possible, was overwhelmed by it, sometimes couldn’t breathe for it. He wanted to marry her so he could spend every day trying to understand why he couldn’t think around her. But they hadn’t even moved in together. He was afraid she’d think it was too sudden, would be spooked by his devotion. And on the tarmac, with the ring in his pocket, he’d choked, suddenly afraid of the immensity of the gesture, the weight of the things he’d leave to Hannah if he never returned.

Hannah was relieved when Drew didn’t propose. She’d expected it – Olivia couldn’t keep a secret to save her life – but was disappointed by it, felt Drew was above something so typical. Drew had never been one for grand gestures, which suited Hannah, because they made her uncomfortable. She wanted Drew to propose, but maybe by a

lake, in a park, when they were alone, and quiet, could spend the hours after not saying a word, thinking only of their new life.

When Rob proposed on the tarmac, like he'd promised, Olivia's reaction was perfect. She cried, and threw her arms around Rob, while cameras flashed and people clapped and reporters jotted down notes for their required feel-good, special interest stories. She hadn't spared one thought about the future; instead, she relished in the attention, in the feel of Rob's arms around her, the possessive hand on the small of her back.

Rob was certain that proposing to Liv was the greatest thing he'd ever accomplished.

Drew stood in front of the bedroom mirror and smiled. He stretched his lips over his teeth in a big, welcoming grin, and held it, counted the seconds off in his head. *One, two, three, flash.* The imaginary click of a camera, and he could relax his face for a moment. But not frown. He'd learned that the hard way, been barraged with pitying side-eyes after he'd contort his mouth between pictures, grimace and pop his jaw. *Poor Drew can't even smile for that long.* Kids had been wary to approach him, because he frowned so easily after he lifted his arm from around their shoulders. But smiling was exhausting – everything was exhausting for Drew these days. Once a notorious night owl, he was lucky to stay awake until eight or nine pm before crashing into bed. He used to dare himself to go until the sun rose; now, he was lucky to see it set.

He'd tried napping on the couch that afternoon, knew Rob's homecoming celebration would be emotionally exhausting for him, though Drew felt little difference

between emotional and physical exhaustion anymore. They left the same bone deep ache, the same shivery echo in his head. But he needed to make sure he was presentable. Drew exhaled and relaxed his lips, studied his face in the mirror as he slowly lifted the corners of his closed mouth and narrowed his eyes just a bit. Even to his own reflection, he looked intent but approachable, eager to listen. It was a look Drew had perfected over time, though it was just as, if not more, tiring than his smile.

“You sort of look like a psycho, grinning at yourself like that.”

Drew hadn’t heard Hannah enter the apartment, hadn’t even heard her footsteps in the hall, but her presence in the doorway didn’t startle him. Little startled Drew anymore. He had buddies who jumped at every sudden noise, but Afghanistan had instilled an odd sense of calm in him. He’d diffused bombs, jumped out of planes. What could frighten him here?

“Just practicing for my adoring public,” Drew said, falling back onto the bed. His thigh ached, but Hannah still preferred Drew to keep the leg on when they weren’t asleep. He rubbed a hand across his mouth. “Think I should shave.”

“Nah,” Hannah said. Drew heard her drop her purse, then felt the bounce of the mattress as Hannah lowered herself next to him. She bumped her temple against his, and the sharp, exotic tang of her hairspray tickled his nose. “I like it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Hannah rubbed their cheeks together, and Drew’s body warmed. He was just as smitten with her as he had been eight years ago, when they’d made out for the first time at Rob’s Halloween party senior year. He wanted to roll over and pin Hannah to the

bed and bury himself in every part of her. But he was tired, so tired, and Hannah said she needed time. He slid his hand under hers and closed his eyes.

“We don’t have to go tonight,” he said.

“Sure we do.”

“But we could just....not.”

“You don’t want to?” Hannah’s voice was low. She pressed her nose to his cheek.

“I want to see Rob,” Drew said. But his appearance at Rob’s homecoming wasn’t just about seeing his best friend again, putting a hand on him and making sure he was still solid, still whole. He’d be expected to play the hero, and Drew found that increasingly harder to do with each function he attended. For a while, after the hospital, it was easy basking in the parades and flowers, the gifts and the sudden, inexplicable attention paid to his every word, like the loss of his leg was compensated in some additional wisdom gained. As his father liked to say when Drew was a child, “If Jesus wasn’t the man we think he was, how come he’s got so many books written about him?” And Drew had been desperate enough to take any sort of encouragement then, some proof he wasn’t defective, though his own girlfriend thought he was.

Soon, though, Drew had to reconcile the fact that he hadn’t done anything particularly heroic – he stepped on a bomb, injured others, could’ve gotten them killed – and that the rally cry around him was less about *him*, and more about some shared belief that those wounded in battle had greatness instilled in them, the propensity to step in front of bullets, a willingness to sacrifice their lives for the town they grew up in, the people they grew up with. The more Drew thought about it – and he’d had a lot of time to think

in those early days, lying prone on a sterile bed with silent Hannah as his companion – the more he figured he owed the town that bullet. He owed them their hero.

Olivia had been a relief, in that way. She never treated Drew like a hero, never saw his prosthetic as a symbol to worship, didn't touch him like he was fragile, like Hannah did. To Olivia, Drew was just as he always was, no more, no less.

But Drew *had* changed. Olivia could pretend he was the same Drew Pfershy from high school, but eventually, the hotel room became a place to escape reality, not ground himself in it. Nights with Olivia started to feel like an obligation rather than a respite – he promised Rob he'd take care of her, though that was bullshit, in Drew's opinion; Olivia had always been able to take care of herself. Now, though, lying next to Hannah, feeling the heat from her body and the soft scrape of her nails across his palm, Drew felt a wave of gratitude for the woman beside him. He'd been offended by her hesitation, but Hannah was the only one to consider how things had changed for them, and act accordingly. She wasn't trying to fix them or take them back; she was trying to make them better. She'd been willing to let him run off with Olivia every few weeks, and still, here she was, in his bed, a little quieter, a little wounded, but stronger for it, and so much the woman he loved. He would've proposed to her right then, if he had a ring, if he knew his temp leg wouldn't slip off as he got down on one knee.

"We have to go," Drew said. "But we don't have to stay."

"I spent a really long time designing that cake," Hannah said absently. "And there's a whole keg to drink."

"I mean," Drew said, "we don't have to stay here. In town. Forever."

Hannah stayed quiet, continuing to stroke her fingers across Drew's. "Do you remember, in high school," she asked, after a few silent moments, "when I wanted to be an ESPN anchor?"

Drew laughed. "Wanted is a bit of an understatement." Hannah had idolized Linda Cohn, had tracked down coaches and teachers for school paper interviews like paparazzi, had even applied to UNC to study journalism on the east coast before accepting the day care job when Drew enlisted.

"That was fun," Hannah said. "Having something like that to look forward to."

"Do you want to go back to school?"

Hannah shrugged. "Pretty sure ESPN's out of the question," she said with a small smile.

"But you could do something else."

"There's plenty for me to do here, right now," Hannah said, and disappointment nestled into Drew's chest, squeezed his heart and barbed his lungs. "Olivia needs us here."

"Don't you think we've given Olivia a lot, already?"

"She doesn't know if she wants to marry Rob."

Drew sat up, peered down at Hannah as she stared deliberately at the ceiling. "Liv said this?"

Hannah nodded. "I can't blame her, after what Rob's put her through. After that phone call."

"Rob's sent me three or four emails since then." And each one said more of the same: *I can't wait to see Liv. How's she doing? Are you taking care of her? Is she*

happy? Is she safe? I miss her. I love her. I can't wait to marry her. “That was a fluke, Hannah, a bad day. He’s crazy about her.”

“He might want to make that clear to her, then, instead of you.”

Drew dropped his head into his hands, tugged at his hair. The only reason Rob agreed to Drew and Olivia’s arrangement was to keep her happy, to fill the void while he was away. But this had been Drew’s fear all along: that none of it would work, that Hannah would grow to despise him, that Liv would see it as something permanent, that Rob would presume he’d fallen in love with Liv. That he *would* fall in love with Liv. If Rob returned to an unwilling fiancé, Drew was going to have a hard time getting him to hear reason. Rob could have a temper.

Drew swallowed. “They’ll work it out. We did.”

“I think the jury’s still out on that.”

Drew shook his head, a well of tears rising from somewhere deep within him, pushing at his chest until he thought it might burst. He must’ve made a noise – a choked sob or a groan – because Hannah’s hands were suddenly on his shoulders, smoothing down his arms. Her lips pressed to the back of his neck.

“Hey,” she said. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.”

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“I know.”

“Drew.” Hannah pulled him back down to the bed, straddled his hips and pressed her forehead to his. “We don’t have to stay.”

“Here?”

“At the party.” She trailed her lips up his neck, his ear, breathed heat across his mouth. “All night.”

Drew leaned up and kissed her, sliding his tongue into her mouth, pressing himself as close as he could to her body. He wanted to be inside her, every part of her, until their bones ground together, their skin cells fused. He felt the suction on his leg loosening, slipping, but didn’t care.

“That’ll be fun,” Drew said, “having something to look forward to,” and kissed her again.

The night before Drew left for Afghanistan, the four of them drank themselves stupid at Rob and Olivia’s house. Hannah and Olivia chugged straight from bottles of wine, danced in the kitchen, giggled and straddled their boyfriends on the couch, feeding them booze. They were both terrified. Drew and Rob played drinking games until neither could see straight, whispered filthy promises in their girlfriends’ ears, bellowed “Anchors Aweigh” in the backyard and swore furiously each time they forget a lyric. At two a.m., Hannah and Olivia were passed out on the couch, curled around one another. Drew and Rob were in the backyard, sitting back to back, passing a bottle of Jack between them.

They were all bravado when drunk, Rob telling Drew how “fucking proud” he was, how he couldn’t wait to get shipped off himself, how he would finally make Olivia proud. How he wasn’t afraid of war, but of never doing anything as important as fighting in one. Drew nodded and said he was ready, excited, that he’d been waiting for this all his life, that he knew he was exactly where he was supposed to be. That they were the kind of men the military needed more of, the ones with their lives together, ready for battle.

“Look how fucking adult we are, man,” Rob said, and Drew agreed.

Later, when Drew left Rob in the backyard and woke Hannah, led her silently to the spare bedroom and tangled himself in her, he felt like a child, frightened, unsure, and weak.

Lying on his back in the grass, where he’d remain for the rest of the night, Rob felt invincible.

Rob wanted to get the fuck off this plane. He rubbed his palms against the armrests, shifted in his seat, tapped his forehead against the window as the patchwork landscape crept beneath him. He’d flown halfway across the world, from Afghanistan to Kuwait to Germany to Hawaii, but this trip from Hickam to Lambert felt the longest. His arms itched. His legs wouldn’t still. He wanted to punch the back of the seat in front of him, or the guy next to him. He wanted to jump out of the plane, or crash it to the ground. Something. Anything. He needed to *move*.

He sucked a breath through his nose, puckered his lips, and released it slowly through his mouth. During their last Skype chat – three months ago, Rob realized, three months since he’d seen her face – Olivia taught him to do that whenever he got anxious or angry, a technique she’d picked up from her therapist. Rob didn’t want a therapist, but had to admit it helped sometimes. This wasn’t one of those times. He closed his eyes and curled his hands into fists, bounced the back of his head against the seat until the guy behind him murmured, “Knock it off, man.”

He knew he had a lot to be nervous about – whether or not Olivia would even speak to him after the stunt he pulled on the phone, whether Olivia was as miserable as

she sounded (or he remembered her sounding; god, it had been so long since he heard her voice), whether she would stop fucking his best friend once he got home. Whether said best friend had snaked Olivia from him, gotten tired of quiet little Hannah and took what was convenient.

He'd know the answers to all those questions soon, though. If he was honest with himself, Rob knew his restlessness spawned, not from a desire to land, but to turn the plane around, take it back to Afghanistan, forget about the whole mess – the homecoming, seeing his best friend without a leg, seeing his girl on his best friend's arm, trying to find a job, a home, a life – and just go shoot stuff in the desert. That's what he was good at.

He'd been an idiot to agree to their "arrangement" in the first place – and why didn't they just call it what it was? An affair. Drew and Olivia were having an affair. But he'd been so stunned by everyone's willingness to go along with it – even Hannah, for Christ's sake – that he'd seen no option but to agree. They ganged up on him, planned it out ahead of time and had Drew, rather than his own fiancé, pitch it to him over the phone.

"She's hurting, man," Drew had said, a full day away and crackling with static. "She's not doing well. I can't get her to talk, to go out. She's not even crying, she's just....not. Not feeling anything."

"And you think your magic dick is gonna fix all that?" Rob spat, driving the toe of his boot into the wall in front of him, over and over and over again, until it was thoroughly scuffed and glazed with dust.

"Would you just listen to me? Hannah thinks – "

“Hannah? Are you kidding me?”

“Hannah thinks Liv just needs someone to touch. To be emotional with.”

“She can be goddamn emotional with me.”

“No,” Drew said. “She doesn’t feel like she can.”

And that was the kicker, for Rob. He’d done everything he could to keep Olivia happy, to tell her just enough, but not so much that she worried, not so much that she spent sleepless nights in a tangle of nerves on the couch, waiting for the phone to ring, for the knock on the door that meant the end of their life together. For that to be used against him, then, felt like a betrayal. So he agreed. And from that moment on, he knew he’d do another tour, go back to Afghanistan or Iraq or wherever the hell they wanted to send him as soon as he possibly could, to get away from all the mind games and the backstabbing and the way he tried so hard to make everything as easy as possible for Olivia but could never, ever get it right. Their last phone call had been an explosion of months worth of spite and anger and fear and jealousy and a sense that if Olivia wouldn’t let him protect her, he’d make damn sure she heard every gritty detail, every horrible thing he thought about his own chance of survival every minute of every day.

But he missed her, now, so much it hurt. He’d driven her away, and the loss of her voice and her words – her letters, particularly, the nearly illegible handwriting, the way he thought he could smell her apple hand lotion on the paper, though that was impossible, with how far the letter traveled – was like a missing limb to Rob. He wondered if this was what Drew felt. He wondered if phantom limb syndrome could be translated to the heart.

So Rob had a plan. Olivia was still his fiancé, he hoped and prayed she still wore his ring, and he’d apologize every day, he’d tell her everything from now on, hold her

and listen to her and make love to her until she felt something again. And they'd make a home together, build a life together, because if he couldn't have the sand and heat and the rush of not knowing whether today was his last day – and he knew he couldn't have that *and* Olivia – then he'd settle down. He'd go skydiving if he needed a rush. He didn't need to be in someone's line of sight to feel significant. He'd make it just fine as a civilian. All soldiers eventually did.

The plane touched down on the runway, and Rob unbuckled his seatbelt, pressed his feet to the floor and took another deep, calming breath. Tonight was the easy part – the party, the drinking, the reunions, a right hook to the jaw if Drew deserved it (a hug if not; he still needed friends, after all), and Olivia, in his arms, if only for a little while. The hard part would be after, finding out who was still with him in the morning, deciding what he'd do tomorrow, and the next day, and the next.

When Drew sees Rob emerge from the security checkpoint at Lambert, he has to stifle the urge to run to him. There's been so much confusion lately that his best friend hasn't been able to comment on – his fights with Olivia, the rarity of their own phone calls, the arrangement – that just to see Rob alive, walking towards them, banishes Drew's doubts. He wastes a moment feeling self-conscious about his leg, the black pylon emerging unnaturally beneath his gym shorts, but Rob grins at him, and Drew knows they'll figure this out.

Hannah feels less than she expected when she sees Rob. She thought she might be angry, for all the things he put Olivia through, for all the pain he caused them all with his spite and jealousy and coldness. But she feels a small, warm burst of fondness for Rob,

for the way his fatigues swallow him, the way his head looks too big with his hair shaved, the way he's almost toppling under the weight of his backpack. He cannot possibly be the same Rob that left for Afghanistan, but he looks similar enough that Hannah is only relieved.

Olivia feels nothing as Rob takes her into his arms. She tries to focus on all the points where their bodies meet, his hands on her back, their chests together, his leg pressing between hers, his chapped lips on her ear. She hears him, as if through a tunnel, whispering, "I love you, I love you, I love you," and digs her nails into his neck. He laughs, picks her up and swings her around, mistakes her tears for happiness. He looks at her and says, "I missed you so much." She looks at him and thinks, *I don't know you.*

Rob sees the hesitation in Olivia's eyes, feels it in her movements, her limp hands, her strained shoulders. He embraces her tighter, as if his own enthusiasm will spark hers. He tells her he loves her over and over and when she doesn't say it back, he says it again. This is what he'll spend the rest of his life doing, if he has to. He'll convince her. He'll win her back. There is no other option for him now. He buries his face in her neck, and resolve coils in his gut, like a sickness.

The next day, a picture of this moment appears on the front page of the local newspaper. Headline: "Happy Homecoming!" Caption: "In a moment of obvious joy, Staff Sgt. Rob Sweeney embraces fiancé Olivia Garcia upon his arrival home from Afghanistan at Lambert International Airport, while hometown hero, Navy EOD Tech Drew Pfershy, and girlfriend Hannah Obreg, keep watch."