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The Fourth Wall

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The Fourth Wall

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partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Creative
Writing

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Abstract

“The Fourth Wall” is the beginning of a fiction novel set in the comedy scene in Lincoln, NE during the #MeToo movement. The story follows a young female comedian in the scene, Kara, from the perspectives of several significant people in her life. Though the novel never inhabits Kara’s perspective directly, it seeks to give readers an intimate look at the difficulty she faces as she tries to navigate the male-dominated world of stand-up comedy during a time when the community is being forced to confront its troubling history of sweeping reports of sexual violence under the rug.

Keywords: Stand-up Comedy, Sexism, Fiction, #MeToo

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CONTENT WARNING:

“The Fourth Wall” is a novel about stand-up comedy during the #MeToo movement, and as a result it contains explorations of sexual violence, assault, and misogyny that may be disturbing to some readers.

Chapter One

Elizabeth sheds her golashes and coveralls in the mud room and then heads to the kitchen to check on dinner. She can hear her husband and daughter laughing together. She startles at the pain; she'd adjusted to the oppressive quiet left behind by her daughter's departure to college over the past three years and her visits home are always jarring.

Kara is fighting a laughing fit watching her dad wipe tomato sauce off the underside of the cabinets, but her face falls when she sees Elizabeth. Kara mumbles about checking something and crosses the kitchen to the stove. Elizabeth watches her back as she works, wondering, as she often does, how their relationship fell so far apart. Every interaction is either meaningless small talk or screaming fights. There is no in-between. The bones of her daughter's shoulder blades press sharp against her shirt as she stirs. Elizabeth wonders if she's eating enough.

When Kara was fourteen, she came home from the private Catholic school she attended with a notice that she was facing possible expulsion and a date for a hearing in front of the school board. The only explanation provided was that she had violated the school policy by engaging in "self-destructive behavior that poses a serious risk to the mental health and well-being of others in the St. Vincent community". The next day Elizabeth woke up early enough to get her morning farm work done in time to drive Kara

to school. In the principal's office she stared at the track and field medals hanging on the wall while he and the school guidance counselor tag teamed an explanation.

“Well, I did wonder about the radio silence when she brought back the previous notes with your signature, but I sent you copies through the Starperformerz online system so I assumed you had to be seeing them, even if she was forging your signature...”

Translation: This is your fault. You should be checking the online system.

“I don't have to tell you that Kara is a troubled child...” Translation: This is your fault. You should be more aware of your child's well-being.

“We don't want to punish her for having a mental illness, but we have to consider the well-being of all our students...” Translation: This is your fault. You have obviously either traumatized this poor child or passed on some genetic dysfunction.

After an hour of this, neither of them had actually explained what behavior Kara had exhibited that prompted the expulsion. Elizabeth wanted to ask, but her brain was too busy wrestling with the enormity of her failures. When the last of their explanations came, they fell onto the pile like the final clump of cement dropping from the end of the mixer, wet and impossibly heavy, providing the raw materials the counselor and the principal needed to seal her off as an embarrassing mistake.

“Excuse me...I've been listening patiently but I have yet to hear the answer to the question I asked when I walked into this office an hour ago. So I'll ask it again. What. The fuck. Did *my* daughter actually *do*?” All the concrete in the world wasn't enough to

keep her from seeing the shock register on their faces, then melt into the smug satisfaction of being proven right in their judgement. She knew she should care, but she didn't. She didn't care if Kara was expelled from their stupid school, she had other options. She didn't care if these two people thought she was a bad parent.

But....what if they were right? What if she was a bad parent? She could handle the failure in an abstract sort of way, but parenting didn't happen in the abstract. There were real world consequences for failure, and they come in the form of harm to the person she cared about the most. When she looked at her teenage daughter, she didn't see the gangly awkwardness of burgeoning adolescence, didn't smell the hyperactive sweat glands, didn't hear the hint of sarcasm in her voice. She saw the toothless yawn of a milk-drunk newborn. Smelled the sweetness of baby shampoo. Heard the satisfied gurgles fading to the deep breathing of quiet slumber. Only a monster would wish harm on such a fragile little being.

In that moment, Elizabeth was overwhelmed by the urge to run out of that office and throw open classroom doors until she found her precious baby girl. She would hold her close and beg forgiveness, kiss the top of her head over and over, reassure her that she was safe. Instead, she waited in heavy silence with the principal as the counselor printed off copies of a month's worth of notes home, each bearing Elizabeth's signature in Kara's handwriting.

Now, six years later, Elizabeth sits at the dinner table and remembers sifting through the reports of depression, recommendations for counseling services, documentation of self-harm and suicidal ideation. She considers this moment to be the start of what would eventually be a vast distance between them, though deep down she

acknowledges that those documents were evidence of a distance that already existed, that started without her noticing. Even with the distance, this is a story with a happy ending. Kara is a senior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln now, just over a semester away from graduating with her degree in Engineering. Elizabeth can endure the pain of separation as long as she knows her daughter is alive and well. This is what she's thinking as she notes that Kara is fidgeting and sees she hasn't touched her food. The chair creaks as she shifts with discomfort.

“Mom” Kara begins, and Elizabeth's thoughts fade into a sort of primal unease. “I've decided to withdraw from my classes.”

Kara is looking at her father as she speaks, so Elizabeth looks at him too. Steven is smiling and nodding encouragement. She wants to hit him. It's clear that he already knew this announcement was coming, that they'd conspired about the best way to tell her. If he'd had any sense at all, he would have suggested Kara wait, told her to let him talk to Elizabeth first. It was so easy for him to be ok with this, while she was in that principal's office experiencing the trauma of realizing she didn't know her daughter at all, he was busy battling his own demons in a rehab facility. And before that he'd been under the fog of an addiction to narcotic pain killers. In a sick sort of way, Elizabeth found she envied him that day. He had something to blame for his negligent parenting. He even had a good reason for developing the addiction in the first place. When Kara was born, he was working as a nurse at a local hospital. By the time she was starting kindergarten, he was experiencing severe back problems. Fast forward through lots of specialists visits, physical therapy, and a handful of surgeries and you end up with a nurse forced into premature retirement with an opioid addiction.

“Mom?” Kara’s voice cracks and Elizabeth realizes she is holding back tears, her anxiety driven high by the long silence following the announcement.

She is afraid of me. My daughter is afraid of her own mother. Everything is shimmering and her tongue is thick and dry, so all she manages is a strangled “Why?”

She can see immediately she has made a mistake. Steven is looking at Elizabeth as though she’d been asked to host dinner for the Queen of England, but set the table with three salad forks on a paper towel. She couldn’t see how they had any right to be so offended. What did they expect? Was she supposed to move straight from shock into being supportive without questioning Kara’s motives? It wasn’t fair. They’d whispered behind closed doors, playing out this scene as judge and jury, expecting her to prove her own guilt before they’d even read her the charges.

It is Steven who breaks the silence.

“Kara just feels like she’s got as much out of her education as she’s going to.” He speaks with steady confidence and it makes her want to scream. Instead, to her horror, she cries.

It starts quiet, tears dropping gently off her cheeks and onto the tablecloth, leaving little dark circles in the pastel pink floral pattern. She tried to wrestle her thoughts under control, but they were gone. The pressure built in her chest until it erupted out in a wet whoosh of air through her lips. She could feel Kara and Steven staring at her and she wanted to die, to curl up into herself until they couldn’t hear the sobbing. Crying was such a stupid, worthless action. All her life Elizabeth hated crying, would do anything to avoid it. She wasn’t the type to appreciate the ‘emotional release’ it supposedly provided for others. But her body wanted her to cry all the time--when she was sad, when she was

angry, when she was in pain, when she was happy. Cry cry cry. She usually had enough control over it to avoid it, even when she wasn't able to stop it completely she managed to hold off until she could get somewhere private. And now here she was, sobbing loudly in front of her husband and daughter. The humiliation made her angrier.

She hadn't cried in the principal's office that day six years ago, she didn't even cry when she read over the notes at home alone later that day. She wasn't able to summon tears for their hearing in front of the school board, though she'd wanted to. She thought it might help if she cried, but in the end the school board didn't really care about the principal's complaints, they were more interested in receiving another tuition check than they were in protecting the other students from Kara's depression. She didn't cry during the following two years, when they had screaming matches loud enough to shake the house off its foundation, when she had to all but physically drag Kara out to the car for her weekly therapy sessions.

There was only one other time Elizabeth cried in front of her daughter--during the conversation she had with the doctor in charge of Kara's discharge from a psychiatric hospital the spring of her junior year.

It was mid-March, the height of the calving season. Elizabeth had just come in from assisting a cow with an especially challenging birth when she got the call from the local police station. They'd placed Kara under emergency protective custody and would be transporting her to the Regional Center in Lincoln following a suicide attempt. On the way to the police station, Elizabeth realized that she hadn't thought to ask why Kara was at the station and not in a hospital if she'd tried to kill herself. The realization calmed her

down. If Kara was seriously injured, she would be in an emergency room, not waiting for her at the station. She slowed down and eventually pulled the car into an empty parking lot outside the old diner. She knew she should be getting to the station as soon as possible, but once the fear of immediate danger was gone, she felt the need to collect her thoughts. She just needed to review the facts.

Fact #1: Kara was supposed to be at work.

It seemed unlikely to Elizabeth that Kara would try to kill herself at work. It wasn't a stressful job. She didn't need it. There was plenty of work for Kara to do on the farm, and Elizabeth had been "paying" her an hourly "wage" for years in the form of depositing money into a college fund that she could write off on the farm taxes as labor expenses. Kara's therapist had suggested she find a job several months ago, claiming being less financially dependent might help her feel a greater sense of control over her own life.

Elizabeth always struggled through the monthly progress report sessions she had with Kara's therapist. It felt like a violation to listen to Dr. Nembla recounting her daughter's damages like a book report, though Elizabeth was hungry for even this shred of intimacy between them. Dr. Nembla was always suggesting scheduling a session for Elizabeth and Kara at the same time, but Elizabeth gave polite excuses not to follow up on that advice. She'd never been in therapy, and if she was honest with herself she wasn't sure she believed in it. It felt like a modern invention, a side effect of a world full of people who are so busy distracting themselves with technology that they don't take the time to stop and appreciate the world around them. Every other month the news reported on the latest thing Millennials have re-defined as "trauma". In her darker hours, she

wondered if taking Kara to the therapist was enabling her to continue with what might just be attention-seeking behavior. Those thoughts made her feel guilty, but it was hard to understand Kara's experiences when she only ever heard about them secondhand through the therapist. And now through the police.

Fact #2: Kara was not seriously injured.

She knew from Steven's years working as an E.R. nurse that if Kara had been injured, even in a way that didn't appear to be life-threatening, she would have been taken to the E.R., not the police department. Steven has always had a morbid fascination with suicide, ever since his own father killed himself when Steven was a teen. He attributes his decision to become an E.R. nurse to this, and Elizabeth could understand that watching your father die on the table might inspire the drive to follow in the footsteps of the nurses and doctors who did their best to save him. What she didn't understand was the desire to continuously expose himself to media that covered it as a topic; the way he spoke faster, the way his voice rose in pitch when he told her stories about the rare occasions when they got a patient at his E.R. who'd attempted it. He didn't even try to hide his disappointment when he talked about hearing the code for suicide attempt over the police scanner, only to end up with a patient who'd barely scratched their wrist with a paper clip, or had mild rope burns on their neck from trying to use "the wrong kind of rope". Even in retirement, Steven kept himself busy writing stories about suicide and sending them off to healthcare magazines and books like "Chicken Soup for the Nurse's Soul".

Still, Elizabeth was willing to overlook this character flaw in her husband. After all, he's experienced multiple traumatic events over the course of his life, and *real* trauma

like that never goes away entirely. But Kara. What about Kara? She had two loving parents, a modest home in the country with acres of space to explore and farm animals to antagonize. What was so traumatic about that? And sure, her father had battled opioid addiction, but even under the influence he was invested enough in his daughter's well-being to cooperate with Elizabeth's efforts to shield Kara from it. Elizabeth was adult enough to acknowledge that part of her frustration stemmed from the jealousy she felt of the seemingly unbreakable bond between Steven and Kara, coupled with a sprinkle of bitterness at the way they both seemed to resent her for being the responsible one. They should have been thanking her, really. She was the one who bit her lip and endured the burning in her muscles as she poured every ounce of her strength into holding their family together. And of course she was happy they are happy, of course she was. But would it have killed them to let her in, just a little? Just because she doesn't televise her anguish, doesn't mean it isn't there.

In her darker hours, she wondered if she should have taken her baby girl and left Steven to lose his battle alone. Given his family history and the severity of his rock bottom while he had her support, she knows what leaving him would have meant. Elizabeth loves her husband. She has always loved him. This line of thinking left her with the same electric guilt she feels when she thinks about Kara's therapy. But still, but still, but still.

When she fell down both these rabbit holes at once, she felt ugly for weeks after. If Kara's behavior came from a desire for attention, and if therapy enabled her to act on that desire, then surely Steven's history offered his daughter an even greater source of enablement? If Elizabeth had left her husband to die, would Kara have been chattering at

Elizabeth about how school went over the cattle shoot instead of self-destructing at the police department?

Elizabeth shook the thoughts out of her head and shifted the car back into drive. And while she was mostly successful in turning her attention to her more immediate concerns, a final ugly thought broke free and dribbled out her ears, belching poison as it went. *You chose your screwed up, junkie husband over your innocent little girl.*

Through sheer force of will, she'd stopped herself from engaging with it. She was already too familiar with the sun-bleached bones she'd find at the end of that line of thought. Instead, she rolled her fingers further forward over the top of the steering wheel and squeezed, savoring the sight of her knuckles as they strained against her skin.

When the doctor's assistant called to inform her that Kara was approved to be discharged from the Regional Center the following Monday afternoon, Elizabeth was confused. "But, she was only just admitted Friday night. It can't be safe to release her so soon."

"Well, Dr. Hall met with her this morning and he approved the discharge." The assistant's tone wavered between sympathetic and patronizing. "The way he explained it to me, it sounds like she would have been released much sooner, if only she hadn't been admitted over the weekend. We don't have appointments for formal psychiatric evals outside of normal business hours."

"What? Why?"

"Well, to be frank, the doctor wasn't sure why she was brought here to begin with--"

“She was *brought* there by the police because she is a 17 year old girl who tried to *kill* herself!” Elizabeth’s interruption was met with fuzzy silence from the other end of the receiver and Elizabeth instantly regretted it. “I--I’m sorry. This is all very new for me.”

After a few more beats of silence, the assistant cleared her throat and continued. “Yes, well, I meant he wasn’t sure why she was brought to our facility instead of the psychiatric unit at your local hospital. We typically only admit patients that are experiencing, uh, well...people who have made more *serious* attempts.”

It was Elizabeth’s turn to sit a few moments too long in silence. When she did speak, she felt like she had gravel in her throat. “Because she was stopped before she managed to injure herself, you what, think she wasn’t going to go through with it?”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant at all.”

Elizabeth could have sworn she heard the assistant’s eyes rolling through the phone. “Well, that’s what you said. You said she wasn’t serious. Or the Doctor said it to you. Can I speak to Dr. Hall myself?”

“As I said, Dr. Hall is in charge of the formal psychiatric evaluations, so he is only on site from nine to five. And even then, he has appointments already booked for the rest of the day.” The assistant’s tone took on the artificial warmth of the standard ‘I-am-a-professional-my-word-is-final’ voice customer service reps use to discourage people from bothering someone higher up the corporate food chain. Elizabeth smiled, despite the grim circumstances. This woman had no idea who she was dealing with.

Elizabeth had a talent for negotiating to get her way, especially with people in official positions. Growing up, she’d spent hours trotting around her father’s feed store,

listening to the conversations he had with his customers, most of whom were rough around the edges take-no-shit types. Over time, she started to notice that he had a set of phrases he repeated throughout the day, things like “Well, you know how it is...” and “I know, it’s a raw deal, but I have to keep the lights on and the pantry stocked, same as you. You know I’d do you better if I could.” When she asked him about it, he looked at her for a moment, then in one smooth motion he swung his right arm behind her knees and scooped her up to his chest, using his left hand to ruffle her hair. “Pretty *and* smart. I’m gonna have my hands full in a few years, aren’t I? My little lizard.”

He wasn’t wrong. She’d made good use of her time trying to stay out from underfoot, charming customers, distribution reps, and the store employees. In exchange for her little smiles and bobbing pigtailed she received lessons in the language of commerce, lessons that paid off years later when she was doing damage control for Steven’s addiction. Thanks to Elizabeth, Steven was never on the wrong side of the law, at least never officially. He kept his job for longer than he had any right to, only leaving when it was time to check into the best rehab facility in the area--a facility that would be far beyond their price range if it weren’t for Elizabeth’s diplomatic interventions.

Dr. Hall’s assistant might as well have been trying to stop a rabid bear with a foam sword. She would’ve had a higher chance of success.

When Elizabeth walked into the hospital a day later for her appointment with Dr. Hall, she’d had good reason to expect things would continue to go her way. She had her negotiation skills to draw on, and she’d done her homework in case the doctor proved especially stubborn. She’d spent the rest of that Monday making phone calls to all the right places--Kara’s therapist, their health insurance provider, an old lawyer friend who

specialized in civil suits. And after business hours were over, she'd conducted her own investigation into Kara's mental state, digging for evidence in her bedroom, her car, and the folder on the family computer labeled "Kara's junk. KEEP OUT!". Steven refused to help, claiming it was an invasion of Kara's privacy, but Elizabeth could not be swayed. Kara lost the right to privacy when she tried to hurt herself.

When the receptionist called her name, Elizabeth picked up the fruits of her labor--notebooks full of macabre doodles and angsty poems, a half empty pack of cigarettes, a stack of the disturbing things she found and printed off the computer--and marched towards the doctor's office ready to prove her daughter was seriously disturbed. But when Dr. Hall pulled the door back to usher her into his office, Elizabeth stopped dead in her tracks. Kara was waiting inside, dressed in gray sweatpants and shirt bearing the hospital logo, her black hair spilling over her shoulders in a tangle of frizzy curls, clearly missing its usual treatment of hair product and a straight iron. In all the possible scenarios Elizabeth had run through her head in preparation for this meeting, she'd been alone with Dr. Hall. She wasn't sure if she could make the arguments she'd planned with Kara sitting right there. Dr. Hall turned and looked at her expectantly, but Kara just continued to stare straight ahead, not even glancing towards the door. It was Kara's lack of acknowledgement that pushed any concerns out of Elizabeth's head. She pulled the door shut behind her and crossed to the chair beside her daughter.

If Dr. Hall could feel the tension that crackled between them, he didn't show it. He leaned back in his black leather office chair as he spoke. "Glad to have you join us, Mrs. Coleman. Kara was just telling me how excited she is to get home to her cats."

They weren't Kara's cats so much as they were farm cats that she sometimes played with, but it was the word 'excited' that left Elizabeth with the suspicion Dr. Hall was just putting words in Kara's mouth. Kara was never "excited" about anything. Elizabeth knew he was trying to reinforce his decision to send Kara home, but she refused to let it rattle her. "Thank you Dr. Hall. I'm sure the cats are happy Kara is still alive and will be able to pet them again soon." Elizabeth leaned forward and laid out the notebooks, cigarettes, and envelope out on his desk as she spoke, hiding her delight at the little frown he gave when she added extra emphasis to 'alive'. "But as I'm sure you know, I'm here today because I don't feel it is best for Kara to come home just yet."

"Yes, of course. What've we got here?" He swept his hand towards the things she'd laid out.

"Well, I thought you might be interested in seeing something more concrete, so you wouldn't have to take my word for it when I say my daughter is in need of some serious professional help." Elizabeth watched Kara for movement out of the corner of her eye before she continued. "These are some of her school notebooks, I've earmarked some of the pages I thought you might find interesting." Kara looked down at that, her eyes followed the notebooks as Elizabeth handed them to Dr. Hall, who thumbed through them absently. When he finished, Elizabeth pulled the papers out of the manilla envelope and half stood up to set them on the notebooks in front of him. "These are some of the things she's saved on the family computer. As you can see, she's been downloading a lot of artwork featuring girls looking sad or hurting themselves. And that isn't all of them, there were hundreds."

Dr. Hall didn't respond for a while, and when he finally spoke, it was Kara he'd addressed. "Did you make this yourself?" He turned one of the pictures around towards them. Elizabeth remembered this picture being especially disturbing to her when she found it the night before. The background was a crumbling cemetery at night with a large mausoleum in the center. A girl in all black lay on her back on the mausoleum steps, her arms stretched straight out over her chest, holding a large kitchen knife with the tip pointed towards her heart. Elizabeth had a tingling sense of familiarity when she first saw it, but she was unable to place it the night before. It certainly hadn't occurred to her that Kara might have made it herself, it looked far too polished. But as she studied it in Dr. Hall's office, something clicked into place and she realized why it felt so familiar. The mausoleum was one of the only ones still standing in the older part of the local cemetery, the rest were destroyed and never rebuilt when a tornado touched down there decades ago. It was one of the stories Steven told when he did a brief stint giving cemetery tours. She remembered being horrified by the idea of a tornado throwing bones everywhere, but when she said as much as she followed him around the cemetery for his practice run, he'd only laughed. Her theory was confirmed when Kara gave a slight nod in answer to Dr. Hall's question.

Elizabeth waited for him to express his disapproval, but instead he said, "It's very good." and set it down with the rest.

"You...don't find it a bit disturbing? It's a little girl getting ready to *stab* herself in a graveyard for Christ's sake." She couldn't believe it.

Kara looked at her for the first time since she'd walked into the office. "She isn't a little girl. She's a grown woman."

Elizabeth started to speak, but Dr. Hall raised his hand. “Just a minute, Mrs. Coleman. Kara, would you like to tell us more about her?”

“She’s a character in a comic I made for a friend.” Kara said.

“What friend? Was it Jenna?” Elizabeth couldn’t think of anyone other than Jenna that Kara might refer to as a ‘friend’, but Jenna didn’t seem like the type of person who would want drawings of cemeteries. The two had been friends since childhood, and it was Elizabeth who put pressure on them to still spend time together as Kara evolved into a mopey loner while Jenna blossomed into a happy little social butterfly. Elizabeth took every opportunity to bring up how long it had been since Kara had Jenna over until she got sick of hearing about it and invited her to come over. When Jenna was at the house, Elizabeth pulled out all the stops to make sure they had fun, baking all kinds of goodies and checking in to see if they needed anything every hour or so. She even bought a mini fridge and a nicer couch for the basement, where they liked to hang out and watch TV. Once, she’d looked the other way when she caught them drinking beer down there, though it went against every mothering instinct she had. Of course, Kara got a stern lecture after the fact, but in the moment she’d been more invested in making sure Kara didn’t lose the only friend she had left.

“Mrs. Coleman, please!” Dr. Hall’s voice cut through her thoughts and she leaned back in the chair to signal she was done interrupting. He nodded his approval and turned back to Kara. “Kara, will you please continue? What is your comic about?”

Kara looked from Elizabeth to Dr. Hall before continuing. “Well, it’s mostly about her--” Kara pointed towards the picture, “--her name is Sara. She kills stuff. Werewolves, mostly, but all kinds of monsters and stuff.”

“That reminds me of a TV show my daughter used to watch when she was around your age. The main character was in high school though, and she killed vampires.”

“Buffy the Vampire Slayer?” Kara asked.

“That sounds right. Have you seen it?”

“Not all of it, but they play reruns sometimes after another show I watch. It seems really cheesy.” Kara gave an embarrassed smile and looked down at her lap. But Dr. Hall just laughed.

“Yes, I seem to remember there being a lot of bad puns. But my daughter loved it, and it was certainly easier for me to watch than some of the other shows she was into. What about you, Mrs. Coleman? Do you and Kara have any shows you watch together?”

It had taken a minute for Elizabeth to process his question, she’d been so busy trying to reconcile the Kara sitting in Dr. Hall’s office with the one she knew. The Kara she knew hadn’t talked that much to anyone in years, especially not to a stranger. “I don’t like what you’re implying. And quite frankly, I don’t think it matters why she drew this particular picture, it doesn’t change the fact that she is a very sick little girl and she needs help.” Dr. Hall opened his mouth to speak, but Elizabeth cut him off. “No, we’re done discussing TV shows. That’s not why I’m here. I know what’s best for *my* daughter and if you send her home prematurely and she hurts herself in any way, I will come after you and your medical license with the full force of the law behind me.”

“Alright, alright. I understand your frustration Mrs. Coleman, I know this is a very difficult situation to be in. Of course we can talk more about Kara’s discharge orders, but first did you have something else you wanted to show me?” He pointed towards the cigarette pack, the only remaining piece of evidence.

“I--” Whatever Elizabeth had been about to say was lost when she’d looked back at the cigarette pack. Of course when she’d found it, she was horrified, and considered it to be further evidence that Kara needed help. But when she looked at it again, after she’d just chewed out the doctor for implying she hadn’t been spending time with her daughter, after she’d just said “I know what’s best for my daughter” with a straight face...when she’d looked at the cigarettes after all that, it dawned on her. They weren’t evidence against Kara. They were evidence against Elizabeth.

What kind of a mother didn’t notice her daughter was smoking? It didn’t seem like Kara had tried to hide it, either, they’d been sitting in plain sight on the passenger seat of her car. And the more she thought about it, the more Elizabeth realized that she hadn’t stopped to think about all the other signs she’d missed, all the things that come with a nicotine addiction. Agitation, the smell, the stained fingers...

Stained fingers. Elizabeth took her eyes from the pack on the desk down to Kara’s lap, where her hands were resting. She’d stared at the dark yellow splotches on the inside of Kara’s middle and pointer fingers until her vision blurred and she felt the unwelcome damp of tears on her cheeks.

The sobs hadn’t come until Dr. Hall asked if she was ok and they continued long after he stood up and beckoned for Kara to follow him with a half-whispered “Let’s just give your mom a minute, ok?”

Thinking about her breakdown in the doctor’s office made it easier to slow her sobs down to a stop now, sitting across from Kara and Steven at the dining room table. Elizabeth pulled the hankie she always kept in her back pocket when she worked outside

and wiped the tears off her face. When she'd cried in Dr. Hall's office, it was because she'd lost the last bit of hope she held onto that she and Kara would someday go back to normal, that she'd someday feel like she knew her daughter again. That was a loss worth mourning, and one she'd found herself crying about many times over the years that followed it, though always in solitude. But this was different. Though Kara's announcement was just as unexpected now as the yellow fingers had been then, Elizabeth was no longer worried that the things she didn't know about her daughter would lead to Elizabeth being held responsible for Kara's self-destruction. And though she was sometimes still afraid that Kara might be suffering, Kara wasn't an impulsive teenager now, she was a full grown adult who Elizabeth felt sure would ask for help if she needed it, even if Elizabeth wasn't the one she asked.

When Elizabeth finished composing herself, she looked back up at Kara and Steven and offered a weak smile. Kara's expression was one of such genuine concern that it compelled Elizabeth to do something she almost never did--she apologized to her daughter. Elizabeth thought that apologizing to your child was one of the most difficult parts of parenting. The parent-child dynamic seemed to Elizabeth to be like the Pope and the Catholic church. Being a parent required a certain air of infallibility, especially when your child is young. You can't use logic to convince a kid to obey you, even if what you're asking of them is in their best interests. If your five year old is poking their fingers into an electrical outlet, "because I said so" goes a lot farther than "if you don't stop you'll be electrocuted". That kind of authority isn't compatible with apologies. Of course Elizabeth has apologized for the little mistakes--stepping on Kara's foot in the chaos of getting ready for school, forgetting to turn on the night light before leaving the room--but

when it comes to admitting she was wrong about something, especially something important, she'd offer excuses that placed the blame elsewhere instead.

Even now that Kara was grown, Elizabeth felt enough residual anxiety about apologies to give them freely. But something about seeing the roles reversed, seeing Kara worried about Elizabeth, made it less scary to admit she was in the wrong. "I'm sorry, honey. I shouldn't have reacted like that. You're old enough to make your own decisions. I just worry you'll regret it if you take a break now, it will be hard to get back into the swing of things when you go back. You're so close to finishing. Why not stick it out for just one more semester?" She expects Kara to be pleased with the apology, but instead a shadow falls across her face, transforming her expression from concern to contempt by the time Elizabeth finishes speaking.

When Kara speaks, her voice is flat and hard as rocks. "Wow. I didn't think it was possible to half-ass an apology enough to turn it into a guilt-trip, but you've managed it." She stood up from the table. "Thanks, mom, for your *concern*. But you don't need to worry about how hard it would be to go back. I'm not going back. Like dad said, there's nothing left for me at school."

Elizabeth tries again. "I'm sorry, Kara, I really am. I'm not trying to make you feel bad, I just care--"

"No, it's fine, just forget it. I have to go anyway." Kara turns her back to her untouched plate of food and heads down the hall towards her former bedroom.

"But, you've still got a load of laundry going in the washer..." Elizabeth calls after her, but Kara doesn't respond.

Chapter Two

“Why?!” Kellor startled himself with the question. He is required to get a reason for withdrawal from the students who visited his office, but he usually asks with more tact.

“I’m going to be a stand-up comedian.” Kara Coleman says for the second time. He heard her the first time, but it seemed so absurd he assumed he’d misheard her.

Kellor has been working full-time in the Registrar’s Office for the last ten years. He started at the front desk helping students with all kinds of registration-related activities, but was promoted after two years to a more specialized position with his own private office. Any student who wishes to completely withdraw from the University is required to meet with Kellor first. As a result, he has seen all kinds of different situations, most of them unpleasant. Even the conversations that aren’t terribly tragic usually result in the students crying. He’d dealt with so many crying students, he’d invested in nicer Kleenexes--the flimsy ones provided by the University weren’t cut out for handling the wracking sobs of broken dreams.

But Kara doesn’t need his tissues. Her eyes remain dry as Kellor looks over her transcript, which reveals a student who is already registered for next semester’s classes, one of them a six credit internship with one of the most successful Engineering firms in the area. She doesn’t have any flags for doing poorly in her current courses, so she isn’t failing. He tries again.

“Yes, but why leave now, specifically? You’ll still have to pay for your courses for this semester in full, and there’s only a few weeks left in the semester.” He studies her

face for a reaction as he talks. Her eyes are a faded light blue; they remind him of the paint peeling off the porch of his grandmother's farm house. He has access to her date of birth on his computer, so he knows she is only 22 years old, but her eyes feel older.

"Is there a form I need to fill out?" She ignores his question. She looks more bored than defiant.

"Sorry, yes, give me a second." Kellor gives her the paperwork and pen. While she works, he studies her file on the computer, searching for something to explain her odd behavior.

Nothing under the accommodations tab. A learning disability, maybe Autism, would have at least explained the blunt communication. Nothing under the misconduct tab either, though even if there had been an entry, Kellor would only see that it existed, the details of those entries aren't visible to anyone outside the misconduct office. Her grades are good, not perfect, but she's never failed a class. Actually, for an Engineering student her grades are really exceptional. Most of the students in that major don't bother working harder than what it takes to maintain a C average, Engineering is a field where most of them enter the workforce straight out of undergraduate and companies don't base their hiring decisions on grades. There is one other difference between Kara and the typical Engineering student--most of her general education courses are cross-listed in Theater.

Maybe Kara was pressured into Engineering by her parents. Kellor sees this a lot. The rising cost of education and the crappy economy inspires media outlets to churn out articles about which majors produce the best return on investment. Unfortunately, the bulk of these articles are written by people who don't understand the nuances of making

these kinds of calculations. They look at the numbers, find the occupations with the highest average salary, and plug them into a snappy looking list of ten with brief blurbs that don't actually mean anything.

Kellor watches the tips of Kara's shoulder length black hair brush against the paperwork; something about her definitely gives off the same vibe he got from the theater kids he knew in high school. She hands him the paperwork, instead of checking it thoroughly for completion his eyes skip straight to the section that asks for a reason for withdrawal. In the large white space beneath the question she'd written "N/A".

"So, not to assume anything..." He began.

"Then don't." She cuts him off, but there isn't any emotion behind it, it feels like an automatic response.

"Well, it's just that I see that your electives are all Theater courses." He waits, but she doesn't react, so he plows ahead. "Have you considered changing your major? Are you thinking you'll come back in Theater later? Because withdrawing now could be a problem with financial aid."

"I'm not coming back."

"I understand, but I've worked with students in the past who were certain they wouldn't come back when they left, then end up changing their minds a few years down the road." She's looking at him as he speaks, but her eyes seem to be focusing on something behind him, as though he's transparent. It's unsettling.

"Is this the kind of thing where you have to approve my withdrawal? Or am I good to go?" She has one hand on her backpack, the tension in her forearm visible through the sleeves of her sheer jacket.

“Why? Are you in a hurry?”

She lets go of the backpack and really looks *at* him now, as though she’s seizing up an opponent before entering the ring. “I guess not.” The way she says it makes Kellor feel like she was surprised to realize it. She leans back in the chair and waits, absently chewing the skin around her fingernails.

“I’ll try not to take up too much of your time, there’s just some standard information I need to review with you before I can process this.” He pauses, but she doesn’t stop him, so he goes on. “The address I have on file for you is on campus, are you still living in the dorms?”

“I turned in my key two days ago, but the RA said I wouldn’t be officially moved out until I met with you. So--” She finishes her sentence by sweeping her arm across the room, as if to say ‘here I am’.

“Good. I’ll need your new address so I can update it in the system. You’ll receive a formal notice of your withdrawal in the mail, typically sometime within the next week or so.” He’s a bit surprised she’s already moved out, the entire interaction up to this point has done nothing to convince him that this isn’t a major impulse decision. But if she’s already put the effort into finding a new place to live, she must’ve been considering it for a while now. He updates her address on the computer and sends it to the printer by the front desk so he can get her signature on a hard copy for the file. The ancient computer that came with the office eight years ago will take a while, but for the first time ever Kellor is glad for the wait. It will give him more time to try to crack the puzzle that Kara’s become to him. He pats the side of the computer. “We gotta give the ole girl a minute to load. So...how long have you been doing stand-up comedy?”

“I’ve been doing it since I was in high school, but most of the shows are in bars, so my opportunities were pretty limited before I turned 21.”

“Very cool. Can I hear one of your jokes?”

Kara makes a face. “It doesn’t really work like that.”

“Oh. Well maybe I could come watch you perform sometime? I honestly didn’t realize there were comedy shows happening in Lincoln.” The computer’s finished loading; if Kellor left now the papers would be waiting for him in the printing tray by the time he made it down the hall to the front desk. But Kara seems to be more open to talking when the topic is comedy, so he doesn’t get up just yet.

“Yeah, the longest running open mic in Nebraska happens every Monday at Duffy’s, just up the street.”

“Wow, I love Duffy’s. I didn’t realize they had comedy there. I’ll have to go check it out.”

“They’ve got a big sign behind the bar advertising that it’s been going on for 25 years.” She raises one eyebrow, but her tone isn’t accusatory. “Duffy’s isn’t the only place, either. There’s comedy all over the place. They’re opening a dedicated comedy club in the Haymarket soon.”

“Huh. The more you know...” Kellor shakes his head. “Does it pay good?”

Kara throws her head back and laughs while Kellor watches in shock. The transformation in her personality is amazing. She stops to wipe her eye with the side of her palm. “Whew. Sorry. It’s been a while since I’ve talked about comedy with a non-comic.” She shakes her head. “We don’t really get paid, not unless you count getting one free drink per night or half-price PBR as a paycheck.”

“PBR? Why PBR?”

She shrugs. “You know, I really don’t know. I’ve asked a couple times, but I guess it’s a mystery to everyone.”

Kellor feels more confident with his ‘her parents pressured her into Engineering’ theory, so he tells Kara he’ll be right back and goes to get the paperwork. He nearly collides with Carol, one of the women who works at the front desk, as he rounds the corner at the end of the hall. “Ope! Sorry about that. Where you headed?”

“I was just bringing this to you, actually.” She hands him the paperwork. “It’s a slow day up front and it was sitting in the tray for a while, so I thought I’d just bring it back to you.”

“Oh no, I’m sorry. You didn’t need to do that.” Kellor says.

“No, no, honestly? I needed the excuse to step away for a minute.” She lowers her voice. “I’m working with Barb today and she is driving me cuh-ray-zee. Ugh.”

“Doesn’t Lisa work Wednesdays?”

“Yes, but she’s taking her son to the pediatrician for his six month check-up, so I’m spending the day hearing all about Barb’s new spin class and what she can and can’t eat on the Keto diet.” She shudders. “What about you? How’s it going back there?”

It was Kellor’s turn to lower his voice. “Honestly? It’s been really weird. The student I’m with is only a semester shy of graduation. And the only explanation she’s given is that she wants to drop out to pursue--wait for it--*stand-up comedy*. Isn’t that weird?”

“You know, I did get a weird vibe from her when I sent her back to you. Is she failing her classes?”

“No, it’s super bizarre. *And* she’s already signed up for Spring classes *and* one of them is a super competitive internship.” Kellor delights in the little gasps of shock Carol gives after each *and*. She’s by far his favorite co-worker, being quite possibly the only person he’s ever met who loves gossip as much as he does.

“My. Just when you think you’ve seen it all, huh?” She shakes her head. “Well, better get back up there before Barb swaps out my chair for one of those weird exercise balls. But you have to give me all the details at lunch.”

Kellor gives a solemn nod and returns to his office. Kara is holding her backpack in her lap now, she looks fidgety again. He sets the papers in front of her and sits back down in his chair. She scrawls a hasty signature and pushes it back. “Is that it?” She asks.

“Just one more second, I’ve got a packet of financial aid information and some stuff from career services to give you and then you’ll be on your way…” He pulls one of the pre-assembled folders of info out and hands it over. “And that’s it. You’re all good to go.” And at that she is up and out the door, mumbling a quick ‘thanks’ as she goes.

Kellor leans back in his office chair, releasing the stress he wasn’t even aware he had been holding in his body. After a couple deep breaths, he looks at her paperwork again and compares the demographic data to the stuff he has on the computer. His eyes fall onto the picture next to her information, taken during freshman orientation for the student ID. The girl in the photograph is almost unrecognizable compared to the girl who just left his office. Her complexion is brighter, her cheeks rounder, fuller. The only similarity between the 18 year-old Kara and the 22-year-old is the eyes. He is still staring at them when his next appointment arrives, trying to pinpoint why they make him feel like he’s bearing witness to a timeless tragedy.

Chapter Three

When Maggie finally walks through the door to Duffy's Tavern for the first time in two years, it feels anti-climatic. She pauses just inside the doorway to take it all in, looking for any sign that time has passed. The menu on the wall behind the bar has been updated from a chalkboard to a digital display and the men's bathroom has a proper door instead of the cheap folding screen that with its very loose definition of "privacy". It was regularly the target of rowdy drunks trying to expose their friends midstream. Other than that the main room matches her memory exactly--even the people are the same. The two old guys sitting at the corner of the bar seem like they always sit there drinking themselves to a slow death in oppressive silence. The bartenders are the same ones that work every Monday night, one of them, Ike, smiles big when he sees Maggie and she waves in recognition and crosses to get a drink.

"Maggie! Where've you been? I was just talking about your Walking Dead joke to a buddy of mine the other night." Ike says, drying glasses without looking at them.

"Oh my gosh, I'd completely forgotten that bit, I haven't done it in so long." Maggie slides in to stand between the stools and leans her elbows on the bar. "I took a little comedy hiatus. This will be my first night back on stage in a long time."

"Well, we're glad to have you back! You still drinking Blue Moon?" He holds up a freshly dried beer glass and wiggles it side to side.

"Yeah, but I need to find the host for a drink ticket first, do you know who it is?"

Duffy's "pays" the comedians who perform on the open mic by offering one free drink. The host gets some extra cash as well. Maggie has performed in bigger cities where the bars don't need to offer free drinks to attract performers, but in Lincoln the promise of free booze has ensured Duffy's mic has a steady stream of performers, probably a big part of the reason that it's lasted when other mics have failed.

"Fred's hosting. Was he coming here when you were still around?" Ike asks. "He's one of the guys from Omaha, I think he started showing up here right around the time you took off. He's not here yet, but we don't do drink tickets anymore anyway, we just write it down."

Maggie nods. "Yeah, I remember him. I used to run into him at the Omaha shows, but I think he actually lives in Council Bluffs."

Maggie wonders why Fred started coming to Lincoln. The Omaha comedy scene is much larger and has more shows at dedicated comedy venues (proper comedy clubs, improv 'schools', and performance theaters), so most of the Omaha comics have ample opportunity for stage time and don't need to make the 45 minute drive to Lincoln. Of all the Omaha comics to break the mold, why did it have to be Fred? He was always such a contrary asshole. Maggie drops a dollar in the tip jar as Ike hands her a beer and heads towards the outdoor seating behind the bar.

Duffy's beer garden used to be one of Maggie's favorite places to unwind; the rectangular brick fire pit in the center makes it perfect for smoking in cold weather. On the weekends it is packed full of drunk college kids engaged in the noisy sexual theatrics of youth, but on Monday nights it is a perfect spot for the comedians to socialize. Tonight there's already a handful of people hanging out, but Maggie only sees one comedian she

knows, a guy named Jack who started performing around the same time Maggie did. He is standing with his back to her, leaning against the moveable bar. This, too, feels familiar. That bar is a favorite haunt for the stoner comics, when it's not in use it gets pushed back just out of the sight line of the mounted security cameras, making it a perfect spot to load and smoke a bowl. Jack is a dealer, so he usually shows up early and hangs out back there, smoking and selling small quantities of weed to his comedian friends. He glances over his shoulder when Maggie walks through the door, but only long enough to assess that she's not a cop. It isn't until she walks up beside him that his face registers recognition.

“Whaaaaatttt?” He laughs and throws his arms out wide. “Hey there stranger! How the hell are you?”

“Jack! I'm good, I'm good.” Maggie tries to keep her voice steady as she steps in for a hug, but her discomfort manifests in the stiff muscles and more-than-polite distance she leaves between them. Even the light contact her arms make with his shoulders traps the air in her throat. She overcompensates with a big smile and a quick topic change before he has a chance to comment on it. “You're looking extra homeless.”

Jack laughs and runs his hand through his shoulder-length hair. “Yeah, my mom and girlfriend are on my case about it, but you know me. I prefer a scumbag vibe.” He passes her the pipe and she hits it. “You're looking a little extra sketchy yourself. Did you buy a tattoo parlor or just decide it was time to commit to the dominatrix biker look?”

Maggie laughs mid-drink and takes a step back to let the beer foam spray onto the pavement instead of all over the bar. She puts her hand up to indicate that she's ok as she regains her composure. “Yeah, you know, you gotta dress for the job you want.”

In truth, the tattoos were a coping mechanism. She'd covered both arms and half a leg before she managed to work up the courage for proper therapy. Even then, she continued to get little ones when she could afford it, sitting in the shops and flipping through the pages of custom designs looking for anything dark and unsettling. Combined with her dark hair and complexion (an inheritance from her Santee Sioux mother) and her love of black skinny jeans and combat boots, she could definitely see "biker dominatrix" as her current look. She leans back against the bar, the beer and weed are starting to work their magic, slowing the flow of electricity through her nerves. A wave of fatigue washes over her but she doesn't mind; better to be tired than anxious. Jack is using a small blue herb grinder to grind weed fine enough to use in his one-hitter. Maggie knows he will break it out once the beer garden fills up; it is smaller and more discreet in a crowd than passing around a proper pipe. There's something Maggie finds soothing in the rituals people go through to numb themselves--the muscles flexing in Jack's forearms as he turns the grinder, the mechanical rhythm of Ike's movements as he washes the bar glasses, the way the bar regulars in the corner alternate between taking small sips from their drinks and staring unfocused at the side of the can. She fishes a cigarette out of her coat pocket and lights it. Tobacco, weed, alcohol. All of them at once different and somehow the same. Smoker, stoner, alcoholic. Cashier, dealer, bartender. People with different roles and reasons linked by a shared investment in suffering. Her therapist would not approve.

Maggie scans the rest of the beer garden as Jack works. The group of guys sitting at the table furthest from her are likely comedians. Even though she doesn't recognize

any of them, they each have a notebook sitting on the table or tucked under an arm. She checks with Jack for confirmation. “Are those guys in the corner comedians?”

“Yeah, the latest freshman class.” Jack laughs. “They’re actually all pretty solid, they meet up early to workshop jokes.”

“Huh. Taking the ‘comedy workshop’ part pretty seriously.” Maggie lets her fingers brush the spine of her own notebook, which is just barely too big to be fully covered by her purse. She picked it up a while ago, thinking that buying a new notebook might trick her brain into following through on her decision to come back to Duffy’s. She’d trashed all her old notebooks when she quit comedy two years ago in what she considered a symbolic act at the time, but what retroactively she now thinks of as a fit of melodrama. The new notebook didn’t end up being much of a motivator, it just gave a focal point to her anxiety as she sat at home the past few Monday nights, staring at the notebook on the coffee table and listening to an imaginary clock ticking away the minutes in her head instead of going to the open mic. Thinking about those nights now gives her a strange sensation, like her eyes are sitting on two spoons with the handles jammed into her empty sockets. She becomes aware of Jack’s voice cutting through her thoughts, but she only catches the sound and misses the words. “What? Sorry.”

If Jack is put off by her asking him to repeat himself he doesn’t show it. “Did you just move back?”

“Move back? Back from where?” She heard the question this time, but she doesn’t understand what he’s asking.

“Weren’t you in Colorado or something?” Jack asks.

“No, I didn’t move anywhere.”

“Oh, wild. I don’t know why I thought you did.” One corner of his nose twitches up and his eyes squint beneath his overgrown blond hair. “Did you go on tour or something?”

“No, no. I just took a comedy break.” A comedy break. This was the answer she settled on when she mentally played out her return. Technically true, but saying it out loud made it feel even further from the truth than it had in her head. Jack is staring at her in silence, his head tilted to one side, his eyes scanning her face. How would he react if she told him about what happened with Jerome? She wrestles her thoughts off that track. There’s no room in small talk for a serious conversation about sexual assault. She pushes her muscles into a half-smile. “Just when you think you’re out, comedy pulls you back in.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Jack’s eyes release her and he turns back towards the new comedians. “Well we’re glad to have you back. We’ve got a lotta new guys but we’re still lacking in the lady department. Speaking of…”

Maggie follows Jack’s gaze towards the door as a couple women walk through. She recognizes one of them, a girl who began showing up at open mics just before Maggie stopped going. Maggie is not surprised to realize she can’t remember her name; her memories from that time are all foggy. It is clear the girl remembers her, though, she practically skips across the beer garden to greet her. “Maggie! How’s Denver?” Her combat boots barely stop her forward momentum.

“That’s what I said!” Jack interrupts, incredulous. “She didn’t even move though!”

“What? Really? Why did I think you moved?” The girl asks.

“We literally just went over this. So weird.” Jack shakes his head.

“You all seem pretty eager to ship me off to Denver.” Maggie teases.

The other girl has caught up with her skipping companion and is hovering awkwardly outside the triangle. The girl Maggie knows notices her and gasps. “Oh my god, I’m rude! Maggie, this is Jenna. Jenna, Maggie.”

“Are you a comedian?” Maggie asks as she shakes Jenna’s hand.

Jenna nods. “Yeah, I’m Kara’s roommate.” Kara. That was her name. “I just moved back from finishing college in Chicago.”

“Jenna and I go way back. We used to watch Comedy Central Presents specials that I recorded on VHS back before my parents sprung for a DVR.” Kara is looking around the beer garden as she talks. “Who’s hosting?”

“I think it’s Fred. I was just going to go check inside to see if he’s here.” Jack shakes his empty beer glass towards the door.

Kara lights a cigarette. “I didn’t see him, but I wasn’t really looking.”

Shortly after Jack leaves Jenna calls out to someone and walks away, leaving Kara and Maggie alone. They smoke in awkward silence, pretending to be interested in the news program being projected on the worn pull down screen near the door. The speakers are playing music, so Maggie reads the closed captions on the bottom of the screen. *The latest poll from CBS predicts Donald Trump having a large edge over Cruz and Kasich as he heads into his home-state primary of New York. The lead, if it holds tomorrow night, would net him the bulk of the state's delegates and put him back on a path -- albeit a narrow one -- to the 1,237 needed for nomination.*

Kara sighs and shakes her head. “My parents won’t stop talking about Trump. My mom thinks he’ll be good for the economy.”

“Really? He’s such an idiot.”

“I’ve been pretty creative with my excuses to hang up the phone every time she launches into that rant. It’s getting old.” Kara rolls her eyes. They stand in silence a bit longer, smoking and half-watching the screen.

Maggie tries to call up memories of Kara from their previous encounters, hoping to remember something worth talking about. She doesn’t want to bring up comedy, but she can’t think of anything else. She tries for something innocuous. “Jack says there aren’t many new women in the scene.”

“There’s some, but they don’t stick around for long. You know how it goes.”

Kara waits for Maggie’s nod, then continues. “The ones who aren’t scared off by all the male comics hitting on them get scooped up for regular hosting gigs. Or spots on booked shows. They don’t come to open mics much.”

Jack comes back out with a group of comics behind him. “I found Fred and signed you both up. He’s going to announce the order out here in a minute.”

Maggie and Kara both nod and join the other comedians standing in a circle to wait for Fred. Kara continues to chat about women in the scene. Maggie is only half-listening, but then Kara says something that triggers a tightening in her chest.

“Sorry, what did you say? It’s hard to hear.” Maggie works to keep her voice level.

“I said I think it’s bad practice to stop going to open mics. I’ve made my way into the host rotation at the Laugh Factory, but I still show up here every Monday.” Kara is

still talking, but it sounds like her mouth is packed with cotton. *The Laugh Factory*.

Jerome. Maggie hears herself giving some excuse, then she turns and walks away.

Behind her Fred is just starting to read the lineup, but she isn't in the conscious part of her brain anymore, she is somewhere deeper, somewhere primal and raw.

Maggie didn't recognize it the first time Jerome assaulted her. It was several months after she'd started hosting at the Laugh Factory, one of the major comedy clubs in Omaha. Jerome owns the club, so she'd interacted with him regularly during that time and up until that point he'd been nothing but professional. The headlining comedian for the weekend wasn't one of the "big name" comics they had most weekends, but they'd had a decent crowd and her set went especially well. Jerome invited her to join him and the headliner for drinks at a bar nearby. She wasn't black out drunk, but close enough to it that by the time he was putting his hands down her pants and up her shirt her objections came off as more playful than serious. The next morning she felt dirty and confused. She wasn't ready to blame him for the encounter--after all he'd been drinking too--but when she closed her eyes she could feel the shadow imprint of his hands on her naked hips, the clumsy squeezes he gave her breasts. Her entire body felt hollowed out, like someone took an ice cream scoop to her insides.

She told no one. Who could she tell? She'd heard comedians refer to him as creepy before she started working there, but none of them ever had a specific story to back it up (or if they did, they didn't tell it) so she'd let it fall from her thoughts until now. She couldn't call to mind any of the specific comedians who had said it, so she couldn't ask one of them for more information. She also didn't want to start rumors.

What if it was just a one-off thing? The lines of consent get so blurry with alcohol. Maybe she led him on. She was a notoriously flirty drunk, after all.

These were the thoughts that ran through her mind the morning after and for several months to come. For the most part, she and Jerome returned to the same level of professionalism following the incident, though he seemed more comfortable around her than before, standing a little closer, putting a hand on her lower back or her shoulder or her hip when he spoke. Maggie told herself the touch was more paternal than sexual. He had a wife and kids, he probably saw her as a surrogate daughter. He continued to invite her out for drinks when he went, she made excuses not to go. Eventually he confronted her about it.

“Look, I can’t shake the feeling that you’re saying no because you’re uncomfortable with what happened last time.” He stood in the doorway of the small green room backstage where Maggie was gathering her things. “I understand if you don’t want to go out, but if it’s because of last time you’ve got nothing to worry about. I consider you a friend and a co-worker, nothing more. I’m only inviting you because I’m invested in your career and networking with comics after the show is one of the best ways to land a touring gig.”

Maggie felt like an idiot. Obviously she’d been overreacting to the whole thing. He had a family and a business to protect, of course he wouldn’t intentionally put all of that in jeopardy to what--cop a feel? It seemed absurd now. “No, Jerome, of course that isn’t it.” She smiled big to emphasize the point. “I’ve just been really busy lately, but I really appreciate that you’re looking out for me.”

“That’s so good to hear.” Jerome loops his arm around Maggie’s shoulders as she’s walking out and squeezes her tight. “So what do you think? Can you fit me into your busy schedule tonight? Just one drink?”

As Maggie reflects on this moment, as she has done so many times in the past few years, she is struck by how little thought she gave to her decision that night. *I should have known better.* She thinks, despite her therapist’s constant reassurance that it wasn’t her fault. *I should have known better.*

But I didn’t.

But I should have.

Fear of falling into these thought loops is a big part of what keeps Maggie at home these days. It was like watching a screen saver from *inside* the computer, the one with a little colored ball bouncing slowly back and forth between the edges of the screen. She knows she needs to move the mouse to make it stop, but her body is only a husk, sitting rigid in the computer chair on the other side of the screen.

She sits in this one for what feels like eternity. She finally locates the thread-thin tether back to reality and follows it out, hyper aware of her own breathing. As her surroundings emerge and slowly take shape, she realizes she is sitting on the toilet in the Duffy’s bathroom with her pants still on. She doesn’t remember how she got here. A pair of shoes is just visible under the edge of the stall door. She realizes she is in the only one that latches properly, so she makes a hasty exit, stopping to flush the toilet first to avoid arousing suspicion. *I should have...* She keeps her head down as she exits the stall, hoping her hair will keep the woman waiting from seeing her face. The woman says

nothing as they pass. As Maggie is washing her hands, she catches a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror above the sink. Her face is covered in dried tears and snot, with matted clumps of hair stuck in the goo. She looks like an artist's rendition of someone suffering from some disease that died out in the middle ages. She is so shocked by her appearance that she can't stop the strange guttural noise that escapes from her throat, followed by a horrified "fuck".

The woman in the stall calls out, "Are you ok?"

"Yea, sorry. My boyfriend just broke up with me." The lie comes easily, as so many have since that first night with Jerome. She used to consider herself to be a straightforward, honest kind of girl. Almost too honest, her bluntness and lack of tact were a source of criticism from many people over the years. If someone collected all the lies she's told, all the *excuses* she's made over the past few years and put them together they'd probably make a compelling screenplay. *Now Playing: The Maggie Gafner Story*. Come watch the epic tale of a girl whose family members have all died multiple times, has had every strain of the flu four times per season, and goes to see the dentist on a weekly basis! You won't even know she has a boyfriend until she's crying over losing him.

When she's as presentable as she can manage, Maggie makes her way back towards the beer garden. She doesn't feel like sticking around, but she knows if she leaves in this state it will be harder to muster the courage to come back. And she really needs to be able to come back. Doing comedy again feels like an important step towards reclaiming her life. The show has already started, but only barely. Fred is on stage finishing up his own material and getting ready to bring up the next comic. She misses

the joke but the audience laughs and Fred lets it die down before saying, “Alright, that’s enough of me! Are you ready for your first comic of the evening?” Polite clapping comes from scattered places in the room and Fred shakes his head. “Come on people, you can do better than that. I said ARE YOU READY FOR YOUR FIRST COMIC OF THE EVENING?” This time the audience claps louder, a few people even whistle. “This lady” Maggie’s heart flutters for a second in panic, she has no idea where she is on the lineup, but Fred continues before she can completely shut down “is one of the funniest people I know. She’s a regular in the Lincoln scene, give it up for Kara Coleman!”

Maggie stops to watch as Kara walks on the stage. Under the harsh stage lights, Kara takes on a worn look, like she came to life one day on the shelf of an antique shop and just wandered off to see the world. In person, she always struck Maggie as being strong, even a bit aggressive at times. But now, watching her pull the mic out of the stand, all Maggie can think is how fragile she looks, how petite. It never occurred to Maggie that Jerome might be as abusive to another girl as he was to her. His apologies and excuses always made everything seem so personal and limited, as though he’d had a one-time lapse in judgement, as though it were Maggie specifically that he found irresistible. And if this had been--and in hindsight Maggie *knew* that it had been--just another of his manipulation tactics, then there was a very really chance Kara’s could find herself living the same nightmare as Maggie, if she wasn’t already.

“If you didn’t like that last joke...” Kara is getting a good reaction from the crowd and Maggie tries to pay attention. “...then you can just get the fuck out of here. Go on! Git!” The audience laughs. “No, wait, I’m just kidding, please come back! I dropped out of college for this, it’s all I have, Oh my God, my life is a dumpster fire.” Kara is on

her hands and knees, pretending to crawl across the stage in desperation. Maggie forces a laugh to be supportive. It comes out shrill, like a drunk girl on a reality show.

Standing there, faking laughs and worrying that her face is still puffy from crying, Maggie knows that coming back to comedy isn't enough. She's going to have to go public with her experiences with Jerome. He took so much from her and she will never get it back. *I should have known better.* The intrusive thought is impossible to silence, no matter how much she knows it is objectively false. She's not ready to go public, not yet. But for now, maybe she can start with Kara. The resolve grows in her stomach, radiating heat out through the rest of her body. She feels fuller than she has in a long time, and as it reaches her brain the thought changes, just a little, shifting some of her guilt into her new-found calling. *Someone should have warned me.*

Kara is lying flat on her back now. The audience sits surprisingly still while she says nothing, exhaling a drawn-out sigh into the microphone. "Do you ever just find yourself emphasizing with the roaches that live in your apartment?" The reaction is loud, the laughter punctuated by involuntary expressions of horror and disgust. Maggie laughs for real this time and backtracks away from the door to the beer garden to get a better view of the stage. Kara's performance is so captivating, it draws Maggie in and sets her free of thoughts of Jerome. Her full attention is on Kara now, who has rolled over onto her stomach and is laying propped partially up on her elbows.

"I mean, I don't just have roaches in my apartment. I have *day* roaches in my apartment." She kicks her feet up and moves them one at a time down towards her butt and back upright, like a teen in an old romantic comedy gossiping on a corded phone from her bedroom floor. "Do you know what it means when you've got *day* roaches? It

means the walls...are *full*.” She moves up onto her knees, leaning forward towards the audience and shaking the mic to emphasize ‘full’. “I don’t know if you guys know this, but roaches aren’t supposed to be out in the day. If you see one, its because the other roaches got together and said ‘Whelp. Wall’s full. Gotta make some room...alright, get out there Martin!” She mimes kicking someone out the door. “Good luck. You got this.’ And then poor Martin skitters down the wall past me while I’m digging in the fridge for a shower beer and I think to myself *yeah man. I get it. I don’t wanna be here either.*” The audience is laughing harder as she goes on. Maggie even hears Ike’s deep throaty chortle behind her. “Martin didn’t ask for this you guys! He just wants to hang out in the wall with the other roaches. So yeah. I’ve been known to empathize with the day roaches in my apartment for a minute from time to time before I squish em.” The audience erupts at that line and Kara raises her arms up in feigned disbelief. “What?! You think I’m not gonna squish him? That’s gross you guys, it’s a fucking roach. I’m not gonna let a roach run around my apartment. Sick.”

Maggie’s face muscles hurt from smiling and she heads back out to the beer garden to get the lineup from Fred before Kara finishes and he has to go back onstage to introduce the next comic. It’s early in the night, and it’d certainly had a rocky start, but watching Kara onstage reminds Maggie why she loves doing comedy so much. There’s a special kind of release that happens when you laugh with others, and that release is even greater when you’re the conductor of that laughter. Comedians bring people together and show them that even the darkest, most unspeakable evils lose their bite when you can laugh at them. And that’s something Maggie knows is worth fighting for.

Chapter Four

The podcast Jenna is listening to is just finishing when she hears the familiar whine of Kara's car pulling into the parking lot behind their apartment complex. The car is leaking power steering fluid; if it was Jenna's car she would have had it fixed long ago, but Kara isn't easily convinced that it is a problem worth fixing. She finishes wiping down the bathroom sink, strips off her disposable gloves and drops them in the trash. She was hoping to have the entire apartment clean by the time Kara got home, but the stove burner pans are still soaking in the sink and she needs to wait for the kitchen floor to dry from the mopping before she can get to them. Kara is always weird about it when Jenna cleans the apartment. Jenna finds it frustrating--the apartment has to be cleaned sometimes and Kara isn't going to do it--but as far as roommate complaints go, it is relatively low on the list. Jenna's last roommate in Chicago was a self-proclaimed, give-no-fucks she-demon, who left the milk open on the counter every time she used it, shaved all of her body hair with both the shower curtain and bathroom door open, and wore her smelly pet ball python around her neck whenever she was home. One day she moved the last of her stuff out of the apartment--after she stopped paying rent and Jenna had to tell her to leave--Jenna walked in on her making out with Jenna's girlfriend on the couch with the snake coiled around her shoulder, its beady eyes transfixed on the whole affair.

Jenna sits on the couch and turns on the TV, managing to pull up Netflix just as Kara walks in the door. "How'd it go?" Jenna asks.

"Oh my God. It was just an *absolute* fucking disaster. I mean, you know I was expecting a train wreck, but holy shit it was so much worse than I imagined." Kara drops her purse on the floor and throws a stack of mail on the table. She is splitting her attention between her phone screen and Jenna, so she hasn't really taken stock of the

apartment yet. “Hang on, I’m gonna tell you all about it, I just need to finish responding to my cousin.”

“Sure.” Jenna focuses on letting her limbs go slack, going for a posture that says: *What, this? Just a bit of tidying while I was watching TV. No need to make a fuss.*

“Ok. So...” Kara finishes typing and looks up. She pauses for a moment and Jenna expects her to comment on the cleaning, but Kara just continues “...I get to my Aunt’s house expecting we’ll have some deep cleaning to do for my cousin’s graduation party, but I figured it would mostly be like sweeping and dusting and shit. You know, standard stuff.” Kara talks fast, moving her hands and pacing the way she always does when she is in the process of sharing juicy gossip. “When I talked to my mom last week she said they were planning to do the party in the garage and just clean the first floor enough that people could go in and out without being horrified at my Aunt’s hoarding, but the garage was still shut and I could see it was packed full of shit through the door window when I passed it on my way into the house. So right off I’m thinking *oh fuck*, you know?”

“Were your parents there already?” Jenna asks.

“So, my mom got there last night, but my dad had to get up early to do the farm chores for her and then drive up after, so I knew he wasn’t gonna be there yet. But my mom’s car wasn’t in the driveway when I pulled up and it turns out my Aunt sent her out for food and supplies because she didn’t do ANY of the shopping in advance. Like none of it.” Kara slaps her upper thigh to punctuate the last sentence. A puff of dust floats up and out of her skinny jeans. Jenna watches it swirl lazily in the beam of sunlight

streaming in through a crack in the blinds. Jenna tries not to think about how dirty those pants must be as Kara plops down on the other side of the L-shaped couch.

“And I walk by the garage on my way inside and it is still just *overflowing* with junk. My cousin Lauren is washing windows on the porch and she tells me her mom spent the last week looking up shit on Pinterest and was obsessing over how cute everyone’s houses looked in the graduation party pictures. Naturally she gets a wild hair up her ass and decides she wants to make all these do-it-yourself decorations and have the party in the house. But here’s the kicker--that’s *all* she did, just sat around pinning stuff. And Lauren--who is obviously busy with all the stuff she had to do before she could graduate--can’t get anything done at home because her mom keeps calling her into the office to see what she’d found and describing how she was gonna do this and that different from what was in the picture. So my Aunt has this whole elaborate vision of how everything was gonna look, but she doesn’t do any of the cleaning or shopping or anything else to make it happen.”

“Wow. What about your Uncle?” Kara’s Uncle Bill is the only person from her extended family that Jenna knows well. He owns a popular food truck, Bill’s Burnin’ Buffalo. On more than one occasion, Jenna and Kara have drunk-stumbled their way to the empty lot of an abandoned car dealership where he sets up, just a few blocks off the main downtown strip.

“He was supposed to clean out the garage but my aunt told him to forget it and focus on food, so he was in the truck out back doing prep work pretty much the whole time.” Kara’s voice is dripping in judgement, but Jenna isn’t sure if it is directed exclusively at her aunt or if Bill is included in that. Kara is always judgemental when she

talks about them, though. They are the only family she has in town and she almost never sees them. Kara prefers it that way. Jenna would never say so out loud, but she resents the way Kara takes having family live so close for granted. Jenna misses her own family, she wishes she had an aunt and uncle she could visit in town.

Jenna gets up to go clean the burners. “Keep talking, I’m listening, I just want to get these before I forget. Did you get everything done before you left?”

“Ha! Yeah right.” Kara follows Jenna and stands in the door frame. “When I left they weren’t even done moving all the trash out of the living room. That’s what I was responding to when I came in, Lauren sent me a picture. Here. Check it out.” Kara stretches out her phone to Jenna.

“What am I looking at here?” Jenna scrapes burnt patches off the burner bowls with her fingernails.

“That’s a camouflage blanket. Apparently my Aunt threw it over the pile of crap in the corner of the living room. I offered to carry that stuff down to the basement multiple times, but she claimed she needed to--” Kara makes finger quotes “--‘sort’ through it first. Obviously that didn’t happen. I wonder if she knows that camouflage doesn’t work like that.” Kara laughs and even Jenna has to chuckle at that. Kara’s phone dings and she pauses for a minute before letting out a long sigh. “Awww, Fuck sticks.”

“What’s wrong?” Jenna stops washing and watches Kara type furiously on her phone.

“It’s my mom. She said she wants to come see the show tonight, but when I left I thought she’d changed her mind because they still had so much to do before the party

tomorrow. She just texted asking what time it starts, though, so I don't know. Hopefully she's not coming."

"Well, it's a competition, so bringing people is a good thing in theory. You won't have time to talk to her too much and she can cheer for you if they pick the winners by applause or something, right?" Jenna drains the sink and dries her hands on a kitchen towel.

The new comedy club is opening in the Haymarket tonight. They won't have their first "real" show til tomorrow, but the owners have been advertising tonight's open mic in all the local comedy groups on Facebook. The description says they'll hire the comics who give the best performance tonight to open for the headliners they've booked for the next few weekends, but doesn't provide any details on how they plan to determine whose performance was "best". There was an interview with the owners in the entertainment section of the local paper that said they'd been doing comedy in Lincoln for 20+ years, but so far no one in the Lincoln scene has been able to confirm that fact. Even Gary, the oldest member of the scene, said he didn't recognize the names, and he's been doing Duffy's since it started. It's been a hot topic for gossip amongst the comedians ever since the first post popped up. Jenna and Kara have plans to walk there together.

"My mom has never seen me do comedy. And if you think about it, there's a good reason for that." Kara shakes her head. Jenna knows a lot of Kara's jokes revolve around her mom, but she has other material.

"She's *never* seen you do comedy? *Really*? She's seen *me* do comedy..." Jenna was sure Kara's mom had been there the last time they performed at the comedy festival in Norfolk. Though it isn't quite big enough for a proper comedy scene, one of the

Norfolk's only claim to fame is that Johnny Carson grew up there, so the city puts on an annual comedy festival in his honor. Jenna made a point to schedule her visits home from Chicago during the same week as the festival, so she could catch up with Kara and see her parents at the same time.

"She's seen you do comedy? When?" Kara strips off her dirty T-shirt as she walks towards the bathroom. Jenna follows her.

"In Norfolk. Doesn't she go to those competitions every year?" Jenna stares at the tiles while she talks, but she still sees Kara stripping out of the corner of her eye.

"Oh yeah, I forgot she would have seen you there. We were never in the same first flights and I never made it past the first round. Too offensive." Kara shuts the door partially and starts the water running.

"I'll let you shower--"

"No, no, I'm shaving my legs first, you can keep talking." Kara sits on the edge of the tub with her legs inside.

"Well, I just figured if she was there watching me she must have been there watching you." Jenna sits down at the vanity outside the bathroom door and starts pulling out her makeup and brushes. They chat this way often when they're getting ready for comedy shows. Jenna showers before Kara wakes up most days, but Kara waits until after work to shower. Today was an exception, Jenna knew she'd be cleaning and thought she'd get a shower in after, but if Kara was shaving her legs first there was no way Jenna would have enough time to shower *and* do her makeup before the show. She'd have to settle for changing clothes and rubbing some dry shampoo through her hair.

“No, she made a point not to see my sets.” Kara’s tone is so matter-of-fact, as it often is when she is saying tragic things. Jenna wonders if she knows how sad some of the stuff is that comes out of her mouth. She must be at least somewhat aware, saying disturbing things in that tone makes its way into her comedy sets often enough.

“Why does she want to come tonight, then?” Jenna is naturally soft-spoken, so she has to repeat herself a couple times before Kara can hear her over the water.

“Well, I dropped out of college for comedy, so I guess she’s decided that pretending like it isn’t an actual career is out of the question now.” Kara materializes at the door, fully nude, dripping water and shaving cream on the floor. “I forgot to get a shower beer.”

Jenna watches her best friend drip across the freshly vacuumed carpet on her way to the kitchen. She knows she should be irritated, but she’s always had a hard time staying upset when it came to Kara. Jenna marvels at the difference between the Kara she knows and the one she sees in public and onstage. At home, Kara has zero shame. She walks around naked, rips horrible farts, drinks milk straight from the jug. In public, Kara is closed off. Sure, she talks louder and is more animated in public, but Jenna’s known her long enough to see it for what it is--an overcompensation for her anxiety and depression. Jenna likes feeling like she knows Kara better than anyone else in her life; it makes her feel like she has the correct answer to a riddle everyone else only believes they’ve figured out.

“You just fucking missed it, holy shit.” Nathan runs his hand up through his mop of dark curls and spins away from Kara and Jenna as they walk together up the sidewalk

towards Lincoln's historic Creamery building a few hours later. "I've been here five minutes and its already a shit show up there."

"Nooooo." Kara says, as Jenna's eyes follow his hand up to the bright red letters in the Cremery's windows: C-O-M-E-D-Y L-O-F-T. Kara hands him a cigarette. He places it between his lips and leans forward, waiting for her to light it. She produces her lighter with a little flourish of her wrist. "A pretty lady never lights her own cigarette." She says as the tip of his cigarette flares orange for a moment, then shrinks to red.

Jenna feels a little flicker of satisfaction watching the exchange. She and Kara have been lighting other people's cigarettes and saying the phrase going all the way back to when they snuck away to smoke their first cigarettes. Kara was "dating" an older man she had zero romantic interest in at the time. When they reminisce about that time, they always put words like "boyfriend" and "dating" in air quotes, because even though they were "together" for a solid two years, Kara's detachment was so extreme she'd even managed to forget his name (it was Levi) from time to time and Jenna had to remind her. When he finally ended things, Levi said it was because he was tired of Kara calling him "Eli" in bed. But up to that point he'd been fine with their arrangement--he bought Kara cigarettes and booze and served as a creep-repellent at parties and in return, he got to have sex with a girl he thought was six years younger than him, though in truth it was closer to eight. Even as a teen, Jenna had mixed feelings about Kara and Levi, especially since she knew Kara's parents were completely in the dark about it. But she'd been grateful for whatever weird arrangement the two of them had the day Kara brought the pack of cigarettes Levi had bought for her to school.

As a general rule, Jenna had been a “good girl” in high school. She got straight As, held a perfect attendance record, and on the rare occasions she did drink alcohol, she never had more than one beer. But there was something about cigarettes she found harder to resist. Her favorite movies were old black and white detective stories, with soft, delicate women who had to be escorted to the chair in front of the detective’s desk and offered a cigarette to calm her nerves enough to tell the detective what it was that had her all worked up. Jenna liked the way the women looked with the cigarette held between their lips, looking up into the detective’s eyes as he lit her cigarette for her without either of them breaking eye contact for even a moment. So when Kara pulled the front pocket of her backpack open just enough for Jenna to see the cigarette box and suggested they sneak out to the little fenced area around the school’s industrial generators after lunch to smoke one, Jenna hadn’t needed any extra convincing.

Jenna didn’t ever smoke as regularly as Kara, and she quit entirely after only a few months, when her music teacher caught a whiff of her jacket and explained that smoking would make it near impossible for her to pursue her dreams of a career in musical theater. But she still carries a lighter in her purse, just in case a stranger asks for a light and gives her a reason to use teen Jenna and Kara’s little catch phrase. Watching Kara light one up now to join Nathan, Jenna feels like smoking fit Kara’s character more than it had ever fit her own. To so blatantly ignore the health risks that come with it, a person has to already have some pretty sharp edges that existed long before they took up smoking. Kara is almost all sharp edges. Jenna is more of a marshmallow. She is genuinely happy most of the time, and the rest of the time she has healthy coping

mechanisms in place. Still, she feels like she and Kara are connected through their early adventures in substance abuse.

When Jenna tunes back in to the conversation, Nathan is shaking his head in disgust. “I know you’re not surprised. I knew it was doomed when I found out Dave was involved.” His voice is dripping with venom. The fading light makes his dark brown irises almost indistinguishable from his pupils. They remind Jenna of a certain pet ball python and her hand floats up to her neck.

There’s an unfamiliar ugliness on Kara’s face as well. “I saw his Facebook post. Does he know the owner or what?”

“It’s Dave. He’s got his fingers in everything. When I managed to book Doug Stanhope at Vega he *called* me less than an hour later begging for a spot on the show. I didn’t even know he had my phone number.” Nathan says.

Jenna is no fan of Dave, but she chimes in to his defense. Someone has to. This conversation was headed into dangerous waters. “The paper said the owner is a local comic. Maybe they go way back?”

Kara laughs. “You’re too nice, Jenna. How much of a local comedian can he really be if Dave is the only one who knows him?” She leans back against the white granite wall of the building and scans the street. Jenna follows her gaze, but there is only a small cluster of people over a block away. Jenna’s eyes track the lazy diagonal they make across the hallmark brick cobblestone streets of Lincoln’s “Historic Haymarket” district.

“I already met him. He’s not a fucking comedian. He owns the Tada Theatre up there.” Nathan waves towards the window opposite the one with the Comedy Loft letters. “His name is Bob Rook, but he calls himself the Doctor of Comedy. I guess he used to do improv or some shit.”

“Kara and I should probably go get our names on the sign up list.” Jenna says, ready for a breather from the negativity.

“You still got 20 minutes before show time, but you can go up there if you want. Or, Jax is up there, you can just message him and ask if he’ll put your names on the lineup.” Jenna shrugs and Kara pulls out her phone. “Oh, and see if he wants to come smoke a joint.”

“What’s it look like up there?” Jenna asks while they wait for Kara to finish typing.

“When I got here they were still setting up tables. A couple of the other comics were standing along the back wall--which by the way is just floor to ceiling mirrors--so I go stand with them. I was like, what’s with all the fucking mirrors? And Dave gets all excited, like ‘Oh yeah, they make the room look bigger. Isn’t that awesome?’ I’m just thinking no Dave, no that is not awesome.” Nathan pauses to take a drag from his cigarette. “In fact, it’s the fucking opposite of awesome. Can you imagine what’s gonna happen when the stage lights hit that wall?”

“Oh, god.” Kara says.

“Right? So I’m standing there chatting with the guys. And then out of nowhere Bob shows up and starts ripping—I mean really ripping—into us for standing there. I mean, this is the first time he’s met any of us and he’s losing his shit because apparently, we’re being disrespectful standing there instead of filling in the seats for the show. Which would be fair, if we weren’t still 40 minutes out from any kind of show happening at that point.”

“Maybe he was just stressed?” Jenna suggests.

“No, trust me this guy is off his rocker. There’s no curtains on the windows up there. The stage is in the corner right up against these windows and the backdrop is a super obvious fake plastic brick wall. I thought maybe it was a budget thing, but Dave said he wouldn’t put curtains up because he wants people to be able to see the performers from the sidewalk. He thinks he’ll get more foot traffic that way.”

“*What?*” Kara looks up towards the windows. She takes big steps back until her heel is on the edge of the curb and cranes her neck back. “You can’t even see inside without the curtains. Does he not realize that’s gonna throw all kinds of light pollution on the stage?”

“I don’t if he doesn’t realize it or if he just doesn’t care. I mean, I’ve only had the one interaction with him, but I get the impression he thinks he’s too good for anyone else’s advice.”

“I have to go see it.” Jenna says. She looks at Kara expectantly, but she just shakes her head and resumes her position leaning against the wall.

“Your funeral. I’m not going in there until right before the show.” Kara sounds resolute, so Jenna turns and heads into the Creamery building alone.

The oldest buildings in the Haymarket have names that hint at their origins— The Creamery, The Apothecary, The Mill, The Taffy Factory. On the outside, they look very different, a product of the individual eccentricities of Lincoln’s early titans of industry. They were built around Lincoln’s main train depot during the golden age of railroads, then left to crumble when it ended. Fortunately, the area is close enough to the University of Nebraska to have been an attractive target for preservation efforts. Less fortunately, the end result was that each of these externally unique and beautiful old buildings ended up with matching interiors decorated in a style Jenna’s mom once referred to as “off-brand opulence”.

Looking up from the bottom of the stairs at the center of the Creamery building, Jenna feels it is the best description for the crime against aesthetics she is witnessing. If she’d turned in a perfect scale replica of this scene for the Stagecraft Design course she took at UIC last year, her instructor would’ve failed it for being “unrealistic”. Gawdy red velvet carpet covers the floor and a banner of it runs up the center of the stairs. From a distance, Jenna thought the exposed parts of the steps were gray marble, but up close she can see it’s really just wood painted to look like marble. She isn’t close enough to tell, but she guesses the same is true of the pink “marble” pillars at the top of the stairs. Jenna has been in the Creamery before, but only to the ice cream shop and the make your own pottery place, which are located on the first floor and in the basement, respectively. She hadn’t considered there might be other businesses upstairs. From her current vantage point, the mismatched black wrought iron and pinewood railings run from the foot of the

stairs to the top and continue on around the inside of what looks like a little viewing walkway. As she climbs the stairs, she can see the gold chandelier's reflection in a gilded, silver-framed mirror hanging on the burnt orange drywall past the top of the stairs, and it isn't until she's three steps from the top that the mirror reflection moves past the chandelier to reveal a hallway on the opposite side.

Jenna runs into Jax in the hall and even with some verbal directions from him she still manages to make a couple wrong turns before finally finds the club entrance. Though she's still determined to give Bob the benefit of the doubt, she can't stop the skepticism growing in her mind about his decision to forgo curtains in the hope of attracting foot traffic after her struggle to find the entrance. She feels even more apprehensive after she opens the door and realizes Nathan neglected to disclose the most shocking feature of Lincoln's new comedy club: naked hardwood floors.

Comedy clubs have carpet. It isn't some unspoken aesthetic consensus, it is a necessity for preserving the integrity of the performance. Without it, the mid-show bathroom breaks or trips to the bar of any patron wearing heels becomes a noisy distraction for both the audience and the performer. And if one of the comedics emphasizes their joke by yelling it, it will echo back off the floors and disrupt the sound quality. Beyond the potential for disruptions, carpet is a mark of respect. It's a way to say to your comedian "Hey, thanks for making the journey and helping me make some money this weekend. As a token of my gratitude, I have done the bare minimum to help you deliver your material with minimal interruption and at an acceptable level of sound quality." Jenna is still trying to wrap her head around it when Bob comes over to introduce himself.

“It’s Jenna, right?” He says as he extends his hand.

Jenna starts to ask how he knows her name, but Dave waves and gives her a thumbs up from across the room and she realizes he must have pointed her out to Bob while she was gawking at the floor. Jenna tries to switch gears from “How...”, but the best she can manage is a drawn out “Howwwdy.” She winces. Howdy? Really? She’s spent her life trying to put distance between herself and her rural Nebraska upbringing, trying to pre-empt the negative connotations that come with it. Not today though. Today she opened with an involuntary “Howdy”.

“Dave tells me you do musical comedy. He says you’ve got range like Karen Carpenter.” He moves his arm Dave’s direction as he speaks, but something in his tone still makes Jenna feel like he wants credit for repeating the compliment. She’s been around guys like Bob before, men who are desperate for validation. It doesn’t ease her doubts about the club, but getting this gig might earn her a little legitimacy in the scene. She really wants the other comics to see her as more than just “Kara’s roommate”, so she decides to turn up the charm.

“A fat lie, but a flattering one, so I’ll let it slide.”

Bob answers with a laugh that sounds like it belongs to a middle schooler saying the word ‘sex’ for the first time since learning what it means. She flashes her most demure smile.

“Seems like you’ve got a great setup here.”

“Oh, yes, we’re very excited about it. You know, Lincoln hasn’t had its own comedy club since the Funny Bone closed in what, ’98? I think that’s right. So my buddy Gale and I were talking about all the good times we had performing at the Funny Bone. And it just snowballed into this.” He waves his arm out towards the wood floors, windowless curtains, fake plastic brick wall.

“Very impressive. I didn’t even know Lincoln ever had a Funny Bone location.” She did, actually. Gary rants about how poorly it was run any time some poor unsuspecting newbie mentions the Omaha location in his presence. But Bob doesn’t know that, and she could tell that he was enjoying his little history lessons.

“Oh, I s’pose not, you’re just a baby, after all.” He mops the flop sweat off his naked scalp. Jenna eyes the deep crevices between the rolls of fat on his arms. “Well, I wish you luck out there. We billed it as an open mic, but a little insider tip—we really consider it to be auditions for the weekend hosting spots. So bring your A-game!”

“Thank you so much! I will for sure.” She watches him waddle into his office before she crosses the room to join the other comics. They’ve reconciled their desire to stand in the back with Bob’s order to fill in the seats by half-sitting, half-standing around two tables in the far corner.

Before she can reach them, Dave waves her over. His chummy relationship with Bob must make him exempt from the rules, he’s leaning one shoulder against the back wall as he chats with a couple people Jenna doesn’t recognize. They smile and shift to make space for her to join them.

“Jenna, how’ve ya been?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “Gale, this is that comic I was talking about earlier, you’re going to love her, she’s funny as fuck. Gale’s the other owner of the club.”

Jenna seizes Gale up as she goes to shake his hand. He looks older than Bob, but he is certainly in better shape. His skin is darker and little leathery, the kind of skin that comes to mind when she pictures the average Nebraska farmer. But the rest of him doesn’t say farmer, he looks too at home in his dress clothes.

“And this is Julie, she’s the host for the show tonight.” Dave continues. “Gale was just telling us about some of the headliners they have lined up for the next couple months. A lot of solid acts to look forward to.”

“Well that’s exciting! It’s really nice to meet you. I’ve been hearing good things.” She smiles at them both and then addresses Gale. “Bob was telling me how you two used to perform comedy together.”

Gale nods. “That’s right, and Julie too. We actually still perform together all over the place, we just got back from a show in Wyoming on Saturday. Well, Bob and I did, Julie’s got her own hustle now.”

Julie laughs. “I don’t know if I’d call it a hustle.” She turns to Jenna. “I’m a communications professor at Chadron, but I’ve been doing comedy a long time.” Her voice is deep and rough.

“I took a communications class my Sophomore year. My professor was super old, I don’t think he even knew what the internet was.” Jenna says.

“Oh yeah, we’ve got a few of those. They’re mostly retiring now.” Julie pulls a sheet of paper from her pocket. “Did you want to look at the lineup?”

Jenna’s name is second from the top behind Dave’s, Kara’s is third. She hands the paper back with a ‘thanks’.

“I told her she can trust you to set a good tone for the show.” Dave says.

“You’re so nice to me.” Jenna smiles. She doesn’t know Dave well enough to have beef with him the way so many of the other comics in the scene seem to, but she wouldn’t consider him a friend. She knows enough to understand that he doesn’t do anything unless he sees it as serving his own goals. He’s had a lot of success as a result. His biggest claim to fame is opening for Joan Rivers, back when he was living in LA and pursuing comedy as his only goal. It is an impressive feat, so impressive that if Jenna had some horrible accident and ended up in a coma, she wouldn’t be surprised to wake up to him telling someone else about it across her hospital bed.

Jenna’s thoughts are interrupted by Julie putting a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll start a little late, I’m thinking in about 15 minutes. You get five minutes, I’ll give you the light at four.” “Awesome, thank you.” Jenna catches sight of Kara’s mom across the room and taps Julie’s hand. “Sorry, excuse me just a minute.” She starts to duck out of from under Julie’s grip, but stops when she realizes Kara is nowhere to be seen. “Actually, could you tell me if there’s another exit? The way I came in was kind of long.”

Gale points to a door near the stage. “It says fire exit, but you can go use it, there’s no alarm.”

“Thanks so much. I’ll be back.” She shuffles half sideways to the exit, trying to make it out before Kara’s mom recognizes her.

Outside, Jenna scans the parking lot for Kara. It is possible she was just in the bathroom and would have joined her mom in a minute, but Jenna wants to make sure Kara knew her mom was waiting for her upstairs. Jenna knows they would have relocated away from the main entrance when Jax got outside, to smoke Nathan’s joint somewhere more discrete. She’d asked Kara if her mom ever responded on the walk here. Kara said she hadn’t, that she assumed she got caught up doing some other cleaning project. Jenna doesn’t know exactly what will happen if Kara runs into her mom upstairs without warning, but she knows it won’t be pretty.

It takes Jenna almost a full loop around the parking lot before she spies Nathan’s mop top beneath a sign that reads “TENANT PARKING ONLY”. Jax is with him, along with a couple other comics who must be answering the siren call of pre-performance weed, but no Kara.

“Hey. Where’s Kara?” Jenna asks Nathan.

“I don’t know. She didn’t end up coming back here with us. I thought she went to find you.” He picks up his pack of smokes off the top of a recycle bin and pockets them.

“*Shit.*” Jenna hisses. Nathan takes a step backwards and throws his hands up.

“Woah ho ho. Miss ‘I don’t work blue’ cursing? What’s the problem?”

“Her mom just showed up.”

“Ok, well Kara will head up there eventually if she hasn’t already, right? Why do you need to find her?” Nathan asks.

Jax chimes in. “Did I hear you say Kara’s mom is here? I gotta get back up there. I love meeting people’s moms.”

Jenna holds up her finger. “First, Jax, that’s weird. Don’t be weird.” She turns to Nathan. “Second, it’s Kara. You’ve heard her jokes, right?”

“You think Kara’s not gonna notice her mom in that room? It’s not that big. She’s not gonna do her mom jokes” Nathan says.

“Whatever, I gotta get back up there. I’ll see you guys inside.” She turns and slides between the cars, figuring it will be faster to cut a diagonal across the massive lot than walking another half loop around the outside. She doesn’t get far before she hears Jax call out behind her.

“Wait!” He yells. Jenna doesn’t stop, but she slows down long enough for him to run up beside her. “Sorry. I just really think it’s fun to meet people’s moms. You get to see where all their weird comes from.”

Jenna just shakes her head and resumes her previous speed. Jax trots a few paces behind her. They continue on in silence for a few minutes, until Jenna stops without warning, causing Jax to smack into the back of her.

“Wha--” He begins, but Jenna raises her hand and shushes him.

Jenna backtracks a bit and points between the cars towards the back end of the parking lot. Kara is perched on a little red brick ledge, her back partially towards them. She is hunched over her right leg, which she's stretched out straight along the ledge at a 45 degree angle to the rest of her body. She's far enough away that she hasn't noticed their approach, but close enough that Jax makes a horrified sucking sound as she takes the last drag off a cigarette and puts it out on the top of her thigh. Jenna grabs a handful of his shirt and pulls, but it's too late. Kara's eyes meet Jenna's and hold them for a few seconds before turns back towards the ledge.

Jenna has known about Kara's self-harming for years. Kara used to tell her about it when they were in high school, back when Jenna's hormones made her just angsty enough to find it kind of exotic and exciting. But her curiosity turned into concern over the years, and eventually Kara stopped bringing it up. Jenna knew it hadn't stopped, she'd seen the little circles in their various shades of red and pink as they went from wound to scar any time Kara wore an especially short pair of shorts or made one of her nude trips across the apartment to retrieve some forgotten item.

But there was a big difference between hearing about it or looking at scars and witnessing it happen in real time. Jenna feels like she is somehow paralyzed and moving at hyper speed simultaneously. When Kara turns around and starts walking towards them, Jenna can't believe her eyes. Kara is *smiling*.

"Are you guys heading inside?" Kara asks when she reaches them.

Jenna's brain can't make words, but Jax answers. "Yup. Show's about to start."

Jenna just watches the two of them turn and walk away from her towards the Comedy Loft, chatting about what jokes they're planning to do as they go. Eventually Kara must have noticed she isn't following them, because she turns and calls out, "Jenna, are you coming?" after they've gone a few feet.

Jenna answers by walking towards them, though she doesn't feel like she's fully in control of her feet.

Back inside the Comedy Loft, Jenna suffers another unpleasant shock when she hears Mrs. Coleman call out and realizes she never delivered the warning she went outside to give Kara in the first place. She feels a brief flicker of hope that the cigarette burn meant Kara already knew her mom was there, but it dies faster than it came when she glances up and sees the look on Kara's face.

"Kara! Kara!" Mrs. Coleman is hovering near one of the tables, cupping her hands around her mouth while she yells Kara's name.

Mrs. Coleman's hands draw Jenna's attention to the increase in noise since she was last in the room. She looks around and realizes that there's enough non-comedians here to be a proper audience. Say what you will about Bob and Gale, apparently they knew how to bring in a crowd. She sees Kara start walking towards her mom and starts to follow, planning to do her best to play buffer between them. But her plans are disrupted by the return of Jax, who had made a beeline for the bar the second he made it through the door.

“Hey, they taped the lineup to the bar, did you know you’re up first?” He’s clutching a PBR in one hand and a shot of some brown liquor in the other.

“Julie showed it to me earlier and I’m second after Dave. Third if you count Julie’s hosting set.”

“Jack said they decided to give Dave a longer “special guest set” halfway through the show since so many people showed up.” He says.

Jenna doesn’t even have time to respond before Julie calls her over and confirms that Jax is correct. She half-listens as Julie repeats the time limits--she’s trying to remember which songs she was planning to do--so she almost misses it when Julie says something she didn’t say before.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that last bit. It got noisy in here.” Jenna says.

Julie leans closer and raises her voice. “I know, isn’t it great?! It’s gonna be such a good show. I said you’ll have to turn on the mic when you get up there, there’s a little switch on the bottom you just slide.”

“Won’t the mic already be on for your set?”

“Oh, no, I don’t need a microphone. *Communications Professor*. Remember?” Julie smiles as though she’s making perfect sense. “Alright, I’m gonna head to the sound booth and make a five minutes to showtime announcement so everyone can finish up at the bar and get settled into their seats. Are you good?”

“Can I follow you? I just realized I forgot to give my music to the sound guy.”

Jenna fishes out her flash drive and holds it up for Julie to see.

“Oh, you don’t just play your own music?” Julie asks.

“I do, but I pre-record it for some of my sets and play it live for others. It just depends on what kind of show it is and which songs I’m doing.”

Julie doesn’t look like she understands, or maybe she isn’t really listening, but she nods and indicates Jenna should follow her as she heads towards the sound booth.

It turns out the sound booth is another thing Bob and Gale got right, though there’s still a little weirdness involved. Proper comedy clubs set up their sound booths in a little balcony over the back of the room, or set it up on a podium in the back of the room if it is a smaller venue. Both options are designed to give the person operating the sound board a straight line of sight on the stage, so they can adjust things as needed if the performer wanders too close to a speaker or watch for pre-determined visual cues for music or effects, etc. Bob and Gale have set their sound board up in a separate smaller room of its own, making up for the lack of windows with a TV displaying a live feed of the stage. Jenna can think of some potential problems with this work around, but the board itself is impressive enough that she’s willing to let it slide. She lets out a low whistle of approval as she steps in the room while Julie closes the door behind them. Bob is the only other person in the room.

“Do you like ‘er?” He asks.

“I *love* her.” Jenna says, tracing her finger along the bottom edge of the set-up. “I bet it cost a pretty penny.”

“You’d be surprised. I’ve got good connections on equipment, one of the perks of running a successful theatre for 25 years.” He hooks his thumbs in his jacket pockets and pops his stomach forward, like a living caricature of an old timey banker. “Plus I started out running sound myself, way back in the day. I’m doing it tonight, the guy we hired only has Thursday through Sunday availability, which is good enough for the scheduled headliner shows, but not great for these little pop up events.”

Julie makes her announcement and leaves them to talk shop for a bit longer, before returning to inform them she’s ready to start. Her music cues sorted, Jenna follows Julie out to watch and wait.

After a few seconds, the house lights dim and Jenna recognizes Bob’s voice floating out from the speakers. “Alright it’s Wednesday night at Lincoln’s number one dedicated comedy club. The staff here at the Comedy Loft would like to welcome you and remind you to turn off your cell phones. We ask that you turn your attention to the front of the room as we welcome our host for this evening to the stage, put your hands together for Julieeee Brrrooks!”

Jenna runs through her lyrics and transitions in her head as Julie delivers an explanation of the show format, but she tunes back in when Julie transitions to doing her own material. Up to this moment Jenna hasn’t spent any energy worrying about what the crowd will be like when it’s her turn to take the stage. She just assumed Julie would have no trouble warming them up, not because of any specific faith in her abilities, but because

the level of ability required to do so in a room like this is so low. In a bar setting the comic has to compete with drunk sorority sisters, TVs showing sports on mute with closed captioning, and countless other distractions. The audience showed up to drink booze and you are interrupting their good time. In contrast, this room is filled with attentive adults who booked a sitter for an hour so they could come to a comedy show. They are here on purpose. They want to laugh. Even the most mediocre comic should be able to deliver under these circumstances.

Jenna neglected to factor in that their dear host Julie, as it turns out, is not a comic. She's a communications professor who moonlights as a motivational speaker. There are a few nervous chuckles at her opening line, "Staying in shape is easy", owing largely to the fact that Julie's body is not giving off "in shape" vibes, so the audience expects that it will be followed by something along the lines of "round is a shape". Instead their smiles fade to confusion and ultimately boredom as Julie delivers a *ten minute* lecture on the benefits of having a positive attitude and sticking to a workout schedule. By the end people are engaging in conversations at their tables. As Julie starts saying lines that indicate she's about to bring Jenna on stage, Jenna realizes she's been gripping the tops of her thighs so hard her arm muscles are starting to cramp.

Jenna's walk to the stage is slower than usual, too slow, but her feet are weighed down by the feeling that she was being called to the executioner's block. As she pulls the mic out and turns it on, she takes a quick headcount from the stage. Only five or six people are still facing towards the stage. Most of those five are sitting at the front tables, watching because they are too close to the stage to get away with not watching. The largest group is engaged in an especially animated conversation, led largely by a woman

wearing a garish collage of items purchased from different multi-level marketing companies. It takes a few attempts before Jenna manages to get her attention, but eventually she stops talking and looks up.

“I’m sorry, I know you were talking. I’m just curious, do you all work together?”

The table murmurs confirmation.

“And where is it that y’all work?”

“A hair salon, down the street.” The MLM lady replies. “Our boss is taking us out to dinner.” She indicates a disheveled looking man in the back of the group.

“That’s your boss?”

She nods.

“You’re sure? What’s his name?”

“Richard.”

“Richard, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but you do not look like the type of person I picture when I imagine someone running a hair salon.”

Richard laughs and the rest of the table laughs with him. Encouraged, Jenna continues doing crowd work until the rest of the audience is back on board. She only ends up having enough time to do the shortest of the three songs she had planned, but Bob still catches the cue and it goes off without a hitch. She practically dances off the stage, breathless with her triumph and ready to face the world. Moments like this are what

makes her feel like comedy is worth the investment--the anxiety, the stress of navigating delicate social situations in the community, the late nights at the bar--all of it a fair price for a few fleeting moments of feeling like this. She'd single-handedly turned a crowd that had soured into one roaring with laughter. Things would go smoothly for Kara and the rest of the comedians that followed, she'd set the tone for success.

Jenna's eyes finish adjusting from the blinding light of the stage to the relative darkness of the rest of the room right when she walks past the spot where Kara is waiting for her turn on stage. Jenna smiles gives her a thumbs up as she passes, but Kara is staring straight ahead and either doesn't see it or chooses not to acknowledge it. Jenna can't get a read on Kara's expression--her lips are pressed in a tight line and her eyes are slightly narrowed, but it doesn't come off as angry, not exactly. It might just be the lingering light floaters messing with her vision, but Jenna feels like if she saw it on anyone other than her tiny friend, she might have described it as "menacing".

Dangerous, even.

The interaction--or rather, the lack of interaction--with Kara has deflated some of Jenna's post-stage energy by the time she sits down, and it only takes a few more minutes for Julie to kill the rest. Typically, hosting is easiest when the comic leaving the stage just had a good set, you hop up there just long enough to deliver a quick transition into the next comic and let the momentum carry itself forward. When the comedian leaving the stage had a bad set, the host may have to do a couple little jokes to bring the energy in the room back up. In either case, the host's goal is efficiency: spend as little time up there as possible while still maintaining a good level of energy in the room.

Julie starts off with, “So you all are hairdressers, huh? I have a funny story about a hairdresser...” and proceeds to spend a whole five minutes rambling about a time when another woman named Julie Brooks booked an appointment to get a perm at the same time she had an appointment for a haircut. It might have been funny if she’d ended up with a perm or had some sort of interesting exchange with the other Julie, but the other Julie didn’t even show for her appointment. So it was just a story about a time she went in for a haircut, the stylist said she had her down for a perm, and they realized there was a second Julie. Jenna’s nephew isn’t quite four years old, and he could’ve come up with a funnier story. At one point she said, “Can you imagine me with a perm? I’d look like...” and then started naming celebrities that look nothing like her, they just all had curly hair. It was painful to watch.

By the time Kara got on stage, there were multiple tables of people having conversations at full volume. Bob had emerged from the sound booth to do damage control. He and Gale went around the room, stopping at the tables with the loudest offenders, but they may as well have been trying to put out a wildfire with a handful of household fire extinguishers. Jenna had been worried Kara might be planning to go tell all her meanest mom jokes, but now she was more worried Kara might not get to tell any jokes at all.

Kara takes her sweet time stepping up the the microphone. She moves the stool a little to the right, sets it down and takes a step back to look at it, then shakes her head and moves it a little to the left. She smooths her shirt with her hands and adjusts the mic stand up, then down, finally just taking the mic out and moving the stand out of the way. Jenna wonders what she is doing, this little preparation act is odd, even for Kara. And that’s

saying something. But then, something magic happens. Kara takes a long, deep breath, brings the microphone up to her mouth, and *shushes* the audience.

This isn't the impatient shush of an irritated librarian. Kara draws it out in one long continuous release of air, letting it sputter out into staccato "shuh shuh shuh" sounds only at the end of her breath, before taking another deep breath and starting all over again. And somehow, it works. People start turning their attention back to whatever this weird thing is that's happening on stage. Kara keeps going until the entire room is so silent Jenna can hear the faint echo of people talking on the sidewalk below. Kara lets the silence sit for a beat or two, then delivers the joke she calls "her only one-liner".

"When I was thirteen years old, I told my mom I wanted a tramp stamp. So she burned the word 'whore' into my back with a curling iron. Thank you." As the audience loses it, Kara gives a little curtsy, returns the microphone to its stand, and walks off the stage.

Kara's was the last real laugh of the evening. Bob had followed it up by going on stage to introduce himself as the owner and scold the audience for talking too loud. Some people left after that, but most of them stuck around, they just took the opportunity to visit the bathroom or refresh their drink, or pop outside for a quick smoke break every time Julie got back on stage. Jenna wished Bob would have scolded Julie, she continued to talk for long stretches in between each comic, once going on for a full ten minutes. Instead, Bob decides to end the show after Dave, claiming they'll do the second half of the list next week or the week after.

Julie is the first to approach Jenna after the show, bubbling and completely unaware of how poorly she'd done. "Oh that felt good, it's been so long since I got to do stand-up. And you were so funny! Dave was right."

"Awww, thank you." Jenna fights the urge to shake her by the shoulders until she stops being terrible. Kara and Bob are having a conversation just outside of Jenna's earshot, but it doesn't look like it's going well. Bob comes over to join Julie and Jenna after Kara walks away towards the door.

"Wasn't Julie fantastic?" Bob asks. "I was a little disappointed in the rest of the comics though. I remember the days when Lincoln actually had a decent comedy scene, sometimes I forget that it was 20 years ago."

Jenna chokes into her glass of water, which saves her from having to come up with some kind of comment on Julie's performance.

"You weren't half bad, though. I'm gonna have to see how it goes with the other crop next week, but I think we might be able to hire you as an emcee with a few small changes. You should leave your contact at the ticket booth before you leave."

"Thank you! I will."

Chapter Five

Fred let the satisfaction of a show well-done roll over him, taking lazy drags off his cigarette as he leaned back against the brick wall outside of the Backline Improv

Theatre. He wishes he could kick off his shoes and crack a beer, but that will have to wait until he gets home. Right now he needs to chill outside the venue, soaking up the congratulations from departing audience members and chatting with the other comics until the owner finishes closing tabs and comes out to pay him.

Jack is the first one out the door, already in the process of pulling his pipe out of his pockets as he pushes the door open with his back. “Hey man, good show. That was a lot of fun.” Jack’s voice has the low, slow sound of a stereotypical stoner. Fred started calling him Shaggy when they were paired up on a roast battle show and he’s been calling him that ever since. The irony of his own name being Fred is not lost upon him. Shaggy’s girlfriend is closer to resembling Daphne than his own wife, though. She was a sexy blonde when they started dating, but three kids and the decision to homeschool them left him with more of a Velma.

Fred shakes the image of his now-frumpy wife out of his head. He reminds himself to focus on now, on the success of the show that he created, that he runs on his own. He reminds himself that he is hands down one of the best comedians in this scene. “Thanks Shaggy. You were terrible as always.” Jack laughs and holds the pipe out to him. “You know I don’t smoke, man.”

Jack shrugs and hits the pipe instead. “Soooo. You were getting into some shit last night, huh?”

“Ha! It didn’t seem to hurt my crowd turnout, huh?” Fred watches Jack’s face flicker briefly before settling on a smile. Fred couldn’t read the flicker, but the smile seems forced and he sighs. “What? You going full SJW on me?”

“Ha ha, no. I just--” Jack looks around like he expects to find the answer in the downtown Omaha skyline. “--well, you know. I like Maggie. She’s been coming back to Duffy’s the last couple months and its been cool catching up with her.”

“Yeah, well, it isn’t her I have a problem with. Its Jenna. She’s always tagging in on these #MeToo posts like she’s the comedy police. Calling for boycotts and bans and shit. Who made her boss? She’s been doing comedy, what, like six months? A year?” Fred drops his cigarette and puts it out with his foot.

“She was in Chicago before--”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. I know. But was she even doing comedy in Chicago? It sounds like she was doing acting.” Fred watched Jenna on stage the first time she did the weekly Barley Street open mic and she was terrible. He makes a point of going out to smoke when she’s up, but he still interacts with her on Facebook.

“I think she was doing comedy too.” Jack nods and murmurs a thank you to a couple departing audience members who compliment his performance on their way towards the parking lot. Fred feels a little miffed that they didn’t say anything to him.

“Ok, well either way she isn’t good. And she thinks she’s in charge.” Fred lights another cigarette and resumes his place on the wall. “I don’t want someone telling me what I can and can’t say on stage.”

“You think that’s what she was doing?” Jack looks confused.

“Well not this time, maybe, but that’s where it's headed.” Fred waves at a few more of the audience members as they leave, but they are already caught up in loud conversation and don’t notice. He must not be standing in good light.

“Well, I guess I’m not as experienced with this kind of thing as you. I just figured Jenna was trying to be supportive for Maggie.” Jack shakes his head. “I just can’t believe Jerome did all that. He always seemed so nice.”

“That’s because he didn’t do any of it. There’s no way.” Fred reads the skepticism on Jack’s face, but he plows ahead. “Really, think about it. I’ve been working with him for *years*. He’s married and he’s obsessed with his wife. He brags about her all the time. Plus, Maggie is not the first female comedian he’s worked with.”

“Well, she’s the first local female comic to get a hosting spot there. Apparently ever.” Jack chimes in.

“I doubt that’s actually true, none of the women in this scene have been around long enough to know whether there was a female comic hosting at the Laugh Factory.” Fred’s voice is dripping with contempt. “And he works with female comics who are headlining. Not to mention all the female bartenders and servers. Plus Kara’s been hosting up there for a couple months now.”

“Why would Maggie lie about that? She hasn’t been around for like two years, don’t you think that’s a good explanation for why she was gone?” Jack sounds unsure, and Fred knows he’s just trying to be a ‘good guy’. But he’s over all this PC nonsense.

“Look, she obviously got shit canned and just made up some excuse for it. She’s probably tired of losing out on gigs because people don’t know who she is.” Fred shrugs. “Or maybe she came on to him and got all butt hurt when he turned her down. Who knows? Personally, I think most of these women just want attention.”

“Wow.” Jack recoils back and spins around in a circle. “I’m not touching that with a ten foot pole. Jesus man.”

“Look, I’m just saying what everyone else is too damn scared to say.” Fred laughs. “You can bury your head in the sand, but I’m not afraid of them. They can cyber bully us all they want, but comedy doesn’t require a background check, ok? There’s only one requirement--either you’re funny or you’re not. Jenna’s not funny. Maggie used to be funny, but she hasn’t been on stage in years.”

Jack looks like he wants to say something, but he’s interrupted by the other comedians joining them outside. He looks relieved, but that fades quickly as Nathan immediately makes siren noises at Fred. “Woo woo wooooo. Here comes the comedy police. You’re under arrest.”

Fred laughs as Nathan pretends to drive a squad car over to him. He’s so engrossed in recapping the same conversation he just had, that he doesn’t notice Jack slipping away until he’s almost to the parking lot. He pauses for a second, considering calling out to him, but then decides against it. Jack is too much of a stoner to ever be a major player in the scene, so Fred doesn’t consider their alliance essential. He turns back to the crowd. “So, anyway...”
