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The Bat in the Tree

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

The Bat in the Tree By Adrienne Rotella

A collection of short stories that explores the effects of physical and emotional trauma on the individual and in his or her relationships. Other issues and themes include gender, power, location, coming of age, mental illness, and strained relationships. The characters, at different stages in their lives, must grapple and come to terms with their conflicts. Each character undergoes some sort of an awakening.

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The Bat in the Tree

Adrienne Rotella

Yesterday came suddenly

The stinging cold bit at me as I left Bowman Hall and I zipped up my jacket. The lights on the street were on now and I followed the path of burnt yellow orbs to the parking lot. Leaning against the door of my red Firebird was Jessica, the foxy blonde from my Statistics class.

“Can I get a ride?”

I looked at her, tall and thin in her bellbottom jeans and tight blue sweater.

“Sure.”

I unlocked the car and she moved to the other side. I tossed my bag in the back seat and immediately played my Beatles cassette. She flipped her long blonde hair back as I started the car.

“So what are you doing tonight?”

“I have an exam coming up, so I really need to study.”

“Oh, that’s too bad... I was thinking I might see you at the party over on Martin Street.”

I looked over at her, her blue eyes hotly gazing at me. I quickly gripped the steering wheel and looked ahead.

“Maybe another time.”

“I hope so.”

I dropped her off in front of her apartment building, watching her hips move as she walked away.

I headed home. The street was black except for our house, which was blazing with lights. I headed straight to my room and slid my textbook onto the desk. Turning the desk lamp on, I sat down and started to reread the material from the review session.

“John, you in here?” I turned in my chair to look at Alex as he knocked and then stepped in. “Are you studying? It’s a Friday. God.” He tapped the cover of the textbook. “This should be banned on weekends.”

“Yeah, well, I have an exam before break.”

“Yeah, I know. We both have exams at the same time.”

“Then you should be studying, too.”

“It’s history. I can handle it. And I actually try to enjoy my weekends.”

I slammed the book closed. “So do I, but this is more important. I’m not a college student just to party for four years. I’m here to get the hell out of my backwards life. I’ll see you later.” I packed up my bag again and headed past Alex, who looked stunned.

“Where are you going?”

“If I can’t study here, I’ll go to the library.” I paused at the door and looked at my best friend. “It’s just because of this exam, okay? When I’m done with exams, it’ll be different. It’s not like I don’t want to party. You know I do.”

“Sure.”

I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or just hopeful, but I left him and headed to my car. When I got to the library, a group of girls passed me, clearly on their way to a party, eyes glazed over from the joint they passed amongst each other. I watched them walk away, laughing and talking. I sat on a bench, slowly pulled out a cigarette from the pack stashed in my pocket and lit up. The scent of the cigarette smoke calmed me down; I sucked on it and exhaled in guilty satisfaction as I stared at the library in front of me.

Five days later, I could finally forget about Economics. Our two other roommates were still sleeping off their hangovers from their party the night before. It seemed like half the campus had been here in celebration of Thanksgiving Break. Alex and I tried to avoid the strewn beer bottles and sticky puddles of spilled liquor and boxed wine as we walked in.

“This is disgusting.” I kicked a can out of my way and watched it scuttle across the room.

“You’re just jealous you missed the party.”

“I don’t really feel the need to become an alcoholic.”

“Whatever, man, it’s college. It’s not being an alcoholic, just being a student.”

“I have a hard time justifying it sometimes.”

We moved up the rickety stairs, ignoring the random person sleeping on our faded living room couch. The old wood floor creaked as I went into my room. I dug my duffel bag out from under my bed and grabbed some clothes. I checked my watch and realized I needed to leave soon if I wanted to avoid traffic on the L.I.E.

“You leaving now?”

“Yeah. Guess I have to.”

“Why don’t you want to go home? It’s Thanksgiving! Everyone wants to go home, at least for the food.”

“It’s nothing. No big deal.”

“Well, whatever it is, if you need to escape, my parent’s house is only a few hours away from yours, and they’re used to taking in my desperate friends. Hey, man, when we get back, let’s do something wild, like we used to. Now that our exams are over.”

“I don’t know...I have another exam right after we get back. I need to do well if I want to get good enough grades to get into a MBA program.”

“Aw, come on! We’re only freshmen. That’s years away. What happened to the work-hard, party-hard guy who went out every single Friday and Saturday night and woke up hung-over every Saturday and Sunday afternoon?”

“He’s trying to survive. I’ll think about it, I promise. I’ll probably need the release after this trip, anyway.”

“What’s Thanksgiving without a little family drama, right?”

I nodded, preoccupying myself with my jacket zipper. “Anyway, I’ll see you Sunday.”

With the window cracked and the radio blasting, I started my five-hour drive home to Huntington, a large town with small-town attitudes and lifestyles.

I turned onto my street for the first time in three months. My hands gripped the steering wheel; I imagined myself driving away, finding some motel along the beach and vanishing for the weekend. I would walk along the rocky beach in a sweatshirt and feel the cold sand on my bare feet. I would be alone and it would be quiet. Instead, I pulled into my parents' driveway and slowly climbed out of the car. When I slammed the door shut, my father opened the squeaky front door and stood above on the fading white porch, waiting for me. His hair seemed thinner and he wore a sweater that showed his growing beer-belly.

"Hey, dad," I said wearily, walking up to meet him. We went inside, where my little brother Paulie sat at the kitchen table, drinking a soda with some Cheez Doodles on a napkin next to him. His legs were swinging below the chair, too short to reach the floor.

"Johnny!" he squealed, and leapt out of his chair to throw himself at me. I laughed and tousled his hair.

"You know you're the only one allowed to call me that."

"John," my mom called out affectionately, limping into the room. She carefully placed her cane against the stove and grabbed me into a tight hug.

"Hey, mom." As she cautiously settled into her chair, I poured a glass of soda and sat next to Paulie, across from my mom. I looked around. "Where's Catherine?"

"She's spending the holiday with her husband's family."

“Hm.”

My father cleared his throat. He stood next to my mom and sipped his mug, which I was sure had more than just plain coffee in it. I glanced up at him then quickly looked down at my drink.

“John, you should leave soon if you’re going to get to the home in time to pick him up.” I slowly looked up, watching him stir his drink with a spoon as he continued to watch me. I chugged my soda. Paulie looked at me, curious, as I stayed quiet. “John.”

“Why can’t you go?”

He looked at me as he sipped from his mug. His knuckles bulged and turned white against the muddy green mug. I smacked my palm against the cool, smooth tablecloth. “Fine.” I stood up, grabbed my keys, threw on my jacket, and left, slamming the door behind me. I thrust myself back into my car. The seat was still warm and the tires squealed as I quickly spun out of the driveway.

The hour-long drive went too quickly for me; I could’ve done the drive in my sleep. Ever since I got my license when I turned sixteen, my dad had passed the duty on to me, eager and willing to avoid the place. I hadn’t been back there in three months and I thought I had been freed from the responsibility now that I was in college. Walking through the dreary halls filled with the other patients to find my older brother was so painful that the memory made me nauseous. My muscles tensed as I saw the sign on the side of the road swinging noisily from the wind.

I drove up to the front of the grey building and slowly parked the car.

I stared at the imposing building.

I zipped up my jacket and got out of the car.

Straightening my shoulders, I strode toward the front entrance. I wanted to get in and out as fast as possible, like ripping off a band-aid without tearing off skin and hairs.

As I walked into the building, I swallowed, forcing down the urge to vomit. The smell of disinfectant and medicine hit me hard, and I remembered the first time I came here. My father always picked him up and brought him home for weekends and holidays. No one else ever went there; it was as if the building never existed, as if Donny simply appeared from and vanished into thin air. My father had never talked about it until the first day he sent me there a week after I got my license. I had been so psyched to get it only to have it tainted with this responsibility. As I had stepped out of the house, my father had walked with me to the car. “Don’t ever talk about it with your mother or brother. They don’t need to know.”

That trip...

I shook my head to clear it.

I needed to find Donny.

I nodded to Shelly, the chubby nurse behind the front desk, and moved toward Donny’s room. The activity hall was packed with all the same nameless faces. I didn’t want to make a noise; I didn’t want them to see me. That first trip, they had swarmed around me like giant, freakish bees and the sea of arms had grabbed and pulled and prodded at my intrusion until the nurses had intervened and herded them away. I had huddled on the floor, prostrated in obedience and fear.

I quickly looked away as one started to wail. The loud, harsh cry followed me as I moved down the white and yellow hall. My throat caught and I started to run on the frayed carpet. Past the dining hall, past the nurses’ offices, past the stairs.

I exhaled sharply as I passed the confinement room.

Breathe.

I had to remind myself.

I averted my eyes so I wouldn't have to see the poor sucker stuck in there today.

I shuddered, praying to God that Donny had never been in there.

Third door on the right.

I knocked.

"Come in," Donny called out, too loudly. I opened the door. "Johnny!" He threw himself at me and hugged me tight.

"You ready to go, Donny?" I patted him on the back.

"Go where?"

"Home, Donny."

"Oh, yeah! Mary helped me pack." I knew Mary was his favorite; she seemed to take special care of Donny, and I always made sure to thank her by giving her a little tip from my savings from my job as a grocer at the A&P.

Donny pulled his red suitcase out from under the bed and opened it to make sure everything was there. He carefully poked through his clothes then closed it firmly, sticking his head close to listen to the clicks of the clasps.

"You look good," I said, noticing his carefully chosen clothes. I knew he always picked his clothes out the night before and laid them out on the chair; my mom had taught him to do that. He was wearing a navy sweater with a white collared shirt underneath, carefully tucked in under his brown belt, with jeans and brown shoes.

"Thanks," he said shyly, shuffling his foot against the carpet.

“Alright, let’s go.” I waved him out the door and he trotted out holding the suitcase carefully against his chest. I made sure to turn off the light and close the door, and followed him down the hall back to the front of the building.

“Bye, bye,” Donny said to the nurses, waving.

We drove home mostly in silence. Donny was like a puppy; he wanted to open the window and stick his head out, and he couldn’t sit still. I was just lucky he kept his seatbelt on. At red lights, I sneaked a peek at Donny. His face was starting to age, and it was disconcerting to see the face and body of a twenty-three year-old with the innocent, trusting, sweet eyes of a seven year-old.

When we got home, Donny followed close behind me like a duckling, eagerly running up the steps and into the house.

“Donny!” My mom held out her arms from her seat. Donny rushed into her arms.

Paulie sidled up to me and tugged on my shirt. I looked down and smiled at him as he bit his lip. I pushed him toward Donny and he tugged on his shirt.

“Hi, Donny,” he said quietly.

Donny turned from my mother’s lap and patted Paulie on the head like a dog. I had a sudden impulse to stop him as I watched his heavy caresses land on Paulie’s tiny head. I was reminded of Lennie with the puppy and it took all of my effort to keep myself from intervening. I had to trust Donny, just like Donny trusted me.

I turned as my father entered the room, beer in hand. “Daddy!” Donny stood up and tightly hugged him, then immediately returned to my mom. She hungrily stroked his hair and watched his face, desperately soaking up every moment she could spend with

him. As I watched the guilt and sorrow on her face melt into happiness, I looked up at the wooden cross that was nailed above the coffee maker.

I left them in the kitchen and moved into the living room. I walked around the cramped room, staring at each framed photo. The only one that had Donny in it was a photo of the three of us in the backyard by the apple tree. Catherine must have been out with her friends, as usual. I held baby Paulie in my arms and Donny had his arm around me, grinning happily. I was missing a tooth. My parents thought it had just fallen out naturally, when I came home from school with blood pooling in my mouth and my hand cupping the bloody tooth. I never told them the truth, that I had protected my older brother from some cruel classmates, that I had gotten into a brawl in the street behind the school, that I had pushed Donny away so he wouldn't be able to see what was happening. I didn't want those innocent eyes to grow cloudy. My eyes were cloudy enough for the both of us.

The other photos had been hidden somewhere by my father, or maybe burned or buried. I had kept a few stashed under my mattress. They were all from before Donny had any problems; or, rather, before we noticed something was wrong. My father had stopped taking photos of him after he left. He was quick to hide the evidence of his existence, either out of shame or concern for my mother.

As it was, she went to Confession at least twice a week. I was sure the priest was very familiar with her feelings. Even though Donny needed help we couldn't give, the fact that our lives were easier without him was hard to swallow. Maybe that was why my father seemed to have a drinking problem: it was easier to swallow alcohol than the truth.

I moved upstairs to the tiny attic that had been my bedroom. I had shared it with Donny, and then with Paulie. I had had a few years to myself in between. The attic was just the same as always, with my Beatles poster on the wall and record player on the floor next to my twin bed. Signs of my need for an escape littered the floor: endless records stacked under the bed, *Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* on the shelf under my nightstand with other worn and well-loved books. There used to be a pack of cigarettes hidden in my pillow from when I experimented during my senior year of high school, but I threw it away when I left so Paulie couldn't find it.

I heard the stair groan and turned.

"Mommy says it's time to eat," Paulie told me from the top step. I got up off the bed. As I passed him I grabbed him and tossed him over my shoulder, like I always used to do. He giggled as I went down the stairs and his body bounced up and down with each step.

Our dinner was quiet, full of scraping silverware and chewing noises, interrupted occasionally by loud hacking coughs from my father, an old symptom of his smoking habit. He might have called it a habit; I called it an addiction. The cigarette hidden in my flimsy shirt pocket felt heavy as I watched him. My mom gazed fondly at Donny over her forkfuls of food, while Paulie scarfed his plateful down and quickly excused himself to go watch TV. Donny followed, eager for cartoons.

I looked at the clock: it was six. It was time for Donny's medicine. I took out his pills and filled a cup of water for him. When I brought it to him, he emphatically shook his head. "I don't wanna."

“You know it’s not that bad, Donny. Just like having a Skittle in your water.”

“I like M&Ms better.”

“Well then, M&Ms.” I held out the cup, and he took it from me. He looked up at me then obediently swallowed. I patted his head and took the cup from him. I walked back into the kitchen.

My mom took my hand and caressed it. “Thank you.”

I let my hand slip out of hers. “I’m going to go for a walk.”

I started walking down our street. I spotted Mrs. Griffin on her porch four houses down and I tried to walk past her without getting her attention. When I was only a house away, she turned and spotted me.

“How’s your mom doing?”

I sighed and walked up to her gate. “She’s fine, thanks.”

“Such a shame about her leg,” she sighed, rocking her chair back and forth on the creaking wood. “It would make her life a lot easier, especially as she’s getting older.”

“She got used to it a long time ago, Mrs. Griffin. After all, she was a teenager when she got polio.” I wished the chair would break the porch and she and the chair would tumble down into the dark earth.

“Well, I hope your father helps her out, especially now that you’re gone to college. It’s hard without the oldest brother.” She came down to the gate, inches away from me, and I had to remind myself that it was wrong to hit a woman. Mrs. Griffin knew about Donny, just like the rest of the neighborhood. Most people had the decency to whisper behind our backs as if they didn’t know anything.

“He tries, when he’s home from his shop.” I dug my fingers into my jeans and felt the sweat absorb into the material.

“And how is the tailoring business these days?”

“Good, good... Anyway, I’m just going over to the Santucci’s, so I better be going.” Before she had a chance to ask another question, I turned and started to walk away. I wandered around the woods behind the high school like I used to do when I needed to skip class or avoid the lunchroom. When it started to get dark, I headed back.

I stopped for a pack of cigarettes at the local convenience store.

I stuffed it in my shirt pocket along with the single cigarette.

Just in case.

When I got back, everyone had started getting ready for bed and I slipped into the living room to set up the foldout couch. Donny always slept in my bed when he came home so he would feel more secure and relaxed, and Paulie was too scared to sleep on the couch after I had once scared him into thinking that he would get trapped in the mechanism. I tucked Paulie into bed, since mom had a tough time getting up the stairs with her cane. “Me next!” Donny cried, jumping into bed. I did the same for him. He was too tall for the bed, his feet edging off the end. I turned off the lights and went back downstairs to the living room.

My watch dug into my arm as I lay down, so I took it off. I carefully ran my finger over the hand-carved engraving on the back of the leather strap: *to Johnny from your big brother*. My mom had yelled at him when she saw him using a kitchen knife to

write on leather in a chicken-scratch style. He had given it to me for my seventh birthday.

I tried to go to sleep.

I thought about my Econ exam.

I thought about that party I had missed.

I turned toward the back of the couch as I wished I were anywhere but here.

Thanksgiving Day was just another day for us; the only difference was the food on the table. My father spent the day in front of the TV with a bottle of beer and a bag of potato chips; my mom spent the day cooking in the kitchen; and I spent the day playing wiffleball with Donny and Paulie in the field across from our house. When the fire station alarm signaled it was noon, we trudged back to the house. As I put down the yellow bat, the phone rang.

“Hello?” I answered, seeing that my mom was too busy to answer.

“Hey, John.”

“Catherine.”

“Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“How’s it going?”

I watched my mom stir the green beans as I said, “It’s good, although I’m sure everyone would’ve liked to see you.”

She sighed. “John, I’m married now. I can’t always be there.”

“It’s not like we’re asking you to come home for weekends. It’s a fucking holiday.”

“Watch your mouth.” My mom pointed the wooden spoon at me.

“John, stop being such an ass.”

“You don’t have the right to call me that.”

She sighed again, and I heard the gush of air crackle through the phone. “John, I know it’s hard to be there... I’m sorry you feel like you have to shoulder all the responsibility.”

“You’re not sorry.” I kept my voice down so my mom wouldn’t hear me. “You never helped out, never. Even when you lived here, you always avoided things. You were never around, and you know it. You just made up excuses and went out with your friends to the soda shop, and whenever you were home, you would shut yourself up in your room and listen to Frankie Valli.”

“John, I’m not getting into this.”

“Fine, whatever.”

“Put mom on the phone.” I gestured to my mom and handed the phone off to her. I fingered the cigarette in my shirt pocket. Donny walked in as I was torn between duty and temptation, and I quickly dropped my hand down.

“Dinnertime!” my mom called out.

Paulie and my dad came in and we sat around the table. We reached out and took each other’s hands as my dad said grace, heads bowed in silence. When he finished, we passed around the plates of food and served ourselves.

“Catherine says Happy Thanksgiving,” my mom told everyone. “She’s sorry she couldn’t make it.”

Paulie whined, “Why doesn’t she come home anymore? Now that she’s married, she never comes home.”

Nobody answered. Instead, my mom rebuked, “Eat your vegetables, not just the turkey and stuffing.”

We continued to eat in silence, until Donny asked, “What time is it?”

“Why don’t you tell us?” I asked. Donny frowned as he looked down at the large watch on his left hand. “Remember, big hand, little hand.”

He stuck out his tongue as he concentrated. “One oh five.”

“Very good.”

“Isn’t it time for me to go home?” We all looked at each other and my mom’s face dropped.

“No, Donny, you get to stay with us for a few more days. Doesn’t that sound like fun?” He nodded eagerly. I looked at my mom, who tried to smile at me. She looked down at her food and picked at it with her fork as her mouth trembled.

“So, Paulie, how’s school going?” We finished our Thanksgiving meal with superficial chatter, refusing to let even a minute of silence pass.

The weekend passed slowly, full of bittersweet moments so painful and intense that it seemed as if the floral wallpaper curled under the weight of it all. My mom seemed to shrink under her constant worry and regret, her cane becoming more and more of a necessity. She aged rapidly within the few days. We went to church on Saturday

and Sunday as usual but my father and I took turns staying home with Donny because he couldn't go. The only reason we took him to church until he left for the home was because my father was determined to have him Confirmed. Regardless of his countless sins and beer bottles, my father was deeply religious and strict about church attendance.

When the family got back from church on Sunday, it was time for the goodbyes. "You ready to go?" I asked as I came back into the room. He nodded.

"Bye, mom." I hugged her tightly.

She held onto her cane with one hand, and I felt her other hand tremble on my back. "Now you drive carefully, Johnny, and call us when you get back to school. We'll see you at Christmas."

My father added firmly, "Work hard."

Paulie hugged me and I picked him up. I whispered in his ear, "Take care of them for me while I'm gone." He nodded solemnly. I laughed and put him down. "Come on, Donny." I pushed him toward the door. I followed him out, taking a look back at the three of them. They all wore similar faces of dejection and confusion. It was hard to know how to feel when Donny left, because it was hard not to feel relieved.

We walked out into the bright, blinding sky and got into the car. The drive to the home seemed so much faster, maybe because I, too, was relieved to be rid of Donny, or maybe because I finally got to go home to school. I quickly escorted him into the building, said hello to the nurses, and left. Donny was happy to leave me for the company of Mary and the other nurses and patients, so I didn't feel as guilty as I used to. Nine years was a long time to adjust. This was his home now.

I walked out without looking back.

My keys in hand, I softly sang the words to “Blackbird” as I made the engine drown out my busy brain and off-key voice and drove back to my college house. Five hours later I pulled into the driveway behind Alex’s Ford. “Hey!”

“In the kitchen.”

He was cleaning up the beer bottles and trash left from our roommates. I laughed. “Nice.”

“Shut up.” He threw the bottles into a trash bag. The glass clanged harshly.

“How was it?”

“Fine. How was yours?”

“Good.”

“Let’s throw a party.”

Alex pounded the counter. “I’m glad to see that the real Johnny has returned. Let’s do it!”

“Sweet. Let’s fill this place with alcohol and leave it in an even worse state for when our great roommates come back.”

“Sounds good.”

“It’s good to be home.”

Alex looked at me like I had gone psycho.

Several hours later, the place was packed with bodies smelling faintly of pot and cigarette and alcohol. The room was hazy with smoke and lust. I sat on the couch next to Jessica.

“So, how was your break?”

“Fine.”

“Do you have a lot of siblings?”

I looked at her, at the way her long hair tumbled down her back and the way it turned golden under the dim lights. “Just two.” It was just easier that way; the familiar lie slipped smoothly from my lips as I slung my arm around her bare shoulders and sipped my beer. We smiled at each other knowingly, skipped any more pretenses, and headed toward the stairs. I took my watch off as we went up and slipped it into my pocket: out of sight, out of mind.

Ava's Song

Ava stared out the window at the apartment across the street. The old woman with frizzled grey hair shuffled in her robe, poured a cup of tea, and sat at her kitchen table with the newspaper in front of her.

“Ava.”

Ava turned and looked at her aunt. “Yes?” She arched her eyebrows, just to piss Aunt Lydia off. There were such benefits to being a teenager.

Her aunt sighed impatiently. “Don’t look at me like that. I don’t know why you have to be so sullen and rude. Where else were you going to spend your summer? At an empty boarding school? I don’t think so. You could be a little grateful.”

Ava exhaled. “Yes, of course. You’re right. Thanks so much.” She kept her tone flat and level.

Aunt Lydia nodded. “That’s better. Anyway, I’m taking off, I have a lot to do at the arts foundation. I’ve arranged for someone to come stay with you during the days while I’m gone.”

Ava stared at her in disbelief. She paused. Smoothed her face. “I’m sixteen, I’m sure I can manage on my own.”

“I don’t want you wandering around the city on your own. This isn’t Connecticut, after all.”

“I’ve been in Manhattan before.”

“Well, I don’t want you getting into trouble. Anyway, she’s a college student, the niece of a friend of mine. I’m sure she’s quite nice.”

Ava rolled her eyes as she looked out the window. The little old lady was reading the paper and sipping her tea, her rounded shoulders facing the window. Ava took a deep breath and composed herself. “I’m sure you’re right.”

Aunt Lydia nodded. She looked over at the piano in the corner of the room. “I’m sure she wouldn’t mind listening to you play, if you wanted to practice...”

Ava turned away. The old woman’s apartment had photos and paintings hanging on the walls, and a vase of tulips on the table. It looked warm and homey and loved. She turned back to her aunt and focused on the apartment she was in. Sparse, emotionless décor. Cold seeped into the floors and chilled her feet.

“Thank you, Aunt.” She looked her aunt in the eyes, flat and smooth face controlled, and observed the creased lines etched on her aunt’s worn and weary face. The lips were the same, and the shape of the eyes, and that arched eyebrow. She looked away and watched the old woman wash her dishes in the cramped kitchen.

“Well... I guess that’s that. I’ll be going, then. I’ll have my cell phone, but please don’t call unless it’s urgent.”

“Yes.”

Ava curled into the curved chair and continued to watch the apartment across the way. As she observed the woman’s daily routine, she heard the firm click of the front door closing, and then a distant ping as the elevator opened on the floor.

This was her third day in this unfamiliar, stiff apartment. Two days and the two of them had exhausted all casual conversation. Tiptoeing around each other in a two-bedroom apartment, even as relatively spacious as this one might be, was continuously tangled and awkward and messy. Silent, leading looks, forced bland faces. They could both feel the weight in the room, pushing down on the floor and swamping the room with a claustrophobic feeling.

Ava slowly untwined herself and got out of the chair. She moved slowly, taking her robe off, kicking her slippers across the guest bedroom, hers now. She slipped into a pair of shorts and a tank top, ruffled her hair, and stared around the room. Generic. Taupe and coffee and smooth.

As she moved into the kitchen for more coffee, she wondered what it had been like before. She poured the steaming liquid into her muddy yellow mug and curled her fingers around the too-small handle. She hated how they always cramped her fingers. Left a red mark. Before, they had had extra-large handles on their mugs. Perfect for delicate fingers. She wondered where they were, if someone had gotten rid of them, thrown them out, given them away, or sold them for millions of dollars. Or maybe had stolen them away for personal use. Or, maybe, just maybe, they were waiting for her

somewhere, waiting for her to rummage through carefully, each item at a time, boxes and boxes stacked in storage somewhere. The house had been sold, she knew that much. Couldn't forget that. She blew, then sipped cautiously. She let it stream smoothly down her throat, warming her instantly.

The doorbell rang. Ava felt a rush of panic. Forced it down. Let it slip further down, to her stomach, with a hasty gulp of coffee. She put the mug down on a coaster, hearing her aunt's persistent voice in her head telling her to keep everything neat and clean.

The bell rang again. Crisp and jarring and sickly sweet. It reverberated in the bare entry.

Ava smoothed her clammy hands against her tank top, the warmth from her palms transferring to the cotton covering her abdomen. She grasped the cool brass knob in one hand and turned it and pulled the door open.

The girl, or woman, in front of her was smiling, a little forced, with her smooth hazelnut hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore dark jean cut-offs and red TOMs and a plain white t-shirt tight against her tanned and toned skin.

"Hi, I'm Maria. Your aunt told you to expect me, right?"

Ava took her extended hand and shook it. "Yes. I'm Ava." She dropped her hand down and crossed it against her stomach. "Please, come in." She moved aside and opened the door wider. Maria stepped in, and Ava shut the door. The noise echoed in the empty hall beyond the door.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Oh, thank you. Sure."

Ava moved quickly into the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind her. Poured another mugful, and returned to the hall. They moved into the living room, and Ava grabbed her mug and settled onto her chair again. Maria chose the chair opposite her.

“I heard you’re staying with your aunt for the summer?”

“Yes.”

“You go to boarding school?”

“In Connecticut.”

“That must be nice. I’ve never been.”

“It’s alright.” They fell silent, and Ava took a long sip from her mug. “How old are you?”

Maria crossed her legs and shook her foot gently, looking around the room. “I just graduated from college.”

“Are you getting paid for this?” Ava interrupted.

Maria laughed. “No, no, nothing like that. Not that I couldn’t use the money, though. I’m off to graduate school in the fall. No, my aunt knew I was going to be free, couldn’t get a job for the summer, too educated for most summer jobs, and too old for the internships, so she asked, and I said yes.”

Ava watched her as she shook her long ponytail behind her back, like a horse’s tail. “Why?”

Maria cracked her neck and looked at her over the mug. “Well, I didn’t have anything else to do, for one.” She took a long sip. “Besides, I figured it had to be kind of lonely, being in a city without knowing anyone, without having anyone to hang out with. And your aunt seemed nice enough.”

Ava scrutinized her face for a sign of knowledge. Her face seemed smooth and blank, devoid of any clues of pity or guilt or horrible curiosity. “So, what, you’re just going to hang around here all day with nothing to do?”

“Nah. I figured we could actually have some fun. Your aunt didn’t say anything about staying in the apartment.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “She doesn’t have to say it.”

“Well, it’s up to you. We can stay here and do nothing, or we can get out of here.”

Ava hesitated. She bit at the skin around her thumb, immediately stopped as if she had been slapped, paused, and continued to nibble at the thick, fleshy skin. As she tore a piece off with her teeth, she stood up. “Alright, let’s go.”

“Alright. Have any place in mind?” Maria watched her for a moment. “No? I kind of figured. If it’s all right with you, I know somewhere we can go.”

Ava nodded, and grabbed her purse from the table by the door. She locked the door behind them, and they rode the elevator down in silence as the operator watched them.

“Doesn’t that weird you out?” They strode out to Columbus toward the station, and Ava squinted at Maria through the blinding sun.

“What?”

“Having some guy operating the elevator, watching you, looking at you, thinking about you.”

“I don’t know, doesn’t seem much different from any other situation.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“I guess I just never thought about it that way. I see what you mean. But still, in such a small space, crowded with a strange man and small talk, it’s a little uncomfortable.”

“So’s life.”

“Geez, you sure you’re sixteen?” Maria laughed. “You remind me of my brother.”

“Is he much older?”

“Eighteen.”

“Going off to college?”

“Nah. Not yet, at least. Not for him. The straight path, I mean. He likes to wander a bit before paving his way.”

Ava looked at her as they headed down the steps into the dark tunnel. “You sound almost proud of that.”

“Is that weird?”

“Everyone I know rants ‘college, college, college’ until the word sticks in your throat from all that ramming force.”

“Sounds painful.”

Ava glanced at her, then looked down at the dirty cement. Kicked trash away from her, down onto the tracks.

“Is that what your aunt does? Ram it down your throat?”

The train pulled in, whipping past them as it started to slow down. The rush of air felt good, and Ava closed her eyes and felt it cool her face. They stepped onto the train.

“I guess you know, then.”

“What?”

“If you didn’t know, you wouldn’t have said that. You would’ve asked if that’s what my parents do.” The automatic doors shut briskly. Ava turned away and watched the station turn into a blur.

“I just assumed, since you’re staying with her for the summer.”

Ava hastened out of the Times Square station, Maria close on her heels. “You might have guessed that my parents were traveling.” She climbed the grimy stairs out onto the street. “Don’t lie to me. Why should you? It’s not like you know me. We’re not friends, or anything.”

Maria grabbed her arm. “Fine. I know. I know your parents are dead, and you’re living with your aunt for the summer because you have nowhere else to go. Good?”

Ava wrenched her arm out of Maria’s grasp. “Why don’t we just go our separate ways and we’ll just pretend we did what my aunt asked of us both?”

Maria laughed. “Now you seem like a sixteen year-old.”

Ava stopped and turned toward her. She clenched her fist, itching to slap that serious look off of Maria’s face. Her perfectly soft, maintained hands felt strained, unused to such tension.

“Go ahead, hit me. You know you want to. No? Well, then come with me and keep acting your age. Doesn’t it feel good?”

Maria steered her toward the opposite street. Ava let Maria lead her. She looked down and watched the gum-stricken ground move below her.

All of a sudden, Ava crashed into her and looked up.

“Landon- what are you doing here?” Maria sounded astonished as she addressed a tall guy in front of her in jeans and sunglasses. He raised his glasses away, and his dark brown eyes stared at Ava and she looked back at Maria.

He swept his brown wavy hair away from his face. “I was just with the guys.” He looked at Ava again. “What are *you* doing?”

“Hanging out.”

“With?”

Maria jerked her hand between them. “Ava, this is my brother Landon. Landon, this is Ava.”

Landon extended his hand. Ava paused, then took it. Her white hand was engulfed by his, tanned and hard. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you,” she repeated.

“You a friend of my sister’s?”

“Sure.”

“From where?”

“We have a mutual acquaintance,” Maria interjected.

“You from around here?”

“Not really.”

“I’m showing her around, Landon.”

“You taking her to Bruno’s?”

“No.”

“I’ll come with you.” He grinned.

“No.” Maria grabbed Landon and moved him a foot away, but Ava could still hear them. “Landon, go away.”

“Geez, what’s got you all hot and bothered? I was just being friendly.”

“Well, she doesn’t need your ‘friendly,’ alright? Your ‘friendly’ gets people in trouble.”

“Is she special, or something?”

“Or something.”

Ava watched as the two siblings stared at each other, Landon towering over his older sister.

“Well, sis, I’ll leave you alone. For now.” He winked at Ava and moved past them. “I had to go do something, anyway.”

“You do that.”

Ava and Maria watched him get smaller and smaller, and finally disappear into the throng of sweating tourists.

“Sorry about that.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing. Never mind. Anyway, let’s go.”

“Are we not going to Bruno’s?”

“No, I thought we could go shopping or something.”

“Oh, okay.” Ava looked back. “So that’s your brother.”

“Yeah.”

Maria moved faster, and Ava hustled to keep up. They passed Bruno’s, a small store with a striped green awning and a window full of grocery goods. It looked empty

from the street, as far as Ava could tell. Ava looked at it as they continued to walk away, then turned forward and continued to follow Maria.

“Did you get along with Maria all right?” Aunt Lydia carefully placed her purse on the table and moved into the living room. Ava sat in a chair with her book. She gently earmarked the page, closed the book, and placed it on the table.

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m glad.” She moved to the nearby sofa and sat down, crossing her legs. “What did you do?”

“We just stayed here and got to know each other.”

“That’s nice. Well, I hope you two get along for the summer. I’ll be very busy with our latest fundraiser at Lincoln Center.” Aunt Lydia paused and looked at Ava.

“I’m sure it will be a big success.”

“Ava...” Ava looked up and glanced at her aunt, hearing the waver in her name. “They wanted to know if you would perform. You know, at the event. It would really get a lot of attention.”

Ava swallowed and scratched at a bug bite on her thigh. She watched her skin turn angry pink, the bite growing large and white.

“I understand if you don’t want to. I told them it was up to you. But it might be good for you.”

She continued scratching, and it opened and started to bleed. She pressed her finger down, hard.

“Anyway, just think about it. It’s not until August, so you have plenty of time to think about it and decide.”

Ava stayed quiet. She lifted her finger, wet and red, and rubbed it. “Excuse me,” she said quietly, and moved to the bathroom. She washed her hands and wiped the bite with a wet tissue until it broke apart. Rummaging through the medicine cabinet, she found a band-aid, tore it open, and placed it over the bite. She tossed the trash into the can.

“Ava.” Aunt Lydia was standing behind her in the hallway. She had her hands down at her stomach, slowly wringing them.

“I’ll think about it, Aunt Lydia.” Her voice sounded hoarse and quiet.

“I don’t want to make you... I mean, I don’t want you to feel... I just want to help you.”

“I know.”

“Your mother... my sister, I loved her.”

“I know.”

“It was a tragedy.”

Ava nodded, and looked at the floor.

“I know I’m not exactly good at all this, but, I’m here.”

Ava nodded again, and lifted her head high. She looked up at the ceiling for a moment, letting her eyes dry, then faced her aunt. “I think I’ll take a nap now.”

She moved past her aunt and headed down the hall to her room. She glanced at her aunt again before softly closing the door. Crawling into bed, she lifted the covers up and over, tucking them in under her chin. With one hand under her head, she stared at

her other hand lying beside her, white and smooth and clean. Just like theirs had been. They had taught her to take care of her hands.

She had liked it, once, the lessons and performances and concerts, the busy everyday life, the early dinners and late nights. She had been happy. She had wanted it for herself; she had been on her way to that life.

Down the hall, she could hear her aunt's soft footsteps move away toward the master bedroom. The door clicked shut. Ava lifted her head from the pillow and listened intently. Frowning, she slipped out of bed, silently opened the door, and tiptoed down the hall. She could hear the faint rustle of sheets. Her aunt was taking a nap. This was part of her usual routine, Ava knew, but lately the arts foundation had taken up all of her afternoons. Ava crept back to her room. Standing by the window, she looked out at the tiny dots of cars and pedestrians and wondered. What did she really want to do right now?

She quickly threw a pillow under the bed and tossed the comforter over it. She didn't know how her aunt would react if she knew she had left, but she didn't want to find out. This should buy her some time if she didn't make it home before her aunt woke up. She shoved her flip-flops on and grabbed her purse. She painstakingly inched her bedroom door closed, and then the front door.

Out on the street, she hesitated, looking from side to side. She didn't know where she wanted to go, she just knew she wanted out. So she started walking, moving wherever her body took her.

When she realized she was close to Central Park, she headed into one of its entrances and followed the maze of pathways.

“Hey!” A man walked toward her, and she realized it was Landon, Maria’s brother. He stopped in front of her, a little out of breath. “Ava, right?”

“Yeah. You’re Maria’s brother, right?”

He grinned. “Yeah. Landon.”

“I remember.”

“Good.” He looked at her. “Out for a walk?”

“Kind of.”

“Escaping?”

Ava looked at him. His dark eyes focused on her intently, and she looked down under their weight. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Good for you. My sister can be a little tense.”

“I’m not escaping from Maria,” she laughed. “I like her.”

“Oh. Who’re you escaping from, then?”

“My aunt. Home. Life. Take your pick.”

“Need help?”

“Clearly.” Ava laughed. “Isn’t that obvious?”

“Well, come on, then.” He turned and started to walk away. He stopped, and looked back at Ava. “Coming?”

“Yeah.” She caught up to him and followed him as he led her through the park.

“So, do you not get along with Maria?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, it was the way you guys were talking yesterday.”

“Nah, we get along like most siblings. We fight, make up, have fun, fight, make up, have fun. I think that was more about you than me.” Ava looked at him, startled, and he winked. “She seems to be a little protective of you.”

“Do I need to be protected from you?” she teased.

“Maybe.”

Ava laughed, and looked up at him to see if he was smiling. His face was tense, as if caught between a frown and a smile. His mouth twitched. He looked down, saw Ava was watching, and laughed.

They walked through the park. When they reached the east side, Landon stopped. “What now?”

“You’re asking me?”

“You have a choice. We can keep going, or we can go back.”

Ava looked at her watch for the first time since she left the apartment. She’d been gone for over an hour; her aunt was probably awake or about to wake up. She hesitated, watching people jog, walk, bike, and rollerblade by. She slapped her flip-flop against her foot. “Keep going.”

Landon grinned. “Good for you.” He grabbed her hand and led her out to the east side. Ava’s heart pounded as she felt the heat in his hand. She could feel the calluses on his palm and she wondered what they were from, work or play.

Ava entered the apartment. As she closed the door, her aunt came storming into the entry. “Where have you been?” Her aunt shut the door behind her. “I’ve been worried sick.”

“I went for a walk.” Ava dropped her bag and kicked off her shoes.

“You could have left a note.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t gone for that long.”

“That long! It’s been hours!”

Ava glanced at her watch. She had been gone for five hours.

“Sorry, when I realized what time it was, I got dinner and headed back.”

“Who were you with?”

“No one. I was by myself.”

“Why didn’t you have your cell phone? I called and called, and then I realized it was in your room!”

“I guess I forgot. I wasn’t planning on being out for so long.”

“Ava, I understand that you think you’re old enough to take care of yourself, but I am responsible for you. Please don’t make me worry.”

“I’m sorry.”

Aunt Lydia stared at her, and Ava glanced away. She could feel her heart beat in her caged chest and she wanted to leave.

Lydia sighed. “Fine.” She looked her over. “Go shower; you look dirty.”

Ava briefly checked herself over. “Fine.” She swiftly moved past her aunt and shut her bedroom door behind her. She quickly stripped her damp clothes off, and the cool air-conditioned breeze hit her moist, warm skin and she shivered. She turned the shower lever on and stepped in and began to wash herself, running her loofa down her body.

She felt hot and cold at the same time, and she thrust her face under the steady stream.

“Did you get in trouble?” Landon grinned at her, waiting for her outside of her building. The sun was beating down again today, hot and suffocating.

Ava stuck her tongue out at him. “Just a little chastising, that’s all.”

He grabbed her arm and brought her up against his body. He ran his hand down her arm, and she felt a hot shock travel through her body like a current. He smirked, and she pushed him away. “Fun, isn’t it?”

She glanced at him sideways, then looked away. “Where are we going today?”

“You’ll see.”

They ended up in front of a store with the striped green awning, and Ava instantly recognized it. Bruno’s. She looked over at Landon.

“Come on.” He took her hand and led her into the store. It was a normal grocery store, and Ava tried to hide her disappointment. “Hey, Bruno.”

An older, portly man behind the counter came around. “Hey, Landon. Who’s this?”

“Oh, this is Ava. She’s cool.”

Ava looked at the pink, faintly musty man in front of her and gingerly took his outreached hand. “Hi.”

“Any friend of Landon’s is a friend of mine. Go on down.”

Landon turned to Ava. “You didn’t think I brought you to a simple grocery store, did you?”

“Of course not.”

He pulled her further into the store, and Ava nodded at Bruno as they moved back behind a curtain. The back was fairly empty, a single chair and a TV and a refrigerator. They moved toward the dark staircase in the corner, and the wood squealed beneath their footsteps.

When Ava stepped onto the floor, she stared, amazed. It looked like a bar, or a club of sorts, with tables and chairs and an informal stage set up with instruments and amps.

“This- is Bruno’s.”

“Wow. This is amazing.”

“It’s where we all hang out, at night, during the day, when it’s hot, when it’s cold. Whenever we want. All the time.”

Ava exhaled, and she felt a small smile creep onto her face.

“You like?”

“Yeah.”

“The guys should be here soon. They like to jam; I thought you might like to hear.”

“Do you play?”

“I fool around a little, but they’re serious.” Landon moved away. “You want something to drink?”

“Sure.”

He returned with two beers in hand. “Here.”

Ava looked at the can and looked at him. She paused. She reached her hand out and took the can from him. It was freezing cold, and dripping with moisture. She shivered, and snapped the tab back and forth and took a gulp. She swallowed slowly and tasted the bitter, sour liquid remain in her throat. Swishing her mouth with spit to rinse out the taste, she looked at Landon. “Thanks.”

He tapped his can against hers. “Cheers.”

They sat down in two chairs toward the front of the room. Closing her eyes for a moment, Ava let her brain rest and felt her body go limp. She opened her eyes and sighed.

“What?”

“This is nice.”

“What?”

“This.” She gestured widely with her free arm. “This place. The chance to sit and not think and kick back and spread out and let go.”

“Yeah, your aunt seems a little uptight.”

“You have no idea.”

“My sister gave me an idea.”

Ava quickly glanced at him, eyeing his face for warning signs, then relaxed as she only saw his teasing smile.

The room slowly filled with guys, all around the same age as Landon, Ava guessed. They all eyed her, curious and suspicious and overly friendly, and introduced themselves and then ignored her presence except for the occasional glance. Five of them moved to the makeshift stage, slung on guitars or sat at a drum set, and started to play

their songs. Ava listened with interest, occasionally noting their choices in arrangement. The music surrounded her, floating around her, dancing on the air and she felt a sharp pang of exhilaration and agony.

“So I heard you were at Bruno’s?” Maria shook her head as they sipped coffee at a nearby Starbuck’s.

“Yeah.”

“Look, I love my brother, but he’s not exactly someone you should be hanging out with.”

“Why?”

“He’s just not exactly the most upstanding citizen.”

“So what? Didn’t you tell me to act my age? I like hanging out with him, and Bruno’s was cool.”

“Yeah, it’s fun when they’re just playing music. Do you really think that’s all they do?”

“What are you saying?”

Maria rolled her eyes. “God, you’re slow sometimes. It’s a front! They’re doing drugs and shit.”

“So what? Plenty of people do.”

“Well, you shouldn’t. And your aunt would kill me.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“For now.” Maria sighed. “Besides, my brother’s a total player. He’s just messing around with you, and pretty soon he’ll get tired and get rid of you. Do you really want to deal with that?”

“Who says that will happen? Besides, I’m only here for the summer, and I don’t want anything serious. Maybe I’ll get rid of him.” Ava sipped her iced coffee down to the last slurp, then took off the lid and slid an ice cube into her mouth. It instantly started to melt, and she sucked on it. She watched as a couple of high school guys looked at her from their place in line and she hid a smirk.

“Well, I hope you do. He’d certainly deserve it.” Maria laughed. “I’d die. It would be great.”

“You’re such a nice sister.”

“Hey, maybe it would teach him a lesson. Time he got burned playing with fire.”

The last bit of ice water trickled down her throat, and she swallowed. “Look, I’m having fun. I get to be someone else. I get to be reckless and carefree. I get to be normal.”

“Normal’s overrated. But it can be fun for a while, I’ll give you that. Look, just be careful, alright? Even if I am hanging out with you because of your aunt, I’m actually starting to like you, you spoiled brat.”

Ava threw her balled-up napkin at her and laughed. “Yeah, well, I kind of like you, too, even if you are a bit of a stick-in-the-mud.”

Maria frowned. “Only because your aunt made me that way. She asks for daily reports and everything.”

“Suffocating, isn’t it?” Ava slouched further back in her cushy armchair and slid another ice cube into her mouth.

“Did you have fun with Maria?” Aunt Lydia called out from the kitchen.

“Yeah. Actually, we’re meeting up later tonight.”

“That’s great.” Lydia came into the living room. “I’m glad you’ve gotten to be friends.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m not sure yet. We might just go to a movie or something.” Ava looked up from her book. “Is that okay?”

“Uh, sure, I guess. As long as you aren’t out too late. Make sure to take a cab back; it’s not safe at night.”

Ava sighed. “I can take the train, it’s not a big deal.”

“I don’t think so. Ava, I get it. You think you’re old enough that you don’t need me looking out for you. I get it, I really do. But I am your guardian, and your closest blood relative, and I would like you to realize that bad things happen everyday and I’m just trying to protect you.”

Ava stood up, angry. “You think I don’t know that bad things happen? You think I don’t think about that everyday when I wake up, when I go to bed, when I see a photo of them, when I get up and imagine I might actually see them at the kitchen table instead of you? Why should I care if one more bad thing happens to me when the worst has already happened?” She felt the tears well up, too late to stop them, and she started to

cry. She fiercely wiped her face and ran to her room to get her jacket and purse. “I’ll be back later.” She ran past her aunt and left.

Her stomach felt hot and sick as she headed to Bruno’s. By the time she got there, the cool night breeze had dried her eyes and cheeks. But she felt on edge, jittery and restless and angry and frustrated. When she opened the door, she moved straight to the stairs and headed down, the faint music growing louder and louder as the bass vibrated in the walls.

It was packed, and she grabbed an empty chair by the back. She looked briefly around, strange faces surrounding her, and faced the stage.

“You’re Ava, right? Landon’s girl?”

Ava looked up. This guy was bending down toward her, with brown eyes and brown, shaggy hair, a little skinny and very tall. “I’m no one’s girl.”

He laughed. “That’s cool. Sorry, I just assumed. I’m Ben.” Ava nodded, and turned back to the stage. Ben sat down at the table, and turned his chair toward her. “So, you like music?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d you like our session last time?”

Ava looked at him more closely and recognized him as one of the guys who had been on stage. “It was all right.”

“Just all right?”

“It was good. The arrangement was well done.”

“Do you know something about music?”

“A little.”

“Do you play?”

Ava paused. Looking straight ahead, she replied, “Piano.”

“That’s cool. I play bass, mostly, but I also play the keyboard.”

“Cool.”

“You want to play? The guys wouldn’t mind.”

“No, that’s okay.”

“Really? I’d love to hear you.”

“Why? For all you know, I might suck.”

“And yet somehow I doubt that.”

Ava looked at him. “Why do you say that?”

“You seem too knowledgeable and too comfortable to suck.”

“Why don’t you play, and we’ll see if I feel like following you.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“I haven’t decided.”

Ben grinned at her. “What will make you decide?”

“If you make it worth my while.”

“Oh!” he cried out. “You think you’re hot stuff. I get it.” He laughed at her, then said, “Fine. I’ll play, but only if you play afterwards.”

“We’ll see.”

Ben stood up, and Ava watched him move up to the stage. He sat down at the keyboard and started to play, his fingers sliding over the keys. Everyone in the room quieted and turned to listen to him. There was a hushed whisper floating in the room, but Ava focused on the music, and the slim white fingers highlighted under the light.

“I can’t believe he’s playing the keyboard.” Maria slid next to Ava.

Ava looked at her curiously. “What are you doing here?”

“Just because I told you not to doesn’t mean I don’t like to come.”

“Why did you say that, about him playing?”

“Well, Ben sticks to the bass, that’s all. It’s hard to get him to play keyboard; he always refuses.”

“Oh.”

Maria looked at her. “Why?”

“Just curious. We made a deal.”

“A deal?”

“It’s nothing.”

Maria grinned. “Glad to see you’re trying to frustrate my brother.”

“This has nothing to do with him. This is all me.”

Ava turned her attention back to Ben. She watched him concentrate, rocking his body back and forth over the keyboard, his right foot tapping against the floor. The music stopped. He paused, then stood up. The room burst into applause but he simply moved through the room back to Ava. Without saying a word, she stood up.

“Ava?” Maria asked, astonished. Ava moved past her, toward the front. She moved to the side, where a baby grand rested outside of the spotlight. She could see Maria back there, her mouth open in shock, and Ben standing behind her, waiting. The room fell silent as she closed her eyes. She felt everything rise from her stomach, flaring in her chest, coating her throat in emotion. Her eyes stung, and she took a deep breath, eyes still closed. Quiet. Still. She opened her eyes and softly placed her hands on the

smooth, cold ivory keys. She smiled as she saw her parents in the dazzling light on the stage and started to play.

Getting Somewhere

Sophie sat on the small red-orange couch, reading the *New York Times*. Her computer was on the table, playing music. The web browser had several tabs open, listings for entry-level jobs and paid internships in Manhattan. She put down the newspaper and began scrolling through the links, clicking on possibilities and reading through the descriptions and requirements. She bookmarked them and began drafting cover letters, uniform except for the names and addresses of the companies and a few key phrases. With a click of a few buttons, she started sending out applications on the websites and in emails. Then, she opened up new search windows, with more options to look into.

Sighing, she pushed the computer away from her and dragged her hands down her face in frustration. The TV was on in the background, showing a “Behind the Music” program. She turned up the volume and paid attention to the melodramatic story. As she

drank from her mug, the doorbell rang. She muted the TV and put down the mug. Going over to the door, she peered into the peephole and then opened the door.

Ben entered, scruffy and wearing a plaid shirt and jeans. He hugged Sophie and kissed her.

“How’d it go last night?”

“Good, really good. I wish you could’ve been there.”

“How long are you in town this time?”

“We leave for Europe in a week.”

“Wow. That’s soon... You just got in town.”

“Yeah. Well, we’re really trying to push ourselves, travel as much as possible.”

“I guess you just never mentioned how crazy your schedule is right now.”

They sat down on the couch.

“You want coffee?”

“No, I just had some.”

Sophie sipped from her mug while Ben drummed his fingers on the arm of the couch. She looked at the clock, which flashed 10:02.

“So, are you excited for the European leg?”

“Yeah, the whole band’s pretty excited. It’s going to be awesome. It might lead to some real exposure.”

“Well, I’m happy for you. That’s a really big deal.”

“Yeah, it really is.”

“You’ve come a long way since I first found you guys playing in some ratty bar.”

“Yeah, you always said we’d make it big.”

“Looks like you’re on your way.”

“Fingers crossed.”

Sophie looked down at her hands and stayed silent.

“I’ll be gone for a couple of months, but I’ll call you when I get a chance.”

“Don’t worry about it. I guess I should be used to this by now. Just focus on your music.”

Ben continued to talk about the tour. Sophie looked away, fidgeting. She jiggled her foot after uncrossing and recrossing her legs. She looked at the clock, which flashed 10:15. Ben finally stopped talking, and looked at her Macbook Pro on the coffee table.

“So, how’s the job search going?”

“It’s not.”

“Well, maybe something will come up.”

“Maybe.”

“Have you been out there? I mean, applying to a lot of jobs?”

“Of course I’ve been applying to jobs. I’ve sent in applications every week. I can’t help it if I haven’t heard back from any of them.”

“Maybe you could ask your dad—”

“I am not asking my dad to set me up with a job. I’m already living off of him, I refuse to beg for a job.”

“It’s a win-win situation for everyone if he can help you.”

“I don’t want his help with this.”

“Why not?”

“Because then I have to wonder if I got the job only because of him, and if that changes how people look at me. Or, if I don’t get the job, it’s only that much worse. Besides, it’s not like he has any contacts in any interesting industries, only boring corporations and banks.”

“So you’re keeping your pride by not asking for help?”

“For lack of a better word.”

“And asking for help is worse than begging for money?”

Sophie stared. Stunned, she felt her face flush. She stood up and crossed her arms. “Get out.”

“I didn’t mean to make you mad, I just want to help.”

“Making me feel worse about everything is not helping! You know I hate to rely on my parents, that they have to pay for everything! That everything in here is theirs!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Just go. Go make your dreams come true while I try to figure out what the hell I’m going to do with my life.” Sophie briskly walked over and opened her door. She waited. Ben slowly got up and walked toward her. He leaned in as if to kiss her, but she turned her head to the side.

“Well, I hope I see you again before I leave... I hope you figure out what you’re looking for.”

He left, and Sophie slammed the door shut. Moving back to the couch, she resumed swiftly scanning over the lists of jobs, few of which she was qualified for. Then she moved on to the job search websites geared toward recent graduates, and uploaded

her resume onto each one. Logging out, she turned up the volume and blasted her music. She slumped back against the couch and closed her eyes.

Walking down to the Chelsea Piers, Sophie sat on a bench facing the water. Her college sweatshirt let in some of the sharp wind, but the pang of cold felt good. She listened to her iPod as she watched the joggers pass by. A woman nearby started to set up an easel and portable workstation. Brushes, tubes of paint, a palette and palette knife were laid out one by one. Globes of paint oozed onto the palette as the woman squeezed the tubes and slowly began mixing the colors with the knife. Sophie watched as she began to paint. The woman was focused, her eyes set on the landscape in front of her as she moved her arm up and down, smoothing a thin coat of paint over the canvas. Sophie wistfully looked at her, envious of her passion and dedication.

Her phone vibrated, and she looked down. She flipped her phone open to read the text message. Frowning, she typed in a response, shut the phone, and got up.

An hour later, she stood in the hall in front of the door. Ran her hands down the sweater-dress she had changed into. Paused and took a deep breath, then knocked. After a moment, she heard the clicks of the lock, and it swung open.

“Scooter!” she cried as the family cocker spaniel jumped up at her. She got down on her knees and began petting and kissing him while receiving a few wet licks on her cheek.

“And don’t we get a hello?” Her mother teased.

Sophie stood up and entered her parents’ apartment. Her mom and dad hugged her. A wafting aroma of roasted chicken hit her, and saliva pooled in her mouth.

“You have good timing. The food’s all ready.”

“Come, sit down. Do you want a glass of wine, or water...?”

“If you’ve opened a bottle, I’ll have a glass.”

Sophie sat down at the long, polished dining table. She glanced down and gratefully petted Scooter’s head as he loyally stood beside her chair. Her mom dished out the dinner onto three plates and her dad poured a glass of wine. They sat across from her. Sophie removed her hand from Scooter’s fur and focused on her plate.

“So how is everything?”

“Good.”

“Nothing new?”

“Not really.”

“How’s Ben?”

“Good.”

Sophie took a large forkful of roasted chicken pieces from her plate. She continued to fork more and more food into her mouth. Her parents watched her carefully while they slowly ate.

“We heard from Meredith today.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“She’s doing really well. She’s been assigned her thesis advisor, and she seems really excited about it all.”

“She seems to really be adjusting to everything. Seems like she loves Colorado.”

“Good for her.”

Sophie picked at her plate. The three continued to eat in silence. The noise of the silverware scraping against the plates was loud and jarring.

“She asked about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Asked if you’d gotten a job yet. I didn’t really know how to respond when she asked why you still haven’t found one.”

“Tell her the job market sucks.”

“It’s not just the job market. It’s been two years since you graduated from college, and you’re basically in the same place as you were then.”

“It’s not like I was sitting on my ass the entire time! I did work. I had two internships.”

“Two unpaid internships, that didn’t hire you full-time afterwards.”

“They didn’t have any openings!”

“You could have found some other opportunities.”

Sophie paused and gently scratched Scooter’s neck. He cocked his head to the side to look up at her, and she smiled briefly. She moved her hand away and looked up. “Really? Because basically I’m either not qualified or too qualified for the jobs out there, and there aren’t that many out there to start with.”

“It’s not that we don’t understand that it’s hard. We do. It was tough for us, too, when we were your age.”

“Were you in the worse job economy ever when you were my age? I know you think you get it, but you don’t.”

“That may be true, but we know a lot of other kids your age who have managed to get through this. We’re worried about you.”

“About me, or about your money?”

“Don’t talk to your mother that way.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell if you’re worried about me, or about your money going down the drain.”

“That’s not fair, Sophie. We just don’t want to see you struggle so hard, for so long.”

“We’ve supported you since you were born! And we will continue to do so, at least in some ways. We know it’s hard to get a job, and we’ve helped you out in every way.”

“Maybe too much.”

“So what are you saying?”

Her parents exchanged looks.

“We’re saying that it’s time for us to pull back a little.”

“It might do you some good.”

“So what, you’re cutting me off?”

“No. Not yet.”

“We’re trying to push you. Get you motivated. Maybe us supporting you has enabled you, enabled your situation.”

Sophie’s mouth dropped and she looked at her plate. She grabbed the fork in her fist, its silver glinting at her harshly, and she tightened her grip.

“So here’s the deal. We will continue to support you, if you go to graduate school. If you don’t we will start to withdraw our financial support.”

“We don’t mean to be harsh, sweetie, but it’s just, it’s been two years. After a certain point, it feels like we’re not really helping you.”

“This is new territory for all of us, and we’re not really sure what to do, but we know that something needs to change.”

“And we can’t just support you spending all your time in the apartment we are paying for, and shopping and clubbing, and with your rocker boyfriend.”

“Don’t bring him into this. This has nothing to do with him.”

“I don’t think it helps that your boyfriend is in a band, surrounded by drugs, alcohol, sex, bad behavior, and bad decisions. We don’t want you influenced by that kind of lifestyle.”

“God, he’s barely even around that much he’s so busy.” She crossed her arms.

“He’s around enough.”

“At least he’s doing something. At least he knows what he wants, and he’s doing something about it.”

“Can we get back to the problem at hand? This is about you, Sophie, right here, right now. We’re trying to get you to the point where you can be independent and successful.”

“And what about being happy?”

“You aren’t happy.”

“Are you happy?”

Sophie looked down at her plate. Her dad took a long sip of wine, and her mom got up to clear the table. Sophie heard the steady hiss of water being run from the kitchen. It stopped, and her mom returned to the table.

“I can’t believe you’re telling me to go to grad school. How can you expect me to go when I don’t know what to study?”

“Sign up for a couple of classes at a school here in the city, try some other areas besides what you studied in college.”

“I’m not taking business classes, Dad.”

“I don’t understand why you won’t give it a chance. How do you know whether or not you’ll like something if you’ve never tried it?”

“I just know.”

“Take one business class and one other class, something you think you might like.”

Sophie sighed and pushed herself up from the table. “I need to get going.” Her parents looked at each other. They got up and walked her to the door. Sophie left, and the door shut.

She entered the elevator. She leaned back against the railing, and started to cry. Tears streamed down her face and her body started to heave with sobs, but she stayed quiet. The elevator dinged at each floor. When the elevator reached the Lobby level, Sophie quickly wiped her fingers under her eyes and dried her face with her hands. The elevator door opened into the spacious, marble lobby. She pushed herself away from the railing and walked out.

She went to her usual coffee shop and sat down with a cappuccino. She listened to her iPod, headphones firmly placed for maximum surround sound so she could hear her music over the mechanical whirr of the espresso machine. Her eyes felt heavy, thick. Stinging. A man sitting at a nearby table was writing feverishly in a notebook, and she watched him. He paused, chewed on his pen for a moment, then continued to write. Sophie watched him. Her mug sat on the table, steam rising.

Sophie browsed through the course catalog for The New School, music playing on her computer. She moved through the business classes to English classes, then Film, Music, History, Psychology. She sighed and flopped back against the pillows and closed her eyes.

The doorbell rang. Sophie looked wearily at the door, slowly got up, and opened it. Meredith entered as Sophie looked at her in shock.

Meredith laughed. “What? Did mom and dad forget to tell you I was coming home this weekend?”

“Ah, yeah. They did. Must’ve slipped their minds when I was over there...they were a little preoccupied.”

“Well, here I am!” Meredith hugged Sophie, then plopped down on the couch. Sophie sat down next to her. “It was a fairly last minute thing, anyway. Good timing, I guess... I’m not that surprised they forgot to tell you. I heard you and the parents got into it.”

Sophie shook her head with a smile. “You always just jump right into it... ‘Got into it’ is an understatement.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for it.”

“Which side would you have been on?”

“Both.”

“I don’t think it works that way.”

“Yeah, it does. You guys want the same thing, you just differ on how to get it.”

“Geez, when did you get to sound so wise?”

“It’s pretty easy, actually.” Meredith laughed.

“Gone are the days when you used to believe that a vampire would come up and suck your blood if you flushed the toilet at night.”

“Yeah, you thought you were so cool with all those ridiculous stories.” Meredith paused, then said, “So what are you going to do?”

“No idea. They want me to go to grad school.”

“And you?”

“I’ve looked at the course catalog, I just can’t figure out what to take.”

“I mean, and what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, Meredith. I’ve been applying to jobs, I just haven’t had any success in getting one.”

“I don’t mean right now. I mean, what do you want to do in life? What is it you’re passionate about?”

“If I knew that I don’t think we’d be having this conversation.”

Meredith sighed. “You know what you should do.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what you’ve always been interested in. I can’t believe you somehow always manage to skip over it! What is the one thing you’ve always been really into growing up?”

Sophie exhaled, frustrated. “Would you just spit it out already? Clearly I don’t know.”

Meredith jumped up and gestured at the computer. “MUSIC! You dumbass!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Growing up, you were always so interested in finding new, unknown bands! You liked all of these groups before they ever got popular! You have this crazy sixth sense about this stuff. Why the fuck are you pretending like this isn’t your passion?! You’re even dating a musician.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Are you using him as an excuse? Like, because you’re dating a musician, your interest in music has to be lesser than his?”

“That makes no sense.”

“Maybe deep down you know I’m right, that this is what you want to do, and you’re scared, and that’s okay, but you’re using him as a way out, a way to keep yourself from going for it.” Meredith sat back and slowed down. “I know you. I know this is what you’re good at and what you enjoy, and it kills me to see you struggling because you think you have nothing to be passionate about.”

“Not everyone knows what they want to be since they were five years old.”

“Yeah, well, I was always ahead of the game.”

“But what can I do?”

“Geez, do I have to come up with everything? You could work for a record label, or a radio station. Or a music venue. Or be a manager. Or an agent. But I personally think you belong at a label. You’re good at finding new talent.”

“I don’t think that’s what mom and dad had in mind.”

“So what? They’re just frustrated that they can’t help in the ways that matter. That’s why they’re pushing business school- it would at least help you financially and maybe lead to a career. It’s not like they were thrilled when I decided to go to grad school for Creative Writing. They just want you to do something. Be motivated.”

“Yeah...” Sophie propped her elbows on her knees and rested her chin against her knuckles. Meredith stood up.

“Just think about what I said. If I were you, I might not bother with grad school. I think you’re better off working first, then if you get motivated enough, you’ll go then.”

“It’s not like I have a lot of experience in the music industry. No one would hire me.”

“What do you have to lose? It can’t get any worse than it already is. Well, I hate to just rush in and out, but I’m supposed to be over at mom and dad’s.”

“Okay.” Sophie walked Meredith to the door and opened it. “Thanks.” Meredith smiled and left. Sophie closed the door. She turned, leaned against the door, and surveyed her apartment. Slowly moving to her bedroom, she climbed onto the bed and hugged her pillow. After a minute, she started to softly cry and she buried her face in the pillow.

The coffee maker hissed and spit as it dripped into the pot. Sophie grabbed a bowl and a spoon, and shook her cereal into the bowl. Humming softly, she poured some

milk in and placed the bowl on the table. Waiting for the coffee, she leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. She looked around. In the living room, the only things that were actually hers, paid with her own meager savings, were the posters. The Clash, The Shins, Phoenix, Spoon. All bought over the years with savings from her odd jobs during high school and college. She looked at the furniture, the TV, the kitchen utensils, pots and pans. All bought or given to her by her parents. She sighed and tilted her head back. Rubbing her forehead, she stared at the ceiling until the coffee maker quieted down.

After pouring herself a cup, she moved and sat in a dining chair at the kitchen table, leaning back so the chair balanced on the back legs, her feet resting on the table. She laced her hands behind her head, frowning, deep in thought. After a moment, she let the chair drop to all fours and she stood up. She grabbed a coin from a nearby bowl, and flipped it. She went to pick it up. As she bent over, she stared at the dull coin.

“This is stupid. I can’t use a fucking coin.”

She picked it up and threw it across the room. It hit the wall and fell to the floor. Sophie dropped into the chair and slumped over the table.

The club was filled with people standing and listening to the band. Ben was on stage, playing guitar. Sophie sat at the bar, watching the band, with a Vodka Tonic in her hand.

The lead singer breathed heavily and grasped the microphone with his sweating hands. “Alright, guys, we’re going to take a short break.” The band moved off stage, and Ben headed to Sophie.

“Can I get a Fat Tire Amber?” The bartender nodded, got the beer, and placed it in front of Ben. Ben took it and turned away.

“Aren’t you going to pay for that?” Sophie asked.

“The band gets free drinks.”

“Ah.”

“What’d you think?”

“It was a good set.” Sophie looked at her glass, the beads of condensation dripping onto her fingers.

“So, what’s up with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been really weird lately. Are you still mad at me?”

“No.”

“Well, then what’s up? You’ve been ignoring my texts, and you didn’t even come to our gig last night.”

“Sorry, but it’s not like my life revolves around you and your band. Not everything is about you.”

“Geez! What the hell is your problem? All I did was ask what’s wrong.”

Sophie stood up from the barstool. She tipped her glass back and finished her drink. She firmly placed it on the bar and turned to Ben. “Ben, this just isn’t working for me anymore.”

Ben looked shocked. He put his beer down on the bar. “So, what? You want to break up?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Ben looked around the room. The rest of the band was at a table toward the back. He took Sophie's arm and led her to the back door. He pulled her out into the alley behind the club. It was dark and quiet, but the sounds from inside the club and passing cabs could be heard. Sophie pulled away from Ben.

"I'm just...a little shocked. I thought we were good. I didn't think there were any problems."

"Exactly. You don't really think about me. You might ask me how I'm doing, but you're really only thinking about you and your music. I'm tired of being an afterthought."

"I don't think of you as an afterthought."

"But you do. You treat me like one. I don't want to be some girl you can just come back to whenever you're in town and want a hookup or a place to crash. All you ever talk about is music. All you ever do is music. I'm happy you're doing what you want to do, but I don't want to be in a relationship where I'm the only one who's really in it."

"Is this even about us? Or are you taking your frustrations out on me because your life sucks?"

Sophie crossed her arms. "God, I can't believe you just said that. You are such a jerk. Yes, this is about 'us'... If it makes you feel any better, you've made me realize that I'm ready to focus on myself and what I want, something that I can be so consumed with, like you are. Well, maybe not so consumed."

"What?"

“Basically, it’s time for me to be selfish and focus on me. I need to be on my own for a while, while I figure out things.”

“It doesn’t. Make me feel better. Do you even know what you want?”

“Yeah, I do. I guess it was always there under my nose, but it took my little sister to point it out to me.”

“What?”

“Music.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I knew you were interested in music, obviously, since you spend so much time searching for new bands and illegally downloading songs, and I know you used to play in high school, but I guess I just never really thought you were that serious about it.”

“Well, I am.”

“... Well, I’m glad you think you’ve found something... but just so you know, I never thought of you as an afterthought, or just a bed to come back to.”

“But when you were with me, you were never really all there. You were always distracted, always thinking about your music.”

“So what? It’s what I do. It’s who I am.”

“Some people manage to do both.”

Ben shook his head and threw up his hands. “I’m done.” He walked to the door and went back inside. The door shut behind him.

Sophie stayed for a moment, then walked out to the street. She pulled out her phone and dialed a number.

Sophie and Meredith sat at a booth in a diner. Sophie smiled and laughed with her sister as they drank Cokes and shared a plate of fries between them.

“So you dumped him?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I am. I think it was what I needed to do. It might sound weird, but I really feel good about it.”

“Sounds like it was the right decision.”

“It’s not like I didn’t like him. I did. But it just wasn’t enough to keep me in it. I would get jealous and upset that I didn’t see him more, and that he already had something he loved, and I hated that. I hated what I became. It’s like I turned into a worse version of myself when I was around him.”

“Because he was already ahead of you.”

“Yeah.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I sent in job applications to some record labels.”

“That’s great!”

“Yeah, I’m so looking forward to telling mom and dad that I’m not going to grad school.”

“Just wait until you hear back- you never know, you might be telling them you got a job! No need to tell them now. Besides, I told them you’re figuring things out. I think I bought you some time.”

“So how’s your life?”

Meredith shrugged. “Eh. I can’t complain. At least, not in comparison to you.”

“Everything’s good? You don’t need me to come swoop in and save you like you just did for me?”

“Yeah, everything’s good. But feel free to ask me again in a few months, when I really have to get my shit together.”

“Alright, I will... It’s been nice, seeing you. It’s been too long.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe I’ll come visit you sometime. See my big shot sister working on the next great American novel.”

“Let’s just hope it gets me somewhere.”

Sophie raised her glass. “To getting somewhere.”

Sophie and Meredith tapped their glasses together and took a sip. They were the only ones in the diner, except for a waitress wiping down the counters. They continued to talk and laugh.

Assisted

Rachel wheeled her suitcase out of the Austin Airport and headed to the line for a cab. As she waited in line, she checked her phone. No messages. She closed it, hesitated, and then opened it again. She paused and stared at the background image, her and Dave at Central Park, then closed it again and put it in the pocket of her leather jacket.

When it was her turn to stand at the curb and get into a cab, she waved off the driver and put her suitcase in the trunk herself. She slid into the cab and leaned back against the seat, closing her eyes for a moment. The torn leather seat felt cool and cushy behind her, and she sank further back. She watched the scrubby bushes and clumps of cacti shoot past her in a blur, the sky drab.

She pulled out her small mirror and began to reapply her lipstick. After she placed the tube back in her purse, she examined her face, running her finger across the faint wrinkle lines around her mouth and eyes.

The cab pulled up into a curved driveway, in front of the large orange and tan stone building. The gleaming sign read *Sun City Heritage*. From the cab window, Rachel saw her mother Karla waiting for her in the lobby. She was dressed in her usual pastel sweater set, today a pale purple, with khaki slacks, and loafers. Rachel paid the driver and slowly got out. She turned away from the entrance and pulled her suitcase out of the trunk. She slammed it shut.

Rachel slowly dragged her suitcase behind her. As she entered, she noticed how small her mother looked now, as if she had shrunk in the last few months. They hugged and Rachel cringed as she felt the bones underneath the thin fabric. She gingerly touched her mother's back, then pushed away.

“How was your flight?”

“Fine.”

They headed through the building, passing a library, pool, game, room, dining room, and many other recreational rooms. The colors were bright and cheerful, yellows and peaches, and there were plants and artwork lining the walls. Everything looked new and clean and well kept. As they continued down the hall, Rachel saw other residents, talking and laughing, some in wheelchairs and walkers, some with oxygen tanks. They occasionally stopped to greet some of the residents, all very friendly and happy to meet Rachel. It surprised her to see them all so happy, considering how her mother complained about the facility.

“No turbulence?”

“Nope.”

“How is Dave?”

They entered the elevator, and stood apart. The elevator was large, but Rachel felt like her black sweater had tightened around her neck, cutting off her breathing. Her boots dug into her calves, tight, tighter. She stared at the silver wall.

“He’s fine. Busy with work.”

“I assumed, since he didn’t come with you.”

“He couldn’t get off of work. I had a really hard time taking today and Monday off. I had to use my vacation time.”

“I’m your mother, Rachel. Of course you would visit. The Clarks’ children visit them at least once a month.”

“They live here in Texas, mom. I live in New York. I have a job, and a husband. I can’t just pop down all the time.”

“Clearly.”

Rachel sighed and crossed her arms. There was a ding and the door opened. They headed down a quiet, empty hall to Karla’s room. The other doors were decorated with art, welcome mats, signs, plants, and other items. Karla’s door was blank. Karla unlocked the door, and Rachel followed her into a plain, sparse apartment. The only decorations were photos of friends and family.

“I think I should go settle in to the guest apartment. Freshen up. Unpack.”

“I don’t know why you couldn’t just stay here with me. I have an extra bedroom in my apartment.”

“I told you already. It makes more sense this way.”

Her mother muttered, “Costs more.”

“Well, I will come back in a bit. Have you thought about what you want to do?”

“I thought we would eat here tonight, with the Clarks. They haven’t seen you in so long.”

“Here? I thought we could go out... That’s fine. It will be nice to see them.” She checked her watch. “What time is dinner?”

“Five-thirty is best. It gets crowded.”

“Okay... I will come back here a little bit before then.”

Rachel turned and left. As she walked away, she heard the door slam shut behind her, the harsh noise echoing down the long, silent hallway. She turned back for a moment to look at Karla’s door, then continued back to the elevator. She headed to the guest apartment the facility offered to the relatives of residents. The layout was the same as her mother’s apartment, but it was richly decorated and more cheerful. Rachel left her suitcase on the wooden rack, unpacked. She collapsed onto the bed and closed her eyes.

Opening her eyes, she reached for her cell phone. She looked at it for a long moment, then flipped it open, scrolled through her messages and call logs, frowned, and flipped it shut. The digital clock on the phone’s front screen read 5:00. He would still be at the office, working late as usual. She wondered what he would do for dinner. He would probably pick something up on the way back to their apartment. Or maybe he would go out with someone, someone she didn’t know, someone from work or someone he had just met. It had been so long since she felt like she really knew him. There were

no surprises, just questions. She couldn't be surprised if she didn't know what the norm was anymore.

She stroked the sleek, smooth phone with her index finger. Brushed her thumb over the screen. She dropped it on the bed and turned away from it, toward the wall.

Rachel knocked on the door and waited. Her mother opened the door, and she stepped inside.

“Are you ready?” Rachel looked at her mother and quickly regretted the question.

“I was ready at 5:30. It's 5:45. We're late.”

“I'm sorry. I was on the phone with Dave.” Rachel glanced away. She wondered if her mother would believe the lie.

“How is he?”

“Fine, mom. Not much has changed since this morning.”

“Did he say anything about the information I sent him?”

“What information?”

“Well, you know how he helps me with the financial things, now that your father's gone. I asked him to look at some things.”

“I could have helped you, mom.”

Karla looked at Rachel, her eyebrows raised slightly. “That's not really your strength, dear. Besides, it's something a man does.”

“Mom, what do you think I did before I met Dave? I did all of that on my own. Me, a woman.”

“I'm just saying, I prefer to have him deal with it.”

“Yes, like your rent.”

Karla turned toward her, and Rachel watched her hand clench at her side.

Decades ago, her mother would not have hesitated, but would have swiftly swung her hand up and slapped her. Karla’s hand slowly loosened. The elevator dinged and they stepped out into the hallway. Rachel followed her mother along the halls until they reached the dining room. It looked like a regular restaurant, only filled with tables of loud, elderly people.

They joined the Clarks, who were waiting for them at the counter. Nancy was smiling brightly, but it was blank, as if the muscles in her mouth turned up naturally. Richard had heavy eyes, and he gave Rachel a small smile and a warm hug. A staff member seated them at a table. Rachel opened her menu and glanced at the choices.

“So what’s good here?”

Her mother answered, “The fish is usually too dry, and the pork is too fatty.”

Richard said, “I like the roast beef and potatoes.”

Nancy smiled and said, “I think everything is very tasty here. And it’s so convenient! Right around the corner from our house.”

Rachel looked at her, hard, then glanced at Richard. Richard smiled bleakly and patted Nancy’s hand with his.

“I’ve taken up woodcarving,” Richard announced.

Rachel looked up from the menu. “I’m sorry?”

“Woodcarving. It’s my new hobby.”

“Oh.”

“You need a hobby here.”

Nancy added, “The classes are great! I like the yoga class. And the knitting class.” Rachel stared at her, trying to follow her jumps in consciousness.

“They offer a variety of classes here. Educational, recreational, everything.”

“Mom, have you gone to any of these activities?”

Karla picked at her bread roll. “No, no... I just haven’t gotten around to it yet. After all, I only moved in here a little while ago.”

“Only two months ago,” Rachel countered.

“Well, but I had to switch apartments, remember? That was only a few weeks ago. Besides, I’ve been busy with the house.”

Richard said, “You’re real lucky you got a buyer. I hear there are some other houses in the old neighborhood up for sale, and they’ve had a hard time with it.”

Karla ripped the roll apart. “Yes, lucky.”

After dinner, Rachel walked her mother back to her apartment. Her mother slowly unlocked the door, and left the door open, waiting to see what Rachel would do. Rachel stepped in and closed the door behind her.

“Mom, why haven’t you participated in any of the activities here?”

“What?”

“It sounds like it could be really fun, and a good way to meet new people. Aren’t you always complaining that you don’t know anyone here besides the Clarks?”

“Well, I just haven’t managed to make it to anything yet.”

“Well, maybe you should make more of an effort.” Rachel leaned against the door, arms crossed.

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“What’s the problem, mom? What is so important that it’s keeping you from living your life and adjusting?”

Karla sighed, her hand resting on the kitchen counter. “It’s complicated, Rachel. Please don’t bother me about this.”

“Well, I’m going to. You give me grief about not visiting you more, and how you don’t like it here, but I don’t see you trying to like it. Everyone else here seems to be doing just fine.”

“You see what you want to see, Rachel.”

“And you don’t?” Rachel sighed, and stood up from the door. “I’m going to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.” She twisted the knob in her palm, opened the door, and let it swing shut behind her.

She returned to her own suite, exhausted. She got ready for bed, taking things out of her suitcase. She kept her phone nearby, moving it as she moved between the bedroom and bathroom. She frequently glanced at it, opening and closing it repeatedly. As she got into bed, she finally dialed Dave’s number. She waited as it rang, then hung up when it reached his voicemail. She wondered where he was. Maybe still out at dinner. Or maybe he was just screening her calls, using this trip as a trial separation. She gently placed her hand over her stomach and felt the warmth radiating from her empty body. She wondered what it would have been like, if things had been different. If she would have had kids. If she hadn’t made the decision not to. If she hadn’t been afraid. If her belly had swelled round and warm, kicking with life. If she and Dave had become parents, doting over ten tiny toes and ten tiny fingers and a fuzzy head and puckered

eyelids. She removed her hand from her stomach and curled into a ball. She fell asleep with the phone in her hand.

In the morning, Rachel headed over to her mother's apartment for breakfast. Karla always ate breakfast at home; she never approved of such wasteful portions as those of restaurants. When she got there, Karla was in her large, fluffy grey robe, making breakfast. Rachel quietly found her way around the kitchen, the silence broken with the whistle of the teakettle and the clang of silverware and the bang of drawers.

They sat at the small dining table, just big enough for the two of them. Karla had a bowl of oatmeal with dried fruit and nuts, and a cup of tea. Rachel had a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee.

"You should have something else."

"This is just fine, mom."

"It's not enough."

"It's fine, mom. This is what I usually have for breakfast."

"But—"

"Mom, I'm a grown woman, not a little girl anymore. I can make my own decisions."

"What does Dave eat for breakfast?"

Rachel paused and took a sip of coffee. "He usually gets breakfast on the way to work."

"You don't eat breakfast together?"

"He's swamped right now, that's all."

Rachel held the mug in front of her face and took a long gulp. Rachel watched her mother, who was watching her in turn as she slowly and daintily spooned her oatmeal into her thin mouth.

“I thought we could run some errands and decorate the apartment today.”

“What kind of errands?”

“Well, I thought we could set up the apartment while you’re here.”

“What do you mean, set it up?”

“You know... hang up some frames, maybe rearrange the furniture. Make it homey.”

“Why didn’t you do that when you first moved in?”

“Because you weren’t here to help me.”

“I can’t always be here to help you, mom. I have my own life, and it doesn’t involve flying back and forth to serve you and your every whim.”

“You are my daughter, my family. You are all I have left. At least in this country. This is what family does, Rachel.”

“You don’t need me to hang pictures.”

“Who is supposed to do that?”

“Richard, maybe.”

“Richard is too old and frail. And he has his hands full with Nancy.”

“She didn’t seem that bad last night.”

“She’s slipping fast.”

“That’s tough. For Richard.”

“It’s not just Richard who’s affected, Rachel. Nancy is my best friend, or was. Pretty soon she won’t even remember who I am.”

Rachel looked away, feeling hot and tense. She rose, moved to the bookcase and looked at a photo propped on the shelf. Her father was tall with a warm smile, and had his arms around Karla and Rachel. It was a recent photo, Rachel remembered. Maybe about five years ago, before he had gotten sick. Dave hadn’t been able to make it, because of work. Karla watched her and hesitated as if she wanted to say something. She moved to the balcony door and stared out the window with her tea.

Rachel put her finger to the picture frame and whispered, “Happy Birthday, Dad.” She turned around and called out, “All right. Let’s go.”

They both grabbed their jackets and purses and headed out to the car.

“You drive,” Karla told Rachel.

“Why? You’re the one who knows where we’re going.”

“I can tell you how to get there. It would be nice not to have to drive. I don’t like it.”

“Don’t you drive to go do errands?”

“When I have to.”

“Fine. Where are we going?”

“Whole Foods.”

Rachel sighed as she reached her mother’s ancient dark green Ford. She turned the key in the lock and slid into the driver’s seat.

“Be careful backing out, I don’t want to have to deal with any dings or scratches.”

“Mom, I know how to drive. If you’re going to ask me to drive, then don’t be a backseat driver.”

“I’m just telling you to be careful. Now, take a left out of the parking garage.”

Rachel sighed and gripped the steering wheel as she followed her mother’s directions to the store. They moved slowly down each aisle as Karla carefully considered the rows of items.

“Mom, don’t you have a list?”

“Yes, but since you’re here to help, I’d like to stock up on some things.”

Rachel wheeled the cart behind her. “Alright.”

They ended up in line with a cart overflowing with cans, dry goods, fruits and vegetables, and odds and ends. Rachel shoved the cart toward the car, where she unloaded the bags into the trunk. Karla sat in the car as Rachel moved the cart back.

“So, you know how to reverse the directions, right? I shouldn’t have to tell you how to get back now.”

Rachel settled back into the driver’s seat and violently forced her seatbelt into the buckle. “Yes, mom.” She turned the key and pressed the brake, and the car roared to life. She pulled out of the parking spot, and headed back to the facility.

Rachel and Karla entered her apartment, their arms full of grocery bags, Rachel carrying the brunt of the load. Karla moved slowly and methodically, unpacking the groceries in the kitchen as Rachel began lifting the various pictures Karla had left out for her.

“Just lift them up so I can see where they should go.”

Rachel lifted each picture, moving it around until Karla settled on its spot. It took a long time for each decision, as Karla debated the pros and cons of each position for each picture, and the different combinations that could be put together. Rachel hung each one, careful with the hammer and nail. When the last one had been placed, she sighed and dropped her arms down. She cracked her neck and stretched her arms behind her back.

“Now, let’s do the rug.”

Rachel groaned softly. She moved the furniture to the kitchen area, then dragged and unrolled the Persian rug as Karla directed her movements. After it had been smoothed out, the nubby surface tickling her hands, she moved the furniture back.

Karla sighed. “That was tiring.”

Rachel turned away, flushed and panting, and rubbed her hands down against her fuzzing jeans.

“I think I need to take a short nap before we leave.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in a bit.” Rachel quickly left before her mother could change her mind and set a new task for her.

Rachel read on the couch in her guest apartment. She sighed and dropped the book on the coffee table. Her cell phone sat at the edge of the table, softly shining under the ceiling light. Hesitating, her hand wavered above her cell phone. She picked it up and dialed Dave’s number again. It buzzed for a while, then went to his voicemail again. She paused, wondering, trying to decide between hanging up and leaving a message.

“Hey... hope everything is going well. It’s been going okay here. Listen... we can’t keep ignoring this. I know this is awkward and uncomfortable, and it’s easier to

avoid the issue, but we both know we need to discuss this. I don't know where we go from here, but clearly something needs to change... I guess we should talk in person, not over the phone. I'll be back in town Monday night."

Rachel hung up. She leaned over with her hands holding onto her legs. She rocked back and forth, pushed herself up to rest her elbows on her thighs, and started to cry with her hands over her face.

When it was time to go, she went over to Karla's apartment. Rachel drove. They sat in silence, the only noise the whistle of the air hitting the sides of the car. Rachel pulled into a parking lot. They wandered through the Memorial Garden. The grass was lush, freshly watered, gleaming in the bright sunlight. Rachel looked at the scrubby hills seen in the distance, then followed the small river and budding trees in the manmade gardens. Along the gravel path were rows of embedded, engraved stones.

"I forgot how pretty it is here."

"Yes...that was one of the reasons we picked it."

Rachel and Karla stopped in front of one stone. It read, "Daniel Schulz, 1934-2006." There was a blank spot next to it, reserved for Karla. They stood still, quiet. Karla's eyes were closed. Rachel turned and looked out at the view. The sun set as they stood apart, facing opposite directions.

Rachel and Karla returned to the apartment after dinner out at a nearby restaurant. Rachel carried leftovers in a Styrofoam container and moved to the kitchen.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Tea."

Rachel dug the scooper into the coffee, dumped it into the machine, and poured water. After she turned the coffeemaker on, she filled up the teakettle and heated it.

There was a steady hissing from the coffee maker.

“I’m just not sure.” Karla looked at Rachel expectantly.

Rachel sighed and crossed her arms. “About what?”

Karla waved her hands. “About this. The situation.”

“Mom, we’ve had this conversation.”

“Yes, well it’s all well and good for you to say that, but it’s me who’s stuck here, living in this hellish limbo.”

“Are we still talking about the facility? Or are we back to your miserable life?”

“Don’t you talk like that to me. You have no idea what it’s like for me. What it’s like here.”

“Mom, I talk to you every week. All you ever do is complain about this place, and your health, and everything else that’s wrong with your life!”

“I’m stuck here, all alone, with nobody to talk to, nobody to spend time with, nobody to be with.”

“Mom, you have the Clarks! You moved here because they were moving here! You didn’t want to be left by yourself in the neighborhood.”

“I do not have the Clarks. Nancy is slipping so fast... I’ve lost my best friend. And you! Everyone here has family that visits regularly, and my daughter can’t even come more than once a year.”

“That’s a lie, and you know it. I came a few months ago to visit this place with you. And unlike everyone else, whose families live in this godforsaken state, I have to fly five hours to get here! It’s not as easy as an hour’s drive.”

“Other people would do it.”

“Well, I’m not other people.”

“Clearly.”

“And why the hell would I want to visit you more? It’s not like we ever had a good relationship.”

“We are family.”

“All you ever do is criticize and complain. Maybe if you changed your attitude, you wouldn’t be so angry and depressed. It’s not like you try to meet people here. It’s not like you ever participate in the classes and events they hold.”

“I don’t want to be here.”

“Well, you decided to come here. You can’t just undo that.”

“I didn’t decide to come here. Your father died, and I had no choice.”

Rachel turned away and fell silent. The teakettle started to squeal loudly, the harsh shriek piercing the brief quiet. She moved to turn off the stove. Pouring the hot water into the mug, she felt the heat from the handle. It was uncomfortable. The coffee maker beeped, and she poured that into another mug, watching the translucent amber liquid fill it up as she kept her eyes down. She took both mugs, looked up, and her mother was at the window. She placed hers down on the table and moved toward Karla.

“Here,” she said wearily, holding the mug out. Karla extended her bony hand and took it, immediately putting her other hand around it. Her hands were pale, and the blue veins underneath were too visible. She finally looked weak to Rachel.

They drove in silence, a half an hour to the neighborhood. Rachel pulled up into the driveway, the house standing out only by the “SOLD” sign stuck in the front yard. Karla moved to the garage, opened it, and unlocked the door into the hallway. She quickly disappeared, and Rachel stayed in the kitchen. The house was bare. A few pieces of furniture and random items were marked “FOR DONATION” in scrawled Sharpie. She started to pack boxes, placing whatever items were left into newspaper and nestled them into the boxes. Karla shuffled in and out of the living room, adding items to the two piles. When Rachel had finished packing the boxes, she moved them one by one to the trunk of the car. Finished, she leaned against the kitchen counter, gripping the side. Karla wandered in with a few items in her hands. She hesitated between the donation pile and the sole empty box in the kitchen, glanced at the items, clutched them tightly, then rubbed one as if it was a talisman. She slowly moved past Rachel and headed to the car. Rachel took one last look at the near-empty house, then left.

When they returned to the facility, they went back to Karla’s apartment for the last few hours before Rachel needed to leave for the airport. She sat in the stiff armchair, across from the floral couch where her mother was perched. Karla looked like a small bird surrounded by its habitat, and Rachel hoped she would eventually get to the point where she could call this place home. As she moved her eyes over her mother’s lined face, skeletal body, and weary face, she wondered when, if ever, that would happen. She hoped it would be soon. Karla’s hands were clasped in her lap. Rachel remembered the

strength those hands used to possess as they smacked her face in anger or punishment. Now, they were thin and Rachel pitied them. As she looked around the freshly decorated living room, she noted all the reminders of a better past: the photos of the three of them, photos of Germany, old textbooks written by her father, knickknacks and trinkets that had decorated their house for decades. Nothing was new.

Rachel knew her mother was not a woman who would have chosen to be a mother; it just didn't fit her, like a mismatched puzzle piece. She smoothed her hand down over her shirt, and as she moved over her stomach, she felt a new flicker of sympathy interlaced with the ever-present knot of fear, anger, and worry. Her mother coughed, and Rachel looked up. Karla was looking out the window. Rachel looked down at her watch, which was ticking away. The noise seemed to grow louder as she focused on the hands.

“My cab will be here soon. I should get going soon.”

Karla nodded. “Alright,” she said softly.

Rachel sighed as she stood up. She took another look around, slowly turning her body to take in her mother's new life. She focused on her mother, small and distant on the couch. “I will visit again soon. I promise.”

“Uh-huh.”

Rachel didn't know if that was meant to be sarcastic. “Things just need to settle down a little bit, that's all.”

“I understand.”

Rachel frowned, skeptically and quizzically observing her mother. Karla's head was tilted down and away from her and for a moment she wondered if her mother was crying.

Karla stood up, and Rachel saw that her face was dry, but etched with lines of anxiety. Moving closer, Karla stopped in front of Rachel and lightly gripped her shoulders. "You take care. And I hope Dave can make it next time, too."

"Yeah...about that, mom. I'm not sure how likely that will be."

They looked at each other, and Rachel felt her eyes growing tingly and moist. She looked up at the ceiling, briefly, then back down at her mother.

"I see. Well, I'll be hoping for that, anyway."

Rachel nodded, not fully knowing which way Karla meant it, but fairly sure she did. Pulling away, she grabbed her bags that she had left in the apartment that morning and moved toward the door. "You don't need to come with me downstairs, mom. You stay here and relax."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay... well, have a safe flight home and tell Dave I said hello."

"Okay."

As Rachel began to open the door to the hallway, her mother added, "I think you would have been a great mother, Rachel, for what it's worth."

Rachel turned, shocked, and she could feel that her mouth was slightly open and her eyes were wide. She quickly forced her face to smooth away her surprise. "What?"

“I’m not stupid, Rachel. I am sometimes aware of things, even when you don’t tell me. After all, don’t you think I might have wondered why I never became a grandmother?” Rachel stayed quiet, stunned at her mother’s unprecedented insight. “Anyway, I just wanted you to know that. Have a good flight.”

Rachel nodded numbly. She looked at her mother for a long moment. Then, she slowly turned back toward the door and moved into the hall. She watched the door swing closed behind her and she moved down the hall.

When her luggage was stowed in the trunk, and she sat tall against the backseat of the cab, she looked at her phone. There were no new messages, no missed calls, no sign of any contact from Dave. She wondered if he was just confused, trying to sort things out, or if this was a sign of his decision. She turned the phone off and slipped it into her purse. Rachel felt comfortable against the leather, calm and peaceful.

Saving Grace

I stepped out of my car and slammed the door shut. The brick and ivy building looked too normal, like a prep school or university instead of a private institution for the rich and abnormal, the embarrassing and weird members of upper-class society that needed to be hidden away under all the crawling ivy. All I knew was that two concerned parents wanted me to help solve their daughter's case, and were willing to pay top dollar for my services. That was all I needed to hear. The business was hurting, and I needed all the clients I could get. So, I crunched my way through the snow toward the intense and depressing building to meet Mr. and Mrs. Cooper.

They were waiting for me in the lobby, and a nice receptionist showed us to an office so we could talk in private.

"Mr. and Mrs. Cooper. Chris Bryant." I shook each of their hands. Mr. Cooper was average height, a little overweight, with brown hair and brown eyes, and was a

banker, according to my assistant, who took care of all of the background checks. Mrs. Cooper was short, average weight, with reddish-brown hair and brown eyes, and was a stay-at-home mom who had gotten involved at an art museum after their only daughter went away to college. They lived about three hours away. They both looked weary and sad, a pervasive air that hung around them.

“Mr. Bryant, it is so great to finally meet you,” she said.

“I’m here to help,” I said. “Why don’t you fill me in on your daughter’s case?”

They sat on the couch and I sat on an armchair. The two of them looked at each other, and Mr. Cooper handed me a manila folder. “I think this will help get you up to speed.”

I flipped it open and settled into the chair. Grace Cooper, 19. Supposed to be a sophomore in college, at Skidmore College up at Saratoga Springs, NY. Was found fifteen weeks ago by her roommate, Maggie Jensen, in bed in a catatonic state. Hospitalized for a week, where she seemed to gain consciousness and motor function, but could not speak. Declared physically healthy, discharged. Parents took her in for two weeks, then moved her to a private psychiatric institution, the Marshall House. Police declared it a cold case, with no physical evidence of abuse, except for signs of sexual intercourse. Could not be declared nonconsensual based on the physical evidence alone, and there were no leads on anything that could have caused her to remain silent. Has not spoken a single word since an unknown event.

I flipped it shut. “What else can you tell me?”

“Like what?”

“Anything that might help. Anything you can think of.”

They both shook their heads. “She was happy,” Mr. Cooper said. “At least, we thought she was.”

“What was she like? Before?”

“Outgoing,” she said, as she pulled at a tissue in her hand. “Nice, sweet, active... a hard worker, good student. She was on the Dean’s List for academic excellence every semester.”

“Everybody liked her,” he added. “We went up to visit her during her freshman year. She seemed to have a lot of friends, good friends, not just casual acquaintances or classmates.”

“Was she seeing anybody?”

“Not that we ever heard, and her roommate swore she wasn’t.”

“And why is she here? This isn’t a judgment, just a question.”

“We did have her at home for two weeks, but it was just too difficult... she didn’t talk at all, and she wasn’t herself. It was just too painful to try to take care of her and not be able to do anything. She needed help, and we couldn’t give it to her.”

“Has it helped? The institution?”

They looked at each other. “Well, she still won’t talk. But she seems to be okay here, and the doctors are really trying.”

I tried to think if there was anything else to ask them, before I met Grace. I had never had a client in an institution, so I was a little nervous about being here. But at least she wasn’t crazy. Or violent. It sounded like a simple case of psychological trauma, but the cops had given up, and the doctors weren’t getting at the answers, so now it was my

turn. I knew the parents really just wanted their daughter to talk again, but I figured that Grace herself might need more.

“Alright. I’d like to meet her now, if that’s okay.”

“Is that necessary?” Mr. Cooper interjected immediately.

I frowned. “Well, for one thing, I generally like to meet my clients; it helps me stay motivated and focused. It might also help me figure out what’s going on. Every little detail can help.”

Mrs. Cooper placed her hand on her husband’s arm and said, “This way.”

We moved out of the office and wound our way to the main staircase. We climbed up the stairs to the second floor. It seemed like the building was set up like a house, with only two floors of rooms. The hall was long and narrow and carpeted. We stopped at room 16, at the end of the hall. Mrs. Cooper went to turn the doorknob.

“She’s expecting us,” she explained. I must have looked surprised that we didn’t need an escort. The door was wooden, just like most bedroom doors, and that surprised me, too. I guess I didn’t know what an asylum could be like, or a private psychiatric institution, as this one was called. It seemed fairly normal, and that surprised me. Everything was unfamiliar to me, and I didn’t like that.

The door opened, and we stepped inside what could have been a dorm room. There was a bed, desk, chest, armoire, nightstand, and chair. It was carpeted, with soft, warm lights and a large window. Again, I was surprised, and I went over to inspect it. It was triple-paned and impossible to open, but still.

“She’s not a danger to herself.”

“Sorry.”

There were books on the desk and a radio/CD player. I inspected them; it looked like they had never been used.

“We thought she might like something to entertain herself.”

I nodded absently, as I continued to look around. There were photos on the wall, of Grace and her parents, Grace and her friends, Grace on vacation. She was pretty, with soft, long brown hair and brown eyes and a warm smile. She looked fit; I should ask if she played a sport. She must have been popular with the guys. I wondered if these photos were good for her, or if they just made things worse. But I guessed the doctors knew what they were up to.

I turned away from the photo, and I spied something in the corner, on the floor.

She was a ball, tightly curled into herself in dark green sweats. Her long hair had gotten even longer, and it spread around her body like a curtain, thick and heavy.

“Grace.”

She unwound herself slowly, and came to a sitting position. Her hair still fell in front of her face, but parted as she lifted her head. She stared at me, and I saw her eyes were empty. Dark. Void. Her eyes glazed over me and she tilted her head to the side as she examined me. The two black pits continued to stay on me as her head moved to the other side, and chills ran up my body. Eerie. There was something inhuman about her, as if her soul had been sucked out by whatever had stolen her voice.

I wanted to back away.

I hesitated, my right foot wavering as the chills settled into my skin and formed goosebumps.

Instead, I took a step forward.

I extended my hand down toward her and smiled. “Hi, Grace. I’m Chris Bryant.”

She turned her eyes to my hand, then back to my face.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m here to help.”

I waited, then retracted my hand. I turned and moved back to the parents.

“Well,” I started.

“That’s how it usually is,” her mother said. “When someone new comes in.”

“I see.” I took a look at Grace, and saw that she continued to watch me. “Well, I guess that’s all I need. I’ll go now.” We headed out, but her mom stopped to stroke her hair. I watched, curious. Grace looked up at her mom, with the same eyes she showed me, but I felt an air of desperation and impatience flow between them. They both felt the same way, but were both helpless to change anything. Grace looked past her mom, at me, and the air disappeared. Her mom lifted her hand and joined us.

It was hard to reconcile the photos with the reality.

“What now?” her dad asked as we headed back down the stairs.

“I’m going to talk to the police and retrace their steps.”

“But clearly that didn’t get them anywhere. What else are you going to do?”

I stopped at the bottom step. “Mr. and Mrs. Cooper, this is why you hired me.

The police haven’t solved your daughter’s case, and honestly probably don’t even believe there is a criminal case to be solved. I’m here to do their job, better. And that usually means retracing their steps to see if they’ve missed anything. The people they interviewed, for instance, might know something important without even realizing it. Like her roommate at Skidmore.”

“Of course. We didn’t mean to question you,” Mrs. Cooper said, placing her hand on her husband’s arm. “You came highly recommended.”

The recommendation had come from a previous client, a man who wanted to find out if his wife was having an affair. Unfortunately, she was. Fortunately for me, the man was a friend of the Coopers. Most of my business came from recommendations, since nobody trusted a private detective found online.

“I’ll be in touch,” I told them, and headed back to my car. They remained at the front door as I got in, watching, their arms around each other. I shivered, and turned up the heat. I flipped through the folder, found the number, and dialed. It beeped several times, then finally went to voicemail.

“Chief Nelson, this is Chris Bryant. The Coopers hired me to look into their daughter’s case, Grace Cooper. I would appreciate it if we could meet and discuss her case. Please call me back at this number. Thanks.”

I had planned on going to Skidmore to talk to her roommate; the college was only ten minutes away from the institution, but I hadn’t counted on the snow. It had started while I was driving up from my office in White Plains, and had taken over the roads by the time I had arrived at the Marshall House. I didn’t want to chance getting stuck when I was driving a stick, so I headed to the nearest hotel and checked into a room. I wasn’t sure how long I’d stay up here. Usually my cases were closer to home; this case was the exception.

Instead, I headed to a hotel I had found on the way up. It was run down, quiet and sparse. I moved slowly up to my room on the second floor, taking the stairs instead of the elevator. My body protested, weary from the long drive. The hall was dim and

slightly musty smelling. When I unlocked and opened the door, I stepped into a cramped room with worn blue carpet, a bed, a desk, and a bathroom. There wasn't even a TV.

I lay on the bed. I could feel the springs pressing up against my back as I stared at the grey ceiling. Counted the cracks. It was close to dinnertime, but I wasn't hungry. As I blinked, I saw those brown eyes, mysterious and entrancing and uncomfortable. I felt the hard yet empty gaze on me, and I sat up. I buried my face in my hands and remembered that other pair of eyes, icy blue, staring at me, dead.

When I woke up, I immediately looked out the window. The sun had started to melt the overwhelming height of the snow, but the ground looked slippery. I skated to my car and cautiously headed away from the hotel. When I reached the Marshall House parking lot, I stayed in the car to make a phone call.

"Saratoga Springs Police Department," a woman's voice stated flatly.

"I'm trying to reach Chief Nelson, about the Grace Cooper case."

There was a pause. "Hold, please." The line clicked, and I heard a faint crackle.

"Chief Nelson." His voice was booming, stern.

"Chief Nelson, this is Chris Bryant, of the Bryant Agency. I left you a message, about the Grace Cooper case?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, I was hoping I could take a look at the official police files on the case. I'm in the area, so I thought maybe I could stop by, so you didn't need to worry about sending anything to me."

"Look, it's pretty busy here today, with all the winter weather. If you stop by later today, we can talk, if you like."

Talk. Later. Code word for yeah right, buddy.

“Sure. I’ll stop by later, then.”

The line clicked and went dead.

I climbed out of the car and walked across the emptied parking lot with my bag in hand. The nurse nodded at me as I entered, and scratched a note on her pad of paper. I went ahead to Grace’s room, hiding the bag behind my back.

I knocked, then slowly opened the door. I waited a moment, then entered. I felt like I was dealing with a scared animal that needed to be given time to familiarize themselves with my scent, my presence.

She was sitting on the floor again, but against the bed this time, not in the corner. I thought I saw a flicker of surprise register in her eyes, but whatever it was disappeared. Back to the empty black pits.

“Hello,” I said cheerfully. “I thought you might like some company other than your parents and the white coats.”

She looked at me blankly.

I plopped down on the floor and sat with my legs crossed. “I brought you something,” I said, feeling a smile creep onto my face, and pulled the bag out from behind me. I handed it to her, wanting to see her reaction.

She softly pulled it to her and peered inside. She reached a hand inside, elegantly like a cat’s paw, and pulled out the large box. She looked at the cover, then looked at me.

“It’s Scrabble,” I said, feeling foolish. I knew she knew that. She could still read, after all. “I’m sure you must have played this, with your parents or friends or something.

I thought you might like to play sometime. Instead of just reading or listening to music. Something interactive.”

Who was I talking to? At least this time she still watched me, but without the oppressive aura that had surrounded me last time. She seemed merely intrigued or curious, like a cat given a new toy, waiting to pounce and bat it around, test it, try it. But what was the toy? The game, or me?

She placed the box down on the floor and pushed it under the bed. We stared at each other in silence, almost like a kid’s contest, until I gave in and got up. As I left the room, I turned, and saw her finger the corner of the box.

“Come in.”

I opened the door and walked into the stark office. Chief Nelson stood up from behind his messy desk to reluctantly shake my hand. He was pretty beefy, with red cheeks and thinning blond hair. It was hard to picture him chasing after criminals.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me,” I said as I gripped his hand. I sat in the opposite chair. “Anyway, the Coopers hired me to see if I could help them get some kind of answer, closure, about their daughter, and I thought looking at the police files might help point me in the right direction.”

“Look, Mr. Bryant, I’m going to be honest with you. This is really a waste of time. Yours and mine. We investigated all the leads, all the possible suspects. Nothing panned out. And there’s no physical evidence of violence or any external causes for her... condition.” He folded his large hands on top of his desk and looked at me.

“I understand that you have no leads, and you may think that this is a dead-end case, a cold case, but I don’t. I was hired to do a job, and I’m going to do it. I will exhaust every clue, every nook and cranny in this case until I find some answers. Because that family deserves some answers. And Grace deserves to get her life back.”

“And you think you can give them that just by figuring out what happened.”

“Yes. I think that will help Grace start to put herself back together again. And it will let the parents stop wondering and completely focus on helping her.”

He shook his head. “Well, it’s a noble thought. But I think you’re going to be disappointed, and you’re going to get their hopes up for no reason. It’s only going to make it worse.”

“We’ll see.” I stood up, and as I extended my hand to shake his, he reached out and offered me a fat, bursting file. I took it and shook his hand firmly.

Back in the hotel room, I went through the file, flipping through interviews, medical records, academic records, everything. Nothing seemed to really stick out. I dropped the stack on the desk and flopped onto the bed, springs squealing. The pillow rustled under my head as I reached to turn off the light. I came eye to eye with the nightstand, and I froze. Lilies. I reached for the box of tissues and stared at the painted flowers. I could hear her laugh ringing in my ears and I threw the box across the room.

I woke up to a painful brightness and shaded my eyes. I had fallen asleep with the blinds open, and now it was morning. The snow had intensified the reflected sunlight, and it was killing me. I groaned and went to close the blinds. January wasn’t the best month to take a case in Saratoga Springs. I was normally smarter than this. The snow

made my job a lot harder. It might make me stay here longer; I needed to stay here until I figured out what was going on, and I had no idea how long that would take.

My phone claimed it would warm up enough to melt the snow, so I prepared myself for the cold. Resigned, I pulled my sweater on over my undershirt, and then my winter jacket, gloves, boots. I looked like a wanna-be college student. Not necessarily what I was going for, but maybe it would work. I examined my stubble in the bathroom mirror. I lathered some foam on my face, and scraped the blade up in slow, deliberate strokes. The scratchy noise was deafening in this silent room, silent hotel, silent town. Everything was asleep in the snow.

The college was empty when I arrived. I had to remind myself that it was a weekend morning, and most students lived on a very different schedule than others. Besides the fact that the entire campus was buried two feet deep in snow. I was glad, though, because I didn't have to worry about looking like an idiot with my campus map.

Howe Hall was located on a sloping hill. I had to wrestle with the doorknob to wrench the door open into the iced-over snow. I had about a foot wide to shimmy through, but I made it into the somewhat warmer lobby. There was a girl nestled in one of the armchairs, buried in a large fleece blanket. I quietly walked over to what I figured was the stairway, not wanting to wake her up.

"Mr. Bryant?" The girl unfolded herself out of the chair and wrapped the blanket around her like an extremely large towel. "Maggie Jensen." An arm encased in sweatshirt was thrust in my direction.

“Yes, it’s nice to meet you,” I replied, and shook her hand through my glove. I followed her up the stairs, her magenta and blue blanket trailing behind her. I was careful not to step on it; I didn’t want another casualty on this campus.

Her room was on the third floor. Their room. The sign on the door had both of their names on it, and as we entered the room, I could see why.

The room was split in half: one side for each girl. Maggie jumped onto her bed on the left side and curled up as she watched me. The other side was Grace’s. It looked like she had never left, like she could walk in at any moment. I kind of expected her to.

“Her parents wanted her to be able to come back this semester. If, you know...” she trailed off. “She could just pick her life back up.”

“Where she left it.”

She was silent as I looked through Grace’s things. The bed was made, with brightly colored comforter and pillows, and the desk had her notebooks and textbooks, pens and pencils.

Her calendar.

I sifted through this treasure, moving back to the beginning of September. For anything that could point to the right trail. She had all of her homework written out in pen, scratched out until the weekend she had been found in that state. The rest was slated out, waiting for her to complete and x out.

“What’s this?” I pointed out September 12th, the night before she had been found.

“What?”

“It’s marked ‘dinner.’”

“Oh, yeah, with her uncle.”

I stared hard at Maggie, who was chipping off her neon-pink nail polish. “I’m sorry?”

“Her uncle.” She looked at me like I was an idiot. I forgot how good teenage girls were at that. “I told the police about it. Sleeping on the job already?” She smiled at me, teasing.

“I’m still wading through the police report. I’ve just got the basic information, but I wanted to get more details. For Grace.”

She bowed her head. “Of course.”

“So. Her uncle?”

“Yeah, her uncle Malcolm. From her dad’s side of the family, I guess. Actually, he’s not really her uncle, but some sort of distant cousin.”

I continued to rifle through Grace’s things as Maggie talked. I opened the desk drawers and started going through the folders.

“Those are for her classes. Anyway, her uncle came to visit, and he took us out for dinner.”

“That was nice of him,” I murmured.

“He’s a nice guy. Not super old, either, but still older, maybe around your age.” I winced as I continued flipping through the pages.

“I’m telling you, those are just academic. Anyway, he’s really nice. Sweet. Kept asking us about college, how we liked it, stuff like that. And he paid for both of us at dinner. That’s better than most college guys, that’s for sure.”

She was right; this was all academic stuff. I shut the folders and put them back in the drawer. I moved on to the next drawer, which was filled with a random assortment of light bulbs, batteries, cough drops, Command Strips, and office supplies.

“Junk drawer,” Maggie called out from the bed. “It would just be easier for you to ask me where things are. I can save you the trouble of going through all the irrelevant things.”

I pulled out a condom. “Guess the police missed this.”

“So what? It’s just a condom.”

“Why does she have it?”

“Because she’s a college student, and a girl?” Maggie laughed. “We’re not stupid, and we’re not careless.”

“So she definitely wasn’t seeing anyone?”

“No. Besides, a lot of people go around campus handing out free condoms. I think the RA’s give it to the freshmen, too.”

I raised my eyebrows. Where was this when I was growing up? I remembered a few specific nights where that would have come in handy.

“So, why was her uncle here in town?”

“I don’t know, something about a job. That’s what he said, I think. At dinner.”

“Like he was here on a business trip?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really paying attention at that point.”

“Why?” I watched her; the fact that she hadn’t paid attention could either be because of her own self-centeredness, or because the uncle had tried to downplay it for his own reasons.

“Well, I had to leave early, for orchestra rehearsal. Professor Liden is really strict when it comes to rehearsals.”

I noted the instrument case next to her desk. It looked like a violin or viola case. “When was this?”

“Rehearsals are at eight.”

“When did you go to dinner?”

“It was at seven; I remember because if it had been any later than that, I would have just skipped it. I thought I would have enough time before rehearsal.” She frowned. “I ended up being late, though, and Professor Liden was pissed.”

“Were Grace and her uncle close?” I finished going through the desk drawers, and moved to the closet, which was littered with piles of shoes and handbags.

“I don’t think so. She had never mentioned him before, and I remember feeling kind of awkward at dinner.”

Trying not to alert her to my sudden interest, I casually asked, “And why was that?”

“Well, Grace was just really fidgety and quiet, and it was kind of weird, because that’s not what she’s usually like. I remember I asked him if they hadn’t seen each other in a while, because of how she was acting.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said it had been several years, but that he used to be really close with the family.”

I quickly moved away from the closet, which was only filled with clothes and accessories. I went to the chest, hoping for some clues. “So, was this planned? I mean, had Grace known about him visiting for a while, or was it a surprise?”

Maggie stared at the wall and frowned, deep in thought. “A surprise... yeah, definitely. Grace was really shocked when he showed up at the dorm. I guess he hadn’t even called.”

“Did she seem happy to see him?”

“No, not really... that’s weird. Now that I think about it, she really didn’t want to go to dinner.”

“Did you tell the police all this?”

Maggie looked down at her hands. “I told them about him taking us out for dinner. But they never really seemed very interested, especially after they talked to him.”

They must have checked out his story about his business plans. It must have been true. But, then, liars always knew to include at least an element of truth, to leave room for doubt. That way, even if some of his story didn’t check out, there was enough truth in it to deceive them.

The difference was, I didn’t need to follow the rules, and I usually didn’t.

I moved through the other drawers and cabinets on Grace’s side of the room. I didn’t find much else of interest; I assumed the police had whatever else could be considered possible evidence or clues. I reminded myself to stop by the department again.

“So, when you got back from rehearsal, did anything else happen?”

“No. I mean, when I came back, the apartment was dark. It was pretty clear Grace hadn’t been back yet.”

“What time was that?”

“Around midnight. We had a performance coming up, so our rehearsals had gotten really long and intense.”

“Did you think it was weird that she hadn’t come back yet from dinner?”

“Not really. I mean, yeah, Grace preferred to do work in the room, but sometimes she would go to the library or a friend’s room.”

“Where is the library?”

“It’s right on the quad. You can’t miss it. But you can’t get in. You need a student card.”

That made things easier; I should be able to check if she had been to the library.

“I know this might be hard, Maggie, but can you remember if anything seemed off when you got back? Was her backpack in the room? Or was it gone? Things like that,” I added.

She frowned and kicked her foot against the bed. “It’s hard to know for sure. It was pretty late, so I was tired and I wasn’t really paying attention. It’s not like I had a reason to suspect anything at that point.”

But if she had felt awkward at dinner, chances were that her intuition had picked up on something, something she wasn’t consciously aware of. She would have been looking for signs, without knowing she was.

“Actually,” she started, and I looked up at her. “Her backpack *was* there. She generally used that if she was going to the library. But, again, she might have gone to a friend’s room.”

“Thanks, that’s really great. I promise, I’m almost done.” I noticed her leg kick the bed again. She was restless. “So, when and how did you find her in the morning?”

“Well, I left really early that morning, like usual, to go jogging.”

“Was she in the room when you left?”

She ducked her head. “I honestly can’t say. I’m so used to sneaking around so I don’t wake her up that I wasn’t paying attention. I thought she was, but I feel like that’s just because I assumed she was there.” She looked up at me, pleading, asking silently for forgiveness.

“It’s okay, Maggie. No one can expect you to remember all the little details. But did it look like someone was in the bed?”

“I don’t know,” she cried out. “I don’t know.” She flung herself onto the bed and buried her face in the pillow. I turned away, awkwardly trying to give her some space.

“Okay. So, when did you leave and when did you get back?”

“I left at eight, and got back a half an hour later,” she said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“And she was there then?”

Maggie thrust herself back up. Her eyes were red but tearless, and she looked haunted. “Yes,” she whispered. I leaned against the chair and watched her as she pulled her legs into her body. “It was awful. I thought she was asleep, at first. But then, when I was changing, I saw that her eyes were open. I called out to her, and she didn’t answer,

and I thought, maybe she's sleeping with her eyes open, because I heard once that some people can do that, you know, like cows, so I went over to her and it scared me, so I shook her, and she didn't respond, and her eyes were just looking at me blankly, and I freaked out and ran to get the RA."

I made a note to talk to the RA. "And then?"

"The RA came, and shook her, and then called 911. And we waited, and it felt like forever, and then they were wheeling a stretcher into the room and lifting her onto it and strapping her in and taking her away." She looked at me, and I no longer saw a carefree, teasing teenager, but a sad and weary woman with hunched shoulders and bruised eyes.

I turned and looked out the window, which was frosted like an idealistic Christmas home. It was cold to the touch and fogged up, and I streaked my finger down slowly, the glass squealing.

"That's all," I said, and I had to clear my throat. "I'll let you know if I have any more questions for you."

Maggie slowly slid off the bed and came over to me. "Here," she said, and held out her hand. I took a photo from her. "To remember." I flipped it over, and saw a happy Maggie and Grace, laughing into the camera lens, up close, like one of them had taken it themselves.

"Thanks." I turned to the door.

"Mr. Bryant?"

"Chris," I corrected her as I turned back around.

"Chris. Do you think she'll be okay?"

I looked at her, as she stood against the backdrop of Grace's dropped life. She seemed black and white against the raging colors behind her, faded. Grey.

"I hope so."

I headed toward the police department, antsy. When I got there, I quickly moved toward the chief's office, and opened the door without knocking.

"Hey, hold on a second," he spoke into the phone. He moved the piece away from his face and held his hand over the speaker. "Mr. Bryant, what are you doing here? I'm on the phone."

"Sorry, but I really need to talk to you. It's important."

He sighed, and lifted the phone back to his face. "Bob, I'm going to have to call you back. Uh-huh. Yeah. Alright, bye." He hung up the phone. "Alright, what is so urgent?"

"I talked to Grace's roommate at Skidmore, and I think I have a lead."

"Which is?"

"The uncle. Her roommate said--"

"I know what the roommate said," he interrupted. "We checked it out. He checked out."

"So he was here on business?"

"Job interview at a local company."

"Did you talk to him?"

Chief Nelson pounded his fist down on the desk. "Yes, we talked to him. Listen, don't assume that small town police do a bad job of it. We did everything we could, and

it all led nowhere. The uncle was a good guy, genuinely concerned for her. Check the file I gave you, it's all there."

I paced in his office, thrusting my hands in my hair. I gripped the chunks in my fists, then released them, crossed my arms. I took a deep breath and slowed down. "I'll do that," I said curtly. I left the office and returned to my hotel room.

The papers showed that Chief Nelson was right; they had done everything they could. Everything checked out. Without Grace's testimony, there was nothing more the police could do. They were at a dead end. But I knew this wasn't over. I wasn't leaving until I could help her.

Each day I went back to room 16. Each day I brought a new game. On the tenth day, she finally opened one of the boxes. She chose Scrabble. I smiled at her, happy she finally wanted to play, or at least wanted to placate me. Her eyes had softened, and her mouth hesitated, almost lifting at the corners. The black pits had somewhere along the way melted to chocolate, thawed. Warmed. She no longer seemed like a caged, angry animal or a soulless creature, but rather a sad, broken little girl trying to mend herself. I no longer worried about the wide windows. Instead, I worried about the locks on them.

"Can she go outside?" I leaned against the nurses' desk. Nurse Clayton, or Sarah, as I called her now, hesitated. She wound her fingers through her long blonde ponytail.

"I'd have to check with her doctor."

"Please?" I leaned further toward her. "Don't you think it could help her?"

"Well, I guess it can't hurt. And it's not like you haven't helped her already."

I pushed away from the counter. "What are you talking about?"

“The games. You coming here every day. You’ve really made a difference. We’ve all noticed.”

I grimaced. “If only the games could tell me who did this to her. Or get her to start talking again.” I sunk down and rested my head against the cool counter.

“Why don’t you ever look me in the eyes?”

I looked up at her and locked eyes with her. Her eyes were a piercing blue color. “It’s not personal,” I said, as I moved away.

We moved slowly, each day taking an eternity. It had taken a long time to convince Grace to leave her shelter for the brisk, snowy wonderland outside. It was hard carrying on a conversation, or argument, with someone who didn’t talk. But I had seen her look out the window enough to know she wanted to get out. She was just too scared to admit it. It was easier to let someone else take that responsibility.

“See, it’s not so bad,” I said, leading her out the back door of the House. The stone path was paved, neatly edged by the thick, tall snow. Everything was heavily blanketed in white, tinged with soft pastels from the rising sun.

Grace was swathed in layers of thick, wooly clothing and intense boots, as if the more layers of clothing, the more she was shielded from the world. For once, she didn’t blend in to her surroundings. She didn’t curl up in a corner and turn invisible. Instead, with her bright pink sweater, striped scarf, and hunter green boots, she took center stage, as if the white world was merely her backdrop.

I watched, smiling, as she furtively glanced at me before dipping down to scrape her gloves against the snow. She tore it off and scooped her bare hands into it. As I

watched Grace, I remembered her, with her blue eyes and blonde hair, playing in the snow, smiling and laughing at me.

She had been five years old when it snowed and she had finally been allowed to go out on her own. I stood at the window from the living room, watching her as she spun about in her pink puffy jacket and blue hat, reveling in the falling snow. She jumped up and down, trying to catch the flakes on her tongue. The snow was so tall by this point that when she fell, she disappeared from my sight. I quickly moved to the door, throwing on my own jacket and boots. By the time I stepped outside, however, she had already bounded up from her icy grave and was scooping up all the snow to bury the mailbox. I sat on the top step, watching, and she turned and grinned at me with her brilliant blue eyes beaming.

Grace approached me, her boots punching through the snow. I lifted my head up, looking at the blinding sky, feeling the cool air on my eyes, then looked down. She held her hand out to me: a gift. I wondered as I extended my hand, then recoiled as she tossed the handful of snow at my face.

“Ah, come on!” I cried out, wiping my face off with my gloves. As I brushed the snow off my eyes, I saw her smile and my mouth dropped. She was smiling. Grinning, actually. I immediately patted my pockets. I felt like I needed to capture this, take a picture, something, to prove it had just happened. In the almost month-long time I had been here, I had never seen her smile. I thought of Nurse Sarah, no doubt doing paperwork at the desk, and started to laugh. Grace turned towards me, startled, then

grinned harder. She dipped down again, and this time I was ready. I ducked as the snowball came flying at me.

Back in my hotel room, my clothes drying as they hung off the back of the chair, I looked over my notes from all the people I questioned. The RA, the students on the hall, her professors, friends, classmates, everyone. I reviewed all of the police reports, checked and double-checked everything. It was maddening.

I grabbed my phone from the nightstand and dialed the office.

“Sam?”

“Chris!”

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s been swamped here, without you, but I’m handling it. How’s it going?”

“Not so great.”

“Uh-oh. Now I know it’s bad,” she joked. “You only admit that when you’re at the breaking point.”

“I’ve done everything. There is nothing to point me anywhere.”

“What about the uncle? Or cousin, I mean?”

“His story checks out, even if I personally find him a little creepy.”

“Chris, I think you’re forgetting something here- you weren’t hired to solve the case. Yes, that would be huge, but you’re really just there to do something, give them some closure or something. It doesn’t need to be legally.”

“I know, but I really don’t see her leaving the House until her attacker is found.”

“Chris, maybe it’s time to come home. You’ve done everything you can. You can’t win them all.”

“This isn’t about winning, damn it,” I said, and hung up.

I showered, sticking my head under the waterfall and letting the water run down my face. The gentle pounding felt good. A nice slap in the face to wake me up, calm me down, refocus.

Once I had dried off, I looked around the bare room. I looked out the window. I pulled on my heavy coat and boots and went out for a walk. My hair was still damp and I could feel the freezing cold move down to my scalp. The snow was manageable now, plowed piles stacked on the edges of the streets. I walked toward the town, no destination in mind. I just wanted to walk.

As I got closer to the main part of town, I started to see flyers posted on the telephone poles. Bright yellow paper, eye-catching, with a picture of a cat and the word “MISSING.” The cat’s eyes looked mournful, as if it was just waiting to be found. Waiting to be returned to its warm home with catnip and scratch posts. Below was a list of information and pleas for help. It was handwritten, clearly hastily put together, copied, and posted around town.

We had done that, too. Back then. Put up flyers across town. White paper, with a photo of her from her twelfth birthday. She was glowing in the photo, the candles from the cake lighting up her face. She had on one of those silly birthday cone hats, placed on her silky blonde hair. It had left a creased ring around her head, and we had teased her

about it. The flyers had been everywhere, scattered around the buildings in town, passed amongst townspeople, neighbors, friends.

I stared at the calico cat for a minute, named Lila, then turned and slowly walked back to the hotel. The sun was bright, blinding, and I had to look away from it.

I went back to the Mitchell House the next day. We were playing Boggle when they came in.

“Mr. Bryant.” I stood up to shake Mr. Cooper’s hand.

“She looks good today,” Mrs. Cooper said. I nodded. “The nurses are singing your praises downstairs.” She gripped me in a hug. I awkwardly patted her back.

“I didn’t think you guys were coming today.”

“Well, we actually have a surprise!” Mrs. Cooper turned to the door, and a tall, stocky man with dark hair walked in. “This is our distant cousin Malcolm.”

I started. There was a rattle, and I turned to see Grace pushing herself away from the game. The word die shook inside the plastic bubble.

“He’s here on business again, and he really wanted to come see how Grace was doing. We told him about the wonderful progress she’s been making.”

“I see.” I crossed my arms against my chest. Why was he really here? If he was guilty, would he come back here? To revel in his torturing influence? To maintain her debilitating state? Was he trying to seem innocent? Or was he innocent? “And what do you do?”

“Ah, well, I’m between jobs right now, but I’m in discussions with a local company here.”

“Franklin & Co?” His brown eyes darted in my direction and his mouth twitched as he clearly fought to control his reaction.

“Yes,” he said too calmly.

Grace was backed against her bed, curled into a ball. Her hair fell along her body. Chills flooded down my body like an overrun river, and I looked back at “Uncle” Malcolm. A few minutes and he had just undone a month’s worth of work.

I stood between Grace and her family, unwilling to let any more harm be done.

“So why are you here?”

“I just told you why.”

“No, I mean, here in Saratoga Springs. Why are you looking at a job here?”

“I was told about the job opening.”

“There weren’t any jobs closer to where you were? Where do you live?”

“In the city.”

“And you couldn’t find anything in the great metropolis of Manhattan?”

“Not the kind of job I wanted.”

“I see.”

Mr. Cooper interjected, “Anyway, he told us he was in town, and he said he wanted to come with us to see Grace. See how she was doing.”

“How nice.”

Malcolm stepped toward Grace, and I hesitated between elbowing him, tripping him, or just letting him go. The Coopers were watching, and I had no real evidence to use against him. I let him move past me.

He squatted down. “Hello, Grace.” He laid a hand on her bent knee. I clenched my fist. Grace scooted away, so minutely that her parents couldn’t tell.

“I’m sorry to see you aren’t doing better. I heard that you were, so I was looking forward to seeing the improvement.”

He put his hand on her shoulder, and this time her parents couldn’t miss her reaction, as she slid further back and tightened her curled body.

“Maybe this isn’t a good idea,” Mrs. Cooper said. “Maybe seeing you reminds her that she was totally fine when she last saw you.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want you to see her like this, since you were the last one to see her happy and normal,” Mr. Cooper added.

I held my tongue, and was rewarded when they agreed to leave. I stayed behind. “Thank you, Grace. That’s all I needed to know.”

As the three of them left to have a happier family reunion, I rushed back to the hotel. I pulled out my laptop and cell phone and got to work. Four hours later, I sat back in my chair with my hands folded behind my head.

Malcolm Conley, 35. Graduated from a community college in New Jersey. Married his college girlfriend who died a year later in a car accident. Lived with the Coopers for a little less than two years after that. Grace was ten years old. The Coopers then moved to upstate New York, and Malcolm bounced around between jobs.

“I found something interesting,” Sam told me when I picked up my phone. “It was hard to dig up, but I figured there had to be something, somewhere. Back in high school, in New Jersey, he coached the girls’ softball little league team.”

“That’s not that helpful, Sam.”

“It gets better. One of the girls later accused him of rape.”

I perked up. “When?”

“This is the interesting part. When she was in college. She claims that he had harassed her during little league, nothing more, but then raped her when they ‘coincidentally’- her words- met again while she was in college.”

“Thank you, Sam,” I whistled. “That’ll do.”

“There’s one problem: she never took him to court. She only filed a report.”

That was a problem. That meant that there was no way to use it against him if the Coopers, or Grace, ever wanted to go to court. The statute of limitations was way past. It was legally worthless. But since when did I ever follow the rules?

I stood in her room, faded yellow and blue. Everything was the same, like always. The teddy bear propped up against the frilly pillows, the family photos hanging on the walls, the teen magazines out on the desk. I wanted to believe that she would understand, even if my parents didn’t. Or maybe they did, but just couldn’t say anything. They had become quiet, soft. Faded. I had packed up my things, my room was empty. I dropped my Law School sweatshirt on her chair. Maybe it would be of better use here. I certainly didn’t need it.

My plan was set. I faxed all of the information to the police department, made a few phone calls. I headed over to the House.

I sat in her room. We sat side by side against the bed.

We waited. Or, rather, I waited.

Soon, Mr. and Mrs. Cooper walked in, followed by Malcolm.

“What’s wrong?” Mrs. Cooper exclaimed. “I got a call that she was worse, that we needed to come over right away!” She rushed over to Grace and smoothed her hair away so she could see her face.

A minute later, the cops swarmed in, led by Chief Nelson.

They arrested Malcolm, right then and there, and told the Coopers they were sorry they hadn’t looked into it further.

I told them to apologize to Grace.

I was glad I could follow my intuition without being hindered by the law.

The Coopers held each other. They looked like they were having trouble simply standing up. It must be hard to reconcile that a family member, a friend, could have done this.

After a long time, they left, weary, weakened, flat. I stayed seated next to Grace for a while longer. I got up when it was dark outside the window.

I didn’t know what to say, or how to say it, or if this was goodbye. I stayed, twisted on the spot, wavering.

Grace pushed her hair back and lifted herself up from the floor. She smiled at me, and I stared, amazed. I guess Malcolm’s return hadn’t knocked out all of my efforts.

“Thanks.”

It was a weak, wavering word. But it sounded like the most beautiful word in the world.

The Bat in the Tree

Why does anyone write anything? Why do I? Why do we feel the need to put our words to paper and see our name in print? Are we ever really immortalized?

It's all just salt in the wound.

I was raped.

I called it "nonconsensual." It was gentler that way. I don't know what the difference is, between nonconsensual sex and rape, if there even is one. Maybe I was in denial, or maybe I felt like I do shoulder a portion of the blame. It's hard to say "some," or "a large part," or any kind of quantitative measure. How do you decide how to slice up pieces of a memory? Of a word? Of something that hovers in the air, a shapeless aura, dark shadows in the corner of my mind? I think I would like to slice it up. Have my own version of violence against something. Where I am the attacker, not the victim.

Slicing it up like a delicious piece of blackberry and peach pie, with a silver knife, and a delicate doily underneath, and a fragile plate and fork waiting. I think I would like that.

Or maybe I would take the knife and hack it down through that pie, and jerk back and forth, over and over, like all the killers in good old thriller movies, and feel whatever rush they feel. Vengeance. See the blackberry juice bleed down onto the fragile white doily.

Maybe I would eat that slice of delicious, mouth-watering pie. Stick a fork in it and shovel it into my mouth, slowly chew, coat my tongue with its jelly, gulp, and consume it.

Maybe I would throw it in the trash, bag and dump it. It served its purpose.

When are you a victim? Is it automatic, like some sort of automatic labeling system that shoots out a sticker onto your forehead the moment after? Or is it when you yourself create it, nestle with that label, use it as a blanket or a crutch?

Somewhere, somehow, along the way, I shed my fear and shattered pain like drops of water rolling down my back as I walked out of the warm ocean waters. Daily baths in the sea, floating on my back in my blue bathing suit. I stopped feeling nauseous, stopped needing to curl into a ball at night, stopped running up the hill at three in the morning because I was scared of my own shadow and the bat in the tree.

It could sense my fear every time, swooping down over my head late at night when I was alone. It never went after anyone else. It rested in that tree on the hill, dark, hidden, folded up. Waiting to stretch out. Every night, alone, I would jog up the hill in

my black flats or heels, back from a night out. My roommates forced me to go out, have a drink. It would cheer me up, they said. They didn't know anything. Guesses and best wishes and pitying looks.

Who gets to decide what is best?

How can you be sure that you are ever really healed? When a year has passed and I still can't define what happened, when I can't decide, make up my mind, place blame, does that mean I was in denial all this time? They say you should see someone, talk to someone. "They." They always seem to know so much and you are always supposed to listen to them. I resent them for that. I had friends tell me that, supporters of the distant "they." Even if I said I was okay, I should still do it. I didn't. I felt fine. I had gotten over it while I was still there, down under it all. I thought I had, at least. No sense in ruminating, in staying bogged down when I was supposed to be "living it up," whatever that means. I had to make the most of it, not spoil everything. Push a smile on my face and continue the motions of daily life. I repeated the effort so much it actually became glued on. I started to believe it myself. I started to forget. And then I came home and further distanced myself from it. I made flippant comments and told casual friends in passing, as if it was nothing. As if I was impervious. Water rolling down my body, only stopping when the drops hit the floor and pooled below me.

Did I ask for it? I wasn't even wearing provocative clothes, if that makes a difference. Does that alleviate the blame? Shorts and a t-shirt and a jacket. Flats and

earrings. Nothing revealing there, nothing tight. I had run out of clothes to wear that would cover up my sunburned and peeling back and shoulders. If I had been wearing a tight dress, would that mean I deserved it? That I had earned my slice of guilt?

My friends always called me boy-crazy. I loved good-looking guys, and I was always chasing after a crush or wishing I had a boyfriend. My entire existence was wrapped up in my body. My emotions, my choices, my hopes, dreams, fears, everything. My impatience with my aloneness. My frustrations with my seeming undesirability. My jealousy. It all depended on physicality. It used to be a tool, a weapon, my own advantage to use when I wanted to, and ignore when I didn't want to. Females know the rules of the road. The risks of gender. The double-edged sword that could cut you down if you weren't careful.

I wasn't looking for anything that night. It was not a case of falling for the wrong guy. Or maybe it was. I was upset over some bad news, and I was feeling gross with my burnt skin and mismatched clothes, and someone introduced us and we started talking, and he bought me a drink. I tried to refuse, with a cute, fleeting smile and a "No thanks, I buy my own drinks," and then a "I don't like to make guys buy my drinks for me," and then I refused again, and then finally accepted. What chivalry, buying me a drink because I was so distraught. Oh, pub-crawls. What a wonderful tradition of acceptable debauchery and public drunkenness.

It was one of fourteen drinks I had had that night.

It was my last drink of the night.

And my last pub-crawl.

When you burst into tears over a song, or in the shower, how much of it is because of the present, and how much of it is the underlying long-term effects of pushing the past aside? Of sudden, forced reminders?

How do you create a new existence for yourself, one that has grown from physicality, one that has been shaped by it? Like that green tape used to force roses to grow on trellises. Tying you down. How do you clip off those shoots? How do you balance between basing your entire being on your body and completely digging it up and destroying it?

Shades of grey.

Some days I feel rusty, dilapidated and decayed. I wonder if someone can see the reddish tint flaking on my skin. When I look in the mirror, I wonder if I will see it there, lying under my skin in wait. For what, I wonder? Maybe it will turn to poison. Will it continue to flake off of me forever, or will it stop when all of the pieces are gone? What will I be left with? Will I be shiny and pink like a newborn, or will I be blackened bones and ugly?

I wonder when we were taught about being women. What that means, to be a woman. What it means to be taught to be a woman. What can be taught. Who is the teacher. Who decides and how they decide what should be taught and what shouldn't.

Maybe with a different teacher I would be dangerous. I would be a dangerous woman. Femme fatale. Fatal attraction. Black widow. Or maybe I would be a 1950's throwback, living only for my man, making his nightly cocktail, pushing out babies. A million possibilities, given a different teacher, a different lesson. How impressionable we all are. Children are our future.

As I write, I feel sleepy, heavy, and want to sink down into the bed and escape into the tangle of blankets. But there is a force that keeps me writing, keeps my eyes open. I am tired yet restless, unable to sleep. I must write. A rising energy pulses in my fingers and I type feverishly.

Does writing have to be shared, for the good of others? Can it be solely individual, only for me? Or is that selfish? Is that going against what writing is? Who defines writing, and how do they do it? What is a writer? Who is a writer?

Everyone else has an answer, it seems. Maybe the only ones without answers are the true writers. The ones who know without knowing. There are no answers. Only a million little possibilities that randomly clump together in different people and make up different variations.

I think of genes, the building blocks, as every science teacher spouts, and I think of my mother. I wonder if experiences of violence or physicality are genetic. Can you pass down the likelihood of experiencing certain things? Has my mother ever experienced something like this? Or is it just a female problem, like they used to call

periods? Something for which half of the world's population is just automatically at a higher risk?

Just like a child, I want my mommy when I am hurt or sick or in pain. It is that first immediate, subconscious reaction. It bursts up out of me like a gunshot. I want my mommy. I want to go home. How ingrained those words are in us. It's amazing, really.

Every day I wondered and questioned and thought.

What a difficult problem, who to tell.

I didn't have that problem when we were back, away from that town, back to our temporary home, where all the kids knew. I never had to choose who to tell; they all knew or heard.

So when I was finally presented with a chance, a choice, I stared at it like a grey ceiling, riddled with holes and cracks.

Do I be selfish or do I protect?

Even now, I wonder about my choice. There are moments, random and unsought, where I turn and look at her next to me on the couch, and the words are there, resting on my tongue. Waiting to drop to the floor. Stop, drop, and roll. That's what they would do, these words. These words of power.

But I stop myself each time.

And when we watch a particularly painful scene in a movie, I pretend as if I am merely cringing because that is the normal response, the human response. I am a delicate, innocent doll, not yet broken. That is the party line. It is not because it creates a bubbling in my chest, bloody pink, rising like acid, rancid in my stomach, burning my throat.

I want to vomit.

Where is the boundary between truth and fiction? (And what is the difference between lies and fiction?) How do we ever know how to find it? I wonder if there is some warning sign, like yellow police tape or red stop signs that mark it, like the border between two states. Truth and fiction.

Shades of grey.

I don't know what I call it anymore.

Rape. Sex. Violence. Consent. Pleasure. Ignorance. Guilt. Blame.
Responsibility. Forgiveness.

Where do these words come from? Where do they start? It must be fun, to create words. Sound them out, delicious drops on your tongue. Skittles in water. Oh, the power it has. Power to do.

Do what?

I would just like to do something. I don't have a specific plan. Each moment is infinitely variable. My life is infinitely variable, subject to the tiniest ripples that lead to giant tsunamis, sucking me in, dragging me down, violently tumbling.

Maybe I will go to the gym.

Maybe I will eat some brownies.

Maybe I will write. Or talk.

It hurts as I write but it feels good. It hurts so good. Song lyrics were never so right. The pain and relief mingle together uneasily. I don't know what helps and what harms. Where is that defining line? Who decides what the line is? Do doctors know best, or is it individual?

The humanist in me says it is I! I am, therefore I know.

They say no one can ever truly know how you feel if they have never gone through it. I wonder if this applies to every experience, not just this. If I have never gone skiing, then I can't relate to that thrill of sublime fear? They say people are more understanding now. But I still get questions about responsibility. If I dress a certain way, does that mean I deserved it? That I led someone on?

I want to unwrap my body, unwrap this packaging that ties my essence, my existence, to it. My physicality. I am my body but I do not want to be my body. But neither do I want to be bodiless.

There is no winning.

I was scarlet. I needed an A. Or perhaps a V. V for Virgin No More.

Everyone knew, whispered. It started with the few, the witnesses who didn't know what they were witnessing. Then the listeners who heard me enter, sob, cry out, climb onto the bunk bed and huddle into sheets. It flickered through the group, slowly but irrepressible. A bush fire slowly blazing to life.

Only one was apparently ignorant.

It was claustrophobic. The room, the town. But I was immune, at that time. I relished the walls, the boundaries. They were my real protectors. Give me that yellow wallpaper with its rippling floral chains.

I was informed of the other side of it, the male perspective. They whispered behind me, you just don't understand how a boy feels, how they think. Maybe you led him on. That's a virgin for you. Changing her mind at the last minute. It stung, the invisible handprint smarting on my face for days, weeks.

Apparently it is difficult to be a horny male, desperate for sex and misinterpreting the blandest actions and ignoring the hints. Apparently I should practice forgiveness.

I wish I had faith to give me guidance. To tell me what to do, tell me karma is a bitch and it's okay to forgive because he'll get his in the end, tell me it's okay not to forgive, tell me it's okay to hate. Give me faith so I have a pillar to lean on.

Can it be forgiven?

How can I forgive when I don't know what to forgive? When I can't reconstruct my own story well enough to piece it all together, to make a decision? I want to pinpoint that moment, where it twisted, dark and sickly, from fun and flirting to unwilling and abused. How early had he made that decision? Or was he truly ignorant of any wrongdoing, as he acted? Can you ever really be blameless? There is such a disparity between the legality and morality of such an issue. I want my own Ghost of Christmas Past, rather, my own Ghost of Past, to sweep me into the air and show me everything. Tell me it all. Let it be true.

Finally.

Final.

But there is no such Ghost, at least not now. There are only the bits of broken pieces, shards that do not match up. Scattered. Leering. Crying. I want to sweep them away with my hand. Or pick them up and drag them against myself and see if that is the way to line them up, make them talk. Show.

Random sounds and images thrust me back to those jumping moments, dizzying and blurry.

I hear my echoing cries in the tiny space, his quiet, throaty words, people whispering, giggling, my barefoot thumping on carpet, the door clicking shut.

I lost one of those earrings. My friends went back and got my shoes the next day. I ran out barefoot, feet thumping down the carpeted halls.

I see those silver shoes, those shorts, that jacket, that single earring. All that washing but the laundry machine can't get out that smell of repugnance. Of violence. Of memory.

Shards of shattered glass, wet and glistening and loud and haunting.

Memory smells the strongest of all.

I Should Have Been a Boy Scout

One, two.

I tap my toothbrush against the side of the pristine sink.

The steady jet runs over the pile of white goop.

I watch as it slowly moves off and drops into the drain.

I stare at myself in the mirror. Examine my face, running my fingers over my face for any bristles of stubble.

Satisfied, I turn away.

I pass the photo, framed and hanging on the bedroom wall. I touch my fingers lightly over their faces, and a pang hits my stomach. The family portrait. The first and only time we had managed to finally make it to a photographer's studio. My mother's New Year's Resolution. My reminder. I examine the surface for a fingerprint and then move to the closet.

I pull a crisp, pressed white shirt out the rows of color-categorized shirts. I dress carefully, making sure not to miss a button, and tuck the ends into my pants. My coffee is in my travel mug, and I take it with me out the door. I make sure to lock the door behind me.

In the subway, I pull my briefcase close to me and stand in the middle. All the seats are taken. I look at the metal pole, consider for a brief moment, then put my free hand in my pocket. I've gotten good at staying balanced through the swaying, curves, and jerky stops. I follow the flood of people at my stop, 50th Street, and up the stairs to the light. There are many ways to get to the office, so I always follow the lights. It's more efficient that way, than to take the same route and wait for the green lights to come.

In the office, I greet Mary, who is usually there before me. She likes to come in early so she can leave early. She smiles at me, and I notice she has some lipstick on her teeth. I wonder if I should say anything. When Nathan comes in, late as always, he drops a pile of papers on my desk, things for me to sort through. I straighten them so there are no pages jutting out. I don't like paper cuts. Nathan sort of smiles at me, a furtive, smirking type of smile. I don't like it. When he leaves, I wonder why he smiled like that. I think they all think I'm weird. I don't understand it. I like things neat, organized. It makes me a better worker. They should all be the same way.

When Mary hands me the forms I asked her to complete for me, I frown. There are smudges dotting the page. They look like drops of liquid that have dried. I look up. "What is this?" She avoids my eye. She knows I'm not happy.

"Something wrong?"

"There are smudges all over. I can't turn these in to corporate."

“All the information is there.”

“It’s messy and unprofessional. Please redo these, neatly.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, and looks at me. I see that her eyes are red. “My boyfriend broke up with me yesterday.” She waits for me to react, to say something.

“I’m sorry. Please redo them,” I repeat, and turn back to my work. She leaves after a moment, taking the messy papers with her.

When it is time for lunch, I heat up my soup and salad and return to my desk. As I carefully spoon the hot broth into my mouth, I again wonder. I just like to be neat. That’s all it is. Right? I chew over this question as I stab the lettuce and vegetables lightly slathered in olive oil and vinegar. I chew slowly, the lettuce crunching under my teeth. I relish the crisp juiciness.

My family was not neat. My mother would leave messy piles and stacks of papers littered on the desk, tables, any counter space. My father would leave glasses and bottles around the house, next to his lounge chair, next to his bed, in the garage. My sister would leave a trail of clothes throughout the house: sweatshirts, jackets, gloves, hats, scarves, socks, shoes. I cleaned it, after. Purged. The whole house has stayed tidy, untouched over the years.

When was the last time I had gone out there?

I took a psychology class once, back in college. I remember the term. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. OCD. Onset can vary, but typically in the twenties or thirties. I try to remember the details. Where is the line between being neat as a habit, and having a disorder? I finger the card of a psychologist I met with once. After it happened. After some stranger walked into the house, a burglary gone wrong, killed them all in the hot

mess of his mistake, and fled. After they bled like pigs on the wood floors. After the police took all the photos and evidence, after the case went cold, after I purged the house of impurities and hurtful memories. I kept the card, even though it's been years. I like to keep these types of things, just in case. It's just good sense. You never know. I should have been a Boy Scout. I am always prepared. I take a sip of water and gulp it down. The knot in my stomach loosens.

I work through the afternoon, diligent as usual, perhaps a little distracted. When I notice the hall is dark, I look at the clock on my desk. The second hand ticks and jerks. It is six o'clock. Mary is certainly gone, and Nathan has probably just left. I put my pen back in the holder, and straighten up my desk. I lock the door behind me.

The subway is even more crowded, packed to the gills with sweaty bodies and grumpy faces. One. Two. Three. At the third stop, I get out. It is a busy exit, right across from Lincoln Center and surrounded by popular shops. I walk across, down to the river. The streets eventually get cleaner, and the awful, putrid smell of hot urine disappears.

The doorman opens the door for me, and I nod. I try not to get involved with the workers, because it leads to unnecessarily long chatter about their families and hopes and concerns, and the weather, and other tenants. I don't want to know. They quickly got used to my silence, which I appreciate. We coexist in blissful silence.

When I enter my apartment, I turn the deadbolt and lock the second lock. With a sigh, I place my briefcase onto the closest chair at the dining table. I already have dinner ready, in the freezer. Every Sunday, I cook a dish that leaves leftovers for the entire week. I freeze them, so my freezer is always stocked with plenty of choices. I never

order delivery. If I want to, I go to a restaurant nearby. I open the freezer door and pull out a frozen dish of baked ziti, and place it in the microwave. I glance at the door. Did I lock it? My heart pounds. I go to double-check. Reassured, I go back to my dinner and the newspaper waiting for me at the table. My fingers blacken from the newspaper and get up to wash my hands.

One, two, knocks at the door. I quietly wring my hands on the towel and move to the door. I peer into the peephole. I spy a blonde woman. Frowning, I unlock both locks, hearing the clicks, and open it.

“Hi,” the girl-woman says. It is hard to tell how old she is, but she is bright and chipper and overly cheerful. She smacks the gum in her mouth and shakes her long ponytail, like a horse’s tail. She is wearing neon-bright athletic clothes. It hurts to look at her. She belongs to the 80s.

“Hi.”

“I’m Lacy. I just moved in down the hall.” She holds out her hand. I watch her as she pauses. “I just wanted to introduce myself.”

I hesitate, then take her hand and shake it carefully. “Lucas.”

“Oh, you totally look like a Luke,” she gushes. “Can I call you Luke?” I stare. “Anyway, I hope we can be good friends and good neighbors!”

“Sure.”

She pauses again, then smiles brightly. I can see her white, white teeth and the gum pressed between them.

With a little wave, she briskly turns and struts down the hall. I wait, and hear the click of the door, one, two, and it is shut. I close my door and lock both locks. I stare at

my hand. It feels warm and clammy. Like something is boiling, bubbling to the surface. Rising, shifting. Something stirring in me, familiar and unwanted. It feels hot, sick. I don't like it.

I turn the sink faucet on, and run my hands under it, lathering them with thick, silky soap until I am covered with foaming white.

Is it too much?

But I think she looks like she might have a cold. I think I heard her sniffle once or twice. I reassure myself that it is smart. I don't want to get sick. I hate being sick. The piles of used tissues, boxes and bottles of medicines, all claiming to work, lying in bed all day with nothing to do. Worthless, vulnerable.

I drum my fingers against the counter after I dry my hands off.

That girl, woman, girl-woman... I recall her radiance, the brightness she exuded. More than just the clothes. And her fingernails, painted a bright pink, almost magenta. She looked happy. I wonder if she is really that happy. Is anyone really that happy?

Definitely not Mary. Poor, frumpy Mary who met her boyfriend, or former boyfriend, waiting for coffee in the Starbucks around the block from the office. She wears plain, drab clothes. Not like Lacy. Polar opposites.

I wonder why I care.

I flip on the TV and settle onto the plush beige couch. I pluck a loose feather poking out of the beige pillow. I flip through the endless channels of repeats, police dramas, medical shows, reality crap. I turn it off and stare at the black screen. She seems neat. I wonder if she is. Or if she is one of those people who looks neat but is really a slob. With clothes littered all over the floor and dust everywhere and food going

bad in the refrigerator. I wonder about this as I get up and start my nightly routine. Change into pajamas, put away clothes, floss, brush teeth, wash face, wash hands. Maybe she likes her room to be cluttered. Feel lived-in. Maybe she doesn't mind leaving her shoes strewn out on the floor. I settle into bed, tucking the sheets and blankets back under the bed. I like the feeling of the bedding tight around me, warm, comfortable. Safe.

Maybe she has a roommate. Maybe she likes arguing about who should wash the dishes that night after ordering in Chinese food.

Maybe

I wake up with a harsh light on my face. I blink. When I pull myself up against the headboard, I see that I forgot to close the blinds. How could I forget? I must have been really tired. That's all. I tell myself that it is okay. No big deal. Just a little bright light in my eyes. No harm there. Maybe it is nice to feel the sun on your face, to wake up with that warmth. Maybe that's what my family felt. What they feel now. Warmth.

One, two.

I tap my toothbrush against the side of the pristine sink.

It starts again. Just like always.

But this morning, Mary isn't at the desk. Well, she doesn't always beat me to work. Sometimes she comes late, if the subway breaks down or if it is raining. She'll stick her head in my office to let me know she has finally gotten here. Sorry, she'll say with a sheepish smile, I forgot my umbrella and had to go back. Something like that. So I head to my office and start working.

"Lucas." Nathan comes into my office.

“Nathan.” He sits in the chair across from my desk. I look at my clock, ticking away. It is ten o’clock. “Is Mary still not here?” I ask, frowning. This is the latest she’s ever been.

“Actually, that’s what I’m here to talk to you about. Mary quit.” Nathan looks at me, and there is a hardness to his eyes today. I chew this over as I watch the hand on the clock jerk steadily. Quit. Left. Gone. Do I want to know why?

Nathan continued, “Lucas, she quit because of you.” I stare at him. Me?

“Why?” My voice catches, and I clear my throat. I try again. “Why?”

“She didn’t want to work for someone... like you.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighs. “Don’t make me say it.”

“Say what?”

“...you’re... you’re just different. It can be hard to work with you sometimes.

And I think Mary just needed some sympathy, some support.”

“But personal problems have no place in the office. It gets in the way.”

Nathan smiles that sad, awkward smile he always gives me. “Everyone has some tough times, Lucas, and everyone wants to get a little slack and a little understanding.

Mary just got tired of feeling... suppressed. I guess that’s the right word.

Uncomfortable.”

“She cried all over the forms. I just asked her to redo them.”

“I know. I do. But it’s not just that one time. She just decided to find a different environment.”

I stare at my fingers, neatly laced on top of the desk. I pick at the undersides, pushing between the plump flesh and the smooth nail, for any bits of dirt.

“Lucas.”

I look up.

“I’m not firing you.” Nathan watches me as I continue to dig at my nails.

“You’re good at what you do. I’m just asking you to think a little next time, with the next assistant. Think if it were you.”

I stay silent.

Nathan rises. His shirt is coming untucked, a little, the shirt hanging loose and low over his slacks. I don’t say anything. He sees where I am looking, and smoothes it flat against his stomach, the best he can do without tucking it in again right in front of me. I wonder whether it is for his sake or mine.

The day is slow and quiet, slower and quieter than usual. When I leave, it is later than usual. Nathan didn’t turn off the light, like Mary does. Did.

It is close to eight o’clock when I get home and smell it. A delicious aroma wafting softly in the hall, so tempting and seductive. Some sort of meat, maybe a pot roast, with vegetables smothered in a thick, gravy sauce. I try not to breathe through my mouth, to keep my stomach from waking up and complaining loudly. Did I have lunch? I can’t remember. Weird.

As I turn my key in the top lock, I hear a soft click. I turn and see Lacy. No neon clothes this time, but a bleach-white dress. Her hair is twisted up, soft and glinting in the warm hall light.

“Luke,” she says, smiling. My stomach starts to wake up, but instead of grumbling in hunger, it shifts awkwardly and I feel a little sick. Maybe it is from lack of food.

“Hi.” My hand is still raised with the key. I drop it and turn around fully.

“Sorry about the smell.”

“Oh, no. It’s fine. Smells great,” I say. My hands are hot and I rub my palms against my thighs.

“Did you just get back from work? It’s so late.”

“I lost track of time.”

“Oh, I do that all the time,” she says enthusiastically, as she walks closer. She has a large, black trash bag in her hand and it looks so wrong. It doesn’t suit her, in that dress. “I’m lucky, my boyfriend usually calls me to remind me.” I drop my briefcase. I feel my face flush as I bend to retrieve it. She has a boyfriend?

“That’s nice.” Does it come out weird? Does she notice the little stutter?

“Anyway, I won’t keep you. I’m just taking out the trash.” She waves the bag at me.

“I can do that for you,” I blurt. I extend my hand.

“Oh, no, really. I couldn’t.” She backs away a little as she flashes a smile at me.

“No, really. The trash chute is right by my apartment. Besides, you shouldn’t take the trash out in such a nice dress. Something could spill.” I reach out for the bag, and she holds it out for me.

“Well, that’s awfully sweet of you, Luke.” Another bright smile. I duck my head and she moves back to her apartment, dress swishing behind her. The small, silver box is

around the corner, and I turn the handle gently. Its mouth opens as I pull. I drop the bag into the deep blackness and hear it rustle as it travels down the long chute.

I go inside and drop my bag onto the floor. I shut the door behind me, and I wander through the apartment. My throat feels tight, so I yank off my tie. After I toss it onto the couch, I still feel hot, chaffed. I unbutton my shirt and throw it over a chair. I kick my shoes off, one, two, and they drop onto the floor with a hard thud. My belt curls itself on the bedroom floor. My pants fall onto the cold tile of the bathroom. I can feel the cold through my socks and I shiver. I look at myself in the mirror as I splash some water onto my hot face. I feel feverish, raw. Wrong.

I find an old pair of sweatpants in the chest. I pull them up, roughly, and wrench a t-shirt over my head. The matching sweatshirt is wrapped around something, and I jerk it out. Whatever is in it crashes onto the bottom of the drawer. I thrust myself into the sweatshirt and flop onto the bed. I yank at the tightly tucked sheets and blankets until they finally give in and let me bury myself under them. They hang heavy.

I wake up feeling suffocated. It is dark and stifling. I claw my way out to the top, to air, to light. I blink. The clock flashes six o'clock. It hurts my eyes.

I shuffle aimlessly in my old slippers. Blue and fuzzy and warm. There is a hole in the front where our dog chewed on it. I yelled and tugged and forced his jaw to release it and there was the hole, damp and warm. I tossed them into the closet a lifetime ago.

My stomach rumbles, and I realize how long it has been since I have eaten. Moving towards the kitchen, I see the key hook next to the door. It is empty, glaring at me, angry. I feel a rush of hot, sick energy flood my body. I rush about the living room, searching, frantic. I empty my briefcase, I check the counters, my jacket pocket, my

pants pocket. Did I ever lock the door? I hesitate, sick, as I place my hand on the knob. I don't want to turn it. No.

I feel nauseous. I take a deep breath. I turn the knob, slowly, gently. It's open. My stomach drops. I feel heavy, weighed down. As my body gets heavier and heavier, I begin to feel empty.

Blank. Numb.

My keys are on the floor, inside the apartment.

I pick them up.

Place them back on the hook.

Close the door.

Lock it.

Check to make sure it is locked.

Turn and see the chaos, remains of a hurricane. Begin to pick up the litter of work clothes. Fold them neatly, stack them on the table. Carry them into the bedroom. Put them away. Make the bed. Everything is falling apart. It needs to be picked up. Fixed. I bring out my cleaning supplies and feverishly start to scrub, sweep, polish, vacuum, mop, tidy up.

The clock now flashes eight o'clock.

I need to get dressed, get ready for work.

But my mind continues to whirl, and my body follows the orders to clean up.

I bend over to close the chest drawer, left open sometime last night. After I put on the sweats. There is a glimmer, and I carefully shift through the mess. It's a picture frame, with a photo of the four of us and the dog.

I slump to the floor and rest against the bed. I remove the photo from the frame, and gaze at the innocent, unknowing faces. The beaming smiles. The tanned and freckled skin. The wet, glistening bathing suits with discarded towels on the beach chairs.

It is so bright.

It hurts.

I shade my eyes as I continue to look at them.

I lightly brush my index finger against them all, embracing them. A drop of water splashes onto it, and their faces become blurry.

I pull myself up and over to the phone. I fumble, looking for the card. I find it, and dial the number.

Listen to the rings.

“Doctor Singer? It’s Lucas Cummings.”

“Lucas. It’s been a long time. How are you doing?”

He sounds so far away. I look at the photo again. “I think I need to come in. On a regular basis.”

“What prompted this decision?”

“I want to get control. Of my impulses, my life, everything.”

Control. Or was it freedom I wanted?

I would call in sick today.

Chipping Away

Erica walked into the apartment with Brad, the agent and superintendent hovering behind them. “We’ll take it,” they said in unison. Erica knew it was the perfect place for them. Three-bedroom, three and a half-bath apartment with plenty of apartment and building amenities, and the added bonus was the location. Prime Upper West Side real estate, and right next to a subway station that led almost directly to their offices. Erica walked ahead, inspecting the moldings, the closets, the windows. Brad watched her as he leaned against the doorway.

“Come on, Erica, we can do this later, when we move in. Let’s get the papers drawn up and settle the whole thing first.”

She grinned. “You’re right. The sooner it’s settled, the sooner I can start fixing this place up.”

The agent led them out of the apartment and the superintendent followed them. They signed the contract and Erica and Brad had a new home, not just a place to live like their previous apartments.

Erica dropped the box down on the rug. She wiped her forehead with her sleeve. “That’s the last one!”

Brad came into the room with two glasses of iced tea. He handed her one and started drinking from the other with large gulps.

“Ah, perfect.” She sighed and sipped it slowly. She sank into their couch and spread out, surveying the apartment.

“I know that look. What are you thinking?”

“This room is fine, but I want to paint some of the other rooms and do some other minor little things.”

“Like what?”

“Just some touch-ups, little projects I can work on. It’ll all be done within a month or so.”

“All by yourself?”

“Yes, all by myself. It’ll be fun.”

“Whatever makes you happy.” Erica curled up against him. She drank her iced tea in contented silence.

Erica met Brad at Café Ronde for dinner after work. They sat at a table in the back, dark but lighted by a soft candle.

“So, I was thinking about the apartment.”

“What about it?”

“Well, I want to get started on the work. You know, the walls and everything. I thought we should pick out colors.”

“I trust you.”

“You don’t want to help me pick? It might be fun.”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“Well, I want you to like it.”

“I’m sure I will like whatever you pick out.”

Erica hesitated. She took a sip of her wine. “Well, I was thinking we might want to think about that third bedroom...for instance, we might want to paint it a nice, pastel color.”

“That sounds fine to me. But why that room?”

“Well, we have our bedroom, and an office, and then I was thinking that that extra room might be a good second bedroom. You know, for the future.” She watched as Brad finally realized what she was trying to say.

“Don’t you think we’re getting ahead of ourselves?”

“Don’t you ever think about it?”

Brad hesitated then leaned away from the table. “I mean, of course I want kids some day. I just hadn’t thought about it.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t mean to freak you out or anything, I just wanted to think ahead so we wouldn’t have to repaint the room. That’s all.”

“Yeah, that’s all.” He drank from his glass of wine and looked away.

Erica heard a rustle and peeked one eye open. She saw her white sheets and blanket, and pulled them away from her face. Brad was bent over the bed, putting on his socks. “It’s Saturday. Get back in bed with me.” She stretched out to tug on his arm.

“I’ve got lunch with my mother, remember?”

“Right.” She sighed and sank back into her cocoon of blankets and reveled in the warmth. She closed her eyes again. “Wait.” She forced her eyes to open again. “Why aren’t I invited?” She watched Brad as he buttoned his crisp white shirt and cuffs.

“Because I’m going to tell her about our new apartment.”

“First of all, why didn’t she already know, and second, why can’t I be involved?”

“I just never got around to telling her, because I knew she would want to ask a million questions, about the apartment, and about us. I thought it would be better if I told her alone.”

She kicked off the blankets and sat up. “I’ve met her before, you know, and I thought she liked me.”

“Well...She doesn’t hate you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Come on, Erica. Most people don’t get along with their significant other’s parents.”

“Why doesn’t she like me?”

“It’s nothing.” He turned away from her and looked out the window.

“Well, I won’t keep you from your mother.”

“Come on, Erica, don’t be mad. She just has to get to know you better. We’ll have dinner sometime, all three of us.”

Erica sank down into the pillows again. “Whatever.”

She stopped at Joe’s Hardware to pick up some tools and supplies. She eagerly started on the walls as soon as she got back scraper in hand. Desperate to strip off the ugly pink wallpaper left from the former tenants, Erica chipped away at the bedroom wall. As the paper unfurled into small curls onto the floor, Erica started whistling. When she reached the fourth wall, Erica surveyed her work. The door banged shut.

“Hello?”

“In here.”

Brad walked in and looked at the mess with wide eyes. “I see you’ve been productive.”

“I’m going to clean it up, don’t worry.” She peeled off a remaining strip. She looked up and saw Brad’s face. “What?”

“I don’t really know why you’re doing this yourself. I mean, we have the money to hire somebody to do it for us.”

“Because I want to.”

“It’s just a little odd, that’s all.”

“Where is this coming from?”

“It just seems like a waste of time and energy, and it’s not like you don’t already have a job.”

“Is this what you think, or what your mother thinks?”

“She thinks we should hire someone since it’s a job for a professional, and doesn’t understand why you’d want to do this.”

“Why I’d want to do this, or any woman?” The few times she had met Brad’s mom she had been struck with her Greenwich, Connecticut conventional 50’s-like mentality.

“Don’t make this about her. We just happen to think the same way.”

“That’s the problem! It’s supposed to be you-and-me ‘we,’ not you-and-your-mother ‘we,’ Brad. You are an adult, in a committed relationship and you are supposed to talk with me, not your mom.”

“She’s my mother. Of course I would talk to her.”

“Not of course, Brad. Most people don’t talk to their mother every day. Most people don’t let their mothers decide how they think and feel.”

“We can’t share the same feelings? Look, I can’t deal with this right now. I’m going for a walk.”

Erica heard the door slam shut and turned back to her streaky pink wall. She touched the spot where the torn wallpaper and the wall met. She dug her nail under the patch and yanked it down the wall till it broke off at the bottom. Her skin bled under the nail and she sucked on her finger.

While Brad was off jogging Sunday morning, Erica went to the paint store. She had finished stripping off the wallpaper and now she wanted to start painting. She wheeled up and down the towering aisles with her shopping cart, pausing to pick up brushes, rollers, trays, and buckets of paint. The aisles were busy with couples young

and old, debating about wood samples and paint colors. She watched them wistfully. She wondered if Brad was really jogging, or if he just used that as an excuse to avoid her.

Erica went back to the apartment. It was quiet. As she poured the thick yellow paint onto the roller tray, she heard Brad come in. His running shoes pressed into the wood floors and the harsh squeak made her straighten.

“Hey,” she said warily. “Good run?”

“Cleared my head a little.” He squirted water into his mouth as he watched her. His sweat ran down his body in drip-lines, and as he moved, the drops shook off onto the floor.

“You might want to shower.”

“I’ll shower when I’m good and ready.”

“What’s gotten into you? I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I thought you said you would be done in a month.”

“I’ll get it done.”

“It doesn’t seem like it.”

Erica looked at him and shook her head. “Ever since you had lunch with your mother, you’ve really changed. You don’t seem like the guy I fell in love with, the guy I bought this apartment with.”

“Don’t talk about her like that. She’s been very understanding about you, and tried to like you, in spite of...things.”

“Are you talking about the fact that I had an abortion?” she whispered, and took a step back. They looked at each other in silence and she touched the wall behind her for support. She felt like the wind had been kicked out of her. She leaned against the wall

and her eyes started to swim with tears. “Get out.” The words came out trembling, quiet, her throat dry. She swallowed.

“What?”

“We’ve been together for a year and a half, and I told you about it a long time ago; you said you were okay with it. If you aren’t, stop wasting my time and get the hell out of my apartment.”

Brad picked up his water bottle and chugged it until it was empty. He wiped his mouth off. The only noise was the occasional car honk from the streets and his heavy breathing. He hesitated and then picked up his sports bag and turned toward the door. He took one long look at her, and left.

Erica watched the closed door for a moment. She bent down to pick up her mallet. With one swing, she crashed it into the wall. The mallet punched through and she pulled it out with one rough tug. She let it drop onto the floor with a dull thud. Pulling the chair over, she splayed out and surveyed the giant, ragged hole she had made.