

**TOWSON UNIVERSITY
OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

YOU'LL THANK ME LATER
a novella

by

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**A thesis
presented to the faculty of
Towson University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Science in Professional Writing
Department of English**

**Towson University
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May, 2018

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Acknowledgements

Geoff, you not only gave me the opportunity to complete this project, you also read countless terrible drafts. You gave me the creative space (and time) to work, and continued support and accountability. Your encouragement, feedback, and criticism are so appreciated, and I am so thankful to you. Also, the title was all you.

To Michael and Leslie. Thank you for being on my committee and for reading my thesis. Knowing you were my audience is probably why this took so long to finish.

Richard, we've learned a lot through this process. Thank you for going through this with me, for telling me I'm a good writer, for telling me to get my work done. I couldn't have done this without you.

And, finally, to little AJ. The world is lucky to have your smile.

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One

She faced all the crap he'd left—his assortment of grilling utensils, thermometers, various-sized tongs, ugly platters decorated with sport team's logos. The awful couch he insisted on having in front of the elliptical he swore he'd use. Faded posters of concerts he'd gone to in the nineties which sat deteriorating and dusty in the forgotten part of the basement. She knew exactly where they were and she knew for certain he'd forgotten all about the Goo Goo Dolls. He'd forgotten about everything else except Mimi with her stupid name and her stupid curly hair and unusually puckered lips. Mimi who liked to talk dirty and Roger who supposedly liked dirt.

"Oh, Roger, I want your tiny little weenie," Carolyn said into the emptiness of the kitchen, suddenly feeling sick.

Scanning for more of his belongings, she spotted them up on the shelf to the left of the dining room: the row of beer glasses he'd bought her three Christmases ago (before Mimi, but not before things were bad).

"But I don't drink beer," she had said, seated next to the twinkling tree. He'd explained that each glass was from a city they'd visited together, patting her knee like that would make her understand.

"But, they're sports logos."

Eager, he nodded, like that made them even better, his round face unshaved for the holiday. He wasn't as bald back then.

Fogged by years of kitchen grease, the glasses stared down at her like they were amused that she was still there, too. As she scooped them into her arms, they clinked together, gathered against her cotton shirt.

Out through the garage and around to the side of the house that was unseen by any neighbors, she launched them against the yellow siding, each piece exploding with a pop before falling to the ground in shatters and dust. Then she brushed her hands and turned on her heel to set out to find some posters to burn.

The judge smacked the gavel and ended what was Roger and Carolyn Heffler. Leaning back in her chair, she laced her fingers together, and pressed them to her forehead, breathing in her first moments of freedom. At the next table, red-faced Roger slumped over on the table digesting the amount of alimony he owed while his lawyer patted his back. That fat cactus, she thought. His only option was to pay.

A roar of air conditioning pushed a coolness on her and she closed her eyes, feeling a chill crawl down the back of her head. She'd read that the court date, even though they'd separated months before, would make the break up feel like it had just happened, and she'd

expected that the proceedings would be hard to get through. But as the judge had tossed out each of Roger's claims (she didn't owe him anything for the elliptical) and his lawyer began to rub the center of his chest like he was uncomfortable, Carolyn felt an increasing lightness, like everything had been made right again.

"Marriage isn't for everyone," she said, passing a stoic sheriff's deputy standing by the courtroom exit.

Outside, the bright sun bleached the courthouse, and Carolyn stepped down the grand marble stairs, singing.

Oh, what a beautiful morning

Oh, what a beautiful day

I've got a beautiful feeling

Everything's going my way

Opening the door to her bronze Mazda, she felt grateful for the warm April that finally felt more like summer than the battle to end winter, and as she turned the ignition, she found it funny that her divorce day had been the best weather of the year. Leaning forward so that the light warmed her face, she smiled. So much of her attitude affected her mood, she realized. She shouldn't focus on the break up anymore—she should be grateful for the sun.

She merged onto the highway, heading north from the city, remembering similar advice she'd read from online divorce blogs—how difficult the whole thing can be, how important it was to give oneself time to heal. Those first nights she'd spent alone, digging through the internet for advice, trying to find comfort from a stranger's blog, worried her life was ruined, forever scorned by a scarlet 'D' stamped to her forehead.

But those blogs had been magnets for complainers—whining about how they'd been wronged, how awful their husbands were, the unfairness of the courts. Carolyn hadn't felt defeated—not in the least.

"Move on, sistah!" She pointed at a round woman with a tight ponytail driving a beige minivan in the left lane.

Besides, Carolyn thought, turning right into her cul-de-sac as the minivan hummed along, today wasn't the end for her, it was just the beginning. Why spend so much energy to make it such a big deal? There can be a mentality to it, no, there *should* be a mentality to it, to life in general, that helps. Like the sunshine on a spring day. Like a divorce as a fresh start. Positivity. Wellness.

And there it was: the word. It rang in her head like an arriving train and the significance of the day was sealed. She'd not only gotten divorced, but she'd found her new calling.

She parked in the driveway, noticing the peach and red tulips that had begun to reach up from the soft dirt which was now thawed with spring. She also noticed that they were surrounded by aggressive weeds. (Weeds she knew she'd ignore until they became intolerable forests in a month or two.) Without any more thought, she passed them and entered her house, and dumped her purse on the table in the foyer.

She could do better than those divorce blogs, she thought. She could do her own blog. A better blog.

On the large oak desk in the study, beneath the invoice for last week's dryer repair, she discovered her silver laptop.

"Wellness isn't just for Wednesdays"

Ever hear of that phrase? Wellness Wednesdays? Places like gyms and doctor's offices use it to market tid-bits of advice to help you live your life better.

Well, I'm here to tell you that wellness isn't just for Wednesdays, it's for everyday of the week! And that is my job: to provide you with daily bits of advice and encouragement to help you in each and every way. I'm Carolyn, your wellness guru—it's great to meet you! We're going to have fun together, just you wait. This is very exciting!

For my first post, I want to talk about shaping your mentality to ensure you have the best day, every day.

I'll be honest with you, today could've been a total tragedy for me. At the start of today, what I had to face could've made anyone stamp "failure" on an otherwise perfect day. Had I accepted that it was a failure, I probably wouldn't have received the many blessings that I have. I decided to see that the sun was bright and cheery, not an annoyance. I decided to accept that each moment was new and something to be embraced. And, as a result, I sit here, writing to you, feeling completely whole and alive and, well, just simply amazing.

I encourage you to do the same. When something comes your way that seems impossible, or just plain awful, take a second to rethink it and see if you can somehow spin it in a way that benefits you.

Others will be happy if you are happy.

More later, dears—the start of many posts!

Satisfied, she saved her work and reclined in her chair which squeaked from her weight. Lifting her hands above her head, she screamed into the emptiness of the house.

"Eeeeeeee!"

Upstairs, a loud crash ensued, followed by a heavy thud from the proximity of Peyton's room. Carolyn tilted her head.

She'd forgotten he was home, and she called up to him through the floor.

Silence.

The hardwood steps creaked under her feet as she passed the pictures lining the wall, realizing it was still covered with her and Roger. Of everything she'd discarded, she'd forgotten them: The three of them on the cruise five years ago holding enormous neon-orange cups with swirly straws. Her and Roger squinting on their bright wedding day, the enormous white sleeves of her dress so large they almost blocked her face, his marred by his

hideous goatee. Peyton at his first baseball game with Roger distracted, not even looking at the camera.

She wondered if Peyton had noticed they were still there or if he'd ignored their smiles, too.

Carolyn removed the photos from the wall, stacking them in a pile on the landing when she heard the sound of a window closing.

"Pey?"

At his room, she knocked on the Yoda poster hanging on the door.

"Can I come in?"

She opened and found him sitting on his unmade bed, running his fingers through his long hair that hung past his ears.

The room appeared undisturbed. His desk, to the right, was cluttered with his usual stuff—comic books, knick-knacks, and the old boom box she'd given him which he now used as a shelf for his devices while they charged.

"You okay?"

He shrugged.

"Yeah."

Peyton seemed young for sixteen, and Carolyn often had to remind herself that he was almost an adult. Tapping his fingers on his knees, he avoided her gaze, and shook his uncombed hair so it settled over his eyes. As he bit his lip, Carolyn noticed his cheeks were flushed.

"Loud sound? Care to explain?"

Peyton tossed his head some more then brushed the hair from his eyes.

"I dropped something."

"Twice?"

"Yeah."

"Two different things?"

"Yeah."

"What did you drop?" Leaning against the doorway, Carolyn crossed her arms.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yeah."

She scanned the room again.

"Did you throw something out the window?"

"Nope." He glanced down, fiddling with his socks. Carolyn pushed away from the doorframe and crossed the room.

"Get out of my room already. I told you!"

At the window, she peered over the front porch roof.

"What did you throw out the window?"

"I didn't throw anything out the window." He shifted in his spot on the bed. Carolyn resumed investigating and found peeking out from the dust ruffle of his bed, was the slender strap of a bra.

Peyton tried to hide his horror as she snatched it from the ground and waved it, silky and black, in his face.

"Amelia was here?"

He shrugged.

"Knock it off!"

"Must've been from a while ago."

"It's warm."

He winced.

"I thought I told you she's not allowed over if I'm not here?"

"I can't help it if you're never here."

"I'm always here!"

"Too busy getting divorced."

She felt the bitterness in his voice hit her the same way the air conditioning of the courtroom had made her shiver.

"Don't speak to me like that."

"I don't give a shit."

He flopped back and curled up with his pillow, pulling the covers up over his shoulders. Carolyn threw the bra at him, landing it on his cheek.

"Where is she?"

Carolyn knelt and peeked under the bed, finding a block of Tupperware bins that stored his old comic books. She went to his closet and opened the door. A wave of stale air hit her, and she wrinkled her nose, wishing she'd remembered to get him an air freshener. No way a girlfriend was hidden in there.

"She snuck out, Mom."

Carolyn went to the window. There, past the house with the chorus of plastic flamingos in its front yard, was Amelia with her long hair and tight clothes just making it to her lime-green Jeep. The car's lights flashed when she approached and crossed to the driver's side. Once she climbed in, she must've looked up at Carolyn because she lowered the window and shoved her fist out the window, middle finger waving in the air.

She turned to Peyton

"She's the worst! I can't believe you!"

"Don't say that about her!"

Carolyn stared out the window, realizing that what was happening right then was not how it was supposed to go. She felt a tightness in her throat and water pooling in her eyes as she watched that damn green Jeep turn out of their development. Roger was gone; it felt like she was losing Peyton, too.

As tears threatened to spill from her eyes, she refused to turn around and let him see her cry. She could not be that weak today, no, she *would* not, and she was not going to let things continue as they had. She wiped her face, cleared the lump in her throat, and put on the biggest smile she could.

She turned to him.

"You know what?"

She stretched her smile even wider.

"I got divorced today," she said through her teeth.

Peyton put his hand to his face.

"But that's not important, actually. What's important is that I'm a new person now and by new person I mean I am no longer living an un-well life."

She put her fingers to her temples and began to rub tiny circles.

"Try this," she said. "It feels good."

"Oh my god."

"Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Yeah it means you're not allowed to be mad at me."

Carolyn put her hands on her hips.

"I'm so sick of your attitude," she said. "I'm trying for a new start here."

"Pass."

"What?"

"Maybe I liked things how they were."

Peyton climbed from his bed and plopped in his swivel chair. From his desk he grabbed his tablet, signifying that any listening on his part was over.

Carolyn gave him a sour look then went to the door and paused.

"You are not allowed to see her without my permission, understand?"

Peyton shoved ear buds into his ears and fixed his eyes on the screen.

Dear readers,

Putting ideas into practice can be daunting and, if anything, somewhat discouraging when we fail. I know this by first-hand experience!

The important thing is to stick to it. It takes more than one try to fix an attitude, it takes a lot of effort and it takes, sometimes, a pretty big change in your surroundings, too.

Know someone who is always putting you down? Get rid of them, or tell them to stop.

Have a situation that has you chronically down? Remove yourself from him and feel the freedom that comes with change.

Tomorrow, we'll talk about meditation and how that can seal in the positivity for which we seek.

All my best dears, peace, peace.

--C

Carolyn saved her document and went into the kitchen to discover the bread was left open on the island, next to abandoned mustard and mayo bottles, and the juicy remains of a sliced tomato lay gutted on a cutting board.

She sat at the island with her head in her hands. Peyton needed a lightning bolt to give him some perspective. He should know better than to leave a mess in the kitchen, and he should know better than to have a girlfriend sneaking around while she was out of the house.

That girlfriend. There was the problem. There was something unhealthy about the two of them. She didn't want to admit it, but it reminded her of her and Gene. How they used to lock themselves away for days at a time, thinking the world waited on them to turn, ignoring direct frowns from her father and irritated sighs from her mother.

They'd been right, after all.

If she told Peyton about Gene, about the mistakes she'd made, maybe he would come around?

She took the steps two at a time, and paused at Peyton's door, staring Yoda in the face, deciding if she should knock, if she really wanted to go through with it. She remembered him when he was little with his short fuzzy hair she could rub her fingers through like it would bring her good luck. Back then, his eyes used to give away everything he was thinking. Like how he eyed her when she cooked, wanting to touch the stove. It was easier to help him then—pull his hand away from danger, tell him not to touch. Now, what could she do?

She knocked twice. He didn't answer.

She opened the door.

He was gone.

Two

We found him alright, after a long ride in the back of a box truck where we all had to hold our pee and pretend our stomachs didn't growl. Alejandro, my mother, and I, plus a handful of smelly men whose faces I never saw. My mother told me to sleep, that we'd see my papa soon, that everything would be okay. As we swayed with the truck across potholes and hills all the way from Texas to Jersey, she cautiously stroked my head.

She left us alone in a motel room to find him. I wish I could've seen him, so I knew what his house looked like. If it was white with a tiny porch like so many houses in the small town of Hammonton, New Jersey, or if it was a dirty apartment with mice everywhere. I wish I'd seen his face when he saw her long hair down the middle of her back, her chest and hips round from having us kids, like maybe he'd missed everything that was my mother. Maybe he realized he'd made a mistake.

It doesn't matter. Point is, we arrived and then we didn't live with him and we made new memories. The first of which, for me, was that scorching summer day when we played in the Stevensons' backyard on their brand-new metal swing set, the one with the purple and turquoise paint on the poles, and Alejandro almost killed me with the teeter-totter.

Britney and Stacey took the swings as high as they could, the two of them like twins with their brown hair and sundresses flowing in the wind, their faces waves of white, their voices a giggling medley. I did cartwheels in the grass. I must've been four at the time, maybe five. Old enough to know not to go near the swings, but not old enough to know that cartwheels nearby were risky. I fell and wound up beneath the teeter-totter which my brother rode like he was trying to reach the moon, like if he rode any faster he could outdo gravity. He couldn't, though, and the teeter-totter hit me in the head again and again until Mrs. Stevenson sprang from the back door of their massive house shouting, "Stop! Stop!" Stacey and Britney did the same, but Alejandro, unable to understand English, continued on, stupefied, unaware that the thump interrupting his ride was the head of his little sister. Frantic, they screamed until Mrs. Stevenson grabbed the swing, and Jandro toppled over, catching himself with his hand on the seat. Only then did he turn around and see me there on the ground clutching my head.

Speaking hadn't been that important between us and the Stevenson sisters (what else do you need to say when you're swinging in the summer sun except, 'Aiee?'), but I was lucky I didn't bleed or need stitches because I don't know what we would've done had we needed a hospital. I think my mother realized this when we stumbled back to our house, my head pounding, Alejandro a conflicted mess of knowing he'd almost killed me and upset he could no longer swing.

She stood in our kitchen, staring out the window above the sink at the Stevenson's manicured backyard. Her dark hair, no longer long and magical, fit her head like a cap,

chopped once she'd started cleaning houses, and her once-soft middle had melted away from supporting and raising two children.

As Alejandro disappeared to another room, I smelled fried chicken and hoped for lunch. When Mama took a glass bowl from the fridge and placed it on the table, I clamored to the metal chair and sat. From the metal cabinet, she removed two lime-colored plates and two clear plastic cups and set them down beside the bowl. The silence of the room only interrupted by the arranging of tableware before she called for Alejandro who sprang from the floor of the front room like a puppy. At our tiny table with the flowered tablecloth and wobbly legs, the three of us ate.

I chewed a piece of meat until it was a dry wad stuck in my cheek, noticing that Alejandro acted like the swing-set scene had never happened. My mother, however, had yet to cut her food and instead focused on the center of the table, the light from the kitchen window shining on her.

Then something shifted in her face.

"No más español," she said, her eyes fueled with a new determination.

I blinked and rubbed the sore lump on my head, wanting to spit out my inedible food. Laying her palm on the table between all of our plates, she put it forth.

"English," she said.

I spent several days thinking this over, which is why it is so prominent a memory, I think, but also because in the following weeks, anytime Alejandro or I tried to speak in Spanish, she slapped us across the cheek, or on the butt, or on the back of the head, whichever part was nearest to her at the time. It didn't take long to figure out that the woman was not joking about no more Spanish in our house. Problem was, we didn't know English either which made things thorny. Me, four years old, my brother almost six, hit for asking for a snack.

But it wasn't long before she came home from work with a television in her hands. I don't know how she got it. Part of me has always believed my mother to be one to save up every spare penny in order to buy something, but the better part of me knows that she likely stole it from one of the houses she cleaned.

At the sight, Alejandro cartwheeled off the couch and rolled around on the floor, shouting every celebratory remark he could. He then dodged swats from mother once she set down the TV in a corner of the front room.

Technically a living room, the front room was probably not as large as I remember it to be, but we also had no furniture which makes any room seem big.

Brown, with a greenish-gray screen that was round like a bubble, the box had two tiny knobs on a right panel. Alejandro plugged it in and turned it on as my mother, without any regard to their function, pulled on and adjusted the two antenna that stuck up from a mount on top of the unit causing the picture to come in and out. As I figured out how to change the channels, and after some adjusting, my mother got the TV to settle into a solid picture without the snowy stripes sliding up and down.

As we watched, we learned English. Every morning, the monsters on Sesame Street taught us the alphabet, and how to count. Daytime soaps with glassy-eyed women and stern men taught us conversations as did the evening news anchors with their official-sounding voices.

My brother and I picked up the language quickly, and before long were speaking with the Stevenson sisters on many subjects like the huge ant colony that lived in the compost pile between our two backyards, and the neighborhood bully, David, who waited on his front porch to assault us with nasty words like ‘spics’ or ‘fags’ or his super-soaker, both of which he had handy on any given day.

I loved this new connection with our neighbors, my first friends, and even though I didn’t always understand everything they said, I all too quickly left my Spanish behind. Anything and everything Britney and Stacey did, I had to have it too. Like my mother’s desire for assimilation was permission for something I hadn’t known I’d wanted. Whatever the Stevensons were having for dinner, I wanted it, too. If the girls had money for the ice cream truck that sang its way through the neighborhood, I begged my mother for her spare change. If Britney had a new t-shirt, then I had to have one, too.

My mother, however, had a harder time learning the language. She was often at work or in the kitchen when we watched, and she often missed out on the shows. But her priority seemed to rest on her children’s ability to speak it rather than hers, and, as a result, for a while she didn’t say much to us at all.

Until one evening in November as we watched the news, she heard the announcer say something that made her stick her head out from the kitchen and listen, staring at the screen like it told her a secret. When the segment ended, she put her hands to her mouth.

“Un milagro.”

Alejandro thought it appropriate to smack our mother for speaking Spanish, but she swatted him so hard his eyes watered.

The miracle, I would later learn, was Reagan’s amnesty bill that gave us the chance to become citizens. My mother applied and, that fall, Alejandro and I were enrolled in school. She quit cleaning houses and opened a small dry-cleaning store near the center of town. It was one block off from Main Street which cut through Hammonton and was lined with little stores and restaurants. We moved into the two-bedroom unit above the shop, away from the Stevensons and their fancy swing set to begin again.

The store was noisy. In part from the machines, which cleaned and rotated clothing with an incessant regularity, and because mother kept extended hours which meant customers came in at five in the morning and as late as eleven—a strategy that brought her success. She worked while Alejandro and I watched TV upstairs. Sometimes I did my homework and Alejandro didn’t do his. Years continued like this, until I was ten—old enough to start helping downstairs

The store had a small front with large windows that brightened the faded floors. The place might’ve once been a pizzeria—white tiles with the occasional red every fourth or fifth

space. The wall to the left was entirely mirrored, and I often imagined small tables along it set with parmesan and red pepper shakers. Now, our beat-up counter extended halfway across the space, which haughty customers would cross behind like doing that somehow made them in charge of things. They always left (and always awkwardly) because how much authority can one have in a Laundromat?

The work was easy: I sat behind the counter reading a book or watching the tiny box TV, which was set between the cash register and the wall. With an arriving customer, the little bell above the door would ring. They'd deposit clothes before me, and I would then stuff the items in a garment bag as they specified any stains or special requests. I'd then toss the bag into the bin behind the little half-wall which separated the front from the back. The carousel began there, and when it spun, escalated above the floor to what felt like into my bedroom.

When I was fifteen and Alejandro, eighteen, my mother started dating Chuck, who ran the convenience store on the corner. Extremely tall, his head almost touched the tops of doorways, and his silver moustache had grayed before his hair. He reminded me of the customers who liked to come behind the counter because he often stood with his arms folded and his chest puffed out. Whenever he came by, he'd take his time outside, like he had to think about something. Usually finishing a cigarette, he'd examine the store front with critical eyes before tossing the butt to the curb, and when he'd enter, he'd pull the glass door so that the little bell rang twice.

"Bella," he'd say, flicking his nose with his thumb.

In the years before Chuck, mother would do paperwork in the office since Alejandro and I were capable of handling most of the work ourselves. The actual machine-cleaning was done by Tony, a man she hired from Hammonton Cleaners, a Laundromat and carpet cleaning service across town, because she was willing to pay more if he worked the extra hours. Between the four of us, we ran a smooth operation.

But Chuck only saw the need for improvements—the front awning needed to be replaced, the sidewalk was crumbling, the windows were dirty. My mother embraced his opinions, saying he was a respected businessman, that his opinions were helpful, but what I saw was her denying refunds for stains she couldn't get out—a sudden anti-customer policy.

For example, Mr. Affini was one of our first customers. He lived around the corner in a house the color of butter with bright white shutters and an iron storm-door. He walked to the laundromat every Monday with his Sunday clothes he'd worn the day before with his toy poodle, Percy, leashed at his side. I never knew if Percy was a boy or a girl, nor what church Mr. Affini attended, but he was dutiful in his patronage and generous every Christmas when he would bring us Italian cookies and a card for my mother which held several twenties.

He was, in a way, a grandfather I never had.

Over the years, he, of course, aged. Considering he was old when we opened the shop, by the time I was a teenager, he was remarkably old. Old enough to need a cane, old enough to not handle the walk with Percy anymore, old enough to get confused.

One day he came in when Chuck was in the back office with my mother, and I worked the counter like usual. The little bell above the door dinged and when my mother saw Mr. Affini, she waved and pushed the button to move the rack.

She found his ticket and handed him his clothes on a hanger, pressed, and draped in light plastic. He placed them on the counter and lifted the plastic to examine a pair of pants.

"Spilled marinara," he said.

His finger circled a faded pink spot, and I noticed we hadn't completely removed the stain. He frowned but my mother said nothing. Instead, she ripped the receipt from the cash register and handed it to him, as if she hadn't seen any of it. He, however, didn't take his receipt. His hands stayed on the pants and he framed the stain with his fingers.

"These are my good pants."

The man had several pairs of nice pants (he dry-cleaned his church clothes every Monday, after all).

"They look good," my mother said.

"Can't you put them through again?" he asked.

When mother crossed her arms, I tried to escape upstairs. But when I stood, she put her hand on my shoulder and forced me back in my seat.

"These are my good pants," he said.

"I'll put them through again, but you pay."

"I don't want to pay for another cleaning. It's a small stain."

They went back and forth about it. He asked her to look at the pants, but she refused, saying they did good cleaning, the pants were clean, repeating herself several times. I wanted to tell her to stop, that the repetition made her seem stupid, but her hand on my shoulder prevented me from doing anything but sit there and absorb it all.

"I got married in these pants!" Mr. Affini raised his voice which, unlike his hands, was steady and strong.

Chuck emerged from the back with a confused look on his face, like he was genuinely concerned, but his chest stuck out and I knew better.

"Problem?" Chuck asked.

Mr. Affini, confused by Chuck's presence, studied my mother, waiting for an answer to the situation, but she was unable to speak once Chuck was there.

"Problem?" Chuck repeated.

Mr. Affini shook his head and his watery eyes locked on mine. Suddenly, Chuck picked up the clothes from the counter, carried them to the front door, and tossed them out onto the sidewalk.

My mother's fingers dug into my shoulder and I felt my heart seize.

Before he shuffled out, Mr. Affini turned to me and tipped an imaginary hat on his head. Outside, he struggled to bend over and pick up his cleaning, but once he had, he turned towards the direction of his house and plodded out of sight.

"You didn't have to do that!" I yelled. "Mom! Why couldn't you help him? Just clean it."

"I clean. He just have to pay."

"Problem solved," Chuck said as he shooed me away.

Walking up the steps to our apartment, I remembered the pain in Mr. Affini's face as he watched his wedding pants fall to the ground, like Chuck had punched his heart. I cried for his clothes crumpled on the dirty sidewalk, still stained with my mother's mistake. The hum of the downstairs carousel drowned out my sound, though I knew my mother wouldn't care if she heard.

Later that night, after she'd closed up downstairs, she came into my room. I was in bed, awake, listening to the sounds of the store below, hoping for Chuck to say he was going home instead of staying over with us. I heard the front door lock and her feet come up the wooden steps before she stood next to my bed with her hands clasped.

"Chuck says you don't help anymore."

I buried my face into my pillow, feeling everything in my body squeeze.

In similar fashion to how he handled Mr. Affini, Chuck drove away the remaining customer base my mother had worked years to establish. By the time I was seventeen, our customers were unfamiliar faces who rarely dry-cleaned their clothes or were new to town (both of which were rare for Hammonton). And that's when Chuck began to handle my mother how he handled his business.

The first slap happened downstairs, but I didn't realize it until much later when Chuck hit her right in front of me and Alejandro. The pop of his hand to her cheek was so loud I felt as if I'd been the one who was hurt. He must've said something to her, must've convinced her somehow that because he was a man, she deserved it, or he was somehow right. Either way, it wasn't right. Even worse, I somehow got used to it because when it happened the last time, I didn't hear it.

On the last day of September, when I was seventeen, I woke to the sound of two-way radios and voices downstairs. Out my front window, I found the street crammed with emergency vehicles and swirling lights. I dashed to our door and threw it open, just as an officer made his way up, holding out his hands to stop me from going further. Everything in me dropped as he embraced me, his bulky vest scratched my face, and I let myself go to him until he said something had happened, let's go upstairs and wait. When he relaxed his arms, I shot past him, down the wooden steps, past the office, the carousel, and the various clothes-filled bins along the way. That's when I found her covered in white.

The police said blunt force trauma. I said Chuck, who was suddenly nowhere to be found.

Unable to afford a funeral, Alejandro and I entered the funeral director's office which was on the other side of town. We had walked. The room was covered with the same green carpet that spanned throughout the rest of the building. The director's massive desk was made of oak and clear of clutter; a large window behind his chair let in bright light. Silent, Alejandro and I sat in leather arm chairs with a small table between us that held a full box of tissues and an unopened coffin catalogue.

As the director presented our options, Alejandro blinked several times like he did when he tried to not cry. I stared down at the cover of the binder which had "Santoni's Funeral and Cremation Services" written on the front in gaudy cursive. Under different circumstances, I might've traced the swirling 'S' with my finger.

The director finished speaking and waited patiently for our response. His hair slicked across his head and his eyes were tiny like grapes. I wondered how many times a day he had to have the same conversation about embalmment.

Alejandro cleared his throat before asking the director if we could have some time to think it over.

"Of course," he said. "I'm here to help."

He excused himself and Alejandro nodded, looking at the binder.

"You want to bury her?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"You can't keep her at home."

"It's just you and me now," I said.

He lifted the binder, placed it on his lap, and flipped the cover.

"You want me to decide?" he asked.

I nodded.

The funeral director tapped on the door and slipped into the office. I hadn't noticed how skinny he was.

"Very unexpected, but I'm sure you'll be relieved," he said.

Alejandro flipped a page.

"A member of the community has offered to cover the expenses."

"Who?" Alejandro asked.

"Ah. They've asked to remain anonymous," he said. "Perhaps—"

"It's okay," I said.

Through the window, I saw him shuffle through the parking lot, wobbly cane in his pale hand, white shirt tucked in his crisp navy pants.

I wondered who did his cleaning now.

Three

It began five years later, after a late winter storm had shut down everything with a foot of snow and I was eager to get out of the drafty farmhouse we'd rented. I'd bundled up with my winter coat and hat made from a material that made my forehead itchy as Alejandro watched from the blue recliner with his feet propped up, his dirty white socks loose around his ankles. When I mentioned I was going for a walk, he turned up the volume on the TV and pretended to chew something in his mouth.

Outside, it was warmer than I'd thought. The wet snow glistened in the bright sun and melted into streams in the street, so I removed my hat and stuffed it in my pocket.

Crossing the development's entrance to the main road, I strolled the two miles into town which took about thirty minutes. Sometimes, if I wanted, I would stretch it to forty-five.

When I reached the train tracks that crossed Main, I wondered if the schedule had resumed. Piles of snow lined either side of the street making it more like a corridor than a roadway, and I was thankful the sidewalks were clear. People in Hammonton were good like that.

In those five years, I'd visited almost daily. With each walk, I hoped to see a family like mine had moved in, that the person who bought the place would be someone who believed in opportunities for single mothers or small business owners. That one day I would pass by and see a girl's face with deep eyes like mine gaze down, so I could wave and pass the place onto her.

But today, as I turned off Main, I discovered a large, army-green dumpster wedged between two mountains of snow jetting out into the street. By the pharmacy, I paused and leaned against the window to see the laundromat wide open, the front door propped with the stools we used to sit on behind the counter. Men walked to and from the building, carrying items to discard, and from the windows of the second floor, a kitchen cabinet soared into the trash.

I clutched my stomach like they harvested my organs as hangers, like birds, flew from the building. How much we'd left behind! I'd taken my clothes and we'd packed the dishes, the easy chair, but we were still there. Mama was still there.

"Ah, Bella." Mr. Tucci, the pharmacist, emerged from his store, his breath fogging in the chilly air.

I wiped my eyes and closed my mouth.

"I heard a restaurant, maybe?" he said, crossing his arms.

When I didn't respond, he patted me on the shoulder and returned inside.

The next morning, when I opened my door, Jandro waited for me in the hallway.

"What's your deal?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"You walking today?"

"I'm not doing that anymore."

He shrugged.

"Look," he said, running his fingers through his hair. "Here it is. I'm moving out. Taking an opportunity that's come up, and I want my own space."

I went to the edge of my bed and traced my finger along the seams of the comforter I'd had since I was fifteen, as Alejandro's heavy footsteps disappeared downstairs, leaving me there to count the cracks in the wall.

Four

Dear Readers,

We must remember who we are! When times get crazy, when things seem out of control, that is when it is most important to focus! Be well! Why else bother?

I'll tell you who I am: I am a positive person who has a plan for her life and is not letting anything slow me down.

There is one person in my life who is having a hard time supporting my new lifestyle, even though he should recognize how much it will benefit him. And, as much as it feels right sometimes, I can't just up and cut him out of my life.

So, what to do about this? I will confront him! Yes! Confrontation will only make a relationship grow, dear readers, and so, if someone in your life is preventing you from becoming the person you are supposed to be, then by all means confront them about it!

Strength, Resilience, and Pure Happiness to you...

Peyton had to return at some point, even if he ignored her texts, so she spent the evening in the office, clicking away, sipping a chardonnay.

Since she had a few posts together and the ideas were flowing, she browsed the internet for a decent blog site and set up an account.

The process was longer and more complicated than she had imagined. There were overwhelming page settings: Allow readers to comment? With or without moderation? (Moderate.) Allow readers to direct message her? (Sure?) Colors? Font? Sizing?

She wanted her site to be fresh, hip—the same feeling she had when choosing from the fancy tea assortment at the spa. Earthy tones. Each entry displayed in a frame like an inspirational poster. Things like that.

But the site's features were limited, and Carolyn was forced to choose a template she didn't quite like. The title displayed in bold orange letters the color of vomit and the text of the first post was too small with too much space between the lines. The thing more resembled a high school newspaper than a ground-breaking wellness blog.

Carolyn tried to fix it, but an error message popped up asking if she was sure she wanted to make the change. No, she wasn't sure if she wanted to, she just wanted to see what it would look like differently, and so she gave up trying to redesign the template and instead uploaded her photo, published the first post, and was done with it for the evening.

The photos of her saved to her computer felt old and inappropriate. The last time she'd taken a photo of herself was before her wellness initiative and she hated seeing that old dullness in her eyes. Her hair was longer last year and had less grays, but it was limp, too, as if trying to be well in the past few hours had already given it some oomph.

She always thought her face looked like an apple. If the light was bad, it looked bruised—the pockets under her eyes darkened like rotting dots above her cheeks. Recently, however, she felt as if her face had thinned, and she was convinced that all of her effort to be

closer to a perfect self had fixed her fruit-resemblance. She grabbed a pencil and jotted on a notepad a blog idea about “self-image.”

The photo didn’t need to be all of her (her body had yet to catch up with her face in regard to being better but there was still time for that). It wasn’t pregnancy that had ruined her body, it was her marriage. Roger’s unhealthiness—his love for beer and burgers, her lack of self-control, her inability to say beer makes her fat, her inability to not love beer and burgers. She took a sip of wine and added another idea to the paper about “self-control.”

She thought about it for a little bit—the self-control in a relationship—and wondered if that even made sense. She recalled how Roger used to ask her what she’d wanted to eat and she would usually say she didn’t care, that he could choose what restaurant, or what dinner to make, even letting him pick her entrées. He would then order two of what he was having—ribs, cheeseburgers or steaks, or on winter nights, penne alfredo or a hearty lasagna. She crossed-out the line about self-control and decided she had to think about it some more.

Carolyn found her camera and turned it towards her, practicing pursing her lips like she’d seen people do online. (An up and coming blogger should exude confidence, be attractive!) She snapped the button, checked the screen, and discovered a scared clown. Easing up on the lips, she went for more of a pout which was equally disappointing. The photo required lipstick and blush, all of which seemed too much effort at the moment. On the pad, she jotted an idea for “natural beauty tips.”

Fed up with the whole thing, she uploaded the first take and scanned over what would be her inaugural blog. Readers would soon flock to her, she knew, and shortly after that, sponsors with ads. Money would come and then she wouldn’t have to depend on Roger for anything.

Moving the cursor over a rectangle button which read “PUBLISH,” she paused and reconsidered her first post’s title. Something about “Wellness Wednesdays” seemed weak. Considering the site’s transcendental possibilities, something about it, she admitted, felt mediocre, like maybe she should take a little bit more time to plan it out and make it better.

The front door slammed, Peyton’s way of announcing his return from his unapproved departure, and Carolyn called out to him. His footsteps plodded upstairs. She sighed. If he was going to be handful, she was going to need more wine. Scanning the webpage, Carolyn clicked “PUBLISH” like a conductor ending a symphony, anticipating its birth would come with some sort of triumphant declaration. The page, however, remained unchanged as a notification box popped up, asking her if she was, in fact, sure that she wanted to publish the page.

“Lord,” she said.

She clicked “yes,” she wanted to publish the blog, and the site assembled itself. It didn’t look that bad, she thought. After another glass of wine and a good night’s sleep, she could work on it some more, and, if she was lucky, she’d already have a few followers by then.

From the cardboard box in her fridge, Carolyn squirted chardonnay into her glass. With her heel, she closed the door and practically floated upstairs.

Peyton's door was, no surprise, shut. While she'd planned on confronting him, she decided, this time, to ignore him, hoping he was in bed nervously waiting for her to knock with whatever rehearsed retorts he had expiring every minute they went unused. Maybe he pretended to be asleep, or maybe he destroyed his brain on a piece of technology. Either way, she hoped he heard her close her door without saying goodnight, that he would have a hard time sleeping, thinking she was so mad as to avoid him, that his secret parade from the house had him in so much trouble that she couldn't even speak. The more she thought about it, the more it irritated her all over again.

Carolyn placed her glass on the mahogany nightstand and pulled down the thick comforter to her bed, grateful it no longer smelled like Roger. She'd replaced their shared sheets with a higher thread-count (since she was moving on to better things, less stingy things even though she was broke) but even their smoothness and the two fluffy pillows strategically together in the center of the bed didn't calm her how she hoped.

She laid down and tried some deep breathing, wanting to flush her brain. She tried closing her eyes but couldn't keep them from moving, picturing Roger and Mimi climbing into their bed. She tried pulling the covers over her head as if the act would somehow bring on sleep, but she was uncomfortable in the air. She didn't want to think about exercise and yet, there she was, hiding under the covers, thinking about exercise. The only thing left to do, she decided, was the usual.

Carolyn leaned over and from the nightstand drawer, removed a small orange bottle. Popping the cap, she eyed the small white pills inside: still enough to last her a couple weeks before she'd have to call the doctor again and justify their necessity. She shook one into her hand and downed it with a giant swallow, then finished her glass in three gulps.

As she ruminated on the potential necessity of pennames in the online world, the mixture of medication and wine fueled a vibrant buzz in her head, and with it, the suggestion of a future headache.

She fell asleep and dreamed for the first time since before Roger left: the launch of her blog was explosive. Advertisers called, hungry for space on her page. Readers wrote how grateful they were for her refreshing and honest writing that encouraged them to be the women they never thought they could be. The success took her straight to morning talk shows and live-feeds from social media. Her face on the front cover of a lifestyle magazine whose headline read "WELL WOMAN." And all of the publicity featured her sad duck picture she'd posted to the page.

Gasping, she shot up from the covers, realizing that from behind the curtains, morning sunlight bled into the room. She felt her legs and her face before remembering: she had to re-take that photo.

Her back cried as she shuffled toward the bathroom. She turned on the light, and once her eyes had adjusted, she checked herself in the mirror. She froze. An old woman, older than

her mother, glared at her. Her usual eye circles had inflated and darkened, and every line on her face seemed deeper. What she thought had been a smile was more like leftover frown, like she was in pain, like she'd done something wrong. Her head felt like it looked: stuffed like a pillow.

She turned off the light and shuffled downstairs.

The laptop woke as she tapped the space bar, hoping someone out there had found her site. She bit her top lip, and scanned the page, until she found the tab up top, to the right: MANAGE SUBSCRIBERS. She clicked.

YOU HAVE NO SUBSCRIBERS AT THIS TIME.

She sank in her chair. Did it have to be so blunt?

Then, she discovered a red flag in the mailbox icon at the top left of the page.

Carolyn,

It's been so long. There is so much to say to you. So much has changed.

You look exactly the same.

How's Peyton?

I know that things ended badly, and I have grown to regret that very much. I should've been in his life.

Will you visit me in Miami? Will you bring Peyton to meet me? I could go there, but I imagine a spring break might be needed and I have just the place...

--G

She blinked and reread the email, feeling a familiar rush. Sixteen years for him to come around. *So much has changed* and, yet, it felt like nothing had. Rubbing her eyes, she wished she looked the same as sixteen years ago.

The doorbell rang, and Carolyn squinted from the sound, rubbing her temples as she went into the foyer. At the front door, she opened to find Amelia on the step, her breasts exploding from a canary-yellow cardigan.

"Hi, Mrs. H."

"Quite the sweater there."

Upstairs, she heard Peyton emerge from his room.

"Yellow would look good on you, Mrs. H."

Carolyn frowned as Peyton clamored towards them.

"Wow. You look hot," he said.

Carolyn gripped the edge of the door as Amelia entered the house, and Peyton wrapped his arms around her, reaching up to rub his eyes still full of sleep.

"We're going to watch a movie downstairs," he said, leading Amelia to the kitchen.

Carolyn's stomach sank as the girl leaned her head onto Peyton's bony shoulder, remembering how Gene used to show up at her parent's house and they'd leave together

without saying goodbye to anyone. How they would zip away in his Ford hatchback with the evil muffler, ignoring everyone else except each other.

"No, you're not," Carolyn said.

The teens turned to her, confused. She tapped her finger to her forehead and then pointed to Peyton.

"Go pack your suitcase," she said.

"What?"

"Goodbye." She tugged on the girl's elbow and escorted her through the door.

"What are you talking about?" Peyton asked.

"Peyton's not available for a while," she said, clicking the door shut. Peyton shot past her and tried to re-open it.

"We're taking a trip," she said, her hand firm on the knob.

"What for? Why?"

She looked him up and down and managed through a surprised laugh, "You're going to meet your father."

Five

“You need to get a job,” he said. “You need to do something.”

It had been ten years since my last walk to the dry cleaners and ten years since he’d moved out. He hadn’t changed much—his body was the same, like he could’ve been athletic if he’d tried—except for a little thinning of his hair which I would never mention noticing.

“You can’t just sit here anymore,” he said.

I turned up the volume on the television and opened a new bag of chips, scooping a handful which I deposited on my belly like a plate.

He tossed his hands up and went into the kitchen.

Five years ago, he’d said the same thing to me, when he was so frustrated with me he threatened to burn my chair. He’d threatened to hire me a babysitter because I was so pathetic. Still, he checked in a couple times a month, usually to cook me something or pick up the mail.

I’d changed, but not how he had hoped. Fifty pounds, at least. Possibly seventy-five. But, after fifty, why bother counting? I was fat, I knew it, I wasn’t even close to being not-fat. I noticed it every time I stood and sat, heaving my body to balance it on my legs which were always tired.

Alejandro returned from the kitchen and snatched his keys from the table in the entry.

“I’m getting you a babysitter.”

I waved him off as the front door shut loud enough to make me blink. Like usual, he hadn’t said goodbye.

Tonight, I realized during a prime-time hospital drama where the head ER doctor finally kissed the nurse who’d been flirting with him for weeks, that Alejandro probably had a new girlfriend (even though he seemed like too much of a loser to have so many girlfriends).

Illuminated by the television’s glow, my lumpy shadow cast against the wall, I reclined, suspended in the fog that had become my life. I accepted that the hot ER doctor would never want to kiss me. Oprah would explode if she saw my lack of anything fabulous: at me, the un-fabulous.

I switched to ABC. A children’s movie about a lot of puppies was on, so I flipped back to the hot ER doc who slowly removed the clothes from the flirty nurse. I could not stuff enough chips into my mouth. It was like everyone had sex, but everyone does not have sex. Sometimes people don’t want to see sex because it reminds them that they are not having sex. Don’t the television networks think about that? The un-sexed population? Consider that maybe tonight, after years of being alone, I didn’t want to see it? I popped another chip in my mouth. The doctor took off his shirt and grinned at the nurse, and the more I chewed, the less I cared because (who was I kidding) that doctor was nice to watch.

Then, someone knocked at the door. I froze and stared toward the entryway, a wad of gooey potato piled on my tongue.

The knock returned, this time louder.

With a grunt, I heaved myself from the chair. An avalanche of chip debris fell by my feet, and I shuffled through the crumbs, wincing from a pinch in my back. I had to pause and catch my breath before I opened the door.

Standing on my porch, was a man who resembled the hot doctor, smiling at me like we'd been friends in high school. I felt every fat cell in my body scream and my face turn to ice. His grin didn't falter even when his eyes narrowed with a hint of insecurity. I wiped my mouth with my fingers and noticed that in his hands was a laptop.

"Hey," he said. "I'm Bryan."

"Are you selling something?"

"No. No, no," he said. "I'm your new neighbor. Well, I moved in a few weeks ago, but we haven't met yet."

Alejandro had said nothing about a new neighbor. And, as I thought about it, I realized that the obnoxious kids next door were no longer noisy.

I glanced at the laptop.

"Alejandro said you didn't have one," he said, displaying the computer.

Alejandro said anything about me? To him? From the living room, I heard the unmistakable moans of the flirty nurse. Bryan cleared his throat.

"Here," he said, handing it to me. Like a gun, it was cold and heavier than it appeared, and I pressed it against my chest, looking down to avoid his gaze.

"Uh." He stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Your brother said you were home. Saw him on his way out. I got a new one, so I thought I'd give that one to you. There's nothing wrong with it or anything. I can show you how--"

"Thanks so much." I closed the door with one swift push and carried the black computer to the dining room table. The laptop had a circle logo on top and not a single scratch on its face, and once opened, a blue screen illuminated, and a cursor blinked in a thin bar labeled "password." My stomach sank.

Then the knock returned.

Something about his smile felt genuine, like looking at me made no difference to him than if he looked at a baby bunny or a brand-new car. Even though I knew it couldn't be true, though. Even the plumber who fixed the bathroom sink a few years ago, who could be described as bulbous at best, couldn't even regard me as human. His eyes had shifted away from me when I'd asked how long the water would be turned off, like seeing me made him ill.

"You'll need the password and help with the Wi-Fi, too. I figured you can just share mine. Signal probably reaches here."

I glanced at his beautiful toes sticking out from his tan sandals, realizing how nice the night felt, how warm it was for early May. I motioned for him to come in, and as he followed

me into the dining room, I wished the bag of chips on the floor would disappear. After connecting the computer to his internet, he showed me how to search for things, and introduced me to social media. I couldn't believe all the things that had developed in the years I'd been inside—my hospital drama had a site with web-only episodes, and, apparently, the actor who plays the hot doctor has an obsession with animals and posts pictures of rescue dogs on his social media account. I could even message him directly, if I wanted to.

How much I'd missed.

Bryan's arm brushed mine and I almost whimpered because if kindness had a scent, it would smell like him.

Once I was all set up, he let himself out. When the front door clicked, I stared down at the white search engine page which waited for me to ask a question.

How can I change my life?

Blue link after blue link, they arrived, waiting for me to click—a flood of available answers. I considered the kindness of my neighbor, this sudden and astounding connection to the outside world, to the pale blue house next door. I not only had an answer to my question, I'd discovered the start of something unexpected, something necessary.

It wasn't the first link I clicked, nor the second.

Now don't be intimidated if you are less than firm. I've had those days, too, and let me tell you—it's better to forget about them and just move on! You know what I'm saying? Exercise. It won't kill you. Ease into it and try it for a few minutes every day. A walk around the block. A few sit-ups or chair dips. Anything and everything to move—get the blood flowing! Feel alive! Stretch yourself!

Oh! Let's not forget that stretching—there's no easier way to add days to your life than by taking the time to stretch. Do you want to be frozen stiff by the time you're eighty? Or swimming laps in the pool? It's your choice what road to take, just be sure to take the right one.

At the top of the page, to the right, a button said, "Talk to me!" I clicked, and a box popped up, the cursor flashing. I hesitated.

Then, glowing in the television's white light, the deflated bag of potato chips caught my eye.

I won't pretend that my life is in anyway normal. Ever since my mom died, my brother takes care of me. She died when I was eighteen and now I'm thirty-four.

I haven't left the house since we moved here which was right after my mom died. I have spent years watching TV and not being a person which is why I am here in the first place, writing to you.

Everything right now seems weird because I just got a computer and this is my first time on the internet really but I was wondering if you knew what I could do help myself not be what I am right now. I don't have any money except for what my brother leaves in case I want take-out.

Just to be clear, he's not happy with me either. He doesn't like that he still has to take care of me but I think he just feels bad because of what happened and so here we are today. I don't like the arrangement either, I guess, if I'm being honest.

My body has ballooned into what I am. I remember not feeling out of breath when I walked up the stairs, I remember being able to get out of my chair so much easier. Maybe I'm just older, but even though I've lived in a bubble, I know I've lived in a bubble. I let the world go by.

I know I need to lose weight. I've watched so many shows on that.

My new neighbor is gorgeous. I can't even think about how he sees me.

I can't stay like this for much longer. You seem to know the best way to go about things. If you could help, you would be saving my life.

Bella

A notification alerted "Message Sent!" and a feeling of dread landed in the center of my chest. But, before I could close the website and forget the whole thing, I received a message.

Thanks for writing! I'll get back to you as soon as I can, but, in the meantime, I encourage you to fill your time waiting with something productive and positive and only something that will make your life better! Trust me. You can thank me later!!

I put my head on the table and groaned.

Beat-up, grayed, and laces frayed, they'd hidden in my closet since my last walk. I pulled them on and had to loosen the laces so they'd feel less tight. In a box, I found one of Alejandro's oversized sweatshirts he'd left behind, and I threw it on, lifting the hood up over my head.

I forced myself to not look at Bryan's house, to check if his lights were on, to see if he watched me leave the house at eleven o'clock at night, if he knew it had been eighteen years since I'd walked out under the open black sky.

Six

“Music?” she asked, glancing at Peyton, slumped in the passenger seat, his arms folded across his chest like he was cold.

Carolyn turned the dial, flipping through FM stations until she found some easy listening and began to hum along. Peyton, with a jarring swoop of his arm, turned it off.

She blinked, tapping the steering wheel. He’d come around eventually, she thought. They had four states and a thousand miles to go.

She’d packed well for both of them (since he’d refused to pack)—his Hawaiian shirts she bought for him last summer (shirts he’d refused to wear) and a couple pairs of khaki shorts. Plus, a bathing suit. She assumed Gene had a pool. If he didn’t want to have a kid, he had better have a pool.

For herself she’d brought her khaki shorts and tennis shoes (in case they took a walking tour), the loose blouses she’d bought on sale at the end of the season last summer, and the knit black dress in case they went out to eat.

They were in an endless line of pine trees in southern Virginia which, for some reason, made her think of the early settlers.

“Don’t you have U.S. History this year?” she asked.

He shrugged, staring out the window.

“Honey,” she said.

He slid further into his seat so his knees touched the dash.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Those two words mean nothing to me. You can’t just lie to me my entire life and think everything will be fine.”

“Honestly thought it would be better for you. I didn’t want you to wonder about him. I never thought he’d actually show up.”

Peyton held up his hand for her to stop speaking.

She sighed and gripped the leather steering wheel, wondering when the pine trees would end. She knew things switched over to a more tropical tune the closer to Florida they got, but it had, after all, been seventeen years since her last venture down 95.

Carolyn glanced along the shoulder and thought the spot felt familiar.

“I actually did this drive with your father once.”

Peyton stared, silent, out his window.

“He was a musician then. On tour with his band.”

Peyton stuffed earbuds in his ears and thumbed the screen of his phone.

They’d crammed into a minivan they’d called The White Whale which, on its last legs, broke down somewhere in Virginia—a vicious plume of smoke pouring from the hood. She’d feared they would never get to Florida, let alone their next scheduled show—that their lives would be frozen on the side of 95 before anything really fun had even happened.

Terry, the guitarist, drove. Pete, the drummer, rode shotgun, his hairy legs perpetually propped on the dash. She and Gene snuggled in the back seat, and Terry had a habit of looking at them in the rearview mirror with an annoying regularity.

The memory tingled. Roger used to make her feel like that too until the whole thing became a dead flower. She became lumpy. He, grouchy. Nobody wants either of those.

A dead flower, she thought. Such a good metaphor for a blog entry.

She smiled.

"How can you be so happy when you've *ruined* my life?"

"Your life hasn't even started yet. Believe me."

He pounded his fist into his hand, and Carolyn told him to calm down.

"I *don't* want to be *going* here," he said.

She bit her lip and spotted a sign for fast food.

"Burgers, fries, and a milkshake cures all."

"Yeah, by killing you."

She took the off-ramp, turned right, and discovered several restaurants on either side of the road.

"Drive through or sit-down?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

"Well, I have to pee."

"So, pee."

She pulled into a parking spot near the silver front door of a burger joint—it's tall glass windows around the perimeter like a mirror to the world.

Inside, the place was empty except for a few men in jeans and ratty t-shirts who didn't look up from their meals.

When she'd finished in the restroom, Peyton waited for her near the registers, his hands jammed into the pockets of his tan shorts which he wore low, almost off his backside. Carolyn hated this look—his long hair, his sullen eyes that only animated when Amelia was around.

She ordered for them, and in a booth along the row of windows, they ate. Stealing fries from the pile on his tray, she offered him some of her salad, but he shook his head, sucking hard on his straw. You can't be mad while drinking a milkshake, she thought.

"So," she said. "Here's better news than the whole 'You have a different Dad' thing."

Peyton closed his eyes.

"Too soon. Probably. Sorry."

"You obviously don't get it."

She could hear a cry welling up in his throat.

"I know. Calm down."

"You're making me do this and I don't want to."

"I told you. I think you need some time away from Amelia. Besides, you might enjoy Miami."

His eyes bulged.

She stole another fry and caught another glare.

"Last one," she said. "Anyway. The better news is... your mother has started a blog!"

Peyton tossed his head so the hair was out of his eyes.

"Did you hear me?" she asked.

"You've started another project you'll never finish," he said. "You can't just decide things for my life."

"I finish stuff."

"You made Roger buy you that whole yogurt maker so you could make your nasty yogurt which you never did."

"Kitchen appliance. That's different."

"Scrapbook class."

"Well—"

"This wellness initiative."

"I'm well!"

"You're eating french fries."

Carolyn frowned as Peyton took an angry suck from his shake.

"There's the whole pottery thing in the garage you never use," he said through a mouthful of icy vanilla milk.

"I'm going to use it. I've been busy."

"Busy *getting divorced*." He slammed the cup onto his tray, forcing fries to jump and fall from their sleeve.

"This isn't attack Mom day."

"Every day from now until eternity is attack Mom day. Roger's gone. Now you want.... You know what?"

Peyton crumpled his burger wrapper and chucked it onto his tray, grabbed his milkshake, and left.

She leaned back in the booth. Even if he was upset, a part of her was glad it happened this way. Not telling him about Gene had hurt him, sure, but had she'd told him a long time ago, he would've wanted to meet him, forcing her to chase down Gene at a time when Gene didn't want to be found. With things the way they were, Gene had at least tried (something he should've done a long time ago—then she wouldn't have this problem).

Her phone buzzed in her purse, and she retrieved it, to find a new message waiting from her blog.

Elated, she read until after the first paragraph where the person writing complained about her life. She'd been a hermit for fifteen years or something—the story was pathetic (a little sad, she admitted, but overall, pathetic). Why couldn't she attract a reader who knew sponsors? A reader who knew people? She needed money, not sob stories.

The message was signed "Bella."

Carolyn wondered if she could charge her a fee—a “Wellness Fee,” perhaps. Or, a “Subscription to Carolyn.” Twenty-five bucks a week. No, a month. No. How much did people pay for yoga? Acupuncture? She didn’t know. She could be charitable, she supposed. She could start to charge people later.

Dearest Bella,

Thank you for your interest in Carolyn’s Wellness Blog! I’m so thrilled to hear you’ve already benefitted from the site.

Please understand that I am very busy with the site and a few other ventures. I’m only saying that so if I don’t get back to you right away, I’m just busy doing other things! I apologize in advance.

But, in any case, I’m happy to help you for free. You mentioned your neighbor—don’t pay him any mind! You don’t need a man’s approval. You don’t even need a man. You can be happy and confident as a single and successful woman. Just choose what you want to be successful with. Is it losing weight? Get exercising! Cut out processed foods! Drink water! You will see the benefits, dear, I promise.

How do you want to succeed?

Remember, wellness isn’t just for Wednesdays—it’s for everyday! And, please, tell your friends about Carolyn’s Wellness Blog!

--C

Outside, Peyton sat on the curb in front of their car, poking at something next to his shoe.

“Ready?” she asked.

He stood and adjusted his shorts.

“Can I at least drive?” he asked.

She pursed her lips.

“You don’t know where to go?”

“South.”

“But when we get to Miami?”

“Do you know?”

She threw the keys over the top of the car.

As they buckled their seat belts, her phone buzzed again.

Gene: *Let me know when u r close*

Carolyn: *Just made it to NC.*

Gene: *What kind of food does he like? We’ll go out to eat.*

“Your father wants to know what kind of food you like,” she said.

“Which father?” he asked.

“Gene.”

“Tell him I hate all food and that I hate everyone.”

"I'm not telling him that. Miami has amazing restaurants."

Carolyn: *Is that taco place still open? The one on Biscayne?*

Gene: ???

Carolyn: *We'll eat wherever you think is good.*

Gene: *I was hoping you'd say that*

As Peyton merged them onto the highway, her phone sounded again, and she squealed with the flurry of activity.

"I have a fan now!" she said. "This is going to take off, just wait and see."

"Whoop, whoop."

Thank you for answering me! Thank you, thank you, thank you! You have no idea how much this means to me.

I've been walking. Gone out twice so far. My neighbor was out when I came back from one this morning. He waved at me but I didn't even look at him! Just like you said.

What else should I do? I don't have much going on. My brother wants me to get a job, but I don't know what to do. What do people do?

I'm so thankful for your answers. Thank you!

Carolyn tossed her phone in her lap. *What do people do?* Really? Things pop up all the time. Opportunities. New directions. You don't even have to try.

Carolyn spotted a billboard for South of the Border.

"Want to stop?" She pointed to the sign.

Peyton accelerated.

"Stopping?"

"No!"

Leaning her head back against the rest, she decided she didn't have to answer Bella. She could cut her off there. Signal she'd crossed from "amazing fan" into "annoying parasite," but, then again, she had no other fans. If she cut off the first one, then it would shut down the whole thing. No. She needed think of something clever to respond.

The endless pine trees switched to fields of tobacco as the incessant billboards for South of the Border promised unbelievable fun.

"Sure you don't want to stop?"

"The place screams food poisoning."

"Funny," she said. "You're right, though. We don't have to stop just because the signs make you want to stop."

Then she realized: she knew what to tell Bella.

Bella,

Just because someone tells you to do something, doesn't mean you need to do it. Only you can decide what's right for your life.

--C

Out the window, sign after sign screamed "South of the Border! Half-a-mile!", "A quarter mile!" and, eventually, "The EXIT IS RIGHT THERE!"

"There it is," she said.

"Oh well."

"I've actually been there before. Long time ago."

"Good for you."

Pete had demanded that they stop as soon as he saw the first sign. He'd slapped his leg, shouting "South of the border, bitches!" before pointing at each person until they made some sort of agreement with him. Gene gave two thumbs up and Carolyn did a cute smile because she wasn't actually in the band so her vote counted less. Terry wanted to keep driving and he was pointed at the longest until he sighed.

"That was seventeen years ago," she said.

"Cool story." Peyton tapped the steering wheel, agitated, and then blew a tuft of hair that had fallen across his right eye.

They'd taken the exit but not before Gene had lit a joint and passed it around, the smoke clouding the car before being sucked outside through the window slits. Carolyn, already feeling a little carsick, had smoked too much and her only memory of South of the Border consisted of one moment where the four of them laughed at gigantic hot dogs the size of small baseball bats rolling on metal bars under an orange light.

She decided that Peyton did not need to know that.

They continued on.

Twenty-one was a good year; twenty-two, much different. The east coast tour in The White Whale had consolidated to what most people could fill a decade with—seen an entire coast, partied with strangers, slept on couches in between shows. She'd drank until she puked behind dumpsters and rolled around the back seat of a busted-up minivan. From beach shacks to dive bars, even a bistro in Ft. Lauderdale, she'd loved the band's music, even after hearing it every night. The free drinks, the meeting new people, the variety of it all, she'd felt like life could give her no better than that.

The band had reached Miami Beach in the blurry early morning and slept in The White Whale parked on Ocean Drive. They woke to the scorching late-morning sun—the car so hot they were drenched with sweat, and Carolyn felt like she would explode. She escaped and crawled to the shade of several palm trees that grew in a grassy quad between the road and the beach. When Gene and Terry flopped on either side of her, their breath was so terrible she had to scoot away.

Pete brought orange juice and bagels. Food, prior to then, had never been so delicious, and once she'd finished her drink, she asked Gene for his. He shrugged and shook his empty container which, for some reason, made Carolyn burst into tears.

"What's wrong with you?" Gene asked.

She shook her head, trying to collect herself, but she felt like an overflowing tub.

"Let's get in the water," Pete said, eyeing a group of sarong-clad women behind them who were making their way to the beach.

"I need to piss," Gene said.

Carolyn minded them as they made their way to the strand, assuring herself that the food needed more time to get to her stomach, that it had simply been too long in the car. She attempted to control her breathing by taking deep inhales and slow exhales, but each try was staggered by cries.

Then, as she leaned against the smooth trunk of a palm tree, a breeze rushed by that smelled like rotting trash. She waited for it to pass, but even after the wind had ceased, the stench lingered and felt stuck in her nose. She pulled her shirt up to her eyes, but her body didn't smell any better.

She decided to take a dip.

The guys had stripped and left their clothes in clumsy piles behind their shoes. From the water, they whooped and hollered at her to get in.

Stepping in, she was initially relieved by the coolness on her feet, and she continued until it was to her knees. But, diving forward, her head underwater, she felt weird. She felt no better wet than she had beneath the palm. The tepid water was clammy, like an unwanted hug.

Then something pinched her butt. She screamed as Gene's head popped up behind her, laughing before he'd even taken a breath. From several yards away, Terry and Pete roared.

"Not funny," she said.

"Oh stop," he said, grabbing her again, this time pulling her towards him. He put his lips by her ear. "I just peed over here, so enjoy."

"Gross." She pushed him away and made her way to shore.

"Such a mood today."

In the shade of the lifeguard stand, a small house with a long ramp that extended to the ground, she watched the guys splash around. They soon returned to the sand, shaking the water from their hair, and made their way to a large canopy with lit grills and large tables filled with food. Terry followed and before long shook hands with a man in a fedora who held a spatula in one hand and a beer in the other. When Pete and Terry lifted beers from a cooler and toasted each other, Carolyn wasn't surprised.

She left them there and walked up shore.

At the next lifeguard stand, she stopped and rested in its shade, poking clumps of wet sand from between her toes. The trash odor returned. She turned her face to escape it but

couldn't. Her stomach churned as her cheeks felt cold and the top of her scalp tingled like someone had touched it with ice. Overcome, she got on her knees, leaned over, and threw up in the sand.

Footsteps descended the lifeguard ramp and a woman's voice asked if she was okay. Carolyn couldn't answer.

"You okay? Too much to drink?" The woman placed her hand on her back.

Carolyn shook her head.

"Eat some bad food? Think you're sick?"

She shrugged.

The girl sat back on her heels.

"Pregnant?"

Carolyn examined the sandy mess of vomit, her stomach feeling no better than before.

"Come with me." They went into the lifeguard stand which had a sink and mini-fridge against the back wall and a small couch in the front of the room. As Carolyn leaned against the door, the girl dug through a worn-out purse.

"Here." She handed something to Carolyn that looked like a tampon wrapped in medical-grade plastic.

"I got mine today, but I was going to take it if I didn't. Guess I was supposed to have this for you."

"Georgia." Peyton said.

"What?" she asked. "When did that happen?"

"South Carolina is short."

"We aren't going to get there until late."

"You're realizing this now?"

"Maybe we should get a hotel? I'm going to text him."

"Why? What the fuck is he going to do for us?"

"I just—"

"This whole thing is stupid!"

"Pull over."

Peyton pulled to the shoulder and parked. Slamming his fist into the steering wheel, the horn wailed. The car rocked with the rush of passing traffic.

"You didn't even ask me if I wanted to go."

"A week off from school to go to a tropical place and you don't want to go? I should take your temperature."

"So what if he's my Dad? I haven't heard of him. What difference does it make? Roger isn't around either."

Carolyn bit her lip as Peyton shook his head.

"I somehow got stuck with you—"

"Pey—"

“—who won’t let me see my girlfriend or go anywhere or even have my own car. And now you have decided that for my life I need to go meet Gene the douchebag in Miami.”

“Language.”

“Fuck that mom. Fuck you and your stupid blog and fuck this whole trip.”

“Well, if you feel that way—”

“You can’t brush this off. Stop brushing this off like everything. You let it ping off of you and pretend like it doesn’t matter. Look at me.”

She met his eyes and felt something shift—a distance further than she’d felt from him before.

“I’ll drive,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“Means nothing,” he said, pushing his door open to check for oncoming traffic.

Carolyn merged back onto the highway where they drove through Georgia in silence as the hours passed and the sun sank to the horizon. The trees changed from consistent pine to palms. They made it to Florida and stopped for burgers at a chain restaurant, the air so humid she sweated just from stepping out of the car.

Peyton chewed his food in silence, and this time, she did not steal his fries, and when he went to restroom, she pulled out her phone.

Carolyn: *Should I get a hotel?*

Gene: *Just get here. I’ll be up.*

She couldn’t help but smile.

From the lights of oncoming traffic, she could see Peyton’s heavy eyes, drifting off to sleep.

She couldn’t stop thinking of Gene. Disturbing behavior, considering thoughts of him through the years had come in surprising bursts, usually after Peyton did something inherently similar to what she remembered Gene to be like—his innate neatness, the way he coughed, the way Peyton stood once he’d hit puberty. She hadn’t, however, tried to remember the last time she’d seen him.

Sitting on the floor of the van, Gene’s feet dangled by the road. Terry and Pete had gone to the liquor store and that’s when she told him. Her throat choked with upset, she couldn’t look at him—his face was undeniably anguished, and he rubbed his head the same way he did when the car broke down and they were faced with the possibility of missing a show.

“Where’s the test?”

“Threw it away.”

“How do you know it was right?”

Standing on the sidewalk, Carolyn rubbed her arms, only able to think inward, to what was happening inside of her, how everything was suddenly so different from yesterday. The city’s stench made her constantly sick and she craved a vat of orange juice.

Gene muttered something under his breath.

Carolyn spotted Terry and Pete. As they crossed the street, each carrying a brown paper bag, they grinned at the line of cars they'd stopped. She knew exactly how the rest of the day would go: After an afternoon drink they'd pass out in the van for a couple hours, waking in time for a late dinner which would include drinks, then even more at the show. An after party in their van with even more drinks and the random people they managed to sync up with along the way. What had felt like the best life imaginable felt suddenly hollow.

"I need you guys to drive me to the airport," Carolyn said.

Terry, confused, glanced between the two of them.

"What's the deal?" he said, reaching into his bag, producing a beer.

"Put the booze away!" Carolyn swatted at the can.

Gene stood and put his hands on her shoulders.

"I'll drive you," Gene said. "Come on."

In the grassy quad, under the shade of palms and the gaze of girls, they left Terry and Pete with their bags of beer.

Gene drove with his hand on her knee, and except for the sickly chug of the van's engine, and the roar of tires on the road, there was silence between them.

By her feet sat the small bag she'd packed for the trip filled with sundresses, her toothbrush and a small compact of makeup. She still wore her bathing suit beneath her clothes, and the trapped sand made her itch.

As they approached the airport, the massive underbelly of a launching plane passed over them. They exited the highway and wove through the drop-off terminal where Gene pulled into the loop and parked against the curb.

"I'll come back soon, okay? Just a couple more shows." He squeezed her knee, and she glanced at him, his face unusually sober.

"Need me to get your door?" he asked.

She leaned over and pressed her lips to his, sliding her hand down his belly to his zipper. He took her hand and squeezed it like he had her knee, pulling his head back with a grin.

"Not the best time for that, I think," he said.

She felt a thousand miles away.

She climbed out of the van and shut the door. Clutching her bag to her chest, she crossed the sidewalk to the terminal, and as the automatic doors to the airport slid open, she turned to wave at Gene, only to find he had already gone, the ugly sound of the vehicle blending into traffic as it merged from the drop-off loop and into a flow of cars.

She knew they were close when the billboards switched from West Palm Beach advertisements to bikini wax specials and Brazilian hair treatments with pictures of towering models pouting at them, their perfect hair somehow supposed to be the focal point and not their cleavage as deep as the Grand Canyon.

Carolyn wondered if Gene had gained weight, if his hair had grayed or had completely disappeared. She found herself adjusting the straps of her dress from falling off her shoulders and tried to fix her hair.

It was past midnight when they reached the end of 95, the heart of Miami. They merged onto Dixie Highway which was lined with neatly-spaced palm trees that arched over the road.

For the middle of the night, there were a surprising number of cars out. A black hatchback with neon lights raced through the intersection, dance music blaring from its open windows audible even above its aggressive muffler. The sound woke Peyton and his head shot up from the seat.

"Miami drivers," she said, as the car disappeared around a corner.

Carolyn noticed Peyton scouting the area as if he was impressed.

"Gene lives in Coral Gables. Where *The Godfather* was filmed."

"Which one?"

Carolyn frowned.

"Oh. You know. One of them."

Peyton lowered his window, and a rush of tropical air filled the car. Carolyn grinned because it didn't smell like trash.

"It's like another country," he said.

She checked the address on her phone and took a right off the highway, slowing in front of a large white house with a stucco roof and hurricane shades that angled out from each window. She stopped. Two palm trees stood in the front yard which had neatly trimmed grass, and short lights lined the path from the driveway to the house. Every room illuminated, it glowed a soft yellow. She parked in front, along the street, and turned off the car.

Peyton covered his face with his hands.

"Want to wait a minute?" she asked, gathering her purse from the back seat.

He surveyed the house. Then, without a word, he got out of the car, closed the door, and crossed through the yard. Carolyn bit her nail and followed, except she took the driveway. When she made it to the lit pathway, Peyton had already reached the house and stood at the open front door facing Gene.

It was hard to breathe, seeing him there, looking exactly the same and somehow completely different, the man-version of his boy self (the man version being far sexier and less scrawny). Carolyn felt an immediate attraction to him, even longing, because she saw Peyton in him, too. They had a horrific and wonderful resemblance. Of course, he would look like Peyton, or that Peyton would look like him. But the similarities...

As Carolyn joined them on the porch, Gene stuck his hand out to Peyton then pulled him in for a hug. Peyton's expression shifted between shock and surprise.

"Carolyn," Gene said, noticing her. He released Peyton and opened his arms.

"Gene," she managed, leaning into his thick body. She detected his delicious scent. He smelled like wealth.

"Come in. Come in. Your stuff there." He pointed to spot on the floor by the door. "You must be tired, but first a drink? Carolyn? Wine?"

They passed through an immaculate living room with two dark leather arm chairs positioned around a white shag. A piece of sexy art hung on the wall: a large red gash of paint splashed across a pearly canvas like a wound.

Gene took them into the kitchen where Carolyn collapsed onto a stool at the center island; Peyton plopped next to her gawking at the room which could host impressive parties. The appliances seemed unused. A bar separated a breakfast table from the den that had an oversized loveseat and matching easy chair, and everything was immaculate and pure white. Carolyn didn't want to stare, but it appeared the floor was marble.

"Peyton? What would you care for?" Gene moved to the black counter and reached for the cabinet.

Carolyn examined him—his odd airiness. He had not been this charming when he was twenty-one.

"Whatever you're having," Peyton said. Carolyn noticed he seemed barely awake.

Gene chuckled, moving his shoulders up and down. That he used to do when he was younger.

"That's my boy! Oh, this is going to be fun. How about a juice? I buy these fresh pressed—carrot apple is good. Yes? Carolyn. A chardonnay? I also have a Pinot or Riesling. Oh, Sauvignon Blanc?"

"Yes, please," she said with an exhausted wave. Gene filled their glasses and handed them their drinks. Peyton gulped while Carolyn took several quick sips and set her glass down, the wine glorious on her tongue.

"You'll each have your own rooms upstairs. Darla made up your beds earlier. She's in and out."

Carolyn coughed, glancing at Peyton who continued to admire the house with his mouth open.

"When was the last time you saw my mom?" he asked, looking past Gene and out to some lights in the backyard.

"I won't pretend it wasn't how it was and so I'll tell you: before you were born." Gene leaned and offered Peyton his hand. "And for that, I'm sorry. Might as well get it out of the way. I'm sorry, Peyton, that I wasn't around. But I'm hoping both of our lives can be better now because of this."

If Carolyn weren't so disturbed by how charming Gene was, she would've been emotional about it. The arresting way he held Peyton's hand, apologetic. He hadn't known that hand when it was little, when it was born, let alone grow into what it is today. Why should he have it so easy? She wanted him to let go of Peyton and she wanted him to never let go.

Peyton withdrew and tapped his fingers on his glass.

"It's okay—"

"Gene. Just call me Gene. That's fair, right?"

Peyton glanced down before pushing the hair away from his eyes.

"Sure, yeah."

Gene shot up and puffed out his chest, tapping his shoulders like a proud gorilla.

"Today is a good day," he said.

"It's tomorrow at this point," Peyton said.

"That it is." Gene studied Carolyn. "Shall we put you to bed?"

She wondered if she was sleeping, if she was actually still driving and about to crash the car. Maybe, if she woke up, she could save them.

They followed him back through the living room and up the front stairs which were, in fact, marble with an iron banister that spiraled up to the second-floor landing, opening into a hallway that ran to the back of the house.

"The master suite," Gene said, waving as he passed the first door to the left.

He waved to a door on the right. "Guest bathroom."

At the end of the hall was a door on each side.

"Carolyn. This has a private bath," he said, opening the door on the right. "I hope you're comfortable. Peyton, there's a plasma TV in there. No porn."

"Lord," Carolyn said. "Go get the bags."

Peyton disappeared down the stairs.

"What is this?" she asked. "Is this an act?"

"I'm not who you remember."

Carolyn leaned against the wall next to her door as Gene ran his fingers through his hair.

"I know I'm not. And I know you're not. And maybe that's okay," he said.

"But... marble?" She glanced towards the stairs.

"It's a thing."

"You used to get so wasted you had to walk with your head on my shoulder. Sleep on my lap."

He grinned.

"That still happens from time to time."

She thought about all the other women and then she tried to not think about the other women. As she wrung her hands, he took them in his. Their eyes locked.

"I'm looking forward to getting to know you again," he said. "Sleep well."

He left, and she went into the room, cracking the door for Peyton. No way Gene had become Casanova. Even if his magnificent home signified some sort of integrity, (at best: a respectable stability!), no way this was his true self. Not the skinny, loud-mouthed Gene she remembered.

Peyton returned with her suitcase, placing it on the floor by her bed. They regarded each other, silent, until she said, "Well, here we are."

"Here we are."

Peyton crossed the hall and closed his door.

Without changing, she slipped off her shoes, knowing she wouldn't need her pills tonight.

When a buzz sounded from her purse, she checked her phone.

Roger: *Hey. Can we talk?*

She tossed her phone back in her bag as exhaustion hit her like a wave. She switched off the light. After pulling down the soft covers of the bed, she climbed in and sank into the comfort, letting go of all the miles she'd gone.

Seven

Carolyn woke in a sunbeam that warmed the blankets of her bed. She shoved her sweaty feet out from beneath the covers. The linens smelled like bleach, not her flowery detergent, and she remembered she wasn't home. Even her body smelled different—like the car, like yesterday's junk food. She needed a shower.

The room was bright and the walls were lined with a soft-emerald wallpaper. Everything else was white—the bed, the duvet, the overstuffed easy chair in the corner. Even the carpet was white. She flopped back onto the pillow, which hugged either side of her head, realizing Gene had better taste than she, and she cringed remembering the grungy dining room carpet back home.

The house was still, and she admired through the window the leaves of a palm tree that waved to her in the breeze.

After a shower, Carolyn laid out her outfits across the unmade bed. She assessed them, disappointed. A competition for drab and frumpy, she thought. So “up-north,” so old, so unexciting. She'd brought the knit black dress, in case they went to a fancy restaurant, but now, as she surveyed the spread, she realized that the knit black dress was now the bar, and the rest needed to be higher. This was Miami. The floors were marble.

She slipped it on and adjusted it, flattening the skirt across her belly. Standing sideways in the mirror she scrutinized her untanned arms, puffy from a winter indoors. Her stomach, the same, with a slight billow to it; though, if she stood with her chest out, it almost disappeared. She decided the dress served its purpose and made her face more attractive. It would look even better with a tan.

Downstairs, the kitchen floors felt cool against her feet. She smelled coffee and found the coffee maker on the counter by the fridge with two over-turned mugs next to it.

Carolyn filled her cup and reached for the sweetener but paused. Something about being here made her not want the sugar. She didn't want the milk, either. Something about the house, or the city, maybe the rectangular shape of the mugs, she didn't know, made her want to drink her coffee black.

She stepped out back to the veranda. A stone patio surrounded a pool shaped like a kidney bean; white chairs with bright red cushions lined the pool deck; and, at the back of the yard against a thick white fence, a massive garden grew rows of robust vegetables and was surrounded by flowers and ornamental grasses; to the right of the plot stood a small shed.

She felt lucky and robbed at the same time. Like the vacation could've been hers all this time.

“Morning.” She heard Gene's voice from somewhere in the yard.

He emerged from the shed and closed the door behind him, wearing coral shorts and a white polo. At the pool, dipped his foot in and grinned.

"Like a bath," he said.

Carolyn sipped her coffee, disappointed by the bitterness.

"Morning," she said, adjusting her skirt as he parked on the shaded chair next to her.

"I see you found the coffee. Nice dress."

After several minutes in the sun, the chair she'd chosen had become unbearably hot and she set her mug on the ground to fan herself. Squinting, she then shielded her face with her hands, but it wasn't much help—she wanted to gouge out her eyes.

"Sleep okay?" he asked.

"Great."

"What would you like to do today?"

"Peyton will probably have an opinion. If or when he gets up."

"Well," Gene said. "In the meantime?"

"Coffee. Maybe I'll try to get some work done."

He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes behind black sunglasses. His legs were furrier now than they had been before, his feet still large with long toes, but now with a tuft of hair across the top.

"And what's this work?"

"I'm a writer," she said, flipping the hair that was stuck to her neck.

"A writer of..."

She didn't want to admit the blog he'd seen was it.

"I'm also a wellness coach."

Gene laughed.

"Everyone's a wellness coach around here. Juicing, raw foods, this thing where you let leeches suck on your skin. Seems more common than a college degree—a certified wellness coach. Some people don't even get certified, they just think they can do it because they've read the internet."

Carolyn shifted in her seat.

"I actually help people. This one girl reached out to me because of my blog. I just influenced her without even trying."

"How are your parents?"

"So bright out," she said, rubbing her eyes.

"They okay?"

The last time he'd seen them was just before the East Coast Tour for her family's annual pig roast. She remembered the sheer tunic that had clung to her like plastic wrap after he'd pushed her in the pool. They'd snuck Coors from the fridge in the garage and poured them into plastic red cups to be inconspicuous. She remembered laughing a lot and avoiding her Uncle Charlie who still thought he was allowed to tickle her.

"They're good," she told him. "Sold their house ten years ago. Downsized."

"They had a nice house."

They'd taken her father's Cadillac out after people were too intoxicated to keep track of them, after sunset and the hot day had mellowed into cool evening. Windows down, the wind roared as she drove along Route 40. He asked her to pull over, and she did in the ghostly driveway of an abandoned nursery-rhyme park. Then he told her to recline her seat.

Peyton could've been conceived that night. He could've been conceived on any of their romps throughout the East Coast Tour. It could've been before then, too. She didn't know.

"I have my own recording studio now," he said, filling the silence. "Gigged out for many years. Then had enough of a network to do some recordings. Did that for a few years. Business grew."

"That's great," Carolyn said through her teeth. She stood to adjust her dress.

"I can show you the studio today, if you want? Does Peyton play any instruments?"

"He doesn't."

"Unless you have work to do."

Carolyn scanned the yard, and, in her periphery, caught Gene grinning at her.

"I can fit it in later," she said.

Gene clapped.

"Yes! You're here! Let's have fun!" He checked inside and clapped again. "There's my boy!"

Gene held the door for her, motioning for her to enter, and as she passed, he puffed out his chest so her arm brushed against the buttons of his shirt.

Inside, a groggy Peyton rested at the granite island. Carolyn joined him, and Gene leaned against the counter by the stainless-steel sink.

"Coffee?" Gene chuckled. "Mornings are not friendly to you?"

"Mom said I can't have coffee until I'm eighteen."

Gene gawked at Carolyn, his mouth agape.

"I seem to remember your mom telling me many years ago that she was going to let her kid drink coffee whenever he wanted. Carolyn? Senior week in Ocean City. We stumbled down the boardwalk looking for a coffee shop open early on Sunday."

"We walked ten blocks."

"Cool story, you guys."

Surprised, Gene looked between the two.

"It was cool! We were really cool," Gene said. "How have you not told him how cool we were?"

"She hasn't told me anything about you."

Gene nodded, thrust his hips to pull his body away from the counter, and went to the coffee maker. He flipped an unused mug and poured a steaming black stream into it, the sound bubbling off of the tiled backsplash.

"From your old man, to the young man. Have at it," he said, presenting the cup.

Peyton stared at the mug and then straight at Carolyn, cracking a smile. His took a sip, and his face soured.

"He doesn't need coffee," she said.

"The man is clearly having trouble with his morning here," Gene said.

"Yeah, Mom. Trouble."

Carolyn pushed her mug towards Gene, and he noticed her full cup.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I want a fresh one."

Gene emptied her cup and refilled it, placing the cream and sugar in front of her.

"I didn't think you liked it black," he said.

In the late morning, they drove through Miami and Gene pointed out interesting buildings along the way. Carolyn hadn't been there long enough the first time to remember the city, so she nodded and gazed out the passenger window through her large round sunglasses, admiring the sights. She could tell from his silence in the backseat that Peyton was not awake.

"There's the basketball stadium," he said, signaling a right turn.

"Peyton," Carolyn said.

"Huh?" He leaned forward.

"Basketball."

She heard him flop back against the leather seat.

They pulled onto a bridge to cross a sparkling bay, and the stadium shrunk in Carolyn's side mirror. As massive yachts floated past, she expected dolphins to leap up from the water.

They rode in Gene's luxury SUV with heated seats and a sunroof. His dark curly hair gelled in tight ringlets, his stubble closely trimmed—Gene looked far from the scrawny kid with the poofy hair he used to be. He looked fancy. Dignified, or something. They'd both changed over the years, but when Carolyn caught a glimpse of her scowling lips in the mirror, she pulled back her shoulders and tried to smile.

And then there was the arm brush in the kitchen earlier—remembering it gave her a feeling she hadn't felt since high school. She glanced at his hands on the wheel. They were thicker than they used to be. Who knew who else he'd touched.

She put it out of her mind as they reached the end of the bridge.

"South Beach," he said. "Five more minutes."

She glanced back at Peyton who gazed out the window.

"Where's LeBron?" he asked.

"In Cleveland," Gene said.

They passed manicured palms casting prickly shadows onto the street and then turned right.

"Lincoln Road Mall," Gene said. "Carolyn, dear, you may want to do some shopping."

Carolyn scanned the stores, spotting a boutique with oversized tunics and handbags in the front window.

"That's all she does," Peyton said.

"Do not," Carolyn said.

"And get divorced."

Gene pulled into a parking garage and took an immediate spot on the right. He lowered his sunglasses and peered at Carolyn as Peyton got out of the car and closed his door. She reached for her seat belt, but Gene stopped her with his hand.

"Recent?" he asked.

"Last week, actually."

"I'm sorry,"

"Don't be."

Grinning, Gene removed his hand and unbuckled his seat belt. Peyton waited for him outside his door.

"He was like the total opposite of you," Peyton said.

"Is that so?" Gene said, and as they stepped into the sunshine, he adjusted the sunglasses on his face.

After half a block, they faced a wall of black glass. Gene waved at his reflection and two doors immediately parted. They entered into a large lobby that was gray floor-to-ceiling and had a modern black sofa and receptionist's desk where a girl with red hair and equally red lips waited. As they approached, she lifted the white sunglasses from her eyes.

"Emma," he said, taking Carolyn under the elbow, "this is Carolyn and Peyton. My guests."

The girl nodded and pushed a button which opened another set of black doors.

"Slate floor," he said as they passed the desk.

"Everything is so dark," Peyton said.

"Musicians like it that way," Gene said. "Good atmosphere."

"You would know," she said. She felt him squeeze her elbow and then put his hand on her back as they passed through a short hallway to a door with an illuminated red sign that read "Recording in Progress." Gene motioned for them to be quiet.

"Silverfish is here this entire month," he said. "Pey, you like Silverfish?"

Peyton froze.

"Silverfish? As in the band, Silverfish?" Gene motioned for him to keep his voice down.

"They are fantastic. Very chill. Don't need a lot of fuss. They're good live, they're good in the studio. I'm sure they're good in bed."

Carolyn heard Peyton snicker and was thankful for the darkness because she was certain her ears went red. She was about to be introduced to the greatest pop-artist of the year as Peyton's mother, the only credit to her name, and she'd all of a sudden stepped into the middle of Gene's life after all these years like it was somehow normal. It wasn't normal. It felt like an interruption, like something was now unbalanced. And she realized, deep down, she didn't want it to be this way.

They entered the recording booth which had a massive panel covered with knobs and buttons that spanned the length of the room. A large piece of glass separated them from the

recording space and they could see the band positioned around their instruments—a shiny drum set, a couple of electric guitars, a synthesizer, and on a tall stool in front of a microphone, sat a woman with long hair the color of white frosting.

The man at the control panel removed his headphones and held up his hand up to Gene. Carolyn eyed his stringy hair and scruffy beard, and as Gene pumped his hand, thought there was something familiar about him.

“Do you remember Terry?” Gene asked.

Terry stood, his Hawaiian shirt wrinkled at his waist.

“Carolyn!” he said, extending his arms. As they embraced, she smelled cigarettes and an abundance of cologne.

“Terry. I had no idea.”

Gene evaluated the band and leaned against the back wall with his arms crossed, a big grin on his face. Carolyn, meanwhile, examined Terry who hardly resembled his former self. His once-lanky body had ballooned with a generous belly and he now preferred to breathe through his mouth.

“How they doing today?” Gene asked.

“Dope as always. They’re like sold on this one beat for “Surfside” you know with the super mellow guitar that sounds like if the sun were a cat or whatever. I think they’re figuring it out. Want me to ask?”

“Nah.”

Terry’s eyes glanced over at Peyton and then between Carolyn and Gene.

“He sure looks like you, Carolyn,” Terry said. “Wow.”

“Only fair,” she said.

Gene pulled away from the wall and put Peyton into a headlock.

“I might have not been around, but this guy’s my kid.”

Peyton tolerated the gesture until he was released.

“I’m lucky my son had such a fantastic mother.” Gene put his hand on Carolyn’s back.

Carolyn noticed they’d ignored the band who studied the booth, and that the drummer, a muscular man wearing a baseball cap, waved at them with his drum sticks.

“Shit,” Terry said, spotting him. He pushed a button and spoke into a small microphone. “My bad. We had a little reunion going on back here. Wassup?”

“A reunion?” the singer said into her mic, her voice raspy and light.

Terry hit the button again and said, “Gene’s long-lost son.”

He was never lost, Carolyn thought.

“Right on,” the drummer said, poking his hair up into his hat with the end of a drum stick.

“Aww,” the singer said. “We’re gonna break if that’s cool with you guys.”

Gene leaned over and pulled the microphone towards him.

“I’ll listen to the morning stuff.”

“Your ears are why we’re here.”

"I'll try to not disappoint."

"I doubt that you are capable."

Carolyn shifted her weight and glanced over at Peyton who gaped at the band as they left their instruments and exited through a wide door to the left. When Terry opened the booth's door, the woman with the white hair was on the other side, smiling, her lips closed, her eyes dark and locked on Gene. Carolyn tucked her hair behind her ears, trying to remember her name. It was something short, she knew. Something cool.

Silverfish had won five Grammys including one for best music video where the woman had walked through various scenes almost naked except for a silver thong and two starfish she held over her breasts. Carolyn, the first time she saw it, had banned Peyton from watching it. Seeing him now, gawking at her, made her realize he had probably done just the opposite.

Noticing Peyton's stares, the woman gave him a warm smile. As the band members filled in, they shook Peyton's hand and introduced themselves. Gene pulled Carolyn towards the singer.

"Carolyn, this is Desi. Desi, I'd like you to meet the mother of my son."

Desi put her hands together like she was going to pray and bent towards Carolyn who tried to nod her head in a like gesture.

"You are a lucky woman," Desi said. "Cute dress."

Carolyn blushed, feeling the need to clarify that she and Gene weren't together just as Desi brushed past her and grabbed Gene's face, planting her lips on his. He took her head in his hands and closed his eyes, seeming to wait until the woman was finished. When she let go, she turned to leave, and, as she passed him, punched the guitarist on the shoulder.

Carolyn's stomach lurched as the singer strutted from the room. Gene watched her go. Everyone watched her go.

"She always does that," Gene said.

"If Desi did that to me every time she saw me. Holy shit," Terry said. "What the fuck is that."

"She's just special that's all," Gene said, stepping toward Carolyn and patting her on the shoulder.

Carolyn managed a smile.

Peyton had followed the drummer into the studio and tapped a drum stick to the cymbal. And when the drummer pointed to the bass, Peyton gave it a push and a soft 'thump' followed. Carolyn's heart gave a similar sound as Desi entered the studio and Gene gazed at her.

It dawned on Carolyn that a famous singer knew Gene better than she did even though she was the one who had his child.

She slipped from the booth and darted down the dark hall, reaching Emma who was still hidden behind her glasses, staring at her phone. When she saw Carolyn, she leaned forward and gave an uncertain smile.

Down the street, Carolyn reached a plaza that was paved with red bricks and shaded by vibrant trees and healthy ferns. Tropical flowers bloomed in well-watered beds and women paraded past her in dangerous heels, designer purses dangling from their elbows.

Carolyn adjusted her dress and glanced back upon the shaded sidewalk from where she came, but Gene had not followed. She scanned the stores, finding a familiar coffee chain across the plaza, and hurried to it before she sweated completely through her dress.

At a table beneath a relentless air conditioning vent, she sat, noticing a little boy about the age of five burst into the store, followed by a woman in a flowery dress and a smart-looking man. As they admired something in the pastry case, Carolyn thought of Peyton as a child—his short buzzed hair, and his sweet baby face. And when the man put his hand just below the woman's waist, it made her think of Gene.

Carolyn tapped her finger on the table before whipping out her phone.

Bella,

I take it all back.

If I could do it all over again, what would I do? I don't know. How can I answer that when it will solve nothing for me at this point? I am where I am and nothing is going to change that except I can choose where I go from this point.

The same goes for you. Why am I telling you to be independent and to do everything by yourself when you can find someone to be with? Someone who can make you happy? I hope it's not too late for me. It's certainly not too late for you.

We're in this together now! Find someone. Find someone and keep them and hold on to them and build a life together. Get coffee together. Do stuff together.

I have someone in mind. Do you?

Dating websites. They're apparently the thing now. Do that. Do something. Do anything. Just let me know how it goes.

--C

She set down her phone and gazed outside just as Gene emerged from the shadowy side of the street, walking towards her into the sun.

Eight

I peeked through the side window by the stairs to his empty porch. He'd leave for work soon and then I'd wait the rest of the day for him to come home. His door opened, and a bright blonde emerged from his house, an oversized purse slung over her shoulder. Bryan joined her, rubbing his eyes, and she touched him on his arm before reaching to give him a deep hug. As they embraced, he glanced at my window, his stare landing in my chest, and I collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Just then, Alejandro came in the front door. Discovering me, he gave me a curious look.

"What's your problem?" he said, tossing his keys on the small table in the entry.

I stood and wiped my hands on my shirt.

"This is why you need a babysitter."

I sighed.

"And what's new with you?"

"Just work."

"What's her name?"

"I see next-door Bryan had to work last night, too." Alejandro laughed, crossing through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Outside, I heard the familiar squeak of Bryan's door, so I hurried to the front window and peered through a narrow slit in the curtain. The blonde was gone, and Bryan wore his adorable blue scrubs with a red baseball cap, a general niceness to his face. The lights on his silver truck blinked as he approached. Leaving for work, I assumed.

At the dining room table I sat, wondering about the blonde. Did they work together? Maybe they were often in a hospital room together, pondering the condition of an unconscious patient. Maybe she had her hands on her hips and a concerned look on her face that he thought was cute. Maybe he held a clipboard to his chest when she finally caught his stare. Maybe suddenly the clipboard fell to the floor and she leapt into his arms...

From the kitchen, Alejandro shut the refrigerator with a thud and asked me if I wanted any eggs. I didn't answer, and instead opened my laptop to discover another message from Carolyn.

Girl!

Have you made a profile yet? If not, DO IT!

I'm going for it tonight.

What a thrill! I feel like a kid again!

--C

<3

P.S. what do you have to lose???

PPS. Tell me how it goes!!!

With a blue bowl in his hands, Alejandro emerged, stirring something with a fork.

"Sis," he said.

I ignored him as I found the dating site and faced a picture of a beaming couple with bleach-white smiles, their arms wrapped around each other. Dropping my face in my hands, I heard the stirring stop as Alejandro came around to my side of the table. Paralyzed by both embarrassment and hopelessness, I kept picturing the blonde. I'd never even stepped foot in Bryan's yard and there she was sleeping at his house.

"I'll make you some eggs," he said. "You're getting too skinny."

He pushed through the kitchen door with a grin on his face. And as something sizzled on the stove, I stared back at the computer and clicked "Join."

Nine

The day couldn't have gone better (besides Peyton's mood which seemed to have followed them like a little cloud from the moment they'd left the band). They'd visited stores, strolled Ocean Drive, paused at Gianni Versace's house and the steps where he'd been murdered. Gene always with his hand on Peyton's shoulder. The two were copies of each other. Peyton just a smaller version—their boxy shoulders, the way their feet stuck out just slightly as they walked. Even their butts had a similar sway.

Her purse vibrated and, as Peyton and Gene crossed Ocean Drive, she retrieved her phone, cradling it in her palm.

Roger: *Can we talk? Please??*

She caught up with the guys across the street and sandwiched herself between them.

"Everything okay?" Gene raised his eyebrows and glanced down at her bag.

Carolyn beamed and hooked her arm with his.

"Couldn't be better."

At dusk, they sat on the upstairs terrace of Smith and Wollensky, enjoying the view of the water and the occasional splash of a small wave. Carolyn wore the long, coral dress that Gene had bought for her that afternoon, which felt especially nice to wear while sipping a fresh mojito. They ordered appetizers and Carolyn ignored two more buzzes from her phone.

Peyton, however, pouted in his chair with his arms crossed. When Carolyn suggested he try his shrimp cocktail, he shrugged, and said he'd rather hang out with the band.

"We're here on this great trip. Not everything is awful," she said.

Gene leaned back in his chair, his mouth concerned, while Peyton glared at the beach.

With her eyes, Carolyn pleaded at Gene for help. He leaned forward in his seat, an uncomfortable look on his face.

"Pey." Gene scratched his nose. "You wouldn't have had a good time anyway. That scene it's--"

Peyton flashed his eyes at him.

"—it's not that great."

"Doubt that," Peyton said.

Gene leaned over, clapped his hand on his shoulder and gave him a little shake.

"How about along the beach. I'll meet up with you once I—"

Gene shook his mojito, then leaned over and whispered something in Peyton's ear which made the boy's face brighten. He shot up from his chair and waved to his mom.

"See you later," he said to Carolyn who, perplexed, watched him weave through the restaurant tables.

"What did you say to him?" she asked.

Gene shrugged and took a swallow of his drink.

"It's guy stuff," he said, pulling his sunglasses down onto his face. His charm was almost irritating. Were it not for the buzz from her beverage, Carolyn would've been more annoyed. Instead, after glancing down at her purse, she leaned over and put her hand on his arm. Gene focused on it, his lips flat.

"Cheers," he said, lifting his drink to her. "It's great you brought him here."

A couple of seagulls flew past, landing lightly on the concrete barrier that ran between the beach and the grassy plaza to Ocean Drive. Convertibles crawled along the road for show; the air smelled like fun.

"He's a great kid." Carolyn said.

"So I'd like to take him out tonight. Just me and him. See a movie or something. If that's alright. Can't make up for all the years, but maybe it will make a memory that lasts."

Below on the sand, Peyton picked up a shell and tossed it in the sea.

"I have to tell you something," she said.

"Okay." Gene cleared his throat. "I have to say that whenever a woman says that to me, I—"

"What is happening? I can't describe this. Today, after the studio and then all the time we've spent together as a family—"

"Carolyn." Gene removed his hand from beneath hers, placing it on his knee.

"I am still in love with you. I love you again or before or the same as it always has been deep down. Like this question has always been. The 'what if I'd never left' question. The what if I'd begged you to come back with me back then. The what if we'd made it work?"

"Carolyn."

"You turned out completely different than I thought. Knew you were talented, but what you've done. It's... I'm almost jealous. I am jealous. I wish I were you."

"It's not all that it seems."

"I want... I don't know. Could we be a family?"

"Carolyn—" Gene winced.

"You loved me then. I remember who we were."

"It's been sixteen years."

"Yes. But it feels like yesterday, doesn't it?"

"It does, but—"

"I've seen the way you look at him. He's fascinating to you. He's exactly like you. And I... I can be what you want me to be. I am me. I am who you loved. It's just been space. I mean—"

"You were *married*, Carolyn."

"What difference does it make? I brought him down here thinking it would help him not be like us. Help him be more responsible, I guess. But what if what we were was supposed to be? What if we were right and just everything else we did was wrong?"

Gene rubbed his jaw with a pained expression as Carolyn smelled a whiff of trash. A waiter arrived and asked them what else they would like to order.

"I think we're done, actually." Gene wound his index finger by his cheek and pulled his credit card from his pocket.

Carolyn felt like she had when she'd found Mimi's messages. A simultaneous sting and sinking feeling—the feeling knowing a brutal truth. Before, it had made her smash glass against her house, but now she felt like melting into the floor.

The waiter returned with the receipt which Gene signed and slipped under his fork. Even though the sun had almost set, Carolyn retrieved her sunglasses from her purse and pulled them over her burning eyes.

"I'll call you a car."

Tapping her on the shoulder twice as a goodbye, Gene left the table. Carolyn pulled her phone from her purse.

Roger: Carolyn. I just want to talk. Is Peyton there? He's not answering my texts.

Carolyn: For the love of god. We are in Florida. He met his Dad. Maybe he's not answering because you walked out??

Carolyn leaned back in her chair and dropped her phone in her bag, hoping it fell with such a force as to break the damn thing, hoping Roger would share her particular feeling of misery at the ocean.

She got out of the car. Gene's white house looked the same as it did the night before but was now laced with an undesired familiarity, like it was framed by a mistake. As she approached the porch, the door opened, and she hoped that Gene had changed his mind, that he and Peyton were there, waiting for her. She quickened her pace but, to her surprise, came face to face with a petite woman with black hair and thick glasses.

"I'm Darla," she said, giving Carolyn a perturbed look.

For a housekeeper, Darla was elegant, Carolyn thought as she followed her into the kitchen.

"You want food?" Darla said, running her finger along the counter, tapping it three times at the corner by the fridge.

"No. Yes. I don't know."

"You want food?" Darla repeated.

"No, thank you." Carolyn leaned on the counter, her head in her hands.

"He said to feed you."

Carolyn nodded, and Darla went to work, opening the fridge and removing a plate from the shelf. She was dressed in black, her dark hair cut into a blunt edge at her shoulders.

"I'm sorry. Thank you. I didn't think to expect his housekeeper."

"What's that?"

"It's just weird for me. To be waited on like this."

Darla froze.

"I'm his *wife*."

Carolyn covered her face, the whole thing making terrible sense.

Darla pointed at her face. "I'm not that special." She ripped the sheet of plastic wrap from the plate which was full of assorted, wrinkled pieces of chicken. "No children, so I guess I'm not. But you did. The child. Now you're special."

"I'm sorry."

"Maybe he will be happy now."

Carolyn stood and pushed back her chair.

"I had no idea."

"Why would you? He does what he does. Doesn't he?"

Carolyn nodded.

"Doesn't he? He did that to you."

"I thought—"

"He did that to you." Darla balled the plastic wrap and tossed it in a trash can she pulled from a cupboard. "Who knows who else. You want this?"

Carolyn moved towards the back door, longing to be outside.

"Do you know where they are?" she asked.

"I get a text "Out tonight. Feed her." They aren't coming back until tomorrow. That is always what I know. He has parties. And then after-parties, and then all sorts of disgusting things I don't even want to know. But I know. And if it's Silverfish. Definitely. Him and Desi."

"But he wouldn't take Peyton there would he?"

Darla's expression delivered a painful clarity. She picked up a drumstick.

"You're so dumb, I could throw this at you right now."

Earlier, the singer, with her arms wrapped around Gene, pressing a kiss flat on his lips. The way Gene had dismissed himself from dinner.

"And now his baby momma is in my house!"

Darla launched the drumstick which spiraled towards Carolyn's head. She dodged it and shot out back, and as she shut the door, a meaty thigh thudded against the window pane, leaving a round grease print when it fell. Carolyn choked, fearing Darla wasn't finished, but the woman strutted from the kitchen.

Carolyn sweated in the evening air which felt hotter than it had at sunset. Mosquitos buzzed around her ears. She kicked off her shoes and flopped on the chaise, until her shirt clung to her chest with sweat and a bug bite stung on her foot. A light turned on upstairs. The roar of an approaching airplane rattled her. Her mind reeling, she stood and jumped the three steps off the porch, sprinted across the patio, and leapt into the glistening surface of the pool.

Ten

I had a message ready for Carolyn about my new dating profile and the exchange I'd had with the guy who liked chocolate milk so much, he'd featured it as the first sentence in his bio, beneath the photo of him in a Ravens hat. Bearded and brown-eyed, he seemed like any other guy, I guess, and even though he'd stopped responding to me, I felt encouraged.

But when I wrote to Carolyn to fill her in, it wouldn't send, and I discovered, at the top of the screen, that the icon bar had a question mark where the Wi-Fi signal should've been.

I glanced through the window to the light-blue siding of Bryan's house.

At his door, I knocked and pulled a strand of hair from my mouth, admiring the brass knocker. Bryan opened, wearing a Rutgers sweatshirt and loose-fitting jeans, looking as if he'd been up all night. When he saw me, his face softened, and I felt my cheeks flush as I stared down at his bare feet.

"What's up? Come in. Everything okay?"

Inside, I discovered our houses were almost identical in layout, except his walls weren't cracked plaster like mine they were smooth and painted a cool blue that made the polished hardwood floors shine. A ceiling fan hung in the front room, and chair molding ran around the perimeter. Despite the renovations, I was surprised to find it rather messy for a guy I had assumed was perfect. The dining room table was filled with various boxes, stacks of magazines, and an unsorted pile of mail. By the front door, next to several pairs of shoes, was a pile of socks like he'd taken them off when he'd come home and there they would sit forever. In the living room, several bowls were gathered together on the floor next to an over-sized chair, their abandoned utensils sticking up like white flags for help. The place made me feel a little better about myself—yeah, I was fat, but—at least I was clean?

"How's it going?" He plopped into the over-sized chair which made him look small. Rubbing his eyes, he yawned.

"Are you okay?" I leaned against the entryway wall.

"Yeah. I was over-night and it always throws me off the next day even when I nap." He gestured towards the kitchen. "Actually," he said, "want some coffee?"

Yes, I wanted coffee. I wanted anything he had to offer. I nodded, realizing my face was stuck in a dumb stare like I'd been the one who had worked all night.

He rose and headed for the kitchen motioning for me to follow, which I did, and discovered that it was identical to mine—linoleum counters, a porcelain sink, an old electric oven. We had the same 1950's dream kitchen no one has wanted to deal with since.

"Nice sink," I said.

Bryan smiled.

From a silver bag on the counter, he scooped out grounds and dumped them into a metal filter.

"That's the big project. Knew it would have to be done at some point when I bought the place. Just haven't had the time or the money. Soon, maybe. I don't really care that much."

He filled the machine's reservoir with water and flicked a button, so a green light popped on. Brushing his hands, he turned, leaned against the counter, and looked at me. Our eyes met and I felt compelled to fill the silence in the room.

"You can use my kitchen when you rip yours out," I suggested.

"Hey, thanks!" He turned and, from a cupboard behind him, retrieved two red mugs, setting them on the counter.

"I'm serious. You've helped me more than you know."

The brown liquid dribbled into the pot and as soon as enough had accumulated, Bryan filled each cup and returned the pot to finish brewing.

"I'm happy to do it." He grabbed a half-gallon of milk from the fridge and offered it to me. I took it, feeling weak, because I felt like the moment to say why I'd come had passed and we'd crossed into "being friends" territory. Terrifying as the thought was, I wished for a million more coffee dates. I could barely pour my milk.

He watched me struggle to not spill and in those silent moment of me dressing my beverage, I pictured him at work, wherever it was he worked, whatever he did in the blue scrubs I'd seen him wearing to and from his house.

"Where do you work anyway?" I asked.

Returning the milk to the fridge, he sighed.

"General Medical. It was a rough night."

We simultaneously drank from our mugs.

"I'm a nurse," he said. "It was busy and one of my co-workers was caught stealing prescriptions which is just totally messed up. I thought she was a good person, too."

I cupped my mug between my hands, staring at three tiny bubbles clinging to one another on the liquid's surface, contemplating all the other people he knew and interacted with every day. How much time he'd probably spent that day thinking about the prescription thief.

Bryan cleared his throat. I put down my drink and rubbed my eyes.

"Things haven't gone how I thought they would. Life-wise. For me."

Immediately, I regretted saying it. Why volunteer such personal information? But when my voice cracked, and I struggled to stop my quivering bottom lip, Bryan set down his drink, came over to me, and embraced me. I could've wailed. Everything in me wanted to cry on his shoulder. But I didn't. Because I knew of all the things I wanted right then, blubbering in Bryan's kitchen was not one of them.

"It's okay." Bryan stepped back.

I nodded, and we stood there, silent.

"Your brother told me about your situation."

"I just shut down. I don't know. I wish I hadn't."

"It's okay."

"I need to change. I am changing. You—"

Bryan shrugged and put his arms on my shoulders.

"Give yourself credit."

It was as if his arms on me had made a runway straight for his face, and I don't know what made me do it. It was like garbage falling down a chute. Gravity. Dumb decisions are from gravity. I leaned forward and puckered my lips, but instead of meeting his face, my lips met the flat of his palm. And it smelled like coffee.

"Whoa." He dropped his hands. His expression had fallen, too.

"I'm so sorry."

He stared at the ceiling.

"I think, we need to—"

"I—I just came here to tell you the Wi-Fi wasn't working! Not to do that. I—"

"What?"

I put my hands to my face.

"Wi-Fi," I mumbled.

I heard his footsteps leave the room, and when their sound changed on the dining room's hardwood floor, I went to the kitchen door and saw him stoop in front of a desk in the living room, examining a box with lights on it. The desk sat where the TV was in my house.

He picked up the box, pressed a button, and then placed it back in its place.

"Should be good," he said. With that, I jetted to the front door.

"Wait," he said.

I should've left. Gone home. Spared myself from drowning in embarrassment.

"I think it's best we kept this professional," he said.

I'd been staring at the doorway to freedom, but I turned, confused, and faced him.

Seeing my expression, he shifted his weight between his feet.

"Probably better to keep things platonic, right?"

I tried to identify the strange feeling in my chest.

"What arrangement?" My voice had developed a wounded tone.

With a deep inhale, Bryan ran his fingers through his hair.

"Arrangement?" I asked. "Like, neighbors?"

He looked uncomfortable.

"I guess he didn't tell you. Well, actually, it's obvious he didn't. I think it's messed up, so I will."

I realized I was paralyzed and couldn't have left if I wanted to.

"When I moved in, we'd just wave to each other in passing. But after about a month, one night when I came home from work, he was sitting on my stoop, looking upset. I didn't even know you lived there until he told me."

When I realized he was talking about Jandro, I felt like I had fallen through the floor.

“He told me about your mom. And how you kinda gave up on everything. It’s crazy that guy only got ten years.”

He searched my face as if to verify the fact, and I thought I would be sick. The thought of Chuck was nauseating enough but knowing he had probably long finished his sentence was worse. It felt like I was still serving mine.

“Look. You’re really great. I think you’re doing great, but while your brother pays me, I should keep a professional distance, if you know what I mean. Nurse to patient, but in the best way, you know?”

I swallowed hard.

“Jandro pays you?”

Bryan hesitated.

“He pays me to look after you.”

Eleven

Downstairs, Darla beat her to them, her voice like the yip of small dog. Gene's voice growled something in response, while Carolyn listened to the squabble from the upstairs landing.

Darla's yelling only ceased with a slam of the front door, and Carolyn watched her climb into to her pearl-white SUV and peel from the driveway.

Of course, it was white, she thought.

In the kitchen, she found a sunburnt Peyton throwing cheese puffs at Gene's gaping mouth. In between tosses, Gene drummed his hands on the counter like it kept his energy going.

Seeing her, Peyton tossed a puff her way, but it fell short in an orange tumble to the floor.

Frowning, Carolyn leaned against the counter, her eyes hard and unimpressed. Gene grunted as he put Peyton in a headlock, who then punched him in the gut. Gene's face formed a tight smile as he tried to deflect the hits. They played as if sixteen years apart had never happened. They played as if she didn't exist.

Gene released him and got in his face.

"You could've called!" he sneered.

Peyton mimicked him—the two of them looking at the other like they had a secret.

"You could have called. Yes," Carolyn said. "Or answered texts. Peyton, I should take your phone."

Gene pretended to be concerned, and Peyton avoided her by stuffing puffs in his mouth.

"I thought I was going to have to report missing persons," she said. "Or a *kidnapping*."

"We're fine, Mom." Peyton said.

"You said a few hours. That you'd be back later."

"A few hours. It is later," Gene said. "See you've met Darla."

"You said she was your housekeeper."

"I never said that but at this point, she pretty much is."

"You never said she's your wife!"

"That, my dear, is a very long story."

"I'm sure it is. Just like your bachelor excursion to loser-city."

Peyton shot her a look.

"Don't say that to him!" he said.

Carolyn held up her hand.

"Get your things, Pey. We're leaving."

Peyton and Gene glanced at each other. Then Peyton nodded his head towards his mother.

"Carolyn—" Gene said.

"The point of this trip was for you two to finally meet. God knows who else you've met along the way." Carolyn gestured up and down their bodies.

"Carolyn—"

"Have to take him to a doctor. You haven't changed a bit. You piece of slime. You piece of selfish slime."

"Mom!"

"And don't think I'm bringing you back—"

"Carolyn!" Gene shouted. "Let's be reasonable here."

Peyton smacked his hand on the granite which startled Carolyn.

"I want to move here," Peyton said. Gene put his hand on his back.

"What?" Carolyn felt her breath vanish.

Gene crossed his arms and leaned against the counter, his smug lips pressed thin.

"I want to stay here. You said yourself you thought I'd like it here. Well, I do."

Carolyn glared at them, their faces more similar than ever. The softness of Peyton's cheeks something she'd always attributed to herself, was gone.

"He'll use you as long as you fit his purpose and then he'll ditch you," she said.

"That doesn't even make any sense," Gene said.

"He's my *dad*."

"No way this is allowed to just happen. What about your things at home? What about Amelia?"

"Suddenly you care about her? I'm sixteen and I can decide what I want."

She shook her finger at them before turning and rushing down the hall. At the stairs, she missed the first step and almost fell before catching herself with her hand on the railing.

In her room, her suitcase lay open on the floor. She threw her clothes, toiletries, and shoes into it, pausing as she reached for the sun dress he'd bought her, the light skirt crumpled in a ball. She picked it up and chucked it in the trash.

She plopped on the edge of the bed to think. Of course, Peyton had been swept away by the whole thing. She had been, too.

Her phone buzzed, and she retrieved it from the nightstand.

Roger: *I'm in Florida. I came to see you guys.*

Carolyn: *Why?!*

Roger: *Where are you?*

Carolyn: *Do you know what you did to me?*

Roger: *Have you checked the bank account?*

Carolyn stared at the chaise in the corner of her room, trying to make sense of it all, before logging into her account. Upon seeing the balance, she gasped.

Account balance: \$10,112.50

Pending withdrawals: 0.00
Available balance: \$10,112.50

Closing her eyes, she heard Gene and Peyton's voices downstairs. Nothing made sense anymore—she had no control. With a sigh, she stared down at the screen of her phone and texted Gene's address to Roger.

Twelve

"You don't need him!" Carolyn said.

Via video chat, her face filled my computer screen. It was rounder than the photo on her site, her eyes were puffier, too. I knew she was right: I should forget what had happened, but I felt even more pathetic than before I'd tried to change.

"I'm telling you! Forget him."

Carolyn, however, kept glancing off screen ever since we'd begun our video chat. She seemed distracted by something, irritated.

I put my head in my hands.

"What am I supposed to do? You tell me one thing and then switch to another."

"Whatever you want to do. That's all anyone does. Welcome to the planet. It's a great big world full of surprises."

Carolyn looked away again and seemed to hear something that interested her. Before I could say anything, she'd popped from her spot leaving me to stare at the back of the desk chair.

"What is your deal?" I shouted.

She returned and parked in her chair, a defensive look on her face.

"Sorry?" She placed her hand on her chest. "You do realize I'm helping you."

"One minute I need a man, the other I don't need anyone. How is either an answer to my problem?"

Carolyn sighed, tracing her eyebrow with her finger.

"It's your life. Maybe I can't help you after all."

She shook her head and glanced off-screen. Then the chat went suddenly dark.

Thirteen

Carolyn couldn't believe Bella's attitude. She had enough problems with one child. Now it felt like she had two. She rubbed her eyes, irritated, and kept picturing Bella's mooney face. The girl was larger than she'd pictured her to be. She seemed friendly enough but being blamed for all her problems... that was the ridiculous part.

Even worse, she'd heard someone arrive at Gene's house—a female. Not Darla—no shouting—but a light voice that seemed familiar.

She heard the voices go out back, and from her bedroom window, she discovered Gene and Peyton by the pool joined by the slender woman with long white hair. Gene put his arm around her and she wrapped her arms around his waist, her fingers interlaced.

Carolyn felt her stomach flip. Into the back of their heads Carolyn shot lasers of hatred, hoping their skulls would burst or, at least, hurt enough to let each other go. But before she could zap them apart with any more negativity, the doorbell rang.

Carolyn dreaded seeing Roger, but she also feared that it was Darla. How much worse could the woman do beyond flying chicken wings! Tossed poultry was traumatic enough, what if she threw a punch? A knife? A lawsuit? Desi had no chance.

The doorbell sounded again, and Carolyn realized that the backyard three probably couldn't hear it. If she answered, and it was Darla, what would she do? It wasn't necessarily on Carolyn where Darla's anger was focused—Gene definitely bore the brunt of her fury (as he should). Besides, Carolyn figured, feeling lighter, why would Darla ring her own doorbell?

Downstairs, the bell-ringer had switched to a knock by the time Carolyn reached the door. She turned the knob and swung it open. It was Roger. Roger with two police officers.

"We're not together," he said.

"Gene Kovacs here?" the female officer asked.

"Out back." Carolyn thumbed behind her shoulder, opening the door wider. The officers entered and headed through the house while Carolyn stared at Roger.

"What the hell, Roger?"

He wore an Eagle's ballcap and his face was thinner than the last time she'd seen him, grimacing in the courtroom's wooden chair.

"What do they want?" He pointed to the back of the house.

"What do you want? Don't you know this is completely—"

"Did you see the bank account?" he asked, stepping inside.

"Another thing you should explain. I don't need you to—"

"I've made a mistake," he said.

Carolyn held up her hands to stop him as the officers went out back.

"Save it," she said. "Come on."

Outside, Peyton stood at the deep end of the pool. When he recognized Roger, his eyes widened.

At the shallow end, by the steps with the metal handrail, Gene and Desi spoke with the officers as Carolyn and Roger stopped at the bottom of the porch.

"Get a warrant then! What proof does she have? None! It's a baseless accusation from a bitter ex-wife." Gene was animated, his face bright red.

"We are obligated to follow up on all domestic abuse allegations," the male officer said.

"That's all they are. You can't arrest me."

Carolyn covered her mouth, realizing Gene definitely would've preferred flung poultry.

"Quite a guy," Roger said under his breath.

"Where's Mimi?" Carolyn said through her teeth.

Roger nodded like he expected the question.

"She dumped you, didn't she?"

"No. Actually," Roger hesitated. "I was really dumb, Carolyn."

"There is no family anymore, even if you wanted. Peyton wants to move to here. You came all the way for nothing."

Roger studied Peyton, nodding as he thought.

"Why don't we all move here?" he said.

Carolyn tried to pretend the idea didn't thrill her, and the fact that Roger had suggested it felt like a piece to a puzzle she didn't know had gone missing.

She huffed.

"You seem to be forgetting everything that has happened the past six months."

Desi put her hands on her hips, her face wrinkled with concern. Today, she wasn't glamorous like in her music video, she looked like any other lady, just with weird hair.

Gene's eyes met Carolyn's then noticed Roger. The sight of them seemed to discourage him.

"There's no truth to this, right?" Desi asked.

Gene pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I never fucking hurt her."

"Gene—"

"It's to get back at me."

"It's going to be okay." Desi moved behind him and began to rub his back. "You have a good lawyer!"

But Gene stepped away, lifting his hands so that Desi's would fall from him.

"Hell of a mess now!" He pointed over to Peyton. "Find my son to find meaning? You said it. See his mom for the first time in almost twenty-years? Why did I think, even for a second, that this was a good idea?"

Desi crossed her arms.

"I was trying to help. I can't connect with you if you as a person are broken."

"Maybe best if you two talked inside?" Carolyn cupped her hands around her mouth. Desi and Gene gave her similar unimpressed looks.

"Hi, Peyton." Roger waved across the pool.

"Oh my god," he said.

Gene came over to the porch, pointing at Roger. "Okay. What's going on? Who the fuck is this?"

"Language," Carolyn said.

Gene's face looked like it would explode.

"My house," he said. "My language."

"Think of your audience!" Carolyn nodded towards Peyton.

"Gene Kovacs." Gene extended his hand to Roger who shook it. "My house. My soap opera, apparently."

"Roger Heffler. Carolyn's husband."

Gene looked between Carolyn and Roger, releasing his hand.

"Ex-husband," Carolyn said.

Desi slipped her arm into Gene's.

"I just want you to be happy," she said.

"I am happy!" Gene stepped away from her. "Or I was. Why did you think I was not happy? Everything was fine before. Now look at this? Do I look happy?"

Desi paused.

"But you always said that something was missing."

"Okay. The kid. I'm glad I met the kid. Yes. I'm glad. But other than that? A mess."

With that, Carolyn tugged on Roger's sleeve, and they made their way towards the pool as Desi and Gene began to bicker. Peyton, with his feet in the pool, sat hunched, and his head hung so low it was almost between his knees. Carolyn noticed the boniness of his spine sticking through his shirt.

"Roger's here," she said, trying to sound enthusiastic, knowing full-well it came out flat.

Peyton, silent, swirled his hands though the water.

Roger settled down next to him and patted him on his back.

"Hey, kid. Maybe weird for me to be here, but I just really needed to talk to you. To mom, too."

Peyton kept swirling as Desi yelled at Gene.

"Buffalo chicken? That was your idea! Just hire a caterer if you don't like the food. That was my mother's recipe."

"You were the one—"

"Those two. Wow," Carolyn said.

Roger cleared his throat.

"Peyton. I'm hoping we can talk. Can we talk?"

From the porch Gene shouted, “You know I can’t last that long! You want all of this magical stuff! Maybe lower your expectations!”

“You think no expectations will work?” Desi quipped.

Roger splashed some water onto Peyton’s knees, which reminded Carolyn of when they’d go to Peyton’s swim lessons. Peyton, always afraid of the water, would refuse to enter the pool. Roger would jump in first and splash the water on his knees so that once Peyton was used to the temperature, he’d jump in.

“Pey? What do you say? Can we go get a bite to eat?”

Carolyn saw Peyton take a deep breath. Then he slowly stood.

Looking at no one in particular, he wiped his hands on his shirt. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft and monotone.

“I hate you all.”

He marched past Gene and Desi who continued to argue, Gene gesturing wildly while Desi stood with her arms and legs crossed, leaning against the porch step’s railing. Neither noticed Peyton pass by, though Carolyn watched him disappear inside.

As she looked towards the house, Roger started going on about mid-life crises and how it had hit him like a train. She stopped listening, and suddenly grasped Peyton’s perspective. She thought she knew him—his hopes for his life, his girlfriend. How reluctant he had been to go on the trip. But she’d assumed he was just being a jerk, that he’d been uninterested in the idea of his biological father. But, she realized now, he wasn’t a jerk. She’d spent the whole visit fantasizing about a family, obsessed with her own happiness, that she’d completely overlooked his pain. She’d been no help at all.

Then she remembered Bella.

She stood and left Roger mid-sentence as she went towards the house. Gene and Desi paused when they saw her approach but resumed their quarrel when she had reached the door.

Inside, she sprinted up to her room.

Her computer, still open on her bed, was dark, and she tapped the space bar to awaken the screen.

You’re right, Bella. I’m so very sorry. I’d still like to help. I have an idea: Come to Miami? We can meet! Might be a good change for you. A chance to start over.

She sent the message, crossed the hall, and knocked on Peyton’s door.

Fourteen

For the first time ever, I sat on the stoop of my house. The sky was a deep purple, a thin line of orange behind the roofs across the street. A honking flock of geese flapped above, their voices louder than all the years I'd heard them from inside.

Overgrown grass crowded the sidewalk. The blades were respectable and strong, unlike the years I'd spent inside. Cut again and again, they kept on growing.

Bryan's truck pulled up, slowed in front of my house as if he couldn't believe that I was outside, then parked in his driveway. Two women were in the car with him, neither of them the blonde. When he got out, he hesitantly waved at me as the girls closed their doors, glancing between us.

They carried cardboard boxes filled with beer up the narrow concrete path to his porch. The tall one, who wore a lot of make-up, asked Bryan if he was going to invite me and he mumbled something that I couldn't hear. They reached his front door and he gave one more wave before he unlocked it. And as they went into the house, I heard the shorter girl mumble something and the other girl's tinny laugh. Then, music began.

For a moment, I pretended I could continue to enjoy my stoop as if nothing had happened, but the sky wasn't as inviting any more—it had faded into the starless void of early evening.

Down my walkway, I crossed the road, heading towards Main, wishing he watched me go, but I knew better. The word "arrangement" replayed in my head.

The cool air prickled my skin. A jacket would've been a good idea, locking the house even better. I pictured Bryan throwing back beers with those girls. I had been foolish enough to think that we could be close, to think that he would want me and my fifteen pounds lost against a lifetime of sloth. I didn't even know his last name.

But once I made it to town, all thoughts turned to her. They didn't sting like they used to or make my chest feel tight. Tears didn't spill from my eyes. This time, the thought of her made me stand up straight.

Hard to call it home after not being there for so long, but as I crossed the tracks, I felt the same rush I used to—the fear of the Laundromat and the replay of our final days, remembering the ambulance and the white sheet that covered her, waiting to be wheeled outside. Later, packing sparse boxes with Alejandro. The way she mumbled to herself as she stirred a pot of soup, how she smacked Alejandro aside the head when he was out of line. I wondered if he missed that, or if that was one thing he was happy was gone.

Two blocks past the train, I turned left onto my old street. I expected a restaurant like the pharmacist had said, but even his pharmacy was gone, turned into a frozen yogurt shop. My old house, and with it the neighboring group of homes and businesses was gone. Torn down. A monster row of houses with uniform brick walls and black shutters built in its place.

I collapsed onto a crumbling curb, feeling like I'd lost her all over again. But as I held my knees and stared at my feet, I knew that I shouldn't be so surprised that the world had changed while I was still.

I noticed that a little piece of grass sprouted up between the curb and sidewalk.

I give up so easily, I thought.

Instead of returning home, at Main Street, I went left, and strolled through the center of town. The gift card shop was still there, but the Army Surplus had become an arts store, and the convenience store, a yoga studio.

Two blocks past the end of businesses, the street turned residential and was lined with tall maple trees with bark peeling off in big chunks. At the next street, I turned right, onto Cherry Street, and immediately spotted his car.

The lawn was rough-looking and was probably overrun by weeds in the summer, and the house had a massive porch with warped wooden boards.

No one answered. Figuring it was my brother's house, and since he entered mine whenever, I let myself in. For the disaster that was the outside, the inside was even more a surprise—a sleek hardwood floor extended from the living room beyond where I could see. An expansive dining room table glittered under the light of an enormous low-hanging chandelier. In the living room, a light-blue canvas hung above a mustard-yellow couch with square arms.

I continued through the first floor and into the kitchen to discover dark granite counters with jet black appliances, and lime green stools stood at a center island.

The space was gorgeous. I tried to understand the situation but struggled to swallow. The dilapidated exterior versus an immaculate interior, as if he hid this wealth from everyone, especially me.

I tried to reason that I somehow deserved my situation, but as I looked into a den off of the kitchen at an enormous flat-screen TV on the wall, I decided that if he had been in my position, how much different I would've treated him.

From the second floor, I heard the same sounds the hot doctor and the nurse would make, so I went to the bottom of the stairs.

"Alejandro!"

Footsteps pounded from the back of the house, and then Alejandro stood at the top of the steps gaping at me, shorts drooped beneath his pudgy belly. As he came towards me, I was startled by how hairy he was. He seemed so grown up, a man I didn't know.

"Bella! What the—"

More footsteps sounded upstairs before a woman's voice yelled.

"Jandro! ¿Qué pasa? ¿Quiénes esta?"

"Nadie."

I glared at him and he stiffened.

The girl came downstairs wearing a lavender nightie, and her face seemed to be

fixed in a permanent pout. She pointed at me, motioning up and down my body, before releasing a stream of nastiness I couldn't understand.

"You still speak Spanish?" I asked Jandro.

Alejandro shook his head and put his face in his palms, frustrated, like this wasn't the first time they'd had this exchange.

"Mi hermana!" He interrupted the girl with the stomp of his foot. I'd never seen him so animated.

The girl pretended as if she already knew who I was. She pushed past him, headed into the kitchen, and the sound of the television started from the den.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

I wanted to hit him.

"When we were kids—"

"I never forgot, okay? I guess I was too old. Or something. I don't know. Why does it matter?"

He scratched his nose, impatient, looking past me towards the sound of the TV before glancing out the front bay window. I surveyed the first floor again.

"What's the upstairs like?" I asked.

"Bella—"

I shot up the steps. The layout was not dissimilar to my home with front and back bedrooms, except this house had space for an office in the middle of the hallway and, just after it, the most extraordinary bathroom I'd ever seen with tiled floors the color of tropical sand.

To my surprise, sitting on a small table at the end of the banister was the small green television from our first apartment. The TV that taught us English. I went to it and felt the smooth coldness of the box before turning the knobs. I pressed my cheek to the top.

I glared at Alejandro as he reached the top of the stairs. Then, with a fierce shove, I pushed the box from the table so hard it flew out a few feet and landed with a startling thud.

"Why did you do that?"

He bent down and turned the set upright revealing a hole in the screen the size of a tennis ball.

"Where'd you get all this money?" I asked.

Alejandro shook his head.

"You kept all this from me!"

"You didn't care about nothing and now you hate everything I earned? Is that what this is? By myself? I don't care. You gotta go, though. Sorry if you're pissed but you gotta go."

I immediately crossed my arms and legs and parked myself on the floor. My back against the wooden banister, I refused to look at him.

"What do you want?" His voice shook me. I hadn't heard him yell since we were kids and I wondered what my father sounded like when he yelled. What he sounded like at all.

"I need money!" I said.

He clicked his tongue like I was an animal.

"There's something I want to do."

"Get a job! What do you need money for?"

"I know you have money! I wouldn't have kept it from you if you were the one who was sick."

"Oh. Sick. That's what you were."

"I'm better now! I have a plan!"

He snorted.

"I do! I'll—I just need this. Please. I won't be a problem anymore."

"What's your plan?"

"I want to go to Miami."

"Miami! Jesus fuck."

"Stop."

"What are you going to do there? Party? Go to South Beach and party in a bikini?"

"I want to start over."

"How the fuck you gonna start over? You don't even buy groceries. And you're whining about not knowing Spanish."

"I—"

From downstairs, the front door opened and closed so loud the windows rattled. I thought the girl had left, but then I heard heavy footsteps cross the hardwood. Alejandro became agitated.

"You gotta go, Bella."

"Please. Just me give me some money."

"Jandro!" A man's voice called from downstairs. Alejandro leaned over the banister.

"Yo! One second!"

The man started up the stairs. Alejandro pulled me by my arm and ran into the front bedroom. I caught glimpse of an enormous white bed and bright orange walls before he opened a closet to the left and pulled us inside. In the light from a small crack of the door, he took a box from the top shelf. Then he closed us in.

"Jandro—"

"Shh!"

"What—"

In the darkness, he pressed something into my hand, and I felt it, realizing it was a stack of bills.

"Put that away," he said. I folded and stuffed them in my pocket.

"You wait and then you go when I say," he said.

In the darkness, I nodded. Alejandro peered into the room just as the closet door flew open and light burst onto us. I squinted. A tall man stood before us, his hand on the door.

"What are you doing?" the man asked with a laugh.

Alejandro pulled me from the closet. As I passed, I felt a familiarity to him.

"You," I said.

His hair had grayed, and he'd shaven his moustache. Chuck pointed between me and Alejandro, and then examined me, a smart expression on his face.

"Bella."

I glared at Alejandro.

"What is he doing here?" My voice shook.

"I think everyone else here wants to know what *you* are doing here?" Chuck asked. "I thought you were taken care of on the other side of town? And, whoa, you really did get huge."

"You should be in jail!"

Chuck flicked his nose with his thumb.

Jandro grabbed my wrist and tried to pull me from the room.

"Jandro." Chuck said.

"Just lemme handle this."

We left Chuck and entered the hall. Passing the bathroom, I felt my legs weaken and Alejandro's fingers dig into my skin as he struggled to keep me standing.

He spoke in my ear, so soft I could barely hear, and I tried to listen between being unable to breathe and stumbling down the steps, but he said something about how it was all a long time ago, when things were bad and Chuck came around with a proposition, like maybe he felt guilty or maybe he is just crazy, but a proposition for business, or something else I couldn't hear, that he did it to help us get by, that he isn't so bad either, he owes him now. I owe him, he said, something which when I heard made me keel over. We reached the bottom of the steps. The girlfriend emerged from the den and I stared at their feet remembering a sunny day a long time ago, playing in the Stevenson's backyard, the feeling of the teeter-totter pounding my head, the emptiness at knowing that Jandro had no clue.

"Stop!"

He let go. I bolted outside and down the street as fast as I could until my breath felt like fire and they all were far behind, until I was past Main, past my old street and its ghostly memories. I took a left off of Main and saw it there, sleek and silver: the waiting train.

Fifteen

Well, dear readers, I must apologize. I really must, as I've completely neglected you for far too long! It's been, well, quite a while and while I know you are all independent and capable people, I can't help but feel I've let you down!

(I am giving you my pout face!)

And, I'm sorry.

But! I have news!

Carolyn's wellness blog is now based in Miami! Squeal!

(See I had good reason to be away from you, didn't I! Moving is no small feat!)

But enough about me—let me tell you something that has literally saved me the past few months over such a big transition. (And you are going to slap your head when you hear, it is that simple.) Water. That's right: water. I wasn't drinking enough and I bet you aren't either.

Here's a necessary bit of too-much-information (but I feel I just have to go there), your pee needs to be pale yellow or even clear (goals!). Anything darker and you best gets chugging!

I feel lighter. Calmer. My skin is less wrinkly. I am closer to being the best version of myself there is, I believe. And you should, too.

"It's good," I said, sliding the laptop across the small café table.

"The nurse approves?" Carolyn's eyes lit up and she gave herself a squeeze.

"Student," I said.

"Smart girl."

Not used to feeling accomplished, I changed the subject.

"How's Peyton?"

Carolyn shook her head. She'd let her hair grow past her shoulders into stringy strands she'd at some point decided to dye blonde and they struggled with their length.

"What did I expect? I don't know, I don't know. He's happy. At school. I think he's happy."

A waiter delivered our meals—a colorful salad with lump crab was placed before me and Carolyn's usual, a cheeseburger with fries, landed next. The café was busy for being mid-afternoon but being beachfront it trapped tourists who lacked better options, including Carolyn. I hadn't seen the same person here twice besides her.

"You are so good. I could hate you," she said, her lips drooped into a frown as she eyed my plate. "And, what's worse, you look amazing."

"Thank you," I said.

It was true. I did look amazing. Miami had been good to me—the daily Vitamin D, wonderful weather—I walked whenever I wanted. Carolyn stuffed a fry into her mouth, and I picked up my fork and stabbed some crab.

"He sees Gene every now and again. Every other weekend. The weekends Gene's actually around."

As she sprinkled salt on her food, I studied her. For upping her water intake, she seemed tired. Little purple pockets had developed under her eyes. She'd taken to wearing khaki shorts and large t-shirts she'd bought on a recent trip to Orlando.

"Roger wants to work on things. But," she clicked her tongue, "don't date anyone you can't talk to. If you can't talk to him, you can't sleep with him. The two of you go hand in hand. That's some advice right there. Free, sound advice. Take it from me. You can thank me later."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

We chewed. Music blared from a passing sports car, and Carolyn danced in her chair with her hands in the air, a blob of mayo hanging from the corner of her mouth.

"That's what I love about it here!" she said. "Always a party."

I checked the time and motioned for Carolyn to grab a napkin.

"I have to go soon," I said. Carolyn wiped her lips.

"Off to class? I didn't think you had class on Tuesdays."

"Airport."

Carolyn gave me a confused look as I chomped on a crouton.

"My brother is coming."

"That's wonderful!" Carolyn clapped. I gave her a look that said I wasn't so sure.

"He did the best he could, dear. Family is family."

"Can I get this?" I asked, gesturing at the food.

She held up her hand.

"My treat, please."

I hugged her and promised another lunch soon.

Outside, I faced the rest of my day. Life in Miami was different than New Jersey simply because everything could be juxtaposed with the beach. About to see your brother you haven't seen in a year? But there's tropical sand—relax. Thinking about all the tough years you left behind? People in huge sunglasses chuckle as they sip cocktails. It's impossible to feel real about anything.

I left the ocean and passed two blocks of stores, to reach my development—a group of impressive homes surrounded by enormous palms and white equatorial flowers flowing from their window boxes. My house was behind them, the pool house, as they called it, even though the group of homes lacked a pool.

Inside, I regarded myself in the mirror: I was much skinnier than the last time he'd seen me, and I imagined telling him about school. How it hadn't been hard to enroll, even though I thought it would be. How I'm not exactly a nursing student, but on the pre-requisite courses. Carolyn didn't need to know all that—maybe he didn't either. Maybe he just wanted to have a free vacation. Maybe he'd pretend like nothing ever happened. Still, I read his email once more.

Bella,

Even on his death bed, he didn't want to acknowledge me. How is that possible? How can you be so detached from your own children that to you they don't even exist?

He was so small. Maybe when he was my age he had muscles, but not anymore. He was shriveled. He had dark hair like you and me and I think I have his nose, but his lips seemed dead like they'd forgotten they could smile.

I sat there and told him who I was which seemed to bother him because he rocked his head a little, but I don't know. It could've been from anything, but the nurses said even on the meds, he could still hear.

Besides that, I realized I didn't know what to say. I thought maybe we would talk. I didn't know how dead he already was. I mean that's what has loomed over us all these years, right? What the hell happened to our Dad?

Maybe that's just me. Maybe you've had Mom and I've had Dad and that's why we never connected that great?

Why has it taken me so long to realize this?

He's dying. I don't know. I wound up getting upset. I mean I tried to not but the last thing I said was that the luckiest he ever got was being loved by my mother.

Our mother. You know what I mean.

Then he made this choking sound like he was trying to talk. I've never felt so sick in my life.

You were right, Bella. I should've taken better care of you. You're the only family I have. The Chuck thing... I gave him the benefit of the doubt and all the while I gave you, and even worse, mom, nothing.

I should've told you.

I'm sorry. It's been a year and I miss you and I'm coming to visit whether you like it or not.

--Jandro.

I got into my silver sedan and drove up 95 under large cotton-ball clouds, my sweaty hands sticking to the steering wheel leather. I'd done more in that year than I had in almost two decades, but it still didn't feel as monumental as my mother bringing two kids to America alone to have her husband tell her goodbye. How far away she felt yet, somehow, closer than ever.

As I pulled into the pick-up loop and saw him standing there him, groomed and tall, leaner than he had been, his shoulders back, a small duffel bag at his feet, his chin held like he was determined to be strong. I parked by the curb and rushed from my seat, a surge in my chest as I rose, a smile when he was already by my door, his arms around me tight, his mouth in my ear telling me I look like her, oh god how much I looked like her.

