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All That Is Still Here

Julia Fuller

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ALL THAT IS STILL HERE

by

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ABSTRACT

All That Is Still Here is a fictional novel following the character Amelia Hopkirt as she goes on a quest to discover the identity of the human remains she accidentally purchases at a garage sale. Amelia becomes increasingly attached to the ashes throughout her journey, laying more and more personal items to rest with the ashes as she discovers moves closer to discovering who's remains she possesses. Socially inept at interacting with her peers and smothered by an overly protective family, Amelia attempts to meet her emotional needs by using the ashes as a stand in friendship, inadvertently isolating herself from everyone who may care about her. With her growing obsession Amelia begins to jeopardize the few relationships she has in her life including her job and her family, eventually abandoning both as she commits to finding someone who knows whose ashes she possesses and who will love and mourn them. Amelia commandeers her coworker Patrick, forcing him to come along with her on her journey, recognizing that she will not succeed on her own. By the novel's completion, Amelia does discover the story behind the cremated remains she's grown so attached to while also learning more about herself, love, and the value of human companionship.

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CHAPTER 1

The thick, ammonia smell of old cat litter stung her nose as Amelia walked into the laundry room. Her cat died over a week ago, and she still hadn't managed to throw out the old litter pan. Laziness kept her from doing laundry more than once every few weeks, and the forgotten litter pan had remained unnoticed in the corner of the back room since the anticlimactic end of Branwell.

She'd come home from work that hot August afternoon to find him curled up just to the right of a patch of sunlight coming through the large glass door that led to the backyard. She threw her keys on the kitchen counter and greeted him with her usual "Hey Branwell, hungry?" before walking toward the cabinet where she kept his food. She leaned back to look through the open archway leading into the sunroom, but Bran hadn't stirred. Surprising given the fact that she'd never known a cat to enjoy his dinner as much as that fat brown tabby.

"Branwell?" She stepped down into the sunroom, approaching the still cat at a measured pace. She leaned over him as close as she dared. If he were to wake up now, her face would be in mortal peril so close to his claws. Through the thick fluff of his fur, she couldn't tell whether there was a rise and fall to his body or not. She stood back up, nudging him with just the tip of her toe. With only the slightest touch, his stiff body slid a few inches over the slick tile, still curled in the solid sleeping position she'd found him in. Amelia heard herself gasp, feeling as though her extremities were suctioned to her torso. She ground

her toe into the cold tile. She'd never had a pet die before. At least, not without her parents around to deal with it. Bran lay where his inflexible body had come to rest after her unassuming nudge. She crinkled her nose, unsure if the sting at the back of her sinuses was from grief or particles of dead cat that slipped up her nostrils. He felt like a stranger to her now and that hurt. The love she'd always felt for him pushed out from underneath her skin, but couldn't break through. She knelt down beside him.

"You were a good boy Bran." She whispered over him, "May your bowl never empty." That felt appropriate. She gazed down at him, still locked in apparent sleep, eyes closed, already gone from this world, so familiar and yet so strange. She blinked back the little bit of water that had come into her eyes, still not quite processing the reality of the situation, but Branwell's death had been too long coming for her to be totally devastated. Her parents had given her Branwell on her fifth birthday and nineteen years was more than she had a right to hope for, especially for such a fat cat. The love that tried to burst out of her twisted into a knot in her stomach, telling her she was human, but that it was right he was dead.

She remained crouched next to Branwell until the sharp ache in her knees forced her to straighten. She called her dad to ask what to do now, the knot sinking out through her feet and into the tiled floor. He told her to wrap Bran up in a garbage bag and put him in the outside bin. She told him she wasn't just going to throw away her cat; you're not supposed to throw cats away at all! His next suggestion was to put Branwell into the freezer until he and Mom could get over one weekend to help bury him. She told him not to worry about it, that

she'd take care of it somehow. Sorry about your cat, Amelia he'd said before hanging up.

Amelia sighed, slid the phone into her back pocket and contemplated the cat carcass now in her charge. He deserved a funeral, something wild and organic, like Branwell believed himself to be. Resolute, she turned and stepped back into the kitchen. She knelt down before the cabinet under the sink and rummaged around until she found a large paper grocery bag. She went back into the sunroom and tried to slide Branwell inside. She laid it flush with the tile, open toward Branwell's tail, but whenever she pushed the bag forward, Bran's whole body slid across the tiles without entering the bag. Frustrated, she followed Bran across the room, bent over, holding the bag open trying to force his stiff, tortoiseshell body into it. She walked him to the wall, then slid him into a corner, finally able to force his rigid body into the bag.

She rolled the top over itself, then folded it up to her chest, pressing Branwell into place. She carried him out the back door and down onto the patio, placing him on the rusty table that had be left by the last tenants of the house. She walked over the lumpy, cracked concrete, around the protrusion of the sunroom to the shady corner of the house where she'd piled up everything she thought might be useful for an adult with a backyard. For now, it consisted of a couple rotting Adirondack chairs, a broken flower pot, and an old fire pit rusted out at the bottom that she'd picked up off the side of the road when someone had left it to be collected by garbage men.

This holey fire pit she dragged back round to the little patch of concrete that abutted the back door, where Branwell lay waiting, patient as always, in his bag upon the table. She hurried back into the house and up into the kitchen. She rummaged around in the drawer beside the sink until she found a small box of matches. She pulled a stack of unexamined coupons out of the trash, then hurried back outside to Bran.

She crumpled the coupons up into the best semblance of a funeral pyre she could make before gently laying the brown-bagged bundle on top, mumbling a prayer to accompany him to the afterlife. She took a deep breath, then struck a match against the box. The head snapped off. She tossed the now useless stick into the fire pit and tried again, gnawing at her lower lip. It was already a hot, sticky night, but the little gusts of wind sweeping through the back yard made Amelia's task all the more difficult. The second match met the same fate, but the third managed to spark up and sustain fire. She brought the burning match around from one bundle of newspaper to the next, stoking it carefully, using her body to block the wind that threatened to blow the feeble little fire out, coaxing bigger flames with gentle, concentrated breathes. She stood back a few paces and watched Branwell go up in smoke. As he crackled and burned the smell of charred fur wafted through the air. She pulled her arms tighter around herself as another gust of moist summer wind slapped loose strands of hair against her face.

"Goodbye Bran-kin" she nodded farewell to her friend, then turned and reentered the house.

*

This morning was Saturday, and on Saturday's Amelia usually volunteered down at the Briarscreek Animal Shelter. This was meant to be her first Saturday back since Branwell's death, but when she woke up that morning she had a text from the volunteer coordinator at the shelter telling her not to come in. An entire sorority had shown up hoping to get service hours. Amelia had been looking forward to getting out of the house, doing something she enjoyed rather than just work, but who was she to argue with a squad of budding philanthropists?

With an overflowing basket of laundry and no good excuse for how to otherwise occupy her time, Amelia optimistically pushed her way into the back laundry room only to be assaulted by the putrid stench of weeks-old cat waste. She dropped the basket, its contents spilling out and mixing with the scattered litter, and burst back out into the hallway to suck in clean air. Her lungs full, she plunged back into the laundry room, seized the source of the stench, fumbled outside, then threw it into the garbage bin, pan and all. That done, she rushed back into the house. It was blazing that morning and the dark gravel of her driveway was already burning her bare feet.

Amelia wandered into the kitchen, rinsed her hands at the sink, then slumped down into one of the spindly metal chairs at the table in the sunroom. She dared not go back into the laundry room until it had time to air out. So much for a productive morning.

From her half-curled, half-sitting position, she stared out into the bleached light. The sunroom windows had not curtains or blinds so the whole backyard was laid out bare before her. This time of year everything appeared shrunken and crispy, the leaves on the trees dull and tired looking. It couldn't be called a green, or even a brown world. Southern summers sucked color from the trees. This year in particular, with the drought, the grass, even the sky making all appear a dead, dusty yellow. In the distance the fire pit sat looking small, innocuous, Branwell's ashes untouched since his cremation. Behind him, the trees stretched hard to the left, bent by a forgotten wind. It looked devoid of feeling.

Inside, the sunroom windows turned that part of the house into a sauna no matter what the season. The morning light beat through with greater hotness and intensity than any other time of the day. She wasn't used to being home right now. She left for work or the shelter too early to watch the sun creep over the sterile woods behind the house. As it stood now, the sun had climbed high enough to slant into the room and cast its beams at a sharp angle across the table where she slumped, concave, over herself.

From where she was sitting, the sun hit across the left side of her body. It felt warm on her arm, but her ear and the upper part of her cheek was starting to burn sharp and hot. The bun she'd had her hair in the night before had drooped down over that ear. She grabbed ahold of it and tried to finagle it back to the top of her head as best she could. It didn't really help much. She sat, staring into muted black, breathing slow and deep, trying to bring oxygen back into her muscles, while the old analog clock behind her on the wall clicked on and on.

She pushed off the metal armrests of the chair and heaved herself up. Her body always seems heavier in the mornings, and the quick outburst of energy she used to get rid of the old cat litter had left her feeling all the more weighed down and sluggish. She shuffled into the kitchen and put some water on the stove for coffee. She leaned against the sink and stared out the little window above while she waited for the water to heat through. She had no idea what to do with herself. She was never alone this long. She liked it, but was aware of the silence. She didn't even have Branwell to keep her company anymore. She paced the kitchen a few times, periodically checking on the water in the pot. She slid up onto the island and sat on her hands. Of course, just then the water started to boil and she had to slide immediately down again. She poured the hot water into her French press and let the coffee sit while she ran back to her room to change out of her pajamas. She had to get out of this silent, too-bright house.

Back in the kitchen, she pressed the coffee down and poured it into a travel mug then pulled her hair up into a more controlled side ponytail. She flung her purse across her chest, grabbed the keys and headed out the front door.

Outside, the heat smacked her in the face and she suddenly found herself vividly awake. She clutched her keys and coffee tighter into her chest, bent her head against the sun and trudged to the little gray, rusty Buick parked out front. The heat had already brought a sheen of sweat across her hands and she fumbled at getting the keys in the lock, but at last she heard the welcome clunk of the lock turning and fell inside, shutting the door fast behind her.

The car had been baking in the sun and the interior of the car had taken on an oven-like quality. The waves of heat brushed against her cheeks as she cranked the car to life and pulled out onto the road. Her A.C. was hit and miss so she cranked down her window. The bit of air blowing through was tinged with the heat of the morning, but the moving air was enough to provide relief from the bit of sun that had burned into her ears.

Her speakers were blown and the radio signal coming through was broken, tired. She really had no idea where she was going, so she just drove around the rural streets listening more to the wind rushing past the window and the soft purr of the car, rather than what song was being pumped out to the masses. With nowhere to be and nothing to do, she turned in and out and down back roads she had never explored before. She had a good sense of direction and was confident that no matter where she went she'd be able to find her way back home. It would have been a better drive if it autumn had already come, but the leaves still clung to the trees an exhausted, bleached green, while the late summer sun burned down with that strange intensity it only gets that time of year, the trees bending under its weight. That was fine though, she sipped at her coffee and kept a winding course.

She turned down another unfamiliar side street, following the curvature of the road. A few yards ahead a series of cars lined along the shoulder. Amelia looked out the window as she past to see if it was some sort of family event or something to draw so many people, but as the yard came into view she realized that they were all stopping for a garage sale at a modest little ranch style, brick house. She'd always enjoyed exploring the discarded goods of strangers, it tells

you something of what they value, or perhaps don't value since they're getting rid of these things. She pulled over too and stepped out of the car. She walked along the outside of the other cars parked half in the ditch, half on the road toward the driveway. She pulled at the collar of her shirt to send a puff of air up into her face, wondering why anyone would choose to have a yard sale in this weather. The wind only blew more aggressive heat at her.

She paused at the end of the longish driveway and looked up at the other inspectors. Most looked old enough that they could be retired, but not so old they would be classified as 'Seniors' at the movie theater. A couple families were out too, the dad's carrying the smallest child, while the toddlers held on to their skirts and shirt tails of their mothers. Everyone's shirts were white, so from the base of the driveway they all looked like a swarm of multicolored oblong spheres bobbing and swirling along together; grays, browns, and blondes alike. She walked up the driveway to join them.

The tables were laid out in a U shape along the back of the driveway with overflowing cardboard boxes on top, underneath, and spread out beyond the tables and into the dried up grass as well. It looked like the owners had tried to create some sense of order amongst their wares by taping up pieces of paper on the front of each table saying things like "Kitchen Items", "Bed Linens", and "VHS Tapes \$1 Each" in scribbled black marker.

Amelia walked up to the table on the furthest most edge of the U and looked into the first box there. This table seemed to be dedicated to childhood memorabilia. The box immediately in front of her was filled with toys. There

was a Barbie with frizzled hair and her dress half off, a knock-off Etch-a-Sketch, a Mancala board with no stones. She rummaged deeper into the box and pulled out an old pink bunny Beanie Baby. She'd had the same one as a kid. She smiled to herself remembering how she'd insisted on calling it Cuppy because of *The Parent Trap* when with all her other Beanie Babies, she had been an avid supporter of their TY given christenings. She let the Cuppy-bunny fall back into the box and moved over to the next one.

This box and the table space immediately surrounding it contained what seemed to be an entire elementary school library. Quite literally, most of the books had obviously at one point been housed in an archive of some sort. Whether these were well past-due relics, or simply retirees picked up at a local community book sale it was impossible to say, but they all had that flattened bump hardcover texture characteristic of all books bound for mass public consumption. She opened one, "COYOTES" the cover read, complete with one of those tawny wild dogs throwing his head back in a howl. She held the book up to her face and took a deep, articulated breath. The book had the earthen, but dirty smell of reinforced glossy paper.

"You know they'll pay you to kill those" a little high-pitched voice broke through Amelia's reverie. She looked down. A girl, probably six or seven donned in yet another white t-shirt looked up at her. Amelia could hardly see her face. A wild, untamed mass of red curls exploded from the crown of her head, long bangs covering her eyes. Amelia could only see just between the stands of her hair a thin, pink, little mouth. She was pointing at the book with

her tiny exposed hand, gleaming bright with sweat in the sunlight. Amelia closed the book and examined the cover at an arm's distance.

"No they wont!" she said smiling down at the talking bundle of hair.

"Yeah-huh." Her hands balled up and went to her hips. "You bring 'em the ears and the tails and they'll pay you for it."

"Who told you that?" she asked leaning onto her knees to be closer to the girl.

"They told us at school. Told us to tell our dads."

"Why?"

"Because they're eating all the other animals of course!" She looked hard into Amelia's eyes, squinting through the gaps in her hair; who gave her a crooked smile back, then scrunched her face up to look doubtful.

"Are you sure?"

The girl looked exasperated. She threw her hands down her sides and rolled her whole head up toward the sky, then stared back at Amelia with her mouth hanging open in a perfect O shape.

"Of course." She said, shaking her head at her and looking up from under her mane.

"Lisa Mae!" A voice interrupted her lecture. "Lisa Mae, sweetheart, I told you to stay by me." One of the long, lean, white t-shirted mothers walked up

and grabbed ahold of Amelia's educator's hand. "Sorry," she said, meeting Amelia's gaze.

"It's fine." She waved her hand dismissively, then looked back down at Lisa Mae, "Send me your next coyote tail, okay?"

Lisa Mae muttered something Amelia couldn't hear and her mom gave her an apprehensive look. Amelia met her gaze with a smile and the woman pulled her daughter back to her husband on the other side of the driveway. Amelia turned back to the box and rifled through the other books available. They were mostly nonfiction picture books, just more nature stuff like the coyote book, she did find one, a collection of fantastical poems that looked fun. She tucked it under her arm, wiped a sheen of sweat off her forehead and moved on to see what else the yard sale might have to offer.

*

Yard sales are so publicly intimate. A person or family goes and sorts through their memories deciding what's worth preserving and assigns a cheap numerical value to the rest of them, then lays those rejected memories out for anyone to see; the private interiority of your home made corporate and put up for sale. Strangers evaluate that which you've deemed no longer necessary in your life. Everything's old and dirty, overused and out of style, but people will still pay money for it, and that's really all you wanted anyway.

Amelia didn't mind being a part of this transaction. Things she'd purchased second or third hand felt more personal to her than anything she'd ever primarily consumed. It felt more hers when it once belonged to someone

else; like the past owner was sharing it with her as a gift. She looked out over the U to try and find another gift this family might have for her. What memories they wanted to share. She bumped into the shoulder of a charcoaled-haired man over a box of chipped picture frames.

“Oh! ‘Scuse me” she smiled.

He sort of nodded toward her then moved further down the line of tables. She sucked in her cheeks as she watched him scoot away from her then turned back to the boxes.

She was about halfway through the U at this point, right at the center of the bottom arch. She’d found plenty of curiosities on her way round the tables, but nothing that she felt was hers. This table seemed to be home to décor, objects with no practical value in the home, but you still end up accumulating nonetheless. There were a couple dusty fake plants, pots of ivy she thought they were supposed to be, a miniature globe, too tiny for any country but Russia to be distinguished, a golden dinosaur.

That’s pretty cool, she thought picking up the embellished T-Rex, Like, for a bookend or something. She held her poetry book in her arm schoolgirl-style and tucked the Tyrannosaurus between it and her chest. She dug around some more, through vases and baskets and old clocks. At the bottom of the box she found a small wooden chest about eight or so inches wide and maybe three inches deep. She set down the book and the dinosaur on the edge of the table and picked it up.

It was made out of a light, pinkish wood. The top of the chest was carved with an intricate series of weaving flowers and vines swirling out from the top right corner. The carvings continued around the edges of the chest, three separate rows: a geographic pattern, more flowers and vines, and a row of leaves. The box was heavy and when she shook it she could feel something sliding around inside. She ran her fingers along the outside edges, trying to find the seam where the lid of the box opened, but there wasn't any. Looking closely at it, she discovered that there were no visible seams, no hinges, nothing to suggest the box would open at all. She flipped it upside down and saw the words "Franke '56" burned into the bottom, but still nothing to suggest how to access its contents.

"Excuse me." Amelia said to the woman sitting behind the tables. She had set up one of those standing oscillating fan things, but was still spritzing her face with a spray bottle every few seconds. Amelia got the feeling the yard sale hadn't been her idea, but had become her responsibility. She opened her eyes and looked over an Amelia.

"Yes?"

"What is this?" she asked, holding up the box.

The woman stood up from her lawn chair in front of the fan and walked closer to her, setting her spray bottle down as she walked over. With the table between them, she leaned forward to inspect the chest.

"Um, well, to be honest I'm not really sure."

“Does it open?”

“I don’t think so. It’s been sitting on our bookshelf for as long as we’ve lived here. I think it belonged to one of my husband’s relatives, but he said it wasn’t important and was just taking up space.” She turned and plopped back down in her chair.

“Do you know what’s in it?”

She nestled herself deeper into the chair and shook her head.

“Aren’t you curious?”

“Not really honey.”

Amelia chewed her lower lip and turned the box around a few times. Held it in her left hand, her right. She could feel whatever was inside weighing it down.

“How much do you want for it?”

The woman looked back up, her neck stretching out away from the elastic back of the chair in which she sat. She pressed her lips together.

“Five dollars?”

“Okay.” Amelia began rummaging around in the bag at her side for her wallet. “I’ve got a couple other things too, a book and this,” she held up the golden T-Rex, “dinosaur thing.”

The woman shrugged.

“Five’s fine.”

Amelia handed her the money then gathered her findings into her arms, thanked her and turned to head back to the car. The family with Lisa Mae had moved on to the items spread out on blankets in the yard. Lisa Mae was standing dutifully in her place behind her mother. Amelia smiled and gave her a little wave as she passed by.

When she got in the car she dumped everything next to her in the front passenger seat. She’d left the window cracked so now the inside was coated in a layer of brown dust from cars passing by on the unkempt road. She cranked the window the rest of the way down, turned on the radio, and pulled out onto the road again to go home.

CHAPTER 2

Amelia pulled into her driveway, the gravel crunching under her tires as she settled the car under the crepe myrtle tree growing next to the house. In the summer, a thick intertwining mass of branches rose up from its thin, but sturdy cluster of trunks and spread out from its center so that the leaves brushed against the side of the house leaving a dark purplish-brown stain on the white siding; and an explosion of rich, deep lavender clusters pulled the ends of the branches down, arching toward the ground. As a child, Amelia called them firework trees and thought nothing was more beautiful than when the wind blew the blossoms free and made them into vibrant summer snow. But now, so late and dry in the season, the tree was limp, shriveled, and small; drooping down like a broken umbrella.

Amelia shut off the car, then gathered the clutter of garage sale items into her arms. As she tried to slide out the door the strap of her purse caught the handle of the emergency brake and yanked her back into the car. The t-rex and the chest tumbled to the floor around the pedals, but she did manage to hang on to the book.

“Dammit.” Amelia jerked the strap from around the handle and looped it over her head so that the bag rested on her hip away from the parking brake. She reached down, grabbed the dinosaur, tucked it under her arm, then reached back down for the box. As she drew it up from the floor she could feel whatever

was inside shifting around, the weight thumping from one end to the other. She turned it over a few times, checking to make sure nothing had cracked or split, then slipped the box in the crook of her arm with everything else and shuffled into the house.

*

Her front door opened into a narrow hallway that led to the kitchen. To the left was a small living room with large arched windows that looked into the front yard. In summer, the nature of the light coming through those windows changed from the cool white light of winter to an intense yellow fire that burned into the old charcoal sketch of a lawyer who held some place of unknown significance in the Hobkirt family history, revealing a dusty green mold creeping in around the edges of the wooden frame with chipped black and gold paint. Amelia believed that her mother secretly hated the picture and had made such a big fuss about giving it to Amelia to make her feel like she was receiving an heirloom to be proud of, rather than a decaying sketch no one wanted anymore, but felt obligated to keep.

An overstuffed faux leather couch sat adjacent to this drawing, its back to the window; and it was here Amelia collapsed, letting her bag and her items from the garage sale tumble down around her. She lay there for a moment until the heat from the persistent summer sun forced her to turn and alter the angle of blinds, tilting them up so the light burned into the ceiling, and then sat up straighter on the couch picking up the book. It had definitely once belonged to a public library. The cover was made out of rough reinforced acrylic-y hardback

with dirty adhesive residue at the base of the spine. She rubbed her hand over the cover then opened it up and pressed it to her face again, taking a deep breath and filling her lungs with the acrid, but comforting aroma of the ultra-sealed paper. It reminded her of being nine and set free by the independence that came with bicycle ownership and a library card in your name. She placed the book down in her lap and flipped through the pages. The poems were spooky and clever and comforting; filled with childish gore and surprising beauty. It lulled her into a contented nostalgia for an easy, uncomplicated era of life.

*

The wall to her left had built-in bookshelves harboring an old fireplace in their center. The fireplace had been sealed off with layers and layers of white paint that left clumps of long-hardened paint eternally dripping down its front. Amelia pushed herself off the couch and scooped up the dinosaur that had fallen down into the crevice between the cushion and the armrest. She walked over to the mantle and placed the t-rex on the corner, then turned him so he was slightly askew. She stepped to look at him, made a minor adjustment and then returned to the couch, spinning around and dropping heavily into the cushions.

She lay there for a moment before pushing herself up, reaching over, and picking up the box that had been leaning against her leg ever since she had claimed the couch. It felt heavy in her hands, heavier than she expected a hollow box to be, even with something inside. Perhaps the wood was dense. Amelia held the box overhead and examined underneath, nothing really there but the name burned into the bottom. She held it near her ear and gingerly shook it back

and forth; whatever was inside moved slowly. She could hear and feel its reluctance to move with the shaking of the box. She thought maybe that that meant that the object inside was pretty big, but she noticed the odd way its center of gravity was shifted by her shaking. It sort of thumped from one corner of the box to the other.

Amelia set the box back down in her lap. She ran her fingers around the edges of the box, pushing at each crevice to see if it had any give. Nothing yielded. The thought crossed her mind that somebody could have built the box around whatever was inside, without the intention of its ever being opened, but that seemed unlikely; and even if that was the case, it only piqued Amelia's curiosity more.

Her fingernails were short, but she tried her best to shimmy them between each of the indentions of the intricately carved vines covering the outside of the box, almost scratching at it. She inspected for hinges, a semblance of a seam, anything. She started pressing down on each leaf and flower thinking that maybe something was a trigger, a button that would make the box open up. She flipped it over again and pressed down onto base of the box. She thought she felt a little give, like the wood used there wasn't as thick as what made up the walls of the box. She laid all five of her fingertips down onto the box and pressed gently, sort of shimmying her fingers back and forth to loosen anything up that might open to her. Nothing really happened. She considered just breaking the box open, no one would know or notice if the bottom of the box was gone. She looked toward the opening of the room knowing that in the kitchen a

few feet away was a hammer that could easily break open the box in front of her, but she didn't get up from the couch.

She pushed down harder against the bottom. She could feel it shifting underneath her fingers; it felt like it was built loosely into a frame and if she could find the right angle she could pop the piece of wood out. She pushed it against one edge, then the other, but now, certain of the flimsiness of that piece of the box, was cautious about putting too much pressure against it. She pressed down with her thumbs and pushed the box one more time and then felt the wood under her fingers give. She pushed it forward and the bottom slid out along a well-concealed groove revealing a small, purple, velvet drawstring bag tied off at the close.

Amelia picked the bag up and ran her thumb over smooth packaging. She pressed down, but didn't really feel anything distinctive inside the package. She turned it over a few times in her hands feeling the weight of it, rubbing it between her palms. She turned it up and began picking at the knot that held the end of the bag together, digging her short, broken fingernails into the string. Unfortunately, given the weakness of her nails, whenever she'd get a grip on the black thread and begin to pull at it, her fingernail would bend backwards, sending a jolt of pain shooting up her finger; so she went at it with her teeth, turning her mouth to the side to get at the knot between her bicuspid and molars and pulling back with her upper body until finally she felt the knot begin to give. There was a loop in the knot now big enough to get a finger through, so she slipped her pinky through and jiggled the knot the rest of the way loose so

that ultimately, she could untie it, leaving a small squiggled gap at the top of the bag.

Amelia slid her fingers into the opening and spread them out, opening the bag up the rest of the way. She looked down inside, tilting the bag left and right to try and see what was inside. She slanted the bag up toward the window behind her to let the light shine into the bag. She saw something dark shift in a large clump, but couldn't really make out what it was. She reached her fingers into the bag and felt them hit something soft, smooth, and powdery. She pulled them back out. The tips of her two longest fingers were coated in something pale and gray. She held it up against her nose and sniffed, but couldn't make out any particular scent.

She leaned back a ways and rubbed her fingers together, noticing the powder sift down and settle onto her shorts. Amelia squinted her eyes and chewed the center of her upper lip. She looked back down into the bag, flicking her wrist in small movements to make the contents shift around inside as it done had before. She reached back into the bag and used her finger to stir the contents around. Now that she was paying closer attention, she felt little hard flecks periodically inside amongst the powder. She began to get a slight queasy feeling in her stomach and was suddenly very aware of how loud her heartbeat was, how very present and active it moved in her chest. She shifted the powder around a bit more and her finger hit something hard and cold. She looped her finger through it and pulled out a slender, gold ring with a little red stone, dulled by the powder resting at its center.

She looked at it for a moment, glinting in the sharp summer light streaming through the window, rubbed her thumb over it once, then let it slip back into the bag, pulling the strings closed and setting it back into the box. She slid the false bottom back into place, felt it click, and set the box next to her on the couch.

It's ashes.

She continued chewing at her lip, and crooked her eyes over at the innocuous box, sitting petite on the cushion next to her. She scooted into the corner of the couch and tucked her feet underneath her so that her back was secured in the 'v' of the couch back and armrest but she could fully see the box sitting opposite her. She stared at the box, surrounded by floating particles of dust and haloed by the light from the window. She became very aware of the dead body on her fingertips and dove over the edge of the couch rubbing her fingers into the carpeted rug on the floor until they burned from the friction; then eased herself back up into a sitting position, bringing her knees toward her chest and cradling her violated hand between them and her chest. Amelia shuddered.

She stayed curled up on the couch like that until the sun had shifted beyond the range of the window and the room became washed in cool diffused gray. Her stomach started to gurgle, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since before she left the house that morning. Slowly, she stood up from the couch and made her way out of the room, leaving behind the box sitting on that peeling, dark brown, faux leather couch.

*

In the kitchen, Amelia stood with her hands gripping the sink. She closed her eyes and took a few deep, steady breaths. She had a dead body in her living room. Those people had sold her a dead body. She ran her tongue along the underside of her teeth, then turned and leaned back against the sink, arms crossed. What was she going to do? Obviously she had to take it back. They couldn't have meant to sell her a dead body; it was probably somebody important to them.

"But how important can it be if they forgot it was inside?"

It? He? Franke? She couldn't be sure who was in the box. The ring was so small, she assumed it was a woman's, but Franke is typically a man's name. But of course "Franke" is probably her last name. Or it could be a guy who liked pinky rings.

Amelia jumped at the sound of a knock on the front door. She took a minute, leaning on the island to catch her breath. There was a brief pause, and then another three sharp raps against the faux wood. As she walked toward the door she heard the metallic clunk of the deadbolt turning in the lock and stopped short. A second later, an eager, smiling face appeared around its edge.

"Mom?"

"Hey sweetie, sorry to barge in, I thought you might be watching TV or something."

"No, it's fine. What are you doing here?"

“I just wanted to check up on you.” Her mother, Maureen, came all the way into the house, shutting the door behind her, she walked up and wrapped her daughter in a hug. “How’ve you been? How’s the shelter?”

Amelia peeled away from her, retreated a few steps and shrugged her shoulders. “I’m fine. It’s fine. Why didn’t you call?”

“I did call. You didn’t answer.”

“Oh.” Amelia pulled her phone from her back pocket and checked the screen. *My Mother 3 Missed Calls* and a text notification glowed up at her. “Well look at that, so you did. Sorry ‘bout that.”

“It’s fine sweetheart, I just wanted to see how you were doing with Bran and work and everything.”

“What’s wrong with work?”

“Oh nothing, just generally curious.”

Amelia nodded and turned to walk back toward the kitchen. Her mother followed close behind her. Amelia could feel the hairs on the back of her neck registering her mother’s proximity. She rubbed her hand against the back of her neck, wrapping her other arm around her stomach as she stopped and faced her mother, “Work’s fine, you know, just recovering lost emails and what not.”

“And the shelter?”

Amelia’s eyes roved around the room, focusing on anything other than her mother’s face, “I didn’t go today. They had too many volunteers.”

“That’s a shame. How did they get too many people?”

“I don’t know, Mom. A big group came in to volunteer, like a sorority or something, they didn’t really give me any details.” Amelia began messing with the sink, turning it on and off, wishing she hadn’t washed her dishes from breakfast already.

“That’s okay hon, I was just curious.”

“Mmm.”

They stood there in silence for a beat, Amelia continued to pretend to be occupied with the sink. Eventually, she broke the silence.

“But I mean, it was a good day. I drove around, went to a garage sale. Hey, if I bought something and found something super personal inside, should I give it back?”

Maureen was leaning with her elbows on the island, studying Amelia.

“Well that depends, what did you find?”

“Nothing big, just like a box and some stuff. It doesn’t look particularly valuable, but I thought maybe the family might want it back, you know?”

“I mean technically you did buy it, so it’s really up to whatever you want to do, Lia. If you think it’s something important to the family, it can never hurt to ask.”

“Yeah, I know.” Amelia scrunched up her face and leaned her chin into palm.

“Is there any reason why you don’t want to give it back?”

“No, it was just a really long drive, so it’ll be a hassle to go back out there. But I mean, if you think that’s the right thing to do.”

“It’s really up to you.” Her mother seemed to be creeping across the kitchen, closer and closer to her, “Where is it now? A box you said?”

“Living room.”

Maureen turned to walk down the hall and Amelia rushed ahead of her, shutting the french doors that separate the living room from the rest of the house. “It’s not that big a deal Mom.”

“I was just going to take a look at it.”

“No.” Amelia gripped the handles of the door, refusing to allow her mother access. Maureen huffed in her daughter’s face. “You asked my advice Amelia.”

“I know.” Amelia rolled her tongue around in her mouth. “And Mom, I’m okay, alright? I’m not lonely. You didn’t have to come here”

“I’m sure sweetie. You’re just so far away from everything and you’d had Branwell so long.” Her mother was right by her side, her hand on Amelia’s shoulder, walking her back to the kitchen. She was only a few inches taller than Amelia, but her presence right there, deflecting the light coming in from the front window made Amelia feel small and trapped. She took a step out of the reach of her mother’s hand.

“Yes Mom, but really I’m okay. You don’t need to worry.” She held her hands up, a barrier between them. “But hey, I’ve got some work I need to get done okay?”

A smile spread across her mother’s face, “Well I can help sweetie! What do you need done?”

Amelia stifled a groan, “Well, I just. Dinner and…”

Maureen placed her hands on her daughter’s shoulders, “I’ll prepare dinner, you just do the work you need to do.”

“Mom, really.”

Her mother put a finger to Amelia’s lips, Amelia drew her head back away from the finger, but it persisted. “Go work now.”

Amelia’s shoulders drooped. She left the kitchen and disappeared into her bedroom. She hid in there, clicking through the internet on her laptop until her mom called her back to eat, the child in her own home. They sat in the sunroom, her mother chattering on, Amelia chewed while she listened, feeling the invasive expectations of being a daughter, commenting only when absolutely necessary, until finally her mother’s plate was clean.

“Thanks for dinner Mom.” Amelia stood and gave her mom a quick hug. “And thanks for coming by, it was great to see you.”

“Let me clean up these dishes.” Her mother reached across and grabbed Amelia’s plate.

“No I’ve got it!” She snatched the plate back from her mother, “You cooked, really, thanks for coming. I love you.” Amelia herded her mother to the door as she spoke. Maureen again closed her arms around her daughter’s shoulders, who awkwardly held the dirty plates out away from her torso, “I love you too sweetie.”

Amelia pulled her lips into a tight smile as she watched Maureen pick up her purse from beside the door and exit.

Amelia stacked the plates and hurried to lock the door, not that that was any defense against her mother, then returned to the kitchen where she placed the plates down in the sink. She looked into the corner by the pantry where Branwell’s bowls sat untouched since his death and felt guilty for not being more upset he was gone and for being so lazy the bowls were still sitting on the kitchen floor. She walked over to them, stacked them together, and then pushed them around into the corner of the pantry floor, figuring that was good enough for now.

*

Later that evening, Amelia sat in a dusty winged-back armchair, her feet tucked in around her, an untouched mug of chamomile tea growing cold in her hand. Across from her, still sitting in the same spot on the couch was the box; unmoved and untouched. Amelia knew what she needed to do with it, but didn’t like the idea of having to actually pick the box up herself and return it. She sat there, mulling over how to approach the issue at hand. She felt a lot

more reverence and responsibility for the box now that she discovered it was actually an urn.

How could someone just forget their dead body? Amelia had heard of people doing the complete opposite, going to extreme lengths to memorialize the ashes of their loved one in jewelry or art or miniature monuments. She even knew one girl she had gone to high school with had had her brother's ashes made into a diamond after he was killed in a hunting accident. But just to stick him in a box and forget about him so much that you sell him to someone else? What was wrong with these people?

It must be a mistake, it had to be. The wife didn't know what was inside, she wasn't supposed to sell it, her husband's at home freaking out right now because his wife sold off Grandma Frankie. Amelia wished she had their number so she could call and let them know that Franke was safe, that she would bring her back to them tomorrow.

Amelia took her first sip of tea and spit it right back into the mug. It had taken on that lukewarm temperature that when it touched your lip it felt almost warm, but as soon as it was in your mouth the coldness began to spread across your tongue, making the idea of swallowing revolting. She stood up from her chair, walked across the room, setting the now unwanted mug of tea on the coffee table as she passed, then sat down crossed-legged on the floor in front of the box.

Guilt filled her as she gazed upon it, discomfort bloomed inside her, like she was kidnapper, or worse, an odd fetish-ed body snatcher. She imagined

herself dressed in black and creeping through a graveyard with an empty sack – an anti-Santa Claus – breaking into a crematorium and filling up her bag with the ashes of other people’s loved ones, slinking out the window and disappearing into the inky night. She smiled at the ridiculousness of it, but it didn’t make her feel any better about herself.

She reached out and stroked the corner of the box.

“I’m sorry I took you. I didn’t know you were in there, but I promise I’ll get you back to your family.” She leaned her back against the top of the coffee table and folded her hands in her lap. She sat like that for a moment before reaching out toward the box with both hands. She hesitated for a moment, then scooped up the box, nestled her under her arm and carried her out the back door.

*

She had avoided the backyard ever since she had burned Branwell’s body. Even now, she couldn’t bring herself to turn on the outdoor lights that would put the unmoved fire pit in the pool of an artificial yellow spotlight. She carried Franke out with her and set her down on one of the plastic chairs she kept on her patio. She wanted to introduce them, but felt like she should meet with Branwell alone first. She moved toward the shadowy pit at the end of the paved terrace and crouched down beside it, closing her eyes and breathing deeply.

When she opened them again, she jumped a little bit and almost falling backwards over herself. Apparently her amateur cremation of Bran didn’t go as well as she thought it had. The paper bag had burned away around him and all of his fur was gone, but most of him still remained, gnarled, pink and black and

picked over. Where his eyes had been, were now empty sockets, spotted with blood and something stringy and sinewy. The flesh had burned away from most of his legs, but apparently the fire hadn't been hot enough for his bones to burn, so they lay intact, attached to a torso with a ripped open stomach, now wriggling with the larvae of some insect. He was collapsed a little bit, rigor mortis having already run its course; half-burned, and decaying, but he still looked like her cat. Amelia ran over to the tree by the patio and vomited at its roots.

She wiped her mouth on the back of her arm, the streams of her breath coming out long and shaking. Her shiver and shaking hands defying the heat of the evening. She turned to look back at the fire pit, leaning her shoulder against the tree.

"I'm sorry Branwell," she whispered, "I thought I did the right thing."

She stood there for a while, steadying her breathing. Her eyes moving frantically over everything in the backyard. They rested for a moment on the box at the other end of the patio, then moved to the diesel can still sitting at the edge.

"Stay over there," she called to Franke, then moved to pick up the diesel fuel. She shook the can; it felt like it was still almost half full. She walked over to the remains of Branwell, holding her jaw set, and emptied the can over top of him. She turned, went back into the house, and returned with a box of matches and some paper. She balled the paper up and stuffed it in pieces around Branwell's corpse like a blanket, apologies sputtering out her lips. She lit the matches and one by one added them the disheveled funeral pyre.

When the blaze was going strong, she stepped back and to let him dissolve, only this time she made she he was really gone, monitoring his progress. Soon, his body broke apart into two halves and when one half's fire started to dwindle, she moved it closer to the other, fanning the flame bringing them life again. She poked, prodded, and stirred with a stick from the yard; she lit more paper and pushed it up against him as his body became smaller and smaller.

*

It was late, past midnight, when the last of the embers finally died out. Amelia walked forward and leaned down to place her fingers in the ashes. It was still hot and she jerked her hand back in an instant.

"Not time yet." She smiled and looked back over her shoulder to where the box sat illuminated from the glow of the house. She walked over and picked it up, then carried it back beside the fire pit, dragging one of the plastic chairs with her. She sat down next to the pit and set the box on her lap.

"Franke," she whispered the word even though no one else was around to hear her, "I want you to meet Branwell. He was very good." She looked back up at the ashes, a thin tendril of smoke curling up from his edge. "He's still pretty new at death, and needs someone to look after him. I hope you won't mind."

Amelia sat there for a moment, breathing in the acrid smoky smell of Branwell's finale. She flipped the box over and pressed down with her thumbs until she felt it click, then slid the bottom out and set it beside her on the ground. She pulled out the bag, set the box on top of the bottom and held Franke close to

her chest. She slid off the chair and onto her knees beside the fire pit. She reached out, tentative, and swirled a pattern into the ash. It was warm, but not hot, comforting.

She looked down at the bag in her hand, then forced it open with her fingers. The body inside didn't even fill the bag halfway. She plunged her other hand into the ashes, grabbed a handful, and began feeding them into the bag. The ashes were powdery and hard to hold, as much landed outside the bag as managed to get in it. She could feel little bits a broken bone mixed in with the strange softness of the ash. The bag was small, which was fine because Bran hadn't left much behind, but even after Amelia had forced as much of him into the bag as she could and still close it, a good bit of remained at the bottom of the pit.

When she'd finished, she pulled the string closed and tied it up in a knot. She went back to the chair, picked up the box and bottom and sat back down. She laid the bag back down inside. In the little bit of light coming over from the house, she could see her gray fingerprints clinging to the outside of the velvet bag. It looked lonely sitting there inside the box, but Amelia felt better knowing they were together. She sat back up, and slid the bottom of the box back into place. She held it tight with both hands, then turned and walked back into the house.

CHAPTER 3

It was the day after Amelia's successful cremation of Branwell. Amelia stood on the step looking at the front door. It was one of those doubled up storm doors, clear glass with a grayish toned faux wood door behind it. Amelia hated those doors, she was never sure which one you were supposed to knock. Opening the glass door always felt too forward and intrusive, but half the time no one heard you if you knocked on it. So she stood there, bouncing on her heels, her hands buried deep in the back pockets of her shorts, gnawing at her lip, trying to determine the appropriate thing to do. She could hear muffled voices inside and there was a car in the driveway so she figured someone must be home. Finally, she reached out and gave a few easy taps on the glass storm door, took a step back and waited.

Nothing seemed to change. A gust of hot wind ripped through the afternoon, whisking vagrant strands of hair into Amelia's eyes. She tried tucking them behind her ear, then reached forward and tapped the glass again. Again, nothing. She pressed her ear to the glass, feeling its cold spread fast across her skin, her breath fogging up and disappearing again in an instant. She was certain she heard voices inside, but maybe it was just the TV. She straightened back up, gave a short, huffing breath and reached forward, grabbing the metal handle and pulling the storm door open. Its hinges screeched sharp in her ears, making her wince; so quick as she could, she leaned in, knocked hard and fast on the second door, then sprang back up, letting the storm door snap shut. Still nothing.

Amelia leaned out over the porch rails trying to peek into the adjacent window to see if she could spot anyone. There were off-white gauzy curtains hanging in the window making it difficult to see beyond the blinds. Her bag slid off her shoulder and down to her elbow. She hiked it back up, her eyes jumping from window to door.

“Hello?” she called out, swaying back and forth trying to figure out what to do. She didn’t want to just leave the box on the stoop; they might not understand; they might think it was a threat; they might throw her away. Amelia turned and walked down off the porch and around the steps until she was directly under the window. She stood up on her toes, hands on the ledge, leaning her ear in to the bottom seam of the window. She definitely heard voices inside, but also a laugh track, maybe these people just left the TV on so people would think they were home. She’d heard that people do that. Or maybe the volume was too loud and they couldn’t hear her.

“Excuse me!” Amelia called out louder beating her fist against the glass. She stopped, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps. She went back around and sat down on the step. Would it be weird to go to the back door? Yes, it would, people definitely don’t do that. Maybe she could find a window with the blinds open, make eye contact, wave to show she at least had friendly intentions. She stood up and walked around the perimeter of the house, attempting to peek in the windows she was tall enough to reach, but they were all obscured by curtains or half-closed blinds. She went back up to the porch and

knocked again, so hard this time that it sent a sharp shooting pain from her knuckle up to her elbow.

“Ow!” she massaged her hand to ease the pain. She stood there a bit longer waiting to see the handle turn but still no one came. Defeated, Amelia turned, walked off the porch, and headed back to her car, the dehydrated summer grass crunching underfoot. She hoped that maybe the family was listed in the phone book and she could try to reach them that way—or she could write them a letter maybe.

“Hello?” The voice accompanied the screeching of the storm door opening, making Amelia jump as she turned back around. She stood there, breathing for a beat looking at a tired, middle-aged man standing in the doorway, still gripping the handle like he might slam himself back inside at any moment.

“Hi” Amelia let out, feeling her lips move into a smile. Shoulders upright, steps decided, she walked back toward the door, one hand holding the strap of her bag, the other reaching forward to the man. He retreated a bit, narrowing the gap slightly between door and frame. Amelia slowed her pace as she ascended the steps. “Sorry to like, intrude like this. I’m Amelia. I was here yesterday at the yard sale.”

“Yeah?” the man kept his head back away from her, eyes following the line of his nose onto her face. Amelia’s smile faltered as she took her place on the small square of the porch.

“Well,” she hesitated, both of her hands wriggling and restless on the strap of her bag. “Well sir, I bought something and I uh, I wanted to see if maybe you and your wife would like it back.”

“We ain’t a Walmart sweetheart.” The man had one hand on the edge of the interior door, his other barely keeping a gap open for conversation.

“No, I know! It’s not like I want my money back or anything. I’m not unsatisfied or anything like that, it’s just,” she reached down into her bag and pulled out the box, “I just thought it might be sentimental you know? It feels like I’m taking part of your family.”

The man leaned forward barely enough for Amelia to even notice, his gaze directed at the box in her outstretched hand. She took a deep breath, keeping her eyes on his face and focusing on not shaking. This alone felt uncomfortably intrusive.

“Naw, I don’t care about that thing.”

“But sir – “

“Look sweetie, I appreciate the gesture, but you bought that, you keep it.”

Amelia pulled the box back to her chest and held it tight.

“Is your wife here sir? I’d like to speak with her too.”

“Naw, she’s gettin’ our groceries, but it’s fine. That was my box and I don’t mind it bein’ passed on or I wouldnta let her put it in the yard sale.”

“Oh.” Amelia pressed her lips together and looked down at her feet. A crack in their porch concrete made an almost perfect “J” up to the right corner of the porch, her foot resting on the peak of the arch. “Would you mind if I wait for her? There’s just something I’d really like to discuss with the both of you.”

“Look, kid.”

“Amelia.”

“Thomas Burton. Look Amelia, I appreciate your concern, but it’s really ok, just take the box.”

“Do you know what’s inside it Mr. Burton?” Amelia looked back up at his face, following the lines that ran from the edges of his faded blue eyes up to his receding hairline. The box felt heavy against her chest as she breathed.

“Naw, didn’t think it opened.” He had started retreating back into the house again, the storm door all the way closed now.

“Well, it does sir. And I think it’s really important that you know what’s inside before you tell me just to take it and be on my merry way.” Amelia pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows, almost challenging Mr. Burton to send her away.

“Well what’s in it?”

“I’d rather discuss that with your wife here Mr. Burton.” She crossed her arms over the box, her fingers gripping its edges and sank back into her hip, not taking her eyes off his. “This is really important.”

“Thomas.”

“What?”

“Just call me Thomas kid, ‘Mr. Burton’ makes me feel old.”

“Then call me Amelia. ‘Kid’ makes me feel young.”

“Deal.” Thomas nodded his head forward and took his hand off the interior door, sliding his fingers into the pockets of his jeans, his thumbs stopping their full descent. He shrugged, “But I mean yeah, if this is that important to you, you can wait for Martha to get back.”

“Thank you.” Amelia nodded, then turned and plopped down on the top step, leaning her shoulder against the metal railing.

“Whater you doing?” Thomas’ voice asked from behind. Amelia looked back over her shoulder.

“Waiting on Martha sir.”

“Out here? You’ll melt.”

“Well I didn’t want to be a bother.”

“You’re already a bother. Might as well bother inside where there’s A.C.” He leaned forward holding the storm door open for her. Amelia hesitated, looking out over the porch and the yard. “Come on now sweetheart I ain’t gonna murder you. You know I only came out here because my neighbor called and said some girl was prowling around my yard.”

Amelia gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“Sorry about that.” She stood up, shouldering past him into the house, stopping a few feet into the foyer. She heard the storm door slam shut and Thomas walk up behind her. He’d left the main door open.

“Just make yourself at home I guess.” Thomas walked past her, down two small steps and settled onto a sagging gray couch in the sunken living room. She couldn’t tell if he expected her to follow or not so she stood there for a moment, the box in the crook of one arm, the other supporting her bag.

It was a modest house and very empty, but not enough to feel like the Burtons might be moving out. Through the archway that led down to the living room Amelia could see little but the side of the couch, an overgrown houseplant, and the edge of Thomas’ face. She could hear the television though, she was now definitely sure it was a television, playing a rerun of a sitcom that had only lasted two seasons. Sunday afternoon programming.

The foyer she was standing in ran horizontal to the living room. Looking down to her right she saw what appeared to be a dining room with garish red and black carpeting and a horrible matching chandelier too large for the space and so ornate that it almost looked like a Halloween decoration. Glancing down the other direction revealed a hallway with rooms going off either side, if she had to guess, she assumed there’d be at least a bathroom and a couple of bedrooms that way.

What she really noticed however was the green. Pale, pukey green in various hues permeated the house. The walls of the foyer surrounding her were

like a curdled mint ice cream. They even had a strange chunky texture to add to the effect. Now that she was inside she could see that the curtains hanging in the window had a off-green tint to the gauze making the very light diffused through the window wash everything in that same greenish hue. Beyond the faux hardwood of the foyer the main carpeting of the house looked like a dirty white with tiny dark forest green speckles throughout. She was surprised she hadn't noticed the green at the yard sale, but the longer she stood in the house the more the green seemed to be an entity of the inside. She felt that if she tried to take the green beyond the threshold of the house it would evaporate into the orange summer nothing of the outside and be lost; tainted evidence.

"You don't have to just stand there sweetheart." Thomas' voice cut through the chartreuse bringing Amelia back to her present moment.

"Amelia."

"You don't have to just stand there Amelia. But you know, do whatchu want."

It did seem strange to stand there unmoving just inside the doorway. She looked behind her, through the storm door into the colorless yard. A drab and rumped female cardinal skittered twice across the grass before flying away. Amelia sighed, looked ahead of her, then moved down through the archway and into the living room.

*

Amelia sat down in a hunter green chair perpendicular to the scrappy couch Thomas had dissolved into. She positioned herself at the very edge of the seat, holding her body so tense it was almost exercise, with the box balanced on top of her knees, her fingers gripping the edge. She kept her lips pressed together and sort of sway-nodded as she looked around the room. The green seemed to lighten a bit in here, which Amelia attributed to the higher ceilings. Thomas kept his focus on the television, leaning on the armrest of the couch, his chin resting in the crook of his folded palm. The television still sounded muffled, as though Amelia were hearing it play through water. She wondered if there was something wrong with it, but Thomas didn't offer any apologies or anything so she continued to sit there.

"Do you-" Amelia's voice caught in her dry and sticky throat making her let out something like a cough and gurgle combined, "'Scuse me" she paused and swallowed, "Do you know when Martha will be getting home?"

Thomas shrugged, not taking his eyes off the screen. "She's been gone awhile now so could be any time. I told you you don't have to wait if you don't want."

"No, that's okay." She paused. "What show is this?"

"I don't know. It's just what was on."

"You don't want to change it?"

"This is fine."

“Okay.” Amy looked down at the coffee table between them and saw a remote lying on top of a stack of crisp, glossy magazines. They looked as though they hadn’t even been flipped through. She leaned forward, brushed the remote aside and closed her fingers around the top magazine. Thomas’ eyes moved to her direction while his body stayed facing the screen.

“Those are my wife’s.”

“Sorry” Amelia let it go and returned her hand to the box.

“No, I mean, it’s fine.” Thomas wriggled his head a little bit as he spoke, his arm a monopod.

“I’m fine.” Amy spoke over him and kept her hands on the box. Her eyes focused on the wall behind the television, bare except for two framed photographs posted on either side of the screen. Both were portraits and both looked a bit dated, sort of faded all over with a reddish-orange tinge seeping into the corners. One depicted what Amelia assumed was a younger Thomas and Martha in full ‘80s regalia, glasses taking up half their faces, a thick mustache burrowing under Thomas’ nose, and clashing neon, color block suits on the both of them. Shoulder pads galore. It was obviously a professionally taken photograph, maybe for an engagement announcement, Amelia wasn’t sure but behind those enormous glasses she thought their eyes looked bright and hopeful. She smiled to herself.

The other photo looked like the same young couple, but a candid shot, Thomas’ arm draped over Martha’s shoulders her hands resting on his forearm,

both looking in separate directions. They were sitting outside a building, but Amelia couldn't tell where.

"Do y'all have any kids?"

"Hmm?" Thomas looked over at her.

"Do y'all have any--" but just then the storm door screeched open, interrupting her. Amelia jumped to her feet and leaned to see through the archway.

"Why'd you leave the door open Tom? The air'll get out." Amelia could hear Martha's steps heavy on the linoleum wood and rustle of plastic grocery bags move in the opposite direction, away from them.

"We have a visitor." Thomas called out from the couch. He hadn't moved or acknowledged Martha's arrival at all.

"Yeah? That's who's car's out front?" There was a wrinkly thump as the bags were set on a hard surface and Martha appeared through a second archway in the wall perpendicular to Amelia that presumably lead to the kitchen.

"Whoer you?" Martha looked a bit frumpy and sort of lost, sweat stains visible on her pink t-shirt, under her arms and a few sprinklings on her chest.

"Um, Amelia. I was at your thing yesterday."

"Oh, yeah, I remember you." Martha brushed a stray hair away from her face, "Whater you doing back? Was something broken?"

“No.” Amelia hesitated, “I just wanted to see if maybe you wanted this back.” She gestured with the box in her hands. Martha scrunched up her face and raised her eyebrows.

“Why would we want that back honey?”

“Amelia.” Thomas interrupted switching off the television, “Her name is Amelia and apparently she thinks we might want what’s inside.”

“Well what’s inside?” Before Amelia could do or say anything Martha made her way across the room and took the box out of her hands. “How do you even open it?” Martha sat down on the couch next to her husband flipping the box over in her hands, examining it.

Amelia reached out, but stopped just short of Martha’s arm and sat back down on the edge of the chair.

“The bottom slides out, but I wouldn’t–”

Martha flipped the box over, laid it in her lap, pressed down on the bottom with her thumbs, and slid the bottom out. The purple bag sat amid a shadow of cloudy gray ash. Since the addition of Branwell the bag was decidedly more full, the drawstrings barely closed all the way and some of the ashes had sprinkled out in transit darkening the yellow wood. Martha picked the bag up, pinching the top between her thumb and forefinger.

“Is it,” her eyes looked over at Thomas’, he shrugged and they both turned their heads toward Amelia, “a person?”

Amelia swallowed and nodded.

“I thought you might want him back.”

“Him?”

“Well, it says ‘Franke’ on the bottom; I thought that might be who it was.”

Amelia let her lips fold over her teeth and wiggled her jaw around as she watched the couple’s faces. She didn’t want to tell them about the ring inside, didn’t want them to know she’d opened it, rummaged around, added her cat. So it could be a boy for now.

Martha set the bag back into the box and slid the bottom into place. She turned to Thomas.

“This is your family’s box honey. Do you know who it is?” Her voice was almost an accusation. Thomas shook his head, his eyes settled on the box in Martha’s lap.

“Nope, I don’t know. My mom always had that box around, since I was a kid.”

“So it’s your grandpa or something.”

“No, I remember the box was around before he died. I never really thought much about it. I don’t know. My little brother got in trouble for playing with it once. Never really thought about where it came from.”

“Or what was in it obviously.” Martha’s voice seemed to have dropped an octave. Thomas shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't really want it. It's weird now knowing there's a dead person in it."

"I agree." Martha flipped the box right side up and shoved it back in Amelia's lap. "I ain't living with no dead person in my house."

"What?" Amelia was shocked. There was a person in here. She'd had a life, she deserved to have some sort of acknowledgement from the people she left behind. "Are you sure? This is family."

"Not necessarily." Thomas was looking up into Amelia's face now, "I don't rightly know who that is and there's no way to tell from ashes right?"

"I think it's creepy when people keep their pet's ashes lying around," Martha added, "I'm not about to have a dead human on my shelf."

"But he's been on your shelf for years! You said that yesterday!" Amelia could feel a heat welling up from her stomach. How could they be so flippant about this?

"Yeah, but I didn't know that thing was a 'he' honey." Martha crossed her arms and leaned back into the sagging couch.

"So you have no interest at all in finding out who this is or giving him a proper farewell?"

"Let's just say I won't lose any sleep if you take that box straight out the door and I never see or hear about it again." Martha rolled her head to Thomas who nodded in agreement.

Amelia stood up holding the box close to her chest.

“I can’t believe you two. This is your family. Don’t you care what happens to your body when you die?”

“Well sweetheart, I’ll be dead so no.” Martha’s eyes didn’t deviate or waver from Amelia’s gaze. Amelia took a long breath, feeling her stomach tighten in frustration, she pressed her lip tight together.

“This is someone who mattered. Someone who breathed and laughed and loved. I don’t care if you don’t give a shit about her. I do, and I wouldn’t leave her with you even if you paid me double to give her back. She deserves better than the two of you.”

“I thought it was a ‘he’” Martha whispered.

Amelia stormed toward the door, but her foot slipped as she ascended the two little stairs leading to the foyer. She stumbled and fell, the box sliding across the fake hardwood floors and settling at the door.

“You ok?” Thomas stood up from the couch. Martha’s hand covered what Amelia thought might be a snicker.

“I’m fine.” She pushed herself up, walked over to the box and scooped it back up. As she opened the door to leave she turned and looked back at the couple.

“I hope you have nice life.” She stood there and looked at each of their faces, then walked out, slamming the door behind her.

CHAPTER 4

Monday had come and Amelia sat alone in her office, the fluorescent lights only half lit. She had her door shut so that the rustling of the office beyond was just a muffled shuffling like the static on old analog televisions. According to the passive aggressive email she'd received about 30 minutes before, closed doors were "uninviting" and "discouraged interpersonal communication", but Amelia wasn't feeling overwhelmingly interactive today. She hadn't stopped carrying Franke around with her since he was abandoned by the Burton's the previous afternoon. She figured she'd been alone long enough, and until she knew who she belonged to, she was her responsibility.

She had her tucked into the bottom of her backpack hidden in the large square drawer on the bottom right of her desk. Reaching down, she clicked the side of the handle and slid the drawer open, peering down into her unzipped pack at the little yellowy-brown rectangle nestled at the bottom. She felt a strange, probably unreasonable sense of protection over her that she couldn't quite justify but couldn't shake off either. She pushed the drawer back into place with her foot, plopped her chin in her hand, and returned her attention to the computer, pulling up her internet browser as fast as she could to prevent the garish City to Country Insurance logo from being tattooed onto her cornea by the blazing desktop background.

She navigated to her emails, deleting the anti-door memo along with some help requests from last Friday and an ad for “6 Issues for \$6!!!” from Runners’ Life Magazine. She smirked to herself as she deleted that one; she could only assume that sporting goods store had sold her email after she bought a pair of yoga pants online and now she was targeted as a ‘fitness enthusiast’ or something. She had never been to a yoga class though and was definitely a far cry from a fitness enthusiast. The yoga pants were mostly for sleeping once the cold weather set in; she kept her heat off as long as possible to keep her energy bill down. Of course here it probably wouldn’t really be cold for another month and a half, but they’d been half off regular pricing so the purchase felt justified.

For a Monday, it was surprisingly quiet. Usually she was overrun with Help requests that had been backlogged over the weekend. City to Country was a relatively small insurance firm that boasted great personalized service on account of their size, but that one-on-one service was for the most part limited to Monday-Friday from 9-5. They were big enough for an app - the companies latest technological advancement, but not a 24hr customer service line. Amelia supposed pretty much everyone had an app now. Typically, at least one agent would have had a technical difficulty by now - frozen computer screen, rogue pop up penis, something like that; but it seemed the IT gods were feeling generous this morning and giving Amelia some time to herself. When she got to work that morning there had been three reports of a bug on the “Find Your Agent!” link on the website, but that was to be expected. They’d switched email providers over the weekend and the website code needed to be updated to reflect the new domain. Thankfully, website issues weren’t her responsibility.

Amelia opened a new tab on her browser and typed in “Franke” into the Google search bar. The top result was a Swedish manufacturing company that specialized in making sinks. The entire first page of search results were devoted to this Franke, which she was decently confident had nothing to do with her Franke. The second page had a link “Franke GmbH”, which just turned out to be a company producing ball bearings; assumingly taking Amelia further away from her desired results. According to this preliminary search, the Franke’s of the world did not appear to be overwhelmingly interesting. There was a professor named Katherine Franke at a college in New York. Amelia doubted she had anything to do with her Franke, but made of mental note of it just the same since at least this Franke was person and not a company. It was sort of progress.

If she were being honest with herself, Amelia couldn’t even really articulate what she was looking for or where to start looking whatever that might be. She didn’t have much to go on, just the burned signature on the bottom of the box for sure, but she supposed she could try and look into the Burtons and see if there were any Franks in their ancestry. She Googled “surname search engine”.

*

There was a quick rapping knock and a *schook* of the office door handle turning that made Amelia jump and exit out of her internet browser allowing the burning red background to blaze forth once more. She spun her chair toward the

now open door and slapped a tight-lipped smile and alert wide eyes onto her expression.

Her co-worker Patrick had only opened the door enough so that just his head and torso leaned into her office. He'd gotten a haircut over the weekend, reducing it to nothing more than a shot layer of ashy-brown fuzz. Amelia noticed how lumpy the back of his head was. Patrick put his hand over the microphone of his headset.

"Hey, so, I've got a customer on the phone who can't get the quote generator to work on the app; any suggestions?"

Amelia over-expressed something like sympathy, furrowing her brows and softening her smile; she'd already had this conversation a dozen times since the app dropped two weeks ago.

"I don't do the app. Tell them to call the corporate number."

"Yeah she said they directed her here."

Amelia's shoulders compressed inward and she pushed her jaw forward in frustration, "Tell her we'll look into it."

Patrick didn't move or acknowledge that he'd heard her in any way. She moved her lips into a tight pout, looked away and then looked back at him.

"Yes?"

"But are you gonna fix it or..." Patrick's sentence tapered into the air between them, his eyebrows attempting to join with his hairline as he spoke. Amelia sucked at the inner skin of her bottom lip.

"I'm not a programmer. I can't do anything to fix it."

"So what do I tell my customer?"

"Is she on hold?"

Patrick curled his lips together and shook his head. Amelia sighed.

"Put her hold and come back."

Patrick's head disappeared, leaving the door an odd degree of half-open that scratched at Amelia's brain. Soon though, Patrick reappeared, entering the office to its totality this time, pushing the door all the way open in the process. He crossed his arms, making his too-large white button up bunch up around his scrawny torso.

"So whado I do?"

"The app is its own entity, so there's nothing I can actually do to fix it."

"So what's the point of you, then?"

"Damn Patty, what's the point of you?" She shook her head in feigned offense.

"Sorry."

"No, it's cool, but for the record; I handle in-office computer glitches, recover deleted files, get rid of viruses, that sort of thing. Corporate outsources to some programming group for the app so you just need to report the problem to them and they'll send it to the programming people."

“But what do I do with my customer? She said corporate connected her to us.”

Amelia took a deep breath and studied her computer screen, she gnawed at hangnail.

“She’s probably just saying that because she doesn’t want to call someone else.”

“You don’t know that.”

Amelia rolled her head toward Patrick, her eyebrows suggesting annoyance.

“Um, I guess get her contact info and let her know corporate is working on fixing the issue. Tell her you’ll notify her when the app should be working again.”

“Will corporate be fixing the problem?”

“I’ll contact corporate. It’ll get taken care of.”

“Cool.”

Patrick left, once again leaving the door in the state he’d left it upon entry. Amelia eyed it with aggravation, but figured it was a bit too “in her manager’s face” to get up and shut it since it was standing wide open to the rest of the office now. The manager herself, Jen, was standing over someone’s cubicle, but had looked up when Patrick left the office. They made eye contact, Jen giving her an approving nod, directing her eye line toward the now open door. Amelia gave

her best corporate lemming smile back and turned her chair back to her computer.

The City to Country app had emerged as the bane of Amelia's existence. As the I.T. rep for the Colfax Agency it was her job to announce the launch to her coworkers. In the email she'd made it quite clear that the app was beyond her personal expertise. Not surprisingly, no one read the entire email and they just associated her name with the app and the app malfunctioned at least once a day. So for the past two weeks her job had become less I.T. help around the office and more a customer service liaison to corporate. She opened her email back up and began drafting yet another app-related email to corporate.

Amelia felt that weird electrical-neurotic shark sense of a nearby body and turned to see who had entered. Jen stood in the doorway, her gray pantsuit tight and over-starched. Her blond hair was pulled up in a less than perfect ponytail with strategic flyways that seemed to be trying to convey a sense of 'I'm laid back, but don't mess with me'. She had intense eyes that seemed as though they were protruding uncomfortably far from her face and were always a tad pinker than most other people's eyes. Amelia always wondered if she was hired as manager because her eyes were so off putting everyone would be scared into submission.

"Amelia!" Jen smiled, leaning down and resting her knuckles on the edge of Amelia's desk, "How are you doing today."

Amelia shrugged. "Fine I guess. It's been pretty quiet. I'm emailing corporate about another reported app issue." She gestured toward the computer

with her head. Jen gave her a dramatic pout that Amelia wasn't sure if it was sarcastic or not. She always had a feeling that Jen was trying really hard, but she wasn't sure what she was trying really hard at.

"That app is such a pain!"

"Yep," Amelia nodded, "I'm not sure how worth it it actually is."

"That's not you shying away from work?" Jen raised her eyebrows that could have expressed playfulness or anger; Amelia wasn't sure.

"No." Amelia backtracked, "It's just, I'm worried it's negatively affecting our image as a company you know."

Jen stood back up straight. "Well I'm glad you have a team mindset." The words were almost a sigh except for an uncomfortable hike in pitch at the end of the sentence.

Amelia couldn't figure Jen out. She talked like she was quoting a business textbook or maybe some City to Country Insurance employee handbook Amelia had never seen.

"Do you need anything?" Amelia asked. Jen was standing in the corner of the office, examining a poster Amelia had framed on the wall, an art deco inspired pet adoption ad put out last summer by the shelter Amelia volunteered at on Saturdays.

"So this is like a Gatsby shelter?"

Amelia wasn't sure if Jen was joking or not. She gave the poster a quick glance before answering, imagining all the animals in fringe dresses and feathered headbands, cats and dogs doing the Charleston together.

"No, it's just a normal animal shelter."

Jen nodded and looked back down at Amelia, "I need stats on website traffic by the end of the day. Number of visits, peak times, how often a visit leads to a phone call."

"Yeah I'll just fill out the form." But Jen had already turned and left the office.

*

The day pushed forward slow and methodical. The analog clock above the doorway clicked out the minutes of the workday with a persistent emphasis on monotony. Amelia filled out the I.T. stat form and emailed it to Jen as she did every day - Jen's unnecessary reminder had been annoying so even though the information wasn't relevant until the end of the work day, Amelia sent it off right after lunch. There was an uncomfortable vibe in the office today. Maybe Amelia just felt odd; well she did feel odd but for some reason the oddness felt outside of her today, like she was breathing it in.

At three o'clock the suffocation of the office got too heavy; Amelia felt as though she couldn't breathe. With each ping of an email notification she felt her jaw tightening. She scribbled a quick, "back by 3:30" Post-it note and slapped it on her door. She grabbed her backpack out of her desk drawer, slung it over her

shoulder, and slipped out the “Emergency Exit Only” door hidden at the end of the hallway. She couldn’t risk getting caught on her way out of the building.

Once outside she dropped her pack onto the curb and plopped down beside it, ankles folded in a loose crisscross. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs until her chest hurt. The days were getting obviously shorter now that September was approaching its end. It was that tired late summer light that burned into Amelia’s cheeks as she sat behind the office complex, although technically by now she supposed it was autumn. It was still so damn hot. Amelia shrugged out of her sweater and folded it next to her, then turned, unzipped her pack, and slid the box out and into her lap where it sat heavy, secure, and comforting. She ran her fingers over the rough carvings, willing the anxiety to leave her limbs and lie with the dead inside. Her hand slid underneath and she pressed and slid the box open, letting the bag of ashes fall into her hands. She pushed her knees together, sandwiching the box between her thighs and her stomach, cupped her hands around the velvet bag and held it to her nose. She inhaled softly.

“Whatcha got there?”

Amelia jumped, dropping the bag into her lap, gripping the curb with the tips of her fingers and shooting an angry glower over her shoulder as Patrick sauntered over from the back door and plopped down next to her at the edge of the sidewalk.

“What the crap!” Amelia hissed as the pounding of her heart in her ears began to simmer down and be replaced with the buzz of the summer’s last insects.

“Sorry, did I scare you?”

“No, not at all.” Amelia pinched the left side of her mouth together giving him an aggravated side eye and wrapping her fingers back around the packet of ashes.

“My bad.” Patrick pulled a lighter from the chest pocket of his shirt and lit up a cigarette, offering it to Amelia. She waved it away and turned her gaze straight ahead to the unkempt forest-y overgrowth that abutted their building. Patrick shrugged, took a drag on his cigarette, then blew a long stream of blackish gray smoke, letting his gaze fall ahead in synch with Amelia’s. “You needed a break?”

Amelia nodded. “I needed the sun.”

“Yeah me too.”

They sat there in silence for beat. Amelia could feel the high points of her face starting sting from the incessant bearing down of the afternoon sun. Beads of sweat were beginning to gather at the edge of her hairline. She pulled her hair back, twisted it around her finger and let it fall down over her shoulder, creating somewhat of a barrier between herself and her coworker.

Patrick looked down at her lap and nodded toward the bag and disassembled box.

“Seriously, what is that?”

“It’s nothing. Just something I picked up at a garage sale.” She flipped the box over, dropped the bag inside and started trying to slide the bottom back into place, the fabric catching in the seam every few centimeters.

Patrick looked at her face; she could feel his eyes studying her like she’s felt Jen earlier that day. It made her chest feel tighter and she kept her eyes on the box until finally the bottom clicked back into place.

“Let me see it.” Patrick held a hand out. Amelia hesitated.

“Give me the cigarette.”

“Seriously?”

Amelia opened and closed her hand, grabbing for the cigarette. Confused, Patrick handed it over and Amelia placed the box in his lap. She held it out and away from the box as Patrick picked it up and examined it. Amelia watched him closely, ready to snatch it back should the need arise.

Patrick flipped the box over, “Franke”.

“That’s what I’ve been calling her.”

“You call Franke a ‘her’?”

“Yeah,” she moved a little closer to Patrick on the curb, wanting to lessen the gap between herself and the box.

Patrick nodded and continued examining the box. "Look at this," he pointed to the corner of the design along the side of the box. "Doesn't that look initials?"

Amelia dropped the cigarette and grabbed the box back from Patrick, he snatched it up before it went out, taking a drag. Amelia examined the spot Patrick had pointed out and indeed among the carved, twisting vines was a definite "O|W" integrated into the wood, leaves sprouting off each initial.

"What's inside it? Anything good?" Amelia looked up and met Patrick's inquisitive gaze. "If you don't mind me asking," he added quickly, refocusing his attention on the asphalt in front of them.

"No." Amelia, dropped the box into her backpack and zipped it up. "I think it's a person."

"What?" Patrick leaned away from her.

"You know, like cremated ashes."

"And you were smelling it?" His face wasn't judging, just curious; he let out a long exhale of smoke. Amelia noticed he had little pools of sweat collecting along the upper ridges of the lumps on the back of his head.

"I wasn't like..." Amelia trailed off. She wasn't really sure what she had been doing. "You cut your hair."

Patrick took a final pull on his cigarette and flicked the butt away, exhaling the smoke through his nose. "Thanks for noticing."

“It makes your head look weird.”

Patrick laughed, “Damn, Amelia.”

“Sorry,” Amelia looked back out ahead of her, then down at her bag, “I don’t know what to do with it. It’s someone. They should, I don’t know, be at peace or something.”

“You bury it in the woods somewhere. I wouldn’t just go around telling people it’s a dead body though.”

“That’s not enough. Like, someone probably knows her. They deserve to know where she is. Don’t you think?”

Patrick frowned, then shrugged, “Yeah, probably.” He stood up and brushed the dirt off the back of his khakis. He looked down at her, sucked in a deep breath, “Good luck with that,” he nodded to her bag, then turned and headed back inside. Amelia continued to sit on the curb staring out at the woods and waiting for her muscles to relax until her phone buzzed revealing a text from Jen saying “It’s 3:37 where are you?”. Amelia rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, grabbed her bag, and headed back inside.

*

That evening, Amelia sat at the metal table in her sunroom, crunching on a bowl of cereal and scrolling through her laptop. Franke was sitting on the table across from her, almost staring out at the back of the computer. She would periodically glance up at her, as though to assure herself the box hadn’t moved itself somehow. The social implications of carrying around a dead body hadn’t

really bothered her until that afternoon at work with Patrick's warning about revealing the box's contents. Simply having the ashes wasn't weird, plenty of people held onto the ashes of loved ones. But the only people who carried them around with them were manic pixie dream girls in a dark rom com or weirdos on an A&E special. Amelia didn't really want to identify with either of those people.

Still, Amelia couldn't just get rid of it. Even if she had a formal burial or something that wouldn't be enough. She couldn't accept that someone could just simply be forgotten, left behind like that. Someone cared enough to keep Franke out of the ground in the first place - an anonymous rest wasn't right. Logically, Amelia understood that for the most part, everyone is eventually forgotten, unless you are exceptionally great or exceptionally terrible. But to hell with standard and expectation - the box held a former life, and that, she told herself, was worth discovering. Surely, someone remembered who this was and cared what happened to what was left of her.

Amelia stood and pulled her shoulders back, feeling the joints pop and crackle across her neck and down her spine.

"How you doin' Franke?" She pushed the cereal bowl toward the box, informing her she could drink the sugar milk if she wanted, then walked over to her backpack, sitting on the counter in the kitchen. She rummaged through it, pulled out a notebook, grabbed a pen from a drawer and sat back down in front of her laptop.

First she scribbled down the name of the university professor she'd found at work earlier adding "professor, NY" next to it in the vague hope that if nothing more likely turned up, at least she'd have a human being to contact. Then she reached over, pulled the box close to her and reexamined the signature on the bottom, looking for anything that might at the very least give her a manufacturer. She had the passing dreadful thought that the box was someone's home carpentry project, but pushed it to the back of her mind. It was too early to give into such despairing thoughts as of yet. But even that might not be all bad. A local art guru might be able to identify the carver in an instant. At the moment though, Amelia felt like she was standing in an empty prairie, nothing but seemingly identical strands of grass expanding to the far reaches of her eyesight.

She held the box up close to her face. The wood on the bottom wasn't as smooth as the wood everywhere else. Assumedly because no one would ever be looking at it this closely, other than shaping it and the signature, the slab had been left almost completely natural. It was lighter than the rest of the box, almost white, the veins running through it close to invisible; flyaway strands of rouge wood frays clung to her fingertips as she brushed over the signature. She turned her attention to the little 'O | W' Patrick had pointed out earlier, running her fingers over it. That was probably something.

Amelia slid the box to the side and typed "OW" into her computer. "*Ow exclamation; used to express sudden pain.*" She let out a short huff of breath. She tried "o.w." - same response. This was unhelpful. She leaned into her fist, trying to figure out how to get something more potentially helpful. She tried "O.W. Carpentry" and got a lot of videos of people injuring themselves while building

stuff out of wood and one add for a community college offering woodworking training. None of this offered anything that was definitely connected to her box.

She tried “o.w. Woodworking” and got the same results as with carpentry. Then she added a “near me” to the search. A box popped up at the top of her search results, a map with little red pins and listings beneath. A few showed up within a few miles of her, but only one had an ‘o’ and a ‘w’ to it’s name. “Olivanton Woodworking” in Hazel, North Carolina had 5 stars and 4 reviews to its name. She googled them directly and clicked on what looked like their webpage.

She let the pendant she’d had pressed against her lips fall back around her neck. The top banner of the page reveal a much larger, much more detailed, but absolutely the same O | W carved onto her box: O | W since 1954. She finally had a connection. The box must have come from this woodshop. She grabbed her phone and typed in the address - 3.5 hours away. She checked the time. It was only 8:46pm and they didn’t open until the next morning at 9.

From the moment the O | W shone forth on her computer screen Amelia was seized with a reverberating energy. She was hyper-aware of her own body and sitting in that metal chair became unbearable. She stood, she paced, she shut her laptop, then immediately opened it back up again. She clicked their ‘About Us’ page, her eyes racing across the screen. Founded, 1954, two friends, Buzz Jenkins and Howard Franke. Franke. There he was. This was the place. She ushered herself out of the sunroom, but came back and grabbed her Franke from the table. She brushed her teeth. She turned on Netflix. She tried desperately to

distract herself. She called the number on their website, but of course got an answering machine. It was what she expected but it still annoyed her and she didn't leave a voicemail. She didn't sleep and before the sun was up, she was in her car driving north.

CHAPTER 5

A little bell tinkled as Amelia entered the shop. The door was large, heavy, and made out of dark red wood that was sealed in a lacquer that reflected the midday sun. The “O|W” burned into the door matched the carving on her box. It was a grander, more masculine entrance than she had expected from the creators of the intricate box she carried clutched to her stomach with both hands, but it wasn't wrong either.

Inside the air was thick and yellow. The light coming in through the store front windows highlighted the delicate bits of sawdust floating through the room, making the space feel small and tight. The space was crowded. Tables, cabinets, and bookshelves lined the walls, pushing the perimeter in toward a center hallway. The ‘hallway’ itself was created by an array of wardrobes, chest of drawers, desks, and headboards all leaning against each other in a haphazard maze of display. Amelia moved down this hallway toward the back of the store where a desk covered in papers and a computer could be seen through the haze of wood-essence.

As she was approaching the desk a man emerged from a set of steel doors behind it, a sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead. His flannel and jeans were covered by a rough, brown leather apron that matched the misshapen beard that sprouted unevenly from his chin. He leaned his knuckles onto the countertop and smiled over at her.

“What can I help you with today?” His teeth seemed a little too big for his mouth. It gave his voice a thickness like he was talking through a wad of cotton.

“Well,” Amelia paused, unsure of how to articulate what she needed, “I need to um, talk to somebody I guess.”

“A consultation?” His body did a strange perky twitch whenever he spoke, a bit of over-enthused retail happiness.

“I guess so.”

The man moved over to the computer and started scrolling.

“Do you have an appointment?” He kept his body facing the screen, but his eyes cut over in her direction.

“No, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I needed an appointment.”

“That’s fine, we can get you set up right now.” The mouse’s roller ball clicked as he navigated the computer. “We don’t actually do too many consultations on Tuesdays. We’ve only got two craftsmen in the shop. Let me see...” More clicking. His eyes moved back and forth over the screen. Amelia rocked back into her heels, chewing on the inside of her lip as she waited.

“We’ve got Ms. Manson here next.” He nodded to his left and a petite head appeared around the china hutch against the wall. She bobbed a smile at her; Amelia nodded back.

“Then another appointment at two... I think I can see you at 2:45 if that works.” He turned his face toward her then, keeping his back hunched over the computer, his lips tight in a half smile. She smiled back.

“Yeah that works.”

“Perfect. I’ll go ahead and put you in the system. And Ms. Manson?” The woman’s head popped out again. “Megan will be with you in just a few minutes. Name?”

Amelia watched Ms. Manson settle back into her corner. She was so small that all you could see was the tips of her shiny black shoes sticking out from behind the hutch. Her feet didn’t come to the floor.

“Name?”

“What?” Amelia looked back and saw the man staring at her, waiting for her response.

“I need you name mam.” He didn’t sound mad. If anything just a little amused, but she still felt a twist like she’d upset him.

“Sorry. It’s Amelia Hobkirt”

“Got it. I’ll see you at 2:45” He scribbled the appointment down on a piece of paper, slid it across the counter to her, then turned and headed back through the steel doors. She looked down at the paper, “2:45 w/ Willis”.

“What are you having done?”

She looked up and saw Ms. Manson peeking back out from around the corner her hands folded in her lap.

“Oh, I’m not having anything done. I just need them to look at something.” She gestured with her box.

“They do great work here don’t they? I saw a piece on them on HGTV not too long ago and just fell in love with their work. I’m having a whole bedroom suit made for my son. He’s getting married in the spring.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. We’re really so excited. The girl is just lovely.”

“I’m sure.” She strained a smile and didn’t make direct eye contact.

“Oh she is. We’ve already made her part of the family. Such a good fit with all of us.

“That’s always nice.” Amelia couldn’t tell why she felt so uncomfortable. Maybe it was the overall crowdedness of the room in general, but the woman’s chatter felt particularly oppressive and overwhelming.

“Oh it is isn’t it? So nice when new family members just synch right up. I think the bedroom suit will make a lovely wedding gift too.”

“For sure.” She nodded and started back away a little bit, clutching the box closer to her chest like Ms. Manson might try and take it away from her.

“Well, I’m just going to look around for a little bit, but good luck with your stuff.”

“Oh thanks sweetheart, your’s too.” And her head disappeared back behind the china hutch.

*

Amelia took a deep breath and slowly made her way down the improvised hallway. The air wasn’t woody like she had expected. Instead, it had an almost tart-like scent to it, perhaps it was the smell of all the different woods they used combined into one. Despite the smell being so heavy on the air, it’s distance from the musk she had anticipated was slightly refreshing.

She tucked the box in the crook of her left arm and ran her hand down the furnishings to her right. A chest of drawers was almost sticky with thick coating of lacquer over it that her fingertips clung to it as she moved down the row. The next, a cabinet of some sort, was stained a light orange-y red and slid smooth and quick under her fingers. Then there was a dining table, with rough, unfinished, reclaimed wood on top. The “contemporary rustic” that social media and barn weddings had made so popular. It seemed scratchy and unclean to Amelia with no sealant and bark around the edges. It was pretty to look at she supposed, but it gave her a sense of impracticality that irked at her insides.

She rounded a bend and moved into a corner where ladder-back chairs must have gone to die. There were at least twenty or so stacked seat-to-seat at the furthest edge along the wall. Surrounding them however were stools both short and tall, rocking chairs, benches, and dining and Adirondack chairs. The store must have been bigger than it seemed because Amelia would never have

thought that all this furniture could fit into the entire store, let alone this single corner.

She set her box and appointment note on a stool and bent down in front of the closest rocking chair. She ran a hand over one of the armrests. It was incredibly smooth, almost like liquid. The arms were long and creamy, the seat sat deep within itself and the back curved up like the walls of a cave. The chair had been carved out of a dark brown wood and sealed with something clear that enhanced its smoothness and rich natural color. She leaned in and took a long breath, filling up her lungs with its spicy, orange-like scent. It reminded her of Christmas.

She stood, turned around, and then eased her way into the chair. It fit the curve of her back to perfection. In slow, steady movements she pushed herself up and down on the balls of her feet. The chair glided back and forth easy and smooth, without a bump or a crinkle. She breathed a little deeper, closing her eyes. The chair didn't make a sound as she rocked, but Amelia could hear some indie bluegrass band playing softly over the sound system. The singer had a nasally raspy-ness to his voice, but it worked for her. It was an appropriate serenade for the dead trees surrounding her. Very dusty, very warm.

The door tinkled again as someone entered the store. Amelia heard their footsteps creak down the hardwood floors toward the steel doors; heard them slide open with metallic solidity. She closed her eyes and felt the sun warming her face as she rocked. She heard their muffled voice at the back of the room. She cracked her eyes open and stared up at the ceiling. She hadn't realized how

high it was. They were basically in a warehouse; Amelia, Ms. Manson, whoever that guy was, the furniture, everybody in this one space. It was so big, but it felt so closed, like the chaos of the forest these things were made from hadn't been as tamed by the craftsman's hands as they thought.

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Amelia thought she slept a little, but never totally lost trace of the sounds, smells, and sunlit heat around her, but when a spam phone call jolted her back to full awareness it was almost 2:30. She pushed her shoulders together and felt the bones crackling to life down her back. She pushed herself up with the armrests, twisted left and right to get the rest of the ache out of her joints. While she had slid into the rocker so seamlessly, staying dormant in it for so long didn't seem to suit her body quite as nicely.

She put her hands on her hips and took another look around the room. The sunlight she had been baking in had moved a few degrees in front of her. The patch itself had become longer and thinner. It didn't fill the room in the same way the noon daylight had. On an adjacent stool her box still sat with the paper note tucked under it. She reached down, scooped it up, then started back toward the counter in front of the steel doors.

This time Amelia headed down the other little valley created by even more furniture. This crook seemed to be crafted mostly from an array of desks and dressers. There were a few other pieces displayed here and there including some intricate wood art hanging on the exposed brick wall behind one of the desks. This looked more like the style carved into the box and she tried to move

closer to get a better look at the mandala-style art, but there were too many pieces in between the two of them. She did manage to crawl on top of the desk and lean in toward it, but when she tried to brace herself against a stack of headboards leaned against the wall under it, she almost started a chain reaction of falling furniture that she couldn't afford. Instead, she sat back on her heels and tried to see if she could find Franke's mark anywhere within the petite swirls, but she couldn't get her eyes to focus. She bit her lower lip in a moment of disgruntled disappointment before sliding off the desk defeated in this instance, but not hopeless.

Heading back toward the counter she noticed a medium sized dresser tucked between two much larger wardrobes. The dresser was made of a dark red wood, similar to the front door of the shop, but with a more yellowy undertone. The top was mostly smooth, but had a thin border, no thicker than a centimeter framing the piece. Inside this border was a series of tiny little vines twisted in and around each other. Their design was more delicate version of the vines that bordered her own box. She ran her fingers over them, feeling every tiny leaf and stem, before her eyes moved down to the drawers.

The drawers were works of art in themselves. As a whole, the dresser front made a giant tree. The roots sank below the bottom drawers, the trunk grew up between them with branches sprouting off at each of the middle and top draws, finally curling up into a canopy just under the dresser top. The leaves of this tree were delicately carved into the negative space around the drawers themselves, leaving only the outermost edges of the dresser-front bare.

Each individual drawer depicted its own scene of woodland animals, coming together to create a complete picture when the dresser was observed as a whole. The bottom left drawer showed a mother fox with her pup in the bottom corner. The pup was looking up the trunk of the tree, while the mother was looking down, watching the pup. A small hedgehog was moving toward the pair, while a cluster of chipmunks sat huddled together in the far left corner, each holding its own tiny acorn.

Opposite these on the neighboring dresser drawer was a herd of deer. Two doe, three fawns, and a buck. The fawn's legs were bent as if they were running or jumping, while the does kept their heads just above being level with their bodies. The buck on the other hand, held his head high, his antlers stretching up to almost the top of the drawer. His mouth was firmly set and his chest out, keeping careful watch over his herd.

Moving up the dresser to the middle drawers, the craftsman had carved a host of miniscule songbirds that looked to Amelia to be sparrows. They rested on branches and flew among leaves. Some had their mouths open in song, other sat huddled into crannies of the tree and each, despite being so small had intricately carved details of feather, spots, and ruffles. There were so many the drawer-front almost seemed to move; like the quantity of birds had an animating effect on the eye.

On the other side of the dresser, the sparrows were accompanied by three squirrels, none of which were depicted as still. The artist had carved them so that each was caught in a running pose. One, acorn in mouth, looked back over

his shoulder at the squirrel behind him in close pursuit. The third squirrel was leaping down from a high branch to the main branch where the other squirrels were chasing each other.

The top two drawers had been reserved for two solitary creatures. An eagle on one drawer, an owl on the other. The eagle sat centered on a slight dip in the branch. His beak was turned up, away from the viewer, looking instead to something off to the left of the dresser. His wings were folded into his back and if you looked carefully you could see his talon gripping into the bark of the tree.

The owl on the other hand, stared straight out, relentless, at anyone who looked upon this particular piece of furniture. His gaze was penetrating, unforgiving. His beak was not set with pride, but with assurance. He knew his place on that branch and dared anyone to try and oppose him. He looked broad and strong, confident. Amelia reached out and ran her fingers along his wing, pressing her fingernails into the abscess in the wood, left when this owl was carved into being. She wanted to pull the owl off and add him to the ashes in the box she carried.

“Ms. Hobkirt?”

“Yes?” Amelia jumped a little bit, still crouched in front of the dresser, and looked up to her left to see the man who’d made the appointment almost three hours earlier standing above her.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

She stood up straight and then studied the dresser as a whole object.

“Yes. But I don’t think I’d want it in my home. Not really my style.”

“Not too many people’s style as you can see.” He gave a little half-laugh as he said it.

“Who made it?”

“This one is an original Anthony. He’s the son of one of our founders, the ‘anton’ in Olivaton,”

“That doesn’t work.”

The man let out a small laugh, but stopped when he noticed Amelia wasn’t laughing too. “He actually retired a few years ago, but we’ve still got a few of his pieces around the shop. Anyways, you ready for your consultation Ms. Hobkirt?”

She nodded and followed him back behind the counter and through the steel doors. The room beyond was obviously where the actual craftsmanship was done. Sawdust coated her skin and stuck to the insides of her nose and the back of her throat as soon as she took a breath. Off to her right she saw a woman hunched over a table, her saw screaming through the chunk of wood she was working on. Amelia followed her guy around a corner to a small office-like space off the main working floor. When he closed the door behind her the screech of the saw was suddenly cut short and the room felt too quiet, like she’d plunged her head into water.

There was a table in the middle of the room with a chair on either side. It reminded her of an interrogation room on a cop show. On the table were spread

numerous design plans for tables, benches, all kinds of furniture, as well as large sheet of blank drafting paper and a few scattered pencil bits. She sat down in the chair closest to her and set her box down on the table. The man she supposed to be Willis sat down across from her and smiled his tight-lipped smile at her.

“I’m Willis,” he said, extending his hand out to her, “I’ll be heading up your project if you choose to move forward with us.”

“Amelia.” she replied, shaking his hand.

“So, Amelia, what have you got for us today?”

“Well... I feel a little bad, because I don’t actually need anything, like, made you know?”

“Okay,” his face looked a little crestfallen and she thought perhaps his beard deflated a little. She pushed the box across the table toward him.

“I was wondering if you could maybe tell me anything about this box. Like who made it and what not?”

“I can certainly try.” He reach out and pulled the box the rest of the way toward him and started looking it over.

“It’s got y’all’s logo carved into the side, bottom right corner.” Willis lifted the box level with his eyes to see what she was talking about, “but be careful, that bottom slides out. That’s how it opens.” She was leaning over across the table, worried he might spill Franke out onto the table. Instead, he flipped it over and lay the box on it’s top.

“Oh I know this signature!” Willis looked up at her with a real smile this time. “It’s the same man who built that dresser you were looking at on the floor; Anthony Franke.”

“So Franke is definitely the artist then?”

“Definitely. All of our craftsmen brand their name into their pieces before they either sell them or bring them to the client.”

“But you said he’s retired, right?”

“Yeah, he retired not this past summer, but the summer before. But I don’t get why he made this. We don’t typically do small stuff like this.” He picked the box back up, turning it around and examining it at different angles. With every move he made Amelia felt herself reaching slightly out, ready to catch it if he dropped her.

“You don’t know how I could maybe get in contact with him do you?”

“You don’t want something similar made do you? I could definitely whip something like this up.”

“No, that’s fine. I just have some questions about it’s history.”

Willis nodded, assuring her he understood. He set the box back on the table and slid it back to her. She scooped it up and secured it in her lap with both hands gripping tight to the edges.

“Well I can’t tell you much about the particulars of Tony’s individual projects, but actually, his old apprentice still works here. She’s here today in fact.”

“Really?” Amelia straightened up.

“Yeah, her name’s Megan; you actually passed her on your way into the office.”

“Do you think she’d be willing to talk with me?”

“I would expect so. Let me go see if she’s got a sec to spare.” Willis stood up, then walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him. His walk reminded her of a tree, no, he was more of only a tall sapling bending in the wind. When he opened the door, the scream of the saw filled the room in an instant, but was just as quickly extinguished when the door closed back behind him.

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Amelia leaned back in her chair, still holding the box with both hands. Her eyes scanned the room. The walls were a pale gray, decorated with framed prints of various furniture designs. Blueprints made into art. Along the wall to her right, where the door was, were two large square window that looked out into the shop. Through them she could see Willis gambling toward the bent sawing woman. When he reached her, he stood behind her for a moment, then reached out and touch her shoulder. She turned to look at him, sliding her safety glasses up to the top of her forehead. Her clothing matched Willis’s: red flannel,

blue jeans, and a thick leather apron. She folded her arms across her chest as Willis talked to her. He gestured once in Amelia's direction and they both looked over. She wondered if they could see her through the glass looking back at them. She waved just in case. Neither waved back. Instead they just turned their faces back to each other, talked a few more minutes, then Willis turned and walked back toward the store front. Megan pulled her safety glasses the rest of the way off her head and tossed them onto the work table beside her, then yanked her gloves off and tossed them on top of the glasses, then turn and walked toward the office. Amelia turned her head to stare at the wall in front of her until Megan opened the door.

"Hey, I'm Megan." Amelia looked at her and smiled as she walked in. "I hear you have an old piece by Anthony."

"Yeah." Megan walked around the table and sat in the seat Willis had just vacated. Amelia held up the box. "I bought this at a yard sale over the weekend. Willis said that Anthony Franke made it."

"Well, let me take a look at it." She reached forward and for the second time that day, Amelia relinquished the box. "You don't have to open it. There's nothing inside but the ash bag." Megan's eye flashed up at her, confused as she took the box and began examining it. She flipped in over and leaned in close to inspect the signature.

"Ash bag." Megan whispered as she moved the box around before her.

"Yeah, and I'm trying to figure out who it is."

“Did you ask the family you bought the box from?”

“They didn’t know.” Amelia exhaled short, quick, and almost undetectable through her nose, “Do you think you can help me?”

Megan’s eyes moved between Amelia and the box, leaning slightly away from both.

“Will I don’t know how much help I’ll be in determining where the ashes came from, but I can help with the Franke stuff I guess.”

“There’s a year on the bottom, ‘56.”

“‘56? Oh that was way before my time. And Anthony, he probably was still a teenager. This might not have been him.”

Amelia felt a stirring in her stomach and hitch in her throat. It had to be her Franke, there were just too many coincidences otherwise. She met Megan’s gaze and held it, willing her to give her better information. She saw Megan swallow.

“But this could be an earlier piece. It looks very much like his style, with the vines and the leaves and things. Let me,” Megan leaned over the box, her face just inches away from the burned in signature, “Yes, that looks like his mark. To the best of my knowledge, this is something by Anthony Franke, or maybe his father.”

“There’s an O | W on the side.” Amelia pointed it out.

“Yeah, that’s us.”

Amelia felt a flicker of assurance, maybe even hope, ignite in the pit of her stomach. "Do you maybe remember anything about the box? Or anything like it?" She was leaning across the wide table now, trying to get as close to the box as she could without outright snatching it back. Megan looked up at her. She looked hesitant to speak, but Amelia held her gaze.

"No, not really. He mostly did furniture and stuff. The design though is definitely his style and that's definitely his name on the back. I don't know though, that's not really our type of thing here at all." Megan shook her head and handed the box back across the table. Amelia accepted it with both hands then slouched back into the chair, staring down at it, while Megan stood and began.

"He wasn't very open with me, even after we'd worked together awhile. He was pretty old when I started."

"It's okay. Thanks for your help." Amelia stood up to leave, hiking her bag over her shoulder and tucking the box into her arm. Megan reached out and touched her forearm. She looked down at her.

"It's probably him. He'll know it."

"It's okay," Amelia made herself smile a little.

"You could probably talk to Anthony yourself. He retired down in Beaufort. Not too far away."

"I'll give that a try. Can I get a number or..."

Megan frowned, "He's sort of a luddite. I only had his work number, but that was cut off the last time I called it. Beaufort isn't very big, I'm sure you'll be able to look him up somehow. Sorry I can't be more helpful."

She waved her free hand at her, "you've actually been very helpful. This is useful, concrete."

"Well then I'm glad I was here."

"Me too." Amelia reached out and shook her hand again. "Truly, this has been really helpful."

Megan stood and walked around the table to her. "Sure thing. If you find Anthony, tell him we've got checks for him. He didn't give us an address." She smiled though, which made Amelia feel like she was remembering fondly rather than critiquing her old mentor's behavior.

"Thanks again." Amelia moved toward the door. "I can see myself out."

"Keep us updated!" She heard Megan shouting as she closed the door. She waved farewell through the window then headed out the large steel doors.

"Was she able to help?" Willis was leaning against the counter facing her.

"Mmhmm"

She thought she saw him smiling at her as she crossed out into the main floor, waving her gratitude over her shoulder. Clutching her box, she maneuvered the furniture maze back to the heavy front door and shoved it open. It was only just before 4:00, but in spite of the heat, the days were evidently

growing shorter and the sun was already heading to the far side of the earth. She hurried into her car, slammed the door, and cranked on her limp air conditioning. She set Franke's box down in the passenger seat, then rested her hands on the steering wheel. She still didn't really have any sort of answer, but at least there was a path to follow.

CHAPTER 6

Amelia turned onto her road, greeted by dying summer branches. She followed their tunnel, down past abandoned gardens of limp tomato plants and un-pollinated squash blossoms toward the blots of yellow that hailed her home. The evidence of life inside her home dropped her stomach to the base of her spine. She turned into her driveway and swallowed, feeling her mouth trying to form words of surprise, or anger, or excitement—she couldn't say which.

Parked beneath her crepe myrtle tree was a sleek, pearlescent green Tucson, and a dented, orange (formerly red) pick up truck. She pulled in close behind them, shutting off her engine. The air trapped in the cab circled above her head then eased out through the seam around the windows, surrounding her in unseasonal stickiness. The light outside was a deep shade of blue, but still, a burst of light cut a sharp beam of yellow-white across the front lawn as a chunky paws bounded out the door. The dog squeezed herself under the car, scooting across the gravel, until she erupted out the other side and turned, paws on the car, breath fogging the window. Amelia smiled.

“Frog!” Her voice was muffled by the metal between them, but still, Frog's entire haunches shook with the enthusiasm of her wagging tail.

“Frog, get down.” A hand reached out, grabbed Frog's collar, and pulled her off the car, walking her back on her hind legs until she was far enough away

to drop her front paws on the ground. Amelia shouldered open her door and stepped out throwing her arms around her brother.

“Hey seester!” Jack smile returning his sister’s hug. She let go of him and crouched down to greet the dog, who climbed up her knees, licking her cheek and the inside of her ear.

“Froggie! Good girl!” She scratched the dog’s sides, then held her muzzle and kissed her fuzzy cheek before standing up and facing her brother, Frog staring up with her oversized eyes full of love and admiration at the both of them. “What are y’all doing here?”

“Mom stopped by your work today to surprise you with lunch. They said you’d called out sick.”

“So everybody came for a sickness party at my house?” Amelia laughed and walked toward the door.

“Sort of. Mom said she tried to call and you wouldn’t pick up. She had me try, and Dad, and she got worried so she and dad drove over to make sure you were okay. When you weren’t here and still weren’t answering your phone Mom called me and had me come over too.”

Amelia fished her phone out of her bag and saw she indeed had a bombardment of missed calls and 7 unread text messages.

“Sorry,” she muttered, “I was in the mountains. Probably had bad service.”

“Sounds like a great sick day.” He pulled open the front door. Frog lumbered inside followed by her two humans.

“Amelia!” her mother rushed into the room, gripping Amelia in a tight hug. She could feel clammy sweat on her cheek as her mother pressed her against herself.

“Hey, Mom.” She set her hands on her mother’s back. Maureen pulled away from her daughter, but her hands rested on her shoulders.

“We’ve been worried to death! Why haven’t you answered your phone?”

“Sorry, I didn’t have service. And then I was driving. You don’t want me to text and drive.”

“You could have called.”

“Some studies say that’s even worse.”

Amelia walked down into the sunroom and sat at the table across from her father.

“Hey, Dad.”

“I told you she was fine babe.” Robert shot a quick wink across the table at his daughter. She smiled back.

“Well, she might not have been.” Maureen let her hand brush across Amelia’s shoulders as she also took a seat at the table, giving her elbow a little squeeze before settling her weight into the chair. “They said at the agency you called in sick. What’s wrong?”

“She played hooky.” Jack too took his place at the only seat left at the table. Frog followed behind him and settled down under the table, tail across Robert’s feet, chin on Amelia’s. Amelia flexed her toes to scratch under the dog’s muzzle, and Frog sighed in response.

“Played hooky?” her mother’s eyes cut sideways across to her.

“Yeah. Took a little day trip to the mountains.” Jack had a wild grin on his face. He raised his eyebrows at his sister, never too old for getting her into trouble.

Amelia rubbed an eye and leaned her elbows onto the table. “Yeah, Mom it was just one of those days. Mental health and all that.”

“So you’re not even sick?” Robert flipped his phone over and threw it down onto the table. He crossed his arms and slid one of his feet out from under Frog who let out a garbled half bark in protest, then laid her head back on Amelia’s feet.

“No.”

“Excellent. Then you can make us dinner for our trouble.”

“What?!”

“Yep. You make your family search for you all day, then you have to make everybody dinner.”

“Hundred percent.” Jack chimed in.

“Well I hope y’all like ground turkey, ‘cause I’m pretty sure that’s all I have.”

“I trust your culinary skills.” Robert smiled and waved his hand at Amelia. “Go on now.”

Amelia stood up, the metal leg of the chair scraping across the tile floor. Everyone winced.

“I’ll help you, sweetie.” Her mom stood as well and followed her daughter to the kitchen. Frog trotted behind them.

“Y’all can watch Netflix or something,” Amelia called to the men as she dug through her refrigerator trying to salvage a meal together. She heard them shuffle past in indistinct conversation as she tucked the turkey and a bag of half-wilted kale into the crook of her arm. She rummaged deeper through her produce drawer and found a red pepper that had a couple of bad spots, but was overall salvageable. “Hey Mom, look and see if I have gnocchi por favor.”

“Where would it be?”

“Top shelf, cabinet left of the stove.”

Her mom climbed up onto the counter, balancing on her knees as she sorted through the various canned goods and boxes of pasta in her hunt for the dumplings. “There’s some mini ones hun,” she called over her shoulder, “will that work?”

“That’s fine.” Amelia dumped her armload on the island, and dropped down, searching for her soup pot, her back scraping the top of the doorway.

“Ow!” Amelia hit the back of her head as she reversed out of the cabinet, a rush of anger emanating out of her eyes toward the cabinet. She wished she could hurt it back.

“You good?” Maureen’s gaze stretched toward her from the far side of the island.

“Yeah.” Amelia rubbed her head and stood back up, setting the pot down on the island. The sounds of a laugh track drifted down the hall from whatever show her dad and brother had put on. She took a deep breath, feeling the buzz of the full house coming in around her.

“How often do you take these ‘mental health days’?” Maureen asked, sliding a pile of chopped peppers across the counter toward her. Amelia started and turned her attention to cooking the meat.

“Not often. I just wasn’t feeling it today. That’s all.”

“That’s not a good reason to take off work.”

“I think it was.”

Her mother pinched her lips together and cut a hard stare at Amelia.

“Sometimes, Mom, it’s just a shitty morning.”

“Don’t talk like that.” She tossed her knife in the sink and put a fist on her hip, leaning her weight into the counter. “Where’s this attitude coming from. This isn’t the Amelia I’m used to.”

Amelia held a groan in her throat and focused on the pot. Tossing in the onion Maureen had just finished slicing.

“Look, Mom, I’m sorry I freaked you out. Normally, you wouldn’t have even noticed I was gone. I can’t help that today is the day you chose to get all surprise-y. Anyways, why weren’t you at work?” She turned her head toward her and shot back the same hard stare Maureen directed at her.

“It was a teacher workday. They let the ones of us who came in over the summer go home at 11:30. I was trying to do something nice for you. I called to tell you, but you didn’t pick up.”

“I was busy.”

“You still at least send me a text if you’re busy.”

“I don’t know what you’re so upset about. I’m fine. I’m here. All is well.” She drug out the word ‘all’ and Maureen crossed her arms in response.

“What else do you need?”

“Nothing. It’s pretty much just adding things to the pot at this point.”

“Fine.” Maureen walked out of the kitchen toward the living room where Robert and Jack’s laughs echoed in response to something on the T.V. “I’m sorry we care too much.”

Amelia huffed. “Love you.”

“Mhmm.” And Maureen disappeared down the hall.

Amelia and her mother sat in the living room. From down the hall, the sound of running water and clanking dishes rushed toward them. There was an unspoken rule in their family that whoever didn't cook was responsible for cleaning up after the meal. Amelia had the box hidden between the arm of the couch and her thigh, the tip of her finger grazing its side. Her body curved around it as she leaned away from her mother at the other end of the couch. Maureen scrolled through her phone.

"You're mad."

"I'm not mad."

"Yes, Mom, you're mad. I can tell cause your shoulders are all stiff and your chin is too high."

Maureen set down her phone. "You just scared me is all. You can't just disappear like that."

"I'm 24. I don't check in with you every frickin day."

"I usually hear from you at least once."

Amelia sat up straight, twisting toward her mother. The box pressed deeper into her leg. "I don't get why you're being so weird today. This can't be the first time I haven't talked to you in 24 hours."

"I just got a feeling hun. Mother's instinct."

Amelia pressed her hands against her face, moving her skin up and down, then tugged at the hair at the base of her neck. The pressure it gave sent strained relief out across her face.

“Are you on your period?” Maureen had leaned closer and almost whispered. Amelia dropped her hands back down and looked at her mother, mouth open.

“No.”

Maureen scooted closer and placed a hand on Amelia’s knee.

“Pregnant?” she mouthed the word at her daughter.

“What? No! How the hell could I have possibly gotten pregnant? What could I have done with any person ever” she paused and looked directed into Maureen’s eyes, “to make myself pregnant?”

Maureen sat back and held up her hands.

“I’m sorry sweetheart, you’ve just been acting so strange lately. I thought maybe. I don’t know you just couldn’t figure out how to tell us is all. You’ve been so, distant.”

“Oh God, Mom!” Amelia leaned into her hands. Maureen reached out to put a hand on Amelia’s back, but she swatted it away. “Not now, please.” She stood, sliding the box into the crook of her arm as she did so. “I’m going outside.” Amelia walked out of the room, shoulders pointed forward. As she passed through the kitchen Frog sprung up from the floor and followed Amelia out the back door.

Amelia dropped down into one of the curving concave Adirondack chairs on her patio, while Frog wandered off into the shadows of the backyard. At this time of night, it felt as though autumn weather might actually come some day. The air outside was still heavy, but when a breeze rippled across the patio, it made the tiniest of goosebumps rise onto Amelia's bare forearms.

Her backyard abutted untampered with forest. The houses here were set on one acre lots that ran up and down the street, but did not venture backward, so behind the houses were miles of wilderness left to its own devices. In the shadow of the trees, the remnant summer's fireflies blinked slow and random; hoping to find the one fellow insect who had not already found his summer's love. The cacophony of nature's nighttime orchestra rang out from the woods, toward the house, rushing over Amelia as she tilted her head against the back of the chair, holding Franke in crossed arms against her chest. She closed her eyes against the onslaught of cicada and cricket song, fighting the light that poured out from the house behind, trying to focus on the air around her and the box in her arms. She breathed deeply and Franke seemed to breathe with her, rising and falling with every inhale and exhale. She slid the box up toward her neck, rested her chin upon its edge, and rocked herself in time with the cicadas.

The box smelled sour and warm. It wasn't like mothballs or an old folk's home, but it had an ancient scent. A sad one; full of forgets. Night settled over, the yard, the dog, the girl. Amelia forgot that there were three very alive, emotionally charged human beings scuttling through her house. She curled over

herself and Franke and Branwell and became as small as possible. In this moment, it was only the three of them.

*

And Frog, rummaging through the leaves at the edge of the woods, nose to the ground, alert in the darkness. Dirt, urine, and decay rushed up her muzzle telling the story of the forest around her. Her ears twitched as a bird lifted off from a branch and she looked up into the branches to see if she could catch sight of its evacuation. She paused, one paw in the air, nose piercing the wind, but all she could pick up was the muffled hush of flapping wings overhead. She waited a moment longer and continued to investigate. Frog was familiar with these woods. She came here quite often, every time her mother went away. She liked it here. Not as much as home, but if her mother was gone, she wanted to be here. This place was very wet, even when it hadn't rained the dirt seeped into the cracks between her paws, so she carried this place with her for days after she'd gone home. She loved Amelia, so she liked taking a piece of her home.

A warm, wet breeze blew, ruffling the fur along her back. She turned and looked back toward the house. She could see bodies moving inside. In the big window, Jack stood, looking out into the yard his face toward the door she and Amelia had left through. She could see her mother and father standing in the kitchen. Her father leaned against the counter, looking at the face of her mother, whose arms gesturing large and often toward the window. Frog cocked her head. Her mother looked sad, in spite of how wide her mouth was opening and how much her hands were moving. Maybe she was looking for her, calling out.

Frog began moving toward the house when she noticed Amelia was slumped in the chair. Was she sleeping? Her body put off a tight, anxious energy; muscles stiffening under her skin. Frog ambled up to her and laid her chin on Amelia's knee.

The warm weight of Frog's head brought Amelia back to herself. She opened her eyes and looked down at the dog, whose ears perked up from her skull in response. Amelia leaned forward and rubbed the base of Frog's neck, her tail brushing the patio in thanks. Amelia placed her forehead against the dog's, listening to her heavy breathing, drinking in her sweet and earthy smell. Frog pulled away from her as the back door opened.

"Amelia?" Jack stepped down from the house and walked over to his sister, taking the seat next to her. Frog stood at his knees, wagging her tail in anticipation. He obliged.

"Yeah?"

"Just wanted to check on you. You've been out here for a while. Mom thinks you're avoiding her."

"I'm not avoiding her. I'm avoiding everybody."

Jack let out a small laugh, "Well, I'll go back inside then." He stood like he was making to leave.

"No, no, no. Sit back down." Amelia waved him back into the chair. Jack sank down, the half-rotted Adirondack bending under his weight. He heaved Frog into his lap, wrapping his arms around her fat waist. Frog licked at his ear

and then nestled into his shoulder and closed her eyes. Despite having grown to almost 90 pounds, the dog always felt entitled to lap space.

“You’re gonna break my chair.” Amelia smiled.

“Eh, it’ll be fine. You got it off the side of the road anyway.”

“Yeah, but I’d still like to be able to use it.”

Jack shrugged. They sat there for a beat; brother holding the dog, Amelia holding Franke. She tried to relax, to let the tension seep out of her body, to be absorbed with the ashes.

“Mom told me about your box.”

Amelia looked over at her brother, her fingers wrapped tighter around Franke’s edges, “Mom doesn’t know anything about my box. Just that it exists.”

“She said that you wouldn’t let her look inside. She thought you were being really weird about it. Said you shut the door in her face when she went to look at it. Is that it? Can I look?”

“No.”

“What’s so great about it? You’re holding it like it’s a teddy bear or something.”

“You’ll think it’s weird, Jack. The box is my thing ok. Let me have this one thing.”

“Lia, this is me.”

“Yeah, and I’m telling you to back off.”

“Damn, chill out. Hey PMS.”

“Why the hell does everyone think I’m PMSing!? What does it matter if I’m PMSing! Fuck!” Amelia jumped up from the chair and stomped toward the house. Frog, awake in an instant, scrambled off Jack’s lap to follow, scratching his thigh in the process.

“Damn it Frog!” he inspected the scratches, which had raised up and turned red, but didn’t bleed. He went after his sister. “Calm down, Amelia, jeeze. Look”, he grabbed his sister’s arm and pulled her back to him, forcing her to look him head on.

“I am calm.” Amelia grumbled, trying to wiggle out of his grip.

“Hey, Amelia,” he pulled her to his chest, but Amelia only held tighter to Franke. “I just want to know your okay sis.” He stroked her hair and Amelia tightened her lips together. Jack let her go. “It’s your box. All yours.”

“Thanks.” She looked up at him, “I’m fine.”

“I know.” Jack smiled and pulled open the back door. Their parents both turned as they entered, followed by the bounding dog.

“Feeling better?” Maureen looked down at them from kitchen, concern furrowed in her brow. Amelia stuck to the outskirts of the room, pressing her hip into the counter as she moved through the kitchen.

“Yeah, I guess. Anyways,” she met her mother’s eyes. It felt like tiny bugs were running up and down her body, under her skin. She pushed her hair away from her face. “I’m tired. Thanks for checking on me. I need to go to bed now.” Embarrassment rose up from her feet at this childish remark, but she hoped it didn’t show on her face.

Maureen stepped down into the sunroom and walked to her daughter. She reached out toward her, but Amelia shied away. “I’ll see y’all later.”

“Amelia.” Her dad was in the room now too. She could see in his face that he was thinking of trying to get her to laugh. That was how he dealt with awkwardness, trying to make people laugh.

“Dad, not now.” She held up her free hand between them. Maureen’s eyes looked down to the box tucked under her arm.

“Are you carrying that around with you?”

“Mom, please. I just want to go to bed.”

“She is,” Jack interjected, stepping forward into the kitchen, “But it’s cool Mom, just leave her be.”

“Honey...”

“It’s just a box. Y’all are making way too big a deal out of this.”

“No, we’re not.” Robert came closer and looked down at his daughter, “You’re using your weird voice!” He flicked his hand out as if to show that this was the most obvious evidence of failed trickery in world history.

“What weird voice?”

“That voice you get when you’re stressed, but trying to sound calm, or drunk and trying to sound sober. It’s too loud and articulate. Wait, are you drunk?”

“You’ve been with me all night, of course, I’m not drunk.” Amelia felt a dryness in her eyes, she wasn’t blinking enough. She closed them with calculation.

“Mom, Dad, just leave her alone.”

“We just want to know what’s going on.”

Amelia shouldered past her family, through the kitchen, and into her room. The gentleness and legitimacy of her mother’s tone was making her skin crawl. She slid the box underneath her pillow, took a sharp inhale, and stormed back out into the hall. “The box is gone now. Please just let me go to bed. I’m so tired.” Her voice had fallen to just a whisper escaping between her lips. Her body felt as though it were trembling from deep inside of her, outward onto her skin. She stiffened against them.

Her family had clumped together in the kitchen, Jack just slightly taller than Robert, blocked the light from overhead and cast all three of them into shadow. Amelia’s eyes moved through each of their faces. Each stared back at her. She leaned against the wall. Frog sauntered forward and nudged Amelia’s hand with her nose, then leaned her whole weight against her legs. Her giant eyes also stared up at Amelia, although hers emanated a desperate and

untamable love rather than confusion or concern; that look of awe that only comes from the face of a dog. Amelia let her hand glide across Frog's back as she stepped toward her family. She knew what to do to have her house to herself again. She kept her arms crossed over her stomach, but leaned her torso into her mother, resting her head on her shoulder and letting Maureen wrap her arms around Amelia's back. Amelia was smaller than all of them.

Maureen released Amelia, who leaned into her father the same way. He gave her a peck on the top of her head and rubbed her back in two short motions, before pushing her back onto her feet. Amelia looked up and her brother and gave a half smile. He winked back. She scratched at her cheek. She felt the tension running out of her chest and down her arms and legs into the tips of her finger. She clenched her toes, hidden inside her shoes. Her mother took a deep breath.

"We're going to go now."

"Okay," Amelia leaned back, resting against her hands on the edge of the counter. "Thanks for coming. Y'all didn't have to do all this."

"Let's go Mom." Jack took his mother's elbow and guided her toward the door.

Her mother smiled and her dad made some comment about food. They moved as a group down the hall and out the front door onto the porch, Frog following close to Maureen. Amelia flicked on the porch light for them and stood in the doorway as they walked to their cars. Her muscles tensed a little at the loud thumping of their doors and the gravel crunched as her family pulled

away from her. Jack left first, giving Amelia a nod through his open window as he backed out. Her parents followed close behind, Frog's bright eyes standing out against the night, tongue lengthening her wide, gaping grin. She kept those giant eyes on Amelia, paws draped over the window ledge until Robert turned right at the end of the driveway and Amelia was lost to Frog's sight.

*

Amelia turned back inside, locking the door behind her and switching off the porch light. She hustled back to her room, switching off the lights as she went. There had been enough eyes on her for today. She pulled the box back out from under her pillow, sliding the bottom out, and letting the velvet bag sit heavy on the mattress. She looked down at it for a second, the bugs under her skin, biting and crawling, crawling out and filling her throat. She thought she was shaking, but her hands were steady as she opened up the bag and reached inside, letting the ashes sift through her fingers and coat her skin. Her breath was rattled and short. She sunk to the ground beside her bed, cupping her hands to her chest, fingers scrambling and scraping against each other; a tiny piece of Branwell and Co. pressed into the hollow of her palm. The air bubbled, then caught in her throat, and the room gulped into silence.

CHAPTER 7

The world is a surprisingly small place. The universe isn't, but Earth itself is just a speck in a solar system that's a speck in a galaxy, that's a speck compared to other galaxies. There is a never-ending volume of space surrounding each individual living thing residing on Earth. But even so, all of that volume can close around a person in a single moment, heavy and suffocating. In this way, space is a very unforgiving substance.

It's its unpredictability that makes it so terrifying; it's inconsistency. If there were a pattern or an obvious trigger, some way to prepare, to warn Amelia that gravity was increasing, that she was being cellophaned and vacuumed sealed into her mind, no, into her body, then perhaps these episodes would be easier to bear. But there wasn't, so Amelia had to go through and wait to burst back through to the surface again.

She felt the ashes pushing into her skin, encouraged by the fervent shuffling of her fingers. Those same fingers dug into the space between her breasts, pulling at the fabric of her shirt, coating it in dark, uneven gray splotches. She twisted and pulled, her hands feeling as though they'd been taken over by some unseen force, possessed by the ashes that painted them. When speckles of red began to appear among the gray, Amelia didn't notice. She kept her eyes squeezed shut and tried to breathe. She clenched her jaw tight as a tingling feeling sparked at the tip of her chin. It emanated outward, spreading

down under her mouth and running down the outside of her throat until it exploded across her chest. The force of it threw Amelia forward and she crouched on the ground, hands now pushing at the floor, grabbing at nothing. Again Amelia tried to inhale but felt no relief from the weight pushing in around her.

She let out a choking gasp as her mind fought against the sensations her body was communicating. She forced her eyes open and watched her chest swell up and down with every breath she couldn't feel. *You're breathing*, her brain insisted, *I see you breathing*. Her chest was moving faster now, but there was still no release of pressure. A freezing dampness seeped across her body, making her body shake with a frantic fervor mirroring the overhead fan, which whirred and wobbled in an incessant circle above her head. The cold ricocheted down through her muscles, penetrating into the marrow of her bones, mocking the relentless heat that burned outside the walls that enclosed her.

*

She remembered a time when she was in high school. Everybody still living together, her, Jack, her parents, Frog's face was still a deep yellow. It was winter and it was cold. Like the cold enveloping her now. They'd had a bonfire that night. Everyone sat around laughing and drinking. It was one of the first times her parents had let her have alcohol. It was a dry, red wine, that made her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth, but she drank it anyway. Amelia had brought a blanket out with her and was nestled deep within, even pulling it up and over her head so that just her face and the glass of wine peeped through the sea of sherpa and plaid, but still Amelia shivered. She remembered staring into

the yellowy orange mass of the flames, jerking in place, oblivious to the family gathered around it. Its heat burned her cheeks, but she was so cold Amelia welcomed the warmth. A thought passed through her brain that if she could just get all the way into the fire then all of her would be warm at once. She leaned forward in her chair and a strand of hair escaped from the edge of her blanket hood and settled against her cheek. Amelia tucked it back inside and jolted away from the flames.

“No,” she thought, “That’s stupid. That’ll kill me.”

*

Amelia sat on the lid of the toilet, feet up, one arm wrapped around her legs, the other held out, under the stream of the shower. The bugs were settled down into the bottom of her toes and Amelia rested her head on the peaks of her knees, her breath still coming in desperate heaves.

When at last the water morphed into steaming warmth, Amelia crawled over the edge of the tub and settled herself directly under the water. Still clenching her knees to her chest Amelia tilted her face into the stream, letting the scalding droplets pelt the anxiety out of her skin. When her face began to ache from the heat she turned her face into her knees and let the water pound into the nape of her neck. It ran down the pathways of her dark hair, dripping and pooling around her buttocks before eeking its way down the drain. The steam grew thick and heavy and around her. It soaked into her lungs as her heart rate descended back down and her anxiety expanded out into the steam and away from her body. She sat until the water turned cold.

Amelia didn't sleep that night. The shower had calmed the prickling anxiety that tortured her limbs, but there was nothing she could do switch off her brain. She sat in the center of her bed, swallowed by her blanket, that after a few minutes offered little comfort as it grew soggy from soaking in the wet from her hair. She'd left Franke and Branwell out of the box and instead tucked them into the folds of the blanket with her. She couldn't force them back into its wooden confines, not just yet. She stroked the velvet bag that held them, unconscious of what exactly her hands were doing as she stared out at the wall. Eventually, the sun crept through the window behind her and Amelia was forced to reenter the world.

*

For the rest of that week, the world buzzed around outside of Amelia. She did what she was required to do, smiled when she needed to smile, and always kept Franke and Branwell close. She did not trust that her family would leave them alone. She was now hyperaware of her phone, anxious to not miss a communication from her mother, lest it prompt another descent upon her home. The two-toned chime of a text notification sent sparks shooting down her spine, but she always was quick to respond with an overabundance of exclamation points: "Great!!" "Awesome!!" "Yeah!!!" "Love you!!!!" She hoped it was working.

She kept the box on her lap throughout her whole shift, leaving it only when she had to go to the bathroom, at which point she locked it into her desk

drawer and recovered it immediately upon returning. Work itself was growing increasingly hard to focus on. As much as Amelia enjoyed having the IT closet to herself, being the only tech person on the property was getting tedious and her patience with her coworkers was running out.

City & Country Staff,

If your computer freezes, as is happening a lot at the moment, I'm working on it, but let's face it, we've got hella old computers here. Anyways, I know this will blow your minds, but if your computer freezes please try the following steps:

1. Turn your computer off by holding the power button
2. Turn your computer back on by pressing the power button

Magic. Anyways if you try that and your computer still doesn't cooperate THEN come by my office. You don't need an IT specialist to restart your computer for you I hope.

-Amelia

"What is this?!"

Amelia looked up from her computer to see Jen fuming in the doorway, waving a piece of paper at her. Amelia snatched it out of her hand.

"Did you print this out?"

"You need to adjust your attitude, Ms. Hobkirt."

“Excuse me?”

“IT is your job honey, and if people don’t want to risk losing their work when their computer acts up they shouldn’t have to feel guilty about calling you in to help.”

“Look Jen”

“I don’t want to hear it! This email is patronizing and condescending and rude.”

“Aren’t patronizing and condescending basically the same?”

“This is exactly what I mean! You need to cool off Amelia and do your job.” This wisps escaping Jen’s ponytail were performing a furious dance around her head in the draft from the doorway. Amelia’s eyes followed them, wanting to push them back into Jen’s head to calm her down. Jen’s nostrils flared as she grimaced down at Amelia. Amelia smiled.

“Ok!” she tilted her head toward her boss. “Sorry, Jen! Just having a cranky day! Should I apologize to my coworkers?”

Jen pulled her shoulders back. “Yes Amelia, I think that would be entirely appropriate.”

“Certainly.” Amelia stood and pushed past Jen into the main floor, crisscrossed with cubicle partitions, the box tucked under her arm. She wasn’t going to leave them alone with Jen, not with her eyes bugged out and pinker than she’d ever seen before.

Amelia grabbed a table pushed against one of the cubicles, pulled it out onto the floor, and climbed on top so that she could look down into each evenly segmented workspace.

“Excuse me everyone!”

The clatter of keyboards slowed to a stop as headset bedecked faces turned toward her. Amelia softened her eyes as she looked out at them.

“I just want to say, I’m sorry for being annoyed at your incompetence.”

“Amelia!”

“I know your computers are my job and people are your jobs and you just don’t want to screw over the people.”

“Amelia Hobkirt get down from there now.” Jen was stomping toward her.

“I need to be more patient and understanding and please come to me with whatever technology issue you are having no matter how petty.” She gripped the box tight against her chest as Jen pulled at her elbow, trying to force her off the table.

“You need to go home Amelia.” Jen spat through gritted teeth.

Amelia looked down at her, confused.

“Am I fired?”

“Maybe. I’ll keep you posted.”

Amelia sat down on the edge of the table, holding the box in her hands and letting her feet dangle over the edge. She felt the eyes of her coworkers boring into her. She could distinguish Patrick’s voice as he whispered over the top of his cubicle, but she couldn’t make out exactly what he was saying. She kept her gaze focused on Jen.

“I don’t understand. I was just apologizing.”

“That is not the apology I had in mind.”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

Jen threw her arms in the air. “I don’t know Amelia, send another email?! Don’t stand on a table and insult your coworkers to their face.”

“I didn’t insult them.”

“Yes, you did! Ugh, Amelia!” Jen pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. Amelia stared back. “You aren’t fired ok, but I am going to talk to corporate about this.”

“Ok.” Amelia fidgeted with the box for a moment, then hugged it close to her chest again. She hoped they wouldn’t order therapy. She couldn’t go to therapy again.

“And what’s the deal with that?” Jen gestured to the box in Amelia’s arms. She looked down at it and sighed.

“It’s nothing,” she whispered, “I’ll go get my things.”

“If it’s nothing then how about you don’t bring it back here.” Amelia looked over her shoulder at her boss and stepped back into her office.

*

Amelia hung up her phone and tossed onto the couch next to her, pulling her knees in tighter to her chest. She looked out the window, the crepe myrtle distorted by the waves of persistent summer heat. She rested her chin on the back of the couch, her mother’s parting words replaying in her ears. *“You’ll tell us if you’re in a bad place again right? You know we love you.”* Maybe it had been a mistake to tell her mother about the incident at work. Amelia didn’t think it was that bad, but she knew it could be bad if corporate decided to make it bad, but she didn’t think they would. Especially since she was the only IT person they had at her branch right now. She tucked her face down between her knees and the couch. Maybe something good would happen, but probably not. People were unreliable in that way.

She released herself from her own grip and pulled her laptop toward her, criss crossing her legs and balancing the computer on top. ‘Retirement Communities Beaufort SC’ she typed into the search bar, remembering what Megan had told her about the box’s carver, the real Franke.

“We’ll find you’re home.” She smiled over at the box, sitting in a patch of sunlight on the cushion next to her, glowing a golden yellow, then grimaced at the sentimentality of it all. The threat against her box was causing a wooly knot to grow in the pit of Amelia’s stomach. First the Burtons, then her family, now

work. She was running out of places where she felt safe with him, the need to find where he belonged all the more urgent.

She scrolled through the search results, clicking on the top hits and looking for resident directories, but the internet was being surprisingly withholding. The names of these communities were killing her, Breezy Lanes, Sunset Village, Pelican Landing - the cheesiness was almost edible. But the accommodations at these places were amazing. Gorgeous views, spas, wine tastings, Amelia wanted to retire. She wondered how retired people afforded all this - it looked like living at a luxury hotel.

Beaufort was proving to be a popular place to retire and the list of communities growing longer and longer. She needed a little more guidance. Amelia looked up the woodshop where she'd met Megan and gotten Anthony Franke's name and dialed their number. After a few rings the phone clicked into reception.

"Olivanton Woodworking, this Marcus how can I help you?"

"Yeah, is Megan there?"

"She's with a client right now can I take a message."

"Tell her the box girl called."

"Box girl?"

"Yeah, the girl with the Franke box."

"Does she have your number?"

“Oh. No, it’s 555-1331”

“That’s fun.”

“I guess. Just let her know I need a call back.”

“Will do. Have a nice day.”

“Thanks.” Amelia tossed her phone down beside her and explored deeper into the internet. Eventually, she grabbed a notepad and starting writing down each retirement community that seemed like a viable option. What her criteria was for inclusion on the list, she couldn’t really tell. Her phone rang once and she scrambled to answer it, but it was a just a prerecorded spam call informing her that the police were about to arrest her for failure to pay a bill for a credit card she didn’t have. She didn’t want to occupy her phone in case Megan called back, but it had been over an hour since she left the message. She dialed the number for one of the retirement communities.

“Yesterseas of Beaufort, this Janice speaking.”

Amelia put on her cheeriest phone voice. “Yes, my name is Amelia Franke. My grandad is a resident with you.”

“Of course dear, and what I can help you with.”

“Well he moved in pretty recently and no one in the family has his new address. Could I get it from you please?”

“I’m sorry hon, but we’re not allowed to give out the personal information of our residents. I’m sure you understand.”

“But please, I’m...” Amelia hesitated, “Getting... married. Yeah, and I need to mail him his invitation.”

“Can’t you just bring it by sometime when you visit him?”

“That’s not the same! It’s supposed to be sent through the mail.”

“I’m sorry sweetie.”

“Please! Please, please.”

The other end of the phone was silent for a beat. “What’s your grandad’s name?”

“Anthony. Anthony Franke.”

“I’m sorry hon, but we don’t have a record of any Anthony Franke living with us.”

“Try Tony Franke. He goes by Tony.”

“Nope, nothing. Are you sure you’ve got the right place?”

Wait! Franke has an ‘e’ on the end! Try it with an ‘e’.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t think you have the right facility. Maybe check with your parents and-.”

“Fine.” Amelia hung up the phone and struck ‘Yesterseas’ off her list. She had already written down five other retirement homes. She wondered if they talked to each other. Like if she started calling all of them, if they’d catch on and start warning the other facilities. Or worse, wherever Franke did live

would tell him that some creepy girl was after him and he'd refuse to see her if she ever did find him. Maybe she should change up her name each time. Or claim to be Megan. She shut her laptop and ordered delivery.

*

An hour passed and Amelia sat at the table in her sunroom, her leftover delivery growing cold on the plate in front of her as she scrolled through the computer. Amelia jumped as her phone buzzed in her back pocket. She hurried to answer it.

"Hello, Megan?"

"Yeah, is this 'Box girl'?"

"Yes! I'm so glad you called!"

"No, problem. It's Amy right?"

"Actually, it's full-on Amelia, but that doesn't really matter, do you know the name of the place where Franke lives?" Amelia heard chewing on the other end of the phone. Chewing didn't bother her in person, but she hated when people ate on the phone. Swallow.

"It's some place down in Beaufort. I don't know the name exactly."

Amelia deflated, shoulders and back curving in on themselves. "He didn't tell you anything? No forwarding address or anything?"

“He’s not a very forthcoming man. And like I said when you were here, we’ve got a bunch of checks for him if you find him. He never trusted direct deposit.”

“So you have no clue, nothing at all to tell you where he lives now.”

“Nope. Sorry Amelia.”

“And he doesn’t have any family?”

“None that live around here that I know of. I don’t have anyone’s contact info or anything. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m just having a hard time pinning him down.”

“You and me both sister.”

Amelia grimaced. “Well, I guess that’s all I needed to ask you.”

“Sorry I’m not more helpful.”

“It’s fine. It’s not really that big a deal I guess.” Her insides were screaming in frustration. “Hey, what was your last name again?”

“Ingles. Why?”

“If I manage to find him, I figured I’d tell him you sent me. There are a lot of Megan’s in the world.”

“You’re telling me. Anyways, can I help you with anything else?”

“No, that was it really.”

“Good luck finding him!”

“Thanks. M’bye”

Amelia sank back into her chair and stared out the window into the darkening woods. This investigation was proving far more difficult than she anticipated. She turned her attention back to the box, sitting on the table next to her dirty dinner plate and the remainder of her food. She caressed her corner.

“I’m not going to give up on you.”

*

The granddaughter ploy was working well. It turned out that middle aged receptionists couldn’t say no for long to a sweet southern bride-to-be desperately trying to track down her 119randdaddy’s address. It wasn’t as though the facilities were just itching to give away their residents’ information, but after much pleading Amelia could almost always convince them to at least look up Anthony Franke’s name. So far, only one facility flat out refused to work with her at all. She would be pissed if that’s where Franke ended up actually being.

She checked the time: 7:23. These places didn’t keep normal business hours, but it still felt like she was probably getting into creeper territory if she kept this up much later. She had four facilities left on her list. That shouldn’t take too long. She decided she’d work until 8 and anything she didn’t get to tonight she’d take care of in the morning.

“Sunset Village this is Sandy, how may help you?”

Amy coated her voice in Southern charm. "Hi! I'm looking for my Grandeddy. He's a resident with y'all."

"Is he missing? You need to call our emergency number."

"Oh no, no. I'm just fillin' out my wedding invitations and I don't have his new address with y'all."

"If you just send it to our main facility we'll make sure it gets to him."

"Thank you, but you see. He... loves goin' to the mailbox and I' it himself. Says it's more personal that way when you gotta work for it. I saw him last week and he wouldn't let me just hand it to him you know? Even to save on postage, he say, 'No hon, I expect to get mine in the mail just like everybody else'."

"That's sweet. So your Grandad lives in one of our independent cottages?"

"Yes mam." Amelia hoped she was right.

"And what's his name?"

"Anthony Franke. Franke with an 'e' on the end mam."

"Well let me see." There was a brief pause and the faint clacking of keys on the other end of the line. "Here he is!" The moisture immediately evaporated from Amelia's mouth. She swallowed. "Mam?"

"Sorry, yes?"

"I just need to confirm some information with you before I release his information to you."

"Yes, of course."

"Birthday?"

"May 14th, 1990."

"Oh, not yours honey, your Grandad's."

"Oh!" Amelia tried to laugh a little, but it came out as more of a dry garble. "Um, oh dear, you're gonna think me a horrible granddaughter. It's in the summer... I think in June maybe?"

"June what?"

"20-something?" Amelia said a quick prayer.

"That's close enough. It's the 28th by the way hon; you may want to write that down."

Amelia agreed, furiously scrambling for a pen and answering questions she wasn't really paying attention to. She ran back into the living room and found the one she'd started with wedged between couch cushions and ran back to the sunroom and her notepad.

"Alright hon, now since you're not listed as one of his emergency contacts I just need you to name one he has on file."

"Of course! Megan Ingle?"

“Excellent, that’s all I needed.”

Amelia’s breath came in short bursts. Her heart was racing and she tried to keep her voice steady. “Perfect, well I’m ready when you are.”

“His address is 5 Egret Way.”

“Perfect. Thank you so much!” Amelia scribbled it down on her notepad and hung up the phone. She had something. A real something. A physical place to go. She slowed her breathing down. Tomorrow was Thursday. She had work. At least, maybe she did. Maybe she could milk this mental breakdown thing for the rest of the week. She called the office and left a voicemail with Jen, telling her she was exhausted and needed to take a few days.

“My stomach’s been a little weird and I think it’s making me cranky and exhausted. Affecting my judgment and all. I’ve got an appointment tomorrow and I’ll keep you posted about Friday. Thanks for understanding.”

She went to her room and packed a bag.

CHAPTER 8

As Amelia pulled off the interstate she cranked down her window and switched off the AC, almost feeling the car sigh with relief as she ended the struggle to keep the persistent, unseasonal heat at bay. The Southern coastal air especially clung to the sticky sweat of summer long after the rest of the Northern Hemisphere had moved on to the crisp refreshment ushered in with late September. By forfeiting temperature control Amelia conceded to allow a light sheen of moisture to rise up onto her skin, but it was worth it to have the acidic salty air filling her lungs. She couldn't see the ocean yet, but her body felt its closeness.

Here there was no breeze, no cooling refreshment brought with ocean waves. The thickness of gnarled oak branches and a heavy coating of Spanish moss created an impenetrable barrier between Amelia and the sea. She had to follow the twisty curves of coastal backroads, winding through forest, then marshland before the air's salty promise could be realized. But this in-between was Amelia's favorite part. The overhanging trees let dappled light filter onto the road that could lull you to sleep if you weren't careful. The roughness brought by open windows and the steady reverberation of indie rock through her blown speakers kept her mind sharp.

Eventually, the ancient trees dissolved into expansive fields of marsh grass that seemed oddly still as Amelia rushed by. The tide was on its way out,

leaving thick patches of mud and oysters exposed to the late afternoon sun. An egret walked through the pluff to the right of the road, its backward knees bending deep as it crept along rummaging for a meal. She slowed at a stop sign, briefly settling the roar of displaced air. Already the last of the cicadas were pumping their cry through the thickened air; viably competing against Amelia's stereo. She continued forward, unsettled by the realization that she needed to pick a final destination. A stopping point. Her Franke sat next to her in the passenger seat. She rested her hand on top of the box as she rounded a corner and the ocean just came into view on the horizon. Her hair clumped to the back of her neck.

*

She drove until she found a lot with free public parking. She should have felt hungry, but her stomach was too knotted up to register the feeling. The parking lot looked out onto a marina where all manner of boats were docked; small, faded green fishing boats, and more than a few yachts bobbed up and down in the gentle current that slid by. In the distance, a pair of kayakers paddled through the marsh grass and under the bridge connecting the city to the cluster of islands just off its coast. She sat looking out at the scene in front of her, windows down to let a cross breeze tug at the sweaty strands of her hair, the box nestled in her lap.

She would go see Franke. She had to see Franke. He was the reason she'd driven all this way. But not yet. The GPS in her phone said Franke's house was 16 minutes away. She could go by any time; no one was expecting her to be anywhere for the next few days. She picked up the box and held it to her chest

as she leaned back into the headrest and closed her eyes. The city murmured around her. The wet air settled into her skin, in the crevices of her ears, her cupid's bow, the seam between her breasts and her bra. She breathed in deeply, opened her eyes, then shoved her door open and stepped out into the sweltering morning.

Moving felt harder than it should. Amelia stood there next to her car, the sun bouncing off the street and burning into her eyes. She pushed her sunglasses further up her nose, her gaze darted back at forth at everything that moved in those moments: the shivering shadows of the overhanging oaks, a squirrel rummaging underneath them, a middle-aged couple laughing as they walked to their car. Amelia swallowed, pulled the strap of her sundress back onto her shoulder and stepped forward.

*

When Amelia was at the coast she didn't mind that summer refused to let go of its hold on the South. The heat in the air, mixed with the salt and mud of the brackish water meeting the open ocean was constantly swirling in the breeze around her head, wrapping her skin a layer of protective sweat. It was less obtrusive, more comforting.

Amelia wandered the streets without a place to go, her thoughts dwelling on coming up with a way to introduce herself to Franke without sounding like one of those sleazy people who befriends old guys to get all their money when they die. The box would help. The box would prove she was legitimate, honestly motivated. It was just that initial introduction that was so off-putting.

At least with the family she'd gotten the box from they had sort of met her already at the garage sale. Amelia wasn't so obtuse as to not realize her actions were out of the ordinary.

Amelia walked off the main road and meandered now down and between various side streets. Here, the looming mansions cast what should have been cooling shadows across the road, but their wide forms cut off the breeze from the water and instead the air here was just hot and stale. Amelia pulled her hair up into a ponytail and walked into a field that took up about a full block between the houses, a "Natural Space" preserved by Beaufort City Council according to a sign planted into the ground at one its corners. She stood in the center of the space, the sun beating down on her shoulders and cheekbones. She spun around once, slow and deliberate, then sat down, running her hand over the tops of the grass, which seemed to radiate their own heat. Amelia smiled and laid down on her back, hugging her bag to her chest. She felt the sun burning into her skin and let herself be absorbed into the salt and heat.

*

"Mam? Are you okay mam?"

Amelia lifted her head, shielding her eyes with her hand. A man stood a few feet away from her, closer to the road. A woman, his wife presumably, stood behind him holding a toddler on her hip while a young girl clung to her leg. Amelia waved at them, then pushed herself up, bits of dry grass clinging to the sweat on the back of her arms. She wasn't sure how long she'd been lying motionless in the sun.

“I’m good!” she called out and smiled, giving them a thumbs up. “Thanks!”

The man nodded and turned back to his family. He kept his face toward her as his wife said something Amelia couldn’t hear. They talked back and forth, the wife gestured toward her twice with her free hand, her son rested his head on her shoulder. The daughter seemed bored with their dawdling and started climbing one of the nearby oak trees. Amelia looked down at her arms. They looked strikingly red against the black of her dress. The couple was still arguing with their shoulders and head nods so between that and the impending sun damage Amelia figured she should leave. She threw her bag over her shoulder and waved to the little girl, perched on a thick, gnarled branch halfway up the tree before slipping back into the allies between the ancient houses.

Her anxiety aside, Amelia figured she should eat. She made her way back toward Bay Street, where she had passed most of the shops and restaurants a few hours earlier. She checked her phone and saw she had multiple missed calls and a voicemail from her mother. It was 3:47; not lunch or dinner time. Amelia groaned. She needed to at least go drive by Franke’s house. But no, she needed to eat something. She’d had a cup of coffee on her way down that day, but nothing else had graced her stomach with its calories. She would wait until she’d had food. Her phone buzzed and “Father Robert – Message” appeared across the screen.

Call your mother.

She did.

"You called out sick again."

"Hi, Mom."

"Amelia, you're going to get fired."

"Who told you I'm sick?"

"I called your work phone when you didn't answer your cell."

"I was sleeping." Amelia stopped walking and fingered a tendril of Spanish moss hanging over the sidewalk.

"So you're actually sick this time."

Amelia shrugged but didn't answer her mother's question.

"I'm coming over."

"I'm not there Mom."

"Amelia," the earpiece crackled as her mother let out a huff of air, "you can't keep running off like this it's not responsible. You have a job. You have a family."

"I don't have my own family."

"Don't talk like that. You have us."

Amelia again said nothing, just tugged on the dangling moss and watched the leaves bounce a second behind each pull. She was thankful to be occupied. She didn't have anything to say to Maureen, but she wanted her to stay on the phone. She looked up the road and saw the family who'd found her walking

together. The husband and wife held hands, the toddler still balanced on his mother's hip and the daughter danced behind, fluttering in and out of their shadows.

"Amelia? I'm gonna let you go now. Just call if you need me."

"Ok."

She watched the family disappear around a corner, then dropped her phone back into her bag. She moved through the suffocating air, swallowed by the heat until she burst out onto the edge of town and the breeze off the water tugged her hair and ripped the nagging of home out of her head. She faced the sun and moved down the street, ducking into the first restaurant she reached and sat herself at the bar. She scanned the restaurant and saw that aside from a couple in the corner, she was the only patron. She swallowed. The ceiling in the building was high, a chandelier hung overhead, casting yellowy light over the room. She doubled in on herself acutely aware of her visibility. A bartender approached, making some comment about her sunburn. Amelia garbled out something she wasn't sure of and fled.

Back outside she breathed in the sticky air, letting it fill her lungs with salt and humidity and wash the anxiety out of her lungs. An anonymous face alone in a restaurant was fine. Being alone with people paid to interact with you, that wasn't going to work. Out of viable ways to waste time, Amelia returned to her car defeated. The cicadas screamed at her, beating her skin with the threat that she would fail. She scowled into the trees, then swung herself into her car pulled out of the parking lot, her bag nestled in her lap, cocooned around Franke.

Amelia turned on to Egret Way. The houses around all slight variations of a single bungalow alternating in bright tones of pink, green, and orange. Each house had two white rocking chairs stationed by their front doors and a little white fence surrounding a perfectly square backyard that looked too short to be effective. The grass was an especially violent green in the late afternoon sunlight, squared off perfectly even with the sidewalk and driveways. Somehow, timed sprinklers presumably, the grass here had escaped the sun's bleaching. There was a single crepe myrtle standing in the front left corner of each front yard balancing each curbside picture and creating an unnatural redundancy as she gazed down the road. Mailbox, tree, mailbox, tree, mailbox, tree.

She slowed the car down, the strands of hair ripped from the bun by the wind settled down around her face, clinging to the sheen of sweat on her cheeks. She rolled by number five. It was coral orange with white trim and shutters. Only a carved heron poked into the mulch that bordered the front patio distinguished it from the houses on either side. A burgundy Lincoln sat in the driveway.

Amelia leaned across the passenger seat, trying to peer through the windows for signs of life within. Her elbow pressed into the horn on her steering wheel and the car let out a horrendous blast. Amelia jumped, gripping the steering wheel and slamming her foot onto the gas. She didn't slow down until she was one street over and her heart settled back into its resting position. Amelia cruised through the neighborhood, making her way back

toward number 5 Egret Way. Despite the heat, the neighborhood felt frozen, eerie. There were no grandmas tending their flower beds or elderly uncles walking their little Maltese down the blinding white sidewalk. Another car passed, a green mini cooper, but Amelia couldn't see inside its tinted windows. Something like paranoia grew in the pit of her stomach.

She circled back in front of Franke's house stopping against the curb. She positioned herself in her seat and held her phone into the line of vision between herself and the house. With her sunglasses on, nobody would think she was staking the place out, just another damn young person staring at their phone. Nothing had changed at the house since her horn announced her presence. Just a vibrancy of color reverberating the waves of late summer heat.

"Can I help you miss?"

Amelia jumped, dropping her phone. An elderly woman in a sunhat and cover-up had ducked her head into Amelia's open window. She had a towel and beach bag strung over her shoulder and dark black sunglasses blocked her eyes.

"Yes, Mam." Amelia stumbled, scrambling around the floor to recover her phone. "Could you tell me where Shrimp 'n Grits Ave is?"

"There ain't no shrimp 'n grits avenue what d' you think we are an amusement park?"

"I think I just got turned around, I'm just"

"Ain't you got a GPS on that fancy phone."

“Yes, mam.” Amelia’s hands found her phone and she gripped it tight to her chest, scooting away from the woman, who’s whole head and shoulders were now protruding into Amelia’s car.

“Well I suggest you use it to find your way outta here. Anthony don’t need no suga baby.”

A smile slid across Amelia’s face. She found him, for sure and definitely. The woman leaned even further into the car so close that Amelia’s reflection in her sunglasses looked like she was gazing through a fisheye lens. “Go on baby, git outta here.”

“Yes, Mam.” Amelia waited for the woman to extract herself from the vehicle, then pulled away from the curb. In her rearview she saw the woman watch as she eased her way down the road, hand on her hip. Amelia turned on her blinker as she approached the first intersection slowing down as much as she dared, managing to catch a glimpse of the woman walking across Anthony’s yard before she had to turn the corner.

“Crap.” Amelia spit her gum out the window and drove through the neighborhood. She passed a community pool and tennis court, but no one was using either. Had the woman been a ghost? Amelia found the facility’s main building and parked her car in a spot designated for visitors and hidden under the shadow of a tree to try her luck on foot. Afraid of being recognized if she should run into Ghost Woman on the street she pulled her hair out its bun and rearranged it into a braid running down the side of her neck. She popped the trunk of her car and stepped out, taking her keys and Franke the Box with

her. She rummaged through her trunk and found the musty loose knit sweater that had been balled up in there since last winter. She shook it out and pulled it over her dress in spite of the heat sitting heavy in the air since they were away from the cooling breeze of the ocean. She slammed the trunk shut, swung her bag over her shoulder, wincing as it rubbed against her fresh sunburn, and set off toward Egret Way.

Being number five, Anthony's house was only two houses in from the crossroads of Egret and Marshwind Lane. By crossing the street and situating herself behind an oversized pampas grass planted at the base of the faux wood road sign Amelia could observe the front of the house undetected. At least from the view of the house itself. She waved awkwardly at each car that passed by, pretending to talk on her phone. Always cars, never people. Perhaps her sunglasses combined with the tint on the windows prevented her from seeing inside.

Eventually, Amelia's legs started to ache from standing in one spot too long. She sat down at the base of the sign and pulled the box out and on to her lap. She ran her fingers across his surface. She gleamed yellow-brown in the light. Sunset would be there soon.

"We're so close," she whispered to her, "What do I do now?" She knew she needed to wait, although she couldn't articulate what she was waiting for. "He will know. Anthony Franke will know who you are." She hugged her knees to her chest, the box between them resting her forehead on the tops of her knees. Heat and sun and mosquitoes buzzed around her and Amelia didn't

notice, but at the crackle of tires over asphalt Amelia jolted her head up. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust back to the lightened world around her but before it turned the corner Amelia caught a glimpse of a red Lincoln.

“No, no, no, no, no” Amelia shot up, gripping the box and looking over the top of the pampas grass. Anthony’s driveway was empty and beyond it, Ghost Woman toddled down the road.

*

Amelia walked along the shore, the water licking over the tops of her bare feet, curling affectionately around her ankles as it receded back into the open ocean. After Anthony had driven away and Ghost Woman had cleared the area, Amelia realized the opportunity his absence was gifting her. She ran over to his house and jiggled the handle, but the door was locked. Not wanting to be outright criminal, Amelia tried peering through the windows, but even though the blinds were open, the curtains just beyond them were drawn shut.

She moved around the house, stepping over the tiny fence into the backyard. It was a small, square green patch of grass with a tiny patio that housed a single chair, with a birdfeeder poking out of the ground next to it. Most of the backyard was taken up by a shed that was too big for the size of the total backyard. The door was padlocked shut, but by pulling the chair up to its side, Amelia could see look through the small windows that lined the edge.

It was dim inside, the wall directly opposite her was lined floor to ceiling with wooden bookshelves, filled perfectly with large gray binders, not a gap in between. Along the back was shelving that housed a variety of tools that meant

nothing to Amelia and in the center of the shed was a table with a disassembled rocking chair strewn across it. She couldn't see what was directly below her, but the entirety of the room was coated in a layer of sawdust. It piled into the corners and made the windows appear slightly foggy. Amelia placed her fingertips on the window, trying to wriggle it open, but it didn't budge. A squirrel jumped onto the shed's metal roof with a sharp clang that made Amelia jump. She climbed down from the chair and pulled it back up onto the patio. She sat down and surveyed the backyard. She could leave a note. She rummaged through her bag and pulled out an old receipt and pen, hovering over it as she considered what to say.

She crumbled up the receipt and threw it back into her bag with the pen. She didn't want to meet Franke through a note. Deciding to come back the next day Amelia climbed back over the fence, hopped in her car, and retreated to the ocean, where she walked now through the pink ripples of the receding tide, just her and the box. The air around her was hinting at being refreshing as the sun trickled down the horizon, the wind off the ocean pushing away much of the day's heat. But the sun soaked into her skin still burned red and hot, punishing her for her procrastination in the afternoon.

Amelia knelt down at the water's edge, clutching the box close to her chest.

"Did you like the ocean?" she whispered into its lines, running the tips of her fingers through the silky mush at her feet. Another wave rushed over her feet, splashing up around her as it hit her ankles, she felt its spray catch in the

wind and collide with her face. Branwell had never seen the ocean and that made Amelia sad. He was a cat so he probably wouldn't have enjoyed it, but still, it wasn't fair that he'd never even had the chance. Amelia slid the box open, tucking the bottom under her arm and pulling open the drawstring on the bag. When the next bit of wave slid up onto the beach around her feet Amelia knelt down and let the water run over her fingers. She stood back up, dipping them down into the ashes, coating her fingers in Branwell and his friend. She felt her nail brush against the ring inside and gave it a reassuring squeeze. She withdrew her hand and held it close to her chest.

“What do you think Bran?” The sun was behind her, pummeling a little more heat into the back of her head. The sweater Amelia had donned earlier felt as though it were protecting her shoulders from it, keeping the sun at bay. “That’s the same ocean that’s always been here. It was here your whole life Bran and your’s too my love.” She walked into the water, up to her knees, stopping only when the force of a wave made her stumble and almost fall. She widened her stance, gripping her companions tighter in her arms, feeling the ground swirling underneath her feet, teeming with microscopic life. The wind roared in her ears, tugging at her hair and whipping her face. The sun was almost completely set, the air turning from yellowed orange to grayish blue. A cluster of pelicans flew overhead and Amelia stood in the ocean feeling the slow, deep breaths in her chest, the salty air coating the insides of her lungs.

“There’s nothing for us here now.” The words felt pulled from her lungs and carried away from her and the water by the wind. She followed them out of the sea and back up onto the beach where they disappeared into the

horizon. Away from the ocean's reach Amelia sank onto her knees in the sand, nestling the box into the ground beside her. She pinched a bit of sand, rough and gray, filled with tiny pieces of shattered shells and sprinkled them into the bag with her friend and her cat. She drew the bag closed, shut up the box, and began the walk back in the dark.

CHAPTER 9

Amelia turned on to Egret Way for the fifth time that morning, although now it was probably closer to afternoon. She crept down the street driving more with the brakes than the gas, willing herself to stop in front of number five. The burgundy Lincoln was once again parked in the driveway so Amelia was confident that Franke was home. She brought the car to a stop and placed her hand on the gear shift, ready to move it into park. But just as with pass number four, a sharp tightness burned through Amelia's chest as she contemplated approaching the door and again she pulled away from the curb to make another lap around the block.

Amelia grabbed the box off the passenger seat and pulled it into her lap. She wanted to know who's life she was carrying around with her; who's remains she was putting to rest, but knowing meant something. Amelia couldn't articulate precisely what it would mean, but she knew that the knowledge would take a piece of her friend away from her. Amelia swallowed. She was being selfish. No one else was giving this person the rest they deserved. A new wave of confidence coursing through her, Amelia again turned on to Egret Way, but again, with number five in sight, the tightness returned and Amelia sped away once more.

When the morning was undeniably afternoon Amelia was still circling the block around 5 Egret Way. She turned once more on to the street and stopped

when she saw, leaning against the Lincoln, an elderly man in a green linen button-up and khaki shorts. His arms were crossed and despite the dark sunglasses perched on his rather bulbous nose, Amelia could tell he was staring right at her.

Pulling over Amelia shut off the car, grabbed the box, and stepped out into the street. The heat was folded into the air around them, making it thick and hard to breathe in. Amelia hesitated outside her car, willing her feet to move forward, while the man pushed off his vehicle and walked to the end of the driveway.

“You seem mighty interested in my house little lady.” His hands rested in the pockets of his shorts, thumbs poking out.

“Ya, mmm.” Amelia’s words came out broken and clipped, “It’s um, not the house. I-” She set her shoulders toward him and briskly closed the space between them, holding out her hand in greeting. “I’m Amelia Hobkirt. Your friend Megan said you might can help me.” He took her outstretched hand, his almost swallowed hers. It felt dry and cracked against her sweaty palm.

“Megan?” He released Amelia’s hand and sat back on his heels, “From Olivanton?”

Amelia nodded, “Are you Anthony Franke?”

The man pursed his lips, then smiled, “Yeah, that’s me. What’s Megan sending you to me for? How’s Megan know where I live?” His eyes moved to the box in Amelia’s arms.

“Well, I have this box. And it’s got your signature on the bottom.”

“Really?” Anthony held out his hand. Amelia ignored him.

“It’s got someone inside it.”

“Inside it?” he frowned, “I never made any cremation boxes. Let me see it.”

Amelia held the box out but didn’t let it go. Anthony walked around it, ran his hand across the top, and asked Amelia to flip it over. He peered at the “Franke ‘56” burned into the base.

“Well I appreciate you thinking I could have carved something this intricate when I was 17, but I will admit I didn’t really start making anything like this until I was in my twenties.”

Amelia’s face fell and she pulled the box away from him.

“You didn’t make it?”

“No mam, that’ would most likely be the work of Howard Franke; my daddy.”

“Oh.” Amelia stared at the ground, trying to decide her next move.

“It’s an art form ain’t it?” Amelia looked back up and met Franke’s gaze. He had taken his sunglasses off and she could see that his eyes were a pale, watered down blue. She nodded.

“Takes a lot of thinking to appreciate art. Need to do it on a full stomach. You hungry?”

Amelia wasn't, but again, she nodded.

“Why don't you come inside and we'll have some lunch, then we'll see what we can do about your box.

*

It was just as hot inside the house as out. Anthony kept the back door open, “For the fresh air”, he said, but while the screen kept the bugs at bay, the heat swarmed through the house like a plague. Her hair clumped against the back of her neck and Amelia wished she could tie it up, but her hair ties were back in the cup holder of her car. The house sported a small kitchen looking in on the main living space, a counter separating the two. Amelia sat down here, placing the box in front of her, but keeping her hands on it at all times. In contrast with the brightness of the outside of the house, inside the walls were all varying shades of gray, the art that peppered the walls broke up the gray but was otherwise forgettable. Amelia watched Franke moving through the space, rummaging around his refrigerator and pulling out materials for sandwiches. He slapped a mayo smothered ham and cheese in front of her, then placed himself on the stool to her left, chomping on a sandwich of his own.

“So,” he said swallowing a bite and wiping his mouth, “How'd you get that box?”

Amelia pulled it closer to her. “Garage sale.”

His mouth formed into a pout, "Nice to know our work is appreciated." He took another bite of his sandwich, "You know I learned woodworking from my pa. He got it from his. I never had a family of my own so I had to hire somebody to pass on the skill. I certainly took the more expensive route." He smiled. Amelia picked at the edge of her sandwich. "What made you buy the box?"

"I thought it was pretty."

"Not 'cause it had a dead body inside? Good to know you ain't one of those alternative kids." Anthony laughed, but Amelia squirmed on her stool.

"So you found a pretty box, with human remains inside and decided to come find its maker."

"Yeah, I want to find out who it belongs to." She pulled a piece of the crust away from the sandwich, trying to wipe the mayo off on the side of the plate before she popped it in her mouth. "It needs to be properly laid to rest and the family I bought it from didn't want it. I thought maybe you'd know who was inside."

Anthony reached over and pulled the box from Amelia's reluctant fingers. "Well I can't tell you exactly who is in there," he turned the box around in front of him, "but I can probably help you find who it was made for."

Amelia straightened up in her seat, "That'd be great! I'd love that."

Anthony smiled, "Now finish your lunch and we'll go out to my work shed."

Amelia grimaced and took a bite, the mayo oozing out across her tongue.

*

Amelia stood behind Franke while he fiddled with the padlock on the shed. Her eyes wandered around the backyard she had so recently explored on her own. At the base of the fence, she spotted her crumbled up receipt from the day before. It must've fallen out of her bag as she climbed back over the fence. She looked back at Franke. His back was to her as he put in the combination for the lock, cursing his failing dexterity. Amelia darted to the fence, grabbed the receipt, and shoved it into the pocket of her shorts.

"There we go!" Anthony straightened back up, swinging the door open in triumph. As they entered the shed Anthony continued, "When I decided to retire I chose this place 'cause it was the one retirement neighborhood that let me put up a shed in the backyard. These places are all so particular about 'maintaining aesthetic' or some crap like that. But when my brain quits out on me I'll be thankful to have the help. So," Anthony gestured to the wall of gray binders Amelia had spotted through the window the day before. "Let's get looking?"

"What do you mean?" Amelia clutched the box against herself. She was suddenly very aware of the abundance of sharp tools that surrounded her; saws, knives, even a dowel could prove deadly in the right circumstances.

"Pa kept a record of every piece he ever made. He was real organized like that, I suppose it rubbed off on me some, 'cause I've kept up the same system. Consistency from one Franke to the next."

“So my box is recorded in one of these binders?” Amelia stepped up to the wall running her fingers along the spines.

“That’s right. Problem is with the older stuff; a lot of the labels have faded what with these records going back to probably even before I was born. Some things have gotten lost over the years I’m sure between moves and what have you. Pa was in World War II, so we ain’t got much from the late 40s, but ‘56? That ought to be in here somewhere.”

“Do you know which binder?”

“Not specifically, no. But I’d venture it’s on this bookcase here.” He tapped his knuckle against the shelves closest to the door. “These are all my Pa’s for the most part. They’re probably a little out of order from the move, but there shouldn’t be anything here that he made later than the 80s.”

“Thank you.” Amelia smiled.

“I’ll leave you to it then.”

“Really?” Amelia spun around and looked at the old man. “You’re okay with me just being in here? With all your stuff?”

“You can’t hurt none of it. I’ll be inside if you need me.” And with a wave of his hand Franke left the shed.

*

Amelia focused her attention on the wall of binders looming in front of her. She set her box down on the center table and pulled one off the shelf and let it fall open in her arms. Inside was page after page of what looked like product

profiles, protected behind sleeves of plastic. The page she opened to displayed a grainy, orangey-yellow photograph of a what looked to be the bust of a grizzled sea captain. Underneath the photo, scribbled in pen were the words "Carving – Captain Ahab – Pinewood. Completed June 16th, 1973. Color detail by Mable. Sold at state fair on September 20th, 1973 for \$8." Amelia flipped through a few more pages, noting that the binder contained logs of wood crafts created in the second half of 1973. She closed the binder, and placed it on the floor underneath the table.

She pulled out another binder, pulling from the shelf above where she'd found Captain Ahab. The first entry was for a rocking chair – walnut, made in 1987 "in celebration of the birth of Norma Green's first granddaughter. Commissioned for \$175." She closed the binder, placing it on the ground next to the one she originally opened.

Amelia continued the process, pulling binders randomly from the shelf. They didn't seem to be in any particular order at the moment. From what Amelia could gather, Anthony had arranged them based on the wear detectable on the outside of the binders, which she quickly found did not necessarily correlate with the age of the logs inside. As she pulled the binders from the shelf and noted the dates of the entry, Amelia started little piles around her in a semicircle on the floor, organized by decade. After an hour, she had a sizeable pile from the '70s, a few from the '60s and '80s, one lone binder representing Frankes's works from 1994, and only 3 from the 1950s. The first binder she found that was even close to '56 was dedicated specifically to works carved as

gifts for Christmas 1958. The other two binders were from 1950-51 the only two she'd found that were placed in consecutive order.

Amelia threw another binder down onto the '60's pile and stood up straight, pulling her shoulders back and feeling her joints crackle down her spine. As the afternoon wore on it was growing hotter and hotter inside the shed, despite her leaving the door open to let a breeze blow through. Around three o'clock Anthony reappeared bearing a welcome glass of water.

"Any luck?" he asked as Amelia wiped her sweaty palms on her shorts and took the glass in her hands.

She hesitantly shook her head. "I guess I'm making progress. I haven't found my box yet though."

Anthony stepped over her binder piles and switched on the window AC unit at the back of the shed. Amelia stretched her shoulders, "I'm trying to organize the binders for you though. I've got them piled up by decade."

"You ain't gotta do that."

Amelia shrugged, "I might as well."

"Well keep it up if you want. You need food or anything?"

Amelia shook her head, remember the mayo-laden sandwich from earlier and pulled another binder from the shelf – 1962.

"Tony? That car's out front again!"

Amelia looked out the door and saw Ghost Lady standing on Anthony's back porch. She gave her an awkward smile and waved, the binder still propped open in her arms. Anthony came out from the shed and walked up to her.

"I know Nance. It's this girl here, Amy." He gestured to her, standing inside the doorway.

"Amelia." She closed the binder and tossed it with the other '60s, stepping out into the yard. "We met yesterday."

"I ran you off yesterday." Nance put her hands on her hips.

"Nance is my neighbor." Anthony smiled, ignoring her comment. "She keeps tabs on the street. Amelia's doing research on one of my father's old pieces."

"Mmhmm."

Amelia backed up back into the shed and re-commenced her search of the bookshelves. She could hear Nance complaining just outside.

"You gotta be careful Tony. Never know what these young people are up to."

Anthony mutter something dismissive, urging Nance to go into the house. He popped his head back in to the shed to ask if Amelia was still good and when she answered in the affirmative both he and Nance disappeared inside the house.

Amelia kissed the tips of her fingers and laid them on the top of the box.

“We’ll find you.” She smiled, pulling down another binder – 1953 – closer.

*

When Amelia had pulled out just over half the binders on the shelves she was beginning to lose hope. She’d found one binder that had 3 entries from December 1956, but not one of the three was her box. It was so close to what she needed though. The ache in her heart was seeping out into her neck and lower back. The window AC made the work more bearable, but it was getting late. At least she figured it must be, she hadn’t checked her phone since that morning. Looking outside though she could see the afternoon light was beginning to deepen into a richer shade of pink. She sighed and pulled down another gray binder.

“Bench - Mesquite. Completed December 5th, 1955. Sold at Artisan Holiday Exposition on December 18th - \$21”. She flipped to the next page: “Carving - Mallard - Pinewood. Completed December 12th, 1955. Sold at Artisan Exposition on December 18th - \$5”. She turned to the middle of the binder and found February 20th, 1956. Amelia sat down in the middle of her circle of binders. She thumbed through the pages, trying to quickly assess via the photographs which might be her box, but she was too excited and didn’t linger long enough on each page. She took a breath, forcing herself to turn over each individual page one by one by one. There was a table, a rocking horse, a chair, many more small carvings, a bookshelf, and there it was. Her box.

It was hard to tell through the grains of the black and white photograph, but it was certainly her box. She looked up at it sitting on the table, the overhead

light haloing around its edges and the back to the photograph. It looked just as seamless, the tendrils of the carved vines intertwining around its edges, occasional blossoms bursting out across its surface.

“Keepsake box - Cherry. Completed January 5th, 1956. Gift for my goddaughter Ingrid Mozer in celebration of her 20th birthday. Given to her January 7th, 1956.”

“Mozer?” Amelia pulled the page out from its protected sleeve, stood and walked over to her box. “Hey Mozer.” She picked her box up and headed back to Anthony’s house, pulling open the back door and letting herself inside.

“Mr. Franke?”

He stepped in from the front door, apologizing for having to shoo off Nance. “She doesn’t like strangers” he explained.

“I found her.” Amelia beamed, holding out the paper and clutching the box close. “She belonged to Ingrid Mozer. Birthday present.”

Anthony took the paper from her hands, scanned it over and nodded, handing it back, “That sure looks like it.”

“Did you know Ingrid? It says she was your father’s goddaughter.”

Anthony moved into the living room and sank down into a salmon-colored recliner. Amelia stayed rooted in place.

“I do remember her actually. She was a few years older than me. Had a sister closer to my age. But now that I think about it, her sister was a little

younger. Anyways, yeah, I remember her. Her father and my father were in World War II together. Pacific Front."

"Are you in touch with any of them? Do you know where Ingrid is?"

"Ingrid died."

"Oh."

"That's right." His eyes cinched up as memory flitted across his face, "It was horrible. Her daddy took it real bad. My pa stayed with him for awhile after that. A few months I think. It was a car accident I wanna say. She was only in her twenties. Your age probably. Not too many people died like that back then. Not compared to now anyway."

Amelia swallowed and held the box closer, tucking the paper between it and her chest. "Did y'all live around here?"

"Oh hell no. Pardon the language, I only came here to retire."

"So North Carolina, where the shop is."

"No, we'd moved there, when did the shop open? Two years before I think. But we visited all the time. Hatchburgh."

"Hatchburgh?"

"Hatchburgh, Virginia. That's where they settled after the war. They promised to stick together if they survived, see? Always had each other's backs. And wanted to get as far away from Japan and all them other Pacific islands as possible. They wouldn't ever speak of it really, 'cept to remind us how they'd

been through hell so that we could have heaven. And like I said, we moved away when I was teenager. Pa found an investor to open up the shop and we had to go where the money was. They were probably hopin' I'd marry one of them Mozer girls, but as you can see, I've never been the marryin' type." He seemed to be talking to himself now.

"Hatchburgh."

"Yep, Hatchburgh. Small place, up close to the mountains. Not a bad place to grow up. I've always been more of a coastal person myself. Pa didn't like the ocean though."

"Hatchburgh."

Again, Anthony nodded.

"Thank you, Mr. Franke. You didn't have to let me rummage through your heritage like this."

He waved his hand at her, dismissing her gratitude, "Grab me a beer outta the fridge and we'll call it even."

Amelia did as he bid, pulling a Black & Tan out from the shelf, popping it open and bringing it over as Franke flipped on the television.

"I'll straighten up the shed and then head out."

He nodded in response as he took a swallow from the bottle, switching from channel to channel.

Back in the shed, Amelia hurried to stuff the binders back onto the shelves. Any semblance she had of organization during her search was totally disregarded in her hurry to get home. She had found what she came for and now she was exhausted. An ache burned from her shoulders down through her fingertips. She rolled her head from side to side trying to ease the tension in her neck and behind her eyes. It was only after she'd slid the last binder into place that she realized she'd never returned Mozer's paper to her place in the file. Amelia paused, holding it in her hands under the shed's light, then folded it up quickly, and shoved it down inside her bag, which she slung over her shoulder as she eased out of the shed into the blossoming evening. For the second time in two days, Amelia jumped Franke's fence, scurried to her car, and rushed away from Egret Way.

CHAPTER 10

Amelia felt the crown of her head burning as the sun absorbed into her dark hair. She had rolled up the sleeves of her t-shirt and noticed her shoulder turning pink. She brushed the tips of her fingers against it, feeling the heat radiating off it like a summer sidewalk.

“Oof!” Amelia was jerked to the side when the great dane she was taking out to the bathroom suddenly lunged into the bushes. The leashed had been looped around her elbow and the force of the dog’s excitement almost dislocated her other shoulder. “Maximus!” Amelia scolded as the dog snuffed through the pine needles that encircled the corporate landscaping. He didn’t listen, but rather wagged his tail, looked back at Amelia, and then peed on the bush. Amelia narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips back at him.

She was only required to take the dogs out until they’d gone to the bathroom, but she knew this was probably one of maybe three chances Max was going to have to get to be outside. She wondered if dogs needed vitamin D too or got that seasonal defect sadness thing from being in kennels for too long. She walked him up and down the stretch of grass that ran parallel to the building. They really needed a fenced in outdoor space for the dogs to really get to run around in, but the shelter was small, privately owned and always lacking for money. Max walked up to Amelia and pressed his forehead into her stomach and she squeezed the back of his neck. She loved the dog-neck fur. It was

always so soft and the skin was a little looser there and it was so satisfying to get a whole bundle of it in your hands, squishing between your fingers. She slid her hands under the dog's chin and lifted his face up to hers.

"You're a good boy." she said and kissed him on the dip between his eyes before leading him back inside.

Opening the heavy metal door hit Amelia with an onslaught of echoing dog barks. The smell was an odd combination of sterile hospital sting and wet fur. Maximus tucked his tail and stuck close to Amelia's side as she walked him back down the aisle of furious barking and wagging butts to reach his concrete kennel. For the most part, they tried to keep more than one dog in each kennel so that they could learn socialization skills, but Maximus was so big that he got a kennel all to himself. He was a shy dog so this suited him well. Amelia pulled open his door and led him inside, sliding the looped leash off his head. Maximus loved people, but he was so big and awkward he hadn't found a home yet in a year and a half. The shelter was also very picky with who they adopted out large dogs too.

Maximus sauntered into the kennel and scooped a ragged raccoon thing into his mouth. The squeakers frightened him so he'd ripped it out of the toy's stomach almost immediately and it lay in the corner of the kennel with a collection of other extracted squeakers from toys past. He didn't like the squeakers but he also would let you get rid of them. He needed to know where they were, not just that they were gone. The shredded animal dangled in his mouth as he looked up at Amelia and wagged his tail. She grabbed at the toy

and gave it a half-hearted shake that Maximus easily broke free from. He tossed the toy at her now and laid down, ears still a little alert. She picked it up and he followed it's ascent.

"I can't right now love." She gazed at his sad gray eyes so full of unbridled affection. His tail thumped the ground once. "Dammit you." Amelia pressed her back into the wall and slid down next to the dog. He grabbed the toy in her hand and pulled the raccoon back and forth. She could hear the seams popping. Eventually, she let go and Maximus rested his head on her knee. She stroked his neck, scratching behind his ears and down onto his chest. She closed her eyes and felt the dog's calming weight against her side.

*

"Amelia, we've got an adoption applicant requesting your assistance."

Amelia looked up at the receptionist from her spot on the floor. Maximus sighed. "Requesting me? I can be requested?"

"Well, it's not formal or anything, she just said she knows you and wanted to know if you were here."

"Oh, ok. I'll be right there." The receptionist nodded and left, while Amelia stood, disgruntling Max who grumbled and curled himself up into a relatively small ball considering he wasn't a small dog at all. Amelia headed out front to the main entrance only to find Jen standing at the counter, clad head to toe in purple athleisure wear, hair pulled up into the same too-tight ponytail she wore at work.

“Hey Amelia! I’m glad to see you’re feeling better!” She smiled and moved to wrap Amelia in a hug. Amelia kept her hands down by her side.

“Yeah,” she muttered into her boss’s shoulder, “I’ll be back on Monday.”

“Excellent!” Jen pulled away from her and tucked her hands into her armpits. “I’m here for a cat!”

“A cat?”

“Yeah, your little poster in the office inspired me.”

“Oh cool. Yeah cats are great.” Amelia tried to keep her face steady as Jen’s eyes bored into her. “So have you filled out an application?”

“Yeah, I’ve been approved, but I haven’t met a cat yet!”

“Well, I guess that’s what you need to do next. Did you see a cat on the website? Got a particular one in mind?”

Jen shrugged, “No, I just thought I’d come by and see which one I connected with!”

“Ok, well, just come with me back here then,” Amelia moved past Jen, around the front counter, and over to the other side of the shelter where they had a room filled with cat castles, litter boxes, and water bowls that they let the adoptable cats play in during business hours. Jen followed close behind her, peering over her shoulder as they entered the room to a slew of meows and appraising glances.

“Oh wow! Look at them all!” A brown and blonde tabby rustled toward them purring, and rubbing at Amelia’s ankles. She reached down and scooped him up, showing him to Jen.

“This is Rufus. He’s just over a year old. He got dropped off a few months ago when somebody found him wandering around outside their apartment down near the University. He’s super sweet, up to date on his shots, and gets along well with other animals.”

“He’s so cute! Can I hold him?” Jen reached out her arms and pulled Rufus away from Amelia, holding him under his front legs so that his body stretched out long below him. He stopped purring. He wriggled and squirmed, letting out a horrid squawking sound. Jen let go of him and he rushed off into one of the more secure corners of the room.

“What did I do!” Jen looked at Amelia, horrified, hands held up in defense.

“Well, cats like to be held close to you. So they feel safe, you know? Secure and stuff.” Amelia walked over to one of the cat trees and scratched at a long-haired, blue eyed cat, nestled at the top with her paws tucked under her chest. Amelia held her knuckles out to the cat, who sniffed them twice then pressed her forehead into them. Amelia rubbed the back of the cat’s head and then under her chin while her purring grew coarse and loud with satisfaction. “They’re finicky animals.” Amelia explained. “You have to figure out each cats’ individual little quirks. This girl’s name is unfortunately Fluffy, feel free to change it if you like her, she’s a pretty chill cat.”

Again, Jen reached out and grabbed the cat, pulling her off the castle while she yowled and clung to the carpet coverings with her claws and again, Jen let her go and jumped back, while Fluffy scrambled back on top of the tower, tail twitching.

“Maybe try petting them before you pick them up. And it’s ideal if you don’t drop the cats too.”

“Sorry.” Jen said, scratching at the side of her nose, “I’ve never had a cat before.”

“Well cats are pretty easy pets once you get to know them. Here,” Amelia crouched down next to a small, three-legged black kitten, “This is Lucky. She was hit by a car, but is ready to find her forever home now. She’s still a kitten so you can raise her up to be your perfect pet.” Amelia grabbed a strand of her hair, and wiggled it in front of Lucky, who bounced and chased it, falling awkwardly on her uneven gait, but leaping up with great enthusiasm every time.

“Aw! Sweet baby!” Jen squatted down next to them, watching Lucky chase after Amelia’s hair. “You are so cute!” Jen reached out and grabbed ahold the kitten’s upturned belly. Lucky’s three limbs latched onto her hand, her teeth sinking into Jen’s fingers.

“Shit!” Jen pulled her hand back and bopped Lucky on the head with her uninjured fingers.

“Hey!” Amelia scooped up the kitten and held her to her chest. “You can’t do that! That’s just what kittens do! It’s like a teething puppy!”

“But she bit me!” Jen’s forehead seemed to be stretched tighter than usual. She looked at Amelia like it was her fault the kitten had bitten her, like it had been her plan all along.

“Kittens bite. That’s how they play, look!” Amelia directed her down to the kitten cupped in her hands, ardently chewing on one of Amelia’s knuckles and kicking at her with her back feet.

“How do you deal with that!” Jen looked horrified.

“Her teeth are sharp, but her jaw isn’t that strong yet. She’s not even breaking the skin.”

Jen leaned forward and examined Amelia’s hands. “Still, it hurt like hell.”

Amelia bit the inside of her lip to keep from rolling her eyes. “Maybe a cat isn’t the right pet for you. Have you considered any other options?”

“Well, I mean, cats just seemed easy you know.”

“They’re easy if you know how to have one.” Amelia leaned down and set Lucky free among the others, then stood back up to face Jen. “But I mean, if you’re not a cat person then you shouldn’t have a cat just to have one.”

Jen looked disappointed, “I want a pet though. It’s really lonely at home.”

“Aren’t you married?” Amelia nodded to the little gold band around Jen’s left ring finger.

“Yeah, but my husband travels for work a lot. I thought a cat would help.” Jen toyed at the ring, pushed it forward and back toward her knuckle.

“You know; dogs tend to be better companion animals if you’re lonely. Cats can be sort of aloof. They don’t really give a shit if you’re there or not.”

Jen nodded. She wasn’t really looking at Amelia anymore. Or the cats for that matter. Amelia couldn’t really tell what was holding her attention at this point. They stood there for a beat, the cats in constant movement around them.

“Let’s go see some dogs!” Amelia wanted to cringe at the fake chipperness blanketing her voice. She lead Jen out of the room, across the lobby and back into the kennels. It wasn’t as cute and peaceful back here that’s for sure. Dogs certainly have an entirely different vibe than cats. Here the noises were louder, the movements larger, more abrupt. It was the only place where Amelia didn’t mind being screamed at; where noise didn’t overwhelm her. She smiled. “Meet the dogs.”

Jen seemed a little perkier as she walked up and down the aisles of kennels. She crouched down at the bottom of each kennel and let the dogs sniff her fingers. She didn’t jump back when a little terrier mix licked her fingers, which was both surprising and hopeful to Amelia.

“Do you have a size preference? A breed? I mean, almost every dog we have here is some sort of mutt, but we’ve got a few mixes we know for sure what they are.”

Jen stood up straight, keeping her gaze down toward the barking dogs in the kennel in front of her. "I mean, I don't want a little one. I'm scared I'd break it."

"Ok, so we won't get you a blown glass dog, but I think we've got plenty of sturdy pups here that will meet your needs."

Jen shot her one of her most stern work looks, pinching her lips tight together, her bulging pink eyes narrowed. She sighed. "You got any that aren't so barky?"

"Yeah actually!" Amelia took Jen back to the corner where Maximus lived, large, lumbering, and quiet. She knew he'd be a hard sell, but he was such a good dog. When they got to him he was curled up just as Amelia had left him, his butt on his bed and his chin resting on his front paws.

"Maximus!" he lifted his head and the sound of his name and worked himself up onto all fours. "Hey Maxy!" Amelia unlatched the door and walked inside, gesturing for Jen to follow her. Jen stayed in the doorway.

"Come'ere Jen, he's sweet. Max, sit." Max sat. Jen walked up to him and placed a tentative hand on the back of his head. Max leaned into it, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

"Hey! He isn't so bad."

"See? Maximus has been here for almost two years. He's so precious, but no one will adopt him because he's so big."

“But he’s such a cutie pie!” Jen had bent down over Max, cupping his head in her hands. “Are you a good boy?! Are you a good Maximus?!” Maximus thumped his tail against the concrete. “I think I’ll take him!”

“Excellent. Since you applied for a cat, we’ll have to run your application again. They can be a little high strung with the bigger dogs, want to make sure they have a yard and stuff.”

“I have a yard. A big, fenced in yard.”

“That’s great! Also, even if you won’t, tell them that you’ll crate train him. They love when people crate train.”

“Is he not house trained?” Worry flashed across Jen’s face.

“No he is! But they have a thing with crates here. He’s good to go. I’ve been working with him for over a year now. He’s a great dog.”

“Yay! Oh boy Maximus!” Jen threw her arms around his neck, “I’m going to be your mommy!”

*

Amelia walked into the restaurant, the golden light and dark shadows rippling across her face as she scanned the labyrinth of tables and booths for her parents.

“Amelia!” Her mother waved and smiled at her from a back corner booth. Amelia smiled back and moved toward them, sinking into the booth and sliding into its center. “I ordered you a Pinot Grigio. The waitress just left to get drinks.”

“Thanks.”

“How’s the shelter?”

“Pretty good. That great dane Maximus got adopted today.”

“Really?” her dad pouted a little, “I kind of wanted him.”

“Really?” Amelia and her mother both looked at Robert, confused.

“I mean, I wouldn’t have ever actually gotten him. But that was a good lookin’ dog.”

Amelia nodded and fiddled with her menu.

“Did a family adopt him?”

“No, it was my boss actually.”

“Your boss!” Maureen smiled, “That must have been fun.” The waitress arrived, drinks and bread basket in hand. She took their orders, then whisked away. Amelia picked at her bread, chewing little nubs of it between her front teeth, staring out the window. “So was it fun?”

“Huh?” Amelia looked across the table at her mother. “Oh, yeah, it was fine. She wanted a cat, but was like the worst cat person ever. Like the cats hated her guts.”

“Cats hate my guts.” Robert laughed at himself and took a sip of his wine.

“Cats hate most people.” Amelia agreed, pulling her bag closer to herself until she could feel Branwell and Mozer against her thigh. “I miss Branwell.”

“Oh honey.” Her mom touched her hand and Amelia instinctively twitched away. “That’s actually part of why your father and I wanted to take you to dinner tonight.”

“My cat died almost a month ago.”

“Well not just that.” Her parents looked at each other, her father swirling a slice of bread in the spice and oil mixture on the table. The bread was soaked through, but he didn’t seem to notice. Amelia stared as the shininess crept up the bread, through the crust, and onto his fingers. “We’ve just noticed a change in you since Branwell died.”

“It’s not really a change,” her father clarified, “more like a worrisome return to an old Amelia we don’t really want to see again.” He swirled the bread another lap.

“I’m doing fine.”

“Well-”

“I’m not in some great depression over my cat. He was just a cat. He was old.” Amelia took a swallow of wine.

“If you say so sweetie.” Maureen took a bite out of her bread. She chewed slow, but hard. A smudge of lipstick had been growing on her chin with each bite. As though she could sense Amelia’s observation, Maureen reached up and rubbed the smudge away with the back of her knuckle. “It just feels like

since Branwell died, and our disastrous dinner the other night, that you're pulling away from us again. We just want you to know you have a support system."

"I know." Amelia put her hand on her dad's. "There's no more oil on the plate by the way." Her dad smiled and popped the soggy slice into his mouth. Her parents then fell into a conversation about work and people that Amelia didn't know or care about. She engaged every so often, but most stared at the tea candle flickering in the tiny lamp at the center of the table. Salads were served, prayers muttered, glasses refilled, Amelia's phone buzzed with a notification from a meditation app she couldn't stand to use, salad bowls were taken away and eventually a plate of goat cheese-stuffed chicken was placed in front of her and she plunged her fork and knife in with satisfaction.

*

"Have you thought about going to talk to Dr. Jackson again?" Amelia stopped pushing around the remains of asparagus stems left on her plate and looked directly into her mother's face across the booth.

"Why?"

"Well, like we were saying earlier, you seem, unhappy."

"I'm perfectly happy. I just ate a delicious dead chicken."

"See, it's stuff like that." Robert interjected, pointing a masala soaked bread crust at his daughter, "That dark sass hasn't been here in years."

“Yes Lia-bee, and last time Dr. Jackson was able help you. He brought your light back.”

“You give him too much credit.” Dr. Jackson freaked her out. He didn’t ever cross any barriers with her or anything; never touched her, but he had a vibe she didn’t mesh with. His adam’s apple was too mobile and it made Amelia feel like she couldn’t trust him. It constantly bobbed up and down while she was talking, answering his questions. It was gross and eager. It stilled sort of when he would talk to her, but not completely. Instead it seemed to vibrate with subtle vigor while she spoke. She constantly wanted to push it back into his throat where she couldn’t see it anymore. She was also pretty sure he tried to prescribe her loosely disguised cocaine once, but she had no way to prove that. And he texted her constantly. No one should like getting inside someone else’s head that much. The texts should have been more helpful since she could see that damn adam’s apple, but she could just picture it bouncing in time with the click of his thumbs as he typed out messages to her on his phone. “He just made me realize there are bigger problems in the world besides mine.”

“That may be true.” Her dad sat back into his booth, “but that doesn’t make your problems any less valid.” The waitress re-appeared with the black vinyl sleeve containing their bill. Robert slid a credit card in the top and handed it back to her.

“Wow Dad, I’ a little deep there.” Her father had those moments on occasion, where he got all wise and fatherly, like a character in Hallmark holiday film. Amelia appreciated them when they came, since they appeared so seldom.

"I'm just sayin'. Deal with yourself is all."

"I love you too Dad." They exchanged restrained smiles.

Maureen took the envelope back from the waitress when she returned and scribbled out a tip, forging her husband's signature on the bottom, then swallowed the last of her wine. "Promise us you'll just text him please."

"I'm not gonna do that."

"Amelia."

"No, Mom, I'm not. He's got nothing new to offer me."

"Well text someone."

"How about I text you; would you like that?"

"It'd be better than you making yourself alone and miserable all the time."

Amelia sucked in her cheeks and closed her eyes. "Please Mom, Dad, please just trust that I'm doing okay." She moved the box into her lap, settling it between her thighs. "Y'all are making things weird."

"Well that's not our intention." Amelia's mouth twisted up in some sort of kind-ish acknowledgement of the sentiment. She was getting so tired.

"Thanks for dinner y'all. I've got work in the morning, I need to get home and start getting' ready for bed." Amelia stood and her parents stood up with her. She swung her bag over her shoulder and hugged her parents. Her mom held on too long. Amelia smelled the grease in her hair.

Amelia pulled into her driveway and stared at her darkening house. Her windows were down, filling the car with the day's stale warmth. She breathed in until it felt like her lungs were going to burst, stretching them out as far as they would go, feeling the skin ache across her chest. She grabbed Mozer out of the bowels of her bag and crawled with him into the back seat. She stayed there, wrapped around him until the sky went dark.

CHAPTER 11

Amelia was one of the first people to get into the office on Monday. The only other person there was Patrick, who had headphones on and was leaned in close to his computer screen, the blue light reflecting in his pupils. Amelia crossed through the maze of cubicles to her closet at the back of the building. Since Jen wasn't there yet, Amelia closed the door behind her. Her phone buzzed with a text from her mother wishing her "The best of Mondays". There was a pile of IT requests sitting on her keyboard from when she'd called out sick the week before. She placed her bag and Mozer down in her bottom desk drawer and rifled through them. A couple deleted file recovery requests, info on a new hire she needed to set up an email and network access profile for, a new anti-virus update corporate needed her to install on all the office computers. She should probably get started on that before everybody else got into the office.

Amelia sighed and leaned back in her chair, bobbing herself up and down with her toes as she read the installation info on the disk. It looked like this software wasn't actually an update on their current malware protection, but an entirely new program the company was switching to. She would have to go through and uninstall the current program and then upload this new one on every individual computer in the office. Amelia looked over at the empty desk opposite her own. As much as she loved having the IT closet to herself, it was times like these that she wished they'd hire a second IT person. She'd been

happy when the last guy left a few months ago, but now she was starting to feel the heat of being the only professional computer geek in the office.

Amelia took Mozer out of the bottom drawer and set her on the desk, bottom side up. She slid out the bottom and plopped the bag out into her hands, held it to her stomach and closed her eyes. Their weight was comforting. They let her know she'd get through this day. She needed to get to work. Installing the new software was going to take a few hours. She placed the bag back into the box, pulled open the drawstring and popped the zip locked interior bag open. She licked the inside of her forearm and the tip of her finger. She swirled her finger around inside the ashes then rubbed them into the wet spot on her arm until she had a solid gray splotch there. She sealed the bag and box, slid it back into her bottom drawer and locked it. Amelia rolled down her sleeves to her wrist to cover the ashes, grabbed the installation disk, and headed out into the main office. She felt better knowing they were still with her.

*

Amelia had known the installation process was going to take awhile. She hadn't realized it was going to be a next to impossible task to complete. Jen arrived at the office at seventeen past nine with a wispy ponytail and eyes more tightly wound and bulging than ever. Those eyes spotted Amelia almost the moment Jen walked in and she marched up to Amelia and began an intense vomit of words about what on earth to do with Maximus.

"He eats, so much food. Like more food than me. Did you know he eats so much food?"

“He’s a great dane. They’re extra large dogs, so they have extra-large stomachs.”

“I’ve had to buy him a new bag of food every day!”

Amelia swiveled her chair toward her. She couldn’t do anything more on this computer until the bar filled all the way anyway. “How much food are you giving him?”

“Three cups, twice a day.” Jen twisted her ponytail around her finger, leaning on the cubicle partition.

“He actually needs about eight cups a day total.”

“Eight! What the hell Amelia!”

“Buy those bulk bags of dog food, they’ll save you a fortune.”

“Where do I get those?”

Amelia shrugged, “There’s lots of pet supply stores that’ll let you do that. And websites too. I’d try that so that you don’t have to lug them into the house yourself.”

“Yeah, that’s smart. My husband really likes him. Said I picked well.”

“Yeah, you did. Max is a great dog.”

“A great, DANE-g, dog.”

Amelia gave her a tight smile and returned her attention to the computer.

“You got a dog, Jen?” Fern, the account associate who’s computer Amelia was updating was standing next to them during their conversation.

“Uh-huh,” The wisps around her ponytail were sprouting more and more as Jen continued to mess with her hair. “A great dane.”

“Aww, I bet he’s so cute. Do you have any pictures?”

Amelia took advantage the distraction and rushed to finish installing the new software on Fern’s computer, while Jen flipped through pictures of Max on her phone.

“Ok Fern, you’re all set.”

“Thanks, hon.”

Amelia offered Fern her seat back and then moved over to the next cubicle, waiting for that account associate to finish up a phone call before commandeering her desk. Jen moved there with her, while the associated headed to the break room to take advantage of not being able to access her computer.

“So I don’t think Max is all that happy at my house.”

“Maybe it’s because he’s hungry.” Amelia kept her attention focused on the screen.

“No, I don’t think so. But yeah, I’ll feed him more if you think he needs that. But like all he does is like lay around and stuff. He seems really sad.”

“Great danes have really chill temperaments. Laying around with a human is basically Maximus’s favorite past time.”

“Really? I thought dogs like to run around and bark and chase stuff.”

“Some dogs do. Not all dogs are the same.”

“But he’s even really calm when I take him outside. He doesn’t want to fetch. He doesn’t pull at his leash.”

“Danes aren’t really fetchers and you should be happy he doesn’t pull on his leash. That’s a good thing.” *It’s ‘cause I trained him well, thanks, Amelia thought.*

“I just feel like this is too easy. Like the food thing is hard, but like, dogs are hard.”

“Then why’d you want a dog?”

“I just don’t like being alone in my house when I get home.”

“Everything you’re complaining about-”

“I’m not complaining!” Jen interrupted her, tugging hard at her ponytail again. “I’m just worried I’m doing something wrong.”

This constant barrage of unnecessary worry followed Amelia as she moved down to the next computer. In an hour and a half, she’d only managed to complete the new installation on three out of the office’s sixteen computers. Amelia was shocked at all there was to possibly be anxious about with a new dog, especially one as well behaved as Maximus.

It was almost noon when Amelia began to install the new security software onto the fourth computer. She deleted the old system and slid the installation disk into the computer's tray. She was surprised that the new software had to be installed via disk and wasn't something you downloaded online. The old system she'd installed two years ago she had to download and install from the internet. Maybe this was more secure or something.

She tried to tune Jen out as she worked through installing the virus protection. She entered the network password incorrectly twice already. As she went to enter it a third time, the little dots stopped popping into the bar.

"What?" Amelia leaned in closer to the screen and hit the "L" key a few times, but nothing new appeared.

"I said that Maximus seems to like my husband more than me. Like, I'm the one who rescued him, but he's slept on Rick's side of the bed both nights we've had him."

"That sucks." Amelia wiggled the mouse. The arrow moved across the screen, but not in accordance with her mouse strokes. "What the hell?"

"Amelia!" She looked up. Patrick's head was poking over the top of his cubicle as he beckoned her to come over to him. Customer Service sat at the back of the office, so she wasn't even close to getting to their computers yet.

"Hold on, I've got an issue I'm dealing with here."

"No, Amelia, something's really wrong with my computer. Like I can't use it anymore."

“Mine’s doing it now too.” The account associate across from where Amelia was working looked up at her confused.

“Mine too!” The office erupted into a chorus of people chiming that they’d lost control of their computers. Amelia watched the screen of the one in front of her as it canceled the new installation and began clicking through the programs on the desktop.

“Everybody sit tight,” Amelia announced. “It’s probably just a corporate maintenance thing. I’ll go make sure.” Amelia headed back to her office, with Jen tight behind her.

“So for getting Max to like me-”

“Look, Jen, I’ll be happy to help you with this in like 30 secs okay? Just let me sort out this computer takeover real quick.”

“I’m sure it’s standard. I really need your help with this Maximus thing.”

Amelia felt the bugs starting to bubble under her skin and her jaw was getting tight. Corporate always emailed when this was going to happen and Jen should have known that. She gripped her forearm, rubbing the sleeve covering the ashes and breathed slowly out through her nostrils, feeling the air rush past her top lip.

When she got to her office she saw that her computer was too acting of its own accord. She grabbed her phone, ignoring Jen’s irritated protests and dialed corporate IT.

The line clicked on “Yusef Erickson.”

“Hey, this is Amelia Hobkirt, IT for City to Country, Colfax. Does corporate have a maintenance network take over scheduled for today?”

“No, everyone should have just done the new cybersecurity update, so we shouldn’t need to do maintenance again for a while. Why? What seems to be the problem?”

“We’ve lost access to I think thirteen of our computer’s here. Mine included.”

“Oh, that’s bad. That sounds like a hacker.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about.”

“Do you still have visual access to the monitors?”

“Uh, huh”

“Emergency shut down all of the infected computers and call us back for further instructions.”

“Got it.” Amelia dropped the phone back on the receiver and leaned down to hold the power button on her CPU.

“What’s going on?” Jen looked at her, pulling at the end of her ponytail. Amelia wondered how she was able to twist her arm back enough to reach it.

“Go tell everybody to shut down their computers.”

“What?”

“Just do it okay! We’ve got a situation.”

“How can they shut down,”

“They hold the power button until the computer turns off it’s simple!”

“Oh, duh.”

Jen disappeared around the corner and Amelia returned her attention to her monitor when her phone buzzed beside it. She glanced down at the screen, *JACK: Text mom back.* She sucked in her breath. There was a tense pause while she waited for the emergency shut down to activate and then the monitor turned black. She let the breath she’d been holding in her lungs out in relief and held her forearm again. She replied to her brother, assuring him she’d do as he asked and sent a quick “Thanks, kissing emoji” back to her mom. Then the computer clicked back on. “Shit.” she hissed between her teeth. The screen turned from gray to blue and then a white box appeared with “UNAUTHORIZED SHUTDOWN ACCESS DENIED” written across it in bold, black letters. “Oh shit.”

Amelia heard her name being yelled, sharp and frantic, by fifteen voices outside her door. She walked out into the main room to see a sea of blue screens looking back at her. The whole staff starting talking at once and Amelia felt the bugs surging up toward her throat. She gripped her arm tighter.

“Amelia. My office.” Jen didn’t seem so worried about Max anymore. Amelia followed her inside, shutting the door behind her.

“Amelia. What is going on?”

“Our network’s been hacked. We’re shut off.” She scratched at the top of her shoulders, holding her body as close to herself as she could.

“Is it just our branch?”

“I don’t know. We need to call back corporate.”

Amelia sat, chewing on her lip, fingernails digging into her skin as Jen dialed and turned on speakerphone.

“Yousef Erickson.”

“Yes, this is Jen, Manager of Colfax Agency, with Amelia, our IT girl.”

“Hey Yousef.”

“Amelia”

“So, it looks like our network is hacked.” Jen shot a sharp look across her desk at Amelia as she spoke. “Has anyone else reported similar problems?”

“I’ve been looking into it and no, it’s just you guys.” His voice was gruff and muffled over the outdated speakerphone. “How has this happened? The new security software should have prevented anything like this.”

“Well, Amelia was out sick last week, so we were actually just installing it this morning.” Another death glare. Amelia held her gaze.

“You only have one IT staffer?”

“Our other guy left a few months ago.”

“Well there’s nothing we can do about that now. Amelia?”

“Yeah?”

“See if you can figure out where the breach happened. We’ll get our team working on shutting everything down and seeing how much of our clients’ personal information has been compromised. Public relations will have to notify everyone who’s affected. This is serious you guys.”

“I’ll get on it.”

“You better. Jen? I’ll call your office back as soon as we have an update. You might be hearing from some higher-ups about this.”

“We’ll be here Yusef. Thanks for the help.” Jen shut off the call.

“I’m gonna get fired,” Amelia said, standing to leave. Jen leaned back in her chair, arms cross, the light from her hacked screen turning her blond hair blue on one side. She was two-toned.

“You might.” And Jen waved her out the door.

*

The office was stagnant and angry. Amelia had shut down their Wi-Fi and physically unplugged every single computer in the office to prevent further the hackers from obtaining any more information than they already had. There wasn’t much else she could do until the IT reps corporate was sending down got there to help remove the infected hard drives and begin to sweep for infections and malware. Again, her phone buzzed with notifications from both Jack and Maureen. She already regretted texting them to tell them about the hack. Jack was informing her just how screwed she was, while her mother sent unhelpful

assurances that everything would be okay and there was no one better equipped to handle such an emergency than her daughter

Unencouraged, Amelia moved through her coworkers, talking with them more than she ever had before trying to figure out what gateway the hackers used to get into their network. Had anyone clicked on an ad? Visited an unfamiliar website? What was the last thing you were doing before the computer was taken over? For the most part her coworkers were unhelpful, defensive. The accounting guy said she was just trying to push the blame onto one of them instead of dealing with the problem herself.

“What do you think I’m doing right now?” She growled at him, twisting her hand around her forearm, “I’ve got to figure out how this happened in the first place before I can fix it.”

He shrugged, “It’s still your problem that work is completely stalled today.”

“I know it’s my problem.” Amelia walked away, hissing insults under breath.

“Amelia?” Patrick was standing in a corner of the office, slightly away from the other two customer service reps. She walked over to him.

“Yeah?”

“I think it might have been me. I think I let the hackers in.”

“What were you doing before the take over?”

“I was going through and cleaning out my emails. I cleaned out my inbox, but I didn’t have a call on the line or anything and I was bored, so I started cleaning out my spam folder too.”

“You accidentally opened one instead of deleting it.”

“No, I opened it on purpose.”

Amelia looked up into his face. “Why would you do that?”

“It wasn’t like promising nudes or male enhancement or anything, the subject line was ‘New Customer Request Inquiry’ and a bunch of numbers, like when we someone submits an online customer service request. I thought it had just accidentally got caught in my spam.”

“Just opening a spam email though shouldn’t infect your computer.”

“Well I downloaded the attached pdf and that’s when my computer froze.”

“Shit.”

“I’m going to get fired.”

“I doubt it. I gotta call corporate.” Amelia turned to leave, but stopped when she felt Patrick’s hand on her forearm. She look at it, then looked up at him.

“You got your... support?”

Amelia stared at him, "Yeah," she extracted her arm from his grasp, resting her fingers over the covered ashes where he'd held her.

Patrick nodded, "Good."

*

It was six pm and Amelia sat with Jen and the two IT guys corporate had sent down. They'd set up in the conference room, a row of thirteen CPUs lined up in front of them. Amelia had was removing each hard drive while one guy set up a 'safe computer' to sweep each hard drive for the virus and malware and remove it. They had to perform the sweep, remove whatever viruses the hackers had installed, install the new security software, and then return the hard drives to the original computer. Jen was there to supervise and keep all the parts and progress logged and organized. Everyone else had gone home hours ago.

Just before the IT support team arrived, Amelia's mom had called her saying she'd gotten an email from City to Country informing her about the 'cyberattack' and asking how worried she should be. Amelia assured her they were working on it, she didn't know how bad things were yet, and that she'd keep her posted.

"I didn't realize how bad it was when you texted earlier. I just thought that there was a bunch of nude images on y'all's computers or something."

Amelia let out a short, huffing laugh, "I wish."

"Amelia!"

"Not like that! God, Mom."

“Well good luck sweetie. I know you can do this!”

“Yeahmmhmmlove’u” Amelia mumbled and hung up the phone.

The process of cleaning up and fortifying the computers was long and agonizing. Amelia hadn’t eaten since lunch and her stomach was cramping and gurgling in protest at the situation as the hours clicked away. The bugs that had crawled up under her skin had dissipated as they came up with a plan for sweeping the computers, but as the clock ticked on and on with minimal progress and nothing to eat, it felt like they had crawled up into her head and were burrowing into her brain.

To make things worse, the conference room windows faced the west and the late summer rays shown straight through into where they sat, turning the room into an oven and the old AC unit was not up to the challenge. Their makeshift assembly line crept by at a painfully slow rate. Amelia pulled her hair up on top of her head to relieve her burning neck, securing it in place with a pen she found underneath one of the chairs. Her phone buzzed next to her: JACK – *Everything go ok?*

Still here.

A few minutes later: JACK – *damn, that sucks.*

I’m starving.

You need me to bring you something.

There’s three other people here.

That's ok.

Don't worry about it.

"Enjoying your conversation Amelia?" Jen's angry eyes shot out at her from across the room. The heat had made beads of sweat form on Jen's forehead and the disheveled wisps of her ponytail lay plastered against them.

"What else could I be doing right now? We're waiting on the computer?"

"You could be talking with your coworkers."

Amelia looked at the two corporate IT reps, who were blinking at Jen. No one had begun a conversation besides what was professionally necessary since they'd arrived. Her starched button up was clinging to her arms. She unbuttoned the cuffs and pushed them up as far as she could.

"Okay, let's talk"

"What is on your arm?"

Amelia and the two IT guys looked down at her arm. The sweat and Amelia anxious rubbing had caused the ashes to smear and smudge all over her forearm.

"Dirt I guess."

"How'd you get dirt under your sleeve?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's computer dust or something."

"Go clean yourself up."

“Really? Ok.” Amelia was happy for any chance to get out of that room. She went to her office and collected her bag before going into the bathroom. It was almost 8:00.

In the bathroom she splashed cool water on her face and rubbed it up and down her forearms, washing the remains of the ashes down into the sink. “I’m sorry” she whispered as the gray splats dissolved into streams and then disappeared. She checked her phone.

JACK – I’ll have dinner waiting for you at your house.

Amelia wanted to be annoyed that her brother would just assume he could go over to her house, into her kitchen and food, and cook her something, but she was so tired and so hungry that she didn’t care. She was actually thankful. She went into a stall and sat down on the toilet, pulling her feet up to rest on the edge of the bowl. She leaned back against the toilet, holding her bag between her stomach and her thighs. She couldn’t bear to go back in that hot, stifling room. Her stomach growled.

I’ll be there in 30mins. The stall door clattered behind her and she left.

CHAPTER 12

When Amelia pulled open her front door she was greeted by the smell of pizza wafting down the hallway from the kitchen. She carried her bag and the box bundled up in her arms as she kicked the door closed behind her, dropping her keys on the little hook she hung by the door.

“Amelia?” Jack’s face poked out from around the corner.

“Who else?” Amelia threw her bag down into the corner but kept the box in the crook of her arm as she walked to meet her brother in the kitchen. She set it down on a corner of the counter, then leaned into the hug Jack offered.

“Wine?”

“Definitely.” Amelia brushed her hair away from her face and moved to pull out plates as Jack uncorked a bottle of red wine.

“So they finally let y’all out?” Jack asked handing a glass to his sister. She took a long and thankful gulp.

“Yep.” She swallowed, set the glass down on the island and filled her plate. Jack didn’t need to know she’d just left of her own accord. She was surprised Jen hadn’t called to ask where she was. Maybe they’d all decided to quit for the night by now. She and Jack carried their dinners into the living room and sat down, Amy on the couch and Jack in the adjacent chair. Amelia

snagged the box on her way out of the kitchen and set it down on the cushion next to her. She hated to leave her alone.

“So what happened exactly?” Jack asked through a mouthful of pizza as he clicked on the television and scrolled through Netflix.

Amelia related to him the events of the day. How it started off bad with Jen hounding her with needless concerns about the dog she’d convinced her to adopt. How she was probably going to take a lot of heat for the security breach since the new software was supposed to have been installed the week before, but she didn’t think she’d get fired. Especially since she was the lone IT person at her branch when most, even some of the smaller branches had at least two.

“I mean as long as they don’t find out my sickness last week was an impromptu detective trip down to the coast I think I’ll be totally okay. Jen’s going to get yelled at more than me for not looking for someone to replace Hank for three months.”

“Detective trip?” Jack had turned on the sitcom he and their dad had started during the last familial invasion of Amelia’s home, keeping the volume low.

“Yeah. You know my box?”

“Mmhm.” He glanced over at it, sitting next to his sister. Amelia noticed wiggled closer to it ever so slightly.

“I found the son of the guy who carved it and I went to see him.”

“Couldn’t that have waited ‘til the weekend?”

“I had a shift at the shelter on Saturday and I wasn’t just going to drive all the way down there on Sunday and not know whether I’d get to see the guy or not.”

“You didn’t tell him you were coming?”

“I didn’t know how to get in touch with him. No one had his phone number.” She chewed a gob of gummy pizza crust and washed it down with another mouthful of wine. She noticed that the insides of Jack’s lips were growing steadily darker, the wine stains spreading out toward the edges of his mouth. She wondered if hers were starting to look like that too.

“That was really stupid Amelia. To just drives two-plus hours to meet some man you don’t know and not tell anyone where you’re going. That’s like the plot of every horror movie ever. What if this guy had been some creepy psycho?”

“Well, he was like a bajillion years old and living in a retirement community. I think I could’ve taken him if I needed to.”

Jack shook his head, “Those’re the ones that’ll getcha. The ones you never suspect.”

“Thanks for the warning big brother. I’ll keep that in mind the next time I whisk off to a strangers house.”

“You’ve done it once now. Who’s to say you won’t do it again.”

They sat in silence for a bit while they ate, eyes toward the television, but not watching it. Jack had brought the pizza box and the wine bottle into the

living room with them and placed them on the coffee table. Amelia leaned forward and refilled her wine glass. Her phone buzzed and she saw Jen's name across the top of her screen. She declined the call.

"So whatchu find out about the box?" Jack rolled his head onto his shoulder to look over at his sister.

"Not much," she shrugged and studied her plate, "I found out that the Franke I found was the son and not the carver. I thought he was the carver when I went down there, but he told me that his dad made it."

"Was it worth your whole office getting a computer virus to get that info?" Jack's voice was off somehow. Amelia couldn't figure out what exactly was up, but he sounded strained, tense. She thought maybe it was the wine.

"I didn't know we were getting new software. I might've waited then." She opened her phone and texted Jen that she'd thrown up in the bathroom and went home.

"You might not have."

"Maybe."

The laugh track from the sitcom echoed out at them, briefly absorbing their attention. Her phone buzzed again: JEN: *You need to see a doctor. This is getting out of control.* Amelia responded: *Will do ASAP.*

"But probably not."

“What?” Amelia looked over at who brother, who got up from the chair and sat down at the other end of the couch. Amelia tightened the muscles in her back, but relaxed again when her brother reached out and slid another slice of pizza onto his plate before leaning back into the corner of the couch.

“Even if you’d known the new software was coming in, you probably still would have called out sick to go on your adventure.”

Amelia smiled, “I guess you’re right,” and she set her phone down and took another swallow of wine.

“I know I’m right.” He set his plate on the coffee table and leaned onto his knees, angling himself toward his sister. “You can’t keep acting like this Amelia.”

Amelia set down her glass and furrowed her brow at Jack. “Acting like what?”

“So self-involved.”

“How the hell am I self-involved?”

“Just skipping work so you can investigate some stupid box you got at a garage sale. What’s so great about your damn box? Your co-workers were counting on you and you let them down for some dumb inanimate object.”

Amelia scoffed. “I didn’t realize you were such a team player bro.”

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm just worried about you Amelia. You've got to figure out your priorities. You said yourself they'd fire you if they knew what you were really doing last week."

"And what, you're going to tell them?"

"No, but," he huffed out a hollow breath, "you're getting reckless. All for a stupid box." Jack reached out and grabbed the box from the seat beside Amelia. Amelia jumped up.

"You give me that back."

"No, Amelia." Jack stood up too, he was a good head and shoulders taller than his sister. "You're becoming obsessed. This isn't healthy. When's the last time you hung out with other people?"

"I hung out with those corporate IT guys for like a thousand hours. Give me that back."

"Are you trying to replace your cat?"

"No. Give me my box." She reached up his body, clawing at his forearm, but he held the box out of her reach.

"Your ex?"

Amelia stepped back from her brother. "What the hell Jack. You think I'm not over him? It's been three fucking years."

Jack tucked the box under his arm. "You've never really been one to let things go."

“Give me my box back.” Amelia wanted to sound strong, forceful, but her jaw was quivering. She felt the backs of her eyes beginning to ache.

“No Amelia.”

She rushed toward him and tried to yank it from his grasp, but Jack spun away from her and ran out the front door.

“No!” Amelia screamed and rushed after him. She caught up with him as he wrenched open the door of his truck. “That’s mine you freak!” She scratched and pulled gripping on to any part of her brother she could find. Her mind was a reckless haze of purple and blue. She felt the heat and the tears and the wetness of the night burning into her.

“No!” With a heavy shove, Jack threw his sister off him and to the ground. She felt the gravel press hard and sharp into her elbows and palms. The impact knocked the air from her lungs. Her brother slammed the door of his truck shut and the engine sputtered on. “I’m sorry Amelia,” he yelled as he spun out of her driveway. “I love you.”

“Urahhhh!” Amelia screamed, pushing herself up, she ran to the end of her driveway and watched Jack’s tail lights disappear around the corner. Her breathing was short, raspy. The cicadas screamed through the night around her, filling her ears in an overwhelming roar. She felt them crawling in and around. She sank to her knees and she cried.

*

Amelia shut off her headlights as she pulled onto Jack's street. There were streetlights every few feet and their warm orange glow was enough to guide Amelia the final half mile to his house. It was late. The clock in her car revealed that it was just past 2:30 in the morning.

She reached the space between Jack and his neighbor. The houses were well spaced out here, with a cluster of thick, wild trees running back from the road between each two-acre lot. She turned the car around and pulled it off onto the shoulder. She stepped out of the car, tucking her car keys into her sports bra and pulling her hood up over her head. The night was warm and the hoodie otherwise unnecessary, but she wanted to blend in the with shadows of the night.

She crept away from her car, trying to look casual and in place as she crossed the open gap between the cluster of trees where she'd parked and the landscaping of Jack's house began. Her heartbeat filled her ears, drowning out the sounds of the summer night that swirled around her. She stopped when she reached Jack's truck and ducked down behind it trying to steady her breathing before figuring out how to enter the house. Not a car a drove by. Amelia was banking on the earliness of the morning to guarantee her invisibility as fought to recover Mozer and Bran.

She stood up and moved around the hood of the truck. As she passed the passenger side she thought she should check to make sure that Jack had actually taken the box into the house with him. He was notorious for letting his truck pile up with junk. She peered in through the window and saw, lying in a pool of

milky moonlight among the piles of crumpled clothing and old take out trash, right there on the passenger seat, her beautiful box. Jack had opened it, and the box lay upturned before her, the bottom she saw, was down on the floor, under the glove box sitting on a pair of dirty work boots. The velvet bag had been opened and the plastic one lay draped over on the box's edges, the ashes spilling out onto the seat.

Raged swelled up inside Amelia. She pulled at the door handle, but it was locked. She tried the door on the other side, but it too was locked tight. She didn't know why she thought that maybe it wouldn't be. She jimmied at the windows, hoping that, since the truck was old, she could just shake them down enough to reach inside and unlock the door, but her efforts proved fruitless. Frustrated, Amelia slapped her hand against the window, then crouched down into the shadow of the truck, as a car passed slowly in front of the house. She scanned Jack's yard, looking for anything she could use to get inside the car. The only productive thing she could think to do was break the window, but she knew once she did she would have to move fast. Jack might wake up, someone might wake up. There was no subtlety to this after that point.

Leading up to the front door of Jack's house was a sidewalk that Jack had lined with brick. Amelia kicked around them until she found one that was loose. Prying it out from the others with a stick, Amelia gripped it tight and headed back to the truck. She stood in front of the window, holding the brick up near her face. She swallowed feeling the vibrations of the night caressing her body. She slammed the brick into the window. Nothing happened. She slammed it twice more and spider web of crack instantaneously shot out across the window.

“Hey! Whater you doing?” Amelia looked over her shoulder and saw a man standing there on the side of the road just past the next row of trees, in sweatpants and a t-shirt, his eye groggy and a small dog quivering at the end of a leash.

She slammed the brick once more and the window shattered, her hand sliding through the hole, cutting a deep slice into the back of her hand. She dropped the brick and reached the inside handle and popped the door open.

“Hey!” She heard the man yell once more. Throwing the door wide she rushed to the box, her breath came in quick, short bursts as her ears tuned in to the dog barking behind her Blood smeared the seat of the car, staining it dark maroon in the moonlight as Amelia shoved wet handfuls of ash back into the bag.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I won’t let anyone take you again. I’m so sorry.”

She glanced over her shoulder to see the man and his dog, yapping with fervent energy now, stumbling sleepily across Jack’s yard. Amelia grabbed the box, the bag, and it’s bottom and sprinted across the yard.

“Hey! Stop!”

She could hear the man’s unsure footsteps thudding behind her and knew she had to make these moments count. She tore through the yard toward the cluster of trees where she parked her car. Reaching it, she held her charge close to her as she groped inside her bra for her keys. Her fingers were slick with

blood and as she pulled the keys from her clothes they snagged on the elastic of her collar and slipped out of her grasp to the ground. She cursed and snatched them up, looking briefly toward Jack's house. The man was closing in on her, his dog pulling at the leash, barking and barking and barking.

She slid the key into the lock, wondering why she bothered to lock it in the first place. That was stupid. She breathed in slow to calm herself and felt the lock clunk open. She fell into the car, taking the time to lay Mozer gently onto the passenger seat, apologizing to her once more. She slammed the door shut and pushed the lock down, turning on the ignition. Amelia jumped as the man slammed his fist down on the back of her trunk.

“Get out of there!”

She put the car in drive and sped away, the man's shouts swallowed by the roar of the road.

*

Amelia screeched to a halt in front of 1911 N Applewood Street. She slowed her breathing and examined the back of her hand. The blood was beginning to clump somewhat, but still oozed out of the gash, soaked up by the cuff of her hoodie. She took a moment to rearrange Mozer and Bran, get them properly in place and shutting them up secure inside the box before shutting off her car and running up to the house's front door. She banged her fist against the gray painted wood with her uninjured hand until at last the door cracked open and Patrick's tired, confused face appeared at the seam.

“Melia?”

Amelia pushed the door open the rest of the way and into the house, “Grab your things and let’s go,” she demanded looking around Patrick’s entrance way for anything he might want to take with him.

“Whater, what time is it? What’s going on?” Patrick was rubbing his eyes and leaning into the wall, a long, wide yawn escaped his throat.

“Where’s your room? We have to go. Now.”

Patrick, who obviously wasn’t grasping the urgency of the situation wandered over to his couch and plopped down, nestling his face into the arm rest. Amelia left him there and moved through the house, opening doors until she found his bedroom. She rummaged through the closet, found a duffel bag and began throwing clothes inside it at random. She saw his wallet and his phone, charging on the bedside table, and threw that in the bag as well. She didn’t know how long they’d be gone or what all he might need so just kept throwing clothes into the bag until it felt sufficiently heavy. She threw it over her shoulder and then returned to the living room where Patrick had fallen back asleep on the couch. She gripped his shoulder and shook him hard.

“Patrick. Patrick! Dude, wake up! We have to go!”

Patrick swatted her hand away and made a garbled, undesirable protesting sound.

“PATRICK!” Amelia shouted and shoved him off the couch. He landed on the floor with a hard thump.

“Melia. Stop.”

“No. Come on.” Amelia pulled him up off the floor, letting him lean sleepily upon her for support as she half carried him out to the car and dumped him in her passenger seat, tossing his bag in behind him. She ran back to his house and grabbed a blanket off the couch, locked his door, and ran back to the car, tossing the blanket over an already sleeping Patrick. She jumped back behind the wheel, nestled the box between her leg and the door, then turned the car north.

CHAPTER 13

Leaving Patrick asleep in the car, Amelia shouldered through the door of the Waffle House, keeping her body hunched over itself and headed straight into the bathroom. She locked the door behind her with a clunk, thankful it was a single stall, dropped her bag on the tiled floor and turned to look at herself in the mirror. Her dark hair clung to her forehead in greasy strands, her low ponytail matted up against the back of her neck. The t-shirt she wore underneath was stained an acidic brownish-red from her bloody hand. Looking down at her sleeve, she was thankful the hoodie was black; the cuff at the base of the sleeve was rough with dried blood and dirt, but it didn't look like she'd just committed a murder or anything.

She unzipped the hoodie and pulled off her t-shirt. It was freezing in the bathroom, and the sweat that had built up on her skin from driving through a late Southern summer with a hoodie on made her shiver as she dunked her shirt in the sink, scrubbing her knuckles raw as she forced the stain away with friction and cheap hand soap. The cut on the back of her hand was deep and raw, oozing out tiny droplets of blood if she pushed too hard, adding more red to the river swirling down the drain.

When she got the t-shirt looking less like a crime scene, she did the same to the sleeve of the hoodie, holding the rest of the jacket between her knees and scrubbing blindly at the dark fabric until the water ran clear. She held the clothes

under the hand dryer, which let out a weak, half-hearted stream of lukewarm air until they went from soaked to just damp, slipped them back on, grabbed her bag, and headed out into the restaurant.

*

Patrick, it seemed, was not still sleeping, but stood, flustered and blinking just inside restaurant door. She took his arm and led him to a booth in the corner where she could still see the door. A fresh stream of blood trickled out of the back of her hand. She took a handful of napkins and wrapped them tight around the cut. It was likely she needed stitches, but she wasn't willing to risk going to a hospital and alerting her family as to where she'd gone. A waitress came by and she ordered coffee, eggs, bacon, and a waffle for the both of them. Patrick's mouth was moving, but his words weren't registering in Amelia's ears. She leaned her head against the back of the booth and closed her eyes. The AC was blasting in here and her damp clothes made it feel all the colder, but still, it felt good to be able to close her eyes. To not be driving.

She hadn't stopped driving since she'd shoveled Patrick into her car. She had a about an hour of peace for her heart rate to settle and her brain decide where she was going before her phone began to explode. She was heading to Hatchburgh, where Franke had told her he had grown up. Where the Mozer had grown up. After what Jack had done to Mozer, she owed this to her, her determination settled. She would find where the box belonged.

After declining close to twenty phone calls and ignoring countless texts, Amelia turned off her phone. Jack would be pissed. He might even press

charges. But her parents would stop him for now. They'd want to find her. They'll file a missing person's report. What do they do with that when you're not a minor anymore? She didn't know how easy it would be for them to use it to track her, with her phone. She was still one her parents' plan and they'd totally use that to their advantage. It was best to keep the phone off.

She heard the mugs of coffee clank down onto the table and opened her eyes, smiling her thanks to the waitress. She took a long swallow of black coffee and tried to look through the fogged up windows. The sun was just beginning to burst over the tops of the trees, but there weren't too many cars out on the road, the stream of vehicles was lackadaisical but steady. Patrick, after filling his mug with almost half the container of sugar on the table, sank back into the corner of the booth, eyes half shut, cradling the coffee against himself. The analog clock over the door told her that it was 8:47, close to work time, but not quite.

Amelia bit her lip. She hadn't considered work. She'd only been back one day since calling out sick the week before. And she'd ditched them when they needed her most. If she didn't show up today, which was not going to happen, she was a good three-plus hours away already, she was definitely going to be fired. She wasn't sure if it'd be better to quit or be fired, in terms of long-term consequences. She took another drink of coffee and fished her phone out of her bag. If she called the office right now, she'd be most likely to get an answering machine.

As she waited for her phone to power up, their food arrived and Amelia stood up from the table and walked outside the restaurant, chewing on the end

of a strip of bacon until the screen lit up and asked for her password. She opened her contacts and called Jen's office phone. While she waited for the machine to pick up she heard the low boop-boop of a call waiting alert. She glanced at the screen to see her mother calling and pressed ignore as the outgoing message from Jen's phone came through the earpiece.

"Hey Jen. I'm so so sorry to do this, but I'm having some really bad stomach issues. I can't figure out what this is. This is Amelia by the way. Things just keep getting worse and worse, my family is really worried and I'm going to see a specialist soon. Anyway, I don't think it's fair to the company that I keep y'all dangling like this all the time. You need someone who you know can be there. I just think until I get this stomach stuff sorted I just need to quit or take a leave of absence, or something. Let me know what corporate thinks is best. I'll keep you updated."

She ended the call and turned her phone back off, satisfied with the lie. It was definitive, but also noncommittal in a way that might let her have a job or at least a good reference at the end of this. She wasn't going home though until she knew where Mozer belonged. Amelia returned to her booth.

*

Amelia sat and ate and drank her coffee, while Patrick quietly shoveled food into his mouth, barely picking his head up from the table. This suited Amelia fine for the moment. She avoided eye contact with the other patrons of the Waffle House who were mostly ruffled, probably younger than they looked guys in oil-stained t-shirts and ungroomed goatees. It felt strange to not have

her phone to direct her gaze. Instead, she pulled Mozer out of her bag and placed her in her lap under the table. She slid the bottom out, setting it down beside her and inspected the damage from Jack's manhandling. Now that she was immersed in the invisibility of anonymity she felt safer with her. She tugged the drawstring open and popped open the internal bag, shifting through its contents with her napkin-banded hand.

It was darker in there now, and clumpy from the blood. Her fingers felt tiny fragments of glass mixed in with the bits of bone, sharp and biting compared to the softness of the ash and smoothness of the ring. Amelia periodically checked on the ring. It felt like the most human part of it all. She found it, gripped it tight, then pushed it back into the depths of the bag, before closing everything back up and sliding the bottom into place.

"Amelia?"

She made real eye contact with Patrick for the first time since he had admitted to her that he let the virus into the office. His eyes were red now, blending in with the darkness of his irises. There was crust from sleep collected underneath the right one, clinging to a lower lash. What little was left of his hair all bent sharply to the left, like a comic book character who'd been passed by a tornado. There was a crumb of waffle caught in the stubble on his chin.

"Clean yourself up, Patty." She slid a napkin over to him. He wiped his face, then blew his nose into the napkin, crumpling it up and tossing it onto his empty plate.

"I hate when you call me that."

Amelia frown, defense rising in her throat, she gripped her hands together under the table and felt a fresh gush of blood seeping across her napkin. She muttered an apology.

Patrick leaned back into the booth, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hands. His rumpled t-shirt stretched tight across his chest. He sighed and relaxed. "So whater we doing here?"

"I need you to help me find somebody."

"You didn't have to kidnap me for that. You could've just asked."

"I did ask. You wouldn't listen."

"It was the middle of the night!"

"What's wrong with you that you aren't on high alert when someone bangs on your door in the middle of the night?!"

"What's wrong with you that you were banging on my door in the middle of the night?!"

"It was a moment. Okay Patrick. I needed help and you were the only person I could think of who wasn't related to me that could help." Amelia shoved her empty plate out of the way and rested her elbow on the table, talking to Patrick through her fist.

"How'd you even – Dude, you hand."

She looked at it. "I cut it."

“No shit Sherlock.” They sat in silence for a beat, staring at each other. “You need to change your napkin,” Patrick directed her attention with his gaze and Amelia pulled her hand back under the table.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“We could go to a doctor.”

“We’re not going to a doctor.”

“Why?”

“More coffee?” Amelia nodded, maintaining eye contact with Patrick while the waitress leaned between them, topping off each of their mugs. Patrick smiled and nodded to the waitress as she left, then leaned forward toward Amelia.

“What is going on?”

Amelia scratched at the side of her nose. “Something happened okay. I just. I had to go and I needed someone to go with me. I can’t use my phone and I didn’t know who else to ask.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I didn’t know who else to get and I figured you would help.”

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what the hell’s going on.” Patrick shoved himself into the back of the booth, throwing up his hands. Amelia curled Mozer up close to her chest. “That’s it?!” Patrick pointed to the box in her arms, “That’s what this is about?”

“My brother took her. Spilled her out.”

“He spilled your girl?! Dude that’s someone’s ashes!”

“I know!” To Amelia’s surprise, she smiled. “Yeah, he just, threw her all over his truck and then his truck was locked and so…” She shrugged and waved her napkin bandaged hand between them.

“Badass Amelia.”

She grinned. “So I’ve got a lead. We’ve got to go to the town in Virginia. Then we’ll go to, I don’t know, a library or something. See what local records I can find. I don’t really have a next step after that.”

“Y’all need anything?” They looked up at the waitress and shook their heads. “I’ll get your check.” And she walked away.

“You’re paying by the way.”

Patrick furrowed his eyebrows at her. The tired redness had receded from them after his last cup of coffee, the brown now distinguishing itself from the white. “You kidnap me and then you make me buy you breakfast?”

“Mmhm,” Amelia swallowed another mouthful of coffee, “I ain’t got any cash and I can’t use my card. My parents are a little, ehh, you know and they’ll be tracking where I use it.”

“They can’t access your account without permission.”

“It’s the same bank account I opened when I was fourteen. My mom’s name is still on it.”

“They can access your account without permission.”

Amelia let out a small huff of a laugh, “Yeah. So you’re my bank until further notice. I’ll pay you back when we get home.”

While Patrick went out to the car to rummage his wallet out of the bag Amelia had hastily packed for him and pay for their meal, Amelia peeled off the napkins, now very wet and very red, from her hand and plopped them into the pool of syrup that remained on her plate from earlier. She wrapped her hand in fresh ones watching the blood from her discarded napkins marble out from the edges of the paper into the syrup surrounding it, until she heard Patrick calling her to leave.

*

Amelia walked out of the Waffle House, bag over her shoulder, and box tucked into the crook of her arm. Patrick was close behind her, asking if she’d brought his cigarettes when she commandeered him from his house. She opened the driver’s side door and sat down on the seat, trying to figure out what to do next, while Patrick dug through the back of car in search of his prize. Her gas was low, they’d need to stop soon, maybe pick up something for her hand...

She looked down to see that the blood had once again seeped through her napkin bandage. “Dammit,” she hissed and, placing Mozer on the passenger seat, turned to scour through the back of the car. Patrick, having located a very smashed packet of cigarettes, was now a few feet away from the car, smoking and looking through his phone. A few years ago her dad had given her and Jack his own, homemade ‘car survival kits’. You never know what’s gonna happen,”

he'd warned them. She found it shoved underneath the front passenger seat, a black, fire-retardant, tool bag looking thing. She unzipped the top, pulled out a few bags of dehydrated food and tossed them aside, she pushed some more stuff around and at the bottom found a little sewing kit.

"I hate everything," she sighed, placed the bag on the ground in front of her, on the gravel of the parking lot and popped open the kit. Inside were five little spools of thread, red, white, green, blue, and black, three needles of varying thicknesses, a tiny pair of scissors, and a thimble. She plucked out the green thread and the thinnest needle of the bunch. They were all too long, but it was what it was.

It was getting hotter as the sun rose higher overhead, beating down on the half of Amelia's body that sat outside the shadow of the car's door frame. At least her hoodie had dried out now. Sweat made her fingers slippery and she failed again and again to thread the needle. Finally, she got the thread through and tied a knot eight times over to make sure it would come undone. She held the needle in her hand and stared down at the jagged gash across the back of her right hand. This was going to suck no matter what, but doing it one handed with her left hand was going to be next to impossible. She heard the crackle of gravel underfoot and looked up to see Patrick leaning against the open car door.

"You're gonna want to sterilize that." He waved at her, a lighter in between his fingers. She let a slow breath slide out through her nose and stood up from the seat.

“You ever sutured somebody?” She held up the needle and thread between them.

“No, but I’ve reinforced the buttons on every shirt I own so I’ve got a basic idea of how it works.”

Amelia cocked her head at him, but handed him the needle anyway. “Have at it.” She hopped up on to the trunk of her car and sat crossed legged. Patrick stared at her, the needle and thread between his fingertips.

“I was joking,” he breathed his eyes wide as they met Amelia’s gaze.

She rested her hand on her knee. Patrick swallowed and looked down at her hand, still oozing fresh blood, mixed with scabby, clotted bits.

“I, I can’t do this.” He slipped his lighter in the pocket of his pajama bottoms and tried handing the needle back to her.

“Better you do it, than me.”

Patrick looked at her, then down at her hand. “How should I start?”

“Like a button I guess.”

Patrick bit his bottom lip. He pinched the edges of her flesh together and set the tip of the needle against her skin. He breathed long and deep, then pulled the needle away.

“I can’t do it.”

“Oh my God, Patrick. Just do it.”

“You do it!”

“I can’t. I’m not left handed.”

“Neither am I!”

“But both your hands work!”

“I’m -”

“Patrick, please.” She rested her hand on his forearm, “You’ve got to this for me.”

Patrick sighed, “Here,” he held the needle and thread out.

“Dude!”

“Just take it! If we’re doing this, I’m looking it up on the internet first.”

Patrick stepped a few paces away, focusing his attention on his phone. Amelia groaned and leaned against the back window of her car.

“So we need boiling water.”

Amelia shot back up straight. “No.”

“We have to sterilize the wound.”

“With boiling water?! Do you want me to melt my hand off?! No!”

“Okay, then go clean it out with soap and water.” He pointed to the restaurant.

“I don’t wanna go back in there. Hand me my bag.”

Patrick looked at her.

“Just do it.”

Patrick clicked his tongue, then leaned into the open car door and swiped Amelia’s bag up from the floor. She filtered through it with her uninjured hand until her fingers grasp around a small plastic bottle. She pulled it out and popped open the lid.

“Amelia! No!” Patrick placed his palm overtop the bottle, his eyes wide with warning. “Do not squirt hand sanitizer on that!”

She pulled her hand free, “It’ll get the job done.”

“It’ll burn like hell.”

“No part of this is going to feel good dude.”

Patrick shrugged and released her hand, “Whatever, Amelia.”

Amelia turned the bottle over her cut and squeezed. A dollop of the clear, bubbled liquid splattered down and in to the jagged cut. Amelia audibly gulped, then whimpered, her jaw locked tight and her eyes watered. She shuddered in spite of the heat.

“Told you.”

“Shut up.” Amelia gritted her teeth and waited for the initial rush of pain to subside. She breathed out slow. “Okay. It’s sterile. Now what.”

“Seriously?! You’re making me do this.”

“What’s next Patrick?”

Patrick grunted, then looked back at his phone. “Umm, sterilize the needle.”

“Okay, then. I’ll hold your phone.” She held out her hand and Patrick thumped his phone into her palm with a huff of exasperation. He pulled his lighter back out of his pocket and ran the needle through the flame, until the tip had turned an ashen black. He took Amelia’s injured hand and poised the threaded needle just above it.

“Kay Doctor Hopkirt, now what?”

“Um,” Amelia scrolled through the article Patrick had pulled up, “Start stitching. You generally want the stitches spaced a quarter-inch from each other and from the skin edges, which should just barely touch. The skin shouldn’t pucker.” She kept scrolling, and found a demonstrative video at the bottom of the page. “It looks like you stitch and then tie and then stitch and then tie. It’s not like it’s one continuous thing.” She held the phone up to his face and showed him the video.

“It looks like we need scissors.”

“There are scissors in the sewing kit.”

“I hate you.”

“I appreciate you.” Amelia shut off the phone screen and placed it on the trunk beside her. She wiggled her injured hand back and forth in Patrick’s and smiled a broad grin at him. “Let’s do it!”

Patrick grumbled more protests under his breath as he hunched over the oozing cut. "You're absolutely sure?" Amelia heard him ask, along with something that sounded very much like 'I hate my life'. She assured him once more that she was ready, and Patrick pushed the needle through her skin. He let out a squeaking 'ew' of protest as he pulled the trail of thread behind until he reached the little knot at the end. Amelia sucked her breath in sharply, forcing herself to keep her hand still, she bit down on the back of her other hand.

"Sorry," Patrick mumbled as he attempted to tie off the first stitch, then went back in for stitch number two. Amelia chanced a look down at her hand. It was a Frankenstein-esque stitch, but her skin was being pulled back together nonetheless. Patrick pushed the needle through again.

"Stopstopstopstopstop!"

Patrick dropped the needle and jumped away from her. It dangled down by her leg from the now blood-stained green thread. "What I do?"

"It's nothing," she could feel the adrenaline rushing through her, her pulse pounding through the back of her hand. "I just need you to get something for me real quick okay?"

"Sure, anything." Patrick's skin was looking waxy and pale, but she needed him to finish this.

"Go in the car and grab my box. Grab her, grab her, grab her. Oh my God Patrick now!"

Patrick did as he was told, diving into the car and retrieving Mozer from her spot and placing her in Amelia's uninjured hand. She folded it to her chest, resting her chin on the box's edge.

"You good?" Patrick looked at her, as though afraid to touch her

"Yeah, just finish."

And Patrick did; stitch by stitch until the jagged gash became a zigzag of swollen red skin and soaked green thread.

"That's it," he said, tying a knot close to her hand and snipping off the excess thread, "We should probably get some Neosporin or something for it"

Amelia let out her breath, dropping the box down into her lap, but keeping her hand tight around it. "It'll be fine for now."

Patrick nodded and looked down at her hand again. "Does it hurt?"

Amelia let out a short laugh that was only half sarcastic. "Yes." They stayed there for a moment, Amelia folded up on the trunk of her car draped in a black hoodie under the burning sun, Patrick looking out at the street beyond them, pulling at the collar of his t-shirt. Around them, through the waves of heat, the cacophony of passing cars and buzzing insects swirled and thrashed.

"Thank you," she just barely whispered it, looking up to meet his eyes.

Patrick raised an eyebrow at her and let out an exhausted laugh, "Anytime I guess. Whater friends for?"

Amelia hadn't been called a friend in years. It sounded strange and foreign in her ears. She slid off the trunk of her car, landing a bit unsteadily on her feet. She pushed her bangs back against top of her head. "Okay, let's go."

"You want me to drive?"

"What? Hell no."

"I just thought..." he nodded to the glistening, puffy stitches that graced the back of her hand.

"It'll be fine. I'm driving."

"Ok, just figured I'd offer."

They sat down and Amelia turned the car on, cranking the window down on her side. "There's the AC is hit and miss, you're gonna wanna roll that down." She nodded to the gray crank below the window. "Can I use your phone?"

"What's wrong with your phone?" Patrick held the object close to his chest, leaning away from Amelia as she held out her injured hand toward him.

"I told you, I don't want to turn it on."

"Right. Stalker family" Patrick laughed. He handed over his phone, then crawled into the back seat to finally change out of his pajamas. Amelia programmed in Hatchburgh, Virginia and nestled the box between her leg and the door. The tension in her back dissolved into the humid air as she pulled out

onto the highway and Patrick let out an 'oof' as his head bumped against the car's roof.

CHAPTER 14

Amelia and Patrick stepped through the heavy wooden door and into the old Hatchburgh Public Library. Patrick, who had been complaining since they stopped for gas at the Virginia border about being denied driving rights was, much to Amelia's relief, instantly hushed by the aura of silence that innately exudes from libraries. Inside it appeared fresh and new: clean walls, hard, cropped brownish red carpet that served to both muffle sounds and hide stains. It would be an ideal place to commit a murder if it weren't for the security cameras every few feet around the ceiling. The outside of the building betrayed its age, worn down brick siding, paint peeling off the window frames. The smell too, Amelia thought. It was musty and obtrusive like you were eating it rather than smelling it. Amelia spit into the corner before moving into the library's main floor.

The building was fairly large, the bookcases stretched out across a single floor. Along one wall was a row of sleek desktop computers, an obvious addition from the renovation. Centered just inside the door was a large circulation desk that the rest of the contents of the room seemed to spring out from like a furniture crafted mandala that disappeared into the shadowy corners of the building.

Amelia cut across the room, heading straight for the row of computers.

“You aren’t going to ask for help?” Patrick followed close behind her, placing his hands on the back of the chair Amelia sat down in, in front of the desktop. Amelia could see his reflection looming over her in the darkened monitor.

“I’ll get help if I need it.” She kept her eyes focused on his reflected ones until, with a wiggle of the mouse, Patrick’s face disappeared. She agreed to the library’s terms of usage and waited for the home page to load. She folded her arms and leaned back in her chair, bumping her head into Patrick’s chest.

“Dude!” She looked up at him, he down at her.

“Sorry.” He backed up a few steps from her.

The computer was programmed to automatically open up the library’s card catalog. Amelia assessed the catalog home page, determining how best to begin her search.

“So what exactly are we looking for here?” Patrick was restless behind her now, fingering the edge of a book where its plastic protective covering was curling off like a skin tag.

“I’m trying to find my girl. Just leave me alone for awhile.”

“You’re the one who insisted I come.” Patrick plopped into the chair the next computer over, crossing his arms. “If you just wanted a GPS you could have grabbed one at Best Buy.

Amelia’s gaze left the screen for an instant to shoot him a reproachful look then returned to their investigation of the catalog.

“You know this’ll go a lot faster if you let me help.”

“I’m not necessarily trying to go fast.”

“We can’t take forever. We’ve got work tomorrow.” Patrick swiveled side to side in his chair.

“Just say you’ve got the flu. The flu gets you out for a week.”

“It’s not flu season.”

“So you’ve got a super potent out of season flu. All the better. What did you tell Jen you were doing today?”

“Oh shit, I didn’t.” Patrick stood sliding his phone out his pocket, “What did you say? I don’t want to give the same excuse. Jen will think we’re up to something.” He smiled and wriggled his eyebrows at her. Amelia ignored him and focused on the computer.

“I quit. Sort of. Essentially. I didn’t really quit, but they’re probably going to fire me anyway. My absence is accounted for that’s what matters.”

“And that’s accounted for?” he gestured to her butchered hand wrapped now in gauze they’d gotten from the Virginia gas station. The bandage made Amelia’s hand almost double in size and she was having trouble operating the mouse. Just using her finger to click it made her whole arm radiate with pain, but she could barrel through it. The more she moved her hand, the more she could feel the warm bloody pool that was forming underneath the bandage.

“This,” she waved her mummified hand at him, but didn’t take her eyes from the computer, “is fine. Now go call work.” She heard him let out a huff of air, but the dense carpet hushed the sound of his footsteps after he was only three steps away. She found the catalog’s search bar and typed “Mozer”. There was a brief pause and then a list of books flashed up onto the screen. *Electroweak Physics, Beethoven Lives Upstairs, European Pentecostalism* there were listing for books by author’s named Mozer, movies who’s costume designer was somebody Mozer, a citation in a historical report, none of which connected to her Ingrid Mozer. She added “Ingrid” to her search, which yielded zero results. She tried the general internet and got Ingrid Mozers from all over America. She added “Hatchburgh, VA” but got a spelling correction to “Moser” who was some architect two towns over.

“Well I’ve got the flu.” Patrick returned to the seat in front of the next computer. “Jen’s not happy.”

“I’m sure.”

“She sounded stressed. Said everybody is flaking out on her. Apparently the virus situation isn’t fully resolved yet either.”

“Great.”

“She said corporate’s got professionals on it. They aren’t blaming me.”

“They’re blaming me. Good to know I wasn’t a professional though.”

Patrick let out a short breath of a laugh, and turned to face his computer, wiggling the mouse. "I do want to help though," he said, "Give me something to do."

"Go see if they have local records or something here."

"What like, a town paper or?"

"Yeah, or obituaries or like birth records, I don't know. Aren't libraries supposed to archive everything?"

"I'll see what I can find."

Again, Patrick disappeared after three steps and Amelia tried to glean more information from the computer. She googled the town, skimmed through its Wikipedia page, but didn't really find anything to point her in a definitive direction. It wasn't long before Patrick returned, a large, blonde librarian in tow. Amelia swung her chair around to face them.

"I hear you need some research help?" The large woman's voice was surprisingly squeaky, like there was a tiny bird hidden inside her overwhelming frame. Amelia just looked at her for a moment before speaking.

"Yeah. I'm trying to find information on an old resident of the town. Ingrid Mozer. And her family."

"Ok, so I would recommend looking through the old newspaper archive. We had a local paper here in Hatchburgh for awhile, The Ledgerman Post, just closed down a couple years ago, but we have every issue archived here in microfiche, going all the way back to the town's founding in 1882."

Amelia shrugged, "Okay. Is there like a database or...?"

"We're in the process of digitizing. For now, we have a printed guide you can look through, and everything is organized by date. Y'all come with me." She didn't wait, just began lumbering off across the library, her movements reminding Amelia of a buffalo.

*

Amelia and Patrick followed the librarian through an opening, almost invisible between the bookshelves and down a grayish-green flight of stairs. At the base of the stairs the library dissolved into the decades before Amelia was born. It was beige and metal and cold.

"We don't keep these on general display." The librarian explained in her petite voice, "Very seldom do people do need this sort of thing anymore. With the internet." Amelia wasn't sure if the librarian was criticizing her technological skills or not. The librarian walked them over to the far corner of the room where two large references books lay on a desk under a flickering fluorescent light. She laid a hefty hand on top of the closer tome. "These are basically an index. Organized alphabetically. Next to each item there is a series of numbers. The first number tells you what section of the archive that particular document is located. The rest of the numbers are the volume, the issue, and the date of the Ledgerman Post issue that item is located in. Every individual microfiche is in its own folder inside the cabinet; microfilms are in boxes. Feel free to come find me if you need help using the machine or anything else."

“What all have you digitized?” Amelia didn’t look at the librarian, but her eyes wandered around the rows of file cabinets surrounding them.

“We just got funding for the project a few months ago. We’re only to the 1890s.” She remained standing facing Amelia and Patrick, her eyes studying them. Amelia stood a little taller. “I’ll bring y’all some paper and pencil,” the librarian squeaked and walked away from them.

“Ok!” Patrick clapped his hands together and stepped up to the books that seemed almost as large as the librarian who’d lead them to them. “What’s your box’s name?”

Amelia pushed him out of the way, opening the first book up with a dusty thunk. She flipped to the back and saw the last entry was for “Myers, Zelda” who could be found at 3.20.116.4.26.1902. She turned back a few pages, scanning quickly for “Mo”, the pages coating her fingertips in a yellowed powder. The librarian returned with some scrap paper that looked like it came from the old card catalog and a few pencils, then left them again.

“It’s weirdly quiet down here.” Patrick was leaning up against the desk, looking down at Amelia while she bent over the enormous index. She ignored him and continued scanning the pages.

“And like crazy cold.”

“I’m sure they have keep it a certain temperature for the film.”

“Mm.” Patrick began tapping his pencil against the desk’s edge in rapid succession. “It’s creepy how like no one else is here.”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon on a Tuesday.”

“Still.” Patrick leaned over Amelia to see what she was looking at.

“Here!” Amelia pointed. There were so many of them: Mozer, Carl; Mozer, Caroline; Mozer, Nina; and her girl, Mozer, Ingrid. Amelia slid a few of the scraps of catalog over and grabbed the pencil out of Patrick’s fingers and began scribbling down the reference for every Mozer listed in the index as best she could, with her hand wrapped as tightly as it was. A separate card for each one. Carl appeared the most often, but many of his references were also listed under Caroline, Nina, and Ingrid. At least she definitely had the right family. She handed the cards for Nina and Caroline over to Patrick, keeping Carl and Ingrid for herself.

They dispersed into the archive, the Mozer family was contained to the central sections seven through ten, although they had two marks down for files located in section eleven. They navigated through the tall cabinets around them, locating each row Amelia had marked, singling out drawers and filing through each one until they found what they hoped they were looking for. The folders containing the films were labeled on bent up tabs with thick, black marker noting the issue of *The Ledgerman Post*, it’s date, and the major headlines to be found inside. They found obituaries, birth and marriage announcements, election results. Patrick had located everything on his list long before Amelia. He trundled over to her, arms laden with folders and boxes of film. He helped her finish rifling through the remaining references she’d listed out and together they carted all they had found over to the microfiche machines located against the

wall on the other side of the library, right at the base of the stairs they'd been led down to get here. The pair stared at the machines before them.

"I'll get the lady." Patrick dumped his load onto the table beside the machine and disappeared up the stairs. Amelia laid her items down as well and began cross referencing what she'd pulled with her list, organizing everything into piles by Mozer. Patrick returned with the mismatched librarian, who explained how to operate the machines to Patrick while Amelia finished sorting through what she had pulled. Patrick thanked the woman, who nodded to Amelia with narrowed eyes before she returned up the stairs. Amelia grimaced.

"Put this one in first. This is an Ingrid one." She handed file over to Patrick.

"Please."

"Please what?" Amelia stopped sorting through the piles on the table and looked over at him.

"Please, put this one in first."

"Really?" Amelia rolled her eyes, but Patrick grinned, and began loading the microfiche into the machine.

"Here." Patrick stepped back from the machine, motioning for Amelia to step in front.

"How do I look through stuff?"

Patrick leaned forward and showed her how to move the microfiche around, adjust the focus, the zoom. "She said we can print too, just make sure what you want is in this box here on the screen and press the start button and whatever you have in the box is what'll print."

Amelia nodded her thanks and began scrolling through what was available on this particular piece of microfiche while Patrick got to work loading a roll of film into the next machine over. She scrolled through, examining each little rectangle, looking for where Ingrid appeared. She found in her a brief mention in the local news, about the Hatchburgh High School's talent show where she a someone named Jane performed a sequence from an episode of "I Love Lucy" much to the delight of everyone in attendance.

Amelia removed the microfiche and put in a roll of microfilm containing The Ledgerman Post for January 1 – 15, 1958. This role had been listed under every Mozer in the Index, so Amelia was feeling pretty confident about this one.

"I can't get over how skinny you were a few weeks ago!"

"What?" Amelia looked over at Patrick, annoyed.

"This ad, look at this weight gain ad."

Amelia leaned over and looked at Patrick's screen, which showed a buxom lady in a swimsuit smiling at a man with a thought bubble over his head containing what looked like the same woman, just astronomically scrawnier. "Now I know there's no excuse for being skinny!" The buxom woman exclaimed.

“Good to know people have always hated their bodies.” Amelia muttered, turning back to her screen.

She scrolled through, scanning each page for signs of a Mozer. Then a headline caught her attention, “Hit-and-Run on Conner Ave. Resulting in Death of Young Woman”, remembering what Anthony Franke had told her about Ingrid’s violent end, she read on.

“HIT-AND-RUN ON CONNER AVE. RESULTS IN DEATH OF YOUNG WOMAN

JANUARY 12, 1958

Mark Creason, Local Events Reporter

Yesterday afternoon, Ingrid Mozer, 22, daughter of Town Councilman Carl Mozer, was struck by a passing vehicle that is believed to have hit a patch of ice and swerved up onto the sidewalk where Ms. Mozer was walking home from visiting with a friend.

The vehicle in question has been described by neighbors who witnessed the accident to be a light green Dodge Swept Wing, driven by a white man estimated to be in his 30s or 40s. The driver did not stop after striking Ms. Mozer and any information regarding his identity or his or the car’s whereabouts should be reported to the Hatchburgh Police Department.

“I can’t believe he did stop”, says Herman Smith, a neighbor who witnessed the accident. Mr. Smith says the vehicle “was speeding and seemed to lose control.

It went up on the sidewalk and struck the young lady. She got caught in the tires and was dragged a few feet before the car righted itself on the road. We thought he was going to stop and help, but then he just sped off up the road. Despicable.”

It was Mr. Smith who reported the incident to authorities. Ms. Mozer was rushed to Hatchburgh Memorial Hospital where she was pronounced dead on arrival. News of the unfortunate incident has left the neighborhood devastated, many residents having known Ms. Mozer since infancy. “She was such a beautiful, witty young woman from such a wonderful family,” recalls family friend Nancy Franke, “They didn’t deserve such a tragedy.”

Town Councilor and Mrs. Mozer have declined to publicly comment on the accident while they mourn the loss of their daughter, who had just celebrated her 22nd, birthday.

Ms. Mozer’s body will be cremated at Hatchburgh Memorial due to the degree of injury it incurred. Funeral arrangements are yet to be determined. –M.C.”

“I found her,” she whispered, then louder, “Patrick, print this out for me.”

“I told you how to do it.”

“Just do it for me, what are you looking at anyway?” She pushed him away from his microfilm reader, which displayed an incredibly racist advertisement for cream-of-wheat. She scanned through his microfiche, looking

for something related to her family while Patrick printed off the newspaper article for her.

“Her obituary is here too, do you want me to print that off?”

“Really, her obituary?” Amelia returned to her machine, sitting down on top of Patrick in the process. The screen showed a small image of a young woman with dark hair. Amelia zoomed in on her face, Patrick made some protest about being a human cushion, but all of Amelia’s attention was dedicated to the black and white face on the screen before her.

Ingrid’s hair was pulled up and away from her features but still framing and softening the edges of an angular face. Light reflected off the center of her bottom lip making it appear bright and alive. Her lips stretched into a wide smile, and the slightest squint of her eyes and scrunch of her nose made it look as though the camera had caught her in the middle of a laugh. She wore a sheer neckerchief and dark, polka dot dress. Amelia centered her picture in the box on the screen and pressed “print”.

*

A few hours later, Amelia and Patrick were deep into the Ledgerman Post. Most of what they had pulled were articles about Ingrid’s father, Carl Mozer who was a very active and discussed member of the Hatchburgh community. They found an article proclaiming his success at being elected to the town council in 1952, a statement he made to the press a week after Ingrid’s death, warning her killer that they would find him and that he’d have to stand justice for “snuffing out a bright, beautiful flame”, and many many passionate

quotations about supporting veterans during both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Amelia had to be more selective with what she chose to print after Patrick complained that every piece of paper she printed out was costing him a dollar each. She left behind most of Carl's mentions and instead focused on printing out the obituaries of each family member as they found them. Carl's she found particularly interesting:

"CARL MOZER

July 18, 1917 - April 4, 1981

Carl Mozer, 63, passed away Saturday April 4 at Hatchburgh Memorial Hospital after a bout with a severe strain of pneumonia. Funeral services will be held Friday April 10th at 3:30pm at Second Baptist Church on Dwyer Road.

Mr. Mozer has gone to join his wife Caroline, who passed away from breast cancer 4 months prior to his death, and his daughter Ingrid, who was tragically killed in a car accident in 1958. He is warmly remembered by his daughter Nina Burton, her husband Johnny, and his grandsons Thomas and Greg Burton.

Mr. Mozer was a decorated World War II Veteran, serving 4 years on the Pacific Front where he earned the Combat Infantryman Badge, the Bronze Star, and Purple Heart for his service. After being honorably discharged at the end of the war, Mr. Mozer returned to his wife and two young daughters, moving them out to Hatchburgh, Virginia where he and his wife would spend the rest of their days together.

Carl has been described as a 'pillar of the community', serving 8 terms on the Hatchburgh Town Council, during which time he was the recipient of the Harry Benchthaw Award for Public Service in 1976. As a town councilor he was renowned for his various social initiatives in Hatchburgh, an outspoken advocate for the impoverished and veterans' rights. His friends and colleagues remember him as a "great man".

Here, as with Ingrid, Amelia was most fascinated by the images accompanying the posts. For Carl Mozer they had a recent picture of him, staring straight at the camera, a baseball cap shielding his eyes and a portrait of him as a young man, in his military uniform, his wife standing behind, a young Ingrid, probably about 6 years old, and a toddler in his lap. Amelia zoomed in on his face and recognized there the laughter behind the eyes she'd noticed in Ingrid. She printed out both the obituary itself and the blown up family portrait.

"The sister got married."

"Hmm?" Amelia looked up from the printed image she held in her hand, Patrick motioned to the screen.

"The sister, Nina, she got married in," he check the outside of the box the film had come from, "1960". Amelia peered at the screen:

"Nina Mozer, Jonathan Burton

Councilman and Mrs. Carl Mozer are pleased to announced the marriage of their daughter Nina Grace, to Jonathan "Johnny" Burton, son of Aaron and Mary Burton last Saturday, May 21 1960 at Second Baptist Church in Hatchburgh, VA.

The bride wore a gown made by her mother, Caroline, and a red rose in her hair in memory of her sister Ingrid, now passed. The couple were blessed with sunny weather on the day of their nuptials and were surrounded by family and friends for the celebrations. The couple intend to settle and start their family in Hatchburgh. Mr. Burton is a junior associate at Burton & Burton Law Firm, his wife will be a homemaker."

"I got Mozer at the Burtons! That's where she came from!"

"Nina sold you the remains of her beloved dead sister?"

"Nina's dead." She motioned to the stack of obituaries they'd already printed out, "No, that must've been her son. Thomas I think his name was."

"And I suppose you want me to print this out too."

Amelia grinned and returned to the information they'd already collected. Patrick sighed, "You owe me like fifty bucks after this."

*

Around 4pm a new librarian came down into the cave where Patrick and Amelia were working. She was small and bespeckled, but she smiled when she saw them, apologizing that the library was closing soon and they needed to wrap up their research. She even stayed to help them return their materials to their respective filing cabinets around the room.

"Did you find everything you were looking for?" she asked Amelia as they carried a few folders of microfiche back to section nine.

"I found out stuff. Which I guess is all I could really hope for."

"You're researching the Mozer's, right?"

Amelia nodded.

"The librarian down here earlier told me. I actually go to church with Greg Burton."

Patrick popped his head around the corner, "At Second Baptist?"

The librarian looked at him, confused, "Yes."

Patrick grinned and then disappeared down another aisle.

"Anyway," the librarian continued, her eyes still on the spot where Patrick had been, "Greg's related to the Mozer's. His mother was Nina Mozer."

"Yeah, I saw his name in a birth announcement! He still lives around here? You think I could talk to him?" Amelia's heartbeat picked up in her chest.

"I could give him a call, see if he'd be willing."

"Oh my goodness thank you!" Amelia grabbed the woman's hand with such force that it shot a wave of pain up her injured arm. It made her eyes water and Amelia hoped the woman would just think her overwhelmed with emotion.

"Certainly," the woman smiled and extracted her hand from Amelia's bandaged grasp, "Just stop by circulation on your way out and I'll let you know what he says."

Amelia thanked the woman again, then hurried to return the remaining microfilms to their homes. She organized the print outs she'd made as best she

could, tucking them down into her bag next to the box, then she ushered Patrick out of the room, pushing him up the stairs.

She emerged from the gap in the wall, surveying the main library floor. Searching for the little librarian. The library was almost completely deserted. Patrick was muttering about having to get his credit card back, complaining about nobody being at the circulation desk. Amelia climbed on top of the desk to get a better view of the room.

“Mam! Get down!” The woman who’d helped them earlier emerged from a darkened office at the back of the building.

“Where’s the woman who came downstairs a few minutes ago?”

“She’s on a phone call. I really must insist you get down from there.”

Amelia sat down cross legged on the counter. The librarian huffed.

“Can I get my card back?” Patrick cut in, leaning his elbows next to where Amelia sat.

“I need to see your printing receipts.” The woman answered Patrick, but kept her eyes on Amelia, who was staring at the office door. “She took her phone call outside miss.”

Amelia pushed off the circulation desk and headed to the front door, while Patrick ran back downstairs to dig their printing receipts out of the trash. She pulled open the wooden door, just as the woman she was looking forward hung up her cell phone.

“Did Greg say he’d talk to me?” Amelia stood in the open door, blocking the woman’s reentry into the building. She tried navigating around her,

“Yes, he’s happy to talk. Come back inside, I’ll write down his address for you.”

“Did you tell him we’d be by tonight? We’re on a time crunch.”

They returned to the circulation desk, Patrick was settling his bill with the hefty woman, his mouth was clinched tight and he shot Amelia an annoyed face when she came back in, following close to the heels of the other woman, but Amelia kept her focus on the woman, who reached over the edge of the counter, pulling out a sticky note and pen. She scribbled Greg’s address down and handed it over to Amelia. “I’m sure he’ll expect you with the next few days. I didn’t give him a specific time.”

Amelia threw her arms around the woman’s tiny shoulders, “Thank you, thank you thank you!”

“Yes, of course, happy to help.” The woman extracted herself from Amelia’s grasp. Amelia kept the sticky note clutched in her healthy hand. Patrick stepped up to them.

“Can we go now?”

Amelia nodded, a smile stretched across her face. She thank the librarians once more as she and Patrick exited the building, returning to Buick parked out front. The only car visible in the lot.

“Program this address into you phone.” Amelia handed Patrick the sticky note as she slid behind the wheel.

“We’re going somewhere else? I’m hungry.”

“I’ll feed you afterwards.”

“No you won’t. I’ll feed me afterward.”

“I’ll pay you back when we get done. Either way, you’ll get to eat. Stop complaining.” Patrick let out a loud, drawn out groan, but programmed Greg’s address in anyway. “This won’t take long. I promise,” Amelia assured him as she turned left out of the parking lot.

*

“Your destination is on the right.” Patrick shut off his GPS as Amelia pulled up in front of a large home of painted white brick. They double checked the number on the door with the note given to them by the librarian then ushered out of the car and up onto the porch. Amelia hammered at the red door in quick, short, succession. Patrick grabbed her hand, pulling it away from the door.

“You’re gonna freak him out.”

Amelia jerked her hand free as the door opened wide to reveal a tall, middle aged man, who looked very much like Thomas Burton. The same arched nose, and muddy eyes, his hair was only a slightly richer brown. The familiarity of his face sent a rush of anger through Amelia’s body. She squashed it out, telling herself this was a different man, who’d already agreed to help.

“Y’all got here quick.” The man smiled, reaching out a hand to Amelia. She took it, grasping and letting it go in an instant. Patrick did the same. “I’m Greg.”

Amelia nodded, “Oh,” she exclaimed after an awkward pause, ‘I’m Amelia. This is Patrick.”

“So y’all are researching my family?” Greg came all the way out onto the porch, shutting the door behind him. He took a seat in a rocking chair, motioning for Amelia and Patrick to take the porch swing adjacent to him. They obliged.

“Yeah.” Amelia said, twisting the strap of her bag in her uninjured hand. “I found a lot of stuff at the library. I’m really interested in your Aunt though. Ingrid. She died really young.”

Greg rocked back and forth in his chair, his eyes directed out away from the house, toward the road. He nodded, “Yeah, Aunt Ingrid died long before I was born. Mom and Dad got married a few years after it happened, but it was a while before I came along. What’s your interest in her?”

Amelia and Patrick looked at each other. Amelia opened her mouth, closed it, then pulled the box out of the bag positioned in her lap. “I bought this at a garage sale your brother had. I wanted to know more about and he, he couldn’t really tell me much of anything. It belonged to Ingrid.”

Greg reached out, “May I?” he asked.

Amelia sucked in her breath, hesitated, then placed the box in his hands. She leaned hard into the back of the swing, making herself and Patrick rock a bit with the force. Amelia's feet couldn't touch the porch and she rubbed them together incessantly while Greg studied the box.

"I recognize this box."

"You do?" Amelia sat up, sending another wave of energy through the swing. Patrick planted his feet into the porch to stop them moving.

"I do. This was my moms."

"No, it was Ingrid's. Her godfather made it for her." Amelia reached out and took the box back, cradling it in her arms. Greg let out a small laugh.

"I'm not saying that it wasn't. I'm just saying when I knew that, I knew it as Mom's."

Amelia crossed her legs up onto the bench, grinding her teeth. Patrick leaned away from her intruding knee. No one said anything for a beat, then Patrick spoke up.

"Do you remember your mother doing anything with it? Did she ever tell you what she kept in it? Or..." his voice trailed off.

"No, it was important to Mom though. She took it with her wherever we moved. Always kept in on the same bookshelf. I haven't thought about it for years, haven't seen it either since she moved to South Carolina."

“Where’d she live there?” Patrick handed Amelia a piece of gum, whispering that she was going to hurt herself. Amelia popped the gum into her mouth, but kept her eyes on Greg. The sun was beginning to set and it cast a dehydrated yellow beam across his face. Amelia wondered why he didn’t squint or turn his chair away from the light.

“You’ve been there actually, if you’ve been to my brother’s. He and his wife moved into the house after Mom died. You know,” he leaned forward, finally squinting, but now with his attention focused on the box in Amelia’s arms, “I doubt he realized how important that was to Mom, or he wouldn’t have sold it.”

Amelia gripped the box tighter to herself and narrowed her eyes toward Greg. “I tried to give it back to him when I realized it was important. He didn’t want it.”

“Hmm.” Greg stood up, turning his back to the sun and leaned against the porch rail, “He never went with us.”

“Went with you where?” Amelia was leaning into Patrick to get a better view of Greg’s face. Patrick sat stiff beside her.

“When I was a kid,” Greg rubbed his hands across his face, then let them fall to side, “Mom used to take me on ‘secret missions’.”

“Yeah?”

Greg nodded, “Yeah, once a month, Mom would take me and that box and we’d go see Mr. Hirayama.”

“Who’s Mr. Hirayama?” Patrick chimed in. Amelia shushed him.

“I wasn’t ever supposed to tell anybody about our missions or Mr. Hirayama. Mom always said that was of the utmost importance.”

“You never thought that was weird?”

“Patrick!”

“What?” He looked over at Amelia, “I’d be suspicious of going with Mom to see a man I wasn’t supposed to tell anybody about.”

Greg laughed a little, “It’s okay. Yeah, it was weird, but I was a kid, like four, five, six, when this was going on. And I liked going to Mr. Hirayama’s. He had a playground in his backyard. That was a big deal.” He shrugged, “Then when I got older and thought about it I always figured she was having an affair or something, but at that point it didn’t seem like it was worth bringing up anymore.” Greg stopped then, as a landscaping truck rattled by the house. Amelia looked over at Patrick, his face dissatisfied. As the sounds of the truck disappeared down the road, Greg spoke up again.

“So yeah, once a month, when my brother was a school and my dad was at work we’d go see Mr. Hirayama and Mom would always bring that box. She’d tell me to go get her box and we’d go on our ‘secret mission’.” He paused to slap a mosquito that landed on his neck, “We went every month until the Hirayama’s moved away.”

“When was that?”

Greg shrugged, "I don't know. Late 60s, early 70s." I know I wasn't ten years old yet, although there were a few years that Mom went without me."

"How'd you know that?" Patrick had his arms crossed next to Amelia, she wondered why he was being so weird about this.

"The box would move. I mean it always had its place on the shelf, but sometimes it was askew. There was one day when it was just gone completely, but it always came back."

"And you never pressed your mother about this because..."

Greg narrowed his eyes at Patrick, "Like I said, I was a kid. I didn't know to be wary."

"Do you know where Mr. Hirayama moved to? Do you know if he's still there?" Amelia forced herself back into the conversation, afraid that Patrick would derail their chances of getting something useful by pissing off Greg Burton.

"My mom actually did keep in touch with him for awhile after he moved. He and his family would come back to visit relatives each summer and Mom and I would always go for visit when he was in town. He has a son who's about my age and he and I would always go down to the community pool while our parents talk, he and I still keep in touch on Facebook. If that counts."

"But do you know where Mr. Hirayama is now?" Amelia was gripping the strap of her bag again and a discolored line was beginning to show on the back of her bandage.

“Oh yeah, he moved in with his son a few months ago. I saw a post about it. They live up in Pittsburgh now.”

“What’s his address? Can you get his address? If he’d recognize the box, I need to talk to him.”

Greg shifted his position, cracking his back. “I’m not that close with them. I’d imagine he’d recognize the box though; Mom always brought it with her when she went to see him. His name’s Josiah. Josiah Hirayama. He’ll know more about that box than anybody else, I’m sure of it. You can probably look him up online. You can find everything online now.”

Amelia sprung up from the swing, making Patrick ricochet in his seat. “Thank you, thank you so much.” She grabbed Greg’s hand in both her own, shaking in up and down. “This is really helpful.” She clapped her arms around the man’s shoulders. He placed a tentative hand on her back until she let go. “Come on Patrick.” She motioned for him to follow her.

“Is that really all you need?” Greg scratched the back of his head, watching them as they moved toward the steps. Amelia shook her head yes, pulling Patrick away from the house. “Wait!” Greg called out when they were almost back to the car. Amelia paused, her resting over the lump of the box in her bag. “Can I ask, what’s in the box?”

Patrick and Amelia made eye contact. Patrick opened his mouth to answer, but Amelia shoved him to the car, before ducking into the driver’s seat and speeding away from the house.

“Why didn’t you tell him about the body?” Patrick asked as they headed in the direction lights burning primary colors. Amelia assumed they were the harbingers of food.

“I didn’t want him to think he had a right to her. You know, with it being his aunt probably.”

“His brother didn’t want her.”

“Yeah, but this guy. I could tell. He wanted her.” Amelia could feel Patrick studying her face. She looked over at him. “I’ll get her where she belongs. But she didn’t belong with him. Josiah will know more.”

Patrick leaned back in his seat, “Whatever Amelia. I’ll chase Josiah with you into the inferno, so long as you get me something to eat first.”

Amelia nodded and urged the car faster.

CHAPTER 15

Amelia had finally consented to let Patrick drive. The pain in her hand was making it not only difficult to grip the wheel, but the constant throb had permeated up her arm and felt as though it had taken root in the side of her face. Concentrating on the road was next to impossible. She sat curled in the passenger seat, cradling her hand in the space between her stomach and her knees, eyes staring out the window.

The window was just cracked open enough to allow a cooling breeze to stream into the car, ruffling her hair and coating her face in a wash of damp air. Patrick had insisted on music rights as the driver, his phone was propped in her cup holder, amplifying an acoustic cover of some pop song that was only vaguely familiar to her. The sound of it pushed at her back as she gazed at Virginia pummeling past her vision. The GPS said they wouldn't reach Pittsburgh for five more hours. Then it was a matter of finding Josiah Hirayama, talking to him, praying he remembered Ingrid.

Amelia looked down at the box tucked at the base of her seat. Would he recognize it? Would he know what Ingrid used it for? Would he know if Ingrid was in fact the one inside it?

Ingrid and Nina, both were dead. Franke brought her to Hatchburgh, Hatchburgh brought her Greg, and Greg gave her Josiah Hirayama. Josiah lives

in Pittsburgh. What was it with these people and places named “burgh”?

Amelia closed her eyes. The sun was high enough now to just peek over the trees that lined the interstate. Amelia’s phone had been off for just over forty-eight hours now, but she was still keeping it tucked inside her back pocket. She was definitely fired. Patrick might be okay if she could get him back in a week, but he might not even stick with her that long. A sharp jolt of pain shot up Amelia’s arm, making her whole body twitch tighter in on itself. She sucked in air through gritted teeth.

“You okay?” Patrick’s eyes stayed forward but his hand moved outward as if to touch her, but he stopped midway, like he thought better of it.

“Mmhmm.”

Patrick drew his hand back, running his fingers through the short crop of hair that had crept back onto his head over the past few weeks, before returning them to the wheel. Amelia knew he didn’t believe her. She’d seen him clock every wince, every involuntary twitch, every hesitant movement of her hand. His chewing at dinner last night slowed as she clumsily tried to saw her chicken into bite sized pieces with the edge of a fork grasped too tight in her left hand.

“That ain’t a pancake” was his only comment. Amelia took a large gulp of his soda in response.

He was right of course. When she’d changed the dressing on her hand in the motel bathroom that morning the stitches themselves were no longer visible. Her skin burned a purple-red and had inflated itself up and over Patrick’s

amateur sutures. A metallic burn seeped out from the wound, crawling up the backs of her fingers and down almost through to her palm.

She winced as she squeezed a line of Neosporin out onto the infection, following the seam of swollen skin, laid a gauze pad over top and wrapped the bandage halfway up her forearm. She'd find a doctor after she found a resting place for Mozer.

Inside the car, Patrick's music switched over to something lonesome and echoing. It complemented the reverberations of the old Buick as it pushed down the road. Amelia turned over in her seat, unbuckling and began rummaging through the back seat, her injured hand protected against her chest. Patrick looked over at her, his focus jumping between the road and bent over figure of Amelia. He grabbed the back of her shirt.

"Oh my God, sit down!"

Amelia ignored him, even as he tugged harder at her t-shirt. She dug through the array of trash, a blanket, and to-go coffee cups that had accumulated there. She found a receipt from an oil change - one of those ones printed out on a piece of computer paper and plopped back down in her seat.

"Buckle up," Patrick insisted, reaching across Amelia for her seatbelt. She batted his hand away and glared at him.

"I got it man. Back off." She clicked it into place and Patrick returned his attention to the road.

“Sorry,” he muttered, “I just get freaked out when people don’t wear their seatbelts.”

Amelia huffed. She wasn’t a child. Ignoring Patrick’s comment, Amelia pulled her bag up from the floor, burrowing around until she found a pen. She propped the pen gingerly in her hand, not truly even gripping it and by moving her whole arm rather than just manipulating her fingers, she managed to begin a log of everything she’d found so far.

“Box - carved by Franke (Sr)
for Ingrid (20) 1956

Franke (Jr - Anthony)
knew Ingrid when they
were kids.

Ingrid dies - hit & run - 1958 (22)

Family: Carl (father) - died in ‘81”

She shuffled through the papers she’d printed off at the library, looking for Ingrid’s mother’s obituary. There it was.

“Caroline (mother) - died in ‘80

Nina (sister) - died in ‘05

Johnny (bro-in-law) - married Nina in ‘62

kids (nephew to IM): Thomas Burton (garage sale guy)

& Greg - Hatchburgh: gave Josiah's name"

That was Ingrid's family, as far as she could gather from the obituaries, engagement announcements, and birth records she's been able to track down at the library.

Josiah Hirayama though. That's where Greg had said she'd find answers. Sounded like he'd been close with the sisters. That his mother used to take him to visit Josiah when he was kid. But Amelia hadn't found him in any of the records about Ingrid. Not in any of the articles about her death, her funeral. There were plenty of names there, but not his. But still, Greg had insisted that he would know more than any other. That he was the scandalous detail in the sister's lives. The secret that the child had kept for over 40 years. So Josiah was where they were going.

Josiah Hirayama - friend? Pitt, PA

Amelia cursed as bump in the road jerked her pen across the paper and sent a jolt of pain up her arm. The box nudged against her foot.

"Sorry." The word exited Patrick like an impulse. He glanced over at what Amelia was doing, his eyes flashing over the paper. "How's she doing?" He motioned to the box at her feet.

Amelia reached down and scooped her off the floor, leaning away from Patrick and turning her face toward the window.

"She's fine."

“If you say so.”

Amelia’s shoulders twitched, but she kept her back to him.

“Hey, it’s cool,” Patrick placed his hand on her shoulder, but she squirmed underneath his touch, so he let her go. “You’re right Amelia. We need to find her home.”

Amelia didn’t turn to acknowledge him; she didn’t nod or give any indication she’d heard him. But she did let a soft smile form across her face. She held the box close and closed her eyes.

*

Amelia awoke to the sound of the car door slamming shut. She bolted upright, looking around and gathering her bearings. They couldn’t possibly be there yet. She hadn’t been asleep so long. They were in an unpaved parking lot, trees growing up tall around its perimeter. A path cut through them, leading up to a spattering of buildings nestled into a small clearing. Patrick had his back to her, walking up the path toward the buildings. She scrambled out of the car and ran toward him, the the door hanging open in her wake.

“What the hell Patrick,” she shouted when she had almost caught up to him. He turned to face her.

“I had to pee.” He smiled at her and fury surged up through her stomach, settling at the base of her throat.

“So stop at a gas station.” Her jaw clenched tight. How much time had they wasted to get here? “Where are we?”

"I really have to pee Amelia." He turned away from her.

"Where the hell are we Patrick?!" The words bellowed from her chest; a smattering of birds took flight from a nearby cluster of trees.

"Monongahela National Forest."

"Where?!"

"It's in West Virginia. It was on our way." He looked at Amelia, her face fuming with rage. "For the most part." He turned and continued down the path toward the buildings.

"Give me my keys Patrick," she caught up with him again and tried to slip her hand down into his pocket.

"No, Amelia." He swatted her away, "You need to take a break. Enjoy where we are. Clear your head."

"My head is fine." Amelia growled, making another pass at Patrick's pockets.

"Amelia, quit." He pushed her away again, quickening his pace, "Trust me, you're exhausted. Just get out of the car and out detective mode for awhile."

"Don't tell me what to do." She again fought her way toward his pockets, Patrick grabbed ahold of her arms to stop her.

"AhHhhngHhhhh!" Amelia crumpled to the ground, cupping her injured hand to her torso.

“Oh my God, Amelia, I’m so sorry!” Patrick knelt beside her, but wouldn’t touch her. Her breath came out in short, rasping bursts. “I forgot. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Fuck you!” Amelia spat. The sharp of the pain felt like it was penetrating into her bone. It caught in her lungs and stung her eyes. She could feel the bugs in the ground burrowing beneath and into her knees. She grabbed ahold of Patrick’s shoulder with her good arm, pulling herself up as she pushed him to the ground and took off into the woods.

*

An unfamiliar smell accompanied by pounding footsteps speeding toward her den brought the gray fox out of her afternoon slumber and into full alert. The potential danger made the fur on the back of her neck stand on end. The wind was blowing away from the footstep so she couldn’t get a good scent. She crept out from her den, nestled high in one of the forest’s trees. Most predators couldn’t reach her there, but this sound had the cadence of a human and humans were unpredictable.

She hopped down to a lower branch to better survey the forest floor. The crackle of crunching leaves was growing louder as whatever it was approached. The fox braced herself, ready to fight if the human tried climbing her tree.

From up the trail he emerged. He was big, but didn’t look like the humans that normally tracked through her woods. He had less fur than the others, only a thin outer-skin, the kind humans could take on an off at will, that

kept him protected from the fierce wind that rocked the forest. The branch upon which she perched swayed under her paws.

The human passed under her tree and the fox hopped down, branch to branch, until she landed with an undetectable thump onto the foliage below. She crept through shadows and under leaves, able to follow the human's scent now that he was upwind of her. His behavior both frightened and intrigued her. He called out as to one of his pack, but no one ever responded. The fox tilted her nose into the air, sniffing for his companion, but his was the only human scent she could detect.

"Amelia!" he howled into the trees around them, the fox recognized desperation in his cry, like a pup strayed too far from the den.

The human trudged deeper into the woods, sticking to the trail they'd carved for themselves. The fox kept close behind him. Stepping when he stepped, pausing when he paused. The man pulled something out of his fur, small and rectangular. He focused his attention on it for a few minutes, periodically holding it to his ear, before barking at it in frustration and shoving back out of sight.

"No fricking reception."

The man turned around and the fox ducked back into the shadows, clocking him as he passed. She stuck to his tail though, following as close as she dared, undefinably fascinated by this odd, howling human, "Amelia" escaping from his mouth every few feet.

The fox stopped just a few seconds before the human, her ears twitching. More humans were coming. "Amelia?" the pitch was different this time, more communicative.

"You lost your daughter man?" The humans were together now, chittering amongst themselves. The fox crept closer, but into deeper shadow.

"No, my friend. Have you seen a girl walking around alone? Brown hair, kind of gangly, wearing shorts and a t-shirt with a bandage on her arm?"

"You're hunting an injured girl alone in the forest?"

"I know, it sounds bad, but she's hurt and she needs my help."

"You sure she isn't trying to get away from you?"

"Maybe initially, yes, but no. Not anymore. She'll have cooled off by now."

The fox poked her head from under the cover of a leaf, surveying the three humans. The two new ones, standing together, looked like most of the humans who passed through her forest, fuzzy and humpbacked. They didn't speak to each other, just looked between themselves as the original human she'd been tracking spoke. His movements were frantic, his heart rate quickened, she could sense it in the way an acrid saltiness was mixing with his scent.

"Please," he ran his paws over his head, "I've got her keys, neither of us can leave if I don't find her. Her hand's infected."

The two other humans looked again at each other. She sensed their mistrust of her human. The smaller of the humpbacked ones stepped forward, "If she's really lost and you're actually worried, you need to report it to the ranger station."

"I am worried, but I don't know. I don't want to piss her off."

"Better pissed than dead." The two companioned humans shrugged up their humps, "Your call." They walked past her human, past the clump of rhododendron under which the fox was hidden, their steps fading up the trail.

"I'm not a creep!" the man suddenly yelled up the trail, returning the foxes attention to him. He stood still for a moment, his chest heaving up and down, then he turned and began walking again, back toward where all the humans came from. The fox followed the lost man. He continued to howl 'Amelia' until he reached a large rock, jutting out into the trail. He sank down upon it, pulling the small, black thing out once more. He stared at it and the fox stared at him. She slinked closer to him, hesitating with each step before placing her paw on the ground. There was only a few feet between them when he looked up from what he held and their eyes met. The fox froze. They stared at each other, the discord of nature filling the space around them. The man moved the black thing and the fox took off into the forest.

*

Amelia had run until a yellowy dark stain appeared across the back of her bandage. It had felt good to run. To get away from Patrick, from the car, even from the box for a moment. A wave of panic surge through her as Mozer entered

her thoughts. Was she okay? Had Patrick gone back and shut the door to the car? What if someone took her? But Amelia couldn't turn around. She could only move step, step, step, forward along the trail in front of her.

She wasn't sure how far she'd gone, or which specific trail she had taken. She had run where the running was easiest. Now that she had stopped the sweat that had risen up across her skin was being blown away in a stiff breeze. Amelia actually felt cold. She looked around her. The tips of the trees green leaves were turning a bright, vibrant red, frog in a blender trees. Around her birds screeched and forever the wind made the trees whisper to her. She wanted to get out from under them, into the open, into the sun.

*

After awhile the trail opened up into something more like a road. Amelia followed the road until she reach a brown sign reading "Spruce Knob Lake". Looking down she saw the lake spread about before her, black glass reflecting the sky. She scanned the shoreline, but it was pretty devoid of life. One man sat in a boat a few feet offshore, possibly asleep with a fishing line lackadaisically slung into the water, while in the distance a woman tried to keep her child out of the water, running to its edge to grab his hand and walk him away from it, but as soon as she let go, he sprinted right back, the pull of the water stronger than the chill in the air.

Amelia walked along the shoreline, breathing deep the wet air that only comes from being near a body of fresh water. She brushed her fingers along the inside of her injured arm, the only part of her that still radiated warmth. She

walked to where the water quietly lapped at the sand, a gentle whisper. The breeze here was stronger. It whipped her hair away from her face, it chilled the tip of her nose. The landscape appeared easy and kind.

Amelia unwrapped the bandage from around her hand. She didn't want it to get dirty so she shoved it down the front of her sports bra. She peeled the gauze away from her cut, it was thick and soggy, a yellowed brown. Tears welled into the corners of her eyes and she winced as she tossed the gauze away from her. Amelia knelt, scooting as close to the water as she dared without getting her shoes wet. A thick pus coated the back of her hand like an ogre's unabsorbed lotion. Bracing her weight on her good hand, Amelia leaned forward and sank her hand under the water's surface.

Its iciness wrapped around her cut, detaching her hand from the rest of her body. She held it there, breathing slow in and out, in and out. An osprey's shadow flitted across her, darkening her for only an instant before the sun returned to focus its attention along her back. She was grateful for it. The cold blew off the water, and into her face, but it also carried away the burning pain taking root inside her right hand. She finally pulled it from the water when the ache in her knees had grown unbearable. Her fingers were pale and lifeless from the cold, which lingered in her hand as she wrapped it back up inside of the bandage, covering the garishness from her view. She felt as though poison had left her body for the lake.

*

She continued onward, the lakeside air pushed all the anger and frustration from her mind. It filled her insides with hopefulness. She would find what she was looking for. She sat down away from the shore, just before the two-toned tree line. The grass below her was still soft and green, reflecting the light of the sun up and into her skin. She was strong, alive, and free. She slid her phone out of her pocket and turned it on.

She didn't wait for the onslaught of notifications to begin, but called her mother herself the second her phone would allow it. She picked up in an instant.

"Amelia? Amelia? Baby are you okay?"

"Hey Mom, I'm fine." She heard her mother screaming away from the phone's receiver. And then it went silent. Amelia checked the screen to make sure she was still connected. "Mom?"

An odd, stifled sob. "Mom?"

"Hey Amelia. It's your dad."

"Oh hi. Is Mom okay?"

"She thought you were dead."

"I left work a message. Jack could probably guess what was up."

"We're not going to talk about Jack and what you did to his car right now."

"Dad, he stole from me."

“He was trying to help you.”

“No he wasn’t. He was being mean and selfish and stupid. It’s not his job to dictate how I live my life.” She paused, the anger released out of her hand and into the lake was building up inside her again. “And neither do you for that matter.”

“We just want what’s best for you. We’re your family Amelia.”

“So let me grow up. Let me be independent. That’s what a family is supposed to do eventually. We’re not going to be the little Hobkirt unit forever Dad that’s creepy.”

“Just because you’re an adult doesn’t mean that you aren’t a part of our lives.”

“Oh my God, Dad, I’m not trying to get out of your lives I just want some space for just like, some of the time. You’re everywhere Dad. You and Mom and Jack you’re always everywhere. So sure that I’m going to just have another mental breakdown if you’re not there to keep me safe and happy every second of every day. Damn it. Please, just chill.” Amelia had stood up and was pacing tiny crop circles into the grass at her feet.

“You’re having a mental breakdown now Amelia.”

“No. No I’m not.”

“You broke into your brother’s car. Abandoned your job. Abandoned your family. Turned off your phone. We thought you’d killed yourself.”

“Well I’m glad you have such faith in me Dad.”

“Honey, we just want you to come home.”

“Sometimes, home isn’t the best place to be.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Amelia threw her head back, muttering an exasperated prayer. “Yes, I do Dad. I’ve got something important to take care of. I will come home. But not until I’ve finished this. This is more important than me or you or my job or our messed up family. Dad. Just trust me. Give me back to Mom.”

“You mom-”

“GIVE ME BACK TO MOM.” she’d never yelled at her father before. She’d never yelled at anyone before. She didn’t like it.

“Amelia Marleen Hobkirt-”

“Just tell Mom I love her and will be home soon.” She ended the call and turned her phone back off. “Ughhh!” Amelia screamed and threw her phone into the grass, sinking to her knees behind it. The good feeling was gone. Now she was just cold and tired and had a long walk back to the car.

*

The sun had almost completely set when the bathrooms and ranger station came back into view. Amelia’s good arm was tucked up under her shirt for warmth, while her now soaking bandaged one hung limp by her side. She

was about to walk past them through to the parking lot when the door to the ranger station burst open, flooding Amelia in a pool of yellow light.

“Amelia! You’re here!” Patrick rushed to hug her, but stopped just short. She stared at him while he held his arms up, then down, then up, then decided to just wrap one arm around her shoulder for half a second before letting go. A ranger walked down the steps toward them. Patrick turned around to wave at him.

“I found her! She’s here! She’s okay!”

“You gave your boyfriend here quite a fright.” The ranger looked down at her, condescension thick in his voice, “That was foolish to run off into the woods dressed like that all by yourself.”

Amelia rolled her eyes. “I was fine.” She took a step away from Patrick. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Mam are you in danger?” The ranger took a step toward her and Patrick’s face fell. Amelia rolled her eyes even harder.

“No, he’s not my boyfriend, but he is my deeply paranoid friend.”

“Well I suggest you stick by him then. One of y’all needs to be looking out.”

“Looking out for what?” Patrick interjected, placing his hand on Amelia’s shoulder, pushing her away toward the parking lot. She brushed him off.

“Oh, you know.”

Amelia grabbed Patrick's shirt sleeve and pulled him away. "I want to go now."

Patrick obliged, following back up the path, away from the ranger and into the deserted parking lot. "You want to drive I suppose." He said reaching her keys out to her.

"No. I can't drive, but you better hurry and get us to Philly. I just stuck my hand in a dirty lake."

CHAPTER 16

Activity buzzed around them as Amelia and Patrick sat in the waiting room of a Pittsburgh E.R. It was a hopping place just before midnight on a Wednesday. Patrick scrolled through his phone, while Amelia counted the tiles on the ceiling over and over again. She had Mozer propped in her lap, who she periodically caressed with her healthy hand to assure herself that she was still there.

The conversation with her father, while infuriating, at least had assured Amelia that she hadn't been filed as a missing person, that her brother probably hadn't formally pressed charges against her, and that most likely no one outside of her family was looking for her. She knew they knew she was safe, although they didn't know where she was. Still, she wouldn't put it past them to use her phone to figure that last mystery out. She knew that if they could pin down her location they would come looking for her, forcing her to return home, probably even try in check her into some sort of psychiatric care.

At least now though, she felt comfortable going to a hospital. Although really, she didn't have much of choice anymore. As good as it was for her mental state, submerging her hand into a lake had ultimately been a very bad decision. The pus emerging from the wound had become thicker, with greenish tinge mixed into the yellow. The back of her hand was so swollen that even having the bandaged wrapped around it was painful – she didn't want to freak Patrick out

even more though so she kept them loose over top it. What had forced Amelia to admit she needed professional help was the dark red veins that were seeping out from under the end of her bandage – she couldn't deny the infection was probably in her blood stream now.

She shivered in her seat, watching an older man get wheeled across the room on a stretcher.

"You feelin' alright?"

Amelia nodded, calculating her breathing. It was so cold in here.

"We've been sitting here for over an hour." Patrick complained, "Why haven't you been called back yet?"

"Don't make a big deal about it. They'll see me when they see me." She looked across the room to a young girl holding a blood soaked rag to her forehead, her mother in frantic conversation with the receptionist. "Other people have more immediate needs."

"Your need is pretty immediate."

"I'm not pouring forth blood from an open, gaping wound. I'm okay."

"No, you're just rotting from the inside out."

"It's not that bad."

"I can smell your hand, Amelia."

Amelia said nothing in response to this. She could smell the putrid aroma seeping out from under her bandages too, but had hoped that that was only because it was attached to her own body.

“I’m going to talk to somebody.”

“No. Patrick, sit down.” She pulled him back into his seat. A nurse walked into the room, announcing her name. “See?” Amelia said, standing up to meet the nurse.

“No, you stay there” he said, walking over to where Amelia and Patrick sat. “I’m Matt” the nurse continued crouching down in front of them. “I understand you’re here for an infected cut?”

Amelia nodded.

“Mind if I take a look?” He held out his hands and Amelia unwrapped her soaked and filthy bandages, holding out her swollen arm for the nurse’s evaluation.

“Oh,” was his only reaction. He and Patrick made eye contact. Patrick shook his head at the nurse. The nurse swallowed and looked at Amelia. “Well, don’t put those bandages back on. In fact, we’re going to let this air out until a doctor is ready to see you. Should only be a few more minutes.” He threw on a pair of medical gloves and gathered Amelia’s soiled bandages from the seat next to her. “Don’t mess with that any more than you already have,” he added as he carried away the bandages, holding them at an awkward distance from himself.

Patrick leaned away from Amelia, who was resting her injured arm atop the box. "Amelia. Amelia that is so bad."

"That's why we're here."

"What the hell. Why did you let me sew your hand back together? We should have gone to the hospital from the start!"

"I couldn't go to a hospital then. I needed to know I was safe."

"Seriously did your parents put out a bounty on your head or something?!"

"It's fine Patrick. We're here now, the doctors will take care of it and I'll just have a weird scar." She looked at him and smile, "a souvenir from our adventure."

"You probably have sepsis or gangrene. They might have to cut your hand off."

"Don't be dramatic." Amelia gingerly pushed at the edge of her swollen skin watching a bubble of pus rise and recede. Her hand itself didn't actually hurt all that much anymore.

"Stop touching it!"

"Amelia Hobkirt!" Another nurse appeared, wielding a clipboard. Amelia stood and began walking toward her. She stopped at turned back to Patrick. "Well come on."

He looked up her from his seat, his face taking on a pallid, greenish hue, much like the pus that oozed from her wound. "I don't"

"I need you to carry my bag and look after Mozer." She held the bag up him. Patrick groaned, accepted his charge and followed Amelia back to her examination room.

*

"This is serious Ms. Hobkirt. Why did you wait so long before coming in?" The doctor hunched over Amelia's arm, disgust evident on his face.

"I just didn't want a big medical bill you know? And I figured it would just heal on its own."

"What did you cut it on?"

"Broken glass."

"How long ago?"

"About four days."

"This got this bad in four days!" The doctor directed his disgust at Patrick now, who threw his arms up defensively.

"Don't look at me man, she wouldn't let me see it. I trusted her that she was okay."

The doctor bent over the wound again, prodding it here and there, asking Amelia her level of pain in various places. It was worse the further away from

the actual cut he got. Amelia didn't bother telling him there were makeshift stitches under the swollen skin. He'd find it for himself once he cut into it.

"Well we're going to perform a very minor surgery on it. You're lucky it's not worse. We can't wait though, an infection like this can turn septic any time now. We'll cut out as much of the infection as we can and sew you back together. You'll need to get on some heavy antibiotics afterward that you absolutely must finish. You may even need a second round." He turned to Patrick, "I'm trusting you to keep her honest with this. Watch her change her dressing, keep an eye on the healing process, and if it looks like the infection is still spreading a few days into the medication you get her back to a doctor."

Patrick assured the doctor of his vigilance while casting angry glares at Amelia.

"Alright," the doctor continued, "I'll be back shortly to numb you up and then we'll get started as soon as that takes effect." He left the examination room, shutting the door behind him.

"See" Amelia insisted, "It's all going to be taken care of."

"Oh my gosh, Amelia, stop acting like this isn't a big deal. People die when stuff like this gets bad and I'd be held responsible."

"No you wouldn't" Amelia laid back on the examination table, "Give me Mozer."

"No. Mozer doesn't need to be a part of this."

Amelia sat back up, "Give me Mozer Patrick. I got this cut rescuing her from my brother. If I hadn't she'd still be strewn across the floor of his car."

Patrick hesitated, then reached into her bag and pulled out the box, placing it in her outstretched hand.

"Thank you." Amelia laid back down, holding the box to her chest.

*

The operation didn't take too long. They administered the anesthetic directly into various parts of the wound, which was a surprisingly non-painful experience but about a minute later Amelia vomited on the exam room floor and almost passed about. The nurse stationed there to watch her until the anesthetic kicked in noticed her swaying after she threw up and laid her back on the table, handing the box off to Patrick and laying wet paper towels down on Amelia's face. Amelia could hear the two of them speaking as though they were a full room over.

"It's a very common reaction to the anesthesia. She'll be alright in a few minutes."

Eventually Amelia pushed herself back up, pulling the paper towels off her face and motioning for Patrick to give her Mozer back. She held her close while the doctor cut away at the rotten and infected skin that covered the back of her hand. He uncovered the blackened stitches of her and Patrick's first attempt at medical care much to the frustration of the doctor.

“What is this?” he asked, holding a badly degraded piece up thread up in his tweezers.

“I stitched it up myself when it first happened.” Amelia answered before Patrick, whose mouth was open to speak, had a chance to take the blame.

“I don’t think I need to tell you know how bad of an idea that was.”

“Yeah, well cost efficiency.” Amelia rested her chin on Mozer’s edge.

“Not anymore” she thought she heard the doctor mutter under his breath.

Eventually Amelia was properly cut, cleaned, and professionally sutured. Her hand was wrapped in crisp, clean bandages and hefty backup supply of which was stowed in her bag, complements of Matt the nurse who’d had to dispose of her old ones. The doctor gave her a prescription for a particularly high dosage of tetracycline, which he told her could be fulfilled at the hospital pharmacy while they waited. She got the feeling he wanted to see her leave with the bottle in hand.

As Amelia and Patrick waited for her medicine, they worked on figuring out their next move in Operation Mozer. It was past one in the morning and Patrick was exhausted. He insisted that as soon as they got her medicine they go to a hotel and get some sleep.

“I’m not paying for another hotel.”

“We’re not sleeping here. Or in the car. Come on Amelia, I just want to go to bed. Besides, you’re not even the one paying for it right now.”

“We need to find Josiah.”

“We’ll find him tomorrow. He’s a seventy something year old man, he’s not awake.”

Amelia continued to protest until finally Patrick said he’d just leave her there and pick her up in the morning. He still had her car keys so there wasn’t much she could do to stop him with a freshly sutured hand. She agreed to go to the hotel and antibiotics in hand, followed Patrick out of the hospital, a dour expression on her face.

*

Amelia was bent over a hotel desktop when Patrick finally came down well into the morning. She accepted the bagel he offered her, but set it down beside the computer, paying it no mind.

“So I’ve found a few Hirayama options in the city.” She tapped a piece of paper next to her. “Two are in the right age range. One has a former listing in Hatchburgh. We should start with him.”

“Did you take your meds this morning?”

“Yes. I’ve got addresses, but no phone numbers so we’ll have to check them out in person to find the right one. I actually think the two Josiah’s might be the same person. Maybe he moved recently”

“Eat something, Amelia.”

"This other Hirayama is named Ethan. It says he's in his 40s, might be a son?"

"You didn't sleep enough."

"We need to get started soon. You slept too late."

"Amelia."

"Let's go." Amelia stood up, swinging her bag over her shoulder.

"You packed already?"

"I never unpacked. Come on Patrick hurry up."

Amelia paced around the lobby waiting for Patrick to grab his things from the room, reading the list of Hirayama addresses over and over again. Josiah, Josiah, and Ethan. They were probably all the same family right? She bounced on her toes by the door. She heard the rattle of her pills bat against Mozer. Finally, Patrick stepped off the elevator.

"Alright we can go" he muttered.

*

Amelia finally found her autumn. Pittsburgh had very little to offer, even in this first week of October, as far as looming summer heat went. A constant wind blew through the streets, whipping up a flurry of dead leaves and abandoned grocery bags. Patrick, who hadn't had any say in which of his clothing items were packed for their venture above the Mason-Dixon line, perpetually bombarded Amelia with complaints about weather. How it

'wouldn't be so bad if the wind wasn't blowing' and 'you should have grabbed me a jacket when you were kidnapping me"; before they'd even made it across the parking lot to the car, Amelia had given him her hoodie. He couldn't really zip it all the way and the sleeves only reached three quarters of the way down his forearms, but its presence did quiet him a little bit.

They followed Patrick's GPS to a large brick apartment building on the other side of the city. It didn't look like much from the outside, no balconies built off any of the windows, no open windows letting the breeze ruffle gauzy curtains, just a sad brown building bordered on either side by other sad brown buildings. Amelia parked the car in a vacant lot across the street and shut off the car. Patrick made to open the door, but Amelia reached out, placing her bandaged hand on his forearm.

"Um. I think... I want to go up... alone, yah."

"Are you sure? These people could be creeps."

Amelia looked the building over, peering out from the window frame of her car. "I don't think so and if they are," she shrugged, "I'm pretty tough." She thought maybe Patrick nodded in agreement. "So yah, just crack the windows and I'll be back. If you get bored just..."

"I'll be fine. This is your quest."

Amelia nodded and shouldered out of the car, swinging her bag up and across her chest. She waved to Patrick without really looking at him and scurried across the street and up the front steps of the building. A buzzer on the

side listed the last names of the building's residents: Johnson, Wyatt, Alogadagah. Hirayama was listed under apartment 304. She stared at the call button, not moving to push it. Her arms felt heavy and sluggish, like reaching up to push the button was a feat that would take years of intensive training to accomplish. A gust of wind blew down the street, ruffling her hair into her face. She pushed it away, the motion freed her arms from their frozen prison. She used the momentum to press the buzzer, happy that the wind was on her side.

"Hello?"

"Yes, is this Josiah Hirayama?" She gripped the strap of her bag in her good hand, squishing it against her flesh until it felt like it wasn't really there anymore.

"No, this is his son Ethan, what do you want?"

"Um, yeah, so I'm doing some research," her felt dry, but gummy, "genealogy, on my family. Greg Burton sent me."

"Who?"

"Greg Burton. He's my... uncle. I'm looking for information on my relative Ingrid Mozer." She looked out toward the car, almost wishing she hadn't come. She stomach clinched in over itself. She reached her hand down into her bag, wrapping her fingers around Mozer. Assurance flooded her. "Greg said you dad would remember her."

There was silence for a few minutes on the other end of the line. Amelia drew herself up tall, ready for whatever came down to these front steps. She

tried to ignore the little insect scrambling across her back, trying to flee back to the car. There was information in this building. She could tell. Branwell and Ingrid could tell too. She was ready.

The intercom clicked, "I'm coming down."

The little bug moved across her back following her spine. She swallowed, hoping he would lay dormant there. A grayish blob moved behind the clouded window in the door, growing larger as it approached. Then the brown metal door clunked open and a man, who looked a to be around Amelia's parents age, maybe a few years younger appeared. He held the door out for her, motioning with his head for them to come inside, streaks of gray peppered in with his black hair. Amelia ducked inside and the man, presumably Ethan, let the door fall shut behind them. She turned to look at the man, expecting him to lead the way up the apartment, but he just stood in front of the door, his arms crossed over his chest. Amelia felt his dark eyes boring into her, like they were searching for the little bug that persisted in scampering along under her skin. They stared at each other.

"I'm-" Amelia coughed, the dryness in her mouth making her tongue stick against the back of her teeth. "I'm Amelia." She kept her eyes on his face, his eyes looked fiery, but colorless. "Burton."

The man nodded, "Ethan" he spat the word out of his mouth more than saying it, leaving it splattered on the speckled floor between them. "So how are you related to Ingrid Mozer?"

"She uh, she would have been my, great aunt."

“So Nina-”

“Was my grandmother. Yeah, my dad is Thomas Burton.”

Ethan studied her. Amelia tried to smile and drew herself up as tall as she could.

“What happened to your hand?”

“I had a cut. It got infected.” She refused to look away from his face, but slid her hand down into her open bag, pressing the box against her thigh.

Ethan sniffed.

“My dad doesn’t really talk about Ingrid Mozer. I remember your grandmother vaguely, from when I was a kid.”

“But he knew her.”

“Who?”

“Your dad, he knew Ingrid. He knew my aunt.”

Ethan looked at her, then his body twitched into something that was half a shrug and half a nod. The two stood silent, the hissing groan of the overhead fluorescents filling up the hallway.

“So can I come up?”

Ethan uncrossed his arms, “Not yet.” He uncrossed his arm and took a step toward her. Amelia stood her ground, pressing the palm of her hand harder into the box, trying to feel it as best she could through the thick layer of

bandages. Ethan narrowed his eyes at her and she let out a sharp exhale through her nose.

“Why are you here?”

Amelia tilted her head and looked up at him, “I’ve already told you that.” She felt the bug burrowing at the base of her spine. She scratched at it with her thumbnail. Ethan took a step back and leaned his shoulder against the wall.

“Buy why now?”

“I didn’t know about her. Until now.”

“But Ingrid Mozer is a legend. I find it hard to believe your family kept her a secret from you.”

Amelia pulled the box out of the bag and held it close to her, detecting what she thought might be sarcasm in Ethan’s tone. She hated it. Ethan’s eyes fell upon the box, now resting in the crook of her arm and she turned her body a little to put herself more between him and her charge. She tilted her face up, to try and match his height a bit better. “She’s a legend? No one’s ever said that to me. No one ever talks about her. I brought her up to my father and her up he just said she was dead before he was born. I can’t ask my grandmother, she’s dead. I asked my uncle and he said to ask a man named Josiah Hirayama.” Amelia was impressed with the lies pouring out of her mouth. “I’ve just been pushed from person to person and now I’ve been pushed to you. Sir.”

“And you just magically gained knowledge about this long lost relative then.”

"I found a newspaper article. About her dying." Amelia reached into her bag and pulled out the print out from the library detailing Ingrid's demise. She hesitated for a moment then held it out to Ethan. He didn't move. She shook it toward him, "Take it".

Ethan huffed, then snatched the paper out of her bandaged hand. "I already know about this." He crumpled the paper up and threw it back at her. Amelia snatched it out of the air.

"Hey!" She glared at him and dropped the balled up article back into her bag. "What's your problem? I'm just trying to--"

"You're trying to learn about your heritage. That's great, but do you know what your heritage means to him?"

"Means to who?"

"To my father!" Ethan threw a hand up, gesturing to nothing Amelia could fathom. He paced the space between them, his mouth tense. The anger was evident, but Ethan kept his voice low. "It means the heritage he never got to create, the nieces and nephews he never had, the wife he had to settle for, the son that he was stuck with."

"Look,"

"He's an old man. He's had a good life. Maybe not the life he thought, but still a good life. He's happy now. He's happy with me. What benefit can he possibly have from talking to a girl who at best will do nothing more than remind him of the family he thought he was going to have?"

Amelia steadied herself against him, gripping the box tighter to herself, "I'm not trying to cause any problems. I'm just--"

"If you aren't trying to cause problems then just leave!"

Amelia gritted her teeth. "Don't cut me off, sir."

Ethan shook as he moved back and forth across the building's entryway. The skin on his forehead folded tight against itself. "My father is finally okay with us. It took my mother's death, but he's content that I am who he has. You are a representation of what he lost. I will not be resentment again."

Ethan stopped pacing and turned to look at her, his last words had been little more than a whisper. Amelia took a step toward him, but paused, calculating her tone, "I need to talk to your father." She relaxed her posture, letting the box drift down to her stomach, she stroked her with her thumb and softened her voice toward Ethan, "I don't feel like that's a decision you should make for him."

Silence settled around them once more. Ethan directed his gaze at the floor and Amelia looked beyond him and out the windows built into the metal front doors. The window was made out of that ancient, thick, wavy glass that made the world beyond look distorted and out of proportion; like you were looking through an iced-over pond rather than a pane of glass. The street was muted and twitching. Rain from the day before left the asphalt damp and chilled. An occasional rush of autumn wind, potent and angry, would only result in the single overturn of a few drenched and moldy reddish leaves. It was

a scene captured through a smudged and dirty lens. Amelia breathed in time with the swaying of the distorted trees.

Ethan voice brought her out of her measured breathing, "What?" she refocused on the man's face.

"I said fine." Ethan turned and pulled open an adjacent door that opened into a stairwell. Amelia nodded and followed him up, clutching the box against her heart.

*

Ethan lead her up to a small apartment, just as brown as the building's exterior, although the brown inside here had a warmth to it, a kindness worn into the carpet. Ethan called out to his father that they had visitors. A cat rested upon the deep window sill, his face turned lazily toward them as they entered, then he redirected his gaze out the window. She followed Ethan into a small living space, there was a love seat along the wall under the windows through which she could see the smudge of her car in the distance. Two puffed leather armchairs sat facing a small television displaying an ad for a Crohn's Disease medication. In the larger of the armchairs sat an older man, Josiah, wearing a Penguins sweatshirt and khakis, a pair of red slippers on his feet.

"Dad, we have a guest, Amelia" he motioned to her.

"Josiah Hirayama" he said, nodding, but keeping his gaze focused on the television.

Amelia moved further into the room. She felt Ethan's fingers graze past her elbow as she slid by, but she twitched away from him and sat down in the vacant armchair, settling the box into her lap. Ethan frowned and stepped over to the loveseat, positioning himself right up on its edge. Perched, birdlike and stiff.

The room here was green and weighted. It had a sense of stagnation that spread across the rough, mustard carpet and disappeared in the corners of the room, hiding behind a metal trash can; dented and petite, and wicker a basket with National Geographic's so old the cover was nothing but a white rectangle with black filigreed text proclaiming the issues topics. It smelled of tweed and elbow patches.

Yellowish-gray light filtered through the old parchment-y screen that was pulled halfway down the window, presumably to let the cat look out onto the street below. Because the shade of the window was only pulled partially down, a square of hot fresh autumn light burned into Amelia's legs, the dark blue of her jeans drinking in and holding on to every ounce of warmth.

Despite the heat boring into her thighs, Amelia shivered. This room felt like the walls absorbed the cold and then blew it back out into where they sat. It circled around her shoulders and settled against her face. If she were being honest with herself, she could tell it wasn't really all that cold; turning on the heat would have made the room thick and suffocating, but compared to the oppressive enduring humidity of South Carolina's ceaseless summer, this was

basically winter. Amelia folded into herself, sinking back into her chair. She didn't mind the cold, she just wished she hadn't given Patrick her jacket.

Amelia's gaze drifted between Ethan and Josiah, tucking Mozer and Branwell against her stomach. She crossed her arms over them, holding them tight. Mozer might be about to become someone new and she had to prepare herself to open her heart again. She hoped that each time it would get easier since each revelation brought her somewhere closer to the truth. She liked to think she wasn't so selfish that she could be disappointed by the discovery of a life. Although Mozer might be confirmed. She might know for sure who she'd laid Branwell to rest with. Amelia tried running her tongue over her teeth, but her mouth was so dry that it just sort of skidded across. The bug under Amelia's flesh moved frantically through her, escaping the skin to move through her intestines. Before her the television droned on in words she couldn't bother to understand. She reached forward to the coffee table, grabbed the remote and shut the television off.

"Hey!"

"I'm sorry sir, Mr. Hirayama, but..." Amelia stumbled over her words, her tongue useless in her sticky mouth. Ethan clenched his fist and held it to his mouth, but didn't say anything. Josiah turned in his chair to face her, narrowing his eyes as he studied her. His eyes bore into her face then moved down, following her cold, bare arms to the box, gripped in her swollen knuckles. He jumped up from his seat, pointing to her.

"Where did you get that?"

CHAPTER 17

Two sets of eyes followed Josiah's gaze. He was pointing to the box gripped tight and desperate under Amelia's arched frame. She pulled it tighter to her against chest.

"Give that to me." She looked up at the old man meeting his gaze directly for the first time. She thought she saw recognition flit across them. Josiah took a step forward and Amelia leaned back away from him.

"What do you want with her?"

"Let me see her."

Ethan reached out to touch his father, "Dad, I really do think."

"Son."

Ethan went silent, the two locked in an unblinking gaze. The cat made a burrowing sound out of its throat and Ethan sank back into the corner of the loveseat.

Josiah stepped up to Amelia and reached for the box. He slipped his hands between her arms, gripping Mozer in his uninjured fingers. Hers tried to resist, but Josiah ripped the box from her grasp. Amelia burst onto her feet. Her heart pounded in her ears, silencing the rest of the room around her. Her eyes focused in on the box now in Josiah Hiramama's hands. He turned it around,

studying it close under his bespeckled eyes, then he looked at Amelia, holding it in the space between them.

“This is Ingrid’s box.”

Amelia nodded and took a step closer to them.

“How’d you get this?”

She hesitated, swallowed. The bug that’d been plaguing her insides flew away as she answered, “Garage sale.”

Josiah frown, “Garage sale?” His eyes moved away from Amelia down once more to the box in his hands. He flipped it over and popped the bottom out, tossing it onto the floor. Amelia dove to retrieve it. He knew how she opened.

“You can’t do that!”

Amelia hissed and turned to look over her shoulder. Josiah was running his hand over them, their velvety curves. Like he knew them. His breathing seemed to slow as Amelia stood back up and reached her hand out, cupping the underside of the box. As though he felt the pressure lifting from his own hands, his gaze floated up to hers. “Who is this?”

“Well sir, I was hoping you might be able to tell me that.”

They stood in the center of the room together, staring at the lump between them. Josiah reached in and scooped up the velvet bag.

“No!” Amelia tried to snatch them back, but Josiah turned away from her with surprising agility. Carrying the ashes out of the living space and over to the kitchen table. Amelia screamed and scrambled after him, demanding he let them go. Josiah looked up at her, not a word escaping his mouth, and he sat down at the table.

Amelia looked back at Ethan, her eyes begging for help. She could have sworn he smirked before he laid back on to the couch and studied the ceiling. Amelia rushed to the table and tried to swipe Mozer and Branwell back, but Josiah smacked her injured hand. Amelia recoiled and met his gaze, burning with something she understood, with a recognition she’d been looking for. Amelia kept her hand cupped against her chest and lowered herself into the seat across from Josiah. The smell of him mixed with the tweedish aroma of the room. It filled Amelia brain, swirling and twisting inside of her. It directed her motions.

Amelia watched as Josiah gripped the bottom of the velvet bag and turned it over, letting its full contents out of the bag for the first time. Tightness spread across her chest, she bit the inside of her lip to keep from protesting. She could hear them. Mozer and Branwell, assuring her it was going to be okay. She watched Josiah sift through her ashes, her blood, her glass and sand, until his fingers found the small, golden ring. He held it up to the light, sinking back into the ladder-back chair. “It’s her,” he whispered, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth.

“Ingrid?”

“You’ve brought me Ingrid.”

“Dad, you shouldn’t-” Ethan rushed over to the table, but was cut off from speaking by a glare radiating out from his father.

“Sit back down boy.”

“Dad!”

“Sit!”

Ethan’s body tensed, then moved in spastic jerks to the chair farthest away from Amelia and his father. He threw himself down, elbows on the table, and stared at the pair of them. Amelia reached forward, cupped her hands around the spilled ashes, and pulled them closer to herself.

“Why do you have her?”

Amelia scraped more ashes onto her side of the table, focusing on them. “Her family didn’t want her. She needs me.” She looked into Josiah’s face then, refusing to shrink under the intensity of his gaze. “She was alone and lost. I knew someone loved her. I knew I had to find them.” Amelia cupped Ingrid and Branwell, patting them into a pile in front of her.

Josiah grunted at her, but his shoulders relaxed out of the rigidity that had taken hold of them since laying eyes on the box. “That’s me. I love her. Ingrid and I were married, although nobody knew that save for us and her sister, Nina.” Josiah wasn’t looking at her, he directed his gaze on the little ring, the

garnet stone drinking in the yellowed light from the lamp dangling overhead. "Their father wasn't too, well he'd been in the war right? The Pacific front and...."

"He was racist." Amelia whispered the words, now trying to sift the ashes back into the bag where they belonged. They sank into the whorls and arches of her palms as she grasped them, a small piece of glass from her brother's truck lodged underneath her fingernail. She hissed and threw her finger to the comfort of her lips, meeting Josiah's eyes. He nodded.

"Ain't no reason to be soft about it I guess. Yeah, he was racist. But most adults were back then. Mine too a little bit. Not that that makes it any better. I was just a kid when the war ended and they disbanded the internment camps. We'd lived in California before and my parents couldn't stand the idea of going back after they'd forced us outta our home." There was a scratched of wood against wood as Ethan shifted in his seat. Josiah and Amelia ignored it. "Wanted to get as far away from the West Coast as possible. So we settled in Virginia when I was around nine or ten. Unfortunately, it seemed like a lot of the men who fought in the Pacific had a similar idea."

Amelia shoved the last of what she could of the ashes inside and pulled the string shut on the velvet bag, settling it back into place inside the box. The remaining ashes she pinched into a little hill in front her. Her fingers were tinged gray and powdery. She pressed them as hard as she could into the skin at the base of her neck, wanting to absorb every bit of those remains into herself.

She slid in the bottom and placed the box in her lap, turning her full attention now to Josiah. He kept the ring locked in his grasp.

“Ingrid and I were in school together since my family moved East, but we didn’t really get to know each other until high school. She was in my math study group. We were learning algebra and neither one of us like it.” Josiah’s lips stretched into a tight thing semi-smile, “My family owned a little grocery store in town and Ingrid would come by whenever I was working. Neither one of our parents liked that very much. My parents would tell me it was dangerous hanging around a girl like her. Disrespectful to our heritage. They had a very keep to your own kind mentality, especially after the war, but truthfully, there weren’t too many of my own kind to keep to outside of my family. I mean there were other families in Hatchburgh of course, but still, Ingrid just, had something. She was so funny, looked at the world like it was fodder for a comedy show. I loved that about her.”

Josiah paused then and Amelia studied his face. The lines at the corners of his eyes and around his mouth were deep, offshoots crisscrossing down his cheeks, like rivers from the sky. Ethan coughed.

“I remember when she got that box.” He motioned it with his head and Amelia moved it closer to herself. “It was her 20th birthday. Her godfather sent it to her.”

“I know,” Amelia interjected, “I met his son.”

“Did you?” Josiah seemed to be studying something beyond Amelia.
“Was he as big an asshole as his father?”

“He seemed,” she paused, “fine.”

“We were friends.” Ethan interjected, making the both of them jump. “Anthony. That was his name. We would play together when you...” Ethan’s voice faded to nothing under the scrutiny of his father. Amelia watched his adam’s apple bob once and then his whole body lowered closer to the table. Josiah kept his gaze on him a moment longer then returned to his story.

“Eh, Ingrid always like her godfather. He and her father had been in the war together, ‘the Old Men’ they called themselves. He caught her talking to me at the store one afternoon our junior year of high school and he let her have it. Not ‘cause she was talking to me or anything, just for the sake of being in our store at all. Said he and her father hadn’t almost died protecting her from these Japs for her to be spendin’ his hard earned money at their rice emporium. Pulled her outta there by the wrist. It wasn’t too long after that a rumor got back to her father that she and I were goin’ together. She assured him of course that we weren’t, promised she’d never see me again. He even had her classes at school changed mid-year so that we wouldn’t even be together there. He was 288omethin’ in that community let me tell you.”

“I wouldn’t be here without him.”

“Without her father?”

“Without Franke.” Amelia turned the box over, she rubbed her fingertips across the burned in letters, cursive, flourished. She studied Josiah’s face as he stared at them, his fingers gripped tighter around the ring, his knuckles turning white. “He was my first link,” Amelia let the words slip through her mouth, felt

the settle on the table between them, resting atop the box. She thought Branwell purred. No one spoke, just the clock on the wall ticked into the stillness. "You stayed together though." Amelia offered it more as a statement than a question.

"Oh yeah, like all disgusting, cliché star-crossed lovers, hatred just." Josiah smiled and held the fist that enclosed the ring up to his lips. It was a few moments before he spoke again, the words exits his mouth a sigh. "Brought us closer together."

Amelia clutched the box tighter, leaning forward so her shadow fell across it. Her eyes wandered about the room. She was very aware of the slats in the chair pressing into her back. She looked over at Ethan. His mouth looked smaller, his shoulders too. His gaze was fixed upon his father. It didn't even look as though he breathed.

"It was harder after that." The words were a magnetic breath, pulling Amelia back to him. "Had to be more clandestine, like I said, her father had a lot of influence in Hatchburgh, seemed everybody was reporting back to him and I don't think he every stopped suspecting that I was trying to take his daughter away, contaminate her." Amelia felt Branwell stirring inside the box. She pulled him into her lap, curving her fingers around his edges. Josiah never ceased talking.

"I was insistent that she not tell anyone, but she was really close with her sister, Nina. Told Nina everything. Nina became the spy for our side I guess you could say." Josiah leaned back into his chair, closing his eyes. Amelia looked away, the coldness of the room pressing hard against her face.

“But you didn’t get caught. Y’all were married.”

Josiah opened his eyes. He and Amelia both looked over at Ethan, shuffled by his breach. Josiah cocked half a smile toward his son, “That part wasn’t actually difficult all things considered. She and I were both attending college,” he returned his attention to Amelia, attentive before him, “My parents were insistent because I was a minority and her parents were insistent because they wanted her to find a husband far away from wherever I was.” He winked. “Getting to a state that would marry us was the hardest part. It was 1956 so we had to drive all the way to Ohio to be legal. Still, that wasn’t so bad.” He opened his palm and studied the little ring there, holding it under the weak light of the fake brass chandelier, a pitiful spotlight. “I got her this ‘cause it didn’t necessarily look like a wedding band. She always loved the color red and a garnet was the nicest stone I could afford. She wore it on her right hand, called it her little pinprick.”

Amelia moved her hand up to the base of her neck and pressed hard until it cracked. At the end of the table she could hear Ethan moving, but he seemed muffled now, burred. Her eyes wandered as Josiah spoke more about his illegal marriage. Her insides vibrated and she tried to steady herself with the assurance of the box in her lap, slipping the tips of her broken fingernails into the vacant space between two carved vines.

“We told no one. No one outside of Nina. Nina didn’t come though.” Josiah stopped talking then, his gruff hands lay out on the table between them, the ring held between the tips of his fingers looked so forgettable. But he hadn’t

forgotten it. He had lost it though. He'd lost her. She pulled her feet up to rest on the seat of the chair, putting another boundary between the box and Josiah. She cupped it from underneath with her hands and rested her chin upon its edge. She studied Josiah's face and for a moment he looked into her eyes, then his gaze dropped down to the box underneath her chin.

"Ingrid kept the paperwork in that box actually. I saw her put it there. She brought it to Ohio. Thought it was ironic or something. She never took their attitudes seriously. Always figured they'd come around someday." He paused, closing his hand back around the ring, Amelia couldn't tell if there was anger or sadness behind his eyes.

Amelia tucked her face down so her lips rested against the box, she reached out and ran her finger across the top of the table, dusty and gray with Ingrid's essence. She turned her gaze toward the half-covered window, "They killed her."

"No. If they were going to kill anyone, they'd have killed me. I was expendable." Josiah was silent for a moment. It felt as though the world was silent with him.

"Nina. I think she blamed herself."

"She told somebody?"

Josiah shook his head, "They were going to be together that day, Nina would drive. I don't know why she changed her mind, why Ingrid was walking that day. I wasn't even there. I was stocking asparagus." He banged his fist

down on the table, harkening Amelia's gaze back to his face in an instant.

"Stupid. Asparagus." He narrowed in on the box, barely visible over the tops of Amelia's knees. "I didn't even get to go to the funeral. My own wife's funeral."

She sat still and silent. He was upset. She felt it emanating out from him and crossing the table to creep up to her, to seep into the seams of the box. To get to Ingrid. He'd loved her, enough to infuriated his son forty some odd years later. But still. He didn't fight for her. Even after she'd died. Amelia was fighting for her. "Why didn't you fight for her?" She didn't even realize the words were spoken aloud. She reached forward and slid the remaining petite pile of ashes into the palm of her hand, she cradled them there. Listened to their whispers, while Josiah sat unspeaking across the table.

It jolted suddenly as Ethan huffed and stood up from the table and began pacing, well not really pacing. The space was small so he mostly just pivoted back and forth at the end of the table. Amelia shut her fingers around the ashes, pulling them back from the commotion. Josiah glared at his son.

"Ethan?"

"What." Ethan stopped moving, his arms cross over his chest and he glared right back at his father.

"I need you to leave."

"This is my apartment."

"I know. I just need the room. To speak to Amelia?" She nodded.

"Amelia. Alone."

“Dad, I don’t-”

“Please leave.” The words were terse, hissing out between her teeth.

“Excuse me,” Ethan took a step toward her and before she could even register what was happening, she threw the remaining bits of ashes up into his face. She imagined Branwell hiss as he flew through the air; Ingrid laughing. Ethan stopped, watching the dust drift down in the light between them.

“Uh-” Amelia arched herself over the top, pulling her arms tighter around the box, but she kept her eyes locked on Ethan’s. Josiah stood up, walked around the table, and placed a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Son.”

Ethan swallowed then turned and left the room. Amelia looked over at Josiah. “You lost her.”

Josiah took the seat beside her, “I did.”

“You could have looked for her.” *I found her. I gave her a home. A companion.* The words flickered through her consciousness.

“I knew where she was for awhile. With Nina.” He shook his head. “I didn’t know where Nina had her, but I knew she was with Ethan.”

“Her son said she brought her to visit you. You must have known she was in here.”

Josiah pulled back, “Nina came to visit. All the time. For Ingrid. But she never brought Ingrid with her.”

“Greg said she always brought the box. Always. He remembered the box and that the box goes with you.”

“Well if she was bringing her along she never let me know.” He reached forward, laid his hand on top of the box. Amelia gripped it tighter. “But you’ve found her. You’ve found me.” He looked up into her face, “You brought us back together. Thank you.”

Amelia swallowed. “I just wanted to find who loved her. Where she belonged.” She felt herself shaking. Felt a slight pressure against her grip as Josiah tried to take the box from her. She found who loved Ingrid, but, it wasn’t just Ingrid anymore. It was Ingrid and Branwell, and herself. The ocean, Franke, her job. She gave herself entirely to them and this man had just given up. Sat waiting for her to brought to him, but otherwise content to just let her be abandoned. Amelia stood up, gripping Ingrid to herself, her chest shivering with uneven breath.

Josiah stood up as well. He smiled at Amelia and held out his hands. She looked at them, open, waiting to receive.

Amelia thanked Josiah and backed up toward the door. Ethan’s head emerged from out of a door down the hall – either called out by eavesdropping or the sudden lack of speech. Amelia wouldn’t meet Josiah’s eye, wouldn’t even come close to looking at his face. He wouldn’t understand. He loved her. He didn’t love them. Amelia fled.

Amelia took off down the hall at a sprint. She hurried down the stairwell and out the door, not stopping until she got to her car. She pulled at the door, but it was locked. She looked inside, Patrick was gone. Cursing, she crouched down behind it, leaning into her front tire, resting her head against the rim of the wheel well. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, and focused on the air going in and out of her lungs. She heard the wind around her. The birds screaming. Cars in the distance. Time bore through the air imploding around her. She didn't care how long.

"Amelia?"

She opened her eyes. Patrick stood there, in a sweatshirt, fresh, richly black and that actually fit him, her hoodie draped over his arm.

"What happen?"

Amelia recounted everything Josiah Hirayama had told her about Ingrid, about himself, about how he couldn't believe she'd brought them back together. She shivered as a rush of autumn wind ripped through the street where they hunkered next to the car. Patrick, stiff and awkward, tried to wrap her limp and stretched hoodie around her shoulders.

"We're here trying to find her loved her. So she can be put to rest." He seemed distracted, an unexpected hollowness to his tone. He looked at something beyond where they crouched. Amelia hugged the box closer to herself, keeping her eyes focused on the asphalt below her feet.

“I love her.” Her words were less than a whisper, just a breath. “She belongs with me. I’ve bled for her, I’ve cared for her. I’ve given her a companion. No one cares for her like I do.”

“Amelia.”

“Josiah lost her! He let her be taken away from him and he didn’t even try to get her back. He ran away to this awful, wet place!” Amelia was pressing the box so tight to herself it was making it hard to breathe, or maybe it was the cold, or maybe the bugs were back, a heaving rattle escaped her throat. She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up. The hand belonged to Josiah Hirayama.

“You’re right.” The old man sat down on the wet asphalt beside her. She kept her back to him. “I lost her. I gave up on ever finding. I accepted that we would never be together.”

“You want to take her. You think you deserve her.”

“I don’t deserve her. I do still love her”

Amelia chewed on the back of her bandage, her stomach twisting, a stinging fire burning between her eyes and their lids. She shut them tight. “I fought for her. To get her...” She couldn’t articulate where anymore. There was nowhere else to go.

Amelia, Ingrid, and Branwell fell into the old man’s side. They stayed like that, the cold damp seeping up from the ground beneath them; Patrick standing a few feet away. A car drove by. Above them a pair of cardinals argued along the rim of an adjacent building. Amelia held the box close, whispering to it, her

lips brushing its surface. A cloud shifted in the sky, covering the overhanging sun.

Amelia stood, letting the hoodie fall off her. Josiah pulled himself up against the car, facing her. Patrick looked up as they stood, but let them be. Josiah focused his eyes on her. She took a breath, and held the box out to him, staring into the wrinkles around his eyes. She felt it leave her hands and she stepped back away from him.

“Amelia?”

She paused, but refused to move closer to him. He held the box in the crook of his arm as he closed the distance between them.

“Thank you.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek, she felt him place something in her hand, then he turned, walked up the steps and disappeared back inside the building.

Amelia looked down into her open palm and saw the small, garnet ring.

CHAPTER 18

An orange and white tabby, Reggie, the humans called him, stretched himself out on the window sill as he watch the old man talk to the woman in front of the building. Inside, Ethan, his human, paced back and forth in his periphery, it was annoying. The cat focused his attention back on the activity outside of the window. The young man hovered near where the couple was standing, but never came to close. The cat's tail twitched. A bird flew up and out of tree when he moved. He watched the old man, hold the woman close, then he turned and stepped out of sight. The young man walked over to the woman, hugged her, rubbed her shoulders, and together they disappeared into the vehicle as the door to the apartment swung open, drawing Reggie's gaze.

The old man returned and the son stopped pacing. Reggie watched as the son's eyes fell to the wooden box clutched in the man's hand. He cocked his head and studied his human's face. There was anger there, frustration, but more than anything, the cat recognized sadness.

"So I guess now you've got everything you wanted." The cat winced as the words left his human's mouth. Their tone was harsh and biting, he half expected a sharp strike on the nose, but the anger was not directed at him, but the old, who looked at his son, confused. He shook his head.

“No, I wouldn’t say that.” He set the box down on the counter beside him and walked across the room. The cat’s head followed as he approached his son. Ethan stood his ground, eyes fixed on his father, hands balled into fists at his side.

“No? You wouldn’t? Why not? You’ve got the love of your life back. Isn’t she all you wanted all those years? Isn’t that why you had an affair with her sister? We can all stop mourning Mom now, ‘cause Dad finally got the dead body he’d been longing for!”

The cat continued to flick the end of his tail as he studied the old man, who crumpled up his face in disgust.

“I never had an affair with her sister; what are you thinking! We just talked about her. Kept Ingrid’s memory alive.”

“Oh how sweet Dad. How thoughtful. She’s been dead for over fifty years! Get over it!”

The two men stood in the center of the apartment. Reggie watched Ethan’s chest heave up and down, his breathing amplified. The old man remained calm, his hands resting lightly in his pockets.

“Son I’ve been over it. I had you. I had your mother. I loved you both. Always. Yes, I loved Ingrid, but I lost her. That didn’t stop me from living. You’re mother healed me. And so did you. I’m happy to have Ingrid here, I’ll bury her, properly. I’ll mourn her of course, but I’ll mourn your mother too.” He stepped forward, and close the gap between himself and his son. “You’re

mine boy.” He put his arms around his son and the cat directed his attention back out the window.

*

The inside of the Buick grew hotter and hotter and they traveled back south, but to Amelia’s surprise, she found the heat to be pleasant, comforting, familiar. The little garnet ring on her finger reflected the light that burned through the windshield, reminding her that she despite the emptiness she felt, she hadn’t lost anything. Ingrid was here, and probably a little bit of Branwell too. Even with the box gone, they were still managing to fill her up. Beside her, Patrick slept, his cheek glowing red with the midday sun. His head lolled over against his shoulder, banging into the window with each bump in the untended road.

*

They’d stayed one more night in Pittsburgh, Amelia silent and mourning. Patrick had initially tried to get her to talk or to eat or engage at all, but she stayed curled up on the hotel bed, twirling the ring around and around her finger and Patrick, instead of pressing her further, sat beside her in silence, his eyes turned toward a television that Amelia couldn’t comprehend. Every now and then, he’d reach out and stroked Amelia’s head, or give her shoulder a light squeeze, but it didn’t bother her. She didn’t even register his presence at all. Eventually she’d disappeared into the bathroom. She sat on the floor of the tub, the shower streaming over her over her, pounding into the backs of her shoulders. It beat out the blood, the pain. It beat out the tenseness. It beat out

the itch that drove her. She wanted to go home. When she finally emerge she was relieved to find the room empty. She folded herself up, around the ring and went to sleep.

*

“Hey,” Amelia poked at Patrick until he opened his eyes, groggy confusion meeting her gaze. “I want to switch soon.”

Patrick nodded, sitting up in his chair and stretching out as much as he could in the confines of the car. Amelia heard his shoulder pop. “How long has it been?”

“A few hours. If you don’t mind driving for like, the next four, I’ll drive us the last stretch home.”

Patrick agreed and Amelia pulled off at the next exit. They topped off their gas, grabbed coffees, Amelia ran a few laps around the car while Patrick went to the bathroom, smoked a cigarette. Within twenty minutes they were back on the road, music buzzing through the car’s blown speakers.

Amelia dug her cell phone out of her bag, switching it back to life, dreading the onslaught of messages that awaited her, but ready now, unintimidated. There were thirty voicemails alone. Which Patrick told her was the max her phone would hold. Amelia went through the text messages, clicking on them, but not reading them to make the notification go away. Her most recent one was from her mother and was timestamped right after she’d hung up on her father.

Amelia moved through her voicemails. She listened to the first few seconds of one from her brother, screaming about her busting out his window. The next one from him, his tone was softer, almost afraid, he mentioned their mom a lot. There were so many from her parents. Over half of the messages were from them. Amelia deleted them, one after the other, without even letting them play all the way through. She did however, listen to Jen's voicemails. She'd left two. The first was dated two days after Amelia's non-committal sort of quit, the second was the last message that her phone had managed to record. She played the first on speaker, cutting off the radio so Patrick could listen as well.

"Amelia. This is your boss. Or have you forgotten about that? I got your message, not that it told me much, I've been calling and calling, but your phone just goes straight to voicemail. Obviously this job is not that important to you. You've displayed an incredibly negative and selfish attitude over the last few weeks, culminating in your storming out during the computer crisis that you created, Amelia. Yes, you. If you ever do decide that it's worth your time to return to this job understand that it will only be to discuss your severance package." And the message clicked off.

"Damn Amelia! She let you have it."

Amelia smiled and shrugged, "I mean, I kind of deserve it."

"Whater you gonna do? Jen's not going to give you a recommendation. Like for any job."

She laughed, "I'm banking on being a girl in STEM. Somebody will hire me so they can get a diversity tax break or something."

"Still, you can't put Jen down as your last employer. Just put me as the manager when you apply places."

"Thanks man." Amelia continued cleaning out her inbox. She laughed out loud when she listened through Jen's second message. "Patrick, dude, please listen to this!" She put the phone back on speaker and played the message back again.

"Hey Amelia. This is Jen... from work. I just got off the phone with your parents. Wow, it sounds like you're going through a lot. I just want you to know that you really were a good employee. We were really happy with your work. I can't offer you your job back, but I want you know we have no hard feelings. You're a wonderful girl. Really. Max is doing great! My husband and I are so happy that he's a part of our lives and that's all thanks to you. I know Max would be really happy to see you, so you know, if you come back, we'd love for you to stop and, and see him sometime. I hope you're doing alright. We miss you!"

"Can you believe that?!" Amelia bubbled over with laughter, she felt the hole inside her growing smaller. "You think she thought she'd get in trouble or something? 'Cause she was so feisty?"

Patrick shook his head, "That's, wow."

"Right? But let's all be clear, I do not have a job there anymore."

“But you are welcome to go play with her dog. You’re such a ‘wonderful girl’”.

“Good thing she told me that. I never would’ve known.” Amelia switched her music back on, fingering her ring as she sank back into her seat.

*

When they were almost at the South Carolina border, Patrick and Amelia switched places again. Amelia had left her phone on, now that she was returning home, and was surprised that not a single message had come through. It passed through her mind that maybe her family had given up on her, but the thought didn’t upset her. Nor did it relieve her. It just was. And as the landscape around her, densely pinewood-ed and hilly, grew more and more familiar, Amelia felt a strength she’d never felt before stirring inside her. It seeped into her skin through the ring, and flushed through her whole being. It was both peaceful and energizing.

When they were close enough to home, Amelia pulled off the interstate, preferring to take back roads the rest of the way home, even if it added extra time to their journey. She cranked down her window and Patrick did the same. A familiar sticky sheen rose up on her flesh.. Amelia turned up the radio so she could hear it over the wind.

“The good thing about this cast is I can still hold a knife. So if you ever twist my arm again I’ll be sure to put up a fight.”

“I’m glad you brought me.”

Amelia slowed the car down a bit so she they could speak without yelling.
“I’m glad you came too.”

Patrick let out half a laugh, “Although it’s not like I really had a choice.”

Amelia thought perhaps there was a bit a disdain in his voice, but when she looked across at him, he had a soft smile resting across his face.

“Cuz I was young, I thought I didn’t have to care about anything, but I’m older now and know that I should.”

Amelia studied the ring glimmering on her hand, “Still,” she insisted, “I wouldn’t have found where Ingrid belonged if I’d tried to do it alone.”

“I think you would have.”

Amelia shook her head, “No, I would’ve given up at the library.”

Patrick looked over at her, surprised, “That’s was like, the most helpful place we went.”

Amelia rested her elbow on the window frame, leaning her temple into her fist, her gaze further down the road. “I wouldn’t have gotten all that though. I would’ve gone. Sat at that computer. Gotten angry with the internet. Wandered around, maybe have found the downstairs room, but I wouldn’t have figured out how to work everything. I wouldn’t have gotten a librarian, I wouldn’t have found Greg and I’d have driven home that same afternoon angry and depressed, directed by my inside insects and clutching on to that box in hopeless desperation.”

“Oh.”

They sat there together, Amelia directing the car around the bends in the road, neither speaking to the other.

“C’mon Chelsea, speak a little French to me. Heard you spent two whole semesters drinking wine. While I was stuck in Jersey, tryin’ to save some money. I guess I’m just another thing you left behind.”

“This is a very whiny song.” Patrick looked over at Amelia.

“You can change it. Go for cup holder speakers instead.”

He laughed, “Your car is so sophisticated.” Patrick thumbed through his phone and found something better for them to listen to, turned off the radio, and let the cup holder amplify the music as best it could. “Hey Amelia?”

“Yeah?”

“This has been bothering me. Like this whole time. How’d you know where I live?”

“Oh,” Amelia felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the southern weather rise up in her cheeks, she kept her eyes on the road before them. “So, I’m the I.T. person.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And part of my job was to put everybody’s information in the digital database.”

“And you just memorized everybody’s addresses? That’s impressive.”

Amelia pursed her lips, “Well, no, but... when I’d have nothing else to do, I’d go find someone’s address and google maps their house.”

Patrick side eyed her, leaning away, almost out the open window, “Why?”

Amelia shrugged, “It was interesting! That woman Fern, her yard looks like a hoarder yard, you’d have no idea right? She’s so put together at work. So yeah, I’d just look somebody up and then try imagine what they were like, at home.”

“You did this to everybody?”

“No,” she blushed again, she hoped he’d attribute it to the intensity of the sun’s setting raise beating into their faces, “Just the people I thought were interesting.”

“Aw, you thought I was interesting!”

“I looked you up after that time you sat outside with me. When you weren’t weird about my box.” She picked a strand of hair out of the corner of her mouth, “You were normal. It was nice.” Amelia refused to look at him again for the rest of the ride.

Not long after that, Amelia pulled up in front of Patrick’s house; as he stepped out of the car, Amelia felt a heaviness creep up from her toes and settle in her chest. She didn’t know what to do with it. Patrick shut the door behind him, then leaned his elbows onto the open window frame, stooping down so his

head was inside the car. His hair was long enough now that his head didn't look as lump as it did a few weeks ago.

"Well, I'd say I'll see you Monday..." he voice tapered off.

Amelia shrugged, "It's fine."

"Well just because we don't work together doesn't mean we won't see each other. Wanna get coffee or..."

"Well, I mean." Amelia picked at the plastic, peeling off her steering wheel.

"You owe me like a thousand bucks after this trip." Patrick ducked out the window, but stayed crouched over so Amelia could still see his face.

"It's not that much!"

"Gas, hotels, meal, a hospital visit-"

"Well discuss it Monday." Amelia cut him off, laughing, then pulled back out onto the street, waving goodbye to Patrick in her rear view mirror.

*

Amelia drove in silence through the suburban houses that directed her home. She let the wind and the heat fill the interior of the car. She breathed it into her lungs, felt it stirring in her nose, in her ears. The sun was setting now, and the air Amelia drove through was thick and golden, almost orange. She turned onto her street, the arching trees now a luminaria guiding her to her front door.

She pulled into her driveway, unsurprised to see her mother's car parked under the crepe myrtle tree. Amelia parked beside it, sliding her phone into her pocket and walking around the car, up to the house. Before she reached the steps her mother had reached her, wrapping Amelia tightly in her arms. Amelia placed her arms around her mother's waist, clasping her hands together and running her thumb over top Ingrid's ring. Maureen didn't say anything, just held her daughter close, the two of them rocking with the breeze. Maureen finally let go when Frog realized there was someone new outside and began barking at the screen door.

Amelia walked past her mother, pulling open the door to let the dog out. She crouched down next to Frog on the porch, her excitement making her whole bottom half shake as she pranced in place before Amelia who rubbed her ears and scratched her chest, happy to see the dog once more. Amelia kissed Frog's forehead, then stood to face her mother, there were tears in her eyes.

"Hi, Mom."

Maureen clasped her into a hug again, but Amelia pulled away.

"I'm okay, Mom. I've always been okay." Amelia moved over and sat down on one of the rocking chairs on her porch. Maureen stayed in place, leaning against the porch railing, her eyes never leaving Amelia's face. Amelia however, kept her eyes forward, her hand resting on Frog's head when she came and sat beside her. Around them, cicada's trilled hard in the air. Amelia inhaled and exhaled, slow and deep. "I'll fix Jack's truck."

“Oh.” Maureen took the chair beside Amelia, “That’s, that’s taken care of.”

“Well I’ll pay him back then. Or Dad. Or the insurance company or whoever.” She looked over at her mother, who’s eyes were now trained on Amelia’s bandaged hand, “It’s fine.” she insisted, “I cut it on his window, but it’s fine.” She flexed her fingers as if that’d prove her point. Maureen nodded in response so Amelia figured it did.

“Where’s your box?”

Amelia swallowed, and played with the ring on her hand, “She’s safe. I found where she belonged.”

“Jack said it had ashes in it Amelia. Human ashes.”

“Yeah, it did.” She looked directly into her mother’s face.

“You ran away for a dead thing.”

“I didn’t run away. She was a person. She’d been lost. Mom. For like over ten years. I got her back to her family. To the man that loved her.”

“And you lost your job, Amelia.”

Frog laid her head on Amelia’s knee, and Amelia caressed the back of her neck, “It was worth it.” She looked over at her mom, whose face exhibited evident concern. Amelia reached out and took her hand. “Really Mom. I’m good. I’ll get another job. I never really liked it there anyway.” She let go of her

mother and leaned her head back against the chair, rocking herself gently, smiling as she felt the last bits of sun clinging to her cheeks.

They sat there together and apart, the dog moving back and forth between them. Late summer insects filled the air around them with their raucous chorus, but nothing moved beneath Amelia's skin. The sun sank below the horizon and its heat sank down into Amelia's stomach. She moved the ring around so that its gem faced her palm, clasping it tight in her fist. Amelia kept her eyes closed as she rocked on the porch of her little house. She heard her mother stir, felt her lips press against the top of her head. Her steps descended the porch, she called for Frog. Amelia opened her eyes as the car's engine turned over. She waved to her mother as she pulled away from the house, then tucked her fingers beneath her chin, spinning the ring back around. The stone of it rested between her teeth, she ran her tongue back and forth over it, and Amelia was happy.