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## Ivy Dreams On

Emily Davis

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IVY DREAMS ON

by

Emily Davis

Bachelor of Arts  
Arizona State University, 2016

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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## ABSTRACT

Ivy Dreams On is a realistic young adult novel which explores the effects of grief and trauma on adolescents through humor and non-traditional narrative. This book will appeal to readers of young and new adult, written in the spirit of Stephen Chbosky (*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*) and Laurie Halse Anderson (*Speak*).

There was no mystery to Ivy's death: G's sister was drunk, G's sister was high, G's sister fell off a cliff. But when D, an ex-friend and longtime target of G's torment, insists that there's more to Ivy's death, G is reluctantly moved into action. After all, D was the one to find the body and there is no way that G trusts the local sheriff, his father. Meanwhile, G's mood is somewhat improved by the fact that his parents' marriage is finally falling apart. However, the barely repressed hope that his mother will take him away when she leaves his father is shattered when she leaves by herself, and his father is set on winning full custody of his remaining child. G has no idea why his father even wants custody considering his fixation on his job and lack of patience for G's...everything. G must come to grips with the grief that has fractured his reality, the flawed humanity of the adults surrounding him, and figure out how to come to terms with the traumatic events and circumstances of his life.

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## CHAPTER 1

This is the moment

I don't know a lot about science and physics and shit, but I know that time travel is real. Not conventional human time travel. A body going from one space/time to another instantaneously—I mean, maybe that's real. I don't know. Not what I'm talking about.

This is the moment, G,

The time travel of words. The way, once uttered, words can remake existence. Make it bend and weave, restructure it, seep back through time and memory and transform our perceptions, shattering everything we thought we knew, change the past, change the future. The way we felt that first day of fourth, sixth, ninth grade, our mother's hugs, our first kiss, the first time we got punched in the face and punched someone in the face, the first time we fucked up and why we did it—we thought it was because of this one thing, but really it was because of another, or maybe nothing at all, and we thought this moment here and that moment there—that was a turning point, a pivot, a fulcrum, a hinge, a center, a focus, a heart.

“This is the moment, G,” she said.

We were wrong. And right. Things change. The words are said aloud and race back through time and reshape the world, alter and amend, modify, revise, refine. Grand sweeping edits to the narrative of our lives. Fuck that. Should've paid attention to high school English. But I'd thought what good would reading Shakespeare and Fitzgerald and Hemingway do? They're just dead old white guys. What makes character, what makes plot—dig deep, what are the motivations, read the story and tell me, what is this about? And then, what is it about about?

“This is the moment, G,” she said. “I’m gone.”

Spoiler alert: it’s about the human ego. Write what you know. And all we know is how to be human. Even when we’re writing about aliens and dogs and zombies and Cthulhu, we’re writing about humans. It’s all we can do, write about ourselves in circles forever and call it philosophy and physics, literature and neuroscience. Chemistry, chemicals, chemosignals. Art.

This is the moment.

This is the moment.

This is the moment.

“This is the moment, G,” she said. “I’m gone.”

“I didn’t even know you were here,” I answered. But she’d already vanished from the doorframe.

## CHAPTER 2

the car's a convertible, O loathes it and loves it in turns, top down, *useless, useless*, she'd say, *so impractical*, her voice dripping with derision, with self-deprecation and mocking because she was never one for airs of practicality too in love with whimsy, with irony, with pettiness. top down, she braids her hair back, grabs up the keys from the granite countertop, says, *let's go for a ride, kiddo*, fourteen to her sixteen and stuck in the passenger seat, everything aching, and i never really thought to say no. she peels out of the garage and drives out of the zipcode, gets on a highway to nowhere, where the speed limit is 75 and the road cuts through all the space between states, one big city to the next. gets to the proper desolate nothingness she wants and it's like lift-off, going 100, 105, 110 mph, the gale winds battering at our ears, at O's hair, escaped tufts flying, braid whipping behind her, the sun burning against my scalp. O leans forward, fiddles with a few things and music comes blasting, i sink into the seat, knees creaking as my feet go flat against the bottom of the car, let my head rest on the side, Top 40 and wind competing for dominance, and it's all just white noise and blurred scenery, cerulean sky pressed against sepia landscape. *we're going to vegas*, O says, *time of our lives*. we're flying flying flying down the highway, body against the seat, feet against the floor, and i have never felt so still.

## CHAPTER 3

Shrink: Do you think that was a turning point?

me: What?

Shrink: Going to Las Vegas with O? Or is there some other reason you decided to share this particular memory with me first?

[Note: Shrink did not actually verbalize the letter O. Shrink said O's real name. Most of the time actually when there are letters—G, D, O, K, J—the gamut, it's in place of the full name.

Shrink: Why do you think you do that?

me: What?

Shrink: Letters, instead of the full name?

me: Never thought about it before.

Shrink: But if you had to think about it.

me: D can be anyone. K can be anyone. There are so many G names in the world, none of them have to be mine. Maybe I like to pretend.

Shrink: Is that helpful?

me: What the fuck does that mean?]

Shrink: Do you need me to reiterate my question?

me: Huh?

Shrink: Why that particular memory first?

me: I don't know. It was a good time. O knew a bouncer or bartender from a previous trip, maybe someone who owns a club? I don't know. We partied all weekend.

Shrink: That wasn't what you told me.

me: Huh?

Shrink: You told me about the car ride, the driving. Not the end destination.

me: Yeah. Whatever.



Shrink: Please, don't do that. Don't obfuscate. Why did you tell me about the car ride?

me: It was a good time.

[Note from me: Session ended after that. Shrink said she didn't appreciate my dishonesty, said she was willing to wait for me to be ready to tell my story, but didn't want to muddy the waters with the lies I wanted to tell myself. I told her if I believed something to be true, didn't that make it true? She said, do you really believe that?]

## CHAPTER 4

dovetail, *n.*

Pronunciation: U.S., /'dɒv,teɪl/

1.

- a. Something in the shape of a dove's tail.
- b. *spec.* A tenon cut in the shape of a dove's tail spread, or of a reversed wedge, to fit into an indenture or mortise of corresponding shape; also, a mortise shaped to receive such a tenon.

dovetail, *v.*

1. *trans.* To fit together or join by means of dovetails, or by a similar method.

Const. *in, into, to.*

2. *fig.* To unite compactly as if by dovetails; to adjust exactly, so as to form a continuous whole.

3. *intr.* To fit into each other, so as to form a compact and harmonious whole or company.

dove, *n.*

Pronunciation: U.S., /dɒv/

1.

- a. A bird of the Columbidae, or pigeon family.
- b. Applied to the Holy Spirit.
- c. A messenger of peace and deliverance from anxiety.
- d. A gentle, innocent, or loving woman or child; also an innocent or simpleton.
- e. An appellation of tender affection.

dove, *v.*

Loved you and dove you. R. Browning

D, *n.*

1.

- a. Daughter of family friends.
- b. Witness, bystander, passerby.
- c. Gone.

## CHAPTER 5

D finds Ivy's body washed up on the beach beneath the cliffs of Gemini Point. The body is not pristine. There are vivid bruises, gaping cuts, painful looking abrasions that must've stung in the saltwater if Ivy hadn't been dead when she got them, if Ivy had been awake when she was in the water. On the other hand, the body isn't bloated, hasn't begun to decompose—it's winter, for one, a deep preserving cold, but also, no one had even known that Ivy was missing.

For all that people search desperately for bodies of their vanished loved ones, Ivy's body hadn't even had any time to be missed before it was found.

Time of Death: ???

Cause of Death: ???

Why of Death: ???

It must've been awkward for the first responders. Those first on the scene, those paramedics and sheriff's deputies and maybe a coroner, because Ivy was clearly dead and did paramedics—those whose skills lay with keeping the heart beating—come out for the clearly dead? *There's a body on the beach*, D might've said to the 911 call, or maybe she called the sheriff's department directly, or maybe even the sheriff, because there was no scrambling need to search to ID, the moniker of Jane Doe never came to mind, because Ivy was the sheriff's daughter, one of the R family scions, and a favored child of Carefree. Known.

*I know her*, D might've said, and that wouldn't have been a lie. D being one of the few people who knew Ivy beyond the angles of her face, the tidal forces of her presence, the charismatic waves.

The news leaks. A text, a whispered word, a passerby photo, tagged RIP Ivy on a facebook-instagram-tumblr-twitter post, a snapchat story, and all of Carefree knows about the body on the beach that used to be Ivy R before she's been zipped up and shipped off to the morgue.

Freak accident. Is the conclusion the gossip mills of Carefree come to. *Tragic* accident, the more simpering, patronizing adults might say. But anyone who knows anything under the age of twenty-five knows about the party that was thrown the night before in the empty Atterton mansion, the relevant parental units living abroad in Switzerland or Belgium or wherever the fuck and their kid, B, a junior at Arcadia High, whose greatest ambition in life is to fuck as many nubile bodies as possible, experience every drug ever cut or mixed, and possibly, to die young and pretty, as the host extraordinaire. There's always been something wet in B's eyes, like ink, that seemed to drip into his smile. In any case, Ivy was his white whale. The parties were always for her. Need to retrace the victim's steps? It starts and ends at B's soirée high-class—drugs, sex, alcohol, roofies, rape, ODs, and alcohol poisoning, unchaperoned minors doing stupid-ass shit and living their fucking lives out from under thumbs of anyone else. Best part is it's only a few minutes' walk from the Atterton mansion to Gemini Point. Guess poor stupid drunk Ivy didn't pay enough attention and walked right off a cliff. Poor Sheriff R. Tragic.

Of course, I was at that party too. We hadn't gone together, maybe she hadn't even expected me to come, through the crush of people, the body shimmer, sloshing red solo

cups, pulsing music, when her gaze flickered to mine, mapped the points of my face, the targets of my body, her eyes widened, before settling into something that crinkled at the corners. All at once her face relaxed and the arc of her body went loose and she spun and smiled and shrieked with laughter.

It will be the question everyone is asked and asks at Arcadia: When was the last time you saw Ivy R?

Waking up after was the same as I did any day. Didn't know how I got home, but there I was, twisted in bedsheets, sweating into my mattress. My room was dim, only the smallest slivers of lights gleaming through the blinds, but even that was too much. Coming to consciousness was excruciating. My bones crackled inside my skin. The hangover was profound and the only thing that stuck in my head was *how have I gotten so old?*

Managed to get myself to my feet, vision hazing by the sides, head rush and heart rush, cold sweat at the back of my neck reminding me how I'm always, always fucked. It was only after breakfast, after a few hours of x-box, that Mom was in the doorway and she was crying.

It wasn't like breaking a bone. The shock of being hit in the face. The ache and pain. Stuff you can see coming is easy.

It was a closed door. A back turned. An extended, empty silence. The moment of expectation, the agony of the unknowable, it's a crapshoot, anyone's guess, yet knowing, *knowing* something is coming.

Mom never cried. Not for anything.

"This is where you've been." Despite the flatness of the words, there was a sideways accusation that hit in the belly.

“I didn’t know you were looking for me.” My fingers darted to my side where my cell phone rested on the floor, screen dark as it had been since I woke up. One look at the lit-up home screen showed no missed calls, but a string of texts.

There was something wrong with the set of my mom’s face. It had gone concave like something had been scooped out of her body.

“You were out last night. You were there.”

“Last night’s kind of hazy.” Everything had deadened to a dull ache with pain killers and food, but I plucked at my shirt where it stuck in places. Cold sweat still dotted the knobs of my spine. “There was a party.”

“G.” She was still crying. It was as if the world had shifted overnight, more mass gathering in the ground beneath us, a higher gravity weighing down our limbs, the crown of my head.

“Just tell me. Tell me.” There was me. There was Mom. That left two. “What did he—”

“You were with her. Weren’t you? Weren’t you with her?”

## CHAPTER 6

rumors almost create themselves. take a look, a word. an ugly photo posted with the right caption, the right tags, or maybe that adjective should be the binary opposite. spamming, trolling, online never-ending bombardment, get a phone number, an e-mail address, the war is won. people care so fucking much, but Dovetail never did, always so above it all. *i'm just an old soul*, she'd say with a laugh and O would roll her eyes, say, *way of the future, babe, you're not doing yourself any favors*, and Dovetail would turn to me and give me that smile, *that smile*, that wry half-twist of her lips, divot in one cheek, would say, *you'll help me with this stuff, right G?* but i never got around to it. it was never a priority for her, so when it comes down to it, i point other people in that direction, wind them up, let them go. it's too easy. an annoyance for Dovetail, sure, an irritation, a frustration, have to get a new phone number, shut down facebook, get off social media, but for a freak who never cared, it lacks punch, lacks originality, lacks *weight*. it's in the lightness of her eyes, the way she looks through people, tunes them out, makes the words intangible. even worse when she doesn't even notice, an entire lack of awareness of my body near her body, and shouldn't there be some sense, something old and ancient and instinctual, predator and prey—how does someone even live, even survive, without feeling the never-ending creep of people, of eyes, of intentions along the nerves of the skin, pricking the muscles, an unceasing pressure. it starts with ants in her clothes during her gym period. can't get caught in the girls' locker room, so i have A record the discovery, the reflexive gasp and stumble backwards, the scramble to brush off the things that have crawled up her hands, her legs,



shake out her clothes, ant bites dotting her skin. no shriek, no scream, but that was expected, phase one, after all, and now there's a new tenseness to the clench of her jaw, to the scan of her eyes. phase two is gum worked into the ends of long, well-cared for hair, is a can of soda poured into an open backpack, are legs out to trip and elbows out to hit during passing periods in the halls, is an ongoing semester art project disappearing into nothing. and it hurts, it all does, i can tell, everyone can tell, but she comes back, she does, with chin angled up and a brazenly shaved head, with a washed-out backpack and stained notebooks, but still legible notes, with bruises and a matching condescending smirk, and with reddened eyes, but a new project, worked on at home, in school, with greater intricacies and saturated colors, saying *i won't let you win. you can't beat me down.* an almost renewed confidence, determination, with only the slightest of tremors to the brush of her fingers across her lips. O watches me as i prepare for phase three and says, *are you sure you know what you're doing?* and i say, *of course*, and she says, *you are such a fucking moron*, which really isn't fair, because everything everything has gone to plan so far. phase three is live bats in her locker. done between second and third period, she goes to exchange her books, the sheen of her scalp still bright, make-up sharp, weight to her step, curve to her walk, chin high. opens it up and they fly out, they circle, they cling, hooked-thumbs and membrane wings and fur, she screams. she screams and screams and screams. she can't see me for the fear, doesn't know it's me at the moment, but the next monday when she's finally back at school, there's a snarl to her lips, an awareness to all the space around her, to the corner of her eye, and a coldness to her face, a brightness to her gaze that has nothing to do with warmth and i smile.

## CHAPTER 7

Let me know if you've heard this one before.

There are two muffins baking in the oven.

One muffin says to the other, "Phew, is it getting hot in here or is it just me?"

The other muffin says, "AAAAHHH!! A TALKING MUFFIN!"

Or.

What do you call a group of unorganized cats?

A cat-astrophe.

Ha ha, get it?

What about this one.

What do you do if someone thinks an onion is the only food that can make them cry?

Throw a coconut at their face.

## CHAPTER 8

A couple of years ago there was a string of burglaries, the homes of the wealthiest and most well-known Carefree residents were invaded, robbed, and vandalized. It was like magic—the thieves getting in and out of these mansions, manors, estates without a single person seeing them, no gardener or housemaid or cook, let alone the actual residents. It was like they knew when all eyes would be turned away, when the fates aligned so that the house was empty and at rest.

Three incidents went by, some people in an uproar (though, personally, I felt very safe), the neighborhood watch turned into ex-military professionals, extravagant estates turned into fortresses, and the sheriff's department called on-demand like a personal security force, when the thieves got caught by a cleaning lady and her grandson.

I don't know why I remember this more than anything else the night Dad comes home after Ivy's body is found on the beach. The two events are years apart and in no way and shape the same. No one's going to lay in wait to throw rotten fruit at the sheriff and his deputies demanding justice for Ivy like they did for Renata and Alejo, demanding headlines and compassion and results. Ivy was rich and Ivy was white and besides even that, Ivy fell off a cliff.

He comes home early. His car edges up the incline of the driveway, rocks crunching beneath his tires and the cement. The brakes squeak, the chafing noise of the engine gutters out, the door opens, a sigh of release from the car's suspension as feet come down and everything is lifted from the vehicle. The door is closed with a caress.

Mom and I listen to this from the dining room, watch through the window, as we've done hundreds of times before. She's sitting at the table, chair pulled out and turned to face the front door. Her hands are in her lap. They're loose, two commas upturned on her thighs, her elbows in angles. I am on the floor, back against the wall by the kitchen doorway. My head rolls to the side and there are two dark lines on the doorframe at eye-level: O, 33 inches, 2 years!! and G, 31 inches, 2 years!!

*Damn*, I think. The front door opens, two footsteps enter with a whisper. *I was a small-ass baby. Ivy was the big one then.* Ignoring the fact that Ivy was always the big one, no matter how much breadth my body gained, limb by limb, muscle and bone.

After Renata and Alejo were murdered, Dad didn't come home for weeks, or if he did, maybe for a change of clothes or a quick shower, I never saw him. He didn't need someone to demand justice from him for the two victims, he demanded it from himself, from the moment he saw the bodies, grandmother's hand futilely reaching for her grandson in rigor mortis. How perfectly picturesque. It inflamed him to catch the thieves-turned-murderers more than the financial loss of the burglaries ever did, and he blamed himself that he hadn't been invested sooner, that if he'd only cared more, caught the perpetrators earlier, Renata and Alejo... But he hadn't liked the way that some of the wealthier, more powerful people of Carefree tried to use the sheriff's department like it belonged to them, and he'd always resented the upper-crust families that had been hit, had thought, for a brief moment, that maybe they were getting what they deserved. But of course, the worst of it never touched them.

When the fruit was thrown, accompanied by shrieks and shouts, before anything coalesced into sense, and everything was violence and movement, the sheriff and his

deputies dived to the ground and hurled themselves behind cover, hands dropping to their belts. But Sheriff R got to them first, yelled, “HOLD. Hold your fire.” And covered in mold and juice and bits of pulp, he walked over to where Alejo’s older brother and younger sister were crouched behind a car and got to his knees, putting a hand on each of their shoulders and promised on the souls of his children that he’d find the monsters who’d hurt their grandmother and their brother and make them pay.

At least, that’s what Deputy S told me.

Every time we come in contact, it’s like seeing Dad for the first time. I never remember his face, just his hands, worn, callused palms, a map of creases I wish I knew how to read, and long, delicate fingers, made for the violin or the piano. Just his hands and the implacable line of his back.

He unbuckles his belt as he walks through the door. Shoulders held in a tight, straight line, head level, stare forward. He drops it with a heavy clunk onto the dining room table and Mom and I flinch at the sound. His hair is dark brown and clipped short, there are crow’s feet around hazel eyes and laugh lines around a wide mouth, bowed upward as if he was born with the natural inclination to smile. He has thick eyebrows, an aquiline nose, and an angular face that changes when looked at from different focal points, facets on a gem.

He’d gotten the nickname Sherriff Handsome when he was first elected and though he’d smile and laugh when he heard it, I could always see the tightness in his face from where I was.

Mom stands up, chair scraping backwards. Her hands hang by her sides, still loose. “E,” she starts to say his name but can’t get through it. She sits back down. Dad takes two

steps, long strides that devour the space between them, and stands before her, looking down. He falls to his knees, back curving until his head is in her lap, arms wrapped around her. His face is turned to the side. I can see him crying. Mom puts her arms around his neck.

I was eleven when those fuckers who murdered Renata and Alejo got convicted and sentenced for life. There was a string of charges including second degree murder. “Second degree?” I asked Deputy S. I was often at the sheriff’s department because Mom was at work until five and O was off with her friends and I wasn’t allowed to be alone. Deputy S had a neat mustache and a perpetually wrinkled uniform and was one of my more frequent watchers.

“It wasn’t premeditated,” Deputy S said. He made a noise with his tongue and shook his head. “Doesn’t matter though. What those fuckers did to that boy. Your dad wouldn’t settle for anything less than nailing them to the wall and letting them bleed.”

*Fuckers*, I mouthed the word gleefully, though it was nowhere near the first time I’d heard it. Eleven was a weird age where adults started relaxing around you, started telling you more adult things, started re-negotiating the boundaries, started slipping up with what could and could not be told, what was too much, started thinking, *well, they’ve got to grow up sometime*.

My brain got caught on certain words. *Boy. Did*. Alejo had been seventeen and that seemed more than boyhood to me. “What’d they do?”

Deputy S stopped mid-motion, looked at me. “They did, uh, various things. Horrible things. Uh. Maybe you should ask your parents about this one.”

Like that was going to happen. But I shrugged and said, “Okay,” and made to get up as if I was going to see my dad.

“No.” Deputy S scrambled forward, the loudness of his cry turning heads. “No,” he said again, calmer. “Your dad’s got a lot on his plate right now. I don’t want you to bother him about this. Look, G, what do you know about sex?”

“We had a sex-ed class. We talked about puberty. Is this about urges?”

Deputy S levelled a finger at me. “You’re a smart-ass, you know that right? No, it’s just,” he stopped, a frown tugging at his mouth, then started again. “They violated that boy, is all. Beat him to all hell too. Who knows what kind of life he would have had if he’d lived.” Deputy S shrugged. “May be a blessing in disguise, a mercy. Sheriff R, it doesn’t matter to him, you know? He puts his whole heart into his job, into every single case. He does right by the law, but more importantly he does right by the people. It’s why everyone keeps re-electing him.”

“And here I was thinking it was just cause he was the incumbent.”

“Smart-ass. Where’d you hear a word like that.”

A mercy? Where was the line between too much and okay?

Mom’s face is unhappy. She’s crying too and her fingers are twisted as much as they can be in Dad’s short hair. Dad pulls his face away for a moment, looks at me, and holds out an arm.

My head starts to ache and I unclench my jaw, create conscious space between my teeth. I walk over to them and Dad tugs me down until I’m on my knees with him and his arm encases me and Mom’s hand is on the top of my head and I let myself be reconstituted

in this mass of grief, each structure stabilizing the other, because Ivy is dead and all I can think about is Deputy S's mustache when said the word *heart*.



## CHAPTER 9

OK, *adj.*

Pronunciation: U.S., /,oʊ'keɪ/

*colloq.* (orig. *U.S.*).

1.

- a. All correct, all right; satisfactory, good; well, in good health or order. In early use, occasionally more intensively: outstanding, excellent. Now frequently in somewhat weakened sense: adequate, acceptable. *OK by* (someone): fine by (a person), acceptable to (a person). Chiefly predicative.
- b. Fashionable, modish; prestigious, high-class.
- c. Of a person: decent, trustworthy; congenial.
- d. Appropriate, suitable; permissible, allowed. Frequently with *for*.
- e. Of a person: comfortable, at ease, content, satisfied.

Used in a sentence: Seriously, what the fuck does *okay* mean? This doesn't tell me shit.

## CHAPTER 10

Shrink: Interesting. Have you noticed what you do with O and Ivy?

me: I'm sure you'll tell me.

Shrink: You separate the two as if they're different people.

me: O hated her name. Ivy was the nickname she asked everyone to use. So everyone did.

Shrink: Except you. Generally, in your memories, she's O. After she died, as a body, she's Ivy. I think there's some disassociation going on here.

me: God, you're stupid. You think you're so smart, but you're stupid.

Shrink: Excuse me.

me: The memories are from when she was alive. I liked to piss her off. No point in doing it when she's a corpse. The dead don't get annoyed.

Shrink: So what I'm getting from this is that you're smarter than you let on. You don't do things by accident. Then why the mediocre grades?

me: And listen to Mr. C gibber about the Revolutionary War? I have better things to do with my life. Maybe that's why Ivy fell off Gemini Point. Brain turned to mush from boredom.

Shrink: Let's try this again.

[Note from me: Shrink said session was unproductive. I kind of had fun.]

## CHAPTER 11

dad calls one of his emt friends, *common childhood injury*, they say, *we see it all the time, don't worry about it*, and they tell him over the phone how to press down near the radius bone and slowly bend the elbow until everything pops right back into place and he fixes the dislocation right there in the store. *kids are funny*, the friend says, *everything is still brand new and growing so their bones can bend and their muscles can't keep everything in place. G's a little old for Nursemaid's Elbow, but six is still within the range*. O had laughed when i started crying after dad's sharp tug had popped something loose, holding her new toy to her chest, gloating about her district spelling bee win and subsequent reward. *you're such a brat*, she says, *don't call your brother a brat*, says mom, *you okay now, buddy*, says dad, one of his hands rubbing at my affected arm. *it's better*, i answer and am then ecstatic when i get to choose my own toy, O's sour face, mouth open, adding to the glee. *but it was his fault he got hurt anyway*, complains O, *he's the one who threw a temper tantrum and wouldn't get up. he shouldn't get a toy cause he cried*. mom turns her head, *don't be petty*, she says.

## CHAPTER 12

Three weeks ago, I got caught slashing D's tires and Dad grounded me from social media. Three days after Ivy's death when I go back to school I'm almost glad that I got punished. I don't know what would have happened if I had seen all the notifications and all the well-wishes and all the hashtags, especially at first. #RIPIvy. #toosoon. #yolo.

The hush that follows me everywhere I go the second I step into Arcadia is slightly easier to deal with.

B has the locker next to mine. His face is sallow, as I get closer his limbs spasm and sag as if I carry around extra gravity.

"Yolo?" I say to him, my voice dry as dust.

"Her motto, man. Gotta get it while the getting is good." My lips twitch, and B seems to take that as approval. Bolstered, he says, "And boy, did Ivy get it." He brays with laughter and it shatters the silence, conversations suddenly scattering down the hallway, and I wonder if I'm the only one that can hear the hysteria outlining his voice.

The first three class periods proceed as if there is nothing different. Teachers drone on. I don't pay attention. The only variation to routine is when I don't turn in work, there is rambling on about extensions and malleable due dates. Grief counseling. Work with my advisor.

"Okay," I tell them.

D catches me during the passing period, steps right into my path, eyes level with mine, something soft in them once more.

“Something to say, Dovie?” I try to raise my eyebrows in question, an obnoxious grin in accompaniment, but my mouth is stuck in a hard line, and every one of my facial nerves and muscles is bleeding resentment. I wait for her reflexive flinch at the nickname, the one I had ground into her bones, but there’s nothing.

“I’m sorry about Ivy,” she says and acid eats at my throat.

I usually try to slip off campus for lunch, even though as a sophomore, I’m not allowed. But all eyes are my way today and for the foreseeable, so there’s no chance of that. Thankfully, T, a senior, has a free period before lunch so he goes and springs for fast food, handing out burgers and fries and milkshakes like a benevolent god. He knows better than to hand me a milkshake; I don’t like sweet things, so I eat some fries and can’t help but notice that Ivy is thick in the air, fractured into bits and pieces. T and B and A and J and S who are all in my immediate vicinity try to act as if everything is normal, even though J is crying into her burger, and there’s white noise in my brain that prevents the comprehension of any words being said, except one, and then fragments become recognizable.

*i heard she fell off a cliff*

*body was so broken it was unrecognizable*

*her face was cut up like, with a knife or something*

*she was high on cloud nine on acid on e on coke was talking to*

*nah she was just drunk off her face i swear when i saw her*

*that she survived the fall with the rocks and then drowned, like how sad is that*

*bet she jumped off that cliff for attention what a whore*

Some senior fuckwad that Ivy had done and then ditched the next morning, bitter that he couldn't keep Arcadia's golden girl's attention. A football player, tall and broad, with a steady set to his shoulders and a sneer on his face. Did he think because I was four inches shorter and over fifty pounds lighter that I wouldn't do anything?

*i'm sorry about ivy*

No one says anything when I stand up or tries to stop me. I realize that they didn't hear what that shithead said because they were so focused on aiming for normal. That's okay.

I walk over to his table. His back is to me. His friends, their eyes widen, but before they can warn him, I pick up his lunch tray, turn the food onto the ground, and smash the plastic into his face as hard as I can.

He falls backward off the bench, blood dripping from his nose and mouth, but gets to his feet quickly. I don't say anything or give him a chance to say anything, I run at him and we crash together in a tangle of limbs to the concrete and I punch him again and again and again, my mouth brimming with unsaid words.

## CHAPTER 13

Try this on for size:

What do you give an armless child for Christmas?

Nothing, he wouldn't be able to open it anyways.

Or.

When I see lovers' names carved in a tree, I don't think it's sweet. I just think it's surprising how many people bring a knife on a date.

Real truth, right?

This is the best joke to ever joke:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine, they pitched their tent and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes woke up Watson and said: "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." Watson replied: "I see millions and millions of stars." Holmes said: "And what do you deduce from that?" Watson pondered for a minute and replied: "Well, if there are millions of stars, and even if a few of those have planets, it's quite likely there are some planets like Earth out there.



And if there are a few planets like Earth out there, there might also be life.” And Holmes said: “Watson, you idiot, it means that somebody stole our tent.”

## CHAPTER 14

Mom examines my hand and sighs. “That looks very broken. Another hospital visit.” We arrive at her car and get in. She buckles my seatbelt for me, ignoring my wince, and shuts the door with so much force it makes the whole car shake, because my right hand is fucked and my ribs cause gasping pain with each movement and I can’t really see out of my left eye. I swallow down the taste of hot metal, but it catches in my throat.

She turns the key in the ignition.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Her hand drops. “You’re sorry? You’re sorry?” Her voice gets louder with each repetition until she makes a choking sound and she reels back and slams her hand into the steering wheel one, two, three, four, five. I’m surprised it doesn’t break.

She stops, winded, and looks over me. There’s something complicated in her eyes. Something I can’t read, can’t parse out. I know that when she sees me, she sees Ivy too. Neither one of us looking much like Mom or Dad, but very much like each other. But it doesn’t seem like sadness, as if she was just seeing Ivy, and it doesn’t seem like anger, as if she was just seeing me, and I have no idea what a mixture would look like, but I don’t think it’s that either.

“You put another boy in the hospital,” Mom says. She gestures at me. “You’ve put yourself in the hospital. None of the fights you’ve been in before have caused as much damage. G, why would you do this now?”

Ivy has been dead three days.

Today is a Tuesday.

“His face offended me,” I reply.

Mom breathes deeply and reverses out of her parking space. “Your face offends me,” she says, “it’s swollen out of human shape, the proportions and symmetry are all wrong.”

The meeting with the principal was brutal, mostly because my dad is the sheriff and my sister just fell off a cliff, so I got a slap on the wrist. Like my dad would have ever asked for special consideration if I broke a rule. Like a light punishment is going to help me.

Mom has curly brown hair, there’s no restraining it sometimes. Even now, pulled back with a giant clip, curls have sprung free. Her face is round and her nose has a bump in the middle, with a solemn mouth, and whisky-colored eyes. She has freckles everywhere, every visible place, even going up into her hairline. Sometimes when I was little I would card through her hair to see if she had freckles on her scalp. I don’t remember if she did or didn’t.

“Why did you pick a fight?” Mom asks again.

An easy answer. “He called Ivy a whore.”

Mom’s eyes dart to me, before sticking to the road. She raises one of her hands and places it gently on the back of my neck, her fingers climbing up my scalp. “You remind me of E,” she says. “He was always so protective of the people he cared about as well. Irrationally, so. It’s a good instinct, but I don’t like seeing you hurt, and violence never solves anything.”

I pull away from her touch and bite down on the pain that moving causes me.

“Wow, really? What a shocking concept. My life is changed.”

We pull up to the hospital.

Mom is an actuary.

It means she’s really fucking smart. She calculates risk for a living. Finding the statistical significance of the p-value of whatever the hell, I don’t know. Tells her insurance company employer the probability of teenagers, of cancer, of blown out tires, of freak tornadoes, of sneezing while driving at a crucial moment, rocks fall everyone dies. What is the algorithm for saltwater lungs? For Ivy on sheet metal in the morgue? Plug in all the numbers, all the factors, all the math. Pretty high risk, actually.

Should have seen it coming.

## CHAPTER 15

Shrink: Why *did* you punch that boy?

me: He called Ivy a whore.

There is something liquid to the shrink's smile, translucent teeth and a protean bend to the point of her lips, the angle and curve. When her head tilts to the left, her mouth is sober, when tipped to the right it turns sharp, arch and mean all at once.

Shrink: Are you lying?

me: No.

Shrink: We both know that's not the truth.

## CHAPTER 16

grandma and grandpa are overjoyed to discover their grandchildren are a pair of creatives. waves me off when i tell them, *O's an athlete*, more than once. *figure skating is an art*, says grandma, *ballet*, adds grandpa. roll my eyes and don't mention the gymnastics, the basketball, the soccer, the softball, the tennis, the swimming, and the archery that O excels at, excels at everything she does really, look to the side and close my ears to the musings about introducing O to horseback riding, a musical instrument, or perhaps the theater. they've rented out a rink for the afternoon, engaged the services of an ex-olympian coach for private lessons, and i am sitting in the stands wrapped in hat and scarf and sweatpants and jacket, gloves to the side, as O glides across the ice, dancing on the edges of her skates, jumps. grandma and grandpa are at some charity luncheon and don't have to feel the bite of the cold, never feel the bite of the cold, no matter how many times they rent out the rink, but i always do. close my fist tight, working the muscles of my hands, before rubbing my fingers together, pick up the pencil again. i have stacks of notebooks now. charcoal paper and watercolor paper and mixed media paper, high-end pencils, colored pencils, charcoal pencils, micron pens, markers, water colors, canvases, so many types of paint. flying sit spin, the flash of O's hair, the pull of her arms, the fulcrum of her body, cut of blade on ice, and she's in a backspin now, arms up, knees starting to unbend, spirals tightening as her body elongates and i never draw O. i draw landscapes and video game characters and inanimate objects. cars. billboards. pizza. i draw illustrations for songs, i draw everyday

things in mismatched colors, i draw hands, i draw the coil of mouths. everything is malfunctioning, the tip of my pencil stuttering against the paper, and usually i'd just drop whatever i was holding, but with this i put the pencil carefully back into its setting, close the case, close the notebook, put everything away, then lie down on the metal bench and let the cold numb me, eat its way inside my skin. let my eyes fall shut and drift in an afterimage haze of halos around fluorescent lights and the crisp sound of edges against ice and the smell of fresh rubber flooring. in my head O keeps spinning, figure on a stage, before a crowd, in a music box connected by a spring. ice cold wet, a shock that double times my heart, and O laughs as she rubs shaved ice into my face, i sit up spluttering, she says, *you weren't paying attention*. i say, *i wasn't asleep* and she says, *no shit didn't say that did i*, and she says, *wow these sketches are pretty good guess all that money isn't being wasted*, and she says, *why don't you stop being so pathetic? you're always sulking, lighten up*, and i say, *why don't you stop being*

i've forgotten the rest.

## CHAPTER 17

B says, “Your dad’s intense, man.”

Our legs hang off the side of Gemini Point. B is leaning backwards onto his elbows. I’m leaning forwards, chest against the low guard rail, arms dangling off the horizontal top. He has a six-pack of Modelo, three empty, and between my fingers my flask of JD with a dash of fireball feels like it’s floating in my hands. Ivy had a habit of stealing. Clothes, food, drinks, everything. She wore my t-shirts and flannel bottoms and sweatshirts as she saw fit. She ate off everyone else’s plate, took the last cookie, piece of chicken, bowl of cereal in the box. She swiped mugs of coffee and plucked drinks out of hands without discrimination. But Ivy despised fireball, so I mixed it into everything. Eventually, she stopped stealing my drinks, face screwing up at the cinnamon edge, but I never got out of the habit of putting that extra in, even though the sweetness of it makes me sick, makes me choke.

“Where’d you see my dad?” I scratch at the leather decorating the body of the flask. Etched into one side is: *May the bridges I burn light the way*. On the other is: —*That hot guy from Beverly Hills 90210*. It had been a fifteenth birthday gift from Ivy last year.

“He had me come down to the station, man. He interviewed me again. Grilled me all about the guest list like I fuckin’ know. Had me there for hours, man. What the fuck? Is he tryin’ to pin this on me or somethin’? S’like, I get your daughter’s dead, but Ivy—”

B stops talking.



The flask is at my lips. The taste of fireball is overwhelming. There is nothing to swallow.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

“You see anyone else at the station?”

“Huh?”

“Anyone else? In line to be interviewed.”

“I dunno, dude. Wasn’t really lookin’, y’know? I think maybe I saw J? Could’ve been a coupla people. I just dunno.”

The waves tip with foam as they crash against the rocks down below. Everything is gray, dark blue, reflected light. I have the thought to drop the flask and see how it crashes, if it would break apart, but it’s empty now, too light to have real impact, so my fingers tighten around the leather and tilt the fulcrum of my body back until all I see is sky.

## CHAPTER 18

Follow me for a minute.

Sometimes I think about being in multiple places at once. The bodily, corporeal matter of humanity. There is no divorcing the snaps of electrical thought from the tongue, from the stomach, from the soles of our feet. We leave bits ourselves everywhere we go, trailing behind us, markers of life. Strands of hair, finger and toenails, sloughed off skin cells, fingerprints, shit and piss and blood.

The earth is just slopes and valleys of human corpses, broken down, spread about, reconstituted into something else. We swim in other people.

Take, for example, a piece of paper. Printer paper, clean and packaged in plastic. It's bought by Ms. L, a high school teacher. Math. She unwraps the paper and pulls out a thick, but manageable stack to keep on her desk for her students to use as scratch paper. She teaches five classes a day, twenty students a class, sticky fingerprints, as paper gets taken, gets passed out, gets carded through, gets put back on the stack when they do nothing with it.

A single piece of printer paper could have sets upon sets upon sets of fingerprints, of lingering echoes of interactions, until one last person grabs it, puts pen to paper, and folds it up like a fortune teller.

Wait for it. This is important.

## CHAPTER 19

Shrink: This isn't going to work. I'm not going to stop asking. I'm not going to stop trying to help you. Why won't you tell me the truth?

me: I'm talking to you. What more do you want? Blood?

Shrink: Talking? You're obfuscating.

me: Well.

## CHAPTER 20

mom is jewish and dad is an atheist from a strict religious family, some type of protestant, he never really talks about it. most he ever said was he got his faith broken early on, said he believes in the here and now, said the life we're living on earth, said reality. while mom whispered once he left the room, eyes narrowed in secret, that it was only one of the reasons he and his family don't talk now, that he got disowned, only one of. so holidays are hanukkah, are pesach, are rosh hashanah, are yom kippur, but are also sometimes non-descript, or what's the word, non-denominational, small desktop holiday tree and fairy lights in blue and white, caroling and cookie exchanges and latkes and kugel and gelt. but the dinner is the ice sculpture centerpiece of the holiday season, the fleeting spectacle we gather round, eat brisket and mashed potatoes and garlic string beans and gruyere mac and cheese and creamed spinach, each one of us in our chairs, one two three four. gift-giving after dinner, smiles overtaking our mouths, laughter in our chests, always a good time, a happy time, always our family.

## CHAPTER 21

Shrink: [laughter]

Shrink: [laughter]

Shrink: Okay, actually now I'm kind of sad. Was that the happiest thing you could think of with the entire family?

me: Are you supposed to be such a bitch? I'm a fragile fucking flower, remember?

Shrink: No. You're a kid who's too smart for his own good and not smart enough to know that. Now tell me what you don't want to tell me.

## CHAPTER 22

—by the wall and he’s yelling, don’t even know what i did wrong this time, i did do something wrong this time. his hands are huge, the tv is saturated color and movement, theme song for super mario bros duhduhduh-deduh-*duh*-doh, and he rips the xbox from its cord and throws it by my ear. it smashes into the wall an explosion of noise and plastic and something fast and bright flits by my eyes, slices open my cheek, hot blood down skin and can’t clean it up now, my body jerks, movement by eye, hard to resist, haven’t been able to reprogram that reflex yet, and he calls me a pussy and he calls me a little bitch and he says *what the fuck are you flinching for you little shit you think i’m gonna goddamn hit you in the face with that fucking thing you think i can’t aim?* and i’m sobbing as i pick up the broken pieces of the game console, throw them in the trash, chest seizing, as i cough and cry for air, blood continues down my face, he grabs some paper towels and presses them to my cheek, and mom and O are there and mom says *that needs stitches* and O says *where did the xbox go?*

—his fist toward my face, toward my stomach, toward my sides, his hands around my forearms, bruises like coins, like sunsets, like mosaics, my body a work of art from far away, close up more like graffiti.

—when he’s done i’m done, everything hazed out, except the ache and throb of my head, light splintering into fractals, into colors, into heartbeats. slide onto my bed, and even

after my eyelids close, my head continues to squeeze with pain, i try to smooth out the crunch of my eyebrows, the tenseness of my expression, the clench of my teeth. eventually, it's all black. wake up to my body wailing, every movement cracking against each other, but no itch of dried blood, just the pull of proto-scabs, my wounds dressed in sleep, happens sometimes, i never pretend it was him, know it's not, mom sneaking in like a thief, perpetrating the criminal act of caring, and the thought of it, of his hands soft on my skin, making my stomach churn. i swallow the pills placed on my nightstand, drink the water down, and stand up. the bathroom, it has the supplies, damp washcloth and soap for the leather belt, and he's cleaning it, intense focus of a job done well, finish what you started, scrub a bit harder to get a silver sheen back to the buckle, then another damp washcloth to clean everything off. apply a solution of white vinegar and linseed oil, make sure to buff it out later, keep the leather supple. running out of solution. should make more soon. *my own kid some goddamn thug. maybe now you'll think twice before getting into a fight* he says and i say, *maybe now i'll think three times.*

—halloween night, six and eight, ninja mask to the side, O's poodle skirt an epicenter of spilled out candy, rollerskates still on her feet. mom is taking pictures, has been taking pictures the whole night, dad finally home, stripping off boots and belt, and we sort candy, what gets kept, what gets thrown out, mine mixing with O's, everything in our skeleton head bucket, two pieces of candy per day for dessert that is the rule. stay up past bedtime, pretending to be asleep when mom checks on me, sneak down when it's quiet, when no one has moved for forever, and inch a chair toward the pantry. the candy always in the back, right corner on the highest shelf. quiet, quiet, quietly take down the skeleton



head bucket and climb off the chair, take a few pieces of candy, a snickers, a twix, a twizzlers, careful of the crinkle, traitorous packaging, put everything back in its place, bucket in its corner, chair by the table, boy in his bed. step silently into my bedroom, heart hammering with success, hands clenched around victory, when the light screams on and he's there, grabbing at my closed fists. the candy falls on to the floor and lays still and he's still and i say, *i'm sorry*, and there's something wrong with the blankness of his face and he says, *go downstairs*, and picks up the candy from the floor and i go downstairs. in the kitchen waiting and everything is sideways, between spaces and unreal, until he turns on the lights and pours the candy onto the kitchen table, then the world turns distinctly outlined and overexposed colors, very red and yellow and blue. *eat*, he says, and i say, *i don't understand*, and he says, *eat, eat it all*, and when i continue to breathe, the blankness in his face fractures, and he rips open a reese's and shoves it between my teeth and says, *eat, eat, you wanted candy so bad that you broke the rules, eat it then, eat it all*, and i choke and chew and swallow, but he already has more open and ready so my hands start to move and i get ten or twelve in when something acid and hot travels up my throat, the taste making my stomach turn even more than it's already cramping with uneasiness and too much, too much. i must make some noise, because the empty skeleton head is beneath my chin and i vomit into it, the taste lingering. he moves the bucket away and i hear the faucet turn on and i get off the chair to leave and he says, *where do you think you're going* and i'm sweating and hot and really cold and i look at him and i turn and i run. there's a clattering in the sink. he hooks me beneath my armpits, and i shriek *no no no no*. he puts me back on the chair, hands infinitely gentle on my shoulders, and says, *eat*. tears and mucus run into chocolate, into caramel, into skittles, sweet and salty, and i vomit twice more, before i stop,

slide to the floor and dry heave, heart racing off-kilter, and he kneels by my body and starts pressing soft tootsie rolls into my mouth and mom is in the doorway.

—it's breaking the rules, it's fighting, it's having a smart mouth, it's bad grades, it's not doing chores, it's skipping school, it's making him look bad, it's being too loud, it's being sullen, it's giving him a look, it's leaving shit on the floor, it's not putting dishes in the sink, it's smirking, it's walking, it's talking, it's breathing.

## CHAPTER 23

Q: Why did the chicken cross the road?

A: The answer is trivial and is left as an exercise for the reader.

## CHAPTER 24

Thursday at school and the week is still not over.

Hasn't it been a geologic age since that Sunday morning? Five days and humanity has gone extinct and evolved again from monkeys or mice or paramecium.

When lunch starts, I take one look at the roving mass and leave. Find an empty classroom filled with string instruments and music stands. I pull four chairs into a line and lie down. The fluorescent light penetrates past my eyelids so I put my backpack over my face and hold it tight.

An indeterminable time later, D's voice winds between theta waves and bright orange-red lines that fracture into starbursts. "This used to be a storage room. Band gets an auditorium and new supplies while we get the cupboard under the stairs." A vision of D glitters in my mind and then twists into music notes that glow with every beat.

Wakefulness comes like a jump cut to another scene, backpack gone from my face, eyes open, D looking down on me. Her hair hasn't quite grown back yet, boy's haircut, curls flopping over her forehead. I sit up and look through her features until her skin starts to stain red. There isn't enough insecurity, enough shame in her posture and her gaze when she's near me any longer for it to be humiliation. But I'll take embarrassment.

"Stop it, asshole." Her arms cross. She tugs at her shirt wherever her fingers land. I sit up.

"Stop what?"

"You know what. With that smirk on your face. Cutting my hair was one of the most liberating experiences of my life. I don't think I'll ever grow it long again."

“You look like a dyke.”

“What a nice thing to say.”

“I’d say you look like a boy and a dyke, but those bug bites on your chest have gotten bigger over the years. Not huge, but not bad. Mazel tov.”

“Ass.”

“Soul crushing. What devastating wit.”

“G.” D pushes me, hand an agonizing pressure on my chest, and something searing pulls from my veins, separating from blood, to accumulate beneath her palm. “I’m trying to talk to you.” A film of acid above my heart.

“I don’t care.”

Her hand moves away and the sudden lack leaves my pulse racing. I get up to leave, but she blocks my way.

“You’re going to listen to me,” she says, arms still crossed, but no longer clutching. As if the nerves had run out of her hand and into my chest.

“Get out of my way, Dovie.” I use my shoulder to shove past her and when she pulls me back, my elbow digs into the softness of her stomach. She gasps, but there’s still a pulling, my backpack half-on, half-off, getting further tangled as D stumbles away with a strap in her grip.

Step forward to push her back, my body looming over her off-kilter one, and for less than a second I see the fear on her face. More than apprehensiveness to what’s coming. And I have spent the last couple of years trying to get her away, trying to get a hard look in her eyes when they land on me, but I didn’t want it to be like this, like him.

I let my backpack go and she falls to the floor with it and we stare at each other.

D scrambles to her feet, hands fisted at her sides. “When did you get like this? Why? I don’t—” She shakes her head. “I don’t know what I did, but I’m starting think I didn’t do anything at all. You’re just screwed up. You weren’t like this at the funer—”

“Shut up.” I kick a chair. It topples and takes a few music stands down with it, but D doesn’t break eye contact with my face. “If you want to talk then talk, but that shit’s off limits.”

“That’s too bad because I want to talk about Ivy.”

Ivy used to say that D was relentless, dog with a bone, even if that bone was still attached to a living breathing thing, ready to take to down everything in her way to get what she wanted. *She’s got a stubborn-ass living inside her*, Ivy would laugh, *which is cool cause I don’t give a fuck, it’s all about balance, G*. The acid on my heart burns and this is one reason why I’ve been avoiding D every time she’s tried to talk to me since Ivy’s corpse washed up on the beach. She gives more life to the Ivy living in my head.

“Fine.” I sit down and slouch into the chair. “Let’s get this over with.”

D crosses her arms again, nods once, and says: “The sheriff’s department thinks Ivy might have been murdered.”

The world hazes at the edges and there is a crushed feeling in my throat, iron bands squeaking tighter and tighter. My fingers want to scrabble at my neck, want to pull and tear at the bindings, at the skin, want to end my suffocation but it’s all in my head. Feelings. Can’t make them crumble in my hands.

I can’t breathe. But it’s not from surprise.

“I know.” The word is cracked. The pain it takes to articulate it is unreal.

D's mouth parts. "What?" Her face chinks apart and then reforms. This time there's something furious to her mouth, the set of it, and a hard-bitter sheen to her eyes. "What the hell do you mean by that? What do you know?"

Dad told me.

Before the funeral.

He took me to see.

"G."

He said there was someone.

Someone else with Ivy on the cliff.

"G."

There was a witness.

This will never end.

"G!"

Never end.

Water to my face, and I stumble away, dripping, wiping wetness from my eyes and chin.

"Sorry," D says offhand. She tries to reshape her water bottle from where she squeezed it in half. "But you weren't responding. Freaked me out." She doesn't even pause for breath. "So what did you mean by saying that you know Ivy might have been murdered?"

My jaw unhinges and my lungs expand with potential words. The fluorescent lights in the room buzz. D has a cowlick that flickers in the air. Something sticky and resentful rises up in my chest that closes everything up tight again.

The bell rings. D looks at her phone and curses.

Scoop up my backpack and my face twists into a rictus of a grin. “Tragic. We didn’t get to finish our talk. Let me just go walk into traffic from the pain. Bye.”

Losing D is fairly easy, but then, I don’t know if she tried to follow me at all. She might have just gone to class. But the compressed feeling in my throat assures me this isn’t over, not for a long time. Maybe not ever. Maybe Ivy’s ghost will hang like a weight draped across my shoulders for the rest of my life. It was unfair when she was alive and it’s even less deserved now that’s she dead. She’s gone and all I want is for her to disappear.

*you sure, kiddo?*



## CHAPTER 25

biking between neighborhoods takes us through nature preserves and hiking paths. it's even better in the richer part of Carefree because the rich people like more space between houses, a microcosm of ecosystem, the prettiest foliage, and plants that they can eat from, so organic. no sanctioned hiking or bike paths so technically what me and D and O do is trespassing, but no one's ever gonna complain about the sheriff's kids and their friend frolicking in greenery. D and O were girl scouts before O got kicked out and then just D was and she read a book about edible plants and got her badge or pin or whatever for it and ever since then, the three of us have thrown up no less than half a dozen time trying to identify edible plants. it's a dare and a bet all at once and the loser who chickens out has to: jump into the pool naked and streak (D), spend two weeks doing both mine and O's chores perfectly (O), or say 'i love you' at the end every conversation for three days and make it genuine (me). we've eaten: dandelions, elderflowers, blackberries, blueberries, elderberries, fireweed, forget-me-nots, and black nightshade, not deadly nightshade, but it made us sick to our stomachs regardless, though not dead which was a win. this time around i win the rock-paper-scissors so i get to choose the eating line-up, so O goes first, D second, and me last. *don't be such a pussy*, says O, *it's just honeysuckle*. my entire body bristles, she'd been the one to choose me to eat the black nightshade first so i knew where the value of my life stood with her, and my lip curls as i say, *we think. we think it's honeysuckle*, and D lets out an indignant, *hey*, and i shrug at her. O rips the flower apart and lets a bead of

nectar drip onto her tongue, *mmm, sweet*, and D follows and when i reach to pick a flower O darts forward, ripping fistfuls of flowers off the bush and smashing them all over my face, we go down in a tangle of limbs, *take it, G*, O's screaming, and i'm screaming, and D's sneaking her hands between us here and there trying to mitigate the worst, and when O rocks back on her heels, i feel my face and huff, *everything's all sticky now*. and O says, *that was the point*, and then leans down and licks a stripe up my face and says, *sticky sweet*, and i squawk and push her off me and shriek, *how you dare!* and O and D are laughing, and i tackle the two of them with fistfuls of flowers in revenge.

## CHAPTER 26

There's this wall on the side of Arcadia's admin building that faces the street. It's right before the lawn where the kids wait as the busses line up for drop off and pick up, and next to the parking lot for students and staff and visitors, most seen wall of the whole goddamn school. It's been painted white for the past couple of months, a sign stuck in the grass in front of it that says COMING SOON 'KIDS OF THE FUTURE' MURAL (paid for by the R Foundation). Rumor has it that the wall's going to stay white too, at least until the big name fuckwad artist that the foundation paid to paint it gets back from finding his muse or something in Monte Carlo. Walk past it twice a day at least, and standing in front of it now, a ringing in my head and a weight on my bones, I let my bag drop, cans of spray paint clinking.

It's the middle of a class period. It's the middle of the day in a school zone. Hardly anyone will be out and about, but I don't care if anyone sees me. I have a ghost in my head that needs to get out, and if I have to spray paint her to the wall and make her stick, trap her where the world can see, instead of haunting the pathways of my thoughts, the tunnels of my veins, then anyone can catch me, even Dad.

Dad can catch me, and it will have still been worth it.

My backpack holds a rainbow of paints. I take the chair I dragged from the storage room, position it, step on it, and uncap my first color.

## CHAPTER 27

Of course, I was at that party too. We hadn't gone together, she hadn't expected me to come, body still crushed and weeping because I'm a mouthy fuck, a smart-mouthed mouthy fuck, can't keep my mouth shut for the life of me, *You're a total fucking moron*, she had said, *why do you do this?* And I'd hurt too much to ask, *Do what?* But I knew what she meant, of course I did, O was a mouthy fuck too, but not around Dad. Guess I was stupid. But it wasn't so bad this time, and what better way to forget, to feel good for a night, a momentary thing? And through the crush of people, the body shimmer, sloshing red solo cups, pulsing music, her gaze flickered to mine, mapped the points of my face, the targets of my body, and her eyes widened, before settling into something that crinkled at the corners. All at once her face relaxed and the arc of her body went loose and she spun and smiled and shrieked with laughter.

I grabbed a drink and then two. Didn't dance. Went to B and B and J and M and smoked what they gave me and drank what they gave me and the world went blurred and the next time I saw her I remember laughing and laughing too.

It will be the question everyone is asked and asks at Arcadia: When was the last time you saw Ivy R?

## CHAPTER 28

She's sitting down in the mural, profile, one knee bent, the other straight, leaning back as if resting against the end of the wall. From the neck down, her body is the same as it had been that night, same dress, skin unmarred, but freckled, like Mom's. It changes with her face, pale and gray and shadowed. Lips blue. There are small, scattered scrapes across her skin and two deep lacerations. Her hair is dark and tangled. Her head is rolled to the side, looking out from the wall, eyes watercolor hazel and angry.

Her lips are parted and from them grows poison ivy. It grows around her neck and creeps down her body, spiraling around her limbs, until it roots into the ground, chaining her wrists and ankles to the earth.

On the right half of the mural, the wall is mostly empty. On the top, in red paint: CAST YOUR VOTE. Below are three columns with underlined category names: WHO KILLED IVY R? and HOW DID THEY DO IT? and WHY.

In black sharpie, I write, **Aphrodite**, and **by luring her into the sea**, and **jealousy**, **b/c Ivy was just too damn pretty**.

Then I go home and get drunk.

Raiding the armoire where my parents keep all their alcohol has gotten harder over the years. As a kid, it was simply closed. Ivy was the first one to steal bottles of wine, of vodka, of befeater. *Liberate*, she'd said, *I liberated them, like those old farts would have half as much fun as me*. She was thirteen the first time Dad noticed. Then the armoire was locked with a key. That didn't stop Ivy for long. *Youtube is our friend*, she'd said. She

taught me how to pick the lock when I was fourteen. With the both of us going in and out, it didn't take long for Dad to notice again. Then there was a padlock with a numerical combination. Ivy could never figure it out. But I did. I never told her what it was, loved to hold it over her head. *How the fuck?* she'd asked. *What can I say,* I replied, *I know that man.*

Now, I open the front door and call out for Mom, see if anyone's home. Nothing. Go straight to the armoire in the living room and liberate the fireball.

Cap off and my stomach rolls, throat closing in reflex. The cinnamon scent saturates the air, sweet thick sickliness. But I stand there: armoire open, tasteful interior decorations, cheerful curtains, a pin-perfect couch, glass table with mahogany accents and frame, artfully placed photographs, me, Ivy, whole family, me and Ivy, Mom and Dad, whole family, whole family, whole family.

There isn't an image left my head, excised out onto the wall. So I look at the photograph of her and raise the fireball high. "This is for you," I say, and drink it down.

"Drink, drink, drink it down," I sing between swigs, trying to swallow everything—the alcohol going down and the vomit coming up, both burning in different directions. "Come on, come on now. Swallow, swallow, swallow." My nose starts to drip and eyes start to sting. My head swims with dizziness, with nausea, with emptiness, and eventually with alcohol. "Come on now, eat, eat, eat it all. You can do it."

Eventually the fireball runs dry and I lay down on the couch, empty bottle tipped over on the floor. Everything has gone molasses, has gone liquid, has gone windmills and turbines, churning and revolving. There's a sickness in my belly for more than one reason. A sloshiness from the whiskey and a tightness from what's coming. I know what's coming.

The front door opens. The jingly clink of keys, heels on the hardwood floor, bag on the dining room table. She steps into the living room, into my line of sight, her hair a curly crown around her head, she says my name, a high, shrill exclamation.

She comes closer. I lever myself up, body feeling turned upside down. “You’re not Dad,” I say. Her face is horrified. I throw up on her shoes.

“Oh baby,” she says, she’s tucking me into bed like I’m six. “What have you done?”

“The world,” I answer. Made the world see.

Everything is dark, but there’s shouting slipping past my closed door.

Everything is dark, and then there’s a light from the hall in between the cracks of my doorframe.

There is light from the hall, Mom’s sitting on the edge of my bed, back to the open door, her face is shadowed and grim. The haze has mostly left me.

“I’m sorry I threw up on you,” I say.

“How did you get into the liquor cabinet?” she asks. I blink at the dissonance. That’s Dad’s question.

“How did the liquor get into the liquor cabinet?” I reply, a sneering haze to the numbness of my lips.

Her mouth is still hard, and she doesn’t flinch though she should, she should, and maybe that’s why her edges soften a touch and her shoulders round. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need anything?”

Yes. But what? I don’t know.

“No.”

“You know how your father feels about underage drinking.” I don’t say anything. There’s hardly a pause, before she lets out a bitter laugh. “I—I understand you’re upset. We all are. What I don’t—what I can’t understand is why you insist on making it worse.”

The rage is there without warning. More of a shock to me than to her. “Yeah.” My voice seethes with restrained tension. “You’re right. You don’t understand anything.”

A mirroring temper surges behind my mother’s eyes, her face contorting, her hand twitching. And for a moment, I think she’s going to hit me. What pools in my stomach when she doesn’t isn’t so much relief as it is dissatisfaction.

“Don’t take that tone with me. You aren’t the only one having a difficult time here.” Her voice chokes up, words almost inarticulate by the end. “She was my daughter.”

“What? I’m agreeing with you.” My stomach bubbles and twists, anger eating at my insides, guilt curving my shoulders. “You don’t understand anything.”

Maybe it’s something in my voice, maybe it’s something in the line of my spine, but Mom catches me by the chin. She turns my face to look at her straight. “What did you do?”

“You already know what I did.” I try to pull away but her fingers grip tight, nails digging into my skin. “That’s why Dad sent you up here to get how I figured out his precious combination, right? I’ll save the both of us from you having to scrape up whatever tender love and care in you might have in that soulless husk of yours to get me to talk and me from having to take it. I figured it out because he’s so fucking predictable.” I roll my eyes, because I know she hates it.



“Watch your language,” she spits. Her fingers are still claws around my jaw. “And show me some goddamn respect. Is that what you think of me? You think I don’t love you? That it doesn’t kill me when I see you hurting and I can’t do a thing about it?” Tears make their way down her face. She takes in a ragged breath and then lets it out smooth. She jerks my face to the side when I try to retaliate and I lose my words. “You think you know so much, you little shit, but you’re a child. You have no idea about the world around you, about the complexities of adulthood, of, of life. We are all in pain here. Do you think your pain is somehow worth more?”

Moments pass between us as we stare at each other. She gives my face a little shake. “Well?” she demands. “Do you?”

“No.” My throat burns with rawness. The sticky, resentful thing in my chest grows and shrinks with each breath. “Of course not.”

“But you look at me with that guilty face, full of anger, and scream accusations at me, then you block me out and refuse to let me help you.” She lets out a short puff of breath, hard and fast between her teeth, and then releases me, looking away. “Sometimes you’re so much like your father it makes me sick to my stomach.” It’s worse than getting hit. I can’t breathe. “I love you,” she says. “I love you both, but sometimes you make it very hard.”

The accusations build up on my tongue. *How can you say you want to help when you let him hurt me? You let him hurt me. But you always let him hurt me.*

“His combination is the day he won his re-election for Sheriff. The day he proved to his parents and Carefree and all the point-one-percenters that he was more than Sheriff

Handsome and some disowned tool from the wealthiest family on the west coast. Like there's no such thing as incumbency advantage."

Something cracks in Mom's face, a humor and she snorts, says, "Don't call your father a tool," and then goes silent again. Her gaze is distant, and that makes me angry too. What's there to be distant for when I am right here in front of her?

We breathe in the same space. The only sound comes from the wind outside my window. She takes my hands and holds them.

"Is there anything you want to tell me?" she says.

"No."

"Do you need someone to talk to? Or, are you talking to your friends?"

"I'm fine."

"G."

"I talked to D today."

"D? Well then," she shifts her position on the edge of the bed. "That's wonderful. It's been a long time since I've seen her, I didn't know you two were still friends."

"We're not. We just. Talked."

"I see. How is she?"

"Fine."

"That's not an answer."

"I don't know."

"G."

“She’s, fuck, I don’t fucking know, okay? She’s in orchestra. She has short hair. She’s in all honors and AP classes so I don’t see her.” I pull my hands away in irritation and Mom leans back chuckling.

“It was just a question. What about art? I know that’s something you two used to love to do together.”

“I’m not in an art class.”

“You’re not in an art class? Why not?”

“Dad said it was a waste of an elective. So I chose First Aid instead.”

I can see Mom wince in the shadowed light. And I laugh. “See? You get it. I don’t think he did. All he said was that it was good I was getting something practical out of school.”

Suddenly, we’re both laughing, both gasping, both fighting for air. We hear a noise downstairs and stop. There’s a coldness to my chest.

“It’s late,” she says, smooths a hand down my head. “I’ll let you get to sleep. I’ll try to explain things to your father.”

I don’t say: *If you don’t like seeing me in pain, then why do you stay with him?* Instead my tongue says, “Goodnight.”

## CHAPTER 29

An infinite number of mathematicians walk into a bar.

The first says, "Give me a beer."

The second says, "I'll have a half a beer."

The third says, "A quarter of a beer, please."

The bartender pours two beers and says, "Come on, people. Know your limits."

Get it? Know. your. limits. Fucking hilarious.

Also:

As the poets have mournfully sung,

death takes the innocent young,

the rolling in money,

the screamingly funny,

and those who are very well hung.

(by W.H. Auden)

Or.

Q: What is black and blue and brown, and lies in a ditch?

A: A brunette who has told too many blonde jokes.

Guess which one was Ivy's favorite?

## CHAPTER 30

we're swimming in an infinity pool, grandparents' mansion, staff bringing us drinks and snacks and whatever the fuck we want on command, sky cool and breezy blue, sun a gentle light rather than a burning, crisping blaze. O's on a pool float, i'm on my back, i like floating in the water without anything between me and the h2o, it feels more like true weightlessness. *there are no cares in the fucking world here*, says O, which is a lie, because dad had a fit when his parents had contacted mom with the intention to build a relationship with me and O and not him. mom had yelled that we might as well have a relationship with his parents because us living here didn't allow for a real relationship with her parents and dad had yelled that she didn't know anything and that she was changing the subject and that his parents were snakes, but here we are on the edge of infinity with the entire town laid out before us, *nice view*, O had said, when she first saw it, mocking bite to her voice that went entirely over grandma and grandpa's head and they had nodded and smiled, and when they had left O had grabbed me under the armpits, my feet lifting from the floor, my heart twisting and O had said, voice deep in parody, *everything the light touches will be yours, my young son*, and i had squirmed from her grip, and i had laughed, and said, *does that work if it skips a generation*, and O had looked at me as if i was the stupidest thing on earth and said, *yes*. now all i can think about is how much O lies, it's all lies, because i know when i get home there will be something terrible waiting for me, belt or fist or closet. *here isn't fucking care free, no place is fucking care free*, i say, and O laughs, and says,

*perfect, yes, you little genius, and i say, what? and O says, that's here, that's where we live, the inimitable Carefree, and i say, that's not true, and i say, you're such a liar, and i say, why would you say that? and O looks at me, splashes her fingers in the water, and says, obviously, that's the lie of it, and the way she says it sounds like truth, sounds like condemnation, sounds like whimsy, sounds like pretend, sounds like her. she pulls up her head to stare at me better and says, don't you have any friends? why are you always hanging out with me? i roll my eyes and splash at her. it's because i love you so much, i say. liar, she says and lays her head back down laughing.*

## CHAPTER 31

The shrink is wrapped in green. It's her defining feature, everything else is indistinct. When she crosses her legs, one over the other, she slips her hanging foot underneath her knee, to rest on her other calf, thoroughly entwined. If there was a fire, she'd probably fall trying to get up and then be consumed by the flames.

Shrink: That's morbid. You would leave me to die then?

me: It'd be your own fault, so yes. What could I do? You're the one sitting weird, wearing high heels that look like chopsticks, those are your life choices.

Shrink: How cold. You wouldn't even try to save me?

me: You want me to?

Shrink: Doesn't everyone want someone to try to save them before their tragically preventable death?

me: Fuck off. I don't want to talk about this anymore.

Shrink: It's just a hypothetical.



me: Then it doesn't fucking matter and we can stop talking about it.

Shrink: If you're so uncomfortable talking about this particular subject, we can move on for now. There is something I'd like to discuss with you. I feel like I'm missing something.

me: Like your brain.

Shrink: Honestly. You can do better than that, G. No. I mean to say that in your story, in your relaying of what happened after Ivy died. There's time missing.

me: I've told you everything you wanted to know. Answered every question. What more do you want from me?

Shrink: The truth.

me: I've told you the truth.

Shrink: I'm trying to help you—

me: Sure.

Shrink: —and to do that I need to know what you've been through. What you're thinking. You've alluded to this before, G, you don't do things on accident. When you told me about your father, I think, perhaps, that was a misdirection.

me: Are you calling me a fucking liar?

Shrink: Sit down, G. Of course not, I'm calling you smart. I'm saying you're omitting events and replacing them with smaller concessions you're more willing to sacrifice. Don't you want to get past this?

me:

Shrink: What am I missing?

## CHAPTER 32

Of course, I was at that party too.

We hadn't gone together and she hadn't expected me to come, body still crushed and weeping because I'm a mouthy fuck, a smart-mouthed mouthy fuck, can't keep my mouth shut for the life of me, *You're a total fucking moron*, she had said, *why do you do this?* And I'd hurt too much to ask, *Do what?* But I knew what she meant, of course I did, O was a mouthy fuck too, but not around Dad. Guess I was stupid. My fault. But it wasn't so bad this time, and what better way to forget, to feel good for a night than to drink myself into oblivion? Bury myself into a willing body, soft and warm? Sometimes wandering hands pressed too tight against my cuts and bruises, but you get used to pain. Sometimes all mixed up in adrenaline and arousal, it even felt good.

Through the throng of people, the body shimmer, sloshing red solo cups, pulsing music, her gaze flickered to mine, mapped the points of my face, the targets of my body, and her eyes widened. What was that glint in her eyes, before they settled into something that crinkled at the corners? All at once her face relaxed and the arc of her body went loose and she spun and smiled and shrieked with laughter. Care-fucking-free.

I grabbed a drink and then two. Didn't dance. Went to B and B and J and M and smoked what they gave me and drank what they gave me and the world went blurred and the next thing I knew she had me by the hand and then the brisk air was in my face. Street lights bordered Gemini Point, so even if the night was dark, it was so much better lit than

the dim interior of B's rec room. She slapped her rectangle purse into my stomach and I grabbed it by reflex, and she hopped onto the railing, twirling, her hands gripping the lamppost as she stretched her leg into an arabesque, and she laughs and laughs, a roar in my ears that leaves everything else muted.

It will be the question everyone is asked and asks at Arcadia: When was the last time you saw Ivy R?

## CHAPTER 33

Sunday

DAY 1

“You were with her. Weren’t you? Weren’t you with her?”

...

The urge to pick up my phone makes my fingers twitch, black screen remote and unforthcoming. A soft cough bubbles in Mom’s throat.

“She’s dead,” says Mom. “They found Ivy’s body down at Seastone Beach. They think she probably drowned.” Her voice goes steady with recitation. “It’s a statistical likelihood that she was drunk or high and she fell over the railing. She’s statistic now.” Mom’s cracking laughter makes my belly twist with sharp uneasiness, with the urge to run away. “I’m good with statistics.”

...

and everything is fine it’s fine because I don’t understand. It doesn’t compute. Logical processes, computation, comprehension, a glitch in the system, a glitch in the system, what exactly do these words mean, not just what they mean, but they *mean* beyond the superficial, she – is – dead – found – body.

body not her.

...

then it's fingers. A million fingers penetrating my skin, digging past the muscle and bones to the heart, the stomach, the veins, clutching and pinching every internal organ to until my insides go pulpy and the flatten from the pressure. Everything so tight, every millimeter filled, pressure in a can, with nowhere to escape. Kill me kill me kill me kill me. How could she do this? How could she leave me here. This will make everything worse.

...

What is there to say? No she's not?

No she's not.

...

Everything is cold. Fingers and toes, back iced with damp, and I should be able to see my breath in the air. We are at the freezing point.

But Mom looks alive in contrast. She doesn't live in the cold, I know that, she lives. In California, in the sun, in our house. Sweat mists down her temples, beneath her arms, a flush all over her skin, miniscule forks of red veins blooming across her face. Red eyes and the surrounding area, though that color is from crying, not heat. Or it is heat. Tears from

the body, 98.6 degrees, boiling their way into reality though the boiling point of water is 212 F, it still leaves a mark.

“I didn’t believe them,” she says. “Not because I thought that they would make a mistake like that. I know your father’s force is good at their jobs. But I had proof. Her clutch was on the table. The one I saw her leave with on Saturday. Phone and wallet and all. They said, we found your daughter, and I said, she’s right here at home. And then they said, *I*, and the way they said my name.” Her voice stops. Her hands are skeleton fists by her sides. “I *knew* she was alive. Until that second.” The look in her eyes isn’t grief as much as it is betrayal, that her knowing has failed her, that she could not predict this moment. “I thought I knew.”

There is no comfort in the air. No support or give in our bodies. When I stand up, it isn’t to embrace my mom and let her know I’m alive and feel her aliveness. It’s to say: “Maybe they made a mistake, then. If O’s clutch or whatever is here. Did you even check her room?”

“Of course I checked her room, G. What the hell do you think? They didn’t make a goddamn mistake.”

My arms jerk with the impulse to push, to make her fall. “How could they know? Don’t we need to go identify the body?”

The anger drains out of the room. “Oh, G,” she says. “They know what Ivy looks like. You know that. Ivy’s dead. They found her body.”

All I can think is: I know.

Please stop telling me.

...

Dad pulls his face away for a moment, looks at me, and holds out an arm.

Dad tugs me down until I'm on my knees with him and his arm encases me and Mom's hand is on the top of my head and I let myself be reconstituted in this mass of grief, each structure stabilizing the other, because Ivy is dead and all I can think about is things will be worse now and that Ivy was wrong.

Dad stands up. Extricates himself from the hug and soaks in the silence. No one has anything to say. In my head, I imagine all of us separating into different directions, cardinal points on a compass, our backs three sides to a triangle as we walk away, gradations of space between us. But that's not what happens with our bones and eyes.

Dad says, "I heard Deputy S came by to take your statement."

And I say, "Yes."

And he says, "Tell me about Saturday night."

And I say, "Why don't you read my statement?"

Mom says, "This is not what we should talk about. G, E, please."

And I say, "I'm not the one doing the asking."

And he says, "Just because I'm not officially on this case, doesn't mean I won't find out what happened to my girl."

And I say, "She wasn't your girl."

And he says, "The hell did you say to me, boy."

Mom says, "Stop. Stop it. Please. Now of all times."



And I say, “Read my statement, boss. She wasn’t your girl, she was her own fucking girl, who made her own shitty choices. You want to know what happened to your girl? She did.”

That gets me a backhand to the face, heat and sting spreading across my cheek and bone, but something exhilarated in my stomach. Saw it coming, knew it coming, made it coming.

Mom gets between us. “No, not today, don’t you dare. Not today of all days. Our daughter is dead—”

Dad shoves her away, and for one small moment, I am him, E R, of the West Coast Rs, that name and shame and pride and weight, his heart beating in mine, his thoughts and feelings and impulses, surging up my spine as if I own them, as if pushing Mom away would push her words away too. As if removing her from sight, took away the truth of things, but then we split into two beings again, not entirely discrete but separate, and Mom is loud on the floor, everything silent, and it wasn’t my hands that put her there. I double check to make sure.

Dad falls to the ground, holding her and crying. Apologizing beyond his articulation, a slur of sounds that masquerades as communication. She grips him tightly back, soothes him down with whispered words and shaking hands, the glowing flush of validation on her face.

I say, “I’m going to my room.”

When I sit on my bed, hands on my knees, it comes to me with the aftertaste of whiskey sour. I remember that I was the one to bring Ivy’s clutch home, her rectangle purse and toss it on the table, gave Mom hope when there was none, false testimony, a red

herring. My head starts to ache as my eyes tear and I'm glad that she hurt when she saw the clutch. It must have burned, because there's nothing more painful than being wrong about things that matter. The way her face broke, the way she comforts that man, the way I'm alone on my bed, nothing and no one beside me. I blame Ivy for what happened to Ivy, but maybe I blame Mom too.

*are you sure you know what you're doing, kiddo?*

## CHAPTER 34

Monday

DAY 2

I don't know where he's taking me until we're there and it's spelled out in block letters: MORGUE. The hall is empty. The doors are closed. My body shakes with the cold.

"I don't want to go in there," I say.

"You don't even know why we're here," he says.

"I don't care." I don't know if I'm producing sound. I think I am. There is something panicked in my chest, that makes my heart beat fast, not a ponderous throb like horror movie music, but something quick and light, that jerks in my throat and makes me feel nauseous. "I don't want to go in there." I tell my body to run, even if he might catch me, but I can't move.

"Ask me why we're here, G," he says in that soft voice, that patient voice, it's even kind. The one he uses to explain why I am being punished and the exact detail in how it will be done, a teacherly voice, before he fractures into truth. Teaching me a lesson. Correcting my behavior. Helping me become a good, capable person for the future. Educating me as I grow.

"Why're we here?" I ask.

"Is that polite?" he says.

"Sir." My eyes are glued to the doors. Scratched steel. The seam where they meet. What's beyond them. "Why are we here, sir?"

“To get at the truth, son. To get – at – the – truth.”

“I don’t—”

“I’m not finished yet.” His hand encases my shoulder, a wrench with an iron jaw, winching tighter and tighter. The ache spreads down my body. Close my eyes, one two three, and open them. “Don’t interrupt me, son. This morning I got a call from my deputies, updating me on the status of Ivy’s investigation. Do you know what they told me?”

The race of my heart is only overshadowed by the ice in my belly. “How would I know what they told you.”

“They told me that there are several eyewitnesses who place Ivy leaving.” The corner of his mouth jerks as he ignores my sarcasm. “Several that have her at Gemini Point, and several saying there was another person there. Times and descriptions vary, as these were from people driving past or partygoers under the influence. However, according to one eyewitness, the last person Ivy was seen with was *you*.”

He doesn’t give me time to answer. He shoves me through the doors.

A quick look: by the side, a wall of fridges, in the center, a figure covered with a sheet on a table. Everything goes into overdrive, pivot on my heel, scrambling to the exit, but he catches me, always catches me, and my chest and stomach and back are still black with bruises and his unyielding arm barring my way pulls the breath from my lungs, the pain bringing tears to my eyes, and I would’ve slithered to the floor, legs giving out if he hadn’t held me up, brought me closer to the draped sheet, the contours and silhouette.

“Dad, no,” I say. “Please, no, please. Please don’t. Dad, no. Dad, please.”

He pulls the sheet back to underneath the chin, but I strain away, watch the movement in my periphery vision. “I will get the truth from you, G. I will have you look

at your sister's face until you feel like telling me the truth of what happened that night instead of whatever bullshit you fed Deputy S. Even if I have to lock you in here all day and night, I will have it."

"They'll notice. Someone will notice. We shouldn't be here."

"I have a lot of friends here, G. They're giving my son and I some time to say a private goodbye to my daughter."

His fingers unclamp from my shoulder, arm unwinding from my chest, and I sway on my feet and it's a fight to regain my balance without touching the table for support. By the time I'm halfway steady he's through the door and I stumble after him. But he closes the door behind him and when I push against it, I find he's locked it and I am trapped here.

Close my eyes, one two three, open them. The room is cold, but larger than the closet at home. I can't put my arms against the walls and push and push, trying to make the space bigger even if only in my head. This room won't close in on me. But dread scratches at my spine because I know that man. He won't let me out until he knows I've taken the time to stare long and good at Ivy. Wouldn't put it past him to be watching me on the security cameras either, fucker, goddamn, fucking bastard, who would ever think this was a good idea, and how dare he, how dare he, how dare he use Ivy's dead fucking corpse for his own goddamn purposes. My fists clench, a cry ripping from my throat as I punch at the steel door, pain stinging my knuckles, but the heat from the anger has warmed me and everything else has solidified in my stomach. I turn.

There is a gash from her brow to her hairline. Another from her cheekbone to her ear. Her face gapes open. There are smaller scratches, around the line of her jaw, that would've been swollen and red had she been alive, but her body had been frozen in the

current. Beyond that, her face is hers. It's Ivy in costume make-up, in prosthetics, in on a joke. The color hasn't totally seeped out of her yet, escaped by osmosis through her pores. Her hair is tucked beneath her head, tangled and dark. And I cannot move closer. There's a flatness to her face, to her body in death. No blood pumping through veins, electrical signals through nerves, air in lungs, food in belly, muscles twitching, it isn't just lack of movement, but a lack of layers, the industry of the body closed down for business, all that's left is the skeleton equipment. Flat.

Ivy was never flat. She was twelve dimensions shoved into a four-dimensional container. She was still at times, but she was never not communicating something, every movement, every action, every moment, deliberate.

The room is cold. It soaks into my jeans, past my hoodie. My fingers have turned white, my body starts to shiver. I don't want to be here.

She isn't breathing.

I don't want to be here, and he, that fucker, that goddamn motherfucker, he touched her. Pulled the sheet down from head to chin and touched her cheek, a brush before he left, the movement a blur in my periphery, but I saw it. I don't want to be here.

I do an about-face, my back to her, and go to the door. Slam my palms against the cold metal and kick at the bottom, make some noise, make some racket, make a goddamn scene, Sheriff Handsome, I'm making a goddamn scene. "Let me out! Let me out! Help! Please! I'm trapped in here. Let me out!" I scream and hit and kick until my throat goes raw and my hands go numb, and nothing. No one comes.

Tears are bright against my chilled skin. Like hot soup or bits of sunlight. I don't want to be here. Ivy hasn't moved.

I go to her side. Then walk to the head of the table, see the points of her feet underneath the sheet. I go to her other side. She doesn't move. I don't want to be here.

I don't want to be here. There is something hot and sick rising in my stomach. There are jagged points in my throat that makes it hard to swallow, hard to speak. I don't want to be here.

"I don't want to be here." I try to tell her but everything comes out choked and jigsawed. "I don't want to be here." Louder and clearer and said with more force, but nothing reverberates in the air. "I don't want to be here." It's a scream. Suddenly I'm screaming in her face and she's lying there supine and she isn't moving and she's flat. Raw, inarticulate expulsions of noise that make me want to kick her table, push her over, watch it drop. I grab at her sheet and rip it off.

Stark naked and still. Autopsied that morning, chest stitched closed. She's a doll. A wax museum figure. But her hands on the table still look like hers. I wrap my hand around hers, chilled meat.

"Screw you." My hand squeezes tighter. If I broke her fingers would they notice? She wouldn't even bruise. "Why did you do this? This is your fault."

I rest my forehead against hers. "I hate you. I *hate* you."

The door slams open. A gunshot of noise. My heart palpitates, and he strides in, legs eating space. "The hell do you think you're doing, boy?" The next moment I'm on the floor, ribs aching, staring up. His face is wretched, a twisted sob crawling its way out of his throat as he picks the sheet up from the floor and covers Ivy's body once more. "You sick shit. I said look at her, not violate her."

There is something trembling and hot that rises in my chest, it unfurls and takes up space, climbing upward and upward. *I'm winning*, I think, even though I know I'm not, even though I know I can't. Here and now, I'm winning.

In front of the altar of Ivy's body and the idol of Ethan R, I start to laugh.



## CHAPTER 35

Tuesday

Day 3

Mom doesn't want Ivy buried in California. Mom is from the East Coast, is from New York, is from a family who have all been buried in the same cemetery. A family plot, future spaces, invested in years before when living didn't have as much importance as the after. There is a plot for her mother, another for her father, one for her, the other had been for her sister, who had given her plot to Mom when she'd married and moved to Italy and that's where Ivy could go, rest with her great-grandparents and great-aunt and great-uncle and cousins twice-removed, and where her mother could meet her in thirty, forty, fifty years.

"There is space for G too," Mom had said, "and you." She swallowed those last words and I never thought about it before. Me having to rest near Dad until my bones turn dust. Maybe next to him. Maybe below him, his feet near my head. My mouth twisted.

"Ivy's not leaving this town. She's going to be buried where she lived. There isn't anything for her now except justice." Dad had gone on to elucidate all the reasons burials and family plots and cemeteries were scams, con games for the grieving and the religious, and it was all Mom could do to talk Dad out of cremating Ivy and spreading her ashes over Gemini Point.

B'nai Israel Cemetery is the compromise. It's forty minutes away by car going a generous speed on the highway. Not exactly where she lived, and nowhere near Bayside.

Driving to the funeral, Mom is in black, Dad is in his dress uniform, hat on the seat beside me. My fingers twitch to crush the shape into nothing. My parents' frowns and down-turned lines are sketched in sharpie. "What a fun, happy family we are."

Mom is on me in a flash. "Don't start with it today, G," and the shock of it, her not him, the anger that serrated her tongue, settles me back in the seat. It shouldn't shock me. Mom is built with anger these days.

In the rearview mirror, Dad's eyes are like marbles, opaque and impenetrable. But the clench of his jaw has softened, and if I didn't know better, I would have thought his expression was one of sympathy.

Front row at the funeral home and there's some shitty rabbi leading the waspiest of the Wasps through prayer and psalms and mangled Hebrew. He talks around Ivy. He didn't know her, only what he heard from the family aka Mom and Dad. No one wants to hear what I would've said. Mom and Dad don't stand up to say anything. Grandma blubbers through a small speech, A sniffles through another, then Dovetail stands up. My arms are already crossed and I press my fingers into the bruises that circle my sides, unyielding and hard, searching for pain.

The circus moves from the funeral home to the cemetery, lines of seats underneath a white tent next to a hole in the earth.

"There's no gravestone." There is a garish red excavator at the head of the hole. Ivy's coffin already resting on a lowering mechanism.

Mom's head turns, her nose brushing my ear. We're sitting next to each other in the first row underneath the white tent. The air is weighed with heat underneath the blazing sun. "There's an unveiling ceremony for the headstone in a year."

"I'm not coming back here." I shift and sit at angle that hurts.

"Yes, you goddamn will," Mom says. My mouth parts, but she cuts me off. "We're not arguing about this here."

Eventually, Ivy is lowered into the ground and we start to bury her. Dad is handed a shovel and he digs into the piles of dirt and lets the sod thump onto the coffin. He puts his whole body into it, straining arms, taut back, one, two, three, burying her quick, filling up the hole, getting her out of sight. Mom snatches the shovel from his hands, turns it around, and on the back of the blade, can only shovel a handful of dirt. She hands it to me and I scrape some dirt in from the pile like I'm sweeping dust away. I don't look into the hole. Mom grabs the shovel away and gives it to the next person in a line that has formed.

Once everyone has gone, I pick up the shovel where it has fallen. The heat beats down on the top of my head, on my shoulders. Bet Ivy's rotting now, the winter has evaporated here. Rotting in her pine box until there's nothing left and dirt has suffused her, packed around her bones. My back itches with sweat, with infection, and my throat hurts. I lean over the edge, and I don't know what I was expecting, but the coffin isn't covered in the least. There are heaps of dirt, but nothing is buried.

I turn the shovel backwards and drop in some dirt.

## CHAPTER 36

Is this too punny or what?

Q: What did one casket say to the sick casket?

A: "Is that you coughin'?"

And.

Q: What was the name of the hair salon next to the graveyard?

A: Curl Up and Dye.

But this is the truth of the world:

A priest asks the convicted murderer at the electric chair, "Do you have any last requests?"

"Yes," replies the murderer. "Can you please hold my hand?"

## CHAPTER 37

easy, *adj.*, *adv.*, and *n.*

Pronunciation: U.S., /'izi/

A. *adj.*

1. At ease; characterized by ease or freedom from pain or constraint.
2. At liberty, having opportunity or means (to do something).
3. Of conditions or state: Characterized by ease or rest; comfortable, luxurious, quiet.
4. Of persons: Free from physical pain or discomfort, or from outward annoyance or burden.
5. Free from mental anxiety, care, or apprehension. Phrase, ***to make (a person) easy***.
6. Of burdens or penalties: Not oppressive or painful. Of prices or conditions: Moderate, not burdensome.

Used in a sentence: Ivy has it easy.

## CHAPTER 38

### CAST YOUR VOTE!

#### WHO KILLED IVY R?    HOW DID THEY DO IT?    WHY

Aphrodite	by luring her into the sea	jealousy, b/c Ivy was just too damn pretty
herself	botched a king of the world moment	cause she was fuckin' high
no lie probs B	bitch-slapped her into the water, pushed her off the edge, aggro hug	cause she wouldn't screw him
cmon your all dumbfucks it was clearly the brother	push	dude is crazy. have you met him?
this is sick	what the fuck	you're all going to burn in hell

That is the cliff notes version.

The columns have splintered and spiderwebbed. Check marks next to the popular suggestions and comments on comments on suggestions. A discourse has developed, the main suspects being Ivy, B, and myself. There are a few outliers: a lovesick mermaid

wanting Ivy for her own, a scarily cogent conspiracy theory concerning A and her potential rule of Arcadia, a random transient/homeless person like it's small-town rural country and nothing exists outside of it and homeless people are the scourge upon the world, and three or four various teachers that Ivy probably had sex with or so says the wall.

D catches me staring at the wall after school. She crosses her arms, unimpressed. "Did you go to any of your classes today?"

"Does sleeping through homeroom count," I say.

"It's like you don't want to graduate." She sounds horrified.

"Cause *that's* the answer to all my problems." My fingers toy with a sharpie in my hoodie pocket. I twist the cap, push it almost off, snap it back on. I want to desecrate this wall. This thing I created and is no longer mine. I can taste the sharp scent of ink on my tongue, the pungent fumes of spray paint. I still have cans of spray paint in my backpack, I always have cans of spray paint in my backpack. I want to erase the words and start over. I want to erase her face and excise her from existence.

"If you don't graduate high school, you can't go to college," D says matter-of-fact. "That doesn't necessarily mean you can't leave. But do you have money saved? And if you're not going to college, what are you going to do?" Her words startle me into making eye contact. The air is molasses between us. "I mean, only, I thought you wanted to leave," she says, gaze dropping away.

"I never told you anything like that."

She picks at her fingernails. "I just assumed..."

"You don't know fucking anything," I say. "Take this as a lesson in assumption."

I swing my backpack over to my front and pull out a can of black paint. Start to shake it. I pop the cap off, but when I reach to streak out Ivy's accusing eyes, the eyes I took from my head, D grabs at my arm. "No," she says. "Please, don't do that. It's beautiful."

"She's ugly. It's ugly. What's written is ugly." But there's still something vindicating and soaring in the ugliness, I knew if I gave them the space all those people pretending to mourn and care for Ivy would peel away their skin show their rotten insides.

"What's written is terrible, but who says truth can't be gross?" I snort at that. Such deep wisdom. At my contemptuous sneer and after an ineffectual tug at the arm with the spray paint, she explains. "This is the beginning of a suspect list."

"None of these fuckwads knew Ivy. Know shit."

D's face goes cool, her eyes assessing. "And you did? You're too close to the situation. Sometimes it takes more objective—"

*"Objective?"*

"Distanced eyes and positions to see clearly. Besides," she glances up at the graffiti. "Whoever painted this," D pauses meaningfully at me and, fine, message received in neon blink lights, "got Ivy right. Let her snarl with rage. Everyone else, they didn't really see her, just what they wanted to see. She was so angry." D turns her head toward me but doesn't take her eyes away from the images. "You are going to help me figure out who did this."

"What the fuck can we even do?" I lower my arm.



“We can try and figure out the truth about what happened.” Her grin is double-bladed. “Who murdered Ivy.” Everything about her makes me uncomfortable, her smile, her words, her body so relaxed in my space. How can she be so calm?

I look down at the spray paint. Roll the can between my hands, feel the cold weight of it. Something bitter and sticky is gristle between my teeth and I try to chew it down. “Why?”

D’s face splits, goes staticky. “What?”

“Why should I help you?” My eyes snap up in a surge and catch hers tight and exhilaration spreads like a wave from my chest. “Why are you talking to me? I’m not your friend. I’m not your ally. I don’t care about you.” Her smile is mine now. I’ve stolen it from her face. “Why should I go out of my way to help you screw around uselessly, you’re not fucking Nancy Drew, Dovie.”

“We were friends,” she says.

My grin is mean. I can feel the cruelty in my belly. It feels like the soaring rise of a great high. “Were we?”

“All of us.” Her voice goes tremulous. “But especially us.”

“Oh Dovetail, everything you just said is wrong. We were never anything. Just because you had a crush on me, you think—”

“Shut up.” She breaks away from the choked space between our bodies. “You’re ruining it. You won’t ruin our past. My memories. I won’t let you just change it like that. Stop *lying*.” Her face is red, cheeks and neck, tears seeping from her eyes in anger, an involuntary reflex.

The euphoria from causing that expression on her face, that crack in her voice, only fades a little at her retort, not enough for me to stop.

I laugh. “That crush, it was so *pathetic*—”

She cuts me off, eyes bright. “You’re pathetic.”

“Ooh, what a comeback—”

“I said be quiet.” And my breath catches, a bead in my throat. Her lips are pressed tight together as she inhales. “You listen to me, G. You may deny we were friends. You may be trying to destroy any scrap of decency in you. But I know you loved your sister. And I know how you feel about your father. Do you really trust him to get to the truth about what happened?” When I don’t have anything to say and all I can do is sneer at her, D says, “Think about it. I’ll be waiting.”

She takes a few deliberate steps back, snaps a photo of the wall, and walks away.

## CHAPTER 39

she makes props and costumes and i draw the set. we tape up the decorated butcher paper and turn the living room into half a comfortable viewing area and half a wild safari kingdom. we wrote the script together, practiced together, and vibrate with excitement at our upcoming performance. we lead the adults and O onto the couches and get into positions. D's dad mutters to mine, *another addition to masterpiece theater, hoo-ah*. D's mom slaps a hand to his stomach. *N*, she says to him, then to us, *go on, kids. i can't wait to see what you've put together*. she speaks to my mother over the two men, my mom leans in to meet her. *isn't this adorable? i'm filming it this time. i'm not missing the opportunity to have this readily available to watch when they're teenagers again*. my mom chuckles. *send me a copy*, she says. *mom!* i yell. *settle down, honey, we're done, we're ready. waiting on you two*. we launch into act one, we sing and dance and do our own stunts, and by the finale, D brandishes her paper mâché sword and skips forward, *en garde!* she shouts, i hit back with my sword with a cry of *les poissons! les poissons! zut alors! mais oui!* and after she stabs me through i fall to the ground, letting out a wrenching groan, *you haf killed me, crab, au revoir*, and she says, *long live the pirate queen*, and O says, *that's the little mermaid. i thought this was the lion king*, from the ground i yell, *no talking in the peanut crowd*, and O says, *it's peanut gallery, stupid*, and dad asks, *where were there pirates in the lion king?* and mom says, *it's a creative interpretation, let's not crush their imaginations*, and me and D bow to raucous applause.

## CHAPTER 40

Mom's in the kitchen. She stands over an egg salad sandwich, a hand on either side it, fingertips resting on a knife. She's stopped mid-activity as if she didn't have the energy to finish that final step and cut the sandwich in half. She doesn't hear me come in.

She isn't crying. She isn't angry. She's standing there.

She's so close, but it's never been more apparent she's miles away, halfway across the universe, tucked neatly in her head, opaque. My palms itch and I resent that there is no door for me to slam or heavy object to throw and shatter.

Drop my backpack on the kitchen island and she doesn't startle. She comes out of it slow, one, two, three, before she glances at me and smiles, "Hi, honey. How was your day?"

"Shitty," I answer. "You okay?"

"Hm? Of course." She looks down at the sandwich, picks up the knife, slices it neat. "I'm just going to take your Dad a snack. He probably hasn't eaten."

"He's at the station." It isn't quite a question and it isn't exactly a sneer.

Mom's mouth goes hard like a nut, a protective shell, but vulnerable to cracking with the right amount of force at any correct spot. "Where else would he be," she says. "He's working."

"He shouldn't be," I say, the most delicate insinuation to my voice I can layer. "It's not like he can work on Ivy's case. Everything is a messy conflict of interest. I would think he'd be with the people cares about most."

Mom's hand ripples as she re-adjusts her grip and then cuts the sandwich into fourths. The muscles in her forearm are twitching. She places the knife in the sink.

"He needs his work. You know how he is. It's helping him grieve."

"I thought he needed you."

"He *does*." Her mouth is crushed now, her voice grates with violence and impatience as she talks over me. She clears her throat. "G, what is it you want?"

"What?" I lean against the kitchen island and bare my teeth at her in a charming grin. "I can't have a conversation with my mother? It's like you don't want me around either."

The air around her seems to tremble, restrained energy, and I lean forward, expectant. But then her shoulders dip and the corners of her face sag. "Don't you have homework to do?"

"It's Friday," I say in reflex. My mouth parts, hanging open in frustrated anticipation, this isn't how it's supposed to go. She keeps doing this. Backing down. Why won't she fight?

"Then friends," she says. "Are you going out tonight?"

At this, my mouth coils into a smirk, disbelief in the divots of my cheeks. "What—you really don't want me around, huh?" I'm joking, but I'm not. "No yelling? No don't take that tone with me? Just when are you going to be gone?" I laugh. I don't mean to, but I start to laugh. I don't know why.

Mom sighs. "I don't have time for this," and something in me snaps, it's visceral, it's loud. She slips the sandwich into a plastic bag and the plastic bag into a half-filled lunch sack. She starts to leave.

I put my body in front of hers. I'm bigger than she is now, width and height. "Sure you do," I say. "Plenty of time. What do you have to do? If you didn't leave the house today, who would miss you?"

She pulls back from me and continues to fuss with her things as if my body blockading the exit was all part of her plan. "You're a cruel child," she says. She doesn't look at me.

"No, I'm not." The words are hollow. Termites burrow at the lining of my stomach.

She shakes her head. "You're trying to hurt me—"

"I'm not." My voice rises. Cracks. It's a lie. A knuckle presses into the center of my heart, deeper and deeper, and it's worse because she knows exactly what I'm doing and she's not wrong. She's not wrong. That means she might not be wrong about other things.

"Bait me then," she says, with an easy shrug to her shoulders, and I don't understand because nothing about her is easy, she's vibrant intensity and constant movement and capricious temperament. She and Dad almost fit together in that way. Finally, she looks at me, her face a smooth and silver mirror. "What is it you want, G? Make sure your homework is done for Monday. You have permission to go out with your friends this weekend. What else?"

My eyes burn. "I don't know why you're doing this," I say. "He doesn't give a fuck about us, *come on*. He's supposed to be on leave, but he's still at the station—"

Her hands clutch at her purse. "He's going figure out what happened. He promised." The words are choppy, as are the breaths in and out. "He's going to get justice for Ivy. I believe him."

She slips past me when my guard is down. I let her go. “There is no justice for Ivy,”  
I say to the sound of the garage door shutting.

## CHAPTER 41

i don't mean to walk in on them. it's been weeks since the verdict, since those fuckers who murdered Renata and Alejo and did what they did to Alejo were sentenced to jail and that was it. people around town seem vindicated, people at the station seem satisfied, but of course dad isn't. they are in the kitchen, fluorescent lights, and he is crying, *you won*, mom says, *it's a victory*, and dad's whole body shudders, *it's not*. she smooths her hands down his shoulders and holds him tight around the waist. *of course it is, E*, she says, *you got justice for the victims. that's whole point, isn't it? you can't save everybody but you can give them something after death, for their families as well*. he shakes in her embrace, only the boundary of her arms keeping him from flying apart into disparate directions, his agony is so violent. *there is no justice*, dad says, and mom says, *you don't believe that*, and dad says, *maybe i should*. her exhalation is a sigh and she rests her head on his as he's folded up into her frame. she murmurs his name, it's all i can discern from the low throb of noise. suddenly, his body rejuvenates, straightening out and growing strong, back muscles shifting beneath his shirt, and he snakes his arms around her and draws her mouth to his, the slick-spit noises tightening and blooming in my stomach, and when he pushes her against a wall both of them searching for grounding, i twitch forward, sure the look on her face is anguish, but then she takes his belt buckle in her fingers and undoes it.



## CHAPTER 42

D picks up when I call and that just goes to show her bad judgement is, but.

She was right. Sheriff Handsome should have been the one to go head over heels off a cliff for how useful he is, for how much I trust him with anything, let alone Ivy.

“What exactly is your plan?” I ask.

To her credit, she doesn’t hesitate. “It’s Friday,” she says, her words short and clipped so she can get the sentences out as fast as possible. “You can get us face-to-faces with all the students on this list. We can run searches on the teachers mentioned and ask around about them and decide if we want to confront them. We should meet up. You want to drive or should I?”

My face twists, sets. “You didn’t mention the most obvious of things, Dovetail.”

That stops her up. I can see it when I close my eyes, her body’s motion glitching, her breath stuttering, a flushed color to her cheeks. Or maybe a sick sallowness. “You’re going to have to be more specific,” she says. She sounds choked. She clears her throat. “Specificity is key to communication.”

Make a sound with my tongue to convey my derision and mimic her last point that degrades into wah-wah sounds. “Why do you say shit like that? You trying to talk around the point that I’m the biggest suspect? Or that—”

“You didn’t kill Ivy, G.” My words vanish from my tongue. “I never thought you killed Ivy. Not one for second.”

There's a ringing in my ears. Tinnitus. I get it sometimes. I hardly hear anything D says after that, if she does say anything.

"Or that," I think I might be interrupting her, but I don't know. My mouth tastes like metal, my throat like bitterness. "Or that, my dad's the sheriff. So it should be easy to sneak by his office and take a look at the case file."

"That's illegal," says D, but it doesn't sound aghast like it did when she suggested I might not graduate high school earlier today. Manufactured.

"You don't think I could do it?" My blood is racing. I'm staring at my parents' closed bedroom door. There is no one behind it. The world is shifting underneath my feet. The air seems particularly heavy and sticky with salt today. And suddenly all I want to do is break into the Sheriff's station and look at Ivy's case file, steal the information from underneath Dad's nose. Maybe even pull it off while he's there, looking straight at me.

"That's really not what I said."

But I let a laugh ripple out of my throat. "Come pick me up. Let's get over to B's before he gets loaded."

Everything smells like fresh ink, everything mutable, I can push my fingers through the air and change reality, I can do whatever I want and there's no one who can stop me.

## CHAPTER 43

A Frenchman, an Englishman and a New Yorker are exploring the jungle and are captured by a fierce tribe.

The chief tells them, “The bad news is that we’ve caught you, we’re going to kill you, and then use your skins to build a canoe. The good news is that you get to choose how you die.”

The Frenchman says, “I take ze poison.” The chief gives him some poison; the Frenchman says, “Vive la France!” and drinks it down.

The Englishman says, “A pistol for me, please.” The chief gives him a pistol; the Brit points it at his head, says, “God save the Queen!” and blows his brains out.

The New Yorker says, “Gimme a fork.” The chief is puzzled, but he shrugs and gives him a fork. The New Yorker takes the fork and jabs himself all over – the stomach, the sides, the chest, everywhere. Blood gushes from every hole.

The chief screams, “What are you doing?”

The New Yorker looks at the chief and says, “So much for your canoe, asshole!”

## CHAPTER 44

The weed scent sticks to the furniture, emanates from the walls, it turns the space closed despite how spacious B's rec room is, sprawling couches, palatial entertainment center, empty pizza boxes and soda bottles, candy wrappers, family-sized chip bags, sliding glass doors to the backyard. B is draped across a couch like a spindly throw rug. Only movement are his fingers as they manipulate the xbox controller, his high-def television flashing with color and action.

B's head hangs off the side of the couch, neck stretching out, as he plays upside down.

"Whaddya want? Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?"

"Clearly," I say. Walk across the room and block his line of vision. "Now you're in the middle of something with us."

"Us?" B's head comes up, eyes falling on D. He pauses his game and throws his controller to the side. "Dove-Dove, that you?" He snorts. "The fuck's goin' on?"

"Got a couple questions about what you saw the night Ivy died." There is a sigh that feels more like cement winding through my bones, resting on my shoulders. "About why the police questioned you multiple times."

B's face goes narrow, pointed and two-dimensional. "I told you already, that's the cops having a stick up their ass. 'Sides, you were there. Why don't you ask yourself."

"I left before you did."

"Ivy dragged you out. Think I didn't see that, G-man?"

“Yeah, and then I left. She was still alive when I left.”

B’s fingers flex on his knees.

“Did you see or hear anything after G left? Did anything strike you as odd that night?”

D steps forward, her shoulder by my shoulder, a brush of her hand down my back. To others, it might seem comforting, but I know D better. It means *back off*.

“And what the hell are you doing here Dovie? You two grief fucking or somethin’?”

Indignation swells up behind my ribs, but before I can say anything D says, “That’s right. We’re grief fucking. Now answer the questions.” And everything whites out with anger and by the time the world comes back to me they’re already in conversation.

“S’all I know,” B is saying, “no one saw Ivy after she left with G, I don’t think. At least no one at the party. Maybe some passerby.”

“Did anyone leave after G and Ivy did? Maybe someone who could have seen something?”

B’s laugh is scornful. “There was a million fuckin’ people there, Dove-Dove. How the fuck am I supposed to know? I didn’t know half the people there.”

“That’s not true.”

“Fine, a third.”

“You must’ve seen someone leave. Something. Someone you know. Most crimes like these are committed by people that the victim knows.”

“Jesus, s’that what you’re doing, investigating Ivy’s friends? The people who loved her? You’re fucking sick.”

B stands and starts to walk away, but D blocks his path and shoves him down. The shock of it, painted on his face, seems to make his knees bend easy as he rocks back onto the couch.

“I am just trying to get to the truth of what happened to Ivy. Okay?” D scrubs a hand over the short curls of her hair. “Maybe it’s Occam Razor and she just tripped. Or maybe everyone’s right about her and she was high and stupid and got what she deserved. But maybe it wasn’t any of those things and whoever was with her—not G,” she holds up a hand and then throws it into a wide movement, “after G—did something to her or saw something new or I don’t know, but please. Please just tell me what you know even if you think it doesn’t seem important.”

“She wasn’t high.” B’s mouth has hardened into a downward cut. “She didn’t deserve fuck all and she wasn’t high and neither have anything to do with the other.”

Unease skitters across my back. The back of my neck is cold. “You don’t have to protect her virtue or whatever,” I say to B. “I know she took shit, so did I. She wasn’t a saint.”

B steps into my space. “She wasn’t high. I offered. J offered. She didn’t even drink. She did that sometimes. Stayed sober so she could dance. She’d say she could feel the music better, clearer or something. That night was one those nights. So you can fuck off about her virtue, *I* know she didn’t give a shit.”

I make a face. “The hell are talking about? Sober dance nights, what bullshit.” But sickness gnaws at my insides. Chills starting to run up my limbs and goosebumps raising hairs.

B sneers. His teeth are yellow. “You think you knew her best cause she was your sister? Out of everyone, you prob’ly knew her the least. So you can stop lookin’ at me with that face, you entitled prick, like coming here was a waste of time, cause you were just her dumbass kid brother who she kept shit from like everyone else. You’re not special.”

D grips the neck of my shirt and barks out, “No,” a testament to her proficiency at reading body language or perhaps to how well she knows me still. But I lunge forward anyway, feel the cotton t-shirt stretch against my throat and bring B down onto the couch, punching him in the sides and back. His arms wrap around me, fingers scrabbling and scratching down my skin looking for purchase and to hurt. Our bodies twist and we fall to floor, my leg kicks out and catches against the table edge, a bowl upends and a rainfall of broken chips and crumbs covers us, get in between our bodies when we move. He headbutts me, the lower half of my face, my nose, my teeth jangle against his skull and scrape away, I resist the urge to bite him, and manage to grab the empty metal bowl and hit it against his head.

The bowl is snatched from my grip and then there is warm soda everywhere and B and I scramble apart trying to get away. D sets the empty liter of Coke on the table and looks at us both.

Her face isn’t set into a scowl or glare. Her eyes aren’t blazing. She doesn’t look angry. Not resigned or disappointed or frustrated either. She looks at us like she’s seeing us, seeing through us, no judgement or interpretation, but the picture of our beings. She looks at us. She looks far away. She leaves.

There is blood on my upper lip and in my mouth from the hit to my face, scratches sting down my arms. B’s eyebrow is split and bleeding and his breathing is heavy. His

white shirt has been tie-dyed watery brown. And suddenly, B's laughing. He's laughing and laughing and my heart is a stone in my chest and I wish I was soundwaves like him.

"Sorry," I say. "Didn't mean to."

D hasn't left entirely, is waiting in the car. She starts driving as soon as I shut the passenger door. After a few minutes, I ask, "Where are we going?"

She says, "I'm taking you home so you can clean up. Then you're going to get A to meet up with us."

I don't argue. I start texting A.

She pulls up to the sidewalk in front of my house. For a moment, I'm still in my seat, I don't know whether to ask if she wants to come in or not. Dad's car is in the driveway. But she takes the decision out of my hands and unbuckles her seatbelt, opens her door. "What are you sitting there for," she says. "We haven't got all day," she says. "Move."

There are papers spread out across the kitchen table and Dad seated behind them. He sees us come in and says my name.

"Hi, Sheriff," says D, her voice rising an octave. "It's been a while." She pushes me forward. "Go get changed." To Dad, she says, "I spilled soda on G. Before he can get back in my car he needs a new shirt at the very least."

"Lovely to see you, D." I hear my dad reply, the words getting fainter as I move away from the kitchen. "It's good to see you and G putting past issues aside."

"About Ivy, I'm so—"

"No, no, you don't have to say anything, how—"

"—can you tell me—"



I shut my bedroom door behind me and strip off my shirt and jeans. Grab a fresh pair of pants and shirt from the dresser and throw them on my bed. I step in front of the long mirror on the back of my door to inspect the damage. There are raised scratches up and down my arms and by my hips. A mosaic of fading bruises along my sides and back, scabbed up cuts, from the last time Dad had gotten to me, before Ivy died, and a swollen hard edge along my leg from B's table. Once I wash my face, put on my clothes, should be as good as new.

Slip on my jeans and grab my shirt to take it into the bathroom with me. I open the door to Mom's face, a basket of laundry by her front. She puts it on the ground.

"What happened to your face?" She takes the sides of my head into her hands. Fingers prodding at my flesh.

I pull from her grip, walk to the bathroom. "What do you think?" I say. "I tripped." I let the tap run cold and then wash my face, pressing cold washcloth to skin when I'm done.

"Uh-huh," says Mom, standing in the empty space of the doorway. "Tripped, you say."

"Got into it with B a bit. Don't worry about it. It's fixed. D's downstairs if you want to talk to her."

"I don't want to talk to D. I want to talk to my son." Mom steps forward, takes the washcloth from my hands, wets it again with cold, rings it out, presses it to my skin in a way, at an angle, that soothes it more than when I did it myself. "All it seems we've been doing lately is arguing. I want to have a real conversation."

The air isn't cold against my bare skin, but it still prickles with goosebumps. "About what?" My chin juts out in stubborn instinct.

"I don't know, G. About what's going with you? About the fights you're getting into?"

"It's nothing new."

"And it was never okay. But they've escalated. You're getting into more of them. You're hurting yourself."

"Cause that's the problem."

"It is a problem." Mom presses harder. "Maybe you went back to school too early. Maybe you need to stay home, sit shiva with me. You've hardly mourned at all. It might help you heal."

I take the washcloth from her and my fingers touch hers, a papery feeling to her skin, but a warmth as well. Her knuckles swollen from early-onset arthritis. I run the tap again the sound drowning out the silence, the cold numbing my hands.

"Thought that was over."

She gives me a look. "I think we can extend it."

"Rather not."

"Maybe you need to talk to someone."

Irritation burns its way up to my tongue. I ball up the washcloth and throw it into the sink. Mom's scent always fills up the space she's in, Calvin Klein perfume and hairspray always a heady, strong mix that's been the same, that's been there ever since I could remember.

"Talk to who?" I snap. "You? Dad?"

“A professional,” says Mom. “Someone who has the tools to help you.”

Her scent turns cloying. It itches at my nose. There is a pit in my throat that cuts at me as I swallow and speak. “I don’t need any help. Least of all from you.”

She recoils back and I want to retch. Dizziness overtakes my brain, everything swims in a corded tension. I unclench my teeth. My heart is beating fast and the air tastes like sour rot.

“We’re arguing again,” she says. “Why do you turn everything into an argument.” Her voice is double-layered with anger and hurt.

“Christ,” I say and push past her, putting on my t-shirt. “I don’t. It’s you. Why can’t you just leave me alone.”

She takes hold of my arm and I rip it from her grasp and she stumbles one way and I the other and before I can look at her face, I take the stairs down two at a time and walk out the front door and wait for D to catch up.

## CHAPTER 45

it is warm. a thick warm. where the air is hard to move through the nostrils, can be swallowed down like taffy. it is pitch black without light, a lite bright stars and stripes misfirings of the brain type dark. and it is small, the closet, the thin rectangle probably meant for umbrellas and long coats, when sitting, back pressed to the wall, legs cannot unfurl entirely and elbows knock at the limits. it's like drowning, buoyant in heavy air, a tingling weightlessness to my scalp, to my fingertips as they dance on carpet, no constraints to them, but a dragging down my insides. the door opens and there's a breeze of cold and i scuttle out on hands and knees eating air. *i'm grounded now*, says O, she pushes at my arm with her toes. *this is all your fault*. get to my feet, hand to the doorframe when i sway, my fingers feel tight and round like sausages, but they look the same as they've always been. *what are you talking about*, i say. O says, *you didn't do your chores and i was babysitting you and now i'm grounded cause i didn't look after you 'properly.'* O puts that in scare quotes, scrunches her nose. *i told you to pick up your shit. it's not my fault you didn't listen to me*. i say, *ooh bad word*, voice flat. *you're a little brat*, she says, *i was supposed to go see a movie with my friends. what are you crying for? stop it*. everything is wet, my nose is dripping, my breath hitching. *you have no reason to be crying*, O says, *you're not grounded. you're lucky. couple of hours in a closet that's nothing. i'm stuck here all weekend. well, aren't you going to thank me for letting you out? i got dad to say it was okay. ugh, i honestly can't deal with this. stop crying, you little baby*. i say, *thank you*,

but bits of it gets stuck in my belly and my teeth, and nothing seems to chew it away. it's not until monday after school, when i go to T's and T has K and L and R and B over also and we're swimming in his pool and jumping on the trampoline and then laughing at his mother's collectible plates, that i pick one up and ignore T's shouts and throw it to the floor and make it shatter, and *my mom's going to kill me* and *why d'you do that, dickface* and *i'm gonna be in so much trouble* are like cool mints and ginger ale, and everything bubbles away. and T screams and cries, his face going gremlin and red and then he pushes me down, and the shock of it bites at my lips, and i get up and push him and he stumbles and he pushes me and we push each other, entangle, fall to the ground, i keep his face away, his hands, but then he pinches me, nails digging into the skin, i reel back and slap him in the face and everyone is silent and i get up and walk away and feel the air slough off of me.

## CHAPTER 46

me: Even in my head I'm always fighting.

Shrink: Next time, try taking a breath and counting to ten before acting.

me: Did you get your degree from the bottom of a cereal box.

## CHAPTER 47

Mr. S is the third teacher on our list. The other two, Mr. M and Ms. L, categorically denied all inappropriate contact, despite Ms. L's guilty flush. Mr. S teaches woodworking. During that elective Ivy made a tiered desk organizer, a napkin holder, a checkers set and carvings of: a wolf, a skull, a figure skate, and an intricately knotted ouroboros. We corner him Tuesday during lunch. He's leaning against a workbench.

"I just gave Ivy the tools she needed and let her go. She was a great talent. I'm truly sorry for what happened." His jeans and boots are battered, but his shirt is pressed and cleanly tucked into his pants. His light hair is artfully styled. His lips are plush and his forehead is wide. No scruff. I could see Ivy fucking him, he's her type, ordered and neat, ready to be wrecked. "It's such a tragedy."

"A tragedy," D says. If it came down to a life or death decision, I could not pick out if she's agreeing or not. "Thank you for meeting with us."

"Of course." Mr. S looks at me. "I was wondering when you'd come. You're here to pick up her final project, yes?"

"No," I reply. "I want to know if you were sleeping with my sister."

Mr. S's face goes blotchy around the cheek bones. "What did you say to me?"

"Your name was written on the wall outside, you know the one, with the list?"

Mr. S turns away, rolling his shoulders as if he can shake off the accusation. He walks around D and opens the door with a sharp tug. "You—you two—you can leave now."

Just because some misguided student was—was playing a prank, having their fun, doesn't mean that what they wrote was true. And, and I don't take such accusations lightly."

"So you didn't sleep with Ivy." My eyes droop with boredom and my voice is a patchwork of flat and disdainful to exemplify how tedious I find this confrontation. Mr. S's face goes mottled with outrage.

"Of course not!" His arm comes across his body as if trying to swat away the words. He twists the knob on the door and says, "Now leave. I've answered your highly inappropriate—"

Meanwhile, D is frowning, gaze roving over the tools and equipment. "Fine. We believe you. But did you notice anything off about Ivy the week before her death? You saw her that school day. Was there anything weird? Did she contact you?"

Mr. S's hairline glimmers with sweat. "Why would you think she'd contact me? I told you our relationship was professional. I was her teacher. She was my student. We didn't interact outside the classroom and inside said class she was an exceptionally bright student, but that's it."

"Your number was in her book. Fun-fact, Ivy liked to write down her hook-ups in a little book with nicknames, descriptions, and relevant details. I'm pretty sure yours is under Right Angle Drill and that you have maroon silk sheets that she thought were a little hedonistic for someone so buttoned-up."

At D's ah-ha caught-you monologue, Mr. S goes gray and sways on his feet. "Well, that's, that's inappropriate to tell me."

"So you're denying it's you?" I ask. There's an undercurrent of amusement I get from making Mr. S squirm, but I already know this fucker's a dead-end.



Mr. S sputters indignantly. I pull out the book. His eyes go wide, “No, no, I,” he starts to speak quickly, but I’m not listening. I flip to the relevant page, punch the digits into my phone and we all listen as Mr. S’s pocket vibrates.

He steps forward, the classroom door swinging shut behind him. His shirt is drenched with sweat. “Please, I love my job,” he says. “I love it. Teaching you kids is the most fulfilling thing in my life, please. Please, don’t do this.”

“We’re not doing anything,” I say, tilt of my chin bored. “I don’t care if you messed around with Ivy.” I hold up her book. “If you haven’t gotten it by now, let me illuminate you: She screwed you not the other way around. I just want to know what you know about the time surrounding when my sister died.”

“I-I-well, yes, we were in a relationship, but it wasn’t just sexual. I loved her. She was,” Mr. S deflates as his face goes sentimental and I resist the urge to gag out loud, “magnetic. G, listen, I want you to know, what we had, it wasn’t something bad, it was consensual and real.”

Consensual. Sure. Real? That almost makes me laugh. What a goddamn sucker.

“Answer the question,” says D, cutting between me and Mr. S. “Anything off? Out of the ordinary?”

Mr. S shakes his head and backs away. “I’m telling you, she was as she was ever was. Maybe a little quieter and sadder than usual, but that was Ivy, you know? Vibrant on the outside, but such a sensitive, soft inner world. Easily moved.”

What fucking nonsense. Sad? Quiet? Sensitive? None of those words applied to Ivy. None of them. But Mr. S’s lower lip is trembling slightly, eyes watery and I turn to D

and say, “Well now we know one of Ivy’s seduction tactics. More than I ever wanted to know about my sister’s sex life.”

D frowns at me and it sticks in my mouth, making it pucker. “Thank you for your honesty, Mr. S. That’s all we needed.”

“Before you leave.” Mr. S goes to the storage room adjoined to his workshop and comes out with something about the size of a thick book in his hands. He hands it me. “This was Ivy’s final project. It’s a puzzle box she made for you—it’s what I thought you were here for in the first place.”

The box is heavy. The wood is saturated with a blood red varnish. I can feel the seams in the wood where pieces of the box could be moved and altered to open the lock. My name is embossed on the top in silver sharpie. It’s Ivy’s handwriting.

Outside of the classroom, D fiddles with her phone. Staring at it, I realize her phone had been in her hand the entire time we were talking to Mr. S. We walk down the hall and then D bares her teeth, “Recorded everything we need. We’re going to nail that bastard to the wall.” There is a vicious excitement to the lines of her body. My face does something outside of my control, I don’t know what, but it causes D to stop walking. “You don’t think he deserves jail time? Or at the very least getting fired and put on a list so he can never do this to another one of his students again?”

“I don’t understand what was so bad. Do what?”

“Ivy was seventeen,” says D. “A minor. That’s statutory rape.”

I laugh. Continue to laugh. “She seduced that poor fucker and screwed him not the other way around.”

“You don’t know that.” D’s arms fly out as if trying to encompass the entirety of what I don’t know.

“Sure I do. This is not the first time Ivy’s done something like this. And I know because she would brag to me about it.”

“So what?” D rubs at her forehead. “This time could have been different. But any way you frame it, what Mr. S did was wrong and illegal—he took advantage of one of his students. There’s an inherent power dynamic and hierarchy there. Not in Ivy’s favor.”

Wrong. “Ivy had her own power,” I say. My jaw firms and juts out. “No one had any power of her. She even got Dad to do what she wanted.”

“Look, G,” D’s forehead reddens from her scrubbing. “Just because she seemed one way to you, doesn’t mean she wasn’t powerless in another way. Mr. S said she was sad, depressed maybe, and it doesn’t mean she necessarily wasn’t, or even lying to get him into bed—and how is that supposed to be attractive, ugh.” She puts up a hand as if to stop herself. “I only mean to say, we all have our secrets and we all show the world what we want the world to see.”

The hallway is vacant except for us. Classrooms open and empty, bare skeletons, abandoned homes. Our footsteps echo, the soft squeak of my sneaker, the slap of her sandal, a whispering simulacrum of our weight. The walls are painted satin green, gentle, the lockers are a darker green, gradations, blurred. It’s a touch too warm, heating cranked up while winter cold has already started to fade, sweat collects between the two juts of my shoulders, down my spine, an itch across my skin. A chemical Lysol scent emanates from the floors, from the walls, a citrus scent that reminds me of supple leather.

Here’s what I know.

Ivy killed herself.

Maybe the second person spotted on Gemini point muddling the truth was me. Maybe there was someone else after me. Not out of the realm of possibility. Not the point.

Ivy killed herself.

She was drunk. She was high. She was dancing on the guard rail. She fell. She said, “Do you love me, G?” And I said, “Yes.” And she said, “Why?” And I hated her.

She was self-indulgent and self-centered and narcissistic. She was petty and impulsive and whimsical. She did what she wanted whenever she wanted. She was charming. She was charismatic. She was magnetic. Dad loved her. Everybody loved her. I loved her.

“Yes,” I answered. “Why?” she asked.

My shoulders moved up, then down. “You’re my sister.”

She let me out of closets and watched me bleed and tried to teach me how to be better. She pushed me down and tripped me when we raced so she could win. She sat on my bed with me as I cried. She drew band lyrics on my skin. We never talked about it.

She laughed, “So that’s a no, then.” And she said, “I’m so proud of you.”

Here’s what I know now.

Ivy killed herself.

She wasn’t high and she wasn’t drunk and she knew what she was doing. She always did.

D touches my shoulder and says my name and when I focus on her, I can see purple underneath her eyes, a sallowness to her skin, and I ask, “Why are you doing this?”

“I already told you.” The line of D’s mouth goes hard and downturned. “Mr. S needs to know there’s consequences to what he’s done. He deserves—”

“Not that. This—this fakakta investigation into Ivy’s death. Nobody killed Ivy. You have to know that.”

“No. I don’t.” D goes two-dimensional, a wall blocking unwanted noise. Stubbornness and rage. “Ivy was my friend. She was my—” She stops. “She wasn’t some teenage fuck-up who died taking a selfie or something and I’m not going to let people get away with thinking about her like that, saying things like that. Someone killed her. They were on that ledge with her and pushed her. Directly or indirectly. I’m not going to let that go.”

My arm twitches up and my body jerks away. It’s getting the spins while being sober. The shockwave of a head hitting against something hard, the sudden uncooperativeness of limbs. What does D know? What did Ivy tell her? Had she already known when she walked in on me that time when we were fourteen? Was I just some trite secret passed between two teenage girls? The urge to hurt, to destroy, lights up my nerves. I want to rip her apart. The feeling is familiar. I am bloated and stretched inside my skin. Everything has gone in circles.

When I look up, her expression crumples. We have known each other for far too long.

“Have fun with that Dovie,” I say. I shove the puzzle box in her arms and feel untethered from gravity once fingertips leave wood. “A souvenir. I’m out.”

## CHAPTER 48

Of course, I was at that party too.

We hadn't gone together and she hadn't expected me to come, body still crushed and weeping because I'm a mouthy fuck, a smart-mouthed mouthy fuck, can't keep my mouth shut for the life of me, *You're a total fucking moron*, she had said, *why do you do this? I've taught you better than this*. And I'd hurt too much to ask, *Do what?* or say, *Your advice is shit and you know it, you could help me, you could really help me, but you never do*. O was a mouthy fuck too, but not around Dad. Because sometimes he was a puppet to the strings coming from her fingertips, she'd smile and simper, talk about her community give-back extracurriculars and how Dad's parents had no substance to them, moral vacuums, and he crumbled. I knew that man too, could probably fix myself too, make myself someone he liked too, but I never did. Guess I was stupid. My fault.

But it wasn't so bad this time, and what better way to forget, to feel good for a night than to drink myself into oblivion? Bury myself into a willing body, soft and warm? Sometimes wandering hands gripped too tight against my cuts and bruises, but pain becomes relative. Sometimes all mixed up in adrenaline and arousal, it's good. Euphoric. Sometimes I thought about D, closed my eyes and imagined her as she was the day she walked in on me, her face imposed on the face below me, my fingers threaded through her long brown hair, the brassy golden locket glinting on her throat, the knowing that suffused her expression moving down to her fingers as they found each bruise and cut and wound and pressed and pressed and pressed.

Through the throng of people, the body shimmer, sloshing red solo cups, pulsing music, O's gaze flickered to mine, mapped the points of my face, the targets of my body, and her eyes went wide. What was that glint in her eyes, before they settled into something that crinkled at the corners? All at once her face relaxed and the arc of her body went loose and she spun and smiled and shrieked with laughter. Care-fucking-free.

I drank hard until it got to my head. The writhing mass dancing on the floor looked like everyone had sunk in together, tentacle limbs on a giant creature. Went to B and B and J and M and smoked what they gave me and took what they gave me and the world went liquid and the next thing I knew she had me by the hand, the gelatinous mass of my body forming into something solid from the focal point of her fingernails.

She dragged me outside and the brisk air was in my face. The light from the streetlamps, a semi-circle bordering Gemini Point, was blinding, I winced and turned away, but she grabbed me by the shoulders. She slapped her rectangle purse into my stomach and I took it by reflex, and she hopped onto the railing, twirling, her hands gripping the lamppost as she stretched her leg into an arabesque, and she laughed and laughed, a roar in my ears that left everything else muted.

She jumped to the ground and asked, "Do you love me, G?"

"What kind of question is that?" A wave of nausea passed through me, cold sweat, shakiness and I sat down. "I don't feel so good."

A hand touched my face. "Do you even know what you took?"

"Doesn't matter." My face was between my knees. She sat down next to me and rubbed my back, long sweeping strokes. The next time I was aware she had an origami

fortune teller in her hand, clearly homemade, brightly white, she was moving it around, but there was no writing.

“Yes,” I said, answering her earlier question.

“Why?” she asked.

“You’re my sister,” I replied. Lifted my shoulders, lowered them.

“So that’s a no, then.” Her laughter was bitter. I should have corrected her. “I’m a shit older sister, aren’t I?” I should have said something. “I thought I was a good person. I helped you, you know, more than you probably think. But our lives are toxic, right? And you deserved it sometimes cause you’re a little shit, you know? Really self-centered. You’re not blameless. But, I don’t know. It didn’t come to me in a dream or anything, but one day Dad was—and it was really clear suddenly, I thought: I don’t deserve this and you don’t deserve this, no one does. There’s breaking rules and then there’s *breaking rules*. Ours weren’t the same as his.”

Saliva filled my mouth. All I could think about was how much I needed to throw up.

“I hate it here,” she said.

“Me too. At least you have a full ride out of here.”

“I’m never going to leave.” She put her fortune teller to the side and leaned back on her hands. “Even if I move across country, across the world. Australia, the Gold Coast. I’ll always be right here. And here will always be waiting for me.” She breathed in and then out, the breath that streamed from her lips turned to steam in the air. “Besides, everywhere is all the same.”

“That’s not true.”



“What do you know. You’ve never been anywhere else. People are all the same. It doesn’t matter where you are. People are the same, there’s nothing different.” Her fingernails scratched into the cement.

“I don’t believe that.” The cold sank into my skin and shivers racked my body. “I can’t believe that. That’s a bleak fucking future. What’s the point then? Not everyone is Dad.”

Her face broke apart, flaked away into a smile and she laughed. “Not you. That wasn’t your future, just mine. I’m so proud of you.” She grabbed my hand, fingers curling around mine, and it was just pressure. No warmth or cold, just a press, a push, encircling. “After everything, you still believe.”

“In what?”

“Dunno.” She shrugged. “Something. I’m far too old for that pixie dust nonsense.”

She helped me to my feet and then snaked her arms beneath my coat, winding them around my back. “Hey little brother,” she said. “I love you.”

I should have said it back.

Her arms released me from their grip and she put her paper fortune teller in my hand and said, “See you later.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Later.”

It will be the question everyone is asked and asks at Arcadia: When was the last time you saw Ivy R—?

That was it.

And I still have to ask myself what part was real—and what part was random firings of neurons in brain after I passed out that night?

## CHAPTER 49

Spoiler Alert:

Yes, the fortune teller unfolded into a suicide note,  
but you already knew that, didn't you?

## CHAPTER 50

Shrink: Did you investigate Ivy's death with D, go to all that trouble, alienate the friends you interrogated, all so you could pretend that you don't have Ivy's suicide note?

me: You don't understand. She didn't understand either. She thought it would be better without her. That it would get better for me. She says things in the note. I think she wanted to shock Dad out of himself. Or at least let the other cops know what was happening.

Shrink: And you don't agree?

me: Of course not.

Shrink: Hasn't your father been different since Ivy's death, though? He hasn't truly physically assaulted you since that day.

me: Whatever armistice Dad has imposed isn't going to last. Besides, here's the one thing Ivy never understood: He's going to blame me. He's not going to care what's in the note, he's going to blame me. I have the letter, I was there, and I did nothing. It's me, I'm the reason his daughter's dead.

Shrink: Do you blame yourself?

me: No—Don't do that. Don't ask me if I'm lying. Ivy made her own stupid decisions. This is on her except how it's never going to be. It's going to be on me. She did this to me. She left and she left me screwed.

Shrink: If you're worried about that letter being found on you or by you, then you know what you need to do.

me: Burn it?

[Note: For some reason the shrink looked entirely shocked at this suggestion. Has she been listening to me at all?]

Shrink: Absolutely not. That note was Ivy's last words, her last wish. You're not going to burn that away.

me: I could. I should.

Shrink: No. Do something better. Think about it.

## CHAPTER 51

bystander, *n.*

Pronunciation: U.S., /'baɪ, stændər/

One who is standing by; one who is present without taking part in what is going on; a passive spectator.

spectator, *n.*

Pronunciation: U.S., /'spek, teɪdər/

A person who sees, or looks on at, some scene or occurrence; a beholder, onlooker, observer.

observer, *n.*

Pronunciation: U.S., /əb'zərvər/

1.

- a. An adherent or follower of a law, religion, custom, ritual, method, etc. Usually with *of*.
- b. A person showing respect, deference, or dutiful attention; an obsequious follower.

2.

- a. A person who watches or takes notice; a spectator.
- b. A person who observes in an official capacity without participating; *spec.* (a) one who attends a conference, inquiry, etc., to note the proceedings; (b) one posted to an area of conflict to monitor events, supervise a ceasefire, etc.

3.

- a. observer's paradox: the apparent paradox whereby the nature of a thing is fundamentally altered by the presence of the observer, thus compromising the accuracy of the observation.

Observer's paradox—that's just life, isn't it?

## CHAPTER 52

the noises draw both me and O out from our beds, from our rooms. downstairs the liquor cabinet's open and the kitchen lights are on and dad hasn't been home for three days trying to catch Renata and Alejo's killers and my body stops moving. nothing in me wants to catch him like this, but O goes forward, always does no matter what, and after a delighted grin pulls at her cheeks she waves me to join her and i do and it's not dad. mom's stumbling around making a turkey sandwich with all the works, making a mess of the kitchen, an open bottle of vodka on the kitchen table surrounded by orange juice and cranberry juice and gatorade. *mommy?* asks O. mom smiles when she sees us. *children!* she says, *are you hungry my loves?* She puts her sandwich on a plate. *do you need any help?* i ask. O pinches me where mom can't see. *With what?* mom asks, *oh this?* she glances around the kitchen, *we can leave this for tomorrow. come watch a movie with me.* we pile into her bed and put on practical magic, mom's favorite movie, and all three of us say the lines as they come: *why don't you do what you do and i do what i do and we'll see where we end up. okay? okay. curses only have power when you believe in them. and i don't. you know what? i wished for you too.* then mom looks at her plate and asks, *where's my sandwich?* and i say, *you ate it,* and mom says, *i did?* and O says, *yes,* and mom says, *what a bitch,* and the last thing i remember before falling asleep is laughing.

## CHAPTER 53

There are two strangers in the living room. An older man in a boxy dark blue suit, grayed out flattop, protruding ears, his shoes don't squeak as he does a slow circuit of the room, soles worn. And a woman in her early thirties, sharp make-up, hair doing the celebrity curling wave and bounce, product in layers, soft gray pantsuit, and pointed heels that show themselves when she sits down on the couch, tailored fabric riding up. They both have briefcases growing from their hands.

"Who are you?" My intrusion seems to shake the older man, but the woman's expression opens up and her lips unfurl.

"You must be, G. I've heard so much about you." She stands up. "I'm K. An old friend of your father's." She moves to greet me and her slim hand, with long fingers and well-kept nails that sheen, trails down from my shoulder to my palm and she shakes it. Her touch leaves prickling in its wake. "I have to say, you're taller than I expected. Your dad still talks about you as if you're his baby boy."

"We're lawyers," the older man says. He shifts on his feet, left, right, left, right, only a marginal step up from his previous pacing.

"Is there a reason you look constipated," I say. From the periphery of my vision, I can see the stairs and start to regret not ignoring the strangers. The living room has turned oblong, elongated shapes put together wrong, everyone in on the joke but me, livewire currents pushing and pulling in the eddies of each movement, of each word.



The woman arches a brow at me, face cutting and wry. “No reason to be crude, little G. Surely your mother has taught you better manners than that.”

There is something laughing in her voice that has me saying, “Shut up. You don’t know anything about my mother.”

“Son.” Dad’s hand lands on my shoulder. I do not flinch. “You’re home early.” He comes to stand beside me, and the one hand turns into an arm around me and when he squeezes me tight, his arm doesn’t slip up to circle my neck. It’s an embrace. It’s the length of his body next to mine, like a support structure of a building.

“Not really. School’s over.”

“Aren’t you usually out hanging with your friends? You come home later than I do sometimes.”

There is nothing accusing in his tone. His face in a rictus of joviality, Sheriff Handsome at his best. I know what he wants, a gripping performance. So I modulate my tone, say: “Haven’t felt like it lately,” wait a beat and then look down.

His body slackens against mine, face dying down. Something’s wrong. He takes my head into his hands and I let him breathe. I don’t know what to do. He moves forward and wraps me in a hug, it moves past acceptable length. I don’t know what to. There is a hitch of breath against my chest. I don’t think he remembers there are other people here. He must. He smells like cologne. He doesn’t wear cologne. This is too long, too warm. Sweat beads the back of my neck, dampens under my arms. He releases me.

“Of course,” he says. “Look, you’ve interrupted a meeting. And your mother and I need to talk to you, son. Could you wait for us upstairs in your room?”

Lawyers. Meeting. The air crystallizes around me, perfect vision of this moment, the positions of each figure, the shape of his hands, the set of his eyes. Is it finally happening?

“I’ll be waiting on bated breath, Daddy-O.”

I run up the stairs, exhilaration swimming in my belly, body feeling like the moment after a great jolt, an emergency event, and all that’s left is shocky cold and the need to throw-up. I shut the door and sit on my bed. Hands in a knot on my lap, feet still and flat on the floor.

Stare at the shut door.

It’s fine. I know what’s coming.

## CHAPTER 54

In a 2007 study commissioned by The Compassionate Friends, parental divorce following the death of a child was found to be around 12%.

That's hardly anything. But one can always hope.

## CHAPTER 55

me: I used to have these fantasies, right? But not of the usual stuff. No sex, parties, girls. Fame, superpowers, whatever.

Shrink: I always fantasized of having the ability to become invisible at will.

me: That'd be a shit power. What are you some kind of voyeur?

Shrink: Do you think I am?

me: Well, your purpose in life seems to be getting me spill my deepest darkest thoughts. Oh diary, today, I wrote a poem about how much I wanted to kill myself. Black eyeliner has suddenly grown appealing to me. My Chemical Romance is the anthem of my *life*.

Shrink: You'd look good in eye makeup. Okay. What do you daydream of then?

me: So these fantasies—they were of my parents getting divorced. Mom finally getting fed up of all of Dad's shit and saying something like, no more. I'm done. Let's leave. And she'd just take us, me'n O. Take us and leave.

me: Sometimes the turning point would be Dad putting me in the hospital. I'd wake up in some bleached room, high on morphine, Mom holding my hand and then telling me, *this is it, this is the last straw, I'm so sorry I didn't do this sooner.*

me: Sometimes we would move to New York, those were the realistic ones, go to Mom's family. I've never met them, so I'd imagine what they looked like, what they'd say.

me: But then sometimes, we would go to Hawaii. Italy. Japan. Fucking anywhere. Fucking everywhere.

me: Sometimes I'd imagine that she'd wake me'n O up in the middle of the night, her face bruised and bleeding, Dad had done something to her for once, too much, something horrible and she'd take us away. Come to her fucking senses.

Shrink: What makes you think that your father has never hurt her?

me: If he hurts her and she still stays with him that's worse. It's one thing when he's disciplining me. What the fuck has she done? She could take us and leave.

Shrink: So much to unpack there. But let's start. Maybe she's afraid.

me: I don't care. She should have done something. She's my mother.

Shrink: So you'd rather he hit her. Force her to action.

me: No! Of course not. It's just some dumb fucking fantasy.

Shrink: Hm. Well, it's interesting to me that you never fantasized about leaving, running away, or hurting your father back. Putting him down permanently—self-defense. Or even him getting killed on the job.

me: I wasn't going to leave Mom.

Shrink: And O?

me: She can take care of herself.

Shrink: Could she?

me: Yes. I don't, I don't know why she did this.

Shrink: You're a very contradictory person.

me: Screw you. Feelings don't have to be rational.

Shrink: I never said they did. And what about exacting revenge on your father?

[Pause.]

me: That would be letting him win. Hitting him wouldn't do shit. He'd like that I think.  
The excuse to hit me harder, but also proof that he was toughening me up. Teaching me.  
We're Rs. We aren't pussies. Words are water. They don't mean shit.

me: I guess you're right. I am contradictory.

## CHAPTER 56

voted for him in the first election. did you, really? know quality when i see it. thought you were for Z, he did that initiative, remember? vigilant policing. no no that's why i voted for O, that's what got our town in the news, something about racial profiling. politics. we live in a nice place. people just manufacture problems. people from the west side. sure. he comes from a good family. so true. known E since he was a child. his parents are good friends. wife is brilliant, but not all there. don't listen to the gossip about him being disowned. such a good father too did you hear. wanted to strike out on his own, have to respect a man that can make something of himself from nothing. just another joe trying to provide for his family. so handsome and so kind, all that he's doing for the Alvarazes you have to respect. keeps our town safe. yes, he does. finally we have someone who believes in justice. finally we have someone who believes in family values. finally we have someone who believes in the punishment fitting the crime. parents must be proud of him despite their. wasn't even a fight. look at that family of his. stand-up. good. voted for him in the first election. no you didn't. well if i knew him like i do now i would've.

did you hear what happened to the daughter?



## CHAPTER 57

They meet me as a unit.

Dad's not in uniform. Instead, a crisp white button-up and blue jeans. He's not wearing shoes or socks and his feet are bare against the carpet, naked and small.

Mom's hair is pulled back tight, twisted into a knot, an attempt at suppression that fails, wisps of curls scraping free despite containment. The corners of her mouth are downturned, and she has lines there, that complement that expression.

My bedroom is not the best space for this conversation. Too small. The bed, nightstand, and dresser take up most of the space. There are clothes and everyday detritus all over the floor. Movie posters cover the dark green walls. Sometimes when it's night, the only light filtering in from behind the closed door and between the shutters of my windows, it looks like a thousand eyes staring at me in my bed, it looks like different worlds converging on the rectangle of my body, it looks like the violent motion of monsters tearing people apart. There is no comfort in my room.

Nowhere to sit except for next to me on the mattress, so they stand shoulder by shoulder facing me. They do not shut the door.

"G," Mom begins.

My toes dig into the floor. "Are you guys getting a divorce?"

Dad frowns. "Did the lawyers tell you that?" He turns to Mom. "Damn him. I thought you told that paltry excuse for human filth that we wanted to be one the ones to break the news to *our son* and hadn't been able to do so yet."

“I did, E.” Mom crosses her arms. “Maybe it was K. She seemed familiar with the proceedings already. With our house.”

“Forgive me for wanting to prepare myself, I.” Dad steps forward, his pointed finger the strike of a judge’s gavel. “K wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t go against my express wishes.”

I rock to my feet. “Stop accusing Mom of shit. I didn’t need to be told, it was fucking obvious.”

“Language,” say both Mom and Dad at the same time, and I start laughing. I laugh and laugh until I can’t breathe, until the muscles in my belly ache, something along the line of my spine sprains. My body hits the bed.

“—hysterical. What are we supposed to do with that?” Only catch the last half of Dad’s irritated mumblings.

“I’m here.” My feet kick out, fall back, hit against the frame of my bed, repeat, and Mom steps forward and takes my hands in hers.

“I know this is tough to hear—” she says.

“It isn’t. It’s a long time coming.”

Mom’s warm, papery hands spasm around mine. Her face is still dripping downward. “How are you feeling about this, honey? I can understand if this is too much, too fast. But I want you to know that your father and I, we’re committed to making this transition as smooth as possible for you, keep your life as normal as we can.”

“It’s okay.” I say. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

Her face fractures into points and turns impossibly sad. Maybe she thinks I mean I was waiting for Ivy to die. That I’m happier now. That I predicted it.

“Oh, G,” she says.

“You’re okay with this, son?” says Dad. He squeezes my shoulder.

There’s a lightness knitting itself around my ribs. “Never better.”

## CHAPTER 58

Dear Algebra,

Please stop asking us to find your  $X$ .

She's never coming back—don't ask  $Y$ .

Why is it sad that parallel lines have so much in common?

Because they'll never meet.

When ordering food at a restaurant, I asked the waiter how they prepare their chicken.

“Nothing special,” he explained. “We just tell them they're going to die.”

## CHAPTER 59

mom's on a deadline. she's got to crunch the numbers or graph the statistics or reach the hand of god, the perfect predictive algorithm that will launch her career and save her company billions. it's end of quarter or term or annual fiscal year, she never quite finishes her sentences when she's on a deadline. starts to explain what she's doing in attempt to maneuver me away from her, then trails off, re-focuses on the work, the shine of her computer screen, the pungent smell of dry erase markers on white board, the soft squeaks as she writes equations. *why don't you have a computer figure this out?* i ask. *computers don't come out of the void, G, people create them, code and program them, humans create the structure on which computers calculate, that's why i still have job, E!* she calls. her eyes don't leave her work and i think about that for a minute. *you probably won't have a job for long,* i say, *someone's gonna make an a.i. or something*—she yells over me, *E! come take your son!* dad comes in and scoops me up. *Come here, cowboy. let's get you out of your mother's hair.* he throws me in the air an inch. *oomph,* he says, *you're getting big, how old are you now, twenty?* laughter bubbles in my throat. *i'm eight.* i wriggle in his arms. *oo-ooh, eight, you say. that's big, that's big.* free-fall for a moment, my stomach swoops. my neck jerks as arms tighten around me. *stop squirming,* dad says. we go to the kitchen and he stands me on my feet and makes me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. O is at her best friend's house still, second half of a sleepover that spans the weekend. so dad takes me to the batting cages and squares my shoulders and lines my hips, swing. *elbows*

*up*, he says. *contact. it's outta here!* we trample back into the house dusty and sweaty and chattering and i swing from his forearm and then jump onto the tile of our floor, a loud stomp, the flats of my sneakers' rubber soles. there is a responding crashing noise from mom's office and her sharp yell of *shit shit shit fuck me* and dad says, *everything alright?* and mom doesn't answer, so he goes to her office and pushes me back when i try to follow, his arm an iron bar blocking the way. but when his back is turned i follow anyway and peeking over the edge of the door frame, there's a stack of folders and papers strewn across the floor in a line, and the dry erase board is overturned and mom's rolling chair is upside. and she's rounding on dad *can't i get some goddamn quiet just for one day. one day! that's all i ask. is that so much?* dad raises his hands and moves forward stepping on some of her papers, bootprints on the annual fiscal year and i hit the door into the doorstopper and mom's bright eyes land on me and she starts to yell, *get out. get out. get out. get out. leave me alone. i need to finish this.* and dad moves too slow and she throws a stapler at his head, which misses, and leaves a dent and a mark in the wall beside him. he closes the office door as he leaves and rests his hand on my head and says, *she's stressed. she just gets so stressed. let's leave her alone for a while.*

## CHAPTER 60

The door to Ivy's bedroom is open. Instead of going down for breakfast, my feet find their way into the plush carpet of her room. Everything is in shades of purple, galaxy swirls, glitter, gradations of color deep and saturated and neon and glowing by turns and the effect is dizzying, a fever dream, suspended in the air no right way up or down, the infinite void that goes on forever and suddenly, I feel sick. My head is too tight and there is something leech-like in my stomach and Ivy's room is claustrophobic in its vastness. My eyes catch on her bed, rumpled comforter, wrinkled sheets, unmade, pillows askew. The middle drawer of her dresser is partway open, the clothes inside are strewn about. There are textbooks on her desk, papers stuffed between the pages, and graded homework assignments crumpled from being stuck at the bottom of a backpack in a haphazard stack. The closet door is open and her shoes are a mountain. There are dirty clothes in the laundry basket and that stops me cold, an icy point tracing patterns along the base of my spine. Who does the laundry of a dead person? Does Mom? Does Dad? Do they throw out those clothes? Donate them? Clean them up and then keep them in a plastic tub in the garage evermore?

Ivy could be at camp. At rehab. Backpacking through Europe. Finding herself across America. Gotten an internship in a different state. Gone to college. Run away. Found a he-she-they to fund her lifestyle away from this goddamn place. Sugar daddies, stripper poles, sex work, retail work, restaurant work, sales work, call centers, be a mermaid for a living.

When does the missing start? That deep, desperate ache. People cry at the beginning, the initial knowledge—is it shock? Sadness? The realization that this person is gone? Gone? Gone. But how can someone truly feel that loss, that lack, that sudden scarcity of Ivy, a deficit of her presence, until one runs out of surplus.

Have I run out of surplus?

Who washes those clothes?

I venture further into the room and lie on her bed, letting my body sink into it. Ivy has the best bed. She gloated over it. There'd been some major sale or promotion going on when her old bed bit it and in the aftermath, she somehow finagled memory foam and cooling spinal gel and everything else that is good in the world.

Ivy had. What would Mom and Dad say if I told them I wanted Ivy's bed?

When I open my eyes, I realize her walls and ceiling are bare. She never hung up posters, but had made dozens and dozens of mood boards and photo collages she pinned to her walls, and always had a calendar right by her head that ran glittery green with gel pen annotations.

There's a hole in the wall from the nail that held the calendar. I press my fingertip to it.

Sitting up, my eyes fall onto a stack of poster board leaned against the end of Ivy's bed. Flip through them. Most of the mood boards and the photo collages are there, but not all of them, and the calendar is gone.

"I couldn't help myself." Mom's voice comes from behind me and my entire body flinches. "I wanted to keep some of her with me." She's touching the flat surface of Ivy's desk. "Truthfully, I wanted to start going through her things. Not keep a shrine to the day



Ivy died in the room down the hall from where I sleep, but E...” Mom shakes her head. “He says it’s too soon. It’s only been a month.” Her words break into pieces, *a-a-a-m-o-n-t-h*. “But he’ll never—” Her jaw clenches and unclenches by turns. “You’ll have to be the one to convince your father to pack up this room. Keep the good memories, but get rid of all the mess. This room is horrendous.”

“I think there’s an unwrapped twinkie not-decomposing in her bottom desk drawer,” I say. “For science.”

Mom pulls a face. “Tell me that’s a joke.”

“Sure, a joke.”

“What are you doing today?”

“There is this thing called school. Theoretically.”

“Oh, it’s Monday already?”

“Wednesday. I don’t have to go if you don’t want me to.”

That earns me a look, a slice of narrow side-eye. “I have to finish packing. Maybe you can come home straight from school and help me today? The movers are coming on Friday. I thought I had more time.” Her arms cross together over her chest and her skin dimples where her fingers dig into it. “This whole thing has got me spun around.”

There are pins punching into the nape of my neck, dragging needles my spine. My lungs turn concrete. “You’re moving?” My voice cracks and my cheeks flush with embarrassment, not now, not this moment, my face tightens with mortification. My eyes prickle with tears and I widen them to keep myself from crying. Attempt to swallow to steady my voice, but there’s a lump in my throat and swallowing is jagged and impossible. “I knew one of you was going to have to, but. Why isn’t Dad moving?”

“This is his house,” she says.

“Bullshit.” I’m on my feet, salt grinder to my bones, electric. Mortification run free.

“This is more your house than his. He’s barely here.”

Mom grimaces, hands up, trying to placate me, but fuck that, what will a soft touch do for me? “His name is on the deed. His parents actually, we were having some difficulties with the mortgage and, it was during your father’s first campaign, it was after you two were born so there was already some reconciliation, you remember, anyway his parents helped, paid off the house entirely. It’s his.”

“Mom.” My tongue moves inside the cage of my jaw, the bars of my teeth.

“And anyway, I wouldn’t want to stay in this house, it’s, it’s too much. And this place? I hate it here, you know that. I’m finally able to go home, see my family for the first time since I married E.”

“You’re not even staying in Carefree.”

“I’m going back to New York.”

“I don’t understand.” I close my eyes, face folding in on itself as I try to process. Everything is moving in slipstream. “What about me?”

“G,” says Mom, something achingly sad in it, and fuck that.

“You’re just leaving me here?”

“I need some time,” she says. “Some space. I need to figure out who I am again. Who Izzie is. God, you know your father hated that nickname. I haven’t heard it out loud in...”

“But you’re just leaving me here with Dad? Alone?”

“It’s only temporary. Besides, E needs someone and I can’t do it any longer. You’ll be here until I can get a house and set up a new place for us in New York. A few months maybe. You’ll be able to spend the summer with me and then come back here for school.”

“School? You think I care about school?”

“G, you don’t want to leave your friends here—”

“You already lost one child and now you’re throwing the other one away like garbage? Are you so fucking careless to make the same mistake twice?”

“G.” Her voice is high and stringent.

I grab her by each arm, right below her armpits. I’m so much taller than her already, but I feel desperately small. “Take me with you. Please. Please.” My voice cracks again. I don’t care. I lower my forehead to hers and our skulls make contact. “Mommy.”

The skin on her arms has turned a little loose with age. Her perfume smells sharp, her hairspray sweet, and together they smell like her.

“No.”

She says.

“No. I’m sorry, G.”

My fingers release and I lunge for Ivy’s desk. I shove the text books off, the stacks of papers and they scatter everywhere. Her knick-knacks, her bowls of rings, of necklaces, of earrings are more satisfying as I throw them at the wall, they crack and shatter accordingly.

Finally, Mom wrestles my arm down, jewelry decorating the floor, a painted figurine in my grip, and Mom shouts, “G, G, stop, Ivy made that!”

The knick-knack tumbles from my fingers onto the padded carpet and I wonder if this is what it's like to die. Divorced from my body, I'm a ghost. I stand in the door way and watch from a distance as my mother hugs my corpse. The corpse does not hug her back and she clutches tighter and tighter around the body. She says: "Oh, G, oh honey, my baby boy, I'm so sorry, I love you so much," and other nonsense words, a susurrant of her voice.

Maybe if I cry she'll change her mind, but I feel nothing. Not the carpet beneath my feet, or my mom's arms around my body, or the bitter taste in my mouth. *Cry*, I tell my corpse, from the doorway. *Cry. Feel something. Be real.*

I go to school and when I come home she has already left.

## CHAPTER 61

Shrink: You know that's not what happened.

me: Isn't it.

Shrink: She didn't leave for three more days. You avoided her. You wouldn't talk to her.

You wouldn't get near her. You didn't even let her say goodbye.

me: She decided to leave me. And when she decided to leave me, she left.

Shrink: You are very frustrating.

## CHAPTER 62

Did you hear the one about the statistician?

Probably.

Why was the math book sad?

Because it had so many problems.

Why are obtuse angles so depressed?

Because they're never right.

Why is six afraid of seven?

Because seven eight nine!

Why DID seven eat nine?

Because you're supposed to eat 3 squared meals a day!

Why does nobody talk to circles?

Because there is no point!

Dear Algebra, Please stop asking us to find your X.

She's never coming back—don't ask Y.

Wait. I already used that one already. Here's another one instead:

Can orphans eat at a family restaurant?

Also.

Never break someone's heart, they only have one.

Break their bones instead, they have 206 of them.

At least I know Dad doesn't want to break *that*.

## CHAPTER 63

Friday night Dad sits across from my body at the dinner table. Our plates are full of lasagna. Grandma and Grandpa had their five-star chef make it, make us weeks of meals, packed into our refrigerator and freezer. When I put it to my lips, it tastes of grease and rust and salt, a tinny combination that slides viscous down my throat.

It isn't like a movie. Dad doesn't put his fork down and clear his throat. He doesn't take a palate-cleansing sip of water or even look up from his plate. He starts talking in between bites of food, breaking the silence as if there had never been a silence in the first place.

"I know this isn't ideal, son. Your mother told me there'd been a miscommunication during our talk and that's on us. We're the parents, we should have been clear. I'm sure you've been confused and hurt and that was not our aim, believe me. We love you immensely, the both of us, and we only want what's best for you." Scoop of lasagna, chew, chew, chew, swallow, sip of water.

My corpse speaks: "Do I get any say in this? Or are you going to decide everything about my life without my input."

I stand at the head of the table watch the performance in front of me, admire the set-up of the scene, scorn the triteness of the writing.

Dad's head startles upward though I don't know if his surprise is from the sound coming from my throat or the words that they've twisted into. He leans back into his seat, his long legs stretching out in front of him.



“Of course you get a say, G.” Dad’s face is sharp diamond edges, the grit and metal kind that can cut stone. His features arrange themselves into a smile. He thinks I can’t hear it, he thinks I can’t hear or see or think, but his voice has that condescending undertone of indulgence, of placation. Let’s humor the pet dog and maybe then he’ll do a trick.

“I want to live with Mom.”

Dad doesn’t flinch. No tell passes his face. He uses his fork to cut himself another bite of lasagna, cheese and oil dripping. “Your mother doesn’t even have a place to stay yet. Here is a much more stable choice. You’ve got friends, family, the home you’ve lived in your entire life.”

My body slams its fork down, fingers spreading out on the cherry wood table. “I *want* to go *live* with *Mom*. I don’t care about any of that shit.”

I clap my ghostly hands together, applauding the temper tantrum in the making. Bravo! Sensational! Yell, scream, and whine, that’s definitely gonna work for you, always has.

But Dad isn’t phased. No muscle twitches, still relaxed back into his chair.

“Your mother and I agree on this, son. You’re going to stay here for school and you’re not going to see her until she sorts herself out.” His chin tilts up, head going back, eyes roving the ceiling. “Your mother’s hoping to see you by the summer, but, well anyway, we’ll see.”

We’ll see? What the hell does that mean?

There’s a tornado swirling in my chest, a wind funnel uprooting all my internal organs, rearranging the landscape of my insides, splintering the bones, a vortex that stops and stays, maximum damage.

“This is all your fault,” I say, and my body mimics me.

Dad’s arm snakes across the table before I can move. He grabs my chin between his thumb and forefinger in a bruising grip, for a moment he’s both Mom and Dad, and I wonder, who learned it from who?

“Your mother’s not well,” he says. “Even before...well, losing her daughter just made it worse.”

“Whose fault is that.” Suddenly stuck entirely in my skin, my eyelids peel back and everything feels dried out and fixed. His hazel eyes catch mine. My fingers twitch on the table. I twitch my fingers on the table. I’m locked in. I’m stuck. I can’t move except to flinch and I won’t flinch because flinching is weak, it’s weak, and I’m the weakest, stupidest motherfucker I know, but I won’t give him the satisfaction.

“Your mother’s sick. She’s always been sick. Has she told you that it’s my fault? That’s just part of her condition, she’s hysterical.”

The shriek of laughter rips out of my mouth before I can stop it. “Hysterical? What are you, a nineteenth-century Freudian shrink? You hurt her. You hurt me. Ivy—”

He slaps me on the cheek. It’s barely anything. It’s nothing. It’s butterfly wings. It’s comforting. My jaw clicks shut from the shocking gentleness of it.

“Don’t you say a goddamn word about your sister. Don’t you sully her memory. I never touched her except in love. I’ve never touched any of you except in love, G, I love you. I love your mother. Even if we’re no longer going to live together or be husband and wife, she gave me you, gave me Ivy. Years of our lives spent together.” He rests his hand against my cheek, all warmth. “Hurt you? I could never hurt you. I’ve only ever tried to teach you to be a good man. Help you grow. I’m just trying to protect you.”

Tears start down my cheeks, onto his fingers. I'm crying. Why am I crying? I didn't cry for Ivy, but I'm crying for this? Stop it. Stop it. I start to sob, my breath coming in hitching gasps, and my nose runs. I wipe it on a napkin and Dad is beside me when I look up and he puts his arms around me and he says, "I love you," and "I'd never hurt you," and "things are going to be okay," and tears slide off my chin and my hands come up to grip his arm still around me. Stop it. He doesn't care. Stop it. He hates crying and he hates weakness and he hates me. "This is all for you," he says. And I know. I know. I know. I know.

We gather the dishes quietly. I rinse them off and he puts them in the dishwasher. The doorbell rings, and he straightens up, shoulders going back, chest puffing out a touch, "That must be K," he says. "She's supposed to come over after dinner to discuss the case." The case, the case, the divorce case. There must be something in my expression because before he walks to the front door, he says, "I've known K since we were kids. She's a really good person, son. Be nice."

"I'm always nice," I mutter.

He turns on his heels. "I'm taking this moment," he says, the deepening of his voice vibrating in my skin, raising it into gooseflesh. "To ask you to not be rude to *our* guest, the highly-respected lawyer helping me through a difficult time, and my old, dear friend. G, do you understand? Be the polite and respectful young man I know your mother and I raised you to be."

I suppose the word for it is self-destructive. Ivy called me that a few times, half of the time when angry at me and the other half laughing. But it's the only word to label the indescribable surge of stubborn, recalcitrant, spiteful energy that rushes through my body,

my lips, my shoulders, my eyes, whenever someone tells me what to do. Especially him. So, even as I slouch against the counter and smile all charm and say, “Of course, Father Dearest. All you had to do was ask.” I know that somehow, I’m going to show him exactly what kind of man he raised.

But it’s not K at the door.

“G?” says D. “Are you free?”

“Dovetail,” says Sheriff Handsome, all jovial familiarity. He misses D’s brief wince at the nickname, but I don’t, and I school my face quickly though my heart starts to go arrhythmic at the discovery. He gives her a short, sideways hug. “It’s so nice to see you again.”

“You too, Sheriff,” she says, and shrugs, her spine is straightly strung against a metal rod. “Can G come out to play? Ha, wow, it has been a long time.”

Dad’s head cranes back to me and I look at D. She’s dressed casually in jeans and a hoodie, her short curls mussed. She’s wearing boots, but the kind for warmth and comfort rather than ones that can be used as a deadly weapon. She’s shifting her weight from foot to foot, a small rocking motion, and her arms are crossed against her chest, shoulders up by her ears. She does not look the picture of someone who’s going to demand answers or to get back to the investigation or be a stubbornass, so I shrug and say, “Let me grab my wallet,” and run upstairs.

We don’t talk about Ivy. We walk up and down the boardwalk. Stop in the arcade and play a few games. We get sodas and soft pretzels and watch as the strings of colored lights turn the stretch dizzying. She talks about school, about people we know, about recent

movies and television she's seen. I let her noise wash over me. We stop in at Nonni's and order dessert. I get key lime pie, she gets carrot cake.

D groans with pleasure after her first bite. "It's so hard to get carrot cake right."

The key lime bursts on my tongue, a dazzling mix of citrus and sweet. What are we doing? What are we doing here? "This isn't bad either."

"You mean it's the best damn thing you've had in decades."

"Hard to say. I won't cop to more decades than I've earned."

Her laugh is bright. "You one of those that wants to stay a kid forever?"

"You're kidding me, right?" My voice is flat. "Why are we here," I grasp for a word scornful enough, "*chit-chatting*, like we're friends."

"Nonni's really has the best desserts." She swirls her fork in the frosting. Looking like she'd eat that alone by the forkful except that the moue of her mouth makes me think she's lost her appetite. It's a touch too warm in the restaurant and I can see sweat dotting D's hairline. She says: "Do you remember the summer before ninth grade? Ivy was already in high school. We went to Disneyland and Universal so many times that summer. But Ivy was already too cool for us. All she wanted to do was go to parties, pool parties, and make out with boys."

The swallow of key lime goes down like molten metal. It congeals and hardens in my stomach. "She always invited you. She liked you a lot more than me."

"I didn't like getting chlorine in my hair." D's laughter is pained as she waggles her fingers at her short hair, still well-tended. "I give less fucks now. I learned my lesson. You're a great teacher." My swallow is barbed wire. I keep my face blank. "Chlorine? Who cares. All that time I missed." D's voice is tight and she glances away. Starts mashing her

cake with the tines of her fork. When she looks at me again, her smile is wry. “And of course, you were right, I had the biggest crush on you. And Disneyland, who can say no to the happiest place on earth.”

I don’t say *me too*, because what would be the point? It was one of those unspoken middle school conflagrations that ate away at the fuel in your chest, but eventually died out if not tended to. A lot of middle school crushes weren’t tended to.

“We were friends then, weren’t we?”

“That’s not now,” I say. “Or did you forget, Dovie.” No flinch. “It’s not like your clothes got gasoline on them for a week straight during gym while you were out running the mile was a happy accident.”

“It was actually during dodgeball week,” she chirps. Her eyes sheen with remembrance. “By Friday I got banned for aggressive playing and every person in the class got as many bruises as they deserved.” Her mouth arches as she looks at me. “It’s too bad we didn’t have the same gym class. I’m sure we would’ve had great fun. I had to have with all your *friends* instead.”

I scoff. “Don’t say friends like that. That’s how Ivy used to say it.”

Her eyebrows raise. “What—like they’re mindless, sycophantic losers. Sure. You all deserve each other.” D snorts. “Besides, like Ivy was one to talk.”

“Ha!” I exclaim in agreement, my hands flashing out in emphasis.

The conversation drops and we’re silent, both staring at our half-eaten desserts. It smells like chocolate at Nonni’s and it’s bright for an intimate restaurant and I squint into the lights, start seeing shapes and flashes until my eyes burn. We’re at a table in the corner with a smooth cerulean blue table cloth, fresh flower centerpiece, and squat, round candle.

Pull the candle close to me and dip my pinky into the melted wax. The pain of the near burn grounds me.

“You were really cruel,” she says. It’s a whisper. Hardly hearable, but I don’t need to hear the words to know what she’s saying. “You were really, really terrible to me. You hurt me a lot and I wished so many bad things on you. On myself for not standing up to you. On Ivy for not stopping you.”

This is the moment where I’m supposed to say, *it’s not your fault*, but I don’t do that. Don’t even know if I believe it. The seams of my lips go white with tight thinness. That spiteful self-destructive wave is up in my throat and I wonder how it was she knew to say those words, *lesson* and *great teacher*, and said nothing. Let her hurt and blame herself and feel guilt. What did she expect coming to me for sympathy?

“I stopped hanging out with her so much,” D continues, her hand goes to her throat where Ivy’s locket used to hang. “When B’s party happened, I hadn’t talked to her for weeks. She was isolated. She was sad. She needed someone.”

What about me? I think. Don’t you think I need someone? I need someone. I needed someone. She was my someone. You were my someone. Mom was my someone.

I suppose that’s not fair. I, at least, didn’t throw myself off Gemini Point like some tortured, melodramatic figure.

*Ooh, harsh, G-Bear. Is that anger I sense? Some deep-seeded resentment? Tsk. Tsk. And after all I did for you. You need to learn to let things go.*

I shovel the rest of the key lime pie into mouth and swallow it down. Throw some cash on the table, look at D. My jaw unhinges and my mouth parts, words pool beneath my tongue. We stare at each other. Her hand snaps out and snags my wrist. I wonder if she can feel my pulse. In the end, I don't say anything, tug my wrist from her grip, and leave.

The boardwalk is still decently packed with people, first Friday of the month, all sorts of promotions and events bringing people out and about. It's easy to get lost in the crowd. Don't even walk fast, knowing it would be hard for D to find me in this chaos. Pull out my phone and text around to see if anyone's free. M gets back to me that she and A and J are having a girl's night at the boardwalk, but I am welcome to join them, I'm always welcome to join them, so I do. Meet up by the pick n' mix, all three of them have plenty of booze hidden about their person and their purses and we get drunk and high and fail miserably at those fucking rigged carnival games and eat fried dough in consolation. There are few rides up and down the boardwalk, but J vetoes the spinny ones, dragging everyone to the bumper cars, which we get kicked off of after a few rounds, and then the Ferris Wheel.

J leans in and shoves me into a gondola, a sly grin on her face, and I think that I'm going to get laid four hundred feet in the air, before she waggles her fingers and the door slams shut.

D is the only other passenger in the gondola. The ride starts to move and we lift off the ground, swinging.

"Did you know that J's parents cut off her allowance after she hit a dog while blitzed?" says D. "It's funny how easily people can be bought no matter how much they hate you."



Everything is too blurred to really matter, streaking lights and color like fake lightspeed, a cold, fresh breeze that keeps the nausea just below the tipping point, muscles turned to mush.

“What do you want?” I slur. “Can’t I get laid in peace?”

“Please,” D says. “Like J was really going to blow you in a kid’s ride.”

“Coulda happened. Better than this fuckery.”

The gondola rocks sharply. A jolt of adrenaline makes its way to my veins, blood rushing to my heart, and everything goes dizzy electric. When the nausea dies down again, I open my eyes to see D staring down at me. She’s straddling my lap, I can feel the warm pressure on my thighs, our chests parallel.

“Oh good, the color’s back in your face. Are you okay now?”

“You look like a muppet,” I say. “Your face is too big for your face.”

“Understandable.” She nods. “Who am I? Statler or Waldorf?”

“Gonzo.”

“You bitch,” she says deadpan. “Why don’t you want to find out who killed Ivy?”

My hands move up to grip her hips as the gondola comes to a rest at the top of the ride and the stopping jolts us around.

“Not my job.”

“And you trust your father to do it?”

“He’s a great detective-policeman-sheriff. What—?” I snort as my smile turns mean. “You don’t like him, Dovetail? You flinched when he called you that. Don’t think I didn’t notice cause I did.”

D doesn't answer. Just stares down at me. A breeze makes her curls flicker and I reach up and try to catch one.

"I found her body, did you know?" She doesn't wait for a reply. "She was just a shape on the beach that Xenophilus was pulling me toward cause he wanted a sniff. It wasn't until I was right next to her that I realized. I knelt down to take her pulse, but I couldn't touch her. My arms wouldn't move. Xenny licked at her ear, her hair, she was covered in cuts and her eyes were open and I knew she was dead but I didn't know. I should have checked for a pulse, but I couldn't. She had bruises too. Fingerprints, I think, and others that I don't think came from her fall, and besides you don't bruise after you die, right? That's what they say. Right?" She stops speaking and rests her forehead on my clammy one.

"I didn't know there were bruises," I say, though that's not quite true. "I knew there were bruises," I say, but not the fingertip ones. "But not the ones like watercolors."

"G," D whispers. Our mouths almost touch. "G. I know someone killed Ivy. I know it in my soul. I know it in the marrow of my bones. Please. Please help me figure out who did it." She lifts her forehead from mine. The gondola has started moving again and we're sweeping down for another rotation. "I asked you if you trusted your father and you didn't answer. Even if he's not on the case, those cops are his. So no. I don't trust him and I don't think you do either."

My tongue twists in my mouth. No. I don't trust him, but not for the same reasons. Dad loved Ivy. I guess perspective comes easier when you know the truth of things.

From the top of the Ferris Wheel I can see all of the boardwalk, the lines of Carefree. The sky is black and gray as clouds cover the stars. Everything smells like

openness and when I walk off the ride, through the crowds, into the bustle of streets, I realize I can keep walking. I can walk and walk until I drop. I can grab an uber or a lyft to wherever I want. I can buy an airplane ticket, a bus ticket, a boat ticket. I can leave. I can do whatever I want. You can do whatever they want once out of a locked room. The stuckness is part of the heart. It's the spiderweb of the mind. I move my hand through the air and watch as it splits the nothingness. Nothing is stuck to it. I know what I need to do.

There's an unfamiliar car in the driveway when D drops me home. Silver and sleek, it looks like it's just been driven off a dealership's lot. I stand before the front door for a moment, ear pressed to the wood to see if I can hear anything—nothing—before moving to unlock it.

The door opens as I reach for it and K comes out into my arms and we collide sideways, both of us trying to avoid a crash. She's in a black dress, her hair bouncing down her arms and shoulders and back, sleek shoes. Over one shoulder is a leather attaché case and in her opposite hand is a sparkly clutch. Her make-up is impeccable, but a for brief second, as we're both steadying ourselves after our near-miss, something flashes across her face that seems off, maybe vulnerable even, before her lips curve and her face turns arch and expectant as if she'd known I would be nearly crashing into her at this moment all along.

"Little G," she says. "Coming home late. Your father told me you were on a date. It seems like it went well." Her smile slips into a smirk, and she taps a manicured fingernail to her lips. "Or maybe, not well enough? It's not *that* late." Her voice is a low burr that

traces its way across my skin. It's so visceral I can feel phantom sensations of her fingernails trailing up and down my back. I try to stop a shiver and my limbs twitch instead.

"It wasn't a date. She's just someone I know."

K clicks her tongue. "A cold one, aren't you. Poor girl." Her eyes are sharply amused as I make small protesting noises.

"Are you okay?" I ask when I get myself together. The off expression that flashed across her face sticking in my brain and I wonder if my dad would try and teach someone like this. Beautiful and rich and helping him. A lawyer. Someone with connections, who could get him in trouble. But after a discrete visual inspection, I don't see any marks.

K smooths a hand down her dress. She does something with the tilt of her head and her shoulders that makes her hair move in an artful way that I know is completely on purpose, but still makes my stomach go tight. "Like something you see?"

"Your shoes match your bag," I say. Then close my eyes in failure. "I mean, it's nice. The matching."

Her laugh is blood-soaked, burgundy and raw. There's a catch in her throat that makes me think the laugh was unexpected, scraped up from her insides despite herself. "Thank you, little G. I appreciate that. It's little touches like this that make an outfit and often go unnoticed."

It's only after she's in her car that I realize that she never answered my question. When I get upstairs, Dad's door is closed. My jaw loosens. Go to my room and get what I need. Then, as silently as possible, take Dad's keys from the hook and leave again.

Park a few blocks away and walk there. Hat on. Gloves. Sunglasses. Hood up. Years of experience have taught me where the cameras are pointed in the Sheriff's station, where to angle so there are no clear shots of my face.

I leave the suicide note in its origami fortune teller form on Deputy C's desk, the one in charge of Ivy's case. EVIDENCE, I write on the post-it note next to it.

Then I pull out a bottle of red spray paint, the same shade I used on Ivy's mural to begin the list and write DICK across Dad's desk. I don't feel anything as I do it even though I know that I'm damning myself. It should be enough evidence for the deputies, for my dad, as to who gave them the note, the truth of it.

It's not until I'm back in my room at home that I realize I'm still shivering.

## CHAPTER 64

Try this on for size:

How did the chicken get to the other side?

He committed suicide.

Here's something that speaks to me:

You're not completely useless. You can always serve as a bad example.

The pièce de résistance:

Why did the mailman die?

Because everybody dies.

## CHAPTER 65

Screw everyone. Screw all of you.

## CHAPTER 66

eighties pop music permeates throughout the house. my back smarts with reopened wounds after a pick-up basketball game after school, throat is raw, and it hurts to breathe too hard and too deep, but make sure to take a full, deep breath every so often despite the pain, a trick i'd picked up from medical dramas to avoid pneumonia. walk upstairs, every step ginger, but get to the landing. the pop music is louder now. tiffany's 'i think we're alone now' and i bypass my room for a second to look into O's. she and D are dancing. open textbooks and scattered papers and pencils around them, they twirl together, spin and jump, break apart, O leaps onto the bed for a solo performance, her skirt flaring, and D stays on the ground dance moves instantly getting weirder and more ridiculous by the moment. her braids whip around her head and she's wearing my mets sweatshirt. i laugh in the doorway and the two of them gesture for me to come in, *join us*, says D. *i see your studying productively*, i say. *pshaw!* says D, ushering the words away with a flick of her wrists, and O says, *dance dance dance, G*, and i say, *next song, gotta go change*, and leave for my room. throw my soiled clothes in the laundry basket and clean myself up. am looking through my drawers for a new shirt when there's a swallowed cry. reel around and it's D, of course it's D, even strangled her voice is unmistakable, and she yelps again, and i look down and it's the bruises on my chest of course, which would be explainable, basketball, soccer, football, i play with some really competitive jackasses, but she saw my back first



and i have never been here before. at this moment. *it's your dad*, she says, *i knew some—*  
cut her off, *you don't know anything*. don't shove a shirt over my head only because i know  
it will make my ribs worse and validate whatever the hell D is thinking. *get out*, i say, *G*,  
she tries, *wait, please*, i move forward, *get out, get out, get out, you don't know anything*,  
*nothing happened, this was my own damn fault*, i say and slam the door in her face.

## CHAPTER 67

Shrink: Is that why you haven't told her about Ivy's suicide note? You want to punish her for seeing you like that?

me: Like what.

Shrink: Vulnerable.

me: [Shakes head, laughing] So dumb. You're so.

Shrink: Then why haven't you told her G? It's going to come out soon. You broke into the Sheriff's station to give them the note.

me: And if they don't make an announcement about closing the case, I'll upload the picture I have of it to every social media site possible. That's the plan. D... she'll find out then.

Shrink: That's not fair.

me: Fair? Should you be making such qualitative judgements? Life's not fair, get a helmet. This way D knows in the future not to jump to conclusions—

Shrink: Or trust anyone.

me: Or be so egotistical. Like Ivy's life revolved around her that their distance from one another caused Ivy to jump. That she had *anything* to do with it. She's nothing. She's two-dimensional. She doesn't exist when I'm not in the room. That's how much impact she has.

Shrink:

Shrink: It can't be about her, because it's about you, right? You're the reason Ivy jumped.

me: No. No.

Shrink: I don't believe you.

me: We've already had this conversation. Ivy did what Ivy wanted. She didn't give a fuck about anything else. She knew exactly what she was doing she always did.

Shrink: Did she?

me: Yes. She knew what she was doing. She knew what it would do. She just didn't care. If Ivy didn't think that D would take credit for it with misplaced guilt, then that's how much D didn't factor into the decision.

Shrink: You have so much faith in your sister.

me: Is it faith?

Shrink: Seems like it to me. Did you ever really look at me?

me: I never stopped.

me: Why did you do it?

me: You had it so good.

Shrink: It's not about that. If you looked, I don't think you ever really saw.

me: Until now.

O leans forward and lays a hand on my cheek.

O: Are you sure?

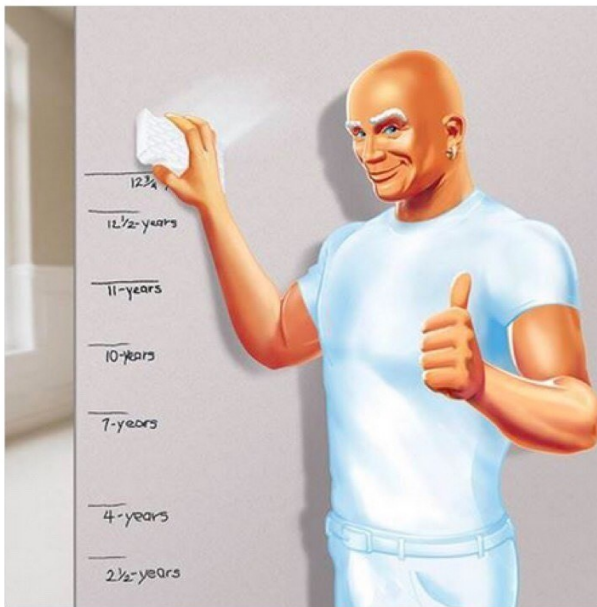
## CHAPTER 68

the bed dips and i'm awake, it doesn't take much. sometimes i wake before the movement is even enacted, before the air vibrates in the larynx for sound, instinct. it's just O though, her body sliding in next to me, her arm twisting around mine. *are you awake*, she asks. her cold feet dig underneath my legs. don't try to roll away, the ache in my body deeper than skin, smoldering coals raking down the fibers of my muscles. positioned correctly, i had almost gotten to sleep, instead i say: *i am now. what are you doing here?* almost tell her to get out, but the words don't make it to my tongue. *i was already up*, she says, *i was just checking on something*, and before i can ask what, the questioning noise humming in my throat, she says, *don't worry about it. but i thought you might need something—to drink, to eat, ice? icyhot patch? neosporin?* i try to move away, reflex, but O holds fast to my arm. *don't you fucking mock me*, i say, and she says, *i would never*, and maybe she's sincere, but all i here is insouciance and irony and i want to make her choke on it. *fuck off*, i say, *what are you doing here?* something stirs down the hall, footsteps, and we both fall silent for a minute. *i'm here because i love—* and i tell her to *fuck off* and she finishes with — *you, so where else would i be in this miserable house? this worthless, miserable house. i say, in your own room, where you're supposed to be*, and she says, *oh like anything is as it's supposed to be* and then puts her hand to a mark on my back and presses down.

CHAPTER 69



Mr. Clean understands that your family  
is long dead and is here to help.



I am a fucking poet.

## CHAPTER 70

The house smells like rosemary and fried potatoes. Dad pulls out the roast chicken and leaves it on top of the stove to rest.

“Keep an eye on the asparagus and the potatoes. The asparagus will be done first that’s what the timer’s for. The potatoes should only need about five minutes more, golden brown, do it by eye, I’m going to freshen up.” Without waiting for an answer, Dad jogs out of the kitchen and up the stairs to his room, smelling his hands, under his arms, as he goes.

K is coming to dinner. Ostensibly to talk about Mom and Dad’s proceeding divorce case, but one can be totally insensate and still know a date when it punches you in the face.

In a button-down shirt and slacks, hair done, face shaved. When I flex the muscles in my back, move my shoulders around, look myself up and down in the mirror, I know I look good. I am one hundred percent. I am full movement. I am pain free. I wonder sometimes when I’m going kick this sand castle over back into its infinite grains, but as I pull out the asparagus and get a full-face kick of the aroma of fried potatoes and my stomach growls, there is something scratching at my insides. A weird kind of excitement at a low-key family-esque dinner.

A knock on the door. “Got it.” I yell up the stairs.

“Hey there, little G.” K is in a white sundress. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail and she is carrying a bottle of wine. She hands it to me. “That’s for you, kiddo,” she says and then laughs as she walks past me. “Kidding. It’s for your father, of course.” She walks straight to the dining room, sets her purse and jacket down and slips off her stilettos with a



sigh and starts to massage her feet with a boldness that leaves me off-kilter. “These shoes are killer. Beautiful, but killer.” She grins up at me, her lips looking soft and pretty with product. “Be glad you’re not a woman, little G.” Her make-up is minimal. She sets her bare feet on the ground as she sits at the dining room table. She looks younger this way.

Dad almost slides down the stair railing he moves so fast. He’s freshly showered and in nicer clothes. He exclaims K’s name and greets her by taking her hands and pulling her to her feet and kissing her cheek. Hugs her tightly.

He looks at me. “The potatoes?”

Right. Set the wine down on the dining room table and scurry into the kitchen. Turn off the oven, pull out the potatoes, and put everything into their serving dishes. Dad doesn’t come back into the kitchen so I start grabbing food-laden dishes and bring them out.

They already have half-filled glasses of dark red wine and Dad is examining the label. “It’s a Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon,” says K. “Scarecrow, 2015. One of my favorites.”

“Expensive,” says Dad.

“Just something I picked up from the wine cellar at my parents. Do you remember that Christmas party I caught you in there with what’s her name, J? J L? J something?” K’s laugh is delicate. Dad winces and his face fractures a bit. “J P.” He corrects. “You were what, seven? Eight? I was horrified.”

K exaggerates a gasp and lifts a hand to her mouth faux-scandalized. “I was eleven, thank you very much. And I didn’t think you even noticed me.” She turns to me, coy, as if she’s imparting a great secret. “That was my very first introduction to sex.”

Dad covers his face with his hand. “Did I traumatize you?”

“Hardly.” K flicks away the question with her fingers.

“That is one thing I enjoyed about getting away from that world. Everybody always knows everybody else’s business. All their missteps and mistakes growing up.”

K leans forward and rubs Dad’s knee. “Your growing pains weren’t so bad. You were very handsome and only grew more so. Me? I was a gangly weed of acne.”

And I realize it wasn’t boldness when she came in to the house, sank into comfort, and took off her shoes. It was familiarity.

“Can we eat sometime soon?” Break into their bubble and they startle as if they’ve forgotten my presence. Dad’s mouth twitches down, but I ignore it. “I’m starving.”

We eat dinner. K maneuvers the conversation between the three of us, knitting us together like string into a warm and welcome ambience. It’s only when Dad’s leg begins to bounce and he asks about how communications are going with Mom’s lawyer that the smile slides from K’s face and the atmosphere chills.

They pass the word alimony between them like a grenade, talking about percentages, talking about custody, and the state of California laws, and going in front of a judge. K’s pony tail swings as she reaches for Dad and takes his hand, speaking softly about how *negotiations like these are common* and *amicability* and *completely normal*. But Dad tolerates nothing less than complete and total victory and says, “Why on earth should I pay her a dime? I’m the one taking care of our kid. I feed him. I clothe him. I house him. What the hell is she doing? She ran away across the country to fuck around however she wants, well good riddance.”

K scribbles something down on a notepad she had pulled out at the beginning of the conversation. She nods her head. “Are we trying to assume full custody permanently

instead of temporarily then? It's still not that common to award father's full custody, but with her history and your profile—You're in a good position."

I've been shot. It's the only explanation for the painful shockwaves coursing through my body, my inability to breathe.

"A good position?" sneers Dad. He towers over where K still sits, legs crossed primly.

But K just smiles. "And with me as your lawyer, it's as close to a sure thing as you can get."

Dad jabs a finger at her. "It better."

"You're in my space," says K, razor sharp, smile more a baring of teeth, and Dad blinks and steps back. His body relaxes and he rubs a hand up and down his face and through his hair.

"I'm sorry," his voice blurry and his eyes are red. "So sorry, K." He leans down in front of her. "I just get so out of mind when I think about this. Her. After everything that happened."

K shushes him and skims a hand down his back and up his chest. "You feel so much about everything, O. I know that. I wouldn't be here if I didn't know that." The image is so familiar, the curved back, the soothing hand, the women are interchangeable. But Mom's space was his space, she never had the strength to draw a line between them and will it into reality.

The moment splits with a ringtone. Dad pulls his phone from his pocket and looks at the screen. "I've got to take this. Give me a few."

He walks through the kitchen to Mom's office. Guess it's his now. I pull out my own phone to deal with the silence. Scroll through my social media feeds.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," says K. My head startles up and I look at her. She has purple smudges underneath her eyes. "But your father thinks you're old enough to know what's happening between your mother and him, and who am I to disagree?"

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Something flickers across her face before she laughs and then frowns, bemused. "You're always asking me that."

"My dad can be intense."

She shrugs. "I'm a divorce lawyer. That was lower-end of the spectrum intense. If I couldn't handle people yelling at me, I would not be as successful at my job as I am."

"I don't want to live with my Dad full-time."

Her lips part and she sighs. "G," she says.

"If you're as good as you say, you can convince my dad to share custody with my mom."

"I work for your father, G. He hired me to help him and in good conscience, I can't undermine what he wants."

"Please." My chair screeches backward as I stand up, my fingers curling into the tablecloth. "He doesn't even *like* me."

"G, your father loves you," K interrupts.

I shake my head. "That's not the point. He'd be happier without me I know he would. He's just doing this to spite my mom. It's not fair. It's my life and I'm not getting a say. You're the only one who can help. You don't have to," I stutter as I try not to shake,

“have to undermine him or lie to him or anything. Just try to keep the possibility of half-custody open or, or,” my eyes roll in my head trying to think too quick and too desperate, “talk to him about it more before he digs his heels in and it becomes set in stone.”

Dad steps into the dining room. Both mine and K’s heads turn toward him. He grins, Sheriff Handsome, potential mayoral candidate, R family scion back into the fold, electric aura. He steps fast up to K.

“I’m sorry, blue eyes, that was work, something’s come up.”

“Of course.”

The bottom of my stomach drops out. Everything about him is relaxed as he helps K into her shoes and then her coat. When he turns his back to lead K to the front door, I run to the back door, open and close it behind me as quietly as possible. I run to the side of the house, listen at the soft words exchanged between the two of them, the start of her car, the silence, then the open shut of the front door. That’s when I unlock the side gate and get to the street and run.

My legs and lungs burn as I tear out of the neighborhood and I don’t know where I’m going, but I know, I’m not going back there.

## CHAPTER 71

...

I don't know why this is so hard. I don't know why the words have left me exactly when I need them the most. I think it's cause I want them to be perfect. I want them to perfectly explain everything that's in my head and make you understand what I'm feeling, but I know nothing can.

...

It's a sadness and a tiredness and a knowing. I know this will never get better. This will never change—and if it does? It won't be me on the upswing. It's not like a feelings chart, point to the expression from 1 to 10 to show the severity, it's more like waking up tired and going to bed gutted and wondering why I can't do anything about it.

...

It's not you, G. But I see you hurt and I see you struggling and I know that I did that. I contributed to that. I helped Dad hurt you. Looking back now, I can see the way I was manipulated, but I also see the choices I made. I thought you deserved to be punished for being such an obnoxious little shit, but that's not why he took his belt to you. I mean, he

kept you in a closet until you shit yourself—how fucked up is that? And even if I try to fix things now, with what I'm doing, I don't think I'll ever recover.

...

Maybe Mom had the right of it. I'm just so sad, G.

## CHAPTER 72

B lets me crash at his house for a full week before his parents come home from their sabbatical to who the fuck knows where and start to coo at me. Once the surprise from finding another human being living in a wing of their house fades, there's *we heard about* and *shouldn't you be with your* and *can't believe it—no, I can't, B, of course I can't—what a thing to say—Ivy was such a lively, pretty girl, who could believe she'd*. Before they can ask how long I've been there or how long I might want to stay, I bail. Before I'm out the door, B grabs me into a hug, slaps my back, and pulls me close, says, "They'll lose interest soon. You can crash here any time, brother."

Nod my head in thanks. Throw my bag over my shoulder and leave. I pull out my phone and wonder if I should turn it on. He could track me then, but would he even still be trying after the first couple of days? Probably has me on alert with the phone company or something. Or maybe he's not looking at all. B said no one showed up looking for me at school and no alarms bell went off with the teachers asking around, so Dad must've excused my absences. Or not.

Lucky timing that, Ivy's suicide becoming public knowledge. The press conference. Sheriff Handsome's noble, yet deeply pained mien as tears brimmed his grief-filled face as he talked about the mental health crisis teenagers are currently experiencing and how we as citizens of our community can do to help our most vulnerable, precious young. Manipulative fucking asshole. Besides, everyone knows unborn babies are the most loved—they don't scream or cry or vomit. They don't demand attention and make trouble



and have just a small biting problem. They aren't a string of disappointments. They don't do drugs and fail school and have underage sex and talk back and hate you. They don't run away from home and disappear from school and show the cracks in your perfect fucking illusion so you have to smooth it all away.

But, divorced from B's stacked rec room, early on a weekday morning, I decide there's nothing better to do than go to school.

It's almost like Ivy has died all over again walking through the double doors and the heads turn and the whispered words and nudges.

Walk into math, Algebra II, and Mr. F's sardonic gaze stops on me during roll call, before moving without pause to the next name. While going over the homework that I did not do, taking idle notes during the lecture, and the practical exercise portion of the class period, I can still feel each eye burrowing into my skin, pincers and legs. Still hear every single time Ivy's name is said, more sensitive to the syllables of her name than my own. Acid bubbles in my throat and stomach, vacillating between the urge to throw up and hit someone, maybe do both at once. The spell is broken when Mr. F calls me up to his desk.

"You're failing, G," he says quietly, as if a whisper is privacy when you're the object of everyone's ravenous, morbid attention.

"I'm having a hardship," I reply.

"Do you want to repeat your sophomore year?" he asks.

"Gee, you mean do I want my life to be a bigger pit than it already is? No, of course not."

He hands me a thick packet of worksheets stapled together. "Lecture notes, exercises, and homework assignments that you missed. If you can do this work and keep up from now on, I can pass you. You'll get similar offers from your other teachers."

Flip through the packet. "This is more than this week."

"You've missed more than this week, physically present or not."

Mr. F's gaze is steady. He's wearing a sweater-vest. Not argyle, no patterns, real math teacher chic. He's young for a teacher, a newbie, still filled with idealism and hope for the future. An optimist. I say, "I've never noticed before but you look like a young Bill Cosby." Mr. F's lips tighten. "What? That was a compliment, not implying you're handsy or that you drug any of these young ladies and have your way with them," I wave back at the class behind me, everything is conspicuously silent.

"Don't make me write you up, G. I'm trying to help you."

"Are you? I guess you are." Fold my arms across my chest and tilt my head up in mock thought. "Cause you're right, I did miss a lot. I, I even missed the, you know, the *proclamation*, and that's a shame, such a gosh-darned shame. Was it on during the morning announcements between what was for lunch that day and how our sports teams are doing? Or did Principal D announce it on the intercom system during class for the shock factor. Or maybe there was nothing and everybody just found out on their own from their parents or friends or fucking google."

Mr. F reaches out to me. "Maybe we should take this outside," his voice so fucking gentle and kind, his washpan hand an unassuming pressure on my shoulder, something tender in the gesture.

Jerk my body away. "Don't fucking touch me."

Those broad palms go up in acquiescence. “Of course, G.”

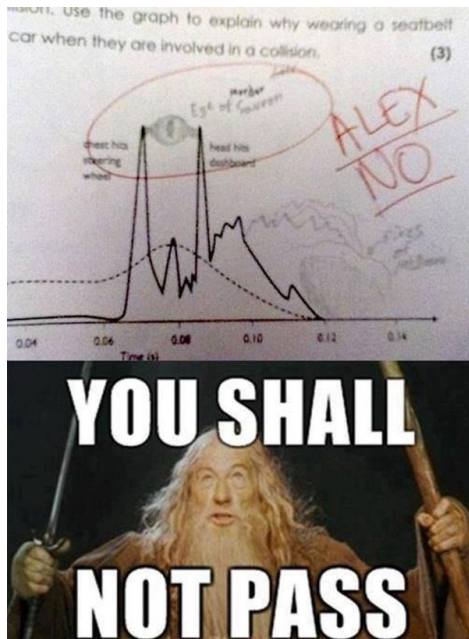
It starts to burble in me, that thick, liquid urge, to destroy this kindness, to wipe it away, to turn it into something more real like anger or irritation. My eyes start to itch and my shoulders and throat tighten with a petulant knowledge at this superficial caring, blow it away like dust, and even so, more than anything I’d get at home, Mom gone, Ivy gone, all that’s left is Dad and me, two broken shards of people that don’t fit together.

“Here,” says Mr. F. He grabs my stuff and leads me out of the classroom into an empty one used for study hall. He puts the make-up work in my hands again. “Focus on this right now.”

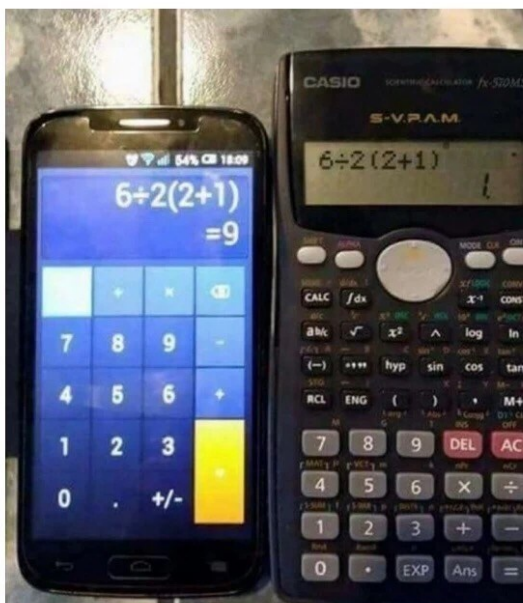
He’s closing the door behind him when a cracked voice I hardly recognize as my own says, “This is such bullshit.” I don’t know if I mean the make-up work, the idea math could take my mind off everything, or the trash fire that is my life.

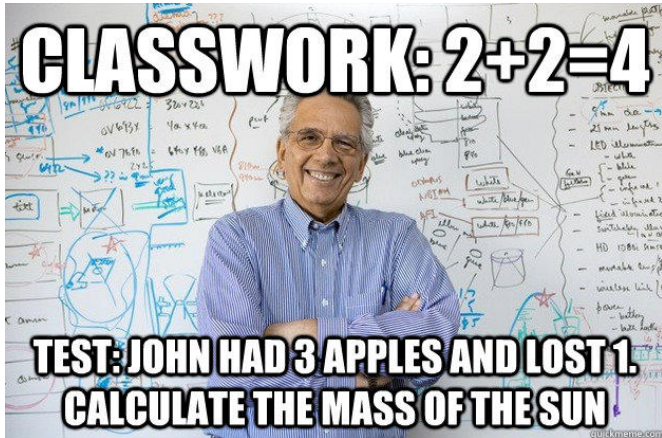
“I know,” says Mr. F. “But give it a try anyway.” He shuts the door behind him.

## CHAPTER 73



Why I have trust issues





Life.

## CHAPTER 74

The next time I'm aware is when the final bell rings and school ends. The math packet is halfway done and a stack of make-up work from my other classes has appeared on the desk next to me. As I listen to the stampede of kids fleeing from the building, I can almost understand my mom, why she loves numbers so much. Everything has a structure, everything has a logic if not an answer. It was so easy to get lost in the numerical nature of math, stripped of pettiness and whimsy and love.

It's with a detached sort of curiosity that I examine the wet spots on the math equations, a new type of watercolor, before I realize that I'm crying. And once it's been acknowledged, the dam crumbles and grief shudders up my back as if my body is going to physically disgorge the emotions inundating my organs. A sob chokes in my throat, half-escapes my lips, and I slap a hand over my mouth.

It's a transformation, into Kafka's metamorphosis bug-man, into Lon Chaney's wolf-man, into Lou Ferrigno's-Eric Bana's-Edward Norton's-Mark Ruffalo's Hulk. It's the xenomorph alien bursting out of John Hurt. This mewling, hitching, terrifying thing, that gets expelled from my chest and then drips from the orifices of my face into my hands, as my body rocks and struggles to breathe and breathe and breathe.

Eventually, it subsides. I clean myself with my hoodie and then pull it off and stuff it into my backpack. Everything hurts. My head aches and my skull feels like it has rubber

band stretched tight around it. I'm very tired and for a moment I wonder if this is how Ivy felt. If this was how Ivy felt all the time.

There's a noise, very slight, a shift of a backpack or a heavy breath or a brush against the wall and my head snaps around. There is the shadow of feet in the line underneath the door.

"Who's there?" I snap. "I see you."

It's D who opens the door and steps into the classroom, because of course it is. She doesn't meet my eyes, instead staring off into some far corner. I don't know how long she's been listening. Which is more of a betrayal—to listen and know and then leave? To never say a word. To pretend everything is fine and keep the illusion spinning. Or to listen and know and stay. To break open every vulnerable, fleshy piece, and squeeze it through her spindly fingers. To crash an entire reality, the big crunch instead of the inevitable heat death of the universe, where energy, where life simply runs out. (*Is that* what happened to Ivy?)

She needs a haircut. Her curls flop down over her forehead to brush her eyes and ears, and usually it's styled, but today, D is bare. No make-up, in sweatpants and flip-flops, an empty looking backpack swinging from her shoulder. Her nails are painfully short and the skin around them is red and irritated, some spots oozing blood.

"The hell are you doing here, Dovetail." D keeps her stare turned firmly away and I lean back on my hands. "If you're just here to be a freak, you can leave. I'd like to be alone and my wants take precedence to yours, or does my dead sister card no longer work?" D's head swivels on its axis, eyes wide with white, blazing. I say: "Have I run out of credit?"

D's arms swing wildly, without purpose, as she gurgles with half-articulated words. "How—how dare you," she finally manages. "How could you. You, you just let me believe, but you knew—you *knew*. This whole time." She steps forward. "Was it some sort of game? Was this your idea of, of, revenge?"

"You're saying words, Dovetail, but they have no meaning."

"Don't call me that," she shrieks, and suddenly the air warps, turns to sandpaper, and I shiver. She's never said something like that before, always held on to the nicknames as if they kept us connected.

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Even, even after everything. The te-terrible things you said to me, d-did to me. I never thought you really hated me. I thought—"

"You thought what." This time I step forward and now we're face to face, and even though I have to tilt down to talk, I have no height over her.

Her skin goes bloodless. "It's because I saw you. Your dad hurts you and I saw and you hated that I knew." Her lips twist with bitterness. "I was so stupid. I thought you hated the fact I saw you beat down, v-vulnerable, not, not *me*. But you do, don't you? You despise me."

Tilt my head in detached curiosity. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I know it was you. You were the one who gave the police the suicide note." Hair rises across the expanse of my skin. "You were the last one with Ivy on Gemini Point. It was you. You knew and you just, just let me go around town trying to figure out what happened to Ivy on some sort of fucked-up wild goose chase. I thought she'd been



killed. I thought someone had murdered her. But.” She stops and blows out a breath, low and slow. “You could have told me. I wouldn’t have told anyone.”

“No,” I say in agreement. “You’re good at keeping your mouth shut. But to be honest. I didn’t think about it. Or well, more specifically you. You’re nothing. A secondary character at best. You don’t exist when I’m not in the room. You want me to say I thought about how Ivy’s suicide coming out would affect you? I didn’t. I didn’t think about whether you might want to read the note or whether it was ‘moral’ or ‘unethical’ to let you spin your wheels thinking Ivy was murdered.” I exaggerate the scare quotes, sneer taking up half my face. “It never even occurred to me. Despise you? You don’t even exist.”

I see the slap coming and let it happen. D hits hard, the sting is comforting in its familiarity.

“Very nice, Dovetail. Just like Father Dearest.”

D sways on her feet, taking on a sickly pallor, but her face hardens. “You deserved it.”

“That’s what he says too.”

“And you say you don’t hate me.”

“Well,” I say, let the malevolence that swirls in my chest drip out. “Maybe a little.”

Her shoulders slope inward. “Look, G, I’m sorry that I saw you like that, but we were friends. We were. Are you so messed up that you think what you did to me was okay just because I saw—”

“It wasn’t because you saw me.” The interjection explodes from my chest, grenade pin pull boom. “It’s because you saw and you did *nothing*.”

She stumbles back on her heels. Shakes her head. “No—I. It wasn’t like that.”

“Mom let it happen. Ivy let it happen. Family business. Just a parent disciplining his kid. Normal stuff. But I thought you—” Syllables stop up in my throat, choke at the brim.

Still remember the exact pitch of the swallowed cry, the moment of realization that set behind my heart when I reeled around and saw it was her, strangled voice unmistakable. Bruises patterning my chest like raindrops and cuts and belt marks down my back and I thought for a split-second how to explain, and then why should I explain? And thought of her wide smile that always seemed to shine at everything and her tender hands on the animals at the rescue she volunteered at and hoped beyond hoped even as I yelled and growled, my sharp spikes pushing her from the room, this will be person that would not let me hurt.

She never said a word.

“I was fourteen.” Her knuckles turn white around the straps of her backpack. “I didn’t know what to do. I thought about the police, but your dad... And then I realized if I tried to talk to my parents, they’d just tell your dad and then what? You get hurt more cause of me? I didn’t want that. But mostly, mostly,” she swallows and steadies herself, “I didn’t think you wanted me to do anything. I didn’t think you wanted me to interfere, G. The way you responded—it’s like you couldn’t even hear it—and, you’re so closed off, you didn’t want my help, you never once asked for it.”

What burns the most is that she’s right. If she’d called the police or CPS or anything, I would’ve protested that everything was fine until my lungs stopped working. In the fantasy, of course, the officers weren’t in my father’s cult of personality, the CPS representative could see through my lies, and D knew me too well or not at all and saved

me from myself. It's crushed hope that's the most corrosive and destructive emotion in the human heart. Even the smallest pip, the weakest spark, or maybe especially—maybe it's especially those minute bits that find a breath of life in all the misery that split and detonate the hardest.

"This is all your fault," I say in a rough whisper. "Me. Ivy. If you had just. You should have done something."

D shakes her head and backs away. "No. No." Her voice is thready, but resolute. "You don't get to do that. Don't you put this on me. I won't let you. This isn't my fault. I was a kid. And, a-and, you could've done something too. You walk around like you're all alone, like you have nothing. But that's wrong. You have people. You have choices."

Tilt my head back and laugh, then sing-song: "Red pill or blue? Chocolate or cheese? Molly or morphine? Life or death? Only you can choose."

"You need to get help," says D. "I can't do this anymore. You're toxic."

"Finally giving up on me, huh, Dovetail. Took you long enough."

"You're right," she nods. "I let it go on too long." She doesn't flinch at the nickname. The fire has drained from her face and all that's left is ash. She rustles in her backpack and pulls out Ivy's box from woodshop. "I only came to give this to you. You should look at what's inside. Ivy made it for you."

My teeth grate together. "I don't want it. Burn it for firewood."

She sets it down on the ground and turns to leave. She lingers for a second, her back to me. "This is the moment, G," she says. "I'm gone."

"I didn't even know you were here," I answer, but she'd already vanished from the doorframe.

## CHAPTER 75

Of course, I was at that party too.

We hadn't gone together and she hadn't expected me to come, body mangled and weeping in the closet, the air weighing down my limbs, pressing my lungs closed, everything heating up with the locked door, there's never enough space to breathe in a place where elbows smack at the limits.

The door opened and there was Mom's freckled skin, her soft face, crushed with sadness, was that who was weeping? Or was she in her bed, lips blue, empty bottles on her night stand, little O desperately shaking her shoulders. It was all the same image, all snapshot slices of time laid over one another in a composite portrait. My hand took it from my mind and sketched it onto paper, excised. But nothing's ever really gone and that's not what happened then.

She hadn't expected me to come, but it wasn't so bad this time, and what better way to forget, to feel good for a night than to bury myself into oblivion? Sometimes wandering hands gripped too tight against cuts and bruises, and sometimes my thumbs made the bruises stay longer and picked at the scabs, hoping to be noticed, hoping to be not, savoring the feel as pain became relative, became the burn of living now.

Sometimes I thought about D, closed my eyes and imagined her as she was the day she walked in on me, her face imposed on the face below me, my fingers threaded through her long brown hair, the knowing that suffused her expression moving down to her fingers as they found each bruise and cut and wound and pressed into euphoria, and when I turned

over, fingers searching for hers, she'd slid away, her back to me, but that never happened either.

Through the thump-thump music, the flickering press of bodies, O's gaze flickered to mine, and her eyes went wide. She hadn't expected me to come, but it wasn't so bad this time, and that happy glint in her eyes, as she took me like a sign, like fate, and all at once her face relaxed with knowing, with the end, and the arc of her body went loose and she spun and smiled and shrieked with laughter.

I drank hard until the writhing mass dancing on the floor looked like everyone had sunk in together, tentacle limbs on a giant creature. And the world went liquid and the next thing I knew she had me by the hand, the gelatinous mass of my body forming into something solid from the focal point of her fingernails. She turned me around and her accusing face said: "You were with her. Weren't you? Why aren't you with her?" And Mom's fingers held me tight as my body tried to melt back to the dancing mass, and I said, "She's somewhere over there. She's fine. She's always fine." Tore my fingers from hers, the flail of unlocked arms knocked us away from each like two similarly charged magnets.

On the couch, D straddled my legs and we sat chest to chest and she said, "Fine like you?" Her hair was in braids and she was wearing my Mets sweatshirt. She stared at O. "She seems so sad, doesn't she?" Then, matter-of-fact, "We never really know what people are thinking or feeling on the inside, do we?"

"She's not sad." Tried to shake my head, but D gripped the sides of my face and touched our foreheads together. "You don't know that."

"Why didn't you tell me? How could you?"

"It hasn't happened. Nothing's happened yet."

She pressed our lips together and my heart shuddered. There was heat between our bodies, electro-static charge in the nonexistent space and it grew as we kissed until it didn't. "This is the moment, G," she said. I closed my eyes and when I opened them again, she was gone. Mom leaned in and kissed my forehead. "I need some time. Some space. I'm going home. It's this house, it's too much."

My hand trailed hand after her. "Wait, Mom. What about me?" But she'd already vanished from the doorframe.

And then there was O. "C'mon G-Bear," she said and dragged me outside. The lights haloing Gemini Point were blinding. She slapped her purse into my stomach and I took it by reflex, and she hopped onto the railing, twirling, her hands gripping the lamppost as she stretched her leg into an arabesque, and she laughed and laughed, a roar in my ears that left everything else muted.

She jumped to the ground and asked, "Do you love me, G?"

"Of course I do," I said. "What kind of question is that?"

She was still. "Thank you."

She was still. "I love you too, G."

She was still. "It's just a question. Why do you love me?"

She was still. "It's just a question. I love you too, G. Thank you. Why do you love me?"

She was still and then she laughed. "You're really bad at this. You have no idea how I would have reacted, do you? Why are you doing this to yourself? Do you really think if you told me you loved me, it would have changed anything?"

“I did tell you I loved you.” A wave of nausea passed through me, cold sweat, shakiness and I sat down. “I don’t feel so good.”

A hand touched my face. “Do you even know what you took?”

“Does it matter?” She sat down next to me and rubbed my back, long sweeping strokes. The next time I was aware she had an origami fortune teller in her hand, clearly homemade, brightly white, and she was moving it around.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Why does anyone love anyone? Can people quantify it? Put it into words. It’s a feeling. Trying to articulate it cheapens it.”

“Telling someone you love them doesn’t cheapen it,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just know that I do love you.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just know that I do love you, and that my life would be worse without you.”

“You don’t know that,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“Can people quantify love?” I said. “It’s hard to put into words. All I know is that I love you and that I can’t imagine my life without you. You’re my sister.”

“That was hard for you to think,” she said. “Could you ever say it out loud?”

“You’re my sister,” I said.

“So that’s a no, then.” Her laughter was bitter.

“That’s a yes. Don’t twist my words.”

“I’m a shit older sister, aren’t I?”

“That’s not true.”

But it was all the same anyway. She said, “I thought I was a good person. I helped you, you know, more than you probably think. But our lives are fucked. And you deserved it sometimes cause you’re a little shit, you know? So self-centered. You’re not blameless.”

“I’m not. I know I’m not. I’m an asshole. I know that. Stop. Stop it, please.”

“But, I don’t know. It didn’t come to me in a dream or anything, but one day Dad was—and it was really clear suddenly, I thought: I don’t deserve this and you don’t deserve this, no one does. There’s breaking rules and then there’s *breaking rules*.” She looked up and smiled. “All roads lead home, little brother.” Saliva filled my mouth. All I could think about was how much I needed to throw up. “And I am never going to leave.”

“How do you know that? You could get a full-ride out of here. You could pack up and leave. I know you have money. You don’t have to stay. You could just—”

“Even if I move across country, across the world. Australia, the Gold Coast. I’ll always be right here. And here will always be waiting for me.” She put her fortune teller to the side and leaned back on her hands. “Besides, everywhere is all the same.”

“That’s not true.”

“What do you know? You’ve never been anywhere else. People are all the same, there is nothing different.” Her fingernails scratched at the cement. “I’m so tired, G.”

“What?”



“I don’t know why this is so hard. Maybe it’s like love, hard to put into words. But it’s the opposite, an entropic void where energy stretches out into nothingness. It’s a sadness and a tiredness and a knowing. I know this will never get any better. I’ve collapsed from my own gravity and now there’s this pit in my chest with tendrils that reach out and destroy everything they touch. I’m a broken thing.”

“I can’t believe that.” The cold sank into my skin and shivers racked my body. “I don’t believe that. You are not broken. Because if you are that means I am too and that’s a bleak fucking future. And even if we are a little bit fractured, that doesn’t mean we can’t still live, can’t still try to fill in the cracks with gold.”

Her brittle face flaked away into a smile and she laughed. “Not you. That wasn’t your future, just mine. I’m so proud of you.” She grabbed my hand, fingers curling around mine, and it was just pressure. No warmth or cold, just a press, a push, encircling. She helped me to my feet and then snaked her arms beneath my coat, winding them around my back. “Hey little brother,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Her arms released me from their grip and she leaned in to whisper, “I know,” as she put her paper fortune teller in my hand and said, “This is the moment, G. I’m gone.”

It will be the question everyone is asked and asks at Arcadia: When was the last time you saw Ivy R?

## CHAPTER 76

gone, *adj.* and *n.*

Pronunciation: U.S., /gɒn/, /gɑn/

1.

a. That has left or departed; no longer present; consumed, used up.

Sometimes coupled with *past*.

*long-gone*: see long *adv.*<sup>1</sup>

b. Departed from life; dead. Cf.

Sometimes coupled with *dead* (cf. *dead and gone* at *dead adj.* 32a).

2. Chiefly *colloquial*.

a. Lost; ruined, doomed, undone; beyond hope of recovery, help, etc.; ‘done for’.

b. In an advanced stage of some (bad or worsening) state or condition, esp. madness, love, or

infatuation. Also with *for*, *in*, *on*, †*with*. Cf. *gone in the head*.

c. Very intoxicated by drink or (later) drugs. Also: in a state of faint or swoon, unconscious.

Also with *in*, *on*. Cf. far gone *adj.*

gone, *n.*

1.

- a. With *the* and *plural* agreement: those who have gone (in various senses of go v.);  
*esp.* the dead (cf. *the departed* at departed *adj.*).

Used in a sentence: Mom's gone. D's gone. O's gone. I'm gone.

## CHAPTER 77

### Transcription Beta

“Hi mom it’s me. I just wanted to call and say hi we haven’t um spoken in a while and I a.m. calling to \_\_\_\_ that. Are you still at \_\_\_\_? School’s fine. My grades are um good ha ha OK they’re um normal they’re regular. I um I realized that you might not have heard or you or definitely heard \_\_\_\_ dad called you that they found O’s suicide note. It’s real um I don’t know what you \_\_\_\_ could you just call me? OK. OK. Bye.

## CHAPTER 78

Well. I had to go home sometime.

The house is at rest, something beyond darkness, lights off, curtains drawn, everything still. It's almost an air of neglect or decay, a sleep that starts with fatigue and wakes with fatigue. It's only nine. An early bedtime, where parents and kids still cuddle on the couch and watch tv until eyes start to slowly drift off.

The air curls around my body, so thick I could pinch my fingers and tear off a piece of the foreboding atmosphere. It seems entirely possible that my dad isn't even at home. No lights, no noise, no movement. But when I open the garage his car is on the left, mine is on the right, and my body starts to shiver, gooseflesh rising in stripes across my back, my legs, my arms.

He's not waiting for me in the laundry room as I close the garage door and walk into the house. He's not waiting for me in the living room or the kitchen. And when I burst into my room, ready to pop the blister of tension the quiet has birthed, he isn't waiting for me there either.

A queer disappointment bubbles in my chest. Maybe he's not waiting for me at all. I'm safe. Safe? Don't know what it means, but I know it's wrong.

The rug creaks under my feet. He's not in his room. Why am I doing this? What am I looking for? Go downstairs once more. There's one more possible place he could be. Is it that I'm looking for absolution? From him? Or am I looking for real safety—the

knowledge that if I lay down in my bed, I will sleep uninterrupted, and wake up in the morning.

Lately I've been having dreams where I go to sleep and I don't wake up, something in my body bursts or stops or hemorrhages, I never even know what happens, I don't even feel it, but I know I'm dead. Then, of course, I wake up.

The door to mom's office is halfway open, changing light creeping across the floor. There's an echoing sound, familiar cracks and shifts, and as I lean into the room I can see an explosion of DVD cases, open, closed, empty, full, strewn through the room with my dad's figure as the epicenter. He's sitting on the floor, positioned toward the couch where his laptop rests on the cushions. *Make sure to get the whole thing, okay? Try to keep me in the zoom. I want to see how I look.* O's young, cocksure voice joins the echoes of the ice-rink, the melody of skates cutting through the ice.

*So you can admire yourself, Narcissa?*

*That's Harry Potter, dumbass.*

*You, don't bait your sister. You, don't call your brother names.*

*Dad, coach is waving at me, have you got it?*

*I've got it, honey. I've got it. Don't worry.*

*As soon as the music starts up—*

*Go, honey, have a little faith.*

The theme from the Addams Family begins to play and a further step into the room gives me a great view into Dad's family movies night. O is skating. Not for a competition, for herself. She used to have one of us record her so she could see what she was doing wrong, so she could fix herself. Then the video cuts and it's her twelfth birthday party at

As You Wish pottery, she's painted her face and hands and started terrorizing her guests, getting paint all over their pretty clothes, snorting with laughter, until she gets to me and does up my face too and knights me, two purple dabs on the shoulders of my white shirt, and yells, *scatter!* Then we're in the audience of a ballet recital, on the side of a softball, basketball, soccer game, she's Peter Pan in the school's winter theater production. Me and O are dressed in formal wear for some charity ball that our grandparents wanted us to go to and she towers over me in heels and Dad's holding the camcorder and Mom's taking pictures, and I bow and take her hand, *here to escort you my lady*, and she says, *no such thing here*, and then she hikes up her dress and flashes us and I shriek, *you're not wearing underwear?!* and she says, *it's a thong, baby brother, live a little, I'm here to teach you about your future*, there's yelling from all sides and the picture goes shaky and then it's a father-daughter dance at O's bat mitzvah.

"She was always smiling," says Dad. That's when I realize he's clocked me standing in the room. Wipe at the wetness at my eyes and nose with my sleeves, and there's not so much. Maybe I'm over it now. "And laughing. It's hard to believe that she hurt so much inside. That we didn't notice." Dad begins to cry. "That she didn't tell us."

Tentative, I sit down beside him and lock my arms around my knees. The words have sunk into skull and I repeat: "No matter how hard we try we can never really know what another person is thinking or feeling." Sometimes the words mean something, sometimes they don't.

Nothing passes through Dad's eyes, his face. It's as if he didn't hear me, can't see me. He says, "She's my little girl. My first born. When your mother got pregnant, we were almost thirty, but we felt so young, like teenagers. Inexperienced and giddy. Terrified and

excited and so out of control.” My eyebrows raise and come together, confused and skeptical, and Dad glances at me and chuckles. “When you have kids, especially that first one, your whole life changes, G. You create a life, a tiny, helpless thing that you are entirely responsible for—their happiness and miseries, how they grow, what they learn, if they’re a good person or not. I know, I know,” his smile turns rueful, “this isn’t new information, no need to roll your eyes at me, G. Clichés exist for a reason. I only mean to say when you love someone, as deeply and as purely as a parent loves a child, all you want is for them to be happy and healthy and good.” His voice chokes and cracks on different beats. He stops.

It’s silent. The montage of video clips continues to play on mute. I stare at my feet. O drifts in the atmosphere, dancing in pixels, saved in memory fragments on a 128GB flash drive. But there’s nothing real, no texture. Can’t take it in your hands and rub it between your fingers.

There’s nothing about this moment that I want to be here for. Is it selfish that all I want to do is find out how mad Sheriff Handsome is at me, accept my punishment, and leave? If it’s brief enough or light enough, there’s a party tomorrow down at Coral beach, where I can get wrecked and get laid, and get back to my life. I’m over this. I am.

“Dad—”

“I missed it.” His face is segmented by shadows. “How could I miss it? I’m trained in this. In reading people, in talking them down, in keeping the peace, in getting justice. How do I get justice for this?” He throws his arm wide in sudden, violent movement. I jerk to the side and try breathe past my beating, bloody heart in my mouth. “FUCK ME. I fucking missed it! I’m so angry at myself. Where the hell was my brain at? Where was I paying attention? I need to pay more attention. What the hell was I doing?”



My mouth moves on its own. “You have a full-time job. You save people. You’re dedicated.” My voice is nonexistent but I can still hear it. And I’m such a fucking coward, because I’m comforting him, *I’m comforting him*, cause all I want in the world is for the fury vibrating in the air to dissipate and the only way to do that is to let him know it’s not his fault, these things happen. Things are never his fault in the end. They’re my fault. Nothing else is tenable. Coward. Sissy. Candy-ass. Pussy. *E needs someone*, Mom said, like he needed her and she needed him until she didn’t. *E needs someone*, and I hear, *he needs you* and I want to die. “Everyone says that. How dedicated you are.”

He rounds on me, blazing with restrained energy, and I can see responses in his teeth, in the slices of his face, in the facets of his eyes. *What does that matter if I couldn’t save my own daughter? It should’ve been you. What the hell do you know?* Everything in me hurts, a twisted ache of nausea through my chest and stomach that has acid up my esophagus and gray hazing the sides of my peripheral vision. I want to disappear. I don’t want to exist in this space. But as he looks at me, there is a softening and a cooling.

“It’s all wrong,” he says. “The video. There’s going to be a memorial and I tried to capture Ivy, but...” He sighs and glances off to the side.

“You can’t capture O. Can’t put her into words. Can’t stick her into film. She set everything she touched on fire with the sound of her voice. I drew her once. I’d never drawn her before and it made everything less.”

The darkness undulated against the thin light from the computer. Dad said, “You were the one who had the suicide note.”

“It’s probably a fake. Shouldn’t believe everything you read.”

“You spray painted an obscene word on my desk.”

“Me? Never.”

He’s wearing his bulky class ring. The slap focuses everything into high-def clarity. I suck at the sour salty blood that comes from my lip. At this point, it almost tastes sweet.

“There is something wrong with you,” says Dad, casual annoyance leaking into the corners of his mouth. “You never take anything seriously.”

“Did I interrupt your moment?” I shrug. This is a safer anger. “Seems exhausting.”

“There were multiple sets of prints pulled from the paper. The strongest were hers. The handwriting sample matches exactly. It was addressed to you.”

Oh. I’d forgotten that part. She had been talking to me. But I didn’t want to listen, to me it seemed like it was addressed to the world.

Dad stands up and shakes his head, makes a disgusted noise. But before anything else can happen, his cell phone rings and when he pulls it out, he says: “Work,” points all around him, “clean up this mess,” puts his phone to his ear and barks, “Sheriff R,” as he walks out of the room and I close the laptop on O’s frozen face.

## CHAPTER 79



Dad: its cool being a dad.



???

???

Son: But since when were you  
ever a dad ?

## CHAPTER 80

Transcription Beta

Hi mom, it's me again. I um haven't heard back from you yet. I uh called you a couple of times about O and \_\_\_\_\_ I don't um know what to say now. If you haven't been checking your phone, like turned it off for now, I understand, but if you're angry at me just tell me and call me so we can \_\_\_\_\_ okay? It isn't fair for you to just stop talking to me and like and screen my calls if that's what you're doing. I lost O too, you know, and Dad's \_\_\_\_\_ and weird and I um I miss you, OK? So just call me back when you can. Please. Bye.

## CHAPTER 81

—time to run again. The police radio garbles up that someone's been spotted vandalizing the community center, the nice one in the rich side of town, and that someone's me, so I book it. Grab the stencil, spray paint, and radio and shove them in my bag, I'm done here anyway.

The first few times I painted the tag I did it freehand, but it didn't have the sharp clean lines I wanted, the rigidity that it was supposed to express, so I cut out a stencil: a jester's hat, straightened to look like a crown, wrapped in ivy. King of all the fools. Don't even know if it can be called a tag, it's an image instead of letters. But now it's stuck on sides of buildings, squares of sidewalks, and even the windows and doors of a couple of cop cars and that's malicious mischief, I know, but prove it, motherfuckers, and Dad's too wrapped up in the newest top priority—an arson at the crème de la crème restaurant where three people died—to put anyone but the freshest fish on me and they don't know my dad, they don't know shit really, so even if they catch me, I doubt they'd bring me to him. Most likely let me go with a warning, suckers.

There isn't a fence to jump, the back of the community center forks off into nature paths and a soccer field and a baseball diamond and eventually neighborhoods, well-trimmed trees and greenery, splashes of flowers. Jog my way to the small, side parking lot by the soccer field and take a back road into Elysian Island where B lives and plan to crash in his wing of the mansion.

But as I use the code to let myself in the backdoor, B calls a greeting from the rec room. His hair's wet, freshly showered, in clothes that make a smirk pull at my mouth.

"Where's the party?" I lean toward an open door and throw my bag into the guest room.

"Some rave L told me about." B runs some product through his hair and then polishes off a beer. "She's been bitching about there not being anything fun to do since Ivy died. Says I'm *morose*." He wrinkles his nose.

The scoff cuts against my throat. "You threw a 'celebration of Ivy' party, a 'funeral' party, and a 'life's too short' extravaganza. All within two weeks after."

"I know." B's indignant. "It's not like I haven't been doing my due diligence in trying to liven up this wasteland, but whatever. She doesn't know what she's talking about. Anyway, she promised to supply the molly and shit so I'm like, whatever you want, babe. You want to come? It's in the warehouse district."

"I don't know, man."

"You gotta come, G-man. You need to *re-lax*."

Shrug in submission. "Give me a few to get changed."

B punches the air. "Awesome." He opens another beer. "Want one?"

—can feel the beat thumping in my dick. From the heels of my feet, to the marrow of my bones, to the nerves in my ass, to the tingling in my nipples. Everything is alight with sensation. Everything is black light and UV body paint, frenetic movement, and a DJ that has consonant letters for a name, with a number or two thrown in. My skin itches with dried paint, but when the patterns flicker in the lights it's mesmerizing and there's a woman dancing in front of me among the mass of faces and body parts and her hair is dark, chestnut

curls, her shirt is cropped and her skirt is short and her body is thick, and she has patterns on her stomach and back that glitter like fish scales, and I catch her eye and her fingers pull me in her direction, a spectral lure, and we collide in bright sparks. The beat of the music is the only thing between our bodies, my hands down her arms, the softness of her skin against the dryness of my fingers, and her fingers are in my hair, nails down my scalp, and we turn and take each other by the mouth.

The air outside is a warm press, a blanket that covers us from prying eyes as I push her back against the brick and my fingers discover no underwear and plunge into heat, and then she pushes me away and spins me around and the world spins with me and my skull hits brick and she takes me in her mouth, and the sky is clear, but her eyes are blue and that's not right, my noises turn confused and she pulls off and says, "Condom?" and yes, there are condoms in my back pocket, and the orgasm tastes like blood, but feels like white light and the wavelengths of the visible spectrum course across my body.

—hangover is nothing new, the aching, twisting, pounding headache, the wretchedness of my stomach, the swimming on my feet as I stumble to B's kitchenette and his fridge. There's a pan already on the stove, so I turn on the heat and cut off some butter and watch it melt far longer than I should. In the cabinets, I find an open box of cheerios and pour some into the buttered skillet and fry them. Pull out two plates and pour half on each and then repeat the process with eggs. B stumbles in when I'm divvying up the fried eggs and moans as his head hangs over his plate and I hand him a fork, and I hold up a fork, and we clink them together before taking the first bite in tandem.

B's face turns puce then pale then regular as he eats. By the time he's done, there's an easing of the lines around his mouth and brow. "T's foolproof hangover cure," he says.

"Gets me every fucking time."

"Time tested," I reply.

"Damn." B scrubs at his face. "Think there's an assembly today."

"Spirit week." I twirl my fork mockingly.

"Cheerleaders."

"Not worth the headache."

B's expression twists. "No, it's not." His eyes light up. "Bro, I got it."

"Hm?"

"Let's go sailing today."

I snort. "You do not know how to sail."

"Wha—? No faith. We'll take my parent's yacht, grab some champagne from the cellar, text a few ladies, and be fucking classy and elegant on the high seas."

"You're right." I shake my head. "You do know how to sail."

—J's legs wrapped around my neck and I hold them down as she battles with L in the pool, the two of them shrieking so hard with laughter it's hardly more than a slap fight than shoulder wars, but L gets the upper hand and I can feel J's weight shift, and I overbalance, and fall backwards. Come up with water in my nose, choking, but J's still giggling, everyone's joy is infectious and we lay out on the deck chairs and drink champagne from crystal flutes because this is an elegant and high-class boat trip and B would be damned if we guzzled from the bottle like fucking low-brow peasants. There's caviar and water crackers and smoked salmon canapés and everyone is dizzy from too



much champagne and too little food and then A vomits off the side of the yacht and we go back inside the salon and drip all over the couches and chairs, we smoke weed and break out the junk food and dirty up the day trip, until elegance and high-class are the last adjectives on our minds.

—when I wake up, it's the last day of school before summer break. Time has collapsed.

Other things happened of course, in all the in-between, but no one cares about that and I don't remember it. Not like any of it matters anyway.

## CHAPTER 82

### Transcription Beta

I just this is such bullshit. It's been over month and you still haven't even fucking texted me. I am your son not some \_\_\_\_\_ and Dad said you talked to him but won't talk to me? So you are you're angry at me, that's it, right? You think it's my fault that \_\_\_\_\_ died or that I kept the note and didn't tell anyone but our family's fucked it's always been fucked so I don't know why this \_\_\_\_\_. If this is just cause you don't have the balls to tell me to my face that you don't want me to live with you just... I don't know. Fuck that. I won't come to \_\_\_\_\_. But I it's not fair I just. I love you. Bye.

## CHAPTER 83

Magician: For my next trick, I will disappear.

Magician: Fuck you, pear! Mangos taste much better than you!

A horse walks into a bar; the bartender asks, “Hello, do you want a beer?”

The horse responds, “I think not,” and promptly disappears.

(Now, admittedly, this joke only makes sense if you are familiar with the French Enlightenment philosopher, Rene Descartes, who famously said, “I think, therefore I am.” The horse thought not, and therefore wasn't...

But if I had explained that first, I would have been putting Descartes before da horse!)

How do you make “one” disappear?

Add a “g” in front.

## CHAPTER 84

To the left of Principal D is Mr. F and to the right is Dr. A, the school counselor, with the principal's stately desk between me and them, and I wonder if this is how they think trying not to ambush someone should go. At least Sheriff Handsome isn't here.

"Am I here so you can tell me I failed sophomore year? Because if you are, you didn't need back-up Ms. D. I promise I won't hurt anyone but myself." Dr. A and Principal D's eyes widen and Dr. A inhales with intent, so I wave my hands in dismissal and smirk and say, "Joke. It was a joke, jeeze, can't say one word without people jumping on your back around here."

"It's Dr.," says Principal D. "You may call me by the degree I earned or the title I hold, but please don't call me Ms. or Mrs., G."

"Afraid I don't respect your authority because you don't have a dick?" There's an insouciant tilt to my head and my expression is loose, but my jaw is tight. I really don't want to be told that I have to repeat a grade. That's another year stuck here. Should've listened to D—no, fuck that, didn't think that.

A small smile flits across Principal D's face. "I rather think that wouldn't help your authority issues at all. In any case, this meeting is to remind you to attend school tomorrow. I know it's the last day and your instinct might be to think that you have better things to do with your time, but even with all the leniency granted to you for the tragedy this past year, the excessive absences these past few weeks have pushed you to the very limit. If you miss tomorrow, I cannot let you pass."

“You shouldn’t say it like a challenge then.” I lean back into the chair, crossing my arms behind my head, and do not miss Mr. F’s deeply unamused glare.

Principal D continues with her little speech like I hadn’t said a thing. No sentient being here, just whispers on the wind. “Which would truly regrettable considering the astounding make-up work that you were able to pull together to get passing grades in all your classes. Don’t lose this chance to progress. Grief can do funny things to the mind—”

“Funny?” The word comes out excoriated.

“As in humorous? No, not really, though some people do laugh at truly awful moments. It’s a coping mechanism. While other people might crack incessant jokes or make light of their loss. But the meaning of my words leant more in the way of mystifying and perplexing, one never knows how grief will hit them, crash down upon their life and move the earth from beneath their feet until all that’s left is to pick up the pieces.”

“Poetic. It’s too bad then that I don’t have any glue. I was never one of those who ate it as a kid—bet they’d still have a supply even now.”

“You’re a very smart, very resilient young man,” says Principal D. I can see Mr. F nodding in my periphery. “I think you’ll find that you’re stronger than you think and that you’re already in the process of ‘gluing’ things together.” I can hear the scare quotes.

“You don’t know me.”

Principal D’s smile sears with kindness, a poison that hangs in the air. “If we are in understanding, I also wanted to say one more thing—” I think: *why is she like this and I was a shit student all year and I broke your precious star point guard’s nose and just do it, just do it already*. She says, “Have a lovely summer, G.” And I wonder why her kindness feels like dying.

It's not hard to google. K's last name is the same as the law firm's, a family business. The address I get from their website leads me to an office building downtown. As dull and drab as it seems on the outside, is how proportionally swank it is once I walk through the double doors into the lobby. The man at the front desk narrows in on me.

"Can I help you?" he asks. His hands are nowhere to be seen and I wonder if his fingers are resting expectantly on a silent alarm for security.

"I'm looking K W," I say. "She's a family friend." I do my best to look bored with a touch of irritated condescension. It was a look that said: *I'm rich, I'm powerful, I'm better than you and things always go my way*. Something I worked to perfect by observing my grandparents, mostly because of that saying, the one that goes something like, do anything with the right amount of confidence and no one will stop you—not true. On the whole, sure, it works. But if you have one of those faces, a face that people find suspicious, that screams troublemaker even if you're a saint, scout's honor, or makes them want to punch you, confidence just makes it worse. It's not confidence you need in these situations, it's entitlement, a virtual heavy dick you swing around that says, *I can get you fired*.

K's office is on the fourth of five floors, not quite at the top. When I get to the door with her nameplate, I press my ear to the wood. Don't hear anything, so I knock and there's a muffled, *come in*, and as I open the door, she comes into view. The sight of her sends electricity spinning out in a web across my skin, a heady mix of hope and fear and want bundled into the image of her, icon to all that she can do, the potential.

Her office is blue-toned. Dark blue rug, light gray walls, with royal blue chairs and bookcase behind her desk. One wall is filled with windows facing the outside, the other is glass with a premiere view of the rest of the office floor except—

“Those were mirrors, weren’t they?” I jerk my thumb to the glass wall I remember walking past and K’s head shoots up, a small smile blooming on her face.

“Little G. Well, this is quite the surprise, isn’t it. Here to sue someone?”

“Just passing by.”

K laughs. “I doubt that. And yes, that’s mirrored glass. Having my name on the outside of the building has some perks.” The curves of her face slowly lose buoyancy and turn down and inside out. “Honestly, G, what are you doing here?”

There’s a picture of K and my father on her desk. Other family photos are relegated to the bookcase behind her and all of those are serious-faced, lawyered-suited, family firm photos. Posed and purposeful. The snapshot of K and my dad seems off-the-cuff, bright smiles, slightly blurred with movement in places, not looking at the camera.

“Can I sit?” I ask instead of answering the question and then don’t wait for permission and slump down into one of the cushioned chairs across from her.

K closes her laptop with a click. “Is there something wrong, G? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“Would you help me if I was?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Even if I did something bad?”

“Yes.”

“Really bad?”

“Yes.” K reaches across the desk and takes my hand. “G, where’s your father?”

There’s something about the way her mouth pulls to the side with a wary resignation that makes me realize that she thinks I hurt him, did something to him.

My snort of laughter is bitter. “Oh, he’s just fine. At work, getting justice for the little guy. For the lost and disenfranchised, power to the people, you know. Why do you ask?”

K leans back and straightens up, once again full of sly smiles and tilted looks. Her fingertips draw patterns in my palm that send small waves of thrills down my nerves in her retreat. “No reason,” she says. “I just thought perhaps if you’d gotten in some trouble, you might feel more comfortable telling me than the Sheriff.”

“But he’s my father,” I say, in the most insinuating, innocent tone I can manage.

K hums behind a hand, amusement in the hidden smile, and as she stretches, her hair falls behind her shoulders, a spool of silk. “I do so love our time together. You are so much fun to play with, little G. You give just as good as you get, don’t you.”

“Anything for a pretty lady.”

“Surely you’re not just here to flirt with me.” She crosses her legs, the hem of her dress sliding up. “Not that I mind.” But the curve of her mouth is hard, running out of patience.

As much as I try I can’t keep eye contact and my gaze pulls to the side. Outside the windows, it’s blue skies. It’s so very often blue skies in Carefree. “You’re the one handling my parents’ divorce, yeah? I want to know what’s happening.”

Silence. Only noise the soft susurrations of air from the vents, a cool breeze that prickles down my back. Just as it hits too long, she says, “Don’t you know what’s



happening, little G? Your father told me you'd been informed of all the most pertinent points by both him and your mother."

*That's bullshit.* First instinct. I don't say that. I want to be taken seriously. I am not child and despite the nickname, K never treats me like I am. I don't want that to change, especially now. I say, "No. I don't think they're telling me anything they don't want me to know. And anything they don't want me to know—"

"Is what you think matters most."

"It's not what I think." My head snaps around and finally I can look her in the eyes. "It's what I know. I *know* they're not telling me what matters most."

K studies me. Her eyes taking me in from crown to toe. She stands up, smoothing down her dress, and walks around her desk to where I'm sitting. She pulls the other chair and angles it so she's facing me. She leans in and touches my cheek, cups my face.

"You're so young," she says. Her eyes seem sad. It's not pity, but acknowledgement. I shift in my seat and her face changes, facets on gem, and for that brief instant something hungry and raw writhes beneath her skin. But it's gone as soon as it came, and it's my dad's face immortalized in photo on her desk, and I know that I can't do it this time, I can't ruin this.

So I put my hand on her hand, pressure on my cheek, and say, "I'm not," and I lean forward, scooting up in the chair, and our knees meet in the middle. "I'm older than they think. I can handle what they're hiding from me."

"This will have to be between us," she says. "Something private that no one else can know or else you'll get me in a lot of trouble."

“I promise,” I say fervently. My heart starting to race with our proximity, with being so close to knowing what I want. “I promise. I would never.”

She pulls the entanglement of our hands to her and presses a soft kiss to my knuckles and my stomach twists with anticipation. “Okay,” she says. “I trust you. I can make an educated guess that you’re worried about when you’ll be seeing your mother again.” I breathe out a *yes* that isn’t audible to anyone. “You’re right to be worried. Your father is planning on suing for full custody. He’s going to try and get her deemed unfit by the courts. Normally, this would be extremely hard, near impossible to do. But your father, he’s respected in this town and his family has a lot of pull, a lot of money and connections, and his parents are behind on this and well,” she runs an apologetic hand through my hair, “they helped build this town.”

“That isn’t fair,” I say.

K’s eyes are cold as she says, “Of course it isn’t,” but when I look again, they’re full of sympathy, a sadness painted across her face. “They’ll paint your mother as troubled. She does have a history. And without the financial ability to take care of you. They’ll tear her to shreds.”

Panic starts to bubble in my chest. “Can you stop it? Fix it? Can you, I, I don’t know, persuade him not to do this?”

For the first time since I’ve met her, K’s composure slips. She pulls back and turns away. “I can’t, G,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“You have to, please.” I’m on my feet, chair toppled behind me before I realize it. “You’re the only who can—”

“I can’t!” Now K’s on her feet, her sharp heels giving her a few inches over me. “You have no idea, G. This is my job, my reputation, I can’t just do something that could ruin it. Especially not for nothing.”

“It’s not for nothing,” I say, desperate, skinned open and exposed. “You know it’s not right. I can’t stay with my father. Please.”

“Your father.” K breathes out the words like a prayer. “There are so many things you don’t understand yet, little G. Your father is so dear to me. I couldn’t do that to him, after all he does for me. It would be a betrayal.” She sits down again and I follow suit. When she looks back up again, her eyes glint with unshed tears. “And my job. I already have to work three times as hard because I’m a woman.”

“But, it’s, this firm, your family—”

A ragged jumble of noises tear from K’s throat that might have been laughter. “It’s worse because it’s my family. My father. There’s so much more expectation.”

“I understand that,” I whisper and my eyes burn, because I can feel it all in a stone in my heart. “It’s not fair.”

“No, love. It’s not.” She lays a hand on my knee. “But if it was just my job, little G. I would do it. I would take that risk for you.”

Something cracks in my chest. “Really?”

K nods and then dabs at her eyes. “But it’s not so simple.”

“My father,” I say.

“He’s done so much for me.”

“He can’t be that great,” I say, resentment sticking to my ribs. “Sure, he can be charismatic, but he’s not *that* great a conversationalist, and he’s always up and down, you never know what you’re gonna get, and he gets so angry—”

“Passionate,” says K.

“*Passionate?*” I repeat, bewildered.

“He cares,” she says simply. “It’s why he’s such a great Sheriff. It’s why his constituents love him. He’s a real-life, modern-day superhero, chasing down criminals and getting justice for the disenfranchised.” She’s mesmerizing as she tells this story, I almost believe her.

“Right,” I say, bitterness coating my insides with ice as warmth suffuses my face, anger and embarrassment at K’s fairytale explanation, as if I was some sort of naïve child. “I thought you...” Were scared of him, didn’t like it, my mind flashes back to when I’d found her after he’d been yelling. I thought he influenced her in different ways, but maybe I hadn’t given K enough credit. “You think he’s swell. Got it.”

“It’s not just what I think,” she says dryly. “It’s not my fault if we’re the only two people in the state who are smart enough to see through him.” My heart jumps and surprised laughter pours from my mouth. And I realize that she’s with me. She’s *with me*. I am not alone.

“Sorry,” I say.

“Don’t be.” Her hand moves from my knee, up my thigh, a warm press. “Your father, he’s a pillar of this community. He has the ears and the votes of the people. I think we could do a lot together, me and him, for Carefree, for a larger range of people eventually... I want to help you, G,” K says, “I do. It hurts me that I can’t.” Her other hand

rests on my chest. Her nails prick at my skin, the thin layer of cotton between us nothing.

“But I can see a really future with your father as partners, professionally. It would allow me to help a lot of people. Do you understand?”

“I guess.” My stomach is tight like a drum.

Her eyes are dark and her hands are hot and they pulse in time with the rush of blood in my veins. “The two of us, we’re in this together now. To be there for each other. Do you see?”

“I see,” I say.

## CHAPTER 85

### Transcription Beta

Hey honey. I'm sorry I haven't called. You're right I should have called sooner. But now's just not the right time for it. I'm still trying to figure out my plan \_\_\_\_\_ move and find a place for us. I don't want you to worry about \_\_\_\_\_ am I am trying to make everything OK for us and that takes time. I need to make everything right for me and for you and \_\_\_\_\_ is he's not good at letting go, he needs someone you know you and anyway the lawyer says \_\_\_\_\_ never mind that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to tell you I love you and of courses I want you with me of course I do. It's just hard. I miss you, honey, and I love you. You just uh have to be patient, OK? I'll talk to you later.

## CHAPTER 86

the car's a convertible, O loathes it and loves it in turns, top down and it's *useless, useless, so impractical*, top up and it's a covenant, it's *you know what he/she's like* and *other people don't see it* and *not like we do* and *you can't tell* and i always replied, *i won't tell, why would i tell?* and O would say something about mom and how i snitched to her and i would say something about dad and then we would shrug and the silence would fracture with complaints. she liked to drive me around and bitch, fourteen to her sixteen, *you'll get your permit soon, kiddo, then i'll teach how to soar*, as if she could. she'd race down highways and the side streets, curving neighborhood lines, and even slid into doing donuts in the cul-de-sac in front of D's house, *leaving a mark of our love*, she'd say to me. but when the ride was done and the ride always ended, we'd sidle into the garage and O would turn off the engine and let the keys dangle. that's where the deepest secrets dwelled, in the minutes between, she complained about mom more than dad, her yelling and nagging, getting on O's case, and i would say, *she's just worried about you* and O would say, *like dad is about you? mom isn't some saint. you just don't understand* and she was right, i never did.

## CHAPTER 87

I text her and she comes to me. My body trembles with nerves. The adrenaline leaves me shocky. Everything hits hardest when you know something's coming, but don't know what.

The knock on the door makes my vision gray out in the corners. There are rats chewing through the lining of my stomach. I'm breathing something in, but I don't know if it's air.

Dad is at work. There was a break in the case, he told me, breathless with excitement while we ate dinner. He grilled a salmon. I baked the potatoes and steamed the vegetables. We put the plates out together. "I'm going back to the station to put in some overtime, hopefully this will all be finished by tomorrow, maybe the day after at the latest," he said.

"Congratulations," I said.

When he grinned, it took years away from his face, and he looked almost boyish with jubilation. "Trust me about this, son, there's nothing better than solving a case and getting justice for the victims."

"And defense lawyers?" I said in a leading tone and he groaned and pushed away his plate in mock sickness.

I unlock the deadbolt. K's hair is in a ponytail and she's in a soft-looking t-shirt and joggers, form-fitting, but something that spoke more to familiarity and comfort. I can't tell if she's wearing make-up, but she still looks perfect and it doesn't matter.



“G?” she asks.

I move away from the open door. “Come in.”

She crosses her arms, a thin attempt at a self-hug in anyone else, in her it looks like expectation, and she says, “You caught me on the couch watching a horror movie marathon on Syfy. Not exactly the most thrilling thing to do in one’s off-time, I know.”

“Better than what I do in my free time.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Ah. You know. Crime.”

Her face takes on a bemused cast. “Crime? Bold of you to admit that out loud.”

I smile slyly. “Well you’re my father’s lawyer, right? That basically means your mine as well. Isn’t there some kind of privilege or confidentiality? I think I’m right.”

“I see.” Her voice is dry, but the lines of her features have gone soft and mutable. Looking into her warmth, seeing her shed her armor, until all that’s left are sweatpants and horror movies on a Friday night, everything in me settles.

“How are you so perfect?” I ask.

“I try,” she says, her lips curling into a small smirk.

My throat bobs as I swallow. “I was wondering if we could continue our conversation.”

“From my office?”

“Upstairs.” I nod. “In my room.”

Her expressions move too quick for me to interpret. “I understand,” she says. She touches my shoulder. “Lead the way.”

In my room, everything is clean. New sheets, bed made, nothing on the floor, shit put away, posters down. We stand in front of each other in the center, waiting. I can see her breathe, the rise and fall of her chest. The air is bloated and tight.

Suddenly, she turns away. “Your father...” she says, and sits on the bed, I watch it dip with her body. Her head is low. She could be asking where he is. If he knows she’s here. To remind me that she cares for him. “You two have been good lately.”

I frown. “You can’t know that.”

“You sure about that?” Her smile is frail. Her palms rest upward on her thighs. “He talks about you when we’re together. He’s so proud of how you’ve been handling everything. And he’s been so happy at how you two have been bonding lately.” She pauses and when she looks up again her expression is apologetic. “He thinks it’s because you’re out from under your mother’s influence—”

“My mother’s influence? Bonding?” My words are strident, jagged edges scraping at the periphery of my brain. “You mean the lack of my bruises and bleeding wounds now that he’s not beating the shit out of me, sure, you can call that bonding if you want.” Start to pace, hands running through my hair in frustration. “What a joke,” I say, a resentment on my tongue.

Then I realize what I said. What I said out loud. And I think I’m turning to run when she’s there, her arms around me, and she’s saying soothing nonsense, and I think I’m saying something like, “no” and “you can’t” and “he can’t” and other fragments, and she replies, “Don’t worry, G, I won’t tell him, I won’t tell anyone. It will stay between us. Our secret.”

The relief is overwhelming. The muscles in my chest contract. “You believe me?” I ask, humiliation curdling my blood because we covered this, she’s with me, it’s not a

question I need to ask, even as I ache for her answer. She looks at me. Her eyes are mournful. She slides a hand up the side of my neck, holding me steady. “This is why,” I whisper. “This is why I can’t stay here. My mom’s not a saint. But the good times never last with Dad.”

“G,” she says. There is no space between us.

“They never last,” I say. “You understand, right? I know you think you can build a life with him, a career, but. It won’t. Do you even like him?” I don’t know why I’m asking that. This question, almost defensive. Her eyes go heavy lidded. Her soft, *of course*, seems wounded until it seems impatient.

Her fingers flex against the back of my head, curl into my hair. I lean in, telegraphing my intentions, and our lips touch. I deepen the kiss. Her hands move. Her breasts against my chest.

When we stop for breath, she says, “This can be another one of our secrets. Together.”

“Together,” I repeat.

She leads me to the bed and pushes me down. Her face above mine, lips parted, a yawning emptiness behind her teeth. But as she takes off her t-shirt, I can see the glint of her smile.

## CHAPTER 88



## CHAPTER 89



probably.

Probably.

## CHAPTER 90

Me: My wife left me, I lost my job, life sucks, what am I doing wrong?

Dentist: \*rips off therapist costume\* IT'S BECAUSE YOU DON'T FLOSS



I should probably floss more.

## CHAPTER 91

B hands me an envelope. “Happy birthday,” he says. We’re in his rec room, breaking in the new GTA. He has the game paused, so I take the envelope, the return address is from China, I think, and rip it open.

“My birthday isn’t for a couple of weeks.” Shake out the contents and something slips into my palm. “Is this your way of telling me you’re not going to be here?”

“I am going to Maui with the fam soon, but nah, dude, this is to kick-off the summer in the right way.”

Turn the plastic over and it’s an ID. I make an impressed noise and bring it closer to my face to examine. “This is a really good fake.”

“Only the best for my young protégé.” B holds a solemn hand to his heart.

“Yeah, you’re all dignified.” I turn the fake ID between my fingers, my face, appearing and disappearing. “Thanks, man. This is awesome.”

B’s expression cracks at the edges. “Actually, uh. It’s from Ivy. I mean, it was her idea. Kind of a rite of passage. We both got our fakes after our sophomore years.” He grins. “Well, our good fakes. She would’ve wanted you to have this.”

Can’t swallow past the jagged ice in my throat.

“I still can’t believe she’s dead,” says B, his throat bobbing. After that first week and rush of parties, B hadn’t mentioned Ivy once. He responded when her name was said, but of his own volition, her name hadn’t been in his lexicon. “She’d’ve graduated this week

so it's easy to pretend she's going off to college early to fuck around or started a gap year in like, Greece, and not like she's really gone."

I don't know what B wants me to say. I don't know why the sound of Ivy's name from somebody else's lips still gives me a jolt, an electrostatic shock. What right do they have to grieve her? And definitely not like I do. I can't talk about this and certainly not with him. I'm over this. I am.

"What a bitch," I say. "She always has to outdo us all."

B's astonished silence is broken when he snorts, then giggles. "Dude," he manages.

"What can I say," I stretch out my legs and pick up the game controller. "I'm in a good mood. Now un-pause the game."

Sunday night. I slice the cornbread open, pile it up with mac and cheese and creamed spinach and put the top back on, making a drippy sandwich and shove half of it into my mouth.

"That's disgusting," says Dad, scowling over his neat plate of Boston Market take-out, rotisserie chicken, garlic new potatoes, and spinach, all in separated sections. I lick my fingers where the filling had leaked all over them. "Table manners, G. Fork, knife, napkin."

Swallow. "Sandwiches are finger food."

"I trust you'll have better manners in front of company," he says, then cuts off a sensible bite of chicken from the bone.

"What company?"

"My parents are coming over for dinner Friday night."

"I have plans."



“Yes, I know,” says Dad. He continues to eat tidily. He’s doing it on purpose to sneer at me. I’ve seen him eat ribs. “You have plans here to eat dinner with your grandparents.”

“But, Dad—”

“No.” The words stop up in my throat. “We’re going to have a family dinner and you’ll be pleasant and presentable and if everything goes well, I will allow you to go out after everything is finished.”

“You swear?”

“Don’t be so dramatic, G. Be the well-mannered young man I’ve taught you to be and we’ll both be able to get what we want.”

“Alright.” I feel my shoulders relax. I scoop another spoonful of mac and cheese out of the plastic container. I watch Dad eat from the corner of my eye. Despite how slow they are, his movements put me on edge.

“There’s something else I wanted to talk about,” says Dad.

Stick the second half of my cornbread sandwich in my mouth and shrug at him to go ahead. I can see his face go ugly behind the Sheriff Handsome mask and triumph rises in my chest. I wonder who he’s trying to fool. No one here but us.

“It’s about what your plans are for this summer. Now that you aren’t in school, having you at loose ends during the day seems unproductive.”

I can see where this is going. “You want me to get a job.” It’s not even a bad idea. In a few weeks, most of my friends will be off to luxury cruises and island resorts and all manner of vacation fun with and without their families, but I will be stuck here, and then,

eventually, in New York with my mom. Picking up some extra cash isn't the worse idea.

"Yeah. Okay."

It's almost offensive how surprised Dad looks. "And here I thought I'd have a fight on my hands."

"Goes to show how well you know me," I reply. "So well."

"Mind your tongue," he snaps. "You won't be able to use that sort of disrespectful backtalk with your boss. It isn't cute. You'll get fired."

"It's a good thing you're not my boss then," I say.

He looks at me and for a moment, I think he's actually seeing me. "You just can't help yourself, can you," he says. "Besides, where else do you think you'll get a job this late in the game. Everywhere else is probably full up of teenagers."

"I'm not working for you."

Dad slashes through the air with his fork. "Not me. The Sheriff's department. We can always use an office aide to help with paperwork and errands."

"No." The bones in my jaw ache as I grind my molars together.

"Let's make a deal," he says, his smug voice letting me know that he thinks he's going to win. "I'll give you two weeks to find a summer job and if you don't find one, then you come work for the department."

"Do I have a choice?" I ask between clenched teeth.

Sheriff Handsome smiles. "I'm glad we understand each other."

We finish dinner and it isn't until I'm almost asleep that my jaw unclamps. "I always understand you," I tell my ceiling.

We go down to LA for a couple of days. A's parents own a hotel there and so we get a bunch of suites to fuck around in and put our fakes to good use clubbing. It helps that everyone's parents besides mine are of the uber rich, if not the famous, and things are skewed in our favor. During the day, we rent segways and zip around the beaches and piers and buy VIP tickets to Universal Studios and at night we party with some legit names, T's dad a major partner at a talent agency with a client list of golly gee, just the best and the brightest, and by the time we get back to Carefree, I've frittered away at least a third of my available time to look for a job.

This is around the time, a voice in my head should be asking me if I know what I'm doing, but my head's been silent since O's suicide note became public and I think she's mad at me. Or maybe she's gone. Maybe all it took was the truth. What? No voice sniggering at me saying *truth*? What truth?

Are you really gone?

A text from K has me going to the Seaside Inn, room 108, a shaded corner on the first floor, and when I knock on the door, it cracks open and she pulls me in. Our encounters have started to structure into routine, but not the boring kind. We come together with excited smiles, hands tugging at clothes and tracing at skin, trying to merge into one being. I do her first, she's taught me all the ways she likes to be touched, the best way to make her hot, to get her off, then she puts hand or mouth to me and pulls me into her. Afterwards, sometimes we lie in bed and talk. This time she says, "You're getting good at that, little G."

There's a bite to her amusement that hits me sideways and as I think of something to say, I hope she doesn't see. Which means of course she does.

“Oh come on, sweetie,” she says with a laugh to her voice, “you know I didn’t mean anything by that.”

Shifting away, I say, “I know. I’m just thinking about something else.”

K hums in a curious tone, willing to accept the change in conversation. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Dad wants me to get a job. If I don’t find one within a little over a week, I’m going to have to work for the Sheriff’s department as an office aide. Do grunt work like getting them lunch and coffee refills.”

She props herself up on an elbow to look down at me. “And you’re too good for that.”

I scowl. “No. Just not for him.”

“Ah.” The amusement’s back, she can always find something to laugh about. Most of the time that’s something I admire. She doesn’t try to take things the wrong way or get angry about missteps when she can laugh about it, but sometimes it grates when I want to have a real conversation. She runs a hand from my shoulder, down my chest, to my hip. “No need to be so tense. The order of the day is to find a job.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Talk usually is.” She squeezes my hip. “Unless the talking is the doing.”

I lean in to capture her mouth, slide a hand down her back to her ass and then pull her into me, her leg curling around my body. “I like the doing,” I say. “I’m much better at it.”

Something flashes across her face, a reply that curves her mouth, but doesn’t touch air and she does that sometimes, censors herself, but this time it pricks at me more.

“Well,” she says. “What are your options?” She catches me still staring at past moments and says, “For the summer job, G. Please tell me you’ve thought about this.”

“The regular things. Waiting tables at a restaurant. Usher at a movie theater. Any retail store that’s hiring. Barista. Valet at hotel, I hear there’s good money in that.”

“Thrilling,” says K. “Ever thought of doing something that you might like?”

“Work isn’t supposed to be fun,” I say in an exaggerated manner. “That’s why it’s work.”

“Your father didn’t tell you that,” says K. “He loves his job.”

Unease skitters around in my belly. “Let’s not talk about him. Anyway, it’s not like I have any skills. It’s minimum wage for me and then one day I’ll die.”

K disentangles herself from me and gets up. She starts to dress. “It seems like you have a lot to do, little G. All those minimum wage applications.” I hate this part. She always gets up first, shrugging off our encounter and shrugging on her clothes and becoming someone else. Her phone never stops ringing and she never turns it off.

“Maybe I could work for you,” I say, inching forward off the bed, sheet wrapped around my waist. “Some sort of receptionist or dogsbody. I wouldn’t mind being run around if it was for you.”

When K looks at me it’s full of pity. “You know you can’t. When your father asks you where you got a job and it’s from me? Or even my law firm? It’ll be me going directly against his wishes,” she shakes her head, “for something so trivial? You know that’s not possible.”

My shoulder blades pull together, muscles contracting down the line of back, so tight it’s painful. “I know,” I say, and I do, of course I do. “It was just wishful thinking. I

already decided that I'd prefer to valet. I'm pretty sure A can get her parents to give me a job at one of their hotels."

"That's good."

"Am I going to see you again soon?"

"Maybe." K sends me a sultry glance over her shoulder. "The firm has a big case and I'm taking lead so I'm going to be busy this week, but even if I don't find time, I'll see you on Friday."

"The dinner with my grandparents," I say. "You're going to be there?"

She nods. "Until next time, little G."

I raise my hand. "Bye."

She's working as a cashier at a grocery. Finding out was accidental, went in to load up on junk food and drinks for a CoD marathon at B's when her image, her hair, the angle of her elbows, flickered in the corner of my eye. She didn't notice me or B then, too caught up in checking out a couple with three kids all under the age of ten and what looked like a month's worth of food. She hasn't found me out since, either. When I go in and browse, watching her in the brief spaces between the aisles, then grabbing a soda and a bag of chips or a pack of cookies to justify the loitering and using the self-checkout when she's busy. It's the busyness that's a twisted screw turning clockwise in my chest, everyone's always so busy. And it's not like I don't enjoy doing nothing with B and the rest of them, or even by myself, but it's a pane of glass so clear you don't know it's there until you can't touch through it, can't speak through it. And mostly it burns me up inside that D can be busy and not have a single thought about me so easily, like she turned off that part of herself and that

was that. One day she stopped. And beyond the burning, the resentment and the hate and the desperate yearning, there's a round bead of jealousy swimming in my insides and wishing I could stop too.

*Yeah. That's the dream.*

## CHAPTER 92

we're in the den. velvet brown couch and faded floral patterns. two beige cushioned recliner chairs. the tv stuck in frozen motion, video game paused, mid-jump. my body aches hot even as it shivers with chills. mom's eyes are bloodshot. sweat mists down her temples, beneath her arms, a flush all over her skin, miniscule forks of red veins blooming across her face. she doesn't live in the cold, i know that, she lives. red marks down her cheeks and it's the heat from tears, an echo and augury. *i didn't believe them*, she says, *because I had proof that she was alive. evidence.* my body is freezing over, cells bursting, veins splitting. she says, *her clutch was on the table. i saw her leave with it on saturday, it's here, phone, wallet, and all, and when they said, we found your daughter, i said, impossible. she's right here at home. right here where she belongs. safe.* i've never seen mom cry before, when she gets upset it turns into anger. shouting and rage. i guess that's her version of crying, energy transformed into something more palatable. here, only a partial transformation happens, her fury making itself known, a bright snap through choked sobs and a strangled voice. all that emotion, making her seem so brilliantly alive. *but the way they said my name*, she says, skeleton fists by her sides, *i knew she was alive. i knew. i was right. i was entirely certain.* there's nothing more piercing than her voice. *until that moment.* she inhales. *until that moment, i thought i knew. and that's because of you.* try to stand, joints clicking, muscles stretching with soreness. shake my head. *we didn't go to that party together*, i say.



*but you were there, she says, you brought her clutch home, but you didn't bring her. what were you thinking? how could you just leave her there alone? this is your fault.* her voice is hoarse. her hands grasp O's rectangle purse and she says, *i thought Ivy was*

I don't know why I'm thinking about this.

## CHAPTER 93

truth, *n.* and *adv.* (and *int.*)

Pronunciation: U.S. /truθ/

A. *n.*

I. Loyalty, faithfulness, etc.

1.

- a. The quality or character of being true to a person, principle, cause, etc.; steadfast allegiance; faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, constancy. In later use only with *to*. Now somewhat *rare*.

2.

- a. In early use: honesty, uprightness, righteousness, virtue, integrity. Later: (more narrowly) disposition to speak or act truthfully or without deceit; truthfulness, veracity; sincerity. Now *rare*.

3.

- a. Faith, trust, confidence. *Obsolete*.
- b. Belief; (as a count noun) a statement of belief, a creed. *Obsolete*.

*Rare and Obsolete*

## CHAPTER 94

K sits at Dad's side at dinner. Not that I thought it would be anything different, but sitting at the head of the table, sandwiched by my dad on one side and my grandparents on the other and K the farthest seat away makes me think it's another one of Dad's lessons. See what I did? I put you at the head of the table, but I still have all the power. But something gloating tugs at the corner of my mouth as I look down at my half-eaten steak. Well, maybe not all the power. My eyes watch the movement of K's hands as she cuts apart her dinner and then gestures wide, conversing with my grandmother. As if sensing where my attention has gone, Dad catches her flying hand and presses a kiss to it. My lips tighten, but that's okay though, soon I'll be gone from Carefree and we'll see who wins in the end.

"G," says my grandmother, stopping all side conversations. Her hair is pulled into a silvery gray chignon. She's wearing a black tailored pantsuit, sparkly earrings, rings, and statement necklace, an outfit that altogether looks more expensive than our house and both our cars. "I wonder if you have any particular plans for your birthday."

They are the reason we're eating off the good china, using mom's mom's real silverware set she gave my parents as a wedding gift. We've never used either before. I don't know what Dad's trying to pull. I've been to my grandparents' mansion, seen their silver and gold. Even our nicest stuff doesn't compare to what they have. It's not like he's going to impress them. Trick them into thinking we're high-class. They know us. And he grew up with them, in that place, with those things and people. He should know better than anyone.

“No particular plans, grandma,” I reply.

Her face stretches into a smile, no lipstick on her teeth, even though it’s really pink and most old women have accidentally painted teeth. “Lovely,” she says. I study her face, the dearth of lines, and think that she’s definitely gotten a face lift or neck tightening or botox or all three, because she doesn’t look real. Her nose is a petite point on her face. I wonder what she looked like when she was younger.

“In that case,” says my grandfather. “We’d like to throw you a party.” Dad’s dad is a dour looking man, thick dark hair that has just gone salt and pepper, bushy eyebrows, a straight nose, rows of wrinkles up his forehead like a bulldog and the jowls to match. I’m pretty sure I won’t look like that when I get old. Everyone usually says I look like Mom and therefore her side of the family.

My eyes dart to Dad and his stare makes it known that I am to accept this party with effusive praise and graciousness. “That’s a lovely offer,” I say, twisting grandma’s word in the back of my throat. Waves of heat start to waft from Dad.

The grandparents don’t pick up on the sarcasm. I suppose that’s better for me in the long run anyway.

Grandma says, “Wonderful,” an effervescent response that belongs to someone much younger. “We were waiting for your go ahead, but I’ve already started planning. We’ll start the day with a nice luncheon, some of our friends get tired early these days, then a reception later on in the evening. I’m estimating maybe two hundred people?”

“Of your friends?” I twirl my knife between my fingers and say in an obviously joking manner because I’m not entirely self-destructive, “Am I allowed to invite any of my friends?”

“Oh, pff,” says Grandma. She pats my hand. Her skin is gossamer-thin but warm. “Of course you can, dear. Many of your friends from school I expect will be coming with their families, and the others, well, they’ll probably have more fun at the reception.”

“Ah. Very thoughtful.”

Grandpa chuckles, his jowls quivering. “That’s my Bea. She’s a master tactician.”

“We’re very excited to introduce you to society,” says Grandma.

“Am I a deb? Is this my quinceañera?” I glance around the table. I can see K’s eyes duck down and away, but Dad’s neck starts to turn red.

“Don’t be silly, dear,” says Grandma. Her eyelids have lowered, almost coy, but her stare is sub-arctic, a slow crawl across a glacier of death.

“Sorry.” The word trips off my tongue it moves so quick.

“That’s alright,” she tells me and I know when I’m being condescended to and when to take it and shut the fuck up. “You’ll invite your friends to the reception. We’ll introduce you to everyone you need to know at lunch.” She squeezes my hand. Her nails are long with white tips and probably plastic. Ceramic? “We’re welcoming you into the family, G, by celebrating your day of birth and saying goodbye to our *tragically* departed granddaughter with a small memorial unveiling.” There’s a soft hitch to her voice when she talks about O and remembering how the grandparents used to fawn over O, I think she actually means it.

“Memorial unveiling? I thought it was just going to be my video.” That’s Dad. His voice has turned low and grating, not smoothed out, which means he’s shaken. He wasn’t expecting this either.

“Yes,” says Grandpa. “We donated money to help the university build strength in figure skating, re-vamp their program, enough that the new ice rink will be the Olivia R Ice Arena.”

K takes up the conversation from there, drawing the focus to herself with ease, and when I tilt my head down, I can see what she saw. Dad’s hands thickly veined and white-knuckled, vibrating against the tops of his thighs.

Unfortunately, K leaves when the grandparents do, phone to her ear, already arguing down someone she works with. Dad and I clear the table. He takes the platters of uneaten food into the kitchen. I take up all the cutlery and drop them into the sink. Dad hisses at me, “Careful,” and begins to inspect the forks. I stack the plates and walk into the kitchen. His lips go white and he barks, “Careful,” again, and I grip the five plates securely, no big deal, five’s not heavy or unstable, and spin on the balls of my feet, then set the plates down next to the cutlery with a gentle clink.

“You’re welcome,” I tell Dad and go to gather the cups.

Dad’s sour, impotent glance is a reward in and of itself for the dinner and the knowledge that I’m not going to be able to go out tonight. I fit my half-empty cup in my elbow as I balance the four unwieldy wineglasses. The wineglasses are empty. K had brought another bottle of wine from her family’s vineyard or wine vault or something ridiculous like that, and they of over twenty-one had sucked it down easy while I was stuck with Sprite. I suppose that’s also why K left so fast. After the second glass, her body went a little loose and by the time Dad was escorting his parents to their car, she pressed her lips to my neck her tongue darting out, her teeth nipping at my skin, her hands playing with my waistband, and I could still see my dad’s back.

I reach by Dad's meticulous washing of our useless expensive things and place the wineglasses down slow, their bulbous cups working uneasily against their fragile stems. My foot slips. Some soap or water from the washing, heart twists in my chest, and I manage catch myself against the edge of the sink and keep everything breakable safe, but my soda cup goes flying out of my elbow and onto Dad's shirt and the floor.

"It's just Sprite." I don't know why I say it. The cup is plastic. The floors are tile, easily cleaned. It's after all our guests have left so Dad can throw his shirt and pants in the wash. It *is* only Sprite. Not even a lot of it. But it's me, so I do it, I break the silence, I'm just stupid.

He drops what he's holding, china shattering by our feet, and slams his hands down on counter. "I told you to be careful," he roars, and his fist slams into my face.

—I'm on the floor, there's a ringing in my head, I'm leaning up on my forearms squirming backwards and it stings—

—there's red down my wrists, wet in my eye, my mouth is hanging open, and the wet drips in past the top lip, sour metal—

—it's so unfair, it was only Sprite, I think I'm saying that, half my eyes work at half capacity, static bursts in the air, and haze at the edges—

—there's an ice pack on my face and I've never felt something so good in my life and strong arms pick me up and I think I hear *easy there, easy there, son*—

—there's plastic beneath my arms, it sticks, look down and it's black, a trash bag, another ice pack is on my face, Dad is picking ceramic out of my forearms and elbows with tweezers and rubbing alcohol and cotton balls and band-aids—

He helps me up the stairs, his hands tender, I've forgotten what he looks like. When I'm in bed, I have to situate myself with pillows and blankets so I'm in a position that hurts the least with the hope that I'll fall asleep.

I tell myself that the pain isn't real. That the pain is in the past. Filtered through layers, caught in snapshot moments, not now, not really. That this—Dad, Carefree, the Friday night I was supposed to go out with my friends, it's already happened, it's gone, it's in the past and I've left those moments. They're phantoms of the mind now. Echoes. Nothing is immediate.

What bullshit.

Everything is immediate.

Everything is happening all at once. All the time. Always.



## CHAPTER 95

Here's a true life lesson:

Give a man a match, and he'll be warm for a few hours.

Set a man on fire, and he will be warm for the rest of his life.

And a little witticism just for you:

O went into a library and asked for a book on how to commit suicide.

The librarian said: "Fuck off, you won't bring it back."

*Like I needed a library, G.*

## CHAPTER 96

The air is resin, fossilized amber in parts, people stuck in poses, in facial expressions, houses and empty streets, discrete as photographs. In the other parts, it's sticky, slowing the works, a dog bark that echoes for three blocks stretching thin along the drip, the slur of scenery as I drive through town, the heat waves emanating up from the asphalt, down from the sun, their oscillation and wiggle. I snigger, forehead lying on top of the steering wheel, arms splayed out on the dash. Words. I open and close my mouth tasting the air.

She's on the register, check-out line number three. She's wearing an atrocious blue vest. She's chatting with an old woman as she scans items, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding...

I'm next to her, the old sees me, she doesn't, so I place my hand on her shoulder and say, "You're cute." She drops the can she was checking and it dents. "Oops." I giggle. "Clean up in aisle twelve." She's staring at me and my tongue feels a little numb so I turn to the old and ask, "Am I drooling?"

D surges toward me. "Shit. Your face." Her hands reach forward, fingertips elongating, but don't make contact. She rocks back, elbows to heels, and I rock forward to compensate. "Are you high? No. Don't answer, stupid question." She walks me a few steps away from the register. "Stay there for a minute."

Hum in agreement, head tilting up, then flinching down, the lights hurting my eyes. I don't realize I'm swaying until D grabs me and stops the motion and to compensate the world starts to seesaw and I look down at the linoleum floor and say, "Thank you."

D takes me somewhere else. On the way, someone comes up to her, mouth open, swallow a fruit, do you take that gaping hole everywhere? And the person frowns and D's hand is up and she says, "I'm on break," and then we leave them.

"How's that for service," I say. She sits me down on a couch. "This smells." D eats my complaint.

She says, "It's the break room. It's a million years old and the birthplace of despair. G, what happened to you? Do you need a hospital? You're bleeding."

That brings attention to my arms. There are dark streaks past the band-aids. "I fell on some glass," I explain even though it wasn't, I don't have the word. "I think I moved them wrong, but it's hard. Arms are important."

She maneuvers my face and makes me stare into her eyes. "I can't even see if your pupils are dilated or unequal because your eye is so swollen. I think you might have a concussion."

I relax into the couch and close my other eye. "Feel fine."

"And you took something while you have concussion," her voice is strident. "Of course, you did. What better way to make it worse?"

I put my hands to my ears. "Ow. Hurts."

"I thought you felt fine," she says. I can feel her weight lift off from the couch and I let myself doze. Later, she shakes me awake. There's gauze wrapped around my arms and an open first-aid box on the table. "I re-bandaged you. Cleaned you up, disinfected

you, and put ointment on, but I still think you should go to the hospital for your head. Your brain could be bruised.”

“I miss you,” I say. Her eyes go wide and then look away, her face is slack, then tight. I reach out, unsteady, and snag a finger on her vest. “This is really ugly.” D snorts, but I can see a half-smile as she turns and starts to put everything back into the first-aid kit.

“So bruised,” she says.

“I dream about you sometimes. And when I have sex I think about you sometimes. Sometimes it’s better that way.”

D stiffens, but she doesn’t flinch. “I don’t want to hear about that. After what you’ve done to me? It’s sick.”

“My dad hit me in the face.”

A breath, then D’s shoulders go boneless, sloping down. “Yeah,” she says and then sighs. “I figured.” In an instant, she’s on her feet. “I—I just, I don’t understand. Why do you stay with him? Why don’t you do anything?”

“He punched me in the face,” I say matter-of-fact, trying to separate my words. “Put me in a box, and that box in another box, mailed me to himself and hit me with a hammer!”

“A hammer?”

I snicker. “No, no, just smashed me up. First time since O was buried. Said we were done with all that.” My brain is a London fog. “Or maybe he didn’t.”

She crosses her arms where she stands. She says: “Why are you here?”

Why am I here? There was no thinking. I was in the car, and then I was here It’s the only place to be. Only place with D.

“I didn’t burn it,” I say. “I didn’t open it either. Is it her?” I ask. “Is she in there? I hear her sometimes.”

D’s angles are inscrutable. Finally, she says, “I hear her too. I don’t think that’s so rare. I believe that the people we love stick with us in all the moments we shared with them and the ways they affected us. But she’s not what’s in the box she left you, G. It’s not something that will hurt you. Ivy never wanted to hurt you.”

At that, burst out laughing. “You definitely, definitely never knew—” Words get cut off with a groan. Pain spikes in my head and I double over.

Her hands on my arms, eventually her voice becomes intelligible through the ringing, “—take you to a hospital, not joking, G. I don’t care what you want.”

She hauls me up. I say, “Take me home.”

She says, “Make me, bitch.”

Okay, she doesn’t. I wish she had though. It would’ve been funny.

## CHAPTER 97

O: If you don't change direction, you may end up where you're going.

me: What are you a fortune cookie?

## CHAPTER 98

When she sees my face, Grandma goes all wobbly and asks, “What happened, dear?”

And I say, “Fell down the stairs.”

“You didn’t get into a fight?” she asks, and that’s when I realize she knows exactly what happened. “Well, no worries,” she says. “We’ll get you fixed up right away.” Within a few minutes, she’s called a make-up artist she uses for high-end events to come down and make it look like I don’t have a sun setting all across my face. Better to meet people without looking like a hooligan ruffian, right Grams?

“To be fair,” I say, “This is mostly faded. I’m almost all healed up.”

“Oh?” says Grandma. “It looks like it hurts. Do you need something for the pain?”

And while I am not usually one to turn down such an offer, especially from someone I can bet has excellent painkillers, I do have some self-preservation instincts. “I’m fine, really. It’s mostly cosmetic,” I tell her.

“If you say so,” she says. And that’s the last I see of her until the luncheon starts. She is whisked away by people in uniforms with clipboards and earbuds needing her input and as I walk around the bustling mansion and wonder what it’d be like to grow up here, I’m envious at the solitude I can imagine. So many rooms that no one can find you.

For appetizers, they serve salmon mousse canapés and sausage stuffed mushrooms and crispy calamari with hot cherry peppers, and for lunch a choice of chorizo and roasted red pepper sandwiches, orange-glazed salmon, or herbed artichoke galette for the

vegetarians. Needless to say, I eat too little galette and drink too much fizzy ginger peach sparkler, but my tipsy smiles are endless for the handshakes and the how-do-you-do do-si-do with fake-wobbly Grandma and white-bread Grandpa, and when I can finally tear myself away, I snag a bread basket and gnaw on the contents in a corner.

There are plenty of people my age here too. Kids from my high school. People I hang out with at parties, get shit-faced with out on the beach. But they already all know each other in this context. Haute couture and fine dining and the CEO-millionaire-palooza. I could go up to their parents and talk about the last time I saw their precious boy or darling girl projectile vomit into a bathtub or sink or on another person, just to make conversation at this thing. Give it some life. But that would probably burn some bridges that even I don't want to crash.

I can overhear a lot in my corner too. It's well-hidden and I'm not opposed to eavesdropping. Most of it is gossip disguised as concerned conversation about people I don't know, doing mundane things like cheating or shady business practices or bribery to get their kid into an Ivy league or a stint in rehab, sometimes a scandalized gasp breaks through all that highly sincere concern, but it's not like anyone murdered somebody, dismembered the body, and then fed it to the dog. Nope. They'd probably just outsource that. Boring. Rich people—boring and predictable, no need to get innovative with all that money except better ways to cheat.

Hear snippets about me too, of course. Nothing I haven't heard before. Me and O. O and me. Poor boy. Poor Sheriff Handsome. Poor O. Suicide, such a tragedy. Is that a bruise covering the grandson's whole face? Oh, his ruffian hooligan-ness is understandable. Such turmoil. And the divorce, *I heard it wasn't amicable* says one



woman, another says, *the wife always seemed off to me and now that we know what happened to the daughter*, and another, *met her at a PTA meeting, she was a very nice woman*, and another, *knew her from before then, we were all pregnant together, remember P?* And I don't understand where they're getting this intel. This knowledge that my mother is "off" is "wrong" is "unfit" and "crazy" and "gone." All while praising Dad with the next breath. Bastard. Bastard with his little gossiping horde of bitches to muddy the waters for my mom to ever to see me again let alone get custody. I wonder if this round of bullshit is left over from when Dad originated this campaign of keep-G-crushed-and-underfoot or if this is somehow new. I don't think it's new. Not when I know I have K on my side calming the tidal wave of my Dad's impulses. I guess once something is said out loud, whether people take it for fact or not, it never goes away. A stain that can't be scrubbed away.

Just for a moment, my brain tilts to D. The things I've said about her, violent, obscene things. Things I've said she's done, she is. She and my mom meld together, an overlapping image, and I want to be sick. I hate myself. I'm just like he is. Just for a moment.

My hand touches cloth. The bread basket is empty and my stomach is bloated with carbs. Whenever I got sick when I was a kid, my mom used to say that eating bread would make me feel better, expand in my stomach and soak up the toxins. And that's what I think about now, the poison from the air and the alcohol getting sucked up by the expanding sponge in my stomach.

I stand up and debate the merits of leaving my hidden corner, but someone finds me anyway. Grandpa claps a hand to my shoulder and exclaims my name and says something about it being unfair to hide when not everyone can. The nearest horde of

blathering windbags look startled at the two of us being so near them, our existence coming into reality with their attention, but I remain blank-faced and my dour seeming grandfather gives them a jovial wave.

My grandfather's face is distinctive. I saw it once and I knew it. It doesn't change like Dad's. It's a solid face. I'm not sure what that means about him and that leaves me slightly off-kilter. But maybe that's what happens when someone grows old enough. When a person finally and truly figures out who they are in life and the world and within themselves. They become a fixed thing. Something durable and secure, a load-bearing wall, the bones of a home, or maybe something brittle.

He steers me to a nearby table and sits us both down. We exchange small talk and pleasantries. I want him to get to the point, but maybe there is no point except to pass time and wouldn't that be a fucking tragedy if that was it, the brutal truth of the world, just passing time.

"Your mother," he says finally, "she was uncomfortable here. Couldn't bring herself to even try to fit in. She didn't want to listen to us talk. She didn't want to be around us." His laugh flutters with incredulity. "I think she looked down on us. Your father, he married her because she was someone he found who was farthest away from everything he'd known. He was angry at us, you see. Young and headstrong. Your mother's beliefs, her background, her socioeconomic status, her hobbies and interests, even how she looked." Grandpa took a contemplative sip of the amber liquid in his glass. "He'd had girlfriends before, growing up. Your mother was simply a different type of beast."

"My mother isn't a beast," I bite out, taut with anger and the instinctive reflex of provoking an unknowable face.

“Of course not,” Grandpa says, an amiable cant to his lips, sheen to his eyes. “She’s your mother, a fine enough woman from what I can remember, but still a woman, and all woman are beasts.” He stretches out his legs, fine materials of his tailored suit shifting and shining with his body, and he leans forward, using the table for leverage. “They’re creatures, G, unpredictable and uncertain, each one a wild, uncharted terrain, a new world, beautiful and treacherous.” Every word came as a proclamation, an illuminati secret, a passing of the whip, here now, I bequeath thee lion tamer. Grandpa closes his droopy eyes and lets out a long, whispery breath. “There are certain types of women as well, some are more knowable than others. But your mother...” He downs the rest of the alcohol in his glass. “Perhaps you’re better off without her.”

I don’t know if the dizziness is from the alcohol or the conversation. Acid starts to climb up my esophagus as my stomach expands and expands.

“What are you talking about?” I grind out.

“Custody. What else?” His old fingers are gnarled, but still seem strong as they drum across the tablecloth. “Apparently, it’s going quite well. Your father was able to get your mother to agree to forgo visitation this summer on the promise of half-custody eventually—”

“Eventually?” Is that cracked, choked word mine?

“Oh it’s all abstract at this point.” Grandpa claps a hand to my shoulder, as if reassuring me of the delightful truth. “You live here. If she wants to take your father to court, she’ll find herself tied up in all sorts of litigation. By the time this is all worked out you’ll be of age.”

There are dark edges around the peripheries of my vision, hazing that usually happens before passing out from drugs or drink, but not enough for right now, I didn't drink enough for it now. Vague movement and I think my grandfather has left my presence, which I'm glad for because I'm overheating, my face has gone red-hot and I'm sure I'm glowing with the flush. Sweat drips down my back, my armpits, my legs, my face. My heart is swimming. Freestyling through the current, but finding resistance in the riptide, and I have to, I have to get away from here, I can't breathe, can't swallow, stumble out of the dining room, past the ballroom, the sun parlor, the stream of doors, to the foyer and the staircase and the exit, but there are still people there, guests and employees, everyone milling about in a torrent of colors and vibrancies of light, and I need to sit down and the acid burns in the back of my throat and I don't know where I'm going, but eventually I get to a place of doors with no one around and then I'm in a violet room and it reminds me of O but the air is still too thick to breathe and I make it to the en-suite and vomit into the toilet bowl.

I sink down into the hard tile. It doesn't bend no matter how dead my weight and pushes unyielding against my bones. After a while, flush the toilet. Wash out my mouth at the sink. There's amenities packaged on the countertop like a hotel so I brush my teeth and swish with mouthwash and splash cold water on my face, then swallow some advil I find in the medicine cabinet. My body aches and my blood feels too dense and jagged for my veins.

Remove my shoes and strip off my suit until down to my boxers. Shirt and pants are soaked with sweat so I hang them from the chair and fall onto the bed. The bedsheets are cool against my feverish skin. Shift to my back and doze.

The door creaks open. I can feel the breeze of movement and before I can bring myself to open my eyes and look, K says, “You’re like an unwrapped present.” The click of her heels before they fall by the wayside and her knees make the mattress depress where she gathers on the bed. The only light comes from the bathroom and it makes her visible in snatches, her movements a stop-motion zoetrope. She sweeps her hand down to my hips, the slinky smile caught on her lips promising sex and good times. Rock’n’roll.

I twist away and sit up. Take her hand and remove it and say, “I don’t feel well,” and I’m not lying. There are broken shards in my abdomen, metal ones and glass ones, things that scrape and sting, and blood on the back of my tongue. “Too much to drink,” and that’s technically not a lie either.

K pulls her hand away and re-positions herself. “What better way to make you better than to have some fun?” she says.

“Why has my mom’s summer visitation been taken away?”

K’s face still smiles, but her eyes have turned to flint. “It was part of a custody deal, little G. To help get your mother half-custody. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

I say, “Yes,” and that’s another lie as well and K can hear it.

“I thought little G loved his mother.” The mocking in her voice is razor sharp and it makes the blood-taste in my mouth stronger.

Fingers coil into the bedsheets, grip them tight. “I thought you were going to help me see my mother more—sooner. The way that they’re talking it’s like I’m never going to see her again.”

K shushes me, a tender hand rubbing my chest and down my sides, resting on the curve of my ass. “These things take time,” she says.

And maybe it's something in her voice or the surety in my grandfather's eyes as he drummed his fingers on the table or the way Dad had comforted me as he cleaned the ceramic out of my arms as I was senseless on the couch, his irreproachable whispers of, "We'll get through this together, son, the two of us. We'll make it. You'll see," that makes me know, sunbeam to the brain, epiphany on the spot.

"You're not helping me." K doesn't flinch, I realize that she never does, not unless she wants to and wants you to see. "You're helping him. You're with him. You've always been. You lied to me."

There is something laughing in K's eyes and her face crinkles in the corners, amused. "I never lied, G. That implies that I ever said that I would help you. You came to me, and whined at me, and I comforted you, but whatever promises of help or salvation or love you thought were between us, you concluded on your own." She tilts her head and runs a finger down the outline of my face. "Wild imaginings of a teenage boy."

Steel bands constrict my chest. It would be easier to breathe if I had been hit by a car, ribs crushed inward. My eyes itch with unshed tears and it takes everything in me not to let anything show. Can't let anything show.

Suddenly, she's on me, straddling my waist, face to face, chest to chest. She unzips her dress and pulls it over her head. She isn't wearing anything underneath. The lines of her body are still arresting, the curve of her soft breasts, the arc of her figure.

My teeth grit and I glare at her as cold as I can. "I'm not in the mood."

"Got a headache, darling?"

"Just realized what a miserable bitch you are. It's rendered you unattractive."

K grinds into my lap and the sensation makes my muscles tense as my dick begins to harden, heat pooling in my belly. “That so?” her grin is wicked. “You really are just like him. But much cuter.”

I shove her off me and scramble out of the bed, arousal swinging. It’s just sensation. “Honest truth, you fugly.” I sneer. “Don’t you know it’s what’s on the inside that counts,” the amount of condescension I can fit in those words is incredible.

Her laughter splinters, a baleful look taking over her visage, before it evaporates and her face shutters closed. “Get back on the bed,” she says. There’s something remote in her expression, in the opaqueness of her eyes, to the way she stands, naked and still.

“That’s not gonna happen.” I step forward toward the chair, reach for my sweaty clothes, and she closes the distance between us, hand going down to my dick as she starts to stroke.

“Shh,” she says, “You don’t want anyone to hear. After all, if we get caught, if this gets out, who do you think your dad will believe? Or worse, blame?” She bites my lower lip and sucks on it before letting go. “Not me. He loves me.” She’s still working me to full hardness and I suppress a whimper of pleasure, of terror and disgust, even with everything she’s saying my body still buzzes with sexual energy, with her expert touch. “So sweetie, shh, we’re going to have fun together, just like we always do.” She presses a finger to my lips.

She lays me down. Her long hair brushes my stomach as she removes my boxers. She takes me into her mouth to keep me going, then rolls on a condom, and sinks down on top of me, encasing me in her, undulating as she brings herself to orgasm. I come too.

“Now that was very refreshing.” She slips on her dress, puts on her shoes, and runs her fingers through her hair. “Well, are you coming?”

“Sorry,” I say, instinctive. “I need a few minutes, my clothes...”

She shrugs, “Alright. I’ll see you out there soon, darling.”

The room smells like sex and lavender. Probably thought they were clever, making the purple room smell like that. Perfume or potpourri or those scented oils you can click into an outlet. Everything seems after the fact. This isn’t the purple like galaxies. I didn’t say no, so it wasn’t like. My clothes are still a touch damp, but I pull everything back on, reassemble myself. Then the socks, the shoes, do up the laces. Check myself out in the bathroom mirror, make sure I’m presentable, don’t want to make the grandparents frown, make Dad look at me twice.

When I make it out, they’ve moved from the dining room to the ballroom where the reception is being held. As I walk through the space, I’m walking through Carefree—the sharp-suited servers scattered through the ballroom, with professional smiles and determined movements and rage behind their eyes; the sharper looking guests with their fluttery costumes and their beautiful human face veils and money in their bones and people between their teeth; and the kids made of clay, half-molded and half-fired, no varnish yet; and me with my blood in my mouth; and K with a laugh on her face; and Dad with a gavel in his hand.

A photographer waves me over, he says, “Let’s get a family photo.”

Dad slings an arm around me, slides an arm around K’s waist. Grandma puts a hand on my shoulder. Grandpa takes the other one. Flash of light.



The photographer looks down at the digital image and smiles. “Fantastic. Nothing like a wholesome family photo for a mayoral campaign, eh Sheriff?”

Grandma’s fingers tighten on my shoulder. It’s the only thing I feel for a long time afterward.

## CHAPTER 99

ravish, v.

Pronunciation: U.S., /'ræviʃ/

### 1. *transitive*.

- a. To drag off or carry away (a woman) by force or with violence (occasionally also implying subsequent     ). Also *figurative*, with death as subject.
- b. To     , violate (a woman).
- c. In extended use: to spoil, corrupt (a thing).

### 2. *transitive*.

- a. To plunder, rob, steal from (a place, building, race or class of people, etc.); to devastate, lay waste to (a country). Also *figurative*.
- b. To rob, deprive (a person or place, etc.) *of* something.

### 3. *transitive*.

- a. To carry *away*, snatch, seize (a person), esp. by force; to drag (a person) away *from* a place or other person; to drag *to* or *into* a place. Also *figurative*.
- b. To carry, take, pull, or drag away or along (a thing); to remove by force. Also with *down*.
- c. To draw (a person, the mind, etc.) forcibly *into* or *to* some condition, action, etc.

Used in a sentence: Nothing happened.

## CHAPTER 100

O: I love you.

me: Liar.

## CHAPTER 101

O: Grayson.

## CHAPTER 102

Nothing has changed.

This room is a holy place of Ivy. I can feel it in the discordant lines, the cacophony of unmade clothes, open drawers, scattered make-up containers. There are photographs taped to the frame of her mirror. Her mood boards and collages are still stacked at the end of the bed. Her papers and textbooks and knick-knacks are neatly stacked and placed on her desk from where I had shoved them off. Mom must have done that before she left. I look for the figurine that she had stopped me from breaking and it isn't there. She must have taken that too. Good instinct, Mom, you know me well, because if it had been here now I would have broken it into atoms.

On the bed is the box that Ivy made for me. I left it here when D had shoved it back into my possession. I thought maybe Dad would see it. Would open it. And he would've if he'd ever gone near Ivy's door, but I guess the best upkeep for a shrine is not to touch a thing, not even with your eyes. Perception changing reality.

Her clothes go first. I fill up the first two garbage bags, the heavy-duty ones that are big enough to hide multiple bodies. Then the shoes. I set all of those bags aside, I don't know how well all that glitter and plastic will react so the clothes and shoes will be donated somewhere. Then go her papers, half-done homework assignments, doodle-ridden notes, her mood boards and collages, her jewelry and make-up, her magazines, her photographs, her shoeboxes with keepsakes from past relationships and memorable trips, her vibrator, gross, her medals and trophies, her athletic gear, her everything. In her closet, there is

detritus dating back to when she was a kid, all of it is priceless, all of it goes into the garbage bags.

Drag it all out to my car and load up my trunk and backseat. Leave her room stripped. CLOSING DOWN SALE. EVERYTHING MUST GO.

I drive down to Seastone beach, the spot right under Gemini Point and build myself a fire pit. Dump everything in the pit and then arrange it like a pyre. The lighter fluid is something I found in the garage and I hope that I don't set myself on fire, but it doesn't stop me from upending the whole container on Ivy's stuff.

When everything is finished, I take a step back. It's the beginning of summer, but the sand has lost the heat from the day and the wind that comes rolling down from the ocean has a chill to it. The billowing of waves is a heartbeat, the only sound in my head.

Click the long wand lighter and a small flame emerges in the darkness. I crouch down and angle my body away as put the tip of the lighter to the edge of the fire pit and then the flame catches and spreads and everything is alight and warm.

The fire eats away at Ivy's life. Blackens and burns it. Turns it all to ash and graveyard dust. But Ivy was already gone. Her body is turning to roots. And I can't live in this moment any longer. I'm breaking this time loop. I'm time-travelling to the future. I don't know what's going to be there, but I know it's not going to be the same.

## CHAPTER 103

Inside the box are bits of paper with torn words and beneath the shredded paper is junk and amidst the junk are old plastic toys and foreign coins and a book, and between the covers of the book is a square cut-out and inside the square cut-out is a flash drive and a photograph, and on the flash drive is a demand for a password and on the photograph is me and you.

The password is dovetail and there are video files.

*Warning!* says Ivy, when I click on the first jpeg. She looks younger in the frame, early teens, not a video made right before her death. There's a wry twist to her mouth and something undefinable in her eyes. She says: *Graphic content ahead. Not suitable for kids.*



## CHAPTER 104

I leave the door to Ivy's room wide open in invitation. The barrenness has made the galaxy ceilings more vibrant and in the absence of her cluttering stuff, it feels as if the walls glimmer and dance with the last drops of Ivy's presence.

I wait on my bed, everything in place. I've taken a page from Ivy's book.

I never guessed once.

Dad gets home and an annoyed noise floats up the stairs. I tracked sand in the house after I came back from the beach. Usually, I would've been more careful or hosed down before coming in, but now it's a lure, baited for one type of animal. Dad yells my name, tells me to clean up my mess.

"I can't hear you," I shout back.

"G!"

He moves around downstairs for a while. I listen to the sounds. The open and close of the refrigerator. The rush of water from the sink. Clinking and clattering of glass and ceramic. The clunk of his boots dropping to the floor, then socked footsteps. The tv goes on for a while, I can hear the canned laughter of a sitcom, then it shuts off. Finally, up the stairs the body goes and my heart begins to beat beat beat.

My door is closed. Ivy's is open.

The footsteps diverge from my path.

Double-check that everything is a go. Yes? Yes? Yes. Showtime.

There is something to be said for coming to a conclusion and making a decision. There is still doubt, still anxiety and stress, but forward is the only path tenable. Anything backwards takes a backseat. So I am calm, so very calm, freakishly calm, even as my insides do the hula.

He kicks open my door and it splinters by the knob.

“It wasn’t locked,” I say, mild. My heart vibrates, hummingbird wings in my throat, hollow bones. I feel light. The air that flows in from the vent in my ceiling feels like fingers, as if it could lift me up and would float away.

“What did you do?” I see him again and I know him once more. His face has solidified in the apogee. “Where are Ivy’s things? Where are they?” His words scatter. His legs eat up the space between us. I don’t flinch backwards. His face takes up my entire view.

“I think you can figure it out.”

His nostrils flare. “You smell like smoke.” The realization that unfurls across his face is a star chart, little points put together to navigate the way.

“A-plus, Father Dearest. Which means?”

The backhand splits my lip. I suck the blood from between my teeth, swallow the metallic taste, let it drip down my chin when it doesn’t stop bleeding. I laugh helplessly. “Sorry, sorry, sorry. My bad. My fault. Yes, smoke. I burned Ivy’s stuff, all of it. I burned all of it. There’s nothing left.” Dad’s body seizes, shoulders curling in, a rictus of pain, and something depresses into the center of my being, a thumb pushing into fruit to the pit, and I say, “I really am sorry.”

“How could you?” He rasps out, the question wrecked with devastation. Tears glisten at the corners of his eyes like a fucking saint.

A thousand cutting remarks fill my head, and I remind myself not to get distracted.

“You believe in justice. Yeah? The law. Right and wrong. Good and bad. Chalk and cheese. Catch the criminal, put ‘em, in jail, and they’re bad, they deserve it. That’s how the justice system works.”

Dad’s brows furrow together and he shifts his weight back onto his heels. “What does this have to do with Ivy? With her things—” I can almost see the moment his sheriff brain takes over, the slightest shift from rage to righteousness, the line so often blurred, so often nonexistent. He asks: “Is there something wrong, G? Are you in trouble?”

He is so sincere. Soundless laughter pours out of me without permission. I am powerless to stop the wrenching of my body with each hysterical gasp. It’s painful to regain control and still the movement, a crackling hurt of frayed connective tissue. “I can see it,” the voice is divorced from me. I hear it outside myself, but I can feel the vibration of the sounds in my throat. “I tried not to, but, I think, you love me. You really do.” He twitches forward to speak, an intake of breath, but I continue before he can. “I don’t understand how you do it. Keep yourself so,” I don’t know the word, “separated. Compartmentalized? If someone was hurting me you’d help me, wouldn’t you?”

Dad exudes so much concern. He grabs hold of me. “Of course, I would. Is someone hurting you, son? Is that what this is? Something to do with Ivy? Someone threatening you?”

Forget Ivy, I want to say. Forget her. This is about me. This is about you.

I can’t take my own advice. Ivy won’t let me.

“Someone powerful. Someone with authority,” I say. “I don’t know if I’d win in court. I don’t trust the legal system, it doesn’t always work.”

My phone is next to me on the bed and I pick it up.

“I know it’s not always perfect, G, but if we work within it, we *can* get things done. I believe that.” He stands in front of my sheriff’s uniform half-stripped away, no belt or boots, shirt buttons undone, but still instantly recognizable to anyone in Carefree, that billboard face.

My head bobbles. “I believe that too.” My smile is thin. “But it’s long and painful and not always a guarantee, not even when you think they’ve gotta believe, gotta see justice done.”

Dad’s hands spasm around my arms and he says, “G, what’s going on? Let me help you.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course.”

“Okay.” I nod again and swallow. Tilt my chin up. My hands are shaking. Goosebumps break out across my body. My mouth tastes like blood and smoke, but when I breathe in through my nose I smell the ocean, salt winds, seaweed. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You are going to stop fighting with Mom. You are going to give her full custody and tell your lawyers to work out a fair alimony and child support deal and then you are going to leave us alone. Permanently.”

The change in atmosphere is a lightning strike. Near instantaneous, but slow enough that I can see it, feel it raise the hairs on the back of my neck. “What.” His hands become

vices around my arms, fingerprints staining into my skin. His expression settles into hard-earned, familiar lines, deep brush strokes that make up the dimensions of his face.

I don't try to get away from his grip. I relish the ache, bright points of pain, it feeds me with recklessness, with confidence. "I'm going to go live with Mom in New York or wherever she ends up and you're going to let me."

"Listen, you little shit—"

*Listen you little shit.* Ivy laughs in my head. Mocking, twirling, dancing. She's behind a door with a smartphone to her face, red recording button activated; she's down the hall messing with photo frames and glass figurines, positioning her camera; she's watching always, always watching, always watching and doesn't do a damn thing. She laughs and laughs and laughs.

"—I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but you have no idea what you're—"

"Because if you don't," I speak over him. Despite the rawness in my throat, a wave of surety sweeps through my blood, and my calm never breaks. I raise up my phone as best I can with his grip on me, prepped and ready-to-go. "I have a series of videos that are about to go viral, narrated by a very special guest star. You know what they say," the glow of the phone reflects off the darks of his eyes, "the internet is forever. And kings and queens rise and die in the court of public opinion."

I press play.

*So what—is this video number twenty? Thirty? I'm kind of bored with this whole documenting gig, it's getting kinda tired. Blah, blah, blah, SSDD. Kidding, fam! You know I wouldn't let my faithful viewers down, so here's video number eighteen, the date is*

*October 4 20-- and the time is 8:36 pm.* The sight of Ivy onscreen is so arresting all potential kinetic energy dissipates from Dad's body. It isn't like viewing the montage of memories Dad had been putting together in memorial for Ivy. When I had watched the videos through for the first time, I'd been mesmerized by her image, the tilt of her head, the cadence of her voice, she was alive, she was real, living out a part of her life in front of me, at that very moment, because this was a side of Ivy, a fact of Ivy, I had never known. *So G was supposed to come home straight after school cause he was grounded for failing a math test, one I know he failed on purpose, like—failure is cool to the male pre-teens? I-d-k. But he went to the skate park with his friends anyway cause he's a dumbass like that. Dad was so mad that he gps-ed G's cell phone and went out and got him and took him home in his cruiser—G's been texting me from the backseat. They'll be home in approximately three—two—oooooone...* The video footage goes shaky as Ivy positions her spy cam with a view of the front door and into the living room. Two figures come barreling in from the front door, the shorter, scrawny one first, mouth running with garbled complaints, then the other in the Sheriff's uniform. Shorter, stupider one turns around to keep arguing and the Sheriff starts undoing his belt. *No!* I vaguely remember a time when I used to fight that hard, burn with the edge of resentment at the injustice of it all, even if I deserved the punishment and I knew I did, it wasn't until the shorter figure was on the ground, knees and elbows, back bloodied, hands over his head that I can see what other people might see watching the footage. After it finishes, the video cuts and Ivy comes back on screen. *Me and Mom cleaned him up together. What a fun family bonding experience!*

By the time she died Ivy had dozens of recordings, shot from different angles in different rooms, camera painstakingly hidden and videos shot one at a time. She'd been stockpiling blackmail material on Dad for ages.

*This is for you, G.* Her smile was a promise. Her cheesy wink was a gift. She was thirteen. After I watched that first video, I cried for hours. I knew everything about Ivy and nothing at all. I guess that's the only way anyone can ever know each other, in small moments and their own perceptions. Observer's Paradox.

The video ends. Dad's face is ashen. His lips are trembling and there's drops of sweat percolating on his temples. I can see the arguments being fought in his head pass through the transparent focal points of his eyes. Eyes are not the windows to the soul and some people are inscrutable, but not him, not to me.

"She fooled me too," I say. "I had no idea she did this. Not until she left me this box, I think it was part of her suicide note." My musings have no impact on him. "I know she wanted me to be okay though. I know that." That's mine now and no one can take it away. A kernel of heat that's nestled underneath the meeting points of my collarbones.

Without warning, Dad moves. He grasps me by throat, hand clamping around my neck, and I come to my feet. "You think—you think you can just," a sob breaks up his words, "Ivy, goddamnit—you're not going anywhere, you, you belong with me. You—you drove your mother crazy and Ivy—" another hitching whine, his free arm is coiled into his body and shaking, "and now they're both gone and that's on you. It's you. I am trying to make you better. I—I am trying to—to teach you—"

My hands scramble around Dad's fingers prying them off where I can, but they always manage to press back down. It's hard to breathe, but not impossible.

“You—you think I’ll let you publish those videos? You’ll ruin everything. You should have thought about that before you showed this to me.”

Right. The magical delete button. Wish I had one of those. Wish I had thought of that. Oh, wait.

“S-smile,” I choke out. “You’re on c-candid cam-er-a.”

I tilt my head. Dad’s grip disappears. A lens peaks out from beneath a heap of dirty clothes positioned on my desk.

Dad’s face contorts. “Delete—”

Before he can finish, I say, “It’s livestream. I’d take a step or two back, give us some space here. Smile and wave. Don’t worry, we can pretend that this was skit or something. People might not believe it, but at least you won’t get arrested for assault. Go on, I’m feeling generous. After all, I’m not going to be living in this shithole any longer.”

Dad’s chin dips down in acknowledgement, the shallowest, most excruciating nod, as if there’s a fishing hook pulling out his intestines.

His calloused palm, his slender musician fingers rest on my shoulder, a tender acknowledgement as we turn toward the camera. “You’re not as smart as you think you are,” he says. “We’ll see about this.”

*But for now...*

But for now, I am going to be free.

We smile and we wave.



## CHAPTER 105

Justify isn't the word, if words are what I'm looking for. I know his reasons. He wanted to teach me, make me better. I was a shit kid. I didn't care about school or my family or the future. I lied and got into fights and broke shit on purpose. Self-absorbed is the technical term. That's a lie. I don't know the technical term. Dad loves me, but his love didn't translate into playing catch in the backyards or fishing trips on long weekends. Well, sometimes they did. But not nearly often enough. See? Self-absorbed. There are a lot of people a lot worse off and I'm complaining about a couple of bruises.

Haven't called my mom yet. Haven't talked to her in a while. She hasn't called me either. In that nebulous moment between awareness and sleep, where hidden thoughts creep out at you from their fathomless depths, the only prison a thought has, I wonder if Mom even wants me. I'm pretty sure she loves me. I'm not so sure she likes me. If I call Mom and tell her that she can have full custody, that I can come live with her tomorrow, will there be hesitation and disappointment or happiness?

Inconvenient. That's a word. I'm inconvenient. What if she needs more time? I don't blame her. Right now. At this moment. I don't blame her for anything.

My phone is in my hand. Time says 3:45 pm. I've been sitting in my towel, damp from a shower, staring at my phone for over a half hour.

I put my phone to the side and get dressed.

*They did various things. Uh. Maybe you should ask your parents about this.*

The mural I painted of Ivy has been wiped clean along with the long list of motives and murder suspects. The white paint cover up is still pristine and begging for something to dirty it up. The crown of fools goes up in gold.

*Seventeen seemed more than boyhood to me.* Now it seems more and less. I'm younger than Alejo was when he was murdered. Not by much, not by enough to mean anything, today versus tomorrow, but lately I can't stop thinking about him and I don't know why.

There's a party at the Atterton Mansion. The first one since Ivy died. B has thrown other parties since, but at the beach or a rented-out club or his family's yacht, not at his home. Too much déjà vu, I guess, a glitch in the Matrix. Mostly everyone's out in the back, splashing in the pool, making out in the hot tub, milling on the patio, tiki torches lighting the way with mist and steam, fleshy bodies in bikinis and shorts, kegs and hoses and cups and a hookah, a table of snacks, and a fully stocked wet bar under the portico roof. Everyone who's still in Carefree for the summer is here, plus others home from college, here for summer fun, woohoo.

Play a game of beer pong, take a couple of shots, do a couple of body shots, steal a handful of chips and crunch through them while dropping down into the last spot on the couch and join in on the conversation, A and T and a couple of randoms in for beach season all stoned and talking serious about the best movies to watch while high, it's all very layered.

*What those fuckers did to that boy. Your dad wouldn't settle for anything less than nailing them to the wall and letting them bleed.* Maybe it's because Dad cared so damn much. Loved dead, violated Alejo in a way that was more than paternal. It was divine. He bled and sweat and prostrated himself to get justice, a righteous mission, not from a god, but from faith, from a knowingness of what's right and true. Or maybe that's what God is—less an omnipotent being and more a feeling.

Why one and not the other? I can't find the word. Can I even compare? No. No. It's not fucking comparable, not nearly, not similar in the least. Not me, not Ivy, not nothing. I'm fine. I am fine. She didn't take anything that I didn't give. I don't know why I'm even

B slings an arm around my shoulders, slides into my body, the planes of our faces pressed together, laughter crawling up and down our bodies. I don't remember what set us off, but we laugh as if we're dying. A joint gets passed around the circle of patio furniture and wisps of smoke hang in the air. The music gets louder, the DJ isn't half-bad, there's a tap on my shoulder, and D's lips are by my ear and she says, "Found you."

*Look, G, what do you know about sex?*

"Dovetail," crows B. "Sit down and have a drink with us. If you try really hard, even you might have some fun."

"I'm flattered," D says over the music. She's wearing a tank top and shorts, not really party fare, but they still flaunt the long lines of her legs. "That was almost an insult-free invite."

"What can I say?" B smirks. "I'm a host here to serve."

"G, can I talk to you?" D's breath ghosts over the shell of my ear.

I flick my hand widely. "Have at it."

“Maybe somewhere more private,” she says.

Most of the irritation is lost in the high. “Sure, sure,” I say and repeat the word in a continuous incantation as we walk inside. She follows me farther into the house, until the music is a faint thump, and I lead us into an empty guest room. I fall onto the bed for a seat. She dithers in the doorway. “So talk.”

“It’s just,” it’s as if now that she has my attention, she doesn’t know how to proceed, so I let her yammer nothing words for a while before I finally hear, “I have your medical records,” and that’s not nonsense.

“My medical records?” My upper lip turns with confusion.

“From when I took you to the clinic. When you had that mild concussion? The doctor checked you over to make sure it wasn’t worse. I filled out the paperwork because you were, ha, wrecked. I might have fudged a few things to get access.”

“I don’t remember this.”

D snorts. “I’m surprised you have any kind of brain function at all, how hard you were hit.” She leans forward, hand extending, and I flinch back, and she stops. My pits and back are cold with sweat and shame. “The doctor said your memory might be fuzzy.”

I cross my arms. “I don’t get why you’re telling me this now. I’m fine, right?”

“Oh! Yes. Definitely. I mean, don’t get another concussion if you can, but you seem to have healed up fine. No. What I wanted to say is that they also documented your injuries and I have those documents—records. For you. I have them for you.” I stare at her blankly. “In case you might ever want to, you know.” I continue to stare. “You know.” I don’t. I can see her getting frustrated, her body unable to stay still, hips and elbows and fingers, a flush creeping up her neck. “If you wanted to maybe start making a case against your father

for the police or CPS. Along with Ivy's videos, from the box? I think, you can get him put away for a while."

"That's not going to happen."

D throws her arms out. "You don't know that! There's so much evidence—"

"I'm not going to press charges."

"That's not—"

"Fair? Don't I get to decide that?"

"Right. It's not right. He's clearly a sadistic bastard. Messed up and not afraid hurting people who he should be protecting. What if he does something like this to someone else? What if he misuses the power he has? He's *the Sheriff*. There's gossip that he's going to run for Mayor. Someone like that shouldn't be allowed to get away abusing his family."

She's sloppy with anger, brimming with enough discontent that she's tapping her toe to the ground, double speed, to let out the energy. Something in me settles. "That's the first time anyone's ever said it out loud." I rub at the back of my neck. "I think from anyone else it would hurt."

"I just want to help you," D says, she shows her open palms, incapable of anything more. "I'm sorry I never did anything. I was scared. I didn't know what to do and I just want you to be okay."

Okay. Used in a sentence...

"I talked to my dad," I don't look away from her intent gaze, her shrewd focus on my face, my body language. "While we were being livestreamed, no audio, but." I shrug. Her eyes widen a touch, recognition blooming. She saw the stream. Or heard about it. "It's set. It's real. I'm going to go live with my mom."

Her lips part, but she bites them down. She paces a circuit around her half of the room and then says, “And that’s it?”

“And that’s it.” My voice goes flat.

“But—”

“It’s my decision.” I shake my head. “He’s got too many friends here—lawyers, officers, doctors, fucking CPS officials. I don’t care that we may have him cold. I don’t want to work in the probabilities. I’m done fighting.” Before she can protest again, I reach out and take her hand and say, “Thanks. You’re the only one. The only one who cares.”

Our hands entwine, fingers knitting together in a patchwork of life lines and fingerprints. “That’s not true,” she says, hushed. “Your mom, your—your friends, there are so many people who care, including me.”

“Dove, take the gratitude,” I say. “I’ve been really shitty. The things I’ve said and done... And you still helped me. You deserve more.”

The flush reaches her cheeks, her ears. “Ah.”

“Can I kiss you?” I ask and before she can answer, I close the gap between us.

The sound of our breaths and sliding lips fills the hollowness of the room, the silence that had invaded without the noise from the party. The kiss intensifies. I take off my shirt, she follows with hers. We’re laying on the bed together. Her hands move down my back, a sybaritic trail of motion and touch, that doubles with sensation, heat and dread, an echo of long, tapered fingernails down my skin, and when she reaches the waist of pants, the v of my hips, I recoil and straddle her legs instead, pull down her shorts and say, “You first.”

“You’re soft,” she says, and the shame blazes across my body so hot that it burns out any pleasure and nausea rises up my throat.

“I’m fine.” I smirk and lower my head, press my lips to her underwear and blow out a breath and she shivers. I reach to remove those too but her hand catches mine and then she’s sitting up frowning at me, nipples peaked, a gorgeous spread, everything I’ve ever wanted since I was twelve and all I want to do is get on with it.

“What’s wrong?” she says.

“Nothing. Christ. Nothing’s wrong. C’mon. Let me make you feel good.”

“You’re not enjoying this.”

“I am.”

“You’re not.”

“Don’t tell me what I’m fucking feeling. You don’t know.”

She reaches for her shirt. “This was a bad idea. There’s too much history. We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“You kidding me?” My hand snakes down, pushing her underwear to the side, my thumb to her clit, my fingers, sinking into the soft folds of her vagina, luxuriating in her arousal. “You’re wet. You want this just like I do. The body doesn’t lie.”

Before I can say anything else, D jerks away and slaps me. Flat palm, hard.

“Get the fuck away from me,” she says. Her eyes are wide and manic. Her movements are jarred as she pulls down her shirt, pulls on her shorts. She looks small for the first time.

Something stirs hot in my belly then, the image of her making me hard, and I realize that there is something broken in me. So I take one last long look, and then I leave.

*Who knows what kind of life he would have had if he'd lived.*



## CHAPTER 106

i photoshop D's face to a naked body. the most time-consuming part is trawling the internet to find the perfect naked female body, one close enough to D's own that the kids at school could look at it, then her, and then think, yeah, that's probably real. making a believable photo from D's face is easy. i cut a smirking grin from a recent photo of the two of us, and paste it to a flyer advertising for sex: looking for fun; dtf; no strings attached; i'm easy, but no need to apply if small dick; into feet and watersports. the finished product gets sent to the student email listserv monday night. by tuesday morning there are hard copy versions plastered over school, hallway walls and locker rooms, some inevitable asshole taking hold of the tail-ends of my home-made disaster and making it even worse. i don't see the moment she first sees the flyers and there's a strange poignant regret to that which nests in my chest. it's fifteen minutes into first period when i take a bathroom break and catch her as she tears down the flyers, from locker to locker, hallway to hallway, methodically ripping them apart, her face blotchy with crying. When she sees me, she throws herself at my body, sobbing, arms squeezing me tight. *did you see this? they put my phone number, my e-mail address... and it's gotta be someone we know, that's not from the yearbook, why would anyone even, this is such bullshit, i've never done anything to anybody...* eventually she realizes that i'm not hugging her back, G? for a moment her voice is tremulous, can see it wavering in the air. but then she steps back and her face closes. G? she repeats, disbelieving, and i say, *sorry, dovie, i'm not in the mood, besides who knows where you've*

*been.* and she says, *you don't believe this, this,* she waves the shreds of the flyers she's destroyed in my face, *this bullshit, do you? it's made up, it's nonsense.* tilt my face up into a condescending smirk which then sinks into a leer. *are you sure? looks pretty real to me.* *no worries, dovetail, i won't judge if you want to whore around. that's just you, right?* her face goes gray, eyes wide. *i didn't do this,* she says, *this isn't me.* i reach down and take one of the fallen flyers and tape it back onto the wall and say, *i know.* my face feels like liquid metal that has hardened in its mold. D stumbles back, two steps, four, then she turns on her heel and runs. i pivot and slam a fist into a locker, my skin splits, i wipe my nose, and my sleeves get covered in blood and mucus and i focus on the sting. two days later, after school gets out, walking to the parking, i see three senior fuckwads crowding D, whistling and sneaking fingers at her hips, her breasts, the edge of her skirt. hear, *c'mon baby* and *i've got a big one for you* and *make you choke on it* and *all of us together or one at a time* and *don't be like.* the voices shade with irritation with each rebuffed word, burning with aggression and resentment. hear, *leave me the fuck alone!* a thud, and an indignant, *you pushed me! bitch pushed me. so you do want to get physical, i see how it is.* look over, and there's a fuckwad getting up from the ground, and three feet of space between D and the others and then her eyes are on mine and we are locked together. something prickles in my limbs, an ache to do something, her eyes are pleading, but i break our gaze and walk away. it's not my problem.

so see? it wasn't that. there was no that. this was in character. this is me. it's always been me. nothing's changed. nothing's changed. nothing's changed. nothing's changed. nothing's changed. nothing changed. nothing.

## CHAPTER 107

### The Worst Things I've Ever Done:

- talking about my feelings
- sexual assault
- physical assault
- bullying
  - rumor spreading
  - cyber-bullying
  - destruction of property
- malicious mischief
- defacement and vandalism
- petty theft
- recreational drugs
- underage drinking
- drinking and driving
- joyriding
- cheating/plagiarism
- skipping school
- breaking curfew

- lying
- existing

## CHAPTER 108

I compose text messages consisting of some version of *I'm sorry* before deleting them. I don't even know if I am. I am. I'm not. I made D feel bad, which was never my intention, not now at least, not for a while. But the rush I felt standing there, the way she cowered, I can still taste the pain and the pleasure on my tongue, endorphins soaking into my brain. I'm sick. I don't understand what's happening to me. Sometimes I start shaking for no reason and my heart races, but it's over in a few minutes and then I'm fine.

I'm packing up my stuff today. Open boxes and half-filled luggage. I haven't called my mom yet, but that isn't going to stop me from leaving.

Dad's stayed out of my way. I think there were enough people watching the livestream that he's been gone smoothing stuff over, doing the PR Sheriff Handsome parade, or maybe he's at work getting Justice for The People.

I don't hear her come in. "That was a mean trick you pulled, little G." K leans against the doorframe at the boundaries of my room. She's wearing tight jeans and a silk camisole. "I didn't know you had it in you. I guess you really are your father's son."

The initial shock at her appearance, the nervous energy, the dreadful expectation, it's all drowned out underneath a surge of tiredness that overcomes my body. The muscles in my back give out and my shoulders curl inward. "How did you get in?" I ask.

She steps into my room. “Your father gave me a key. It looks like you’ll finally be getting what you so desperately want.” She forms her words with a sultry edge, still trying to—I don’t know. “Congratulations, kiddo.”

I’m on my knees, shoving clothes into a duffel bag. The more I do, the less it looks done. That’s the way of it I’ve found—the transition always fooling the eyes. The only way to get through is to finish.

“Is that why you’re here?” I ask. “To congratulate me? Maybe have a quickie before I’m on the road.”

She tilts her head. There’s a bemused half-smile on her face, a gentle pull of her lips in one corner. “I’m here to say goodbye. I think our time has come to an end.”

I want to be angry. I want to be wrathful. Come up swinging, screaming invectives and accusations, demanding answers in righteous fury, promising that I would never ever allow her to manipulate and lie and use someone like she did to me, that it was wrong. Wasn’t it wrong? Fucking bitch.

All I am is tired.

“Goodbye,” I say.

“Goodbye.”

## CHAPTER 109

What is greater than God,  
more evil than the devil,  
the poor have it,  
the rich need it,  
and if you eat it, you'll die?

Nothing.

What has a heart that doesn't beat?

K. Dad. Me. O. Kidding.

It's an artichoke. Ha ha.

What has to be broken before it can be used?

(Hint: It's not an egg.)

## CHAPTER 110

Our legs hang off the side of Gemini point. B is leaning backwards onto his elbows. I'm leaning forwards, chest against the low guard rail, arms dangling off the horizontal top. He has a six-pack of Modelo, and between my fingers my flask of JD with a dash of fireball feels like it's floating in my hands.

"So you're really leaving," he says.

"Yep."

"I'm gonna miss you, man."

"Yeah, me too."

He tips back his beer, lapping at the remnants before crushing the can in his hand. "Fuck," he says. "This year. It sucked." He pops the tab of a fresh can.

Unscrew the top of my flask and knock back the rest of the JD and fireball, choking at the sweetness, turning and spitting when I'm done trying to get the taste out of my mouth.

B's eyes are sly with knowing. "Masochist," he says.

I shoot him a narrow look. "Pain doesn't exactly do it for me."

"Sure it does," he says, and then shrugs. "You can't stand sweet stuff. It," he gestures at his chest, his throat, "it makes you physically sick, but you still mix fireball into your drinks. Cause you're a masochist. Can't help punishing yourself. You like it."

Before I realize it, one of my hands is fisted in his shirt. "You shut the fuck up. That's not true."



B rolls his head my way, an unconcerned motion. “It’s not a big deal, G. We’ve all got our kinks and fetishes.” He leers as he looks me up and down. “You like to be punished.” He hums in the back of his throat. “Oh! I know. We should get you a dominatrix as a going away present. Discipline has never been hotter. I know just the one.”

My hand, the one with a fistful of his shirt, jerks against his chest, an indecision of movement, between punching and holding and letting go.

“No.” The word shreds itself out of my throat. “It’s not—I’m not—that’s not it, that’s not who—” I am.

B gives me a steady look. He’s leaning back onto his hands now. They’re flat on the ground, the base of columns to the structure of his body, stationary. He asks, “Are you okay?”

There’s a lump in my throat so dense it has its own gravity. I try to say words, but all I can make are some cut-off noises. What is it about saying something out loud that makes it real?

“I think I did something bad,” I say. “I was with D. She was really into it, you know? And she thought I wasn’t, which was fucking—anyway, she said we shouldn’t, but she was so self-righteous, you know? Like it was for my benefit or something, history, bullshit, she was so wet, so hot for it, and I proved it to her, and then she slapped me. And she was scared, I think, or maybe upset, I’d done something to her that she didn’t—and that made her less and it made me more and it reminded me of this one time when I had sex with my dad’s girlfriend and it was the other way around then and I think it was the same, you know? We’re the same. In the way that I’m the same as my dad. We’re all just

imprints, pressing down and marking the next person in line that we have contact with.”

B’s face has crumpled into a frown. “You know what I mean?”

“That’s some heavy shit, bro,” says B. “Things are not okay.”

“But you know what I mean,” I press.

“Yeah,” says B. His face is soft and his hands are pressed to the ground. “I know what you mean. Badness all around.” There’s silence for a minute, before he says, “Shit. I wish I had some weed on me. I don’t know what to fuckin’ say, man, except you don’t have to be anything you don’t want to be. Like, if I ever have kids, I’m not gonna be anything like my parents. I’d shoot myself first.” B makes a face and then grabs a Modelo. “Nothing’s fuckin’ set in stone. Want a beer?”

“Sure.” Pop the tab and drink. The fizz slides down my throat and soothes the edges where the words made it raw and it’s a little easier to breathe.

## CHAPTER 111

Says Every Supervillain Ever:

It's not about good or evil. It's about POWER!

Also Every Supervillain Ever:

We're not so different you and I.

...I hope to god they're fucking wrong.

## CHAPTER 112

My room is done. Packing is finished. Even my posters have been rolled into a tube and are ready for a move. I sit on my bed. I haven't called my mom yet. I don't know if I can. I don't know if I should. I can pack up my car and roadtrip for a while. See the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls or watch a geyser or two erupt in Yellowstone National Park and let the metaphor do its work on my soul.

I hear her before anything else. A muffled sound, a trace echo of words said from far away, soundwaves drifting on the air, up the staircase. My name.

I'm on my feet and down the stairs and my mom is here. I hug her tight and her arms wrap around me. She's saying things like *I love you* and *I missed you so much* and *you got so big* even though she's only been gone for six months.

"What are you doing here," I ask when the hug ends. It sounds accusing. It might be.

"I got a couple of calls," she says. "From your friends. And then another one from my lawyer yesterday congratulating me on winning custody of my son." Mom smooths my hair back. "And I thought well it's time to go collect him then."

"I didn't want to bother you."

Mom hmphs. "Wasn't a problem for you before." She waves me off before I can reply. "We'll talk about it later. Let's pack up your car. The drive back to New York is gonna take a few days. I think we have a lot to talk about. And now we have all the time in the world." She wraps me in another hug and says, "Don't drive us off a cliff."

“Well there goes plan a,” I say, but I’m laughing and then I’m crying.

## CHAPTER 113

The apartment is small, but not cramped, there is sand on the floor, swept in by the open window and the ocean breeze, and there are two rooms. The walls are decorated with photographs and the furniture is decked out in cool tones, the floors are fake wood.

“Easy to sweep,” explains Mom. She leads me to my new room. There’s a small twin pressed up against the wall, a rickety night table with a lamp, and a heavy antique desk that takes up half the room. “The desk was my father’s, if you don’t want it, we can move it to the living room, I think.”

“It’s fine.”

“I know it’s not a lot of space, but the beach is our backyard and the view and the fresh ocean air make it worth it.”

“Can you even afford the view? I know Dad isn’t—”

Her hands are on my shoulders. I can smell the floral scent of her perfume. “Let me worry about that, G. Okay? My brother-in-law is in real estate, not a realtor, but he owns this place and he’s letting us lease at a very generous rate. So don’t let it even be a thought in your head, honey. We are okay.”

“Okay.”

We unpack the car. When we’re done, Mom stands in my doorway. “My parents invited us over for dinner. They want to meet you—everyone does.”

“Is everyone going to be—”

“No, no, it’ll just be grandma and grandpa tonight. It’s been a very long week and no one wants to overwhelm you.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me to move it to tomorrow? I can do that.”

I shake my head. “I can meet your parents tonight.”

“Dinner’s at six so you have a couple of hours to settle in.”

“Okay.”

She leaves and I open the blinds above my bed. A pale light permeates my room.

Walk on the beach barefoot, sandals dangling in my hands. The sand is wet between my toes and the water sluices past my ankles. Families on bright beach towels, playing volleyball, building sand castles, corralling screaming children look like heat mirages in the sunlight.

The humidity rolls off the air in waves, salt and water mist my body, but a strong breeze keeps everything from getting too sticky.

D’s hair floats in wispy curls, stuck between too short and a recognizable haircut. Her long legs and arms are dark with sun. She’s wearing shorts and a graphic t-shirt, some indie band I don’t know, summer camp bracelets on her wrists, and a displeased expression on her face.

“You weren’t even going to say goodbye. Jackass.” She crosses her arms, a brassy golden glint strung across her neck, an ivy patterned locket resting on her chest. I stole that once.

“Didn’t think you ever wanted to see me again.”

“That’s not true. I love you.”

“You called my mother.”

“You weren’t going to and someone needed to.” Her expression softens. “And you needed her.”

There’s a stone in my belly and electricity in my heart. “I’m sorry,” the words barely escape my throat. “I didn’t mean to.”

She stares at me for a minute. The rhythmic noise of waves crashing, seagulls cawing, people talking, the smell of salt, of seaweed, of blue and gray, my toes digging into the wet sand, the push of the earth rising up against the soles of my feet. “I think you did,” she says. “But I forgive you anyway.”

“No you don’t.” The words sting my tongue.

“Don’t I?”

I say, “How would I know?”

Suddenly, I don’t know who the person in front of me is. Her linear perspective warps. Her angles become round become cubed. I can’t recognize her face. Another girl, similar in breadth, comes from the side and throws her arm around the person who stands in D’s place. She says, “Let’s blow this popsicle stand. We’ll see this dumbass later.”

The girl with the ivy locket says, “Will we?”

And the reply is, “Of course. Well. One day maybe. When he can look in the mirror and know his face.”

I know who they are now and that I never knew them, not that I couldn’t, not that I shouldn’t, not that some things or people or colors are just unknowable, but because I didn’t want to or didn’t care or didn’t try. Didn’t think, didn’t know, didn’t care. Thought I knew,



thought I knew, thought I knew. Mannequins for me to pose and expression to their faces and thoughts to their heads and words to

I don't want to be stuck in this time loop. I want to know my face. I think I might have a chance now. I changed the past to change the future.

Grandma Esther and Grandpa Boris still live in my mother's childhood home. The stone pathway is worn, the outside of the house is repainted, the front lawn is well-tended, everything has an air of careful upkeep losing the fight against inescapable age.

Mom and I stand on the porch. I fiddle with my button-up shirt, refrain from messing with my hair. There's a looseness to the line of Mom's shoulders, the corners of her lips are slowly pulling up as she goes to knock on the door. She glances back at me, eyes shining.

There's a stone in my belly and electricity in my heart.

## CHAPTER 114

the sand burns our feet but our noises are filled with delight instead of pain even though it is painful. the dads are burying umbrellas in the sand, the moms are unrolling beach towels, tropical colors and sea animal prints. we are all slippery with sunscreen as we rush into the water, salt and sand in our eyes and mouths, waves swelling and breaking on our heads, slimy things underneath our feet. the dads and moms have unveiled the cooler, cracked opened icy beers, cool sandwiches, condensation lining the plastic bags. there are mixed sets of beach toys, shovels and buckets and molds of all castle-space-marine life sorts that lay untouched. the dads pull out a frisbee and a football and fish us from the ocean and wrap us up into an entangled game of ultimate frisbee football deluxe, everyone one of us making up new rules as we play and run and face-plant into the sand. eventually the dads herd us back and we eat damp peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and drink warm water and soda. we are slathered with sunscreen again the moms and dads clucking over beginnings of sun burns, they want to leave soon, we want to go back into the water. *one last swim*, says a mother. the sun is setting, everything is soft shades of red and purple, and we pretend we're on an alien planet with three suns and a different colored sky even though it's just here. a wave catches me unaware and the undertow pulls me off my feet and i don't know which way is up and which way is down, but then my head breaks surface and D grabs me round the middle and pulls me toward the shore and for a minute i relax into her grip, my body going lax and i rest. when my feet touch the sand, i smile at her and say,

*thanks*, and stand without help once more, O meets us where our ankles are submerged,  
bumps against me and i bump against D, and we walk back up the beach.