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MAYBE I CAN EXPLAIN

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis consists of a selection of short stories and flash fiction written between January 2015 and March 2016. The stories, told primarily by young women, examine familial, platonic, and romantic relationships. They are filled with characters doing their best to navigate the world around them, sometimes fumbling, sometimes standing still, but always learning.

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## Chapter 1

### First Moon

Amanda found the box of tampons hidden in the corner of Clara's closet, wedged between the wall and the rack full of shoes that Amanda bought and Clara never wore. Instead, she insisted on wearing the pair of black Converse sneakers her Dad gave her for her thirteenth birthday last spring. Amanda picked one of the shoes up by the lace, brown with dirt and frayed at the top. Clara had picked off the plastic coating. Probably wreaked havoc on her nails, Amanda thought.

After she found the tampons, the cheap kind with a white cardboard applicator, she started a more thorough inspection of the room. She forgot about her original purpose (looking for the letter Clara and her dad exchanged to make sure she wasn't being bad mouthed) and started looking for more evidence that her daughter had matured. In the bathroom, behind all the unused nail polish was a pack of panty liners. In the trash can by Clara's desk, Amanda noticed a plastic grocery bag with its handles tied in a knot. She picked it up and, after a few minutes struggling with the knot, used one of her long acrylic nails to split the side of the bag open.

Inside were a pair of light purple fruit of the looms, a red stain on the crotch of the panties.

That was it then, Amanda thought. Clara was a woman now.

Amanda heard the front door shut and shoved the bloody panties back in the plastic bag, placing it in the trashcan so the tear was hidden from view. Clara appeared in the door with her book bag on one shoulder.

“What are you doing in here?” She eyed her mom.

“Just cleaning up,” Amanda said. Why did her daughter have to look at her with such accusation?

Amanda bent down and grabbed the red pulls of the trashcan bag, then tied them together, closing the grocery bag and panties within. “How was your weekend?”

“Good.” Clara pulled off her cleats and dropped them on the floor at the end of the bed.

“You and your dad go to the batting cages again?” Amanda eyed the cleats.

“Ugh, yes, Mom.” Clara collapsed back onto her bed, arms spread eagle.

“I don’t see why you need to answer like that,” Amanda walked to the door with the trash bag.

“You know we go to the batting cages every weekend.” Clara stared up at the ceiling.

Amanda paused and leaned against the door frame.

“Yes, well, you’ll get bored of it one day.” Clara muttered something under her breath that Amanda couldn’t hear. “Anyway, anything else new?” Amanda could feel the weight of the trash bag in her hands.

“No,” Clara said.

“Nothing?” Amanda asked. “No big news? Nothing you want to share with your mother?”

“Why are you being weird?” Clara sat up.

“I just thought maybe, if there was anything new in your life, maybe you’d want to talk about it.” Amanda swung the trash bag gently at her side.

“There’s nothing new, Mom.” Clara said. She picked up her remote and turned on the PlayStation in the corner of her room.

Amanda hesitated in the doorway. “Well, I’ll be downstairs if you think of anything.”

Clara made a grunt of response.

Sorting their clothes for the wash, Amanda felt as though she had been shunned to the dark basement. The washer and dryer stood in the only part of the room, hardly five feet by five feet that her ex-husband had managed to finish. Grey linoleum tiles made up the floor instead of poured concrete, and the walls were painted a light robin’s egg blue. Both were chosen by Amanda who insisted that it should be her choice since she was the one doing the laundry in the house. Paul hated the color, but he gave in.

Amanda ended up with three piles on the floor: one of towels, one of delicate blouses, skirts, and dresses, and one of cotton t-shirts, jeans, and sweatpants. She sighed looking down at the piles, realizing once again, that the delicate clothing was all hers and the cheap cotton outfits Clara’s. I don’t know why I bother mixing it all up before bringing it down here, Amanda thought. She put Clara’s pile in first, checking all the underwear before she threw it in, making sure none of it needed bleach. How long would Clara wait to tell her?

After a few days of waiting, Amanda realized that Clara had no intention of telling her about her period at all. Amanda gave her ample opportunity. Waited around at the dinner table, checked in with her every morning to see how she was feeling, and in Target one night, stopped their cart in front of the tampons to ask Clara if there was anything else she needed. But Clara said no.

Finally, Amanda grew tired of waiting, and on Friday night, as Clara was packing a bag for her dad’s, Amanda blurted out “I found the underwear you threw away!”

“Mom!” Clara went red in the face.

“You don’t need to hide it from me, honey! You’re just growing up!”

“Oh my god, Mom, stop.” Clara pulled the zipper on her backpack shut.

Amanda walked into the room and hugged her daughter. “My little girl is a woman now.”

“Ew, Mom I really don’t want to talk about this.” Clara squirmed in her mother’s arms.

“Sweetie, why not? You know, I might have some useful information on the subject. I am a woman myself.”

There was a knock at the front door.

“That’s Dad. I gotta go.” Clara made a break for it, taking the stairs two at a time.

Amanda rushed after her. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk first? Your dad can wait.”

“No, Mom. I’ll see you Sunday.”

Clara slammed the door behind her. Amanda only briefly saw Paul’s face on the other side, but it was enough to make her scowl. She watched the two of them get in Paul’s jeep and pull out of the driveway before going into the kitchen to make herself some tea. She sat on her sofa, put her feet up on the ottoman, and called her own mom on the phone.

“You know, you weren’t particularly keen to talk about it either,” her mother said. “She’s probably just embarrassed. Lots of girls are embarrassed.”

“I know. I just want her to know that she can talk to me. She’s constantly talking to her dad. Texting him, dropping little notes in each other’s mail.”

“I told you when you got divorced, I told you that because she was living with you, you would have to be the disciplinarian. Paul gets to take her to the batting cages and out for ice cream, and you have to tell her to clean her room. That’s the way it was with your father and me. It’s always the woman who gets the short end of the stick.”

“Well, it does help that Paul knows how to have fun. Clara doesn’t like any of the things I like. Last time I offered to get her a manicure she looked at me like I had proposed we drown a bag of kittens together.”

“Maybe she would have had fun if she had gone, though.”

“Maybe.”

Amanda spent the rest of the night on the sofa, flicking through the channels on her television. Finally, she settled on an old movie, one she hadn’t seen before. It was a cliché coming of age type film where a group of high schoolers throw a party while their parents were away. It was during the inevitable worried call from the parents scene that Amanda had an idea. She would throw Clara a surprise party. Sunday night, when Clara got home from her dad’s, the females in the family would be waiting for her.

\*

Clara was scheduled to get home around six, so Amanda started setting up at three. She hung red and white streamers all over the living room, put out red vines, red, white, and pink M&Ms (the bag said they were for Valentine’s Day, but Amanda figured they would work fine). She followed the instructions of YouTube video to build a throne out of Kotex maxi pad bags. Some red Hawaiian punch was poured into a crystal bowl with a ladle, and some blue Kool-Aid that looked like the liquid most pad and tampon commercials used got poured into the pitcher that normally held iced tea.

At five o’clock the cake was delivered. A number of the websites Amanda used to research ideas suggested cakes made of red velvet in the shape of pads, but she had thought that was too grotesque, and ordered a dome shaped yellow cake with buttercream frosting that looked like the moon. She set it on the table next to the red velvet cupcakes she had baked herself.

The guests started to arrive at five. Amanda's mom came with Amanda's two younger sisters and their three daughters. Another car brought Amanda's great aunt and her wife. Inside, they all gushed over Amanda's decorations and looked over the list of games and activities they would be playing.

"I say she'll be a heartbreaker," Amanda's great aunt said as she wrote down her guess for the number of boyfriends Clara would have before she found *the one*.

Clara's cousins giggled as they filled out the menstruation themed ad lib.

At five thirty, Amanda heard a car in the driveway, and ran to the window.

"She's early!"

Everyone hurried to duck behind the half wall separating the dining room from the front door, and Amanda turned off all the lights besides the one in the entryway. She waited by the door and opened it when she heard footsteps on the other side. As soon as Clara's foot was inside, her female family jumped up from behind the half wall and yelled "Surprise!"

Clara took a step backwards and bumped into her father, who yelled, "What the hell?"

Clara recovered as her relatives rushed over to say hello, but Paul grabbed Amanda's arm and pulled her aside.

"What the hell is this? Throwing her a surprise party and not inviting me?"

Amanda, trying to ignore her ex-husband, turned to her daughter. "You're home early! We barely had time to hide."

Paul shook her arm. "Amanda! What the hell is this?"

Clara looked back and forth between her parents.

"Relax, Paul. It's a first moon party. Girls only."

“What the hell is a first moon party?” Paul let go of Amanda’s arm, crossing his own in front of his chest.

“Means your little girl has become a woman,” Amanda’s mom said, then laughed.

Paul went red in the face as he realized what was going on. Clara had gone paper white.

“Everyone to the living room.” Amanda waved her arms to shoo them from the entryway. “Say goodbye to your dad, honey,” she said to Clara.

But instead of saying goodbye Clara pushed her mom away and ran up the stairs to her room, slamming the door.

Amanda ran up the stairs after her and Paul after Amanda. Both of them knocked on her door.

“I don’t need your help with this, Paul.”

“You’re the one who upset her. Maybe she’d rather talk to me.”

“I don’t want to talk to either of you!”

Amanda turned the doorknob and walked inside her daughter’s room. “Sweetie, what’s wrong?”

Clara was lying face down on her bed.

“How could you do this to me?” She kicked her feet up and down like she had as a little girl throwing a tantrum.

“Oh, come on. It’s going to be fun!”

Clara screamed into a pillow.

“You know I would never do this to you honey,” Paul rested a hand on his daughter’s back.

“Paul, please, could you give us a minute alone.”

He glared at Amanda, but went to wait on the other side of the door anyway. Amanda sat down on at the end of the bed.

“Clara, I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just your family and me. No friends or kids from school.”

“You ruin everything.”

“Tell her she can stay at my house tonight if she wants to,” Paul yelled from the other side of the door.

“Shut up, Paul,” Amanda yelled back.

“I hate you both,” Clara said into her pillow.

“Clara, please, I didn’t mean to make you upset.” Amanda stroked Clara’s hair. “I just wanted to have some fun with you.”

“Well, this isn’t fun.”

Amanda wiped a tear away from her own cheek and stood up.

“You can go stay an extra night with your dad if you want.”

Clara turned her head and looked at her mom. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

She turned her head back into the pillow and kicked her feet again.

“Sweetie,” Amanda sat back down. “Why can’t you?”

Clara stayed silent and face down. Amanda was just about to get up and leave when she heard Clara exhale and saw her head turn.

“If I tell you,” she said, sitting half way up, “you can’t tell dad.”

Amanda tried not to smile. She could hear Paul pacing in the hallway. “But you tell your dad everything.”

“Not this.” Clara looked down at her comforter.

“Well you can tell me.” Amanda said.

Clara traced a flower with her finger and kept looking down. Amanda waited, trying not to breathe too loudly.

“I invited a boy to hang out tonight. That’s why I came home early.” Amanda nodded to show she understood even though Clara still wasn’t looking at her.

“Okay...so I guess this isn’t the best time for a party.”

Clara shook her head.

“Well, I think you’re a little young to be dating.” Amanda stood back up and put her hands on her hips. Clara sat up the rest of the way and hugged her knees to her chest. “But, why don’t you say goodbye to your dad, and I’ll get rid of our party committee?”

Clara finally looked up at her mom. “Okay.”

Amanda walked Paul to the door. “Is she sure she doesn’t want to stay with me?”

“Yes, Paul, she’s sure.”

“How do you know?” Paul stopped in the doorway and held out a hand to keep Amanda from shutting the door.

“Because we talked about it.” Amanda pushed on it anyway.

“I think I should talk to her before I go.” Paul pushed back.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you about it now, Paul. She’ll come to you when she’s ready.” Amanda pursed her lips.

Paul looked past her at the stairs, but sighed and released his force on the door, allowing Amanda to swing it closed. She hurried off to the living room, ready to shoo her guests, but found Clara sitting on her throne.

Amanda walked over to her and whispered in her ear, “I didn’t tell your dad anything. And everyone will be gone from here in a jiffy.”

“No, everyone can stay,” Clara said, whispering in return. “I rescheduled.”

Amanda smiled. “Okay.”

“But, Mom,” Clara grabbed her mom’s arm to keep her from moving away, “just so you know, this is the weirdest thing you’ve ever done. Please, never throw me a surprise party again.”

Amanda promised that she wouldn’t.

## Chapter 2

### Fleeing the Scene

“I just don’t understand.” Mom’s hands gripped the steering wheel like it was a ledge she might fall from as she asked me what had happened.

“I got arrested.” I was in the passenger seat, resting my head against the window and counting street lights as we passed them to stay calm.

“Yes, thank you for that great insight.” She stepped on the brake a little harder than necessary, throwing both of our bodies forward. “Mind filling me in on the events leading up to that point?”

I told her what I already had: I turned the wrong way down a one-way street. She exhaled loudly and pointed out that you don’t get arrested for something that small. Then it got quiet between us.

She was waiting for the rest of the story, and I thought about telling her the really important bit, that my blood alcohol level had been a .09. But if I told her that, I’d have to back up further, to David’s house where I had taken one too many shots of whiskey, and to explain why I was drinking at my ex-boyfriend’s house, I’d have to arrive at David’s house, tearstained and shaking, having driven aimlessly through town for an hour not knowing who to call or where to go.

And if I told her all that, I knew she would want to know why I hadn’t called her. After all, I always called her when I was upset. And she *always* answered.

But I didn't know how to explain why. I didn't know how to tell her that I had jumped into my car, crying, after fleeing from the back of her husband's head while he grunted on top of someone with brunette hair much longer than hers.

So instead I said, "Thanks for picking me up." And left it at that.

### Chapter 3

#### Going Home

It wasn't that Marcy didn't love her family. Of course she loved her family. Everyone loves their family.

Don't they?

Marcy put the question aside as she pulled into her mother's driveway. She let the song on the radio finish before hitting the power button and turning off the ignition.

Carrying a gift wrapped in bright pink paper and her own black suitcase, she found her mom and brother sitting at the kitchen table, shoving forkfuls of meatloaf, scalloped potatoes, and peas into their mouths.

Marcy stood in the doorway, trying not to drop the gift tucked under her arm.

Her brother Dave looked at her, but said nothing. Her mother said, "We would have waited for you, but we weren't sure you were coming."

"I said I'd be here."

Marcy set the present down on the faux stone kitchen counter, aware of her mom eyeing it, then took a seat at the table. She had made the decision to be here, she thought, so she better actually be here.

Her mother and Dave continued eating.

Marcy drummed her fingers on the table and tried to think of something to say. "It's been a long time since the three of us sat here, huh?"

"Your choice," her mom said without looking up at her.

Marcy swallowed and looked down at her hands. It had been five years since she sat at this table for dinner, five years since she and her mom were on good terms. Marcy was ready to bury the hatchet, but her mom didn't seem so keen.

"Dave, what have you been up to? High school senior. Big man on campus." Easier to talk to him than her mom, Marcy thought.

Dave shrugged and kept shoveling food.

"Your brother's very political," her mom said after a minute of silence.

Marcy looked to Dave for confirmation, but got nothing.

"Going to work on the campaign of a senator this summer. The Democrat."

The room went silent again. Marcy ran her fingers over the deep scratches in the ancient table. Her mom would die in this house with the same furniture she had bought as a newly married woman. Marcy cringed a little at the thought.

"So, Dave, what pulled you into the political arena?"

He shrugged, but Marcy was determined.

"Democrat, so, pro-gun control?"

Shrug.

"Lower education costs?"

Shrug.

"Well, there has to be a reason you're giving up part of your summer?"

Dave stopped eating and looked at her. "Jimmy Howard convinced me to join," he said before he'd finished chewing.

Marcy nodded. So, her little brother hadn't grown into someone she could relate to.

"Well, do you like it? Like the candidate?"

Dave put some thought into her question. Marcy watched his eyebrows push together. “He voted for legal weed, so that’s cool. And if he wins, I might get to go to Washington D.C. as an intern.”

Her mother grunted. “I’m glad you found something you like, but I do hope he doesn’t win.”

\*

Her room had pink walls, a twin bed with a patchwork quilt bedspread. Her dresser was white with silver handles and chipping paint. Marcy was surprised her mother hadn’t changed it into a sewing room, but she supposed her mother didn’t have many hobbies that required space, just a T.V.

She lay back in her bed and tried to get comfortable. The sheets were old and scratchy, the pillows were flat and she started to wish that she had let Sean accompany her, so she had at least one person to feel at ease with.

He was still angry at her for not letting him come along. She had met his family over a year ago. She had tried to make him understand that introducing him to her family wasn’t the same. His family was simple and uncomplicated. Two parents, three successful children. The only beef his family had was over who had the most impressive alma mater.

But people who grew up in families without issues couldn’t understand families with them. That was the conclusion that Marcy had come to. Estranged wasn’t really a word that Sean could wrap his head around. “Just call her.” “Just go home.” “She loves you.” Those were the sorts of things Sean said whenever Marcy brought up her mother.

She looked at the cracks in the ceiling and thought about the last time she slept in this bed. Through the walls she had been able to hear her mom crying and Dave trying to comfort

her, saying things like “She’s not really leaving because of you.” That was half true. Marcy had left primarily to go to UCLA, to learn about film, but she’d be lying if she said that getting away from her mother wasn’t a perk.

Her last morning waking up in that bed, Marcy had got dressed, grabbed her bags, and driven the 800 miles to UCLA without saying goodbye. At the time she’d been angry with her mother for wanting her to stay, for being selfish enough to ask her to pick a different school, and determined to live a life that wasn’t her mom’s. But she hadn’t anticipated the rift that she was creating, hadn’t foreseen the years of passive aggressive comments intermixed with empty chit chat.

\*

Her mother’s fiftieth birthday party, like all big events in the town she had grown up in, was held in the local fire hall.

Marcy’s mom and Dave had left early to help set up, according to the note on the fridge. The present Marcy had brought was still sitting on the edge of the counter. She carried it to her car and put it back in the trunk she had pulled it from yesterday.

At the fire hall, blue and green streamers hung from the ceiling. Aunt Mae was huffing and puffing, trying to inflate a balloon her face red and covered in sweat.

“Need help?” Marcy asked.

Her aunt squealed, hugged her, and instantly began trying to figure out how long it had been since she’d seen Marcy and what had changed since then. Marcy blew up balloons and let her talk.

“Your mom must be so happy you’re home. It’s been ages, Marcy. We always ask about you. She says you’re busy. This, that, and the other thing. I guess that’s what happens when you move away to the big city. You’ve outgrown us, she says.”

Her mom came over and cut her aunt off, asking her to help set out the veggie trays.

“Glad you still remember where the fire hall is,” her mom said as she started to turn away.

“I did live here for eighteen years,” Marcy said.

Her mom scowled. “And couldn’t get away fast enough.”

Marcy dropped the balloon she had been holding and it flew off around the room. Her mother and she silently watched it go. Standing at full height, with her shoulders back and her chin tilted up, Marcy had half a foot on her mom. She looked down at her, hands on her hips.

“You two better not be fighting over there,” Aunt Mae called from the buffet table before either Marcy or her mom could say anything. They both remained still for a few seconds longer, then moved apart.

With no more balloons to blow up, and no faith that she could resist getting into an argument with her mom, Marcy walked around to the back of the building where she could get some air while hiding from arriving guests.

She found her brother leaning against the cement wall. He tensed up for a second when she rounded the corner, then relaxed as he recognized her. The space around him reeked.

“Want some?” he asked, offering her a hit of his joint.

Marcy took it. They stood against the wall, smoking together in silence, then sat together against the wall. At some point, Marcy mentioned that they should probably get back inside to the party, but neither of them moved.

“Do you like California?” Dave asked.

Marcy looked over at him: her brother. They had the same nose. Maybe a little bit of the same face shape too, though Dave’s face was longer, more gaunt. He had their mom’s green eyes, lighter than her hazels. “Yeah, I really do.”

Dave nodded. “Think you’ll ever move back?”

Marcy shook her head as she fished a pack of cigarettes from her purse.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Dave said. “Although, Mom still won’t let me change your room. I wanted to make it into a dark studio, but she won’t let me touch it. Says it’s your space to come home to.”

Marcy leaned her head back against the wall and thought about that.

“She misses you,” Dave added to the silence. “It might not seem like it, but she has to be angry or else she’ll be sad.” He paused a beat, then added, “after you left...it was like someone had died.”

Marcy felt a tickle starting at the back of her throat and tried to clear it. If Sean were here, he would say “See! She does care! Just let her know that you do, too!”

“She doesn’t have much in her life besides you and me, you know.”

Marcy nodded, but she didn’t want to dwell on the sacrifices her mom had made to support her as a single mom. It looked like a dismal life to her.

“So you like photography?” she asked, turning her head back to Dave.

“Yeah. It’s pretty cool,” he said.

She left it at that. Any more conversation and she might say something to ruin the moment, lose the ground she had gained. Stamping out the last of her cigarette, she stood up and walked back inside.

\*

Inside, the party was in full swing. There were about forty guests, Marcy estimated. Most of them were neighbors or local residents she had known for the majority, if not all, of her life. She roamed around the room, listening to the chatter.

Just about everyone pointed out how long she had been gone, asked about her new life. They imagined a big house in the hills, Marcy working as an executive on movie sets. The life they'd imagined for her was far more luxurious than the one she actually led, fetching coffee for people who didn't know her name and sleeping in a dingy studio apartment. Marcy answered their questions as politely as she could manage, bottling up her sarcastic responses. Her brother came in to sing happy birthday and watch her mom blow out the candles. Her mother, it seemed, had been drinking, and she pulled Dave over and gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

Marcy sat at the table with her to watch her open her gifts. By then a lot of the guests had left. Aunt Mae was cleaning up by throwing everything into the trash.

"Here, open mine." Marcy handed her mom the gift she had picked out.

Her mom took it, and removed the wrapping paper systematically, careful not to rip it.

Marcy had spent ages trying to decide what she could possibly give her mom. Growing up, there was never much money around, so birthdays were small occasions with few presents. Marcy had made cards out of construction paper and washable marker. Occasionally, she would have a few extra dollars that she could spend on a store bought card.

It wasn't until college when she had a scholarship and part time job funding her that Marcy had any money to buy a proper gift. She hadn't gone home for Christmas, but she had bought her mom a new coffee pot and sent it through the mail. For her mom's fiftieth birthday, Marcy had tried to think of something similar. She knew her mom liked practical gifts, but then

she had seen the pastel pink sweater in a store, and decided to take a chance on buying something nice. Something she didn't need, but could want. The sweater cost more than she would ever spend on clothing for herself, but as a peace offering, it was worth it.

Her mom pulled the sweater out of its box, letting it unfold as she held it up in the air. "It's very pretty," she said.

Marcy smiled. "It's cashmere too, so soft."

Her mom nodded, then dropped it back into the box and replaced the lid, reaching for the next present.

Marcy felt taken aback by the rapid dismissal. She watched as her mom pulled a new salad tongs out of a bag and exclaimed "ooh!"

"You don't like the sweater?"

Her mom put the salad tongs down and looked at her. "It's very nice, Marcy."

Marcy shook her head. "You don't have to lie. I can tell you don't like it."

Her mom reached for another present and started unwrapping it. "I'm not lying. It's very nice, but I don't have anywhere to wear that."

"It's a sweater, mom. You can wear it anywhere."

"It's a fancy sweater." Her mom stopped unwrapping and looked up at her.

"It's a regular sweater."

"No, cashmere. That's fancy. Maybe in California people wear fancy sweaters, but not here."

Marcy threw her hands in the air. "For once, could you not make everything about California!"

Her mom dismissed her with the wave of a hand. Marcy's jaw clenched tight as she watched her mom open a package full of Tupperware. Without really knowing what she was doing, she grabbed the sweater off the table, crushing the box it was in.

"Fine. It was expensive, so I guess I'll just take it back."

"Marcy..."

Marcy stood up and started a fast walk away from her mother. "Next year I'll just get you some AA batteries!" she called over her shoulder.

"Good! I need some AA batteries!" Her mom screamed at her back.

Marcy carried the box with the sweater to the parking lot and threw it in her trunk.

\*

Marcy left early the next morning. Her mom watched from the window as her brother helped her carry her bags out.

Dave stood next to the car shifting his weight from foot to foot. Marcy realized she didn't know how to say goodbye to him. Last time she left, she had given him a hug, but he'd been young then. Instead, she reached out to pat him on the arm. He smiled at her and stepped back as she got into the driver's seat and started the ignition.

Before she could pull away, he leaned down so he was looking in her window. "Could I come visit you sometime?"

"Yeah," Marcy said. "Of course."

She put the car into reverse and backed away from the house she grew up in, waving at Dave's form in the driveway, and sparing a glance to her mother's pale face in the window. As she accelerated away from the house, she gripped the steering wheel tight, refusing to wave goodbye.

## Chapter 4

### Nose Job

David's mom hadn't given him much. He didn't get a computer when he graduated high school or a car when he turned sixteen. She never gave him rides to soccer practice or red and green wrapped presents at Christmas time or a home to grow up in. What she did give him was this: a lengthy letter on paper ripped from a yellow legal pad explaining that he was better off without her and a nose that was, mercifully, straight, but way too big for his face. She'd also given him a photo of herself which was how he knew the nose had come from her and not his father.

Doctor Hannigan pinched David's nose between his thumb and index finger, moving it to the left then to the right.

"Well, at least it's straight. That'll make our work a little easier. Do you have any other problems with it? Sinus issues maybe?"

"No."

The doctor released his nose. "Well, I definitely think we can work with this."

"Good." David scrunched his nose a few times to get the feeling of the doctor's hands out of his mind.

The doctor started taking down some notes. "So, what do your parents think about this?"

"Hmm?" David watched the doctor write.

"Are they mad that you're getting the surgery? Parents can be touchy."

“Oh, my parents won’t care,” David said.

“Well that’s good. Personally, I don’t see what the big deal is. But, I guess I can see their point. After all, your looks are a connection you have to them. Change the look, erase the connection, I guess.”

“I never really saw it that way.” David rubbed his nose.

The doctor stopped writing and looked up at David. “We’re done for today!” He smiled. “Should we set up the next appointment now?”

David opened his mouth but hesitated. “I think, actually, I’ll take a day to think about it.”

## Chapter 5

### Wheelchair

He was asleep when I got to the house at one in the afternoon. I found him, upstairs, almost sitting up there were so many pillows behind him, snoring with his mouth open. One of his legs was draped over the side of the twin mattress, the blue sheets only covering half of his dome stomach. I stood in the doorway, checked my watch, sighed.

“Dad. Dad, wake up!” I clapped my hands together, walked to the windows, and let the blinds up.

He snorted but didn't move.

“Dad, come on.” I walked over to the bed and shook his arm. “Wake up. Dad!”

His eyelids moved a little, but didn't open. I hit his cheek a few times. He closed his mouth and rolled over, and after shooting an aggravated glance at the ceiling, I walked around the bed and pinched his nose closed. He struggled for breath for a few seconds until his instincts kicked in and his mouth opened to inhale. One brown eye opened and looked at me.

“Rise and shine.”

He reached out and grabbed his phone from his bedside table. “I have ten more minutes.”

“It's already one fifteen. You get up and brush your teeth, I'll get you something to wear.”

“I don't need you to get my clothes out for me.” Dad swung his legs over the bed and stood up, let his head drop from one side to the other, cracking his neck.

“We’re going to be late.” I pulled out a black polo shirt and some khaki cargo shorts and lay them on his bed. “I’ll make coffee.” I walked out of the room.

“Do you have any snacks?” Dad leaned over and tried to look in my purse.

“No.” I closed my bag tighter.

“Are you sure?” He took another sip of his coffee.

I did have a blueberry NutriGrain bar, but I was saving it so that I had something to eat later.

“Can you just check?”

I opened my purse, pulled out the NutriGrain bar and handed it to him.

He ripped the foil, crinkled it in his hand, broke the waiting room silence. When he finished eating, he looked around, tossed the balled foil on top of *Time* magazine. I snatched it up and put it in my purse.

“Well, I’m still hungry,” he said.

“You can get something after the appointment,” I said.

“Want to go out for lunch?”

“I can’t.” I grabbed *Time* magazine and flipped it open.

“You never want to spend time with me.” From the corner of my eye, I could see him staring at me.

“I’m on my lunch break.” I turned a page.

“Well, just extend it some.”

“I can’t just extend it.” I shut the magazine and tossed it aside.

“Oh, sure you can. They can do without you for a little bit.” He leaned back and closed his eyes, put a foot up on the coffee table.

“No, they can’t. We have a lot of appointments today.”

“Oh just quit.” He waved his hand. Dismissed my job.

I opened my mouth to argue, but the nurse came out and called our name. I got up to walk back with my dad, but he turned and blocked my path. “No, you stay here.” He left me in the waiting room.

At the office, my new client and his mom, or rather, my new client and her son, were already seated across from my desk. I greeted them, shook each of their hands and took a seat while the mom admired my degrees hanging on the walls behind me. “Look, Josh, Columbia.”

I smiled as if I still believed my degree meant anything before asking Josh’s mom why they had come in today. I nodded along with her explanation, occasionally writing down a word or two like “Ivy League” or “sub-par SAT scores,” to make it look like I was taking this all seriously. I “hmm-ed” and “ahh-ed” at all the right places, gave Josh’s mom every reason to believe that her son’s situation was unique from every other student’s in the country, and that it was a situation I could help with.

All parents think their kid is different from all the other kids. They all think that their kid deserves to get into a top school. They all think that their kid’s bad test scores and mediocre grades aren’t accurate representations of how smart they actually are. They all see their child as a casualty of the system.

I looked at Josh while his mom talked. He played with a loose thread on the bottom of his sweater that at any moment looked like it would give way and start the unraveling process.

His mouth was open a little bit, the bottom of half of his jaw hanging. I guessed that Josh's grades were less a product of a cruel, unsympathetic system and more the consequence of too much time spent stoned under the bleachers.

"Mrs. Marin, I'm positive we can find a way to get Josh into a great school."

She sighed with relief, hearing what she came to hear. Of course, I didn't feel positive. Sure, I could help Josh write his admissions essays, so that they presented him as well educated, determined student. I could hold his hand while he submitted materials to his prospective universities. And I was positive that Josh would be a competitive applicant at some schools, and he'd be accepted to a few of them. But, great schools? Depends on your definition of great. And the fact of the matter: scores matter. Numbers matter. More than Josh's extracurricular activities. More than any plea he could make in his personal statement.

I got home late that night and found the entrance hallway filled with piles of clothes, my dad in the laundry room with a washer of whites. "That's not a full load." I grabbed some of the clothes from other piles and threw them in too while he protested that I was messing up his system. I wasn't tall enough to reach the laundry detergent, so he reached it for me, groaning as he did and clutching his right leg as he put it down. I told him he should go sit down.

"I'm fine." He sounded annoyed.

In the kitchen, there was a new script sitting on the counter.

"For some new pain medication," dad told me. "Don't look at me like that," he added, noticing my raised eyebrows. "I'm fine."

"Maybe it's time to look into a wheelchair."

He snorted and told me he didn't need a wheelchair. I watched him walk to the couch and sit down, on the lookout for signs of stiffness or pain.

We were both quiet while I started dinner. He broke the silence by asking how work had been.

"More of the same. Reassuring parents that their kids are special." I sniffed some milk that was in the fridge and threw it out. "I need to go grocery shopping."

"I can do that," he said. "And maybe their kids are special."

"Not special enough to get into college on their own," I said.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe whether or not someone can get into a fancy college program on their own isn't actually any measure of their worth."

I didn't look at him. Instead I grabbed a pad of paper and a pen. "I'll make a list tonight and go to the store tomorrow."

After dinner, I went up to my room. There wasn't much there. A double bed took up most of the space. One bedside table with a lamp and an alarm clock and a dresser. When my dad moved into the house he had meant it to be a guest bedroom, and I had sold or given away most of my furniture, so I didn't have to rent a U-Haul to move it all.

The only things in the room that belonged to me were my clothes, my bedspread, a stuffed lion I'd had since I was a child, and my books which were stacked up in a corner.

After I'd grabbed my computer and settled in under my covers, I heard a knock at the door.

My dad came in and asked if I wanted to watch a movie he had rented. I said no.

Before leaving he picked one of my books up off the floor. “Poetry in Post-Modern America.” He whistled. “Heavy book.”

I ignored him. I already knew what he was getting at. In a little bit he’d pick up my GRE book, ask me if I’d thought any more about reapplying to graduate school. I’d tell him no, or tell him I didn’t have the time now, or maybe I wouldn’t say anything at all, but either way the conversation would stop there.

“I think you should go talk to someone.”

I looked up at him. “Talk to someone?”

He looked down at his shoes before answering. “A therapist maybe.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“About, you know, graduate school. Being too afraid to try again.”

I tried to think of something to say, but couldn’t come up with anything before he spoke again.

“You can take the test again, reapply, things will go different.”

I told him I was too tired to talk about this. He watched me on my computer for a while before nodding. “Maybe tomorrow,” he said.

The next night I brought home some groceries and a brochure with some different wheelchairs for him to look at.

When I got into the kitchen, I noticed that there was Chinese food sitting on the kitchen table, plates and silverware next to the cardboard containers.

“I thought I’d give you a break from cooking tonight,” dad said.

We both sat down at the table, spooned food onto our plates, and ate quietly until I pulled the wheelchair brochure out my purse.

“What do you want me to do with this?” he asked.

“Dad, I know you don’t want to think about it, but you need to look into getting a wheelchair.”

“I’m not at that point yet, Caroline.” He kept eating.

I put my fork down. “Fine, maybe you’re not. But it won’t hurt to have one on hand just in case.”

He looked at me then picked up the brochure and placed it on the chair next to him, promising to look at it some other time.

“Okay, but once you’ve picked one out make sure you tell me, so I can order it for you.”

“I can order it myself.”

There was an edge to his voice. Annoyance bordering on anger. I glanced at him out of the side of my eye before stabbing another piece of orange chicken with my fork.

We finished eating in silence. As I stood up to clear my plate, he cleared his throat and asked me to wait a second.

I sat back down and waited for him to say something.

“I think we should finish talking about you reapplying to graduate school.”

I stood back up and told him I didn’t want to talk about it.

“You never want to talk about it. But you have to.”

“I don’t *have* to do anything.” I took my plate over to the sink and rinsed it off.

“The plan was take a year off. One year then reapply. It’s been nearly three.” He had put his silverware down and folded his hands in front of him like a diplomat negotiating an arms deal.

“I told you, it’s just not the right time.” I put my plate in the dishwasher and closed it with more force than I needed.

“No, I don’t want to hear the same excuses you always give. It’s not the right time, you’re too busy right now, you’re too tired to discuss it right now...”

I tried to interrupt him, but he talked over me.

“...you’ve been living here in a room that’s not really yours, books on the floor, none of your own furniture, working a job that’s making you bitter! It’s time to try again.”

I crossed my arms and leaned back against the counter.

He started talking again, softer this time. “If you don’t want to reapply to graduate school fine, but do something. Look for a different job, take a trip, take up painting, I don’t care. Just don’t resign yourself to this life because you’re too afraid to be rejected again.”

“I’m not resigned.”

“You’re stagnant.”

“Maybe I like being here. Maybe this is where I want to be.”

He shook his head.

“How do you know? Besides, who would take care of you if I left?”

“I don’t need someone to take care of me, Caroline.”

I crossed my arms. “Then why did I spend my lunch break yesterday driving you to the doctor. And why did I have to help you with your laundry? You wouldn’t have even woken on time if I hadn’t been here!”

My dad stood up too. “I had an alarm set!”

“You sleep through your alarm all the time!”

“Then, I’ll buy a second alarm!”

We squared off a few feet apart raising our voices in turn.

“You can’t drive yourself anymore!”

“So, I’ll call a taxi if I need to go somewhere!”

“I pick up your medications for you!”

“Damnit, Caroline!” My dad kicked the leg of the table. “I’ll have them delivered!”

I got quiet. I couldn’t yell louder than him no matter how hard I tried.

“I’m going to my room!” I turned on my heel and headed for the stairs.

He followed me. “No, you’re not!”

I started stomping up the stairs.

He followed me, but slowly, and when he reached my door I could tell he was in pain.

He was holding his right leg and when he put his left hand on my door frame, leaning against it and placing all his weight on his left leg.

I started to ask him if he needed help, but he put up a hand to stop me then, after a few deep breaths, looked me straight in the eye.

“You can’t stay here any longer.”

I took a step away from him. “Are you kicking me out?”

He didn’t break eye contact with me, just frowned.

I slammed the door in his face.

Josh and his mom were my first appointment the next day. They bounced into my office wearing big smiles, Josh's mom clutching a big white envelope to her chest.

I stood up to greet them and asked them to take a seat. "Are those Josh's essays?" I held out my hand.

"Actually," Josh's mom said. She looked over at her soon. "You can tell her."

"I got into NYU," he said.

I tried to cover up my surprise with a smile.

"He applied early decision" his mom continued. "We thought it was a longshot, but I guess not as much as we thought. Anyway, it looks like we won't be needing your help anyway, and we would have called, but I wanted to come here and tell you in person. We're just so excited!"

She went on for a few minutes while I nodded politely along.

"I guess you never know until you try!" she said.

I tried to smile in a way that looked sincere rather than pained, but felt my dad's words in my head, eating away at my composure, slowly but surely sinking into the grey matter. "No, I guess not," I said.

## Chapter 6

### Manor

You moved when you realized I was taking a picture. Moved because you hate photographs of yourself, moved because you hate this antique camera I spent half of my last paycheck on, moved because you didn't want to remember this moment, this day. Those are the words I cram from my mind into your mouth. They aren't fair but neither was moving, I think, when we both agreed that this trip would be about reconnecting, about learning to try again. Moving wasn't trying.

You moved, so the camera caught the still mass behind you. From the boat, it looked like a bare cliffside, waiting for the surrounding water to erode it away, but when I looked at the photograph later, I could almost make out the shape of a building sitting on top—an old, forgotten manor. Alone in my darkroom, I started to become convinced that the manor was actually there. I could make out the peaks in the roof, and mapped with my finger the steps, carved into stone, that someone would take to get from the bottom of the island to the front door. The exterior walls were red brick. The floors inside were mahogany.

I showed you the picture and asked you what you saw in it. You shrugged, said “me, trying to escape.” I asked if you could see the manor high up on the cliff, but you only saw a pile of rocks. You said, “If there is any manor up there, it's not the grand thing you're making it into, just some left over rubble.”

## Chapter 7

### Ouija Board

My dad grew up in an old Victorian, brick, with a spiral staircase, hardwood floors, and a large attic room in the eight-sided turret—his bedroom. We were spending the summer there, cleaning it out after my grandma’s death. His job as a teacher meant he had the time off, but my mom didn’t, so it was just the two of us sorting through the things left in his room.

For the most part, the room was plain: a bed, a bookshelf, a closet stuffed with old clothes and some family treasures. The only things on display were a poster featuring the 1977 New York Yankees and a Boston College pennant. Although the room looked empty, I had learned that was a purposeful deception. Being the child of two overprotective parents, my dad had figured out at a young age how to hide things: loose floorboards, easily lifted by pressing a toe in the right spot, books pulled forward on the shelf to create a secret space behind them, drawers with hidden compartments covered by clothes. The Ouija board was in the sock drawer.

My dad found it while we were going through things, sorting them into boxes. I was propped up against a wall, legs outstretched, no longer pretending to pack. Instead, I searched through already packed boxes for any treasures my dad might have been keeping from me. So far, I’d collected a silver mirror, some sparkly costume jewelry, and a red, leather photo album.

“Add this to your collection, kid.” My dad handed me the Ouija board and its planchette.

“Oooh.” I held the board an arm’s length from my face to get a better look at it.

“Don’t tell your mom I let you keep it though.”

“Do you think this works?” I set the Ouija board on the floor in front of me.

“Of course it works,” my dad said. “Saw it with my own two eyes.”

“Did Grandma know you had it?”

“Of course not. It would have given her a heart attack to see me playing with that thing. You know, she’s the one who started the rumors that this house was haunted.”

“I thought this house *was* haunted.”

My dad shrugged. “Could be. If there are any ghosts here, it be nice of them to pitch in with all this trash!” He kicked the box closest to him then slid down next to me on the floor.

“She’ll hate me for getting rid of all this. Not that she didn’t hate me already.” My dad turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder. “One day pumpkin, you will inevitably make a choice that I don’t agree with. And we may very well fight about it. But I will still love you anyway, and I will be sorry that we fought. Got it?”

I nodded. “I bet Grandma was sorry too, Dad.”

He exhaled and stood up. “Maybe.”

By the end of the week, we had packed up everything my dad didn’t want to keep into boxes marked ‘Goodwill.’ In my dad’s old room, where I was sleeping, I’d added some vintage dresses, a pair of tangerine bloomers, two more photo albums, my grandma’s diaries, and some pretty glass bottles in gemstone colors: emerald, sapphire, and amethyst to my own box of keepsakes.

I was flipping through one of my grandma’s diaries one night, trying to make out her slanted cursive hand writing when I saw her. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed some movement by the door, and when I looked up, I saw what I thought was a bit of dress, sweeping out the door.

“Dad,” I called.

I got up from the bed and walked to the door. “Dad,” I called again.

There wasn’t any answer. I walked down the attic level stairs to the second floor hallway and yelled again.

My dad stayed in the master bedroom at the end of the hallway. I made my way towards it, sliding across the floor in my socks rather than picking my feet up to avoid making noise. “Dad!” I whispered. I pushed open his door slowly and peeked my head inside. He wasn’t in there, but standing on the other side of the bed was a silhouette. It was short and white, not quite solid, like dish soap swirling in water, somewhere between opaque and translucent. Even though there weren’t any definite facial features, I knew her: my grandma. When I saw her, I hesitated, still half in the room, half out, staring at her figure.

“Mikaelah.”

My dad’s voice behind me made me jump and spin around. When I turned back, the silhouette was gone.

“What’s wrong? Do you need something?” My dad followed my eyes into the room.

“I…” I didn’t know what to say. “I think I saw a ghost.”

My dad put his hand on my shoulder. “Did you have a nightmare?”

“No, a real ghost.” I pointed to the empty space on the other side of his room.

My dad frowned. “Maybe I shouldn’t have given you that Ouija board.”

The Ouija board reminded me. “But you said! You said you saw it move! You said the house is haunted.”

My dad looked at me then sighed. “Want to watch some TV before bed?”

“But…”

“I think *Gilligan’s Island* is on. Have you ever seen it?”

“No, but I want to talk about...”

“Tomorrow. TV tonight.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

The next day, we dropped off the boxes at Goodwill and picked up some paint, brushes, trays, rollers, and tarps at the Home Depot. At the house, we pushed the living room furniture into the center of the room and put the tarps down on the floor.

“I guess it’s time to get this wallpaper down.” My dad said. He found a seam on one of the walls and started picking at it. The wallpaper was so old that it had already started to come off the wall a little bit. “My mom loved this wallpaper. We never would have gotten it, but a wealthy parishioner owned the Sherwin Williams and saw her admiring it. It was all delivered one year at Christmas. She asked me what I thought of it once it was all up, and I told her the flowers were ugly. She’d be furious if she knew I was taking it down.” He sighed and looked down at his feet. After a few seconds he looked back up at me and smiled.

“We could leave it up.” I found another seam further down on the wall where I could reach and resisted pulling at it immediately.

“No. It’s outdated. The house won’t sell as well with it up. Besides, I think our relationship is past saving at this point anyway.” He laughed.

I looked down at my hands. I didn’t know what to say.

I reached back up to the seam and pulled. The paper ripped in a long line and a chunk of it came down in his hand. He looked at me and smiled. “Feels pretty good,” he said.

We set to work, ripping down the paper one strip at a time. Once everything within my reach was down, my dad let me stand on the ladder for a little and tear down the paper higher up. He made me get down when I ripped a little too enthusiastically and lost my balance a little bit, wobbling on the top step of the ladder. For the rest of the afternoon, I sat on the floor and crumpled up the paper he threw down to me while I asked him about his Ouija board story.

“Most of the time, the Ouija board did nothing. I’d invite cute girls from school over and use it to scare them. I didn’t know how to flirt. But one time...” He paused while he tore down another section.

“One time...” I motioned for him to continue.

“One time, I had this pretty girl over, Cheryl. Mom and Dad were out for the night, so we pulled out the Ouija board and set it up on the coffee table down here. Turned off all the lights. I had been trying to convince her that the house was haunted, spook her a little, get her to grab my arm. She wasn’t having any of it though. Didn’t believe in ghosts. Didn’t believe me.” He finished tearing the last of the paper off the last wall and climbed down the ladder. “We’ve gotta get this out to the trash.”

“Dad, *come on.*”

“All right, all right. You’re sure this isn’t going to scare you?”

“I’m sure.” He sat down on the arm of the sofa and I turned to face him, pulling my legs to my chest.”

“Well, Cheryl had a friend who had died when she was young. A neighbor. He was hit by a car and I guess she had seen it. Or seen him right after. I forget now.” He got silent for a second.

“So you had the Ouija board,” I prompted him.

He smiled. “We had the Ouija board out, and we asked it the same question I always ask. If there are any spirits here, make your presence known. I asked it twice before the planchette moved. It just jerked to the side a little. Then it started moving towards letters. Spelled out D-A-R-R-E-N. Darren. It was her neighbor’s name. Cheryl started panicking. Asked me if I was moving the dial. Didn’t believe me when I said it wasn’t. I knew it wasn’t me, so I thought it must be her and that she was trying to turn the tables on me. So, I started asking more questions. I asked, ‘what do you want Darren?’ He didn’t answer. Cheryl took her hands off the planchette, and I asked Darren if he wanted to hurt us. Tried to out scare her. When I asked, Cheryl got up and made to leave. I took my hands off the board to stop her, and when I did, the dial moved, by itself, over to the word ‘No.’

Cheryl ran straight out the house when she saw it. Threatened to tell her parents what we had been doing, threatened to tell my parents. It took me a long time to calm her down and to get the story of her neighbor. I pointed out that he seemed like a friendly ghost, but the board moving on its own was too much for her. Too much for me too, I guess. I didn’t use the board again after that.”

Sunday we went to the church where my grandfather had been a minister at until his death. Everyone knew my dad and they all came up to talk to him. I sat in a pew and drew on the program while he fielded their questions about the house.

“Selling it? What a shame? It’s such a great house.”

“Well, lucky for whoever buys it. Your mom always kept it so nice.”

“Remember that wallpaper she put up in the living room? The white and green floral? So beautiful.”

My dad picked up his coat when the wallpaper was mentioned. “Sorry, but we’ve gotta get out of here. Lots more work to do.”

We took the trash bag full of wallpaper and shoved it down into the outside garbage can. “I don’t know what everyone sees in this wallpaper. It’s so loud.”

I didn’t tell my dad that I thought it was kind of nice.

“Tell me more about grandma.” We walked back into the house where paint cans were open and brushes were spread on the floor.

“What do you want to know, kid?” My dad started rolling paint onto the wall.

“Why did you guys fight all the time?” I sat on the back of the sofa and watched him painting.

He sighed. “This and that. We were just different people.”

“But, like, more specifically.” I leaned back against the sofa.

My dad let his paint roller drop to his side and looked at me. “It was a lot of things over time. I misbehaved in church, and she was very concerned with appearances. I goofed off in school, went to a community college for two years instead of a four-year university.”

“You went back to college, though.”

“That’s true.” He started rolling paint on the wall again. “I think, after a little while, it was too late to really mend the fences. Going back to school didn’t make a huge difference. Besides, she wanted me to be an architect. Her uncle had been an architect. Made a lot of money. I became a middle school history teacher.”

“I bet she was proud of you anyway.” I said.

“Maybe.”

“Would you be proud of me even if I didn’t do what you wanted?”

My dad turned to look at me. He opened his mouth, but I cut him off.

“Because, you always say you’ll be proud of me no matter what, so I bet you’re wrong and that she was proud of you.”

He narrowed his eyes at me and was quiet for a little bit. “Are fourteen year olds supposed to be this smart?”

I shrugged.

Later that night, with the painting done, we pulled up the tarps, reset the furniture, and put on *Gilligan’s Island*. It played every night at nine, but the episode that night had already been on a few nights before. It had been borderline funny to watch the castaways get super powers from giant vegetables before, but a second time, it wasn’t funny at all. I got up and went upstairs, intending to get one of the photo albums to go through. Instead, the Ouija board caught my eye. I picked it up. It was heavy. Heavier than the plastic, glow-in-the-dark ones that Walmart sells anyway. The weight of it made it feel real.

While I turned it over in my hands, I thought about seeing my grandma’s ghost the other night. I had been thinking about it all week. About her, about what she was doing walking around here. The theory I had come up with was that she came to my dad’s room looking for him, but since he wasn’t there, she went to search for him in the other room. She had disappeared when he showed up because she had seen him and knew he was okay. Of course she would want to know that he was okay. But maybe the Ouija board could do help her do one better. I carried it downstairs and set it on the coffee table in front of my dad.

“Let’s use it.”

My dad looked at me from the corner of his eye.

I clasped my hands together and widened my eyes at him.

He sighed and turned towards me. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Dad, please.”

“Mikaela...”

“I promise I won’t be scared! I won’t! And the last time you used it you got scared, but that ghost wasn’t going to hurt you!”

“Kid, I don’t think so.”

“Please. I saw Grandma the other day. Maybe she’ll answer.”

Dad rubbed his face with his hands. I knew he hoped I had forgotten about my ghost sighting.

“Just this one time, and I’ll never bring up ghosts again.”

I could practically see the neurons firing in his head while he thought it over.

I pouted a little.

“Okay, fine. One time.” He moved to the edge of the sofa so we were both positioned over the board and picked up the planchette. “But you’re gonna have to take the reins on this one.”

We both put hands on the planchette. “What do I do?”

“Ask if anyone is here.”

I took a deep breath. “Are there any ghosts here?”

“Spirits.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Are there any spirits here?”

We both waited.

“Maybe ask a little louder,” Dad said. “More confidently.”

I raised my voice. “Are there any spirits here?”

We both stared down at the board, waiting to see if it would move. I willed it to with my mind.

“Ask if they’re present. In movies they always ask the spirits if they’re present.”

I took a breath. “Okay.” My dad smiled at me, then looked back down at the board. I noticed that his eyes were wide and he was leaning forward. I would have thought he was scared, but he was still smiling, tapping one of his feet on the ground a little bit. “Hello! Are there any spirits present in this house?”

We both inhaled audibly as we waited for something to happen. The planchette was still for a second. And then a second more. I noticed my dad lean back a little, some of his smile disappearing. “Are there any spirits present?”

I stared at the board, my eyes narrowed, thinking over and over in my head “move, move, move, move.” And then it did.

I pushed it. Just a little bit. It slid a centimeter at most away from me. I noticed my dad jump a little. I tensed. Then I pushed it again.

“Yes, it says yes.” My dad read the word the planchette pointed to. “Mom?” he asked. His voice broke a little on the word. I panicked. I didn’t know what to do now that I had moved it. I hadn’t anticipated more questions. So I left the planchette where it was sitting. “Yes. It’s still on yes,” he said.

He looked at me for the first time. I must have looked upset because he asked if I was okay. I said I was fine and tried to smile.

“Go on and ask another question.” He sat back a little, like he was relaxed, but his eyes were huge and his foot was tapping at a much faster tempo than it had been.

“Um...Do you...have anything to say?” I asked the empty house.

We both waited a few seconds again.

“Ask again.”

“Do you have anything to say?” I watched my dad watching the board. Then I moved the planchette again. I wasn’t sure if I meant to do it or not. If I jerked because I was nervous or if the command had come down from my brain to my hands. But once it had moved a little, it was easy to keep moving it. I spelled out the first word that came to my mind.

S

O

R

R

Y

My dad inhaled. He wasn’t smiling anymore, but he wasn’t frowning either.

After a few minutes he whispered, “I’m sorry too.”

I took my hands off the planchette and stood up.

“Mikaela...”

“I...I need to go to bed.” I turned and ran upstairs.

A few moments later, I heard a knock on my door. The knob turned and my dad came in.

“Hey kiddo. All right if I come in?”

I sat up in my bed and nodded. He came over and sat down next to me.

“Are you okay?” He put a hand on my shoulder.

I nodded. “Just got a little scared.”

He nodded in return. “Sorry, honey. I shouldn’t have pushed you to keep going.”

“No, it’s okay. You didn’t.” I pulled my covers up around me.

He watched me settle back against my pillows. “Will you be okay sleeping?”

I told him that I would be fine. And he left, but didn’t shut the door all the way and turned the stair light on as a night light. I didn’t bother telling him that I didn’t need it. There weren’t any ghosts for me to scare me.

The next two weeks we spent re painting the other rooms in the house: kitchen, dining room, formal living room, bathrooms, guest bedrooms. We stopped watching *Gilligan’s Island* reruns. My dad said he was too tired, so I’d go back up to my room and read more of the diaries and my dad, I thought, would go to bed.

We were running out of things to do at the house.

At dinner, I asked dad when we were going home.

“Well, I think there’s a bit more to be done.”

“Like what?”

“Well, your room, or rather my room needs to be painted still.”

“I thought we were leaving that room. The realtor said it wouldn’t matter.”

“Yes, well, it can’t hurt.”

After that he found a leak in one of the bathroom sinks.

A day later he found some cracks in one of the baseboards that needed to be filled in.

The windows all needed to be cleaned too and the lightbulbs changed.

I spent more and more time in his old room going through things while he did work.

Some days, I hardly left the room at all. It was on one of those days, when I suddenly realized there wasn’t any light coming in from outside, that I decided to go downstairs and get something

to eat. As I walked down the stairs I heard a voice in the living room. I crouched down and looked through the spindles.

My dad was sitting on the sofa with the Ouija board in front of him, his hands on the planchette.

“Mom. Mom are you there?”

He stared down at the board while I stared at him.

“Mom? Please?” He kept his hands on the board. I watched him slump forward and take his hands off the board. He pushed his hair out of his face then hit the board. It slid across the coffee table and clattered onto the floor. The planchette bounced towards the stairs where I was spying.

When he got up to get it, I turned and ran back upstairs to my room.

## Chapter 8

### Shoplifter

Tegan couldn't see her mom anymore. She had disappeared somewhere among the off-white, metal, retail shelves after giving her daughter one dollar to spend. Tegan could hear her though, shouting into her cellphone, berating someone from work called "dickhead."

Tegan was grateful for the distraction. It gave her a chance to really look around the dollar store. She walked through the aisles, turning her head from side to side, determined not to miss anything, clutching her dollar in her sweaty, little hand. She stopped for a minute to look at some pink clip-in hair extensions, but decided they weren't worth her dollar.

In another aisle she stumbled upon some school supplies. There were Lisa Frank folders with neon animals, glittery pens, and packs of erasers in fun shapes. Tegan felt drawn to the erasers shaped like zoo animals: a lion, a tiger, a zebra, and an elephant. She pulled the pack off its hook to get a closer look, then nodded to herself. This was what she wanted.

At the register, she stood on her tip-toes to place the package on the belt herself. The teenage cashier looked down at her. "Do you have money for this?"

Tegan nodded and held up her dollar. The teenager scanned the barcode on the packaging. "It's \$1.06."

"I only have a dollar." Tegan looked around for her mom, and saw her walking over, still yelling on the phone. She covered the speaker for a second to ask Tegan if she had picked something yet. Tegan deferred to the teenager who told her mom the total bill.

"How can it be \$1.06? This is the dollar store. One dollar."

The teenager explained sales tax.

“Hang on! Hang on!” Tegan’s mom said into the phone. “That’s ridiculous,” she said to the teenager. “You say a dollar; it should be a dollar. Come on, Tegan. Let’s go.” She started towards the door.

The teenager threw the erasers aside and turned to help the next customer.

From outside, Tegan’s mom called to her, and Tegan started to leave, but stopped next to where the erasers had been tossed. She looked between the cashier, busy ringing up someone else, and her mom, distracted by the phone. Knowing that she shouldn’t, she reached up and grabbed the package quickly then stuffed it into her pocket.

“Tegan!” her mom’s voice momentarily froze her, made her think she was caught. “Let’s go!”

With one last look at the cashier, and her heart thumping in her chest, Tegan ran for it.

## Chapter 9

### Magick

After weeks of nothing, I turned to the internet for help. I typed “writers block” into the search engine and browsed the results:

The 10 Types of Writer’s Block (and How to Overcome Them)  
Writer’s Block-Center of Writing Studies-University of Illinois  
Overcoming Writer’s Block  
How to Overcome Writer’s Block: 14 Tricks That Work  
Advice from Great Writers about Kicking Writer’s Block

I read though article after article, post after post, all of them promising to get me out of the funk I’d fallen into. The unhelpful answer they all gave me: just write.

I slammed my laptop shut, groaned, and went to the kitchen to make tea. My electric kettle started bubbling immediately filling my small apartment with metallic *plink plink plink*.

I pulled my favorite mug down from the cabinet, red with the words *I didn’t choose the write life, the write life chose me* written in a looping black font.

I sat back down in front of my computer and began a new search for writing prompts. The first link that came up took me to the Writer’s Digest site where prompts were listed by date.

I Can Hear You

By Brian A. Klems | Feb. 16, 2016 | Comments 47

You were involved in a terrible car accident and have been in a coma for the past three months. What your family and doctors don’t know is that you can hear everything that they say. Write that scene.

Books and Characters

By Brian A. Klems | Feb. 9, 2016 | Comments 174

Write a story that begins with the title of the book you've most recently read and ends with the name of your favorite character that you've written.

### Letter to the Author

By Brian A Klems | Feb. 2, 2016 | Comments 212

Have the main character in your novel (or short story) write a letter to you. What would they say? Have them write whatever you want.

### Killing Clichés

By Brian A Klems | Jan. 26, 2016 | Comments 162

Write 10 sentences using a different cliché in each. Now, rewrite the sentence to eliminate the cliché and find a more clever and creative way to convey its meaning.

### Portal Games

By Brian A Klems | Jan. 12, 2016 | Comments 329

After a grueling day at work you go home. The sweet allure of your couch and captain crunch is overpowering! You arrive at your door, stick the key in, yank it open and see a writhing horde of minotaur chanting in the night, and then one notices you and charges. You slam...

I scrolled down the page waiting for one of them to grab me, to feel a tickle in the back of my mind that said *that one, yes. But* page after page, I felt nothing. No tickle. No drive. I did start to notice my stomach rumbling in response to all the caffeine I had drank. If I didn't feed it soon, I'd start to feel nauseated.

"You're all too prescriptive," I told the prompts, standing up and stretching.

The only food I had in the apartment was a half kicked box of pasta. I took out the remaining strands, cracking them in half and threw them in the pot of water I'd set to boil on the stove. As I stood watching the steam rise, I thought *I'm already washed up. I'm going to die without ever publishing another piece. A twenty-five-year-old one hit wonder. One piece in Tin House, then nothing. Forever.*

When my pasta was done, I poured it in a bowl, dumped some sauce on top, and carried it back out to my living room. I figured there was no point in trying to write while I ate so instead I opened Netflix and turned on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, figuring I'd watch one episode while I ate, then get back to work.

Four hours and eight episodes later, Buffy and Willow had gone to college, but I still hadn't moved. I watched Willow use her Wicca skills to solve Buffy's latest problem. The cheesy 90s effects cast green and white lights on the walls around me.

"God, this show is so stupid," I said to no one.

"I wouldn't mind having some wicca skills, though," I added.

A girl I knew in college called herself a wicca. The only power she ever seemed to have was the ability to wear an obscene amount of floral print without it looking bad. I grabbed my computer, opened it up and typed "wicca" into the search bar then browsed through the results that came up.

On [wiccanspells.com](http://wiccanspells.com), magic is always spelled magick which is apparently a reference to the religion Thelema. Magick is "any act designed to cause intentional change" and "is not capable of producing miracles or violating the physical laws of the universe." Thelema, I thought, went a little too far, but something about the 'k' on the end of Magick really appealed to me. The extra hard consonant made the word sound stronger, but it also gave it a fairy tale look. Magic I didn't believe in, but magick I was willing to give a try.

I'm not really sure how serious I was as I began searching through the spells listed in the sidebar. It was late and I was tired and part of me was just browsing for the sake of browsing. Another part of me though, a more afraid part, was looking seriously, desperate for something

that might help the words flow from the synapses in my brain, down through my arms, out through my fingers onto the computer screen.

The White Magick Spell for Professional Success promised to help me get the universe on my side when it came to writing. The spell called for:

- A photo of yourself
- 4 green candles and one white candle
- A few drops of essential oil for your astrological sign
- Amber incense
- 10 bay leaves
- 2 green fluorite stones
- Money – a note of any denomination will do
- An offering bowl

Without really intending to, I found myself copying down the list in my phone. I stared at it while I lay in bed that night. I already had a white candle, money, and a bowl I could use, assuming an offering bowl wasn't something special. This *is stupid* I thought and clicked off my phone.

\*

Two days later, I found myself wandering through the aisles of a zodiac shop looking for fluorite stones and lavender oil. The stones were dark green and each had a little piece of white cardstock attached with a rubber band that said:

CLARITY

Fluorite stones are beneficial promoters of clarity. Having one of these stones can help clear the mind, making you more receptive to psychic and spiritual energies.

Out of a back stockroom, the teen cashier managed to find one bottle of lavender oil, the best oil for Pisces. A bundle of amber essence on the bottom of a cluttered shelf, small scent coated reeds tied together, looked like tiny cattails. I carried my assortment of items up to the front check out, where the cashier was flipping through a tabloid. She didn't look up as I approached the counter, just kept reading the page she was on. Next to her there was a woman with a short blonde pixie cut shuffling a deck of cards. I cleared my throat. The cashier still didn't look up, but the woman with the cards stopped shuffling them and gave me a once over.

“Would you like to have your cards read?” She held up the deck.

She was one of those people who made very direct eye contact. Didn't look away, didn't blink, just stared into my brown eyes with her green ones.

“No, thank you.” I looked down at the amber I was holding.

I heard the cards start shuffling again. The cashier finally put down her tabloid and looked up at me. I handed her the fluorite stones, amber, and lavender oil. The shop didn't have

a scanner, so she found the price tag on each and punched the numbers into the register, letting it add them up.

“Seventeen fifty” the cashier held out one hand for my money and picked her tabloid back up with the other.

The woman with the pixie cut gently pushed her out of the way as I fished in my wallet for money. I pulled out the ten I had and three ones. Shoot. Not enough.

I stared at the bills in my hands and willed them to multiply. I was vividly aware of pixie cut’s eyes on me. I checked my wallet again, sticking a hand in each of its pockets searching for the touch of paper.

I sighed and thought about putting the stones and amber and oil back on their shelves and leaving, going home to make some more pasta and watch more TV. Instead, I slid the credit card my mom had given me (for emergencies) and held it up to pixie cut. She nodded and held out her hand for it.

While she was running the card through her register, I got a better look at her deck of cards. They had brightly colored pictures painted on them and golden edges.

“Are you interested in tarot?” Pixie cut handed my card back to me.

I shook my head and put the plastic back in my wallet. “I don’t really...” I stopped talking as I looked up at her. She was staring at me with raised eyebrows.

“Believe in tarot.” She finished for me. She smiled and put my receipt in a paper bag with the rest of the things I had bought. My mom had bought.

“Can I ask what you’re doing with these things then?” She handed me the bag.

I stuttered my way to “nothing” and took a few steps back, eager to leave.

“Looks like a little light wicca work.” She watched me as I took a few steps back. I wanted to turn around and walk away quickly, but she was still making eye contact with me, and I couldn’t bring myself to look away. My dad always said that direct eye contact made you look strong, and I wanted to stare right back at pixie cut, but I couldn’t hold her gaze for more than a few seconds before I blinked and let my gaze flick away. “You know, this kind of stuff can be dangerous when you’re still new to it.”

I opened my mouth, but then just nodded.

“I could help. Perform whatever spell you’re thinking of for you. I wouldn’t charge you too much. New customer discount.”

“No, thank you. I have to…” I gestured toward the door.

She nodded and picked her tarot cards back up. I heard her shuffling them as I turned to make for the door.

\*

I already had a white candle. The grocery down the street from me sold two packs of candles for a dollar each. I grabbed two boxes of green and a bunch of bay leaves before heading home, where I grabbed a wooden salad bowl and pulled a picture out of one of the frames hanging in my bedroom: me in my graduation gown flanked by both of my parents. We were all

smiling in it. Not fake, say cheese smiles. Real smiles. Laughing out loud smiles. Nowhere else we'd rather be smiles.

I thought about calling my mom. I'd have to tell her that I used her credit card. I could already hear the lecture she would give me when she found out: *You need to be more responsible. I'm not going to keep loaning you money if you're spending it willy-nilly. If you want to make frivolous purchases, you can get a job and use your own money.*

Better not call her right now, I decided. I couldn't handle her disappointment. Plus, there was a chance that I wouldn't get her disappointed speech, but her *I believe in you!* speech, and I definitely couldn't handle that. The only thing worse than having a parent who doesn't believe in you is a parent that does even when you don't deserve it.

I grabbed the scissors and made two cuts in the photograph, separating my parents from myself.

I had to set the candles up like the points on a star. A pentagram really. If I was in Buffy, I thought, I would have drawn the pentagram on my floor first in white chalk. Instead, I set the four green candles up in a square and put the white candle at the top. I placed the salad bowl in the middle of them all, and placed the two fluorite stones and the bay leaves inside it. I opened the bottle of lavender oil. There was a dropper attached to the cap, and I dipped it into the oil, squeezing and releasing until it filled, then dropped four drops on top of the stones. I needed to put in money, so with a sigh I reached into my wallet and pulled out one of my ones. I was about to put it in the bowl when I paused. The directions online said that the denomination of bill didn't matter, but would more money give me better chances? Was that a crazy thing to think? Surely, it was. The spell wasn't sentient. It wouldn't know if I was being cheap.

Then again, everything about this was already crazy.

Somewhat reluctantly, I reached into my wallet and pulled out the ten I had. I rubbed the paper between my fingers. I had enough food to last me through the week, and my mom gave me money in monthly installments, so I only had a few days to wait until my bank account was refilled.

"What the hell." I said, and dropped the ten in the bowl.

I reread the instructions before going any further, wanting to make sure I didn't screw anything up. I grabbed the purple lighter I kept in my purse and flicked the metal a few times before it caught. Carefully, holding the picture of myself over the salad bowl (which I realized too late I was ruining) I lit one corner of the picture on fire, letting the flame spread upwards before dropping it into the bowl. I took two of the amber incense reeds and held them over the flame, catching their tips. My apartment immediately filled with their sweet scent. I held them up in the air and let the smoke from them rise. Only after my picture, ten-dollar bill, and the bay leaves had burned up completely, did I drop the incense into the bowl.

I stayed there, cross-legged on the floor watching little swirls of smoke drift up. I looked over the instructions again, double checking that I had done everything I was supposed to. Candles: check. Bowl: check. Stones: check. Leaves: check. Oil, photo, amber: check, check, check. Everything was done, but I felt incomplete. Like I had forgotten something. Like I was waiting for something more. I might have stayed and watched the smoke rise from the essence until they were burned through if the smoke alarm hadn't gone off at that moment, slamming me back into the real world. I blew out the candles, threw open a window, grabbed a pillow, and waived it around underneath the alarm, fighting to make the air clear.

Once it had stopped, I grabbed the bowl and carried it into the kitchen. The fluorite stones I rinsed under the sink and set on my drying mat, everything else I dumped in the trash. The inside of my salad bowl was a little blackened, but not horribly. I debated washing it and putting back in its cabinet, before instead throwing the clean fluorite stones back in it, and setting it on my bookshelf. I picked up the tiny bottle of lavender oil and threw that in as well. The candles were still a little wet with wax, so I left them where they were. I'd just have to remember to move them to the closet in the morning. I wasn't technically allowed to have candles in the apartment, and if my landlord came to make sure everything was okay with the fire alarm...well, the last thing I needed was to get evicted.

For dinner I had peanut butter and jelly. I put Buffy back on the Netflix, and burned a little more incense to cover the smell of generic wax and burned bay leaves. I kept waiting without really know what I was waiting for. For the world to shift? For the sky to crack open and energy to pour out? For my thoughts to suddenly fall in to perfect order and a calm to come over my body?

Instead, everything was the same as always. I was acutely aware of the way my heart was beating the same steady rhythm as always. Like always, my legs started to overheat under the blanket I had covering them, so like always, I stuck my toes out the end, letting the heat dissipate through the soles of my feet. After a few episodes, my head started to hurt. I was too aware of my skin and the sharp angles of my bones and the slow movement of fluid through my veins. I was overthinking. Hyperaware.

I got up, and forced myself to change into a clean cotton tank top and shorts before climbing in between my sheets. It was only nine o'clock. On the street outside cars were still

driving up and down the road, people were shouting to each other, laughing as they made their way out for the night. My upstairs neighbors were playing trap music that sank through their floor and my ceiling. I rolled over and pressed one ear to my pillow, muffling some of the sound. Just a good night's sleep. That's all I need. Sleep.

\*

The next morning, I had almost forgotten about my spell work until I walked into the living room and kicked over a green candle. I gave it another push so it rolled towards my bookshelf and left it there while I made coffee and poured myself a bowl of cereal. I ate leaning against my counter, looking out my window. Normally, I wouldn't be up this early, it was uncharacteristic of me to catch a view of the streets, before they got crowded with people on their way to work.

I should go out for coffee, I thought. I never get to the cafés early enough to get a good table.

\*

The weather was warmer out than it had been the past few days, close enough to spring temperatures that a little bit of sun made the air comfortable.

I'd packed my laptop, a notebook, and my favorite pencil in the canvas shoulder bag I had used in college. Even though I hadn't done this in over a year: grab my things and set out in search of coffee, the routine still felt familiar. I opted for a longer walk to a café I'd visited a lot, close to campus with a pretty consistent crowd of older students and professors, generally in neutral colored cardigans and carrying messenger bags rather than backpacks.

The coffee they served was dark and very bitter, and came in small paper cups without lids. Coffee snobs like me gave the café constant business while the rest of the student population got their fix from Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts. Occasionally, a random passerby would see the café and stop in to try it as was clearly the case with the girl in front of me in line when I got there. She stared at her cup of espresso when the barista handed it to her without a lid. I watched her walk away, turning her head this way and that, looking for the small cart of lids, milk, and sugar most conventional cafes would have. Seeing her confusion filled me with a sense of belonging and home, understanding the protocol of this place relaxed me. I ordered my coffee, and grabbed a table that was equidistant from a window and the heater, so I could look outside, but avoid the cold that came with heat leaking through the window's glass.

I set my computer up on the table in front of me, plugging the charger into the wall preemptively. Didn't want to lose my momentum if it needed to be plugged in while I was in the middle of writing a scene. I opened a new word document. Just to get something on the page, I wrote "Untitled" and centered it at the top of the page.

I hit enter and adjusted my alignment so the cursor blinked on the left side of the page.

I can do this, I thought.

I hit tab.

I've got this.

I watched the cursor blink. The page was so white. It was disorienting to stare at the black cursor blinking on it. I found the battery icon on the bottom of my screen and turned down the screen brightness, so the white wasn't quite so overwhelming.

A few times I started typing.

"After a long time away, she..."

"It was years before I..."

"Years passed after the..."

But each time I hit the backspace button, watching the cursor eat up my words.

After twenty minutes or so, I remembered that I hadn't checked my email yet. I didn't think it would hurt to do that before I started writing. Having unopened emails would make me anxious, so knowing that I had already taken care of it would probably help my writing by alleviating some of that worry.

Half an hour later, I was on BuzzFeed taking a quiz to find out which character from *Friends* I most resembled in personality.

I caught myself suddenly, as if I was made of two people, and one of them had just found the other misbehaving. I scolded myself and closed the internet, returning to my blank white word document. Underneath "Untitled" I added "By Faith Martin." That was a little better.

I sat and stared at the screen for what felt like ages but was more like two minutes before I reopened the internet and started clicking aimlessly.

I left the café an hour later, frustrated and self-pitying. Clearly, my spell for success hadn't worked. Of course it hadn't. Magick isn't real, I told myself. Get a grip.

It had warmed up even more outside while I was in the café, and I didn't feel like going back to my apartment, so instead I started wandering, walking leisurely through the streets, taking random turns.

At the time, I didn't have any conscious thoughts about where I was headed. And maybe I did just end up outside the magick shop I had been to the day before by coincidence. Or maybe subconsciously, part of me was always going that way. I'm not sure, but I ended up standing outside it, looking in the window to see who was there. I could see pixie cut and the cashier, putting things on shelves. The rest of the store looked empty.

I went inside and they both looked up as the little bell over the door rang. The cashier only looked at me briefly, before returning to her task. Pixie cut however straightened up and walked towards me.

"Forget something yesterday?" she asked.

I shook my head and thought about leaving. She was making an unsettling amount of eye contact again. I had the feeling she knew exactly what I was going to ask. "I was wondering, well, I was thinking, I mean..."

She smiled with her mouth closed. "Spell didn't go so well, huh?"

"How much? You said you could help, but how much?"

She stared at me for a good fifteen seconds before answering, her eyes a little narrow, as if she was trying to solve a problem in her head.

"One fifty," she said, clasping her hands together in front of her.

I didn't realize that I had walked forward a little and now I twitched back a little.

"One fifty? As in..."

"One hundred and fifty." She watched me with pursed lips.

The bell above the door rang as someone else entered. I looked over, but she didn't stop watching me.

I knew that I didn't have one hundred and fifty dollars to spend on a spell that was probably bogus and a woman that I had no reason to trust. On the other hand, I'd just spent hours sitting in a café without writing anything. And that after months of the same. What other choice do you have, a voice in my head asked. Get a job as a waitress? Go back to school and get one of the degrees everyone always told you would be more practical?

"I, I would have to come back another day," I told pixie cut, meeting her gaze and holding it.

She nodded an okay and then I left.

\*

Two days later, my mom put two hundred and fifty dollars in my bank account. I stopped at an ATM on my way back to the magick shop and withdrew two hundred. As I folded the money into my wallet I felt a wave of anxiety at the thought of giving so much of it away. I took a few deep breaths and zipped my wallet shut. Not all of it, I reminded myself, just one hundred and fifty. That left me with another hundred for the rest of the month. I could live off that easy. Pasta's only a dollar a box.

\*

At the shop, a new cashier was behind the register and I didn't see pixie cut anywhere. I walked up and down the aisles for a little bit, hoping that pixie cut might just appear before I walked up to the register and asked about her.

"Trixie," the cashier yelled and pixie cut emerged from a door behind the counter. She saw me and waived for me to follow her. The cashier watched and we both disappeared behind the door.

We were standing in a stockroom. It wasn't much bigger than my bedroom, maybe fifteen feet by fifteen feet. Along the walls were gray metal shelves. A lot of the shelves were empty, but a few of them had brightly colored objects on them: different stones, some feather boas, dried flowers.

Pixie cut/Trixie grabbed a bowl and some stones off a shelf. She set them down in the middle of the floor. She was on her way back out to the shop, when she stopped, turned to me, and asked if I had the money.

I handed her three fifty dollar bills which she folded and put in her back jean pocket, before leaving me alone in the stockroom. She came back carrying the candles we needed, a bottle of lavender oil, and some amber reeds. She dumped it all on the floor before going to a shelf where she fished around among the dried flowers, pulling out some bay leaves.

I watched silently from next to the shelf with the stones while she got down on her knees and pulled some white chalk out of her front pocket. This is just like Buffy, I thought.

She drew a star on the concrete floor and then a circle around the star. She set up the candles just like I had, added the bay leaves, and lavender oil to the bowl.

"Do you have the money we need to add?"

Shit.

I had forgotten that the spell required money and of course Trixie wasn't going to use her own. The only cash I had in my wallet was the other fifty-dollar bill I'd taken out of the ATM. If I gave it to Trixie though I would be left with fifty dollars to last me the month.

"I only have a fifty." I clutched my wallet a little tighter to my chest.

"That will work." She held out her hand.

"No, I can't use it all. I need it. For groceries."

She sighed, but got to her feet. "I'll get change from the register."

She came back with a ten-dollar bill and added it to the bowl. She waived me over, and I pulled a picture of myself out before she could ask and handed it to her. This one was from my freshman year in college, sitting on my dorm room bed, newly unpacked. She set it to the side of the bowl and pulled out her lighter, setting fire to the white candle first and using it to light the green ones.

I wonder if that's where I messed up, I thought, lighting each candle with the lighter instead of the white candle.

Trixie stood up and asked me to sit on the floor in her place. I sat cross legged just like I had in my own apartment, but here the concrete was cold, even through my jeans. I shivered visibly and felt the hair on my arms stand up.

Trixie picked up the white candle again and gave it to me, instructing me to use it to light my picture on fire. I did and dropped it into the bowl where the flame quickly grew, fed by the money and leaves. Next she gave me the amber reeds, three of them which I lit all at once. I only held them up in the air for a second before placing them in the bowl and letting them burn with everything else. Trixie sat down across from me and placed the white candle back in its place as the top of our star. We watched everything burn in silence, and when the flame finally went out, Trixie leaned forward and blew out the white candle.

"Give it a day to kick in," she told me.

\*

I gave it more than a day. I gave it many days. I gave it a week. Then two.

Every day I'd spend time trying to write.

A few times I thought I had something, and I'd get a paragraph, a page, maybe two into a narrative. But each time, without fail, the narrative lost steam. The characters that seemed so vibrant in my mind paled on the page, and the plot that had once seemed new and fresh suddenly became trite and overdone.

My money disappeared faster than I thought it would. I was careful when I bought my groceries, but small additions—the strawberries that were on sale, a pack of cereal bars, a box of

veggie burgers—added up quickly. Plus, I spent several days out at coffee shops, trying to write in a more aesthetic atmosphere than my apartment. There I would buy coffee, maybe a pastry or a sandwich if I stayed for a while. Cheap purchases, but not purchases I had budgeted for.

My mom called to ask why I had made a credit card purchase at a store called Magic and More. I didn't know what to tell her, so I just apologized.

As the days went by, I became more frustrated and slowly grew angry. Angry at myself, at Trixie, at Buffy, at all wiccans everywhere.

I started rehearsing a speech whenever I was alone with my thoughts: the things I would say to Trixie. She was a con artist. She had seen I was desperate with that direct gaze of hers. She had taken advantage of me. She owed me.

I went over my lines again and again, imagining her responses, my victory, one hundred and fifty dollars back in my wallet, and finally, I got up the nerve to go find her.

She was in the back of the shop with a customer when I walked in, helping them look through some books I hadn't ever noticed.

She ignored me, focusing on the person she was helping while I stood with my arms crossed, scowling at them both.

After five minutes of waiting for some acknowledgment, I said, "I wouldn't trust what she tells you, she's trying to con you out of your money."

Trixie looked up at me and raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. The customer, who hadn't noticed me standing behind them, jumped before asking, "What?"

"Don't give her your money." I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

Trixie murmured something to the customer before grabbing ahold of my arm and hauling me back towards the door.

"What do you think you're doing, coming into my business, and trying to run out my customers?"

She was standing close to me. I realized for the first time the laugh lines around her eyes and the small wrinkles at the corners of her mouth. She was older than I had realized.

"I...you..." I tried to remember the speech I had practiced, but I had forgotten how off putting her stare could be. "Your spell didn't work."

She looked at me silently.

"I still can't write anything." I didn't want to take a step back, but I leaned away from her slightly. She crossed her arms in response and leaned slightly forward.

"My spell worked fine."

"Then why..."

She cut me off. "That spell is for professional success, but it doesn't guarantee what form that success will take. If writing isn't working, maybe it's time for you to choose something else."

Now I did step back.

"But I'm a writer," I told her. "That's my profession. Writing." We had both been whispering, but my voice got a little louder.

She looked me up and down.

"How long has it been since you wrote something?"

"That's not..."

She took a very deliberate step forward and I moved back without meaning to.

"I want my money back," I uncrossed my arms and squeezed my fists at my sides.

She shook her head. "How long has it been?"

I told her it had been a few months, and she nodded and smiled. "I hate to break it to you," she said, "but it sounds to me like you need a career."

"I have a career."

"Really? Because last I checked, writers write. It's what they do. And if you aren't writing," she shook her head, "maybe it's because writing isn't what you're meant to be doing."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. She stepped back, finally giving me some space. I crossed my arms again and broke eye contact to look down at my feet. "I don't...I don't know what else to do," I said.

"That's not my problem." She turned and walked back to the customer she had been helping before.

I stood and watched them talking, watched the customer take a book she recommended to flip through its pages, and then watched them walk up to the register before finally getting my feet to move towards the door.

Outside, I stood on the sidewalk looking to my right and left, trying to decide which direction to move in: right towards home, or left towards the rest of the city, not excited by either option.

## Chapter 10

### Maybe I Can Explain

We meet at the door. I drop my change while fumbling for my ID and you kneel down to help me pick it all up. I say thank you. You offer to pay my cover, “to avoid further disaster,” but I push my three dollars into the bouncer’s hand before you have the chance. You ask what my name is and I tell you that it’s Danielle, then hurry inside where my friends swarm around me and pinch my arms.

“He’s cute.”

“He likes you.”

“I bet he’ll buy you a drink.”

I don’t want you to buy me a drink any more than I wanted you to pay my cover, but none of my friends believe this.

When you find me waiting at the bar, you do pay for my drink, giving away your money before I can stop you. I end up with a vodka Redbull ordered by one of my friends (even though I don’t normally drink vodka or Redbull or anything really besides an occasional glass of sweet wine). We find a table and you introduce yourself as Colin and politely say hello to all of my friends.

You ask me to dance; I say no. “Come on,” you lean towards me. “I promise my dancing will make yours look good.” Your breath smells like spearmint and I wonder if you just popped a mint. The scent is strong in my nostrils and your breath is warm on my skin and it

makes the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I tell you that dancing isn't really my thing. It comes out sounding harsher than I had intended, makes you stop talking and look away. You take a sip of your drink and the silence starts to become awkward, so I try to engage you in more conversation.

You're nice enough. You ask me about my art classes and seem genuinely interested in my answers. You manage to comment on some of the books I've read recently and gradually the pauses in our conversation get shorter and shorter. You grew up in Hatfield and my high school ran against yours in cross country, so we talk a little about that. You have a cat here at school and you show me pictures of her on your phone. You have a double major in History and Education.

"Score," Laura whispers in my ear when you tell us you have a job lined up after graduation.

You offer to buy a round of shots, immediately winning my friends' gratitude and acceptance. I take one. They taste like Hawaiian Punch.

Eventually, everyone else leaves us to dance. We watch them slowly pair off. I'm surprised you stay and sit with me.

You smile and I smile back. You're good looking. It's not as if I'm blind to symmetry or unaware of the broadness of your shoulders underneath a fairly tight t-shirt. I notice your dark brown hair, the way it's too long and hangs low on your forehead, drawing attention to your amber eyes. Your pupils dilate when you look at me. Your nose is straight and long and narrow and suits your bone structure. Your teeth are a little too white, and I imagine you wearing Crest Whitening Strips while you sit in your apartment with your cat.

While we watch the others dance, silence falls between us. I finish my drink just for something to do, and then wrap my arms around myself, not because I'm cold, but because I'm missing my favorite purple blanket at home, the one I would normally be wrapped up in now. I can feel your eyes on the side of my face, or else, I imagine I can feel your eyes.

I'm starting to feel uncomfortable enough with the silence that dancing doesn't seem like such a bad idea. But dancing, after you've bought me a drink, feels like a step leading towards something else. I watch Avery turn and kiss the guy she's dancing with, someone she's only just met. I don't want that. The dance and the kiss leading to the car ride home and the night spent together. It's a trajectory I don't want to be on, and as nice as you are, I can't imagine that when you look at me, you don't see that one, singular path laid out before us. I turn to look at you. You *are* watching me. I shudder and excuse myself to go to the bathroom. Laura's in the line when I join it.

"How's it going?" She elbows my ribs.

"I think I'm gonna leave soon." I shrug.

"What? Why? He totally likes you."

"Yeah, but..."

She cuts me off. "Are you scared?"

I narrow my eyes at her.

"I mean, is it just nerves? Anxiety? Is that why you always bail like this?" She rests a hand on my arm and I know she's sincerely worried.

"It's not that." I crane my neck around the people in front of us to see how far we are from the bathroom.

“I just...I’ve never liked anyone enough to leave here with them.” I look down at my shoes.

She kicks at my ankle gently. “It’s not like you have to be in love with them.” She takes her turn in the next stall.

I start to feel a little wobbly as I walk out of the bathroom and back to the table. Since I’ve been gone, two other girls have walked up to it and are talking with you. I walk over and you look up, but they both ignore me. I stand to the side waiting for them to move while they giggle at you and each other over something I didn’t hear.

I’m grateful when you point me out to them and they step aside. They both mumble something like hello to me then stalk off. I’m about to sit back down when Laura runs up behind me and whispers in my ear “ask him to dance,” then darts off again. You’re looking up at me and I hesitate. I wonder if maybe Laura is right. Maybe I’m just nervous. I shouldn’t have to be in love with you to want you. So, I ask you to dance, and you jump at the opportunity, standing up and leading me onto the dance floor. We try to find a place where we won’t be bumping into people, and eventually settle on a corner spot.

We start to move a little to the beat of the music. Not sure where to look, I find myself looking at the wall behind you.

The bass shakes the floor, and I nod my head in time with it. I move my hips and my shoulders and any nerves I feel about looking dumb are alleviated by how ridiculous you look alongside me. You move your hands more than any dancing person should.

We start to sing along with the music and you act out the lyrics. I laugh and spin around.

While I’m spinning, you move. When I come to a stop, I feel you behind me. You put your hands on my hips. I freeze. You start moving my hips in time with yours and I look

around. Everyone else is dancing like we are: butt to groin, back to front. Laura is a few feet away grinding with a tall blonde. I try to act like she is, move like she is, but my body is rigid. You don't seem to notice though. It's not that big a deal, I tell myself. It's normal.

I can feel your breath on the back of my neck. Any tipsiness I had been feeling before is gone. The lights and music are too much. Overstimulation. Your hands start moving up and down my thighs, so the rough denim scratches against my skin. I'm too aware of the sensation. You grab my hands and hold them. Yours are sweaty and slippery.

"Are you okay?" You speak into my ear. I'm not, but I nod because I want to be. I want to want this, this closeness, this intimacy.

I wonder if you notice me looking around the room. I feel like I have to focus on something that isn't moving, but I can't seem to find anything. Laura catches my eye and winks. I try to smile a little, but can feel how uncomfortable I must look. My skin feels tight, my jaw is clenched tight.

This is fine, I think again.

I feel your head move to one side of mine. Your cheek brushes against my hair.

"Hey." Your breath tickles my ear. Goosebumps raise on my arms as I turn to look at you. Before I can ask, "what," you cover my lips with yours. They're warm and big and engulf my thin lips completely.

I let my lips soften a little and try to kiss you back. As soon as you feel my lips move, you spin me around so we're facing each other and push down harder. I try to concentrate just on the movement—on how it feels, on technique, on responding to your shifts with my own—but my mind keeps screaming at me that you're a stranger and that this is all wrong.

I need to breathe, but when I pull back a little, your head follows mine.

It's too hot inside.

You jam your tongue in my mouth and I jolt at the sensation.

I need to breathe.

I push you away and take a step back.

"Are you alright?" you ask.

"I need to go." I turn and do a fast walk off the dance floor, past the bar, and out the front door. The couple at the front of the line to get in jump when I stumble past them. The chill in the outside air feels like aloe on sunburn.

I hug myself, take a few deep breaths to try and slow down my breathing and heart rate. I press my cold hands to my ears which feel like they're on fire.

After I pace for a few moments, Laura comes outside.

"What happened?" She grabs my arm to stop me from walking.

"I just wasn't feeling it." I take another deep breath.

"Was he a bad kisser?" She raises her eyebrows and nods her head as if I've already agreed with her. I'm half tempted to.

"No."

She pauses. "Was he mean?"

"No, he was fine. I just wasn't into him." I kick a parking meter.

I tell her to go back inside and that I'll text her when I get home. Her insistence that she walk with me is short lived when the bouncer calls over and says he's going to let someone else take her place if she doesn't head back in soon.

"I just don't get you," she says as she walks back to the door.

I sit down against the cold brick side of the building and let my head fall back against it.

“Neither do I,” I say.

After a few minutes, you walk out with a friend. A group of friends standing a few feet in front of where I’m sitting block me from your view.

“What happened?” your friend asks you.

You shake your head. “I don’t know. One second everything seemed fine and she was kissing me back and the next she was running for the door.”

“Maybe you bit her lip,” your friend says.

You sigh and put your hands in your pockets. “Maybe.”

I watch you start to walk away with your head down, and I think about running after you. I imagine yelling, “Wait!” I think, *maybe I can explain*.

Maybe I can explain that it wasn’t you. It wasn’t me either. It was this feeling that once I took one step with you, I’d have to take others.

But I don’t know how to explain, and I don’t run after you. Instead, I stay outside listening to the music pounding through the walls. I watch couple after couple pass on the street along with groups of girls and guys stumbling over the sidewalk, shouting to each other, checking each other out, looking for someone to go home with.

When I’m too cold to stay any longer, I stand up and go home alone.

## Chapter 11

### Cream Cheese

Harry needs two hundred and fifty mini cheesecakes for his work social tomorrow, so I'm in the kitchen, mixing cream cheese, sugar, and egg yolks in a glass bowl. Harry is not in the kitchen making cheesecake, nor are any of the black tie bankers who will eat it. The cream cheese isn't soft enough, and my hand is sore from gripping the wooden spoon with so much force.

And then I'm gripping Harry's throat, pressing my fingers into his white and pink flesh. It's surprisingly strong, his throat. It pushes back against my hand with its bones and tendons and pulsing blood. I grip tighter and push and pull and push and pull, so his head bobbles back and forth and back and forth.

Eventually, my arm tires of pushing his neck this way and that, so I stop and instead lift my hand and plunge a knife into the thick, white fat on his abdomen. It slices through but gets stuck, and I have to use both hands to pull it out before I push it in a second time and a third and a fourth, each time slicing in a new place, breaking Harry up into pieces.

I only stop stabbing when I hear someone say my name.

"Lindsay, what are you doing?"

I'm holding the knife in the air, poised to strike again.

"I thought you'd be done making those hours ago. It's already ten." Harry checks his watch even though the stove's digital clock is right behind me.

“Does it matter as long as they’re done for tomorrow?” I relax my grip on the spoon.

“No, I guess not. Anyway, I’m going to bed. I need to be rested for the social. Try not to be up too late.” He turns to leave, narrowly escaping the spoon I hurl at his head.

## Chapter 12

### Crash

#### I. Laura

Laura had left her house earlier than she really needed to. She was going to end up waiting in the Starbucks for a good half hour before Brian met her, but she didn't mind. She'd have some extra time to get a good table, use the bathroom, sip her coffee slowly while it cooled.

As she drove, she paid attention to the different landmarks she was passing. She was in strip mall country, surrounded by Walmarts and Big Lots and tiny Chinese food restaurants. It was almost impossible to tell one shopping center from the next as she made her way to the intersection at North Atherton and Colonnade Boulevard. She pulled into the left turning lane behind a silver minivan.

Brian hadn't been to this Starbucks yet, and though he assured Laura that he'd be able to find it, he had no directional sense. Once, when they were in college, he had taken one wrong turn on his way to her house and gone missing for four hours.

Another reason to get there nice and early, she thought. I'll be able to answer the phone when he calls for help.

The light where she was waiting turned green, and the silver minivan in front of her inched up, waiting for the cars in the opposing lane to pass. Once the traffic cleared, the minivan accelerated into the turn just as the light turned yellow. Laura hesitated for one second before

deciding she had time to follow and hitting her own gas pedal. She had hardly moved five feet when there was a blur of color and a crash.

Laura slammed on her brakes and with a shaky hand lifted her gear shift into park. People were already getting out of their cars, leaving their doors open as they ran. The silver minivan she had been following stopped then moved again then stopped again. Laura opened her car door. Her shaking legs hit the pavement and she walked around to the front of her SUV. Lying on the ground in front of her car was a man in black motorcycle leathers and a red helmet. His bike lay a few feet away in several pieces.

Laura put her hands to her open mouth. Her body went numb.

## II. Max

Max tapped his fingers on the steering wheel along with the beat of the music on his way to pick up Jenna. She was planning on grabbing some lunch then going to see *Deadpool* at the theater. Max was planning on ordering a cup of coffee and letting Jenna down easy.

If he was being honest with himself, he wasn't really sure that this was what he wanted, but he'd made his decision and he had to stick to it. He and Jenna had been going out for three months now, long enough that he didn't feel weird calling her his girlfriend even though they never had "the talk."

And it had been a great three months. He knew that. They had seen each other nearly every day. At first, it had been dinners and drinks, planned social calls. Then, as the weeks went by they started spending more time inside together, cooking in his apartment or hers, watching TV in their pajamas, lying in one of their beds, reading, or talking, or just holding each other.

They'd started sleeping over, taking turns at each other's apartment, so that roommates didn't get bent out of shape.

Max loved spending time with her. He was happy.

Until one night when they were lying in bed together, and she mentioned that her lease was up in a few months.

"Maybe we should move in together." She turned her head so she was facing him. Max could tell she was nervous. Her breath was a little heavier than normal.

He reached out to touch her shoulder. He could see it: domestic bliss. They would go grocery shopping together and make healthy but delicious food. They would cuddle on the couch watching their favorite shows. At night, they'd kiss each other good night and turn off the lights in their bedroom, never worrying about whether or not their roommates would be upset.

"That'd be nice."

It wasn't until the next day that he realized everything sharing an apartment would mean. He hadn't ever shared an apartment with a girl. He'd stayed with girls, but he'd always had a separate place. Somewhere he could be alone. Somewhere he could feel totally safe from judgment: wear dirty clothes, refuse to shower.

Jenna would always be there once they lived together. She wouldn't want to live with someone who skipped showers, who smelled, who got cranky when he was stressed, and lashed out when he was overwhelmed.

For two weeks Max had been mulling over his thoughts, drawn to the idea of living with Jenna but simultaneously scared of it. Gradually his fear turned into frustration. When Jenna brought up apartment hunting, he snapped at her. He stayed at his own place more often.

And then he realized, if they couldn't live together, which they couldn't, it didn't really make sense to keep moving forward in this relationship. He would be leading her on.

He took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. He turned up his stereo, hoping to drown out some of his thoughts and anxieties.

There was a noise. Loud like an explosion. Cars skidded to a stop and Max had to hit his brakes hard to keep from rear ending the car in front of him. Almost immediately, Max realized what had happened. An SUV had made a left and hit a motorcycle. Max jumped out of his car and joined the crowd rushing over.

The woman who had hit the motorcyclist was standing with her hand over her mouth not moving.

Someone leaned down and checked his pulse.

"I can't...I can't tell. I can't find it..." she said.

The woman was repeating something over and over again, while another woman tried to pull her towards the sidewalk.

The pavement all around the accident was wet. Oh, god. Is that Blood? Max wondered. He felt nauseated.

A man announced that an ambulance was on its way.

Max took a few steps closer to the body. Its broad shoulders, big feet, and narrow hips told Max it was a man. Not a very tall man, though, Max thought, and not a motorcyclist like the movies depicted: burly with a beard and head to toe tattoos. In fact, the body didn't look very old or tough at all. He looks like me, Max thought. That could be me.

There were too many people around the body. Someone started pushing people back, Max included. He let himself be moved out of the way, then turned and walked back to his car.

He sat inside and called Jenna.

"I'm gonna be late."

He explained the accident to her. She asked if he was okay, if he needed her to come get him, and he started crying.

"Shhhh...It's okay, Max. You'll be okay." She repeated comforting words and phrases, and he pressed his phone tighter to the side of his head wanting to hear nothing but her voice.

"Can I stay at your place tonight?" he asked.

### III. Felicia

Felicia was having a really good day. The sun was out, the weather was getting warmer, and she'd finished her research paper two days before it was due, which meant she had a whole weekend to relax.

The only thing that would make this day better, she thought, is coffee.

Normally, she'd go to the Starbucks downtown, which was closer.

Today though, she felt like driving. She wanted the windows down and the radio up, so instead she went to the Starbucks that was further away, a good fifteen-minute drive from her apartment.

She got into the left turning lane just as the green arrow disappeared and stopped for the oncoming traffic, scooting up slowly, waiting for a break to make her turn.

Traffic was pretty heavy, a lot of people out enjoying the nice weather. Finally, there was a short gap before a motorcycle. Felicia could see he was going fast, but she made the turn, smoothly pulling into the parking lot.

She hadn't gotten more than fifteen feet when she heard a crash behind her. She slammed on her brakes and looked in her rearview mirror. She could see the motorcycle and the man who had been on it lying on the ground behind her.

Immediately, Felicia started to sweat, her chest got tight, her eyes went wide.

Her first thought was that it had been her fault. She had turned too close to him. She had hit him. Or he had swerved and fallen. She had killed him.

Then she saw the red SUV behind him, nearly on top of him, and she realized: the car behind her had turned, hadn't seen him.

There were other people out of their cars now, running over to him. Felicia knew she should get out of her car too. She should help. But she didn't move. And then she thought, I'm blocking the lane. I can't block the lane.

She pulled forward a few feet then slammed on her brakes again.

You need to get out of the car a voice told her.

You can't leave your car here another voice said.

Move.

Move.

She pulled forward again and continued around the parking lot to a parking space. Once her car was parked, the voice telling her to run and help took over and she ran across the parking lot back to the scene. A big crowd had gathered. Someone was squatting next to him. Someone else had called 911. A woman on the sidewalk was crying and, it sounded, on the

verge of hyperventilating. Another woman embraced her, shhh-ed her, tried to get her to calm down.

"This is my fault, this is my fault, this is my fault," the woman said over and over again.

She had short gray hair and looked about fifty. She looks like my mom, Felicia thought.

Some of the crowd started to disperse, giving the scene some room. A few men pushed the SUV back so it was away from the biker and pulled the bike, which was in more than one piece, into one pile.

The woman who had hit him stopped repeating her refrain to cry harder. Felicia didn't know what to do. She felt helpless and lost.

"The fluid on the ground is from her car. The bike must have torn something open," one of the men announced.

Felicia tried to concentrate on steadying her breath. She could feel her heart beating too fast.

I need to do something, she thought. There has to be something I can do.

The woman who had hit the bike was finally convinced to sit down on the sidewalk. Her legs were shaky, and Felicia was glad that she wouldn't have to see her collapse. The woman who was comforting her kept saying, "it was an accident, just an accident."

Felicia squatted down so she was next to the woman.

"Do you want something to drink?" she asked.

The woman took a little while to answer.

"Wa-water." Her breath was hitching over and over. She needed a paper bag, Felicia thought.

"Okay, I'll get that," Felicia told her. "I'll be right back." She turned and ran into the Starbucks. A line of people waited to get coffee, and Felicia almost ran into one of them in surprise. An older couple looked at her suspiciously and she realized she was shaking. The people inside the café had no idea what was happening outside. They had no idea that they were only a parking lot away from what might be a dead body.

Felicia was only one customer away from ordering now. The woman in front of her was getting some fancy latte with milk substitutions and extra syrups and Felicia had an overwhelming urge to hit her, to scream in her face "this isn't important!" She wanted to push her out of the way, grab the barista by her green apron and demand water.

The woman finally moved out of the way and Felicia stepped forward. "Water!" she said.

The barista smiled at her.

"What size would you like?"

Felicia was taken aback. "Uh...I... medium."

The woman smiled again and grabbed a medium cup.

"And do you want that with ice or without?" she asked.

Felicia clenched her hands tightly trying to keep them from shaking. "It...it doesn't matter. It's not for me."

The barista's smile faltered. "Oh..."

"No ice," Felicia said, anxious just to have the cup in her hand. The barista wrote something on the side and put the cup down next to her.

"That'll be ready at the end of the bar."

Right, Felicia thought. She had to wait in line again.

She moved to the end of the bar and stood behind the woman with the fancy latte. She couldn't stop herself from tapping her foot on the floor, a rapid beat.

She looked around the café and noticed several tables were watching her, glancing up and away.

They think I'm on drugs or something, she thought. I probably look like I've taken a handful of speed.

Finally, the barista put her water on the counter and she grabbed it. She ran full speed to the door, catching the attention of more than one patron.

"You don't understand!" She wanted to scream at them.

She leaned down and gently gave the water to the woman from the SUV. She was still crying, but it seemed slightly less hysterical.

She took the water in a shaking hand and sipped through the straw, just a little bit before setting it down next to her.

Felicia stayed with her until the police arrived. One cop asked what had happened and Felicia and another guy her age managed to give him the best picture they could.

After the cops, some firemen showed up. One of them poured what looked like sand onto the liquid that had spilled all over the pavement from the SUV. From the motorcycle, too, probably, Felicia thought, looking at its mangled pieces.

Another of the firemen started directing traffic, letting cars pass by in a slow single file line.

When the EMTs finally showed up, they got to work constructing a stretcher next to the body. "He's conscious!" one of the EMTs called to another. Felicia sighed in relief, then watched the rest of the cleanup without any real thought. Emotions and words were flying

through her too rapidly for her to understand them. They just became part of the accident she was observing.

Felicia shivered and realized it felt much colder now than it had when she had left her apartment. She wished she had brought a heavier jacket. The sun wasn't nearly as bright as she had imagined. In fact, the weather wasn't that nice at all she realized.

#### IV. Laura

The EMTs arrived last and lifted the, thankfully alive, motorcyclist into the back of their ambulance. The police had already taken her statement. She sat on the curb watching the firemen clean up spills from her car and the boy's motorcycle. She hoped Brian arrived soon. He would have to drive her home.

*I did this. This is my fault.*

She was vaguely aware of a hand rubbing her back. The girl who had brought her some water.

"Who hit him?" One of the EMTs asked and Laura said, in the steadiest voice she could, "Me."

Two of them walked over to her then, approaching her slowly.

"Are you okay?" One asked.

She didn't know what to say.

"Me?"

He nodded. "How are you?"

"I'm worried, just worried about him." She gestured towards the ambulance.

The EMT nodded, but knelt down in front of her and pulled something out of his pocket.

"Do you mind if I shine this light in your eyes," he asked.

She shook her head and then there was a bright spot.

She could hear her heart. It was pounding against her rib cage. Squeezing tight and releasing too fast. Her head was spinning and her mouth was dry. She thought she might vomit.

"I think she's in shock."

Laura heard the words, but couldn't see who had said them. The world blurred in front of her, just a mix of colors, no distinguishable shapes, before everything went black.

## V. Dom

Dom left his parent's house in upstate New York earlier than normal. Most visits home lasted the whole weekend, especially since his PhD studies kept him from seeing them very often.

But today...

Today was too good to pass up.

Dom got his bike ready in the driveway. Filled her up with gasoline, washed the dust and dirt off her white and red paint, gave her tires a quick spray.

The sky was cloudless, the sun was bright, the temperature perfect, with a slight breeze that whispered, *spring, spring, spring*.

Dom pulled on the black motorcycle leathers he'd received for Christmas (mostly to please his mom who was always worried about him riding his bike) and his red helmet.

The first part of the drive was slow, moving carefully down winding roads, adjusting to the feeling of the tires on the road, getting his body in tune with the bike so that he needed only the tiniest movement this way or that to change her direction.

Then he hit the freeway.

It wasn't long before he'd left the speed limit behind, letting himself have some fun, basking in the feel of the wind against his body and the adrenaline in his veins. It was without a doubt his favorite feeling in the world.

Eventually, as he neared home, the roads started to get congested again, the speed limit dropped significantly, forcing him to slow down, and strip malls started appearing on his right and left.

He was coming up on a light and hit the gas a little harder, wanting to make it through. It turned yellow before he could reach it, but he was going too fast to stop in time, so he hit the gas again.

As he flew under the light, he caught some movement out of the corner of his eye. And then there was a lot of pain.

\*

Dom woke up with faces close to his.

The whole left side of his body hurt and his head was pounding. For a second, he wondered if someone was repeatedly hitting it. He moved his neck, trying to see better, but one of the men next to him told him to stop. He lifted his right arm into the air, wanting to get up, but someone pushed it down.

Suddenly, there were hands on him, lifting him, and placing him back down on something hard.

“We’re gonna move you to the ambulance now,” one of the men said.

He was lifted again, still on top of the board—a stretcher he realized—and carried into the back of van, set down on a table.

“His helmet is intact.” Dom couldn’t see who said it.

He moved his neck again, craning it to the right, trying to see his surroundings.

“You’re going to be okay,” the same voice said. “Just try not to move.”

The doors of the ambulance shut, cutting Dom off from the sunlight, and leaving the ambulance significantly darker, especially under his helmet.

Dom heard the sirens come on, and then they were moving.

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