

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

“WOMAN OF THE YEAR”

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SPRING 2017

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in Chemical Engineering  
with honors in English.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis contains three manuscripts, two of novella-length and one short story. While each one is unique, they all intersect at the themes of perseverance and character tribulation. The first novella, *Vernon, North Georgia*, was the winner of the Edward Nichols Creative Writing Award in Spring 2016. It depicts the turning point in the life of a troubled man, not quite so innocent or young. In the longer novella, *Grace for Saints and Ramblers*, the bildungsroman-genre shapes a story of a girl losing her father to cancer. The final chapter contains the only short story, *Woman of the Year*, based on the life of my late great-grandmother and her struggle as a single mother and business pioneer in the 1960s. They are all organized in a chronological timeline told from a third-person perspective. The ultimate purpose is to make the reader reflect on their own struggles, whether in comparison to or in sympathy with the characters in these stories.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It's funny how we thank people when we are the ones doing the work in creating a piece of art or scholarly research. Nevertheless, I would like to thank my parents first. They pushed me all throughout my life, and I wouldn't even be in such a privileged position to write a thesis without their support and encouragement. My grandparents have also been an integral part of my success. I owe special gratitude to my aunt and uncle who proofread my early drafts of novels and short stories that will never make it beyond the hard drive of my computer. It takes one person to encourage the art of writing, and I was lucky enough to have two.

## Vernon, North Georgia

*2016 Winner of Edward Nichols Award*

On Christmas Eve of '05, Eleanor Clark fell asleep while smoking a cigarette in bed during a brisk Georgia morning. The old lace duvet caught first; the small orange flames painted a violent sunset across the cream-colored fabric that had been a hand-made wedding present from Grandma June. When the fire department came later to salvage what was left from the blaze, they carried a burned corpse from the bedroom and placed it on the frozen lawn. A white sheet was placed over her in the shade by the big oak tree, the one with the old tire swing. She was so badly charred that no one would again see her golden, wispy hair. Her bright blue eyes were forever burned out. But then again, no one could see the bruises or the scars.

Mason thought it was better that way. She was at peace. Besides, his father wouldn't have liked to answer to the police for any suspicious marks on Eleanor. When Mason got home that day to find the lone fire truck in southern Chattooga County sitting at the end of the long, tree-lined driveway, he knew something was dead wrong. The house was reduced to ashes by then, and the fire chief laid a hand on his shoulder as if to say *sorry, there's nothing to be done*.

He saw the skeleton of his house, and a strange feeling of relief washed over him. Then he saw the white sheet over what looked like a human body, and he averted his gaze. His young face aged in the moments he watched them take his mother away. He was a man, but he retained his quiet disposition, giving his stringy brown hair and soft blue eyes an innocent look. Though Mason was nearly thirty, he felt younger. Young enough to cry. But when he walked to town and

telephoned his older brother in the Georgia State Penitentiary over on Route 147, he was calm and unemotional.

“Ma’s dead,” he drawled in a whisper. It felt weird to say it aloud.

There was silence on the other line, but he knew Neal had heard him.

“Did dad do it?” he asked. Mason heard the fear in his brother’s voice, the trepidation with which he spoke. He could feel it through the greasy pay-phone he held in his dirty hands, as he stood there watching the entrance to the supermarket, decked out in all of its Christmas glory. He felt cold.

“Nah,” Mason grunted. “Burned the house to the ground with her cigarette.”

Neal breathed a heavy sigh. Mason could picture his brother in his prison garb, no worse for wear than when he had been on the streets, strung out and waiting for someone to use his brass knuckles on. He probably had a beard now. Mason nearly smiled at the thought.

“It’s better this way,” his brother said nonchalantly. “Where’s that old fuck anyway?”

“Dunno,” Mason replied, receiving a dirty look from a woman carrying two paper bags with vegetables sticking out of the top. He averted his eyes and looked at the ground. Mason was about to explain that he hadn’t seen their father in quite some time, but the operator cut in and asked to deposit more money, and he was out of quarters. He hung up the payphone and stared out at the parking lot, his right hand in his pocket and his left hand holding his knapsack that had his pocket knife and a pack of smokes. He had everything he owned right here.

There was a slight chance that the police would be able to find his father to make arrangements for Eleanor’s body. But it was Christmas Eve, and the last thing anyone wanted to do was look for a dead-beat redneck. Mason didn’t think anyone could find his father anyway,

especially because the man was well-known for vanishing for unprecedented amounts of time. His disappearance had prompted him to stay with his Ma.

For now, Mason figured he was on his own. Ma was dead. Pa wasn't anywhere to be found. Neal would be out of prison in a few more weeks, and then maybe they could be nomads together. The thoughts of unlikely escape filled his head as he plodded on the wet road.

He pictured his brother, a free man again. The wind at their backs on Neal's old motorbike. They might look for a place to settle; maybe in Georgia, or maybe they would take their chances and head north. The Carolinas sounded like a prayer in his thoughts. There was just so much to see beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains; maybe they could even go farther south—to Savannah. The city. Neal could make his money dealing, and they'd be able to call a cheap little apartment home. It'd be cramped and nothing fancy, but they'd be together. Maybe Mason could even find a job, some kind of manual labor or something that kept his hands busy. It wouldn't be any A-list life, but it'd still be enough.

It would have to be.

The snow flurry picked up, chilling him through the thin fabric of his sweatshirt. He decided to walk up to the old church. It beat spending Christmas in a parking lot, and at least he could sleep on one of the pews—something he'd done more than a few times as a kid when his father's drunken rages were too much. The four-mile walk to the outskirts of Vernon, North Georgia seemed bitterly cold, even though this had been a mild winter so far. Snow flurried around him and across the deserted road as the overcast sky guided him to the small white church positioned on the old mill grounds.

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A few months later, Mason was sitting in the small living space that he and Neal could call home. His brother was out somewhere, and Mason was home, waiting for him to come back drunk and high, needing a babysitter. He was rummaging through Neal's nightstand, looking for a new lighter, when he came across a handgun.

It sparked an old memory. He remembered the day he had walked up the long, shady driveway in the May humidity, right after a thunderstorm. His Ma had been washing an iron pan in the sink, her eyes red-rimmed from crying. She had bruises all over her upper body, a nauseating purple shade that likely meant his old man was sleeping off a hangover in his vomit-green chair. Something inside of him snapped when he walked into the house and saw her silently crying.

While his Pa was passed out in his drunken stupor, he quietly tiptoed up the stairs—creaky though they were—to the hall closet. He had seen Pa pull his handgun out of here more than once; one time he had even threatened Neal with it. Mason might have only been a teenager but he knew the ins and outs of bearing arms. Neal had shown him before he got carted off for armed robbery last fall. Mason clutched the neatly folded towels and pulled them aside, to see the 9mm Smith & Wesson. He thought they might put him in a cell next to Neal, and he could be with his brother. And his mother would finally be free.

When he turned around with the gun in his hands, she was standing there, with her puffy eyes and bruises and all. Her shaking hands took the gun from him silently, her fingers clutching the barrel that was pointed down at the floor. He watched her tuck the gun back under the towels, and then she covered his mouth with her hands, leading him into the bedroom. He remembers how she held him quietly, tears falling from her cheeks as she buried his head in her old sweater. She smelled of strawberry jam, the kind she used to make on Sundays, with a mix of cigarettes and soap. *"You can't,"* she had sobbed quietly into his hair. *"It's too late for me, Mason. It's too*

*late for me and Neal, but it ain't for you. You're gonna make it,"* she whispered, kissing his forehead. Her hands were matted with sweat and ash as she smoothed back his greasy hair, looking him in the eye with the saddest smile he had ever known. *"You're the one thing I'm gonna do right in this world."*

He felt a sting of regret rise in his throat as he wished he would have defied her that day and shot his father square in the chest. He lamented that he could have seen his Pa clutch at his heart as he bled out on the kitchen floor, staining his house of sin with his own blood. Mason shook those thoughts from his head, as he abandoned his search for a lighter and went to bed. He counted his breaths and tried to listen to the beating of his own heart. The steady *thump, thump, thump* reminded him of his own vitality, something that he couldn't just forsake. He fell asleep.

An obnoxious vibration broke through the dim bedroom. A phone was stuck between the headboard and the mattress, rattling the bed. Mason stirred slowly. His long, unkempt hair obscured his vision, making it nearly impossible to see anything. It took him over a minute to fully wake up, and by that time the phone had stopped vibrating. He cursed loudly, reaching between the dusty wood and the old, moldy mattress to grope for the damn thing in the dark.

He had it in his hand for two seconds before it vibrated again: UNKNOWN CALLER.

Mason sighed, his head in his phone-free hand before answering. "What?" he asked rudely. He wasn't always so curt, but he glanced at the old clock-radio on his nightstand and saw that it was nearly two-thirty in the morning. He had the right to be disgruntled.

"Sorry—is this, is this Mason Clark?" The voice on the other line was silk. Pure, smooth, angelic.

"Yeah, who's this?"

“My name’s Leila; I’ve got your brother here down at Old Jack’s. He ain’t fit to drive, do y’all mind comin’ down to get him?” He could picture her. A wanna-be southern belle with bleached hair and a fake promise ring on a silver chain around her neck. Neal’s type. Easy and sweet.

“Ah, shit,” Mason sighed. “Yeah, I’ll be down as soon as I can.”

He grabbed a gray shirt he had worn two days ago at Neal’s hearing (this time he was lucky enough to get parole, but Mason wasn’t sure how long his brother’s freedom would last). He drove his old Chevy pickup down the highway, straight to Neal’s favorite dive. After he had gotten out from his first major sentence, he had taken Mason here, since they didn’t card. He was thinking about that night as he pulled into the parking lot, but all the memories halted at the sight of the girl sitting with his brother.

Next to the old tree stump in the front stood a young-looking girl, her hands in her pockets and her face turned toward the incoming vehicle. With his headlights straining in the darkness, he was able to make out the gist of her outfit: old jeans and some kind of white lace shirt. Mason had gotten the sweet part right, anyway. Neal sat, slumped on the stump, obviously doing his best to remain conscious given the circumstances. Mason approached them nervously.

“You’re Mason,” she smiled. As he got closer, he saw her smile matched her charm. Her features were visible in the lone, flickering flood light. It flashed against the silver cross that lay flat against her even flatter chest. Dark hair tumbled in waves down her shoulders, and her blue eyes were luminous. Her skin was tanned, more than natural for the early May season.

All Mason did was nod. He didn’t have time for young, bar-hopping girls. He reached out his hand to grab Neal, to coax him to the truck (they would have to come back in the morning to pick up his bike). His brother smacked his hand away, looking up into the young girl’s eyes.

“You see here, Masina?” he chuckled at his own joke. “We got ourselves an angel. The finest angel Vernon has ev’r seen. Leila. Leila the *angel*. She saved us, little brother. Saved us.” The girl did not blush, like Mason expected her to. Neal’s attempts to flirt were transparent at best, but obviously, this girl wasn’t here to play games.

“Neal, you’ve had your fun. C’mon,” he grabbed his brother by his collar, and forced him across the gravel parking lot, into the truck. When he turned around, he was met with a pair of bright blue eyes.

“You gonna be alright?” she asked. Her voice was like honey.

Mason gave her a stiff nod. She seemed disappointed in his lack of response, but he didn’t have time to play games with a *little girl*. Her shoulders were slumped just the slightest as she walked away, and Mason was reminded, for a moment, of how his Ma would stand that way against the kitchen sink. After Pa had hit her.

“Hey!” he called out before he could stop himself. She froze. He swallowed dryly; he didn’t have the faintest clue what to say to a girl like this. “Why’d you help him?” he asked. She turned around, to see his hand pointed toward Neal, slumped over in the truck. Out like a light.

“Because it was the right thing to do,” she said. Then she walked closer to him.

“He’s just some redneck asshole,” he said earnestly. “Just let the cops take care of him next time. Don’t fuss over him.”

“You know,” she sassed, “most people would just say thank you.”

“I ain’t most people,” he muttered lowly.

There was something then, the way her eyes lit up. Her lips opened like she wanted to say something, but she thought better of it and stayed quiet. Instead she reached into her purse and pulled out a business card and handed it to him. Mason could just make it out in the bad light:

*Vernon First Baptist  
Rev. Bernard Robinson  
Sunday Worship 11 a.m.*

“You don’t have to come,” she said quickly, after he had read it. “Your brother, he kept talking about needin’ savin’, and I don’t think it’s an accident that he ran into me.”

Mason felt like he had been slapped in the face. This stupid girl had no right to insinuate *anything* about him or his brother. “Girl, listen, you don’t know me or my brother. We don’t need help, and we sure as hell don’t need no ‘salvation.’” Her lower lip trembled, like she might start to cry. But her eyes were solid, fierce, staring into his soul like she knew he was lying.

“My mistake,” she deadpanned.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Mason spat as he turned on his heel and jumped into the truck. He nudged his brother, who was passed out cold against the window. Shaking his head, he sped out of the parking lot, his eyes flicking over to Leila’s form. Even in the dim lighting, he could see her stern expression, almost mocking his departure.

“She’s an *angel*, brother,” Neal muttered, almost inaudibly.

He refused to look at her again as he pulled out onto the road, driving off into the night.

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Mason sat on the steps of the trailer the next morning, his eyes still too tired to really focus on anything but the tip of the cigarette that rested between his teeth. Neal clamored in the kitchen, shouting at someone on his cell phone. *You good for nothing summabitch*, he yelled, *Where am I gonna get that kinda money fore tomorrow?* Mason ignored him, trying to forget how much Neal sounded like their father. He watched as his brother rushed outside and sped away on his

motorcycle, not even bothering to tell Mason where he was off to. Mason had to keep him close, because they were blood and that was that. Their old man had never cared enough about any of them.

Their Ma had told them this before. How the devilishly handsome Herb Clark had proposed to her with the cheapest diamond he found scavenge for. He told her long-winded sweet-nothings of love and happiness and little children with puppies. Ma had said she'd been blinded by her vivacious view on life to see through his lies. Her family resented it, begged her to call off the wedding. How could their Eleanor, their bright little star, marry someone so cruel and spiteful as he? She walked down the aisle, traded her last name, and her family never saw her again.

And like every sad movie and clichéd plot, the day Herb Clark made Eleanor his wife, everything changed. He drank, he whored, he made his kids put soap in a sock and there wasn't a day in his life that he every gave half a thought to their lives.

He didn't know why his Ma told them this. But his Ma had never been one to hide anything from him and Neal. He wasn't sure if she was just that honest or if the heartache made it more difficult to lie. Or maybe she was warning them, letting them know that they only had each other, that they can't rely on anyone for anything. She couldn't go back. And she couldn't stay. And now she was dead and her sons were living on the fringe, skirting town and their problems.

Now as he sat on the porch steps of their trailer, he realized what a load of shit all that was with his Ma. She had put her stock in the wrong person. Mason would end up like Neal, with a rap sheet going on for miles. Or worse, he'd end up like his useless old man, the most disrespected household name in all of Georgia. He had tainted blood. He drew the cigarette from his mouth, stubbing it out on the porch as the sound of a motorcycle approached from the highway. He had

been so lost in thought; he hadn't noticed that half of the pack of smokes had been put out. The sun was high in the sky.

Neal pulled up on his bike, but something wasn't right. His hands were covered in red; his face and his shirt were stained crimson, like blood. It took Mason a split second to react. He was used to Neal bringing home his problems, but it had been in long time since something like this had happened.

"Brother," he rasped, jumping off the bike. "I need you to get out of here."

Mason froze half-way up into the door. "What did you do?"

Neal had that defiant look like always. The one that said he knew he'd done wrong, that he'd probably do wrong again. "Things got out of hand. But I know some cops be comin' down here to nab me, and I don't want them to ring me or you up on that coke I got. Take it and run."

"I ain't leavin' ya," Mason told him. "Not 'til you get booked, you know that."

Neal sighed and laid a hand on his brother's shoulder, his hand covered with fresh blood. Mason couldn't look at it, didn't want to think about where it came from. "I don't know if I'll be gettin' out for this one," he said, looking at the ground. "You gotta give me my best shot and high-tail outta here."

"Why'd you do it?" he asked. "What's wrong with you, huh? You got some kinda obsession with bein' locked up?"

Neal looked at the floor, refusing to answer. "Mason, just get that shit and get out of here."

Mason reluctantly obeyed, shrugging off his shirt and grabbing a dirty one from the floor before rummaging around for the drugs. He flushed it down the toilet. Neal gave him a salute.

"You'll know where to find me," he yelled, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

Mason rummaged through his jacket pocket for the keys to the engine. He pulled out an old lighter and a business card, both of which he threw to the floor. He found his keys in the mirror flap, started the engine, and pulled out of there. Since Mason was born, he had dealt with his brother being in and out of prison. These situations were nothing new, and Mason knew a thing or two about loyalty. Neal was blood, and you don't just abandon your kin. But if Neal had done that—had *murdered* someone—then there was no way he'd be a free man ever again if he got caught. Nothing Mason could do to fix that.

He stopped at a 7/11 to fill up on gas. After he handed the clerk a ten, he sat in the truck for a few minutes, collecting his thoughts. His nerves were running high and adrenaline was pumping from his heart, shooting into his veins. He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, searching the floor of the truck for the lighter he had tossed aside earlier. His hand groped in the darkness, feeling unfamiliar metal, carpet, and a piece of glossy paper. He pulled it out to find the business card that girl had given him a few weeks ago, the night he picked up Neal from the bar. Her name was funny, Lee-lah or something.

He thumbed the card again, reading the address of the church. He'd seen it before many times, going through town. It was an old white chapel with a peach tree next to the front steps. The one he had spent Christmas Eve in after his Ma died. He sighed and put the paper back into his pocket. Neal had run off by now, Mason knew. No way he could go home; they'd just bring him in for questioning. Neal was just like old Herb Clark, never content to stay in one place in life for too long. He sighed as he took the old dirt road out of town, heading north towards the church.

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Vernon First Baptist had two front doors with pure white paint and crystal-clear glass windows on each. Mason tentatively opened the door, the smooth brass knob mocking his dirty

hands, calloused and uneven. The smell of candle wax and fresh paper was instantaneous as he stepped forward, the hardwood floor nearly showing his reflection. It was simple, but he still felt extremely out of place as he sat down on the pew in the back against the wall, the wood creaking under his weight.

They had only been to church one time as a family. It had been this pew they sat in, creaking under their sin on Easter Sunday all those years ago. Eleanor had worn the only bit of jewelry she owned—a string of pearls that glistened like white light, resting on her collar bone and giving her an elegant, almost regal appearance. Mason had only seen his Ma wear them once before, for his grandmother’s funeral down on the river. They had held hands and thrown her ashes into the Etowah waters. Eleanor had looked beautiful then, even with her tear-stained face and bruises, thin as paper in her prairie dress.

Those pearls didn’t burn up with the house because his Pa had sold them a few years ago after one of his self-destructive benders. “*Now don’t you worry about your mean old Pa,*” she had whispered after Mason had tried to rip the necklace from his father’s drunk hands. She had been thrown against the cedar doorframe when she tried to prevent him from taking the pearls, but it was no use. Mason shook his head, doing his best to not think about his Ma right now. He needed to focus—to clear his head. He looked around.

The door to his right stood closed, a picture of Jesus on the cross looking at him sadly. Something shifted, and he looked away, down at the floor. Mason didn’t have a good reason to be here. All he knew was Neal was gone, his buddies probably with him, and that meant they were probably on the run. It was too early to head to the bars—and anyone looking for Neal would know where to sniff around, so that was dangerous. He wished he could have just gone with his brother, just like he thought all those years ago with the gun in his hands.

“Oh, good, you’re here for the groundskeeping position!” a voice boomed to his left. He hadn’t even noticed the door had opened. Mason looked around, too see if there was anyone else because surely the pastor was not referring to *him*. Mason had a wrinkled gray shirt on, dirty old jeans that he just realized had a cigarette burn on his left thigh. He didn’t look like he belonged. “Oh, don’t be shy,” the man smiled from the doorway. “You’re Hollis Jennings, right?”

Mason just nodded. What else could he do?

“Perfect. I’m Reverend Robinson; I’ll show you around.” As he got up to follow him, Mason remembered the name Robinson from the girl at the bar. Leila. The Reverend looked older. He had a long gray beard, his blue eyes kind and watchful at the same time. He matched Mason’s height at nearly six feet. He tried to make small talk, but Mason wasn’t good at that.

“You hear about that cop that got shot up North this morning?” he asked.

Mason just shook his head, and the Reverend stopped trying to get him to talk.

“This is the cemetery,” he said, smiling. “It just needs prettied up a few times a week. Some folks will come put flowers for their dead. Just be respectful and work around ‘em if that happens.” He smiled at Mason, as if to see if he was listening. Mason just nodded. He was about to come out and tell the truth when someone else spoke.

“Daddy, I need the storage key to get the chairs for the meetin’ tonight,” a voice sing-songed from behind him. Mason turned around to see the girl from the bar. Her cowgirl boots hit her mid-shin, and they were muddy and coming apart at the sole. She had a light blue dress on, and her hair was pinned up in some fancy way. He swallowed dryly. She was a lot prettier than he remembered. She seemed older too. He could peg her at maybe twenty, or twenty-two. Still probably ten years younger than him. She apparently recognized him too. She faltered the smallest bit as she looked at him, but he noticed. The look of recognition.

“I’ll get you that key,” Rev. Robinson said, looking at his daughter. “This is Hollis Jennings, the man who offered to take Mr. Landry’s post.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, looking at him. From her eyes alone, Mason could tell she knew he was lying. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Jennings,” she smiled (fake, he could see it) and shook his hand.

“This is my daughter, Leila,” the Reverend said. “She runs the Saturday night meetings in the basement.” Mason nodded. Silently trying to communicate with Leila how grateful he was for going with his cover. “I’ll run and get that key,” he said, leaving them alone.

Mason just stood there, not really knowing what to do with his arms or his hands. As soon as her father was out of earshot, she put her hand on her hip and said, “Really, you decided to show up?”

“I didn’t mean to,” he whispered roughly.

“Mhmm,” she said as she rolled her eyes. “Then why are you lyin’ to my daddy about who you are?” He shrugged. “I think you came here to mess with me. I think you and your brother are up to something no good. What do ya’ll want? Money? Cause we ain’t a church that helps freeloaders.”

“Hey,” he said suddenly, loudly. “I don’t have much, but I ain’t never gonna beg for money.” He was reminded of her ridiculous assumptions back at the bar, when she thought he needed “saving.” She was looking at him smugly, with that stupid, pretty face.

“Then why are you takin’ a job you don’t know nothin’ about?”

He had no response, other than to look at her shoes, and the way they curved around her feet, molded to their shape. How the worn leather met her tanned-skin, the beautiful shade that he

thought looked like the lightest chocolate he'd ever seen. That night at the bar he had thought she was tan from the sun, but now he realized she was Cherokee.

"I ain't gonna say nothin' to him," she said, throwing her thumb over her shoulder in the direction of her father, who had reappeared from the chapel. "If you're here, you obviously need the job. I'll let the real Jennings know and that we found someone else, but you better stop lyin'. Right now." She had moved closer to him, her posture threatening, and he could smell her perfume. It was sweet, but her words were not.

"Oh, and if you would mind not telling my daddy that you met me at a bar. Let's keep it between us, *Mason*."

She walked away then, turning on her heel, her blue dress swishing back and forth against her creamy-looking chocolate skin. He could hear Neal's voice in his head, *Go for it, little brother. Aim as fucking high as you can get. Won't ever work out bad for you*. He shook it off; he was a dirty redneck with nothing to offer. She would never even think of him that way. He'd been lucky enough to find a spot to lay low until Neal came back to gather him and skip town, and he couldn't mess that up.

"So, Hollis," the Reverend said. Mason hadn't even noticed that he arrived. "Let me show you the keys to the shed..."

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Mason was living in the old servant's quarters of the churchyard, refusing to go back to trailer. Neal had told him to get out, so he did. He spent his days using hedge-clippers and lawnmowers, planting seeds and fertilizing landscaping. Mason was used to manual labor. He wasted his high school summers working with a group of local home builders, where his Uncle Tim,

Herb's brother, had hired him as his assistant. Uncle Tim had an ongoing affair with the bottle and often sent Mason in his place. Sawing wood and heavy lifting were part of that routine, and he found he liked the business of it. It saved him from thinking about going home to his Pa, to find him drunk or high or just plain gone.

One morning, the summer before what would have been his senior year, Mason showed up at the subdivision the construction crew was working in, expecting to start work on the roofing. He walked the twelve miles to the site to find an ambulance and a group of men huddled around something. Uncle Tim was rushed to the hospital after showing up drunk to the site that morning.

“Son of a bitch just flat-fuck fell,” one of the men said.

Uncle Tim was never quite right after that. Mason missed the work, the mindlessness of it. Neal's nomad lifestyle had Mason in and out of apartments and basements, never with a steady job or paycheck. Mason longed for some kind of routine in his days, and working for the Reverend's church provided just that. Repainting the windows on the chapel was his new task. He would use the smallest brush they had to make it last as long as possible. It made for a better job too, which Leila admired when she found him outside on the scaffold. She was looking at him through the open window.

“Want some lunch?” she asked. She had two sandwiches on a plate and a pitcher of lemonade. He had thought that after her threat last week when he started that he wouldn't be seeing her much.

“Sure,” he said.

She climbed through the window as if she had done it a thousand times before. The small wooden plank barely had enough room for him, so as she gracefully stepped onto it, he couldn't help but smell her perfume again. Today she had on a pair of jeans and that long-sleeved lace shirt

she had worn the night they had met at the bar. When he realized he remembered her shirt, he shook his head. Couldn't be thinking thoughts like that.

"Hope you like ham and cheese," she smiled, pouring the lemonade into a glass for him. He took a bite and nodded appreciatively. Leila sat across from him, her legs crossed Indian-style, smiling as if they were best friends.

"Why are you being nice to me?" he finally asked. "You threatened me a week ago and now you're making me lunch?" She blushed (he mentally noted how nice her heated chocolate cheeks were, how it made her glow).

Her pink lips parted to take a deep breath. "It's a peace offering. I wanted to apologize," she said. Mason looked at her like he didn't believe her. "Look, I realized that it wasn't fair to treat you that way. You obviously came here for your own reasons, and I had no right to treat you the way I did. Everyone has their time of need, and as a woman of God, I ought to give you the help you deserve."

Mason sat, stunned. He hid it by taking another bite of the sandwich—which was delicious. "So you don't care that I lied to your dad?"

She shrugged. "I've lied to him before, too. I don't know what it is, but I trust you, Mason. I think you're a good person, and I think there's something wrong." So that's the real reason she had brought him lunch. To fish for information. Before he could be angry, she read his mind and quickly added, "And you don't have to tell me anything. I know you're close with your brother. He's not here, and I think you're doing this for him. That's how family works."

"He'll be back," he told her. Mason didn't like to talk to anyone, but he felt like he owed her something for just *understanding*. She seemed more attentive, her blue eyes fixed on him. "Neal likes to disappear. But he also likes to come back. And when he does, I'm gone."

She nodded, and she reached one of her hands out to touch his knee. He felt a jolt of electricity run through his leg and coil in his stomach at her touch. He flinched, and she noticed, withdrawing her hand apologetically. "I understand." He didn't say anything else the rest of the time they sat on the scaffold before she went back inside the chapel. She was content to sit in silence, to watch the birds fly across the churchyard or the wind carry away the pink blossoms on the peach trees.

Leila came around a lot more, after that. She would bring him lunch sometimes if he wasn't too busy. Other times she would watch him do work. Mason thought he would be annoyed with her presence, hovering all the time. The truth was, he looked forward to when she would sit next to him on the grass, her pretty hair splayed across her skin, watching him with genuine interest. He had to shut out Neal's voice in his head, to not think of her that way. Because not only was she his boss's daughter, but her father was a preacher. And he was a redneck from white-trash Georgia, but he wouldn't let himself become a dirty, perverted redneck from white-trash Georgia.

She talked about herself most days and kept true to her word regarding him keeping his life private if he wished. Leila told him her mother had been Cherokee, as he suspected. She reminisced of her childhood summers on the reservation in Canton, where she spent weeks at her grandparents' before the Green Corn Festival. "My father would even stay for the big feast," she had smiled fondly. "I miss it more than anything."

"So why don't you go back?" he asked her.

Her posture had stiffened then, her eyes filled with that sadness he had seen before. "When I was sixteen, my mother passed away," she said. "I haven't been to the reservation since. My grandparents don't understand my contemporary lifestyle. My mother was the bridge, the *asvtlvi*, my grandfather used to call her. To be honest, for a long time I didn't want to go back."

“My ma,” he started to speak, and his voice sounded foreign to him. Leila even looked at him in surprise. “She passed away, too. I came home from work one day, and she was just...gone.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her hand closing over his. He felt a connection with her after that, in a sick way. He didn’t enjoy her pain, and he didn’t push her to share it with him. It was refreshing, though he would never admit it, to have something in common with her. It felt even better to share it with her. She seemed to have no rules anymore after he had opened up to her, and she asked him questions now when she wished.

“How old are you?” she asked one day in mid-June, while eating a plump peach she had picked from the tree in the front. She had been watching him for over an hour, and he had a funny feeling in his stomach about it. Like she wanted something.

He paused his handiwork for a moment, “Older than you,” he said.

“I’m almost twenty-three,” she said, sitting up on her knees. “You can’t be much older.”

“Add seven years,” he told her with his back to her, nailing the new wood plank onto the staircase to the front of the church. He didn’t like where this was going, so he averted her attention.

“Why you workin’ for your daddy?” he asked her, lighting a cigarette while assembling the wood.

“So you’re thirty,” she smiled.

“Quit avoidin’ the question,” he warned her.

“You’re the one avoidin’ things,” she accused him back. He rolled his eyes, taking a long drag, watching her eyes crinkle at the smell of the smoke. Then she relented, “Oh, alright. I didn’t finish college,” she said lowly, clearly embarrassed.

“Got farther than me,” he told her. “I didn’t even finish high school.” Maybe that would derail whatever train of thought was zipping down a line in her head. She clearly didn’t know how to respond to that. Her mouth parted and closed twice because she didn’t know whether he wanted her to be sympathetic or shocked. He spared her the trouble. “Neal got out of his first stint in prison before my senior year. I wasn’t doin’ too well anyway, and I went to live with him and dropped out.”

“Who did you live with before?” she asked.

“My old man had a place,” he said, looking down at the ground, stubbing out the cigarette. “It was a dump, like worst place you’d ever seen. Neal brought me to an even worse place,” he said with an empty laugh. Her melodious giggle drifted out of her perfect mouth, and he looked back at the ground, trying not to think about her.

“So your brother was in prison?” she asked.

“Yeah, for a while. He robbed a gas station with a gun, that’s the only major sentence he’s served.” *So far*, he added silently as he looked at his feet. “You know, I always thought I would end up like him. One way or another, I figured I’d be in the cell next door.”

“Nah,” she said immediately. “Mason, you’re not like him. I saw it the night you picked him up. You care. You care so much.” She could clearly see that he was uncomfortable, so she changed the subject. “What happened to your dad?”

“Dunno. He’s been gone for almost a year now,” he said, shaking his head. “Just up and left.”

“I’m sorry,” she said after a quiet pause.

“Don’t be,” he offered. “Didn’t do nothin’ for me anyway. Or anyone else.”

She sat with her arms crossed over her legs, looking at him sadly. Her blue eyes were sprinkled with sympathy, which he detested, but there was something else there too. He couldn't place it. She moved quickly to embrace him, and he wasn't expecting it. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her face resting on his shoulder. He felt stupid with his arms just hanging at his sides, but he didn't know what to do with them. As she pulled away, he had touched her elbows with his hands. Her gaze met his, and he didn't know where to look. Certainly he shouldn't look at her lips, not when she was this close.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "No one should have to say things like that 'bout their dad."

\*\*

They continued to grow closer as the summer season stretched late. Mason finished painting the outside of the church on a Friday afternoon, when Leila joined him as usual. This time, Mason greeted her happily.

"Heard it's your birthday," he said. Just earlier he had seen her father carrying balloons from the house to the chapel, where he had invited a few guests to celebrate later that night.

"Yep," she whispered. "Twenty-three."

"Well, happy birthday," he told her as she hugged him. He had become more comfortable with physical contact from her. It was just something that she did to everyone, he noticed. She touched everyone's shoulder, embraced everyone she considered close. Every Sunday he watched her hug the old ladies after service. It's just the way she was.

"Thanks, Mason," she smiled. "You should come join us later, you know. I would love it."

"Nah," he shrugged. "Got work to do. Besides, you should go with your friends, have a proper birthday. Loosen up girl; have fun."

Leila looked at him. “I can’t.”

“Why not? A little hooch never hurt no one.” He was sneering at her, but it was all in good fun. Or so he thought.

“I’m three years sober,” she said.

“Shit,” he cursed, looking down at his feet. “What do you mean? I met you at a bar four months ago!”

“I know; I know,” she whispered. “That’s why I didn’t want you to tell my dad. It would kill him. He spent so long helping me afterward, Mason. And that night I was weak. I thought it was all worth nothing, that everything I’d done in life didn’t matter. I was questioning my faith, and then I ran into your brother.”

Mason snorted.

“Exactly,” she whispered, a stray tear making its way down her face. He had the urge to wipe it away, but he fought it. “It’s like I was supposed to have a moment of weakness and go to that bar. If I hadn’t, I would never have met Neal. And I wouldn’t have met you.”

Her eyes met his, and he smiled weakly. His mind was still reeling with this new information, and she supplied the backstory, as she always did. “When my mother died, I got into the wrong crowd at school. My dad was so far into his own depression that he couldn’t pull me out of mine. He was considering leaving the church, and I considered killing myself. I got settled in up at Georgia State, finding every excuse in the book to avoid facing my pain. I got drunk one night before driving to pick up a friend, and I wrapped my car around a telephone pole.”

“Leila, I didn’t mean what I said earlier,” he apologized. “I had no idea...”

“It’s fine,” she said, her voice heavy with emotion. “I woke up on an ER table with my father looking down over me with tears in his eyes, and that’s when I admitted I had a problem. I

got an underage and a heavy reprimand from my dad, but I got it together. I came home, and I got better. And I think I'm still here because I have to help others. Like Neal. God spared my life to show me how to save others."

"You saved me," Mason told her immediately. She stared at him, her expression unreadable. He almost wished he could take the words back, but he wouldn't even if he could because they were true. "I mean it," he whispered. Her fingers closed over his, her head leaning against his shoulder. "If I hadn't met you, I don't know where I'd be right now."

They stood close together, silently, for a while. He could feel her breathing against his neck, steady and slow. He enjoyed her company, more than he ever thought he would. And now he found himself feeling that this was about to be a whole new start to something wonderful. He was scared, and he would probably mess it up, but he was sure of one thing.

"Leila?" he whispered, and she lifted her head to meet his stare. "Neal was right about one thing. You are an angel."

\*\*

Sundays were his days off, since the Reverend had Services to do. Mason usually slept the day away. But this morning he found the Reverend at his doorstep at 9:30. He looked rushed, though not as if something bad had happened. Mason had answered the door, barely awake, wondering what he could need him for this early.

"You don't by chance know how to fix things?" he asked.

"What kinda things?" Mason asked.

"The air conditioner in the chapel ain't workin' right. Normally I wouldn't mind, but it's supposed to hit a hundred and twenty today, and I got older folks that can't be in his heat."

Mason told him he'd do his best and headed up to the chapel. Leila was sitting in one of the pews, her hair sticking to the back of her neck, the room unbearably hot. The late Georgia summer was relentless.

"You here to fix it?" she asked, putting her Bible down.

Mason nodded, heading for the basement. Leila followed him down the creaky old stairs. He could feel her eyes on his back. Mason hoped he could figure out what was wrong and not look like an idiot in front of her. Neal had showed him how to fix up an engine, and how different was this really?

He opened the side panel to see things he was definitely not familiar with, but he kept a level head. Something was definitely out of place here. The compressor—he was pretty sure that was what it was—was filthy. The dust had compacted itself in the thick gold plates, so he cleaned it out. The whole time he was aware of her presence, could feel it in his bones.

"Are you fixing it?" she asked, her voice hopeful.

"I think so," he muttered, tossing the dirty rag aside. "I think it's just full o' dust." He put the side cover back on and told Leila to head upstairs and turn the thermostat on. He felt the machine kick to life next to him, and then he heard Leila's enthusiastic shout from the floor above.

"Oh thank the Lord!" she cried, running down the steps. He smiled at her proudly, and he felt justified in that pride. But then she ruined it. She had on a long skirt that flowed out as she ran toward him, and her hair swished and her eyes were bright and she threw her arms around him and laughed her beautiful laugh. His stomach dropped with his eyes as he looked at her mouth and tried to imagine anything but kissing her in that moment.

She had a different idea, as her lips met his face, the smell of her sweet perfume coiling around in his brain, burning itself into memory. He felt his face flush as she smiled up at him, and

he stood still, completely unsure of his reaction. He was ashamed she had kissed him because he didn't deserve it. She didn't know her lips had touched the brother of a murderer.

"Leila," he warned her, as she looked up at him with a smile. Then—

"Hollis, you did it!" the booming, joyful voice of Reverend Robinson came from upstairs. He made his way into the basement to see his daughter smiling, and Mason stared at the floor.

"Come to the service," Leila said in front of her father. Mason rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

"I don't know..." he trailed off, his face still stinging from Leila's lips.

"Oh, come on, Hollis. Join us today for the service and then afterward you can join us for dinner at the house. My gratitude."

"Really, I don't think I should," he said, the pressure not worth fighting.

"Then come to dinner," Leila said happily. The Reverend had patted him on the back, and the feeling of guilt sunk even deeper into his stomach. He didn't want to owe these nice people any more than he already did. Yet here he was, accepting their dinner invitation like some kind of southern gentleman. Except southern gentlemen didn't fall in love with pretty, young girls that were too good for them.

On his way out of the chapel, he ran into a policeman he recognized as Neal's old parole officer. There was a moment where Mason thought the man might say something, but then his family followed him into the chapel, and nothing came of it. Breathing a sigh of relief, Mason headed back to forget about Leila for a few hours while everyone poured in for Sunday service.

He knew she probably meant nothing by the kiss earlier, just a show of appreciation for his miracle work (because that's what it was; he didn't have a clue what he had been doing). It needed to end. Tonight, he would let go of her because it just didn't ever work this way. Someone like

him, who lived as a drifter, who had no real place in the world, would never get someone like her. She was strong, brave, and she had class. She had everything he didn't have. And part of him resented her for it.

That night when he walked to the house for dinner, she answered the door, clad in a pink polka-dot dress. She looked beautiful. Mason swallowed dryly as he entered, trying not to observe the dip where her shoulder met her neck or how a single strand of hair would fall in front of her face. He desperately wanted to reach out and tuck it behind her ear, but he restrained himself in the presence of her father. He was glad Reverend Robinson was there, because without his booming voice and jolly disposition, Mason might have been tempted to touch her. It didn't help that Leila kept smiling at him whenever they made eye contact.

Reverend Robinson excused himself after dinner to take a phone call, leaving Mason and Leila alone to begin clean up. They reached for the same plate at the same time, and she blushed, looking up at him.

"Mason," she whispered, her voice low and her eyes staring through him, like she could see his soul. "I can't do this anymore."

"What do you mean?" he asked, pretending to not understand.

"This," she said urgently, pointing between them. "I can't take this anymore. I know it's not just me. Right?"

Of course, it wasn't just her. Every day he saw her his heart clenched and unclenched. He was undoubtedly in love with her, but even as she admitted to feeling it too, even though he should be ecstatic, he had to save her from this before she regretted it. And maybe, if he was honest, he could admit to himself that a tiny part of him was scared she would leave when she learned the truth about him, about what a piece of shit he was.

“Leila,” he said, looking at her, finding it harder and harder to break her heart. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He could see the exact moment her heart broke, when blue eyes washed over with the unspeakable gloss, and she looked away from him, her arms crossing her chest. She sniffed, holding back a sob, and then her father chose to re-enter the room, only he was not alone.

“Hollis, there’s a man here to see you,” he said.

Neal’s parole officer, Harding, stepped out from behind Reverend Robinson, looking like he was real sorry about something. For a moment, Mason forgot about Leila and how she was probably going to hate him forever now.

“Mason Clark,” he said.

Reverend Robinson looked confused. “No, sir, this is Hollis Jennings. I think you might be mistaken,” he said.

“We thought you were on the run with your brother this whole time,” he said, ignoring Reverend Robinson. “And then we arrested him last week and you weren’t there. All this time you’ve been hiding in plain sight.”

The Reverend cut in. “Hollis...is this true? What did your brother do?” His voice was hollow and uneven, and Mason inwardly cringed, unable to face the disappointment. He looked away to Leila, who had regained her composure.

“He killed a cop in northern Chattahoochee County back in May,” Officer Harding said. “We got wind of him being holed up in Atlanta, and they turned him over to us.”

“Your brother’s a murderer?” Leila whispered, the disgust louder than her voice. “Mason...why didn’t you tell me?”

Reverend Robinson looked at his daughter. “You knew he wasn’t Hollis?”

Leila took in a breath, tears flowing freely from her eyes. “I met him a few months ago, daddy. I called him to come pick his brother up from a bar. I swear, I wasn’t drinkin’, and I don’t know, I just told them to come to Vernon First Baptist.” She was trying not to sob now, and Mason was half-way caught between the stare of Officer Harding and Leila’s cries.

“Leila what were you doing at a bar? You know you’re not supposed to—oh, Hollis, Mason...whoever you are,” Reverend Robinson started, “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I think I need to talk with my daughter in private.”

“You can come with me,” Officer Harding said. “We need your statement. Your brother is in holding in county jail. You can talk to him after.”

Mason followed Officer Harding out to his police cruiser, trying to ignore the sound of Leila’s crying and her father’s angry words. He was accusing her of being unfaithful, of disrespecting him, but he should have been yelling at Mason. It was his fault.

It was always his fault.

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The walk down the hall to the interrogation room of Chattahoochee County Jail was one of the longest in Mason’s life. His footsteps echoed off the cement walls, taunting him with reverberated sounds of dread. When he entered the small room, he saw his brother, dressed in his orange jumpsuit, a smile plastered onto his face.

“Brother!” he smiled. Mason said nothing as he took the seat across from him, looking into his eyes. They were the same color as his Ma’s, that deep blue.

“How much they say you’re in for?” Mason asked.

A cackle escaped his brother's mouth, and he really couldn't tell if it was Neal laughing at Mason or at his own situation. He hoped it was the former, but knowing Neal, it was definitely the latter.

"They say twenty-five to life ain't bad, brother."

"You killed a cop," Mason said. "You had me throw out your drugs so you could up and leave, you idiot. You deserve what you get." His voice was low, threatening, something he barely recognized. He hadn't come here with the intention to tell Neal off, but he realized that he hadn't come here to be nice either. It was time to give up the charade of protecting for kin. Neal might've had the same blood that run through Mason's own veins, but that didn't make what he had done any less serious.

"Now is that any way to speak to your older brother?" Neal smirked. Mason snapped.

"Shut up," he growled, slamming his fist onto the table.

"Easy, tiger," Neal laughed again. "You know you're gonna end up here too someday. Don't you dare think different. They say Vernon's full o' sin, and you ain't no saint."

*Mason, you're not like him. I saw it the night you picked him up. You care. You care so much.* Maybe Leila had been right, back on the church lawn in the early summer. She was floating to the front of his mind now, as he spoke to Neal. Neal, who had murdered a cop in cold blood because he had him pinned on a bad drug deal. It wasn't worth trying to play this game with his brother anymore. Family didn't have to be from your own blood, and Mason didn't have to end up like him.

"You're wrong," he said.

"I ain't nothin', just like you," Neal hissed, looking at this brother with venomous eyes.

Mason stood up and looked at his brother, his voice coming out soft and hollow. “You know, I might be the one walking away. But you’re the one who’s leaving.”

He turned around and didn’t look back.

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He was living back in the trailer he and Neal had once shared (though Neal would not be coming back anytime soon). The cool September air hovered above the ground at night, and it crept into the bedroom where Mason Clark was rudely awakened by the sound of his cell phone vibrating loudly. It was nearly two in the morning, and the number on the screen made his heart nearly stand still.

“Leila?” he answered, his voice echoing a desperate tone.

“Masonnnn,” her voice was strange, the words coming out in a jumbled mix of syllables. “I miss you,” she said.

If Mason’s heart hadn’t been beating over a thousand miles per hour in his throat, he might have been able to put two and two together. But it was early in the morning and he was tired, lovesick, and alone.

“Leila, are you *drunk*?” he asked.

“Yep,” she slurred over the phone. “You were right about not needing savin’. I can’t save anyone. It ain’t worth it.”

“No,” Mason started immediately, searching his bedroom floor for his truck keys. “Leila, I was the one who was wrong. You were right about everything, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s too late,” she yelled. “I don’t need to save you anymore.”

“You’re right,” Mason said dryly, running to his truck and pulling out onto the highway. “Leila, where are you?”

“Why?” she asked. “So you can come an’ save *me*?”

“Are you at Jack’s?” he asked.

Her lack on an immediate response makes him guess yes, and he pulled off the next exit, turning on the back roads until he got there. In another life where he had more time, he would have thought of the irony of the moment, and how the old Mason never would have driven in the middle of the night for a girl who wanted to give him the middle finger. But for now, he focused on Leila because that was all that mattered. She had always been the only thing that mattered.

It wasn’t hard to find her, and when she saw him, she tried to get away, but he grabbed her arm gently, forcing her to acknowledge him. She was almost unrecognizable in her bar clothes, a tight-fitting top and a mini skirt. A stark contrast to her normal knee-length dresses. “You don’t get to save me,” she spat after she realized who he was. The anger in her eyes were like daggers to his chest, tearing open the wounds he had so carefully sutured closed.

Mason shook his head. “Let me take you home.”

Drunk Leila was stubborn and unlikable. “No,” she said, crossing her arms. They were out in the parking lot by now, and the last stragglers from the bar were leaving and trying not to look at the arguing couple in the parking lot.

“Leila, I ain’t gonna tell your daddy. I just want you to get home safe.”

She huffed, her blue eyes glazed over and her step off-balance. “Is that really all you want? I don’t want to get the wrong idea about your *intentions*,” she hissed.

“Leila, I don’t want to talk about this now—”

“NO!” she shouted, pushing her index finger into his chest. “We’re going to talk about it.” He could smell the alcohol on her breath, and he wanted to tell her to get in the truck, to just listen to him this one time even though she should never give him the time of day otherwise (and she

was right, because he had broken her heart and it didn't matter why). "All I wanted was you, Mason. I didn't care about your shitty past, or anything your brother did. It don't matter because I *loved* you, but it wasn't enough. Because you didn't love me, right?"

Mason sighed. He wanted to tell her everything. How he had noticed her from the very beginning, how he had been so afraid of her and everything that came with her. Then she had showed him, really showed him, how he could overcome the hand he had been dealt. But he still couldn't tell her that he didn't deserve her. She wouldn't understand.

"What do you want from me, Mason?" she asked, tears rolling down her cheeks.

He hung his head, opening the truck door. "Leila, will you please just get in the truck and let me take you home? I promise I'm not trying to play you."

"You would say that, wouldn't you?" She rolled her eyes, but the tears kept rolling down her face. She relented, dragging her stiletto heels in the gravel as she plodded into the truck begrudgingly. "Fine," she whispered finally, defeated.

In the end, she was falling asleep when they got back to the house. He debated for a few seconds about waking her, but decided against it when he saw her father had come out to the porch. Mason carried her out of the truck up to the house, her head leaning against his neck. He could feel her shallow breaths against his skin. The Reverend did not seem surprised that Mason was carrying her. His eyes only conveyed gratitude and understanding as he lead them inside to the sitting room. Mason gently placed Leila on the couch.

"Thank you," Reverend Robinson whispered, tears welling in his eyes. "I had no idea where she went, and I just knew, somehow, she was in trouble."

Mason only nodded, taking one last look at Leila's sleeping form on the couch, the calm rise and fall of her chest as she slept. She looked beautiful, even in her tear-stained, sleeping form. He turned to leave, but Reverend Robinson stopped him.

"Wait, just a second there, Mason." The use of his real name jarred him, coming from the booming voice of the Reverend. "You come here, hiding from your brother's crimes. You do the work we ask; I daresay, more than we ask. Then you lied to me, to my daughter."

"I know," Mason said. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Let me finish," the Reverend interrupted, hushing him. "That girl hadn't smiled like she did this summer since her mother died. Son, I had tried everything to get her to be the sunlight again. And you showed up like some kind of *angel*, and you just did it. You brought her back."

Mason looked at his feet. He felt the words catch in his throat. "Listen, Reverend, I've got too much respect for you to pass the buck on this." That got the man's attention. "I can't be with your daughter. I mean no disrespect."

"Well, I can only say that that's mighty selfish of you."

Mason looked up, confused. "No," he said quickly. "I don't want her to have to see the kinds of things I've seen. You don't—"

"I do know," the Reverend said. "And I was wrong before, asking you to leave. You are nothing like your brother." Mason dug his hands deep into his pockets, as the Reverend sighed. "I won't force you to reevaluate your decision, Mason, but I want you to know what I've told you tonight."

Mason nodded. "Thank you," he said. "For everything."

"No. Thank *you*, Mason."

Mason drove by the house the next day to find Leila dressed more like herself, sitting on the front porch. She was eating breakfast with her father, and when Mason pulled up in his truck, the Reverend excused himself to give them some privacy. He cast a knowing look, but Leila seemed not to notice.

“Hi,” he said, taking a seat on the porch steps.

Leila swallowed. “Hi.”

“How are you? Hungover?” he joked. It fell flat.

She shut her eyes, shaking her head. “I’m so sorry, Mason. That was so inappropriate. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s fine,” he told her calmly. “I’m glad you called me.”

She looked down at her legs that were crossed on the porch swing. “Yeah, well, I’m glad you came to get me. After what I did, when I threw you under the bus, I didn’t expect you to even pick up.”

Mason sat up little straighter. He watched the way she tucked her hair behind her ear, how she seemed nervous but relaxed at the same time. “I’ll always pick up for you,” he said. “I want you to know that.”

Her blue eyes met his, and he didn’t look away. “Even if it’s three in the morning and I want to paint the church windows?”

He laughed, getting up to sit beside her on the swing. “Probably not for that,” he said joking. Leila leaned her head into his chest, and he kissed her forehead gently, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. “I’ve been thinking, too, you know about what you said last night.”

Leila looked straight at him. “You spoke to my daddy,” she whispered apprehensively.

“I did.”

“And? Did he threaten you?”

“Not in the way you would think,” he laughed, looking at her. The mood shifted to something more serious in his pause. “I shouldn’t have been so afraid before, you know. I ain’t much good with this kind o’ stuff, but I think I can give it a try...” She smiled sweetly, her hand coming to rest on his. “...with you.”

A muffled laugh escaped him when her lips met his, and he could feel her grin as she brought her warm hand to his unshaved face. He had dreamed for months of how this could be. She broke away to smile at him, and his chest tightened.

She sucked in a breath, her lips forming a perfect circle in her complacent sigh. Then she laughed. “What *did* my daddy threaten you with? A pitchfork? Eternal damnation?”

“No, but that might have gotten me to this conclusion sooner,” he chuckled.

“Bet he had ya shakin’ in your boots.”

## Grace for Saints and Ramblers

*Something was wrong.*

Emily Vandergrift awoke with a start, her nerves on edge. It was completely dark, and her eyes peered around the blackness of her room. She stopped herself from calling for her father or Lucia. The house was silent, but faintly she could hear the traffic out on the highway. *Christ, it was just a dream.*

She let out a deep breath and rolled over onto her side, willing her racing heart to steady itself—

*Crash!*

She froze, waiting to hear more noises. After several minutes of silence, her heart rate began to slow. Then the faint, yet distinguishable, sound of a scream downstairs had her out of bed immediately and reaching for the Bauer hockey stick that she had leaning against the bedframe. A second yell soon followed, sounding closer than the first.

*Dad.*

Emily flew out of her bedroom, stick raised. She peeked into her father and step-mother's bedroom, but it was empty, their bedding askew. She rushed back towards the top of the stairwell, but now all she heard was silence.

She descended the stairs, gripping the shaft near the bottom with the blade pointed in front of her, ready to strike in the inky darkness in her own home. She turned the corner and saw her step-mother hovering over her father, who was lying on the kitchen floor, his face twisted into a grimace of pain.

The hockey stick clattered to the floor as she swiftly kneeled down beside Lucia.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her eyes fixated on her father.

“I don’t know,” Lucia whispered unsteadily. “I heard him downstairs, and I came down here and found him like this.”

“I’ll call an ambulance!” Emily exclaimed, jumping up to grab the cordless phone that sat atop the counter. She relayed the information to the dispatcher as calmly as she could manage. It was difficult to get her father to say anything, as he grabbed his stomach and writhed with pain.

She felt sick when the paramedics arrived, and even worse when they decided that he would need to go to the hospital. Lucia agreed to accompany him in the ambulance, while Emily would gather a few necessities and meet them there. The dread that had filled her stomach since she had woken violently this morning hadn’t left. The entire drive to the hospital her legs were shaking.

She found Lucia in the waiting room, a stone-cold, rigid look on her face. Her face was tear-stained and her right hand tightly clenched a used Kleenex, but when she saw Emily, her eyes lit up briefly.

“They’re doing a CT scan,” she whispered. “They don’t know anything yet.”

Emily nodded, giving her a tight hug. “I brought you a change of clothes.”

Lucia looked down at herself and realized she was still in her night dress. She laughed, hollowly. “Thank you, dearie.”

Lucia had held her hand tightly as they waited for him during the CT scan. Emily felt as if she was in an episode of *House*, but remained calm when the test results were brought to the two of them in a small room. She couldn’t concentrate on everything the doctor was saying, all medical terms and things she hoped she never would have to understand. They had Hank under on some kind of painkiller, and he had no clue what she and Lucia were being told.

Her eyes directed toward Lucia, who was intently listening. Then she turned her attention back to the doctor, who was explaining a surgical option. She wondered briefly how it must feel to be the one to deliver a death sentence to someone. Then she brushed it off again and listened as best she could.

“So surgery is the best option?” Lucia asked. “Do most other people with this stage do that?”

“From what we can see, the tumor is slightly larger than two centimeters,” the doctor indicated with his fingers, “and we don’t think there are any other abnormalities in the area. Stage One-B is generally treated with surgery very quickly to keep it from spreading any further.”

“Will it get rid of it?” Lucia asked.

“It’s very possible.”

“Why is it not one-hundred percent?” Emily asked.

“His tumor is located in the tail of the pancreas. Sometimes tumors in that area are unresectable because they can invade blood vessels. Our imaging has shown us that this has probably not occurred yet.”

“Probably?”

“Well, we cannot be sure until we start surgery. It is possible that surgery won’t be able to completely remove everything, and if that’s the...”

After that, Emily realized she had been thrust into a world of ‘maybes’ and ‘what ifs’. These doctors were nice and cheerful (for doing such a difficult job), but they could never give a definite answer to any question that anyone asked. Ever.

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The Duke University acceptance letter hung, proudly framed, on the sunshine-yellow bedroom wall that had been home to Emily for over a decade.

“Don’t go packing on me just yet,” a calm voice said from the hallway. It startled Emily, who jumped, her head hitting the underside of the bed.

“Ouch,” she whispered, sitting up to see her father, holding a gift wrapped in pretty gold paper. For the first time, she noticed how yellow his skin looked, how gaunt his features had become in just a week. It was frightening to think that nothing had been wrong a month ago, and now he was staring cancer in the face.

“Sorry, kid,” he smiled. “I’ve got something for you.”

Emily smiled back, despite her throbbing head. “Did you wrap this?” There was almost a comical tone to her voice.

“Of course not,” her father laughed back. “Lucia did it after she told me it was unacceptable to give it to you inside the dog food bag.”

She sat down on her star-patterned bedspread, periwinkle with echoes of preteen choices, and gently tore at the golden wrappings. Inside, she found a new Duke t-shirt along with a copy of the Chicago Blackhawks season schedule.

She hugged her Dad, who had sat down beside her.

“Thank you, Dad,” she said. “I love it.”

He pulled back and looked at his daughter. “I figured you could have another shirt, even though it won’t lower your tuition at all.” Emily laughed. “Happy birthday,” he said.

“Just taking inventory,” Emily said when he motioned toward her messy room. “I have three solid storage containers under my bed now, and I think that should be enough to take with me.”

Her Dad rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “Geez, you’d think you were leaving tomorrow, kid. Can’t you enjoy your summer like everyone else?”

“It’s less than a month, Dad. And I just want to be prepared. I can’t come home until Thanksgiving break, and that’s a long time. I’ll need everything.”

“I’ve been thinking,” her Dad said. “How are you going to watch the hockey games when you’re at school?”

Hank Vandergrift sat down at the end of the bed, his hand resting comfortably on his daughter’s leg. His smile was sincere, as was everything else about his demeanor.

“I haven’t given it much thought,” she answered honestly.

“Are you taking your poster with you?” he asked, motioning towards the large poster of the Blackhawks logo above her headboard.

She smiled. “I wouldn’t dream of leaving it behind.” There was a pause, in which she gave serious thought to her Dad’s previous question. “I really don’t know how I’ll watch them. I guess I’ll try to catch the national games when I can. I’ll read the recaps after every game, you know.”

Hank nodded. “I’m gonna miss watching the games with you, kid.”

“You only have to get through October. When I get home for Thanksgiving, I’ll be able to watch them, and I’ll be home for a whole month in December and January.”

“I know,” he said. Emily looked around her room, silently contemplating how her roommate would react to the NHL memorabilia with which she’d be decorating her side of the room.

Her Dad smiled sadly, his expression turning into a grimace more than anything else.

“You going to see the doctor for your pre-op appointment?” Emily asked, getting up to put the new t-shirt in her closet.

“Yeah, Lucia’s driving me over around three. Then we’ll be home. She’s making meatloaf tonight,” he said happily.

“Oh,” she sighed. “I already told Cecily and Raymond that I’d meet them for dinner.”

Her Dad got that sad smile again. “But it’s your birthday,” he said.

“I’ll be home tomorrow. We can do something then.” Emily smiled.

Her Dad smirked. “I’ll hold you to that.”

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In exactly three weeks, Emily Vandergrift planned to be in the lovely town of Durham, North Carolina to attend Duke University, majoring in political science before going on to Georgetown Law School. After graduating as the Class of 2009’s Salutatorian her plans seemed pretty realistic. Hopefully. It was easy for her to get lost in the fantasies of ambition—and with everything going on with her father, it was definitely more pleasant to live in the future than in the present.

But right now, as she drove in her dark green Volkswagen Passat, her thoughts shifted towards enjoying her last few days in the suburban districts of southern Wisconsin. The outer limits of Kenosha came into view, and she turned up the music a little louder. Lucia’s CD was currently in the player, so she was stuck listening to some kind of Latino beat. She was meeting her two best friends, Cecily and Raymond, for one last summer get-together. Cecily was a few days away from departing for her annual lake house trip with her family.

She tried not to focus too much on the “lasts” that she was about to experience. It was just another night out with her two friends, and anything that was approaching them from the future

was still far enough away to warrant disregard. As she pulled into the lot and parked her car, windows down and music still blaring, she spied Cecily standing at the edge of the lot.

“What the hell are you listening to?” Cecily yelled playfully as she walked over to Emily. Her boyfriend, Raymond, was following close behind her.

“My stepmom’s CD is still in here,” Emily laughed.

“Happy birthday, anyway,” Cecily hugged Emily as she stepped out of the car. Emily grinned. Cecily smiled back at her friend, her long blonde hair framing her heart-shaped face. Her blue eyes pierced through everything they were set upon, warming your heart or freezing your emotions, depending on her mood.

Raymond grabbed Cecily’s hand, and steered them inside the restaurant. Emily watched, unnoticed, as his perfect hair flipped back as he leaned down to kiss her best friend’s face. Turning her head half out of embarrassment, half out of jealousy, Emily followed them inside, taking the seat in the booth opposite them.

“It just doesn’t feel like we’re leaving soon,” Raymond said to her. “I still feel like we’ve got ages, you know?”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll hit us the day before we leave or something,” Emily muttered, looking at the napkins at the center of the Formica-topped tables. The retro pizza shop was something of a natural habitat for the three of them. Ever since Cecily’s sister had been able to drive, and then Cecily herself, they had been going here for a hangout spot.

“I leave in twenty days,” Cecily said. “I mean, that’s really soon. Basically, I get home from the lake, and I’m gone the next day.”

James Bellby hopped over to their table just then, tablet in hand but no pen. Emily recognized him from her AP Chemistry class last fall. He had been a new student, moving from a prep-school in downtown Chicago to the suburbs of Kenosha.

“Hey James,” Emily waved. He noticed her then, giving a stiff nod. “I didn’t know you worked here.”

“Just started this summer,” he said politely. Then he turned his attention back to the group. “Can I put your order in?”

“We’ll just have the special,” Ray said, handing him the menus. James nodded and left abruptly. Emily watched him walk away.

“I can’t believe he never asked you out,” Cecily whispered after he left. “All he ever did was stare at you in chem.”

Emily shrugged. She knew the reason. James probably liked Cecily, just like every other guy in her grade. The only reason he never asked Cecily out was the fact that she had been dating Raymond since the beginning of senior year. Emily brushed that aside, willing herself to only think good thoughts for the rest of the day.

She had yet to tell them about her father. That was something she felt she had to do. With her father heading into surgery tomorrow to hopefully be on the road to recovery, she figured it would be best to tell them now.

“My Dad is getting surgery tomorrow,” she said after their pizza had arrived. “He’s got a mass on his pancreas and they think they can get it.”

“You mean like cancer?” Raymond asked, his expression reflecting how Emily felt.

“Yeah,” she said, looking away. “But there’s a good chance they will remove it, since they caught it early.”

“Where’s he having the procedure?” Cecily asked, sipping on her Coke.

“United.”

“My mom had her hysterectomy there,” Raymond said. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

The conversation seemed to flow directly out from there, and Emily couldn’t decide if she was happy that she could escape the unwanted speculation of her father’s health, or if she was upset because they seemed unconcerned.

“I’m thinking about taking one more trip to Chicago before school starts,” Raymond said.

“I want to go see the Chocolate Calvary one more time.”

“My roommate is from Chicago,” Cecily said eagerly. “And I didn’t want to tell you this if you can’t go Em, but she invited us out tonight. Like to Chicago.”

Emily put down her water. “We can’t drive to Chicago tonight.”

“Oh why not?” Raymond asked. “We’ve got one last chance to do something stupid, we should take it.”

“It’ll be an hour of driving, and I’ve got my Dad’s surgery tomorrow...”

“It’s a little over an hour,” Cecily waved her off, looking at Raymond. “Come on, it’s just a little party at her house. It’s a great way for me to get to meet her. She sounds really cool! Come on Em, I don’t want to go without you!”

Emily looked uncomfortably at her lap, then she looked up. Raymond was looking at her, his brown eyes deep and wonderful, and she stared at his lips when he said, “Come on, Emily.”

“Alright,” she said with a reluctant smile. “Just let me tell my Dad that I’m sleeping at your house.” She sent a quick text with her phone. “But I have to be back tomorrow morning to go to the hospital with my Dad.”

“Fine, I promise to have you home, Cinderella,” Cecily rolled her eyes as Raymond left money for the tip.

Emily dropped her car off at Cecily’s house, and then climbed into the cab of Raymond’s truck. The GPS sat on the dashboard as they set course due south, to a suburban neighborhood of Chicago, where Cecily’s future roommate was throwing a party at her parents’ house. The sun was starting to set as they got on the road. Emily sat on the passenger side with Cecily in the middle. Raymond had a certain fondness of his truck that Emily found both annoying and admirable. The decision to ditch the Passat was an easy one, as the radio did not work.

Raymond had a station tuned in that was currently playing a Rush song. He went to turn it up, and Cecily immediately groaned. “God I hate this band.” He conceded and beckoned her to put on whatever she wanted. Top 40 music was soon blaring out of the speakers as they drove down the highway.

Emily tuned out the bouncy pop music, letting her hand fly free out the side of the window. She watched as the sun set to her side, and she rested her head against her arm. She could hear Raymond and Cecily talking at a low murmur, so she tried to focus on the wind. It was better than listening to them coo over each other.

For forty-five minutes, she had her head there until her face was numb from the wind, when they stopped in front of lit-up house in a small community. The sun had almost completely set now, and she got out, shutting the door behind her. The front door opened, and she could hear people talking and singing and laughing. Music was playing, but it wasn’t ridiculously loud.

Certainly nothing like the untamed, wild throng of high-school kids she had been imagining.

A very pretty girl came out yelling, “Cecily!” over and over again. The two hugged and laughed like they were old friends. Emily looked uncomfortably at Raymond, who seemed to feel just as awkward as her for once. Maybe he finally saw it. How untouchable Cecily really was.

“This is my boyfriend, Raymond,” she introduced to the girl. “And this is my best friend, Emily.”

“Hi,” she smiled. Her sparkling white teeth provided the perfect contrast to her beautifully tanned skin. “I’m Jessica.”

She invited them into the house, where everyone seemed to be having a good time. Jessica introduced Cecily to a few people, mostly guys. Emily could sense Raymond was feeling a little bit awkward, as Cecily never mentioned to any of them that he was her boyfriend. They stopped in the kitchen, where Raymond was given a beer and Cecily and Emily were given a cup full of pink juice from a Gatorade jug labeled “Bitch Juice.” Cecily seemed to be a complete natural when it came to parties. Neither of them had ever drunk before, at least not in a social setting.

Cecily had always been focused on her studies, graduating first in their class of two hundred. Emily had ranked second, giving her speech as Salutatorian. Both of them, best friends since first grade, looked at each other as they drank their first sip of what they were told was a “mix of lemonade, Kool-Aid, and Smirnoff, among other things.”

Emily was introduced to almost everyone there, and Cecily smiled her way through all of it. She and Jessica laughed and got along quite well. Emily would have felt sorry for herself if she didn’t feel so bad for Raymond. He had been pushed into the backseat, only speaking when someone directly talked to him. Emily could tell he felt uncomfortable.

“So are you going to Penn State, too?” a male voice asked behind her. Emily turned around to see a nice-looking tall guy, probably a basketball player in high school.

“Oh, no,” Emily said immediately.

The guy smiled. He reached out to shake her hand, “I’m Mark.”

“I’m Emily,” she said tentatively. “Nice to meet you.”

Soon after she had started talking to him, Mark invited her to play pong. She told him she had never played before, but he insisted that she be her partner. So they walked to the kitchen table arranged into a makeshift pong table. Cups were in disarray from the last game, so she helped Mark to arrange them.

They were playing against Jess and Cecily.

“First time as partners,” Jessica smiled as she tossed the ball up and caught it.

“Get ready to lose, Em,” Cecily smiled playfully.

The first few rounds, Emily was still trying to learn the rules from Mark, who would try to teach her every time there was a pause in the game. She was downright awful at this game, but Cecily was a natural. She made her first two shots in before she even missed once, leaving her and Mark to play catch up.

Eventually Mark got a few in, and it was down to the last cup for both teams. Most of the people had come to watch by now, cheering for Jess and Cecily as new partners. Mark was something of a jester in the group, Emily had learned, and no one seemed to care if he lost. They didn’t seem to care much about her either.

So when Cecily took the winning shot, she and Jess bowed excitedly and proceeded to take dramatic bows and take on their next opponents. Emily hid her embarrassment as a few people clapped her on the back, and she bowed out to the back porch, where she found Raymond sitting on the wooden stairs, listening to a small radio.

She might have gone back inside, but he looked off, so she sat down next to him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Raymond sighed, running a hand through his hair. Even in the dark, his outline was perfect. She shook herself slightly, trying to be a good friend in the moment. He was silent for a long time, listening to the end of Pink Floyd’s *Welcome to the Machine*. This was Raymond’s favorite kind of music, the old stuff.

“I always knew that this would happen, you know,” he says suddenly. “Like I always knew she would go away and everyone would love her. It’s just who she is. She has this power over people. It’s like she’s on fire, because everywhere she goes, they look at her. She’s got this natural thing.”

Emily swallowed. She was slightly drunk—or at least she thought she was, as she had never been drunk before—and decided to say something she probably would never have said under sober circumstances.

“That’s what it feels like to be me,” she says quietly.

Raymond turned to look at her. His eyes reached hers in the dark, and Emily felt her breath catch. Her stomach leapt forward, like it had for nearly six years whenever she looked at him. Then he looked away and sighed again.

“She doesn’t do it on purpose, you know Em. When I met you guys in middle school, and everything, I noticed Cecily, sure. But to be honest…” he drifted off, and Emily laughed.

“What? Come on, you can tell me…” she smiled, even if he couldn’t see it.

“I had the biggest crush on you, you know,” Raymond laughed. “It’s stupid, now, you know, because we’re graduated. I’m going to UW and you’re going east, and it just seems ages ago.”

Emily didn't say anything. It felt like someone had punched her in the gut, swift and hard. She couldn't even breathe.

"You...*you* had a crush on *me*?" she asked incredulously. "Like *me*?"

Raymond laughed and shook his head, looking out into the yard, where the fireflies glowed. "Actually, I liked you up until Cecily. I never wanted to ruin the group dynamic, you know. And I don't know...last summer, when you went to Lake Michigan for two weeks with your Dad, I felt like I connected with Cecily so well. Just her and I."

Emily felt dizzy. This was not happening. Not when she was about to leave and everything was going to be perfect and she was finally going to get over Raymond because they would be hundreds of miles apart. No.

"You could, you know, say something," Raymond muttered.

"I don't know what to say," Emily answered honestly.

"We are going away for a long time, Em, I'm being honest here."

She sighed, closed her eyes, and looked out at the fireflies. A Rush song came on the radio, seemingly to complete the moment that Cecily had cut off earlier in the truck. She didn't know whether to be honest with Raymond now, to betray her best friend, or to sit quietly and pretend it was all nostalgic.

The bitch juice decided for her.

"I just never understood what happened when I got home," Emily started. "You and I had been talking so much more. We were always close, Ray. But when I got back from the lake, you killed me, you know that? I thought..."

Raymond looked at her, moving closer. “I swear, Em, I felt the same way.” His hand brushed her shoulder. “I was ready to tell you when you got home, but Cecily told me she liked me. And, well, I was stupid. I did the easy thing.”

Emily shrugged, her stomach dropping. “It doesn’t matter.” She felt his hand tighten on her shoulder. It made her both nervous and excited. “Anyone in their right mind would choose Cecily. I would choose Cecily for God’s sake.”

Raymond was shaking his head. Suddenly he was alarmingly close to her face with his own. “Emily, I shouldn’t have kept it a secret. And I know that you’re going away and I’m going away. I wish I could make this right; I would go back and change it.”

Emily felt a tear fall out of her right eye, and she went to wipe it, but Raymond beat her to it. “Ray, don’t...” she whispered. “You’re with Cecily, and she’s my best friend...”

“You’re my best friend, too,” he whispered, before kissing her lips.

Emily’s eyes closed. She sighed softly into his mouth as he deepened their kiss. Emily had never kissed anyone before, and was at a loss of what to do with her hands. Raymond (who was experienced, which Emily tried to push out of her head) touched the sides of her face.

Heat shot up and down her body, making her alcohol-warmed body even hotter. She breathed softly as he broke away, and then his brown eyes met her blue. Both of them shot backwards, as if electrocuted. The Rush song carried away in the yard on the radio, and Emily looked up at the sky.

“If our situations were different,” Ray whispered after a while.

Emily just shook her head. “Don’t.” Her fingers traced the bitter disappointment on her mouth. She saw him nod out of the corner of her eye as she got up. She fixated on the sky, the twinkling stars way above, and for a moment, she wished everything was different.

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When Emily slipped through the front door of her house the next morning, she did so with an unsettling feeling of guilt in her stomach. The drive back had been quiet. Cecily had barely slept the night before, so her head rested against Raymond's shoulder as he drove. The radio was on again, Raymond's favorite station, playing on without interruption. Emily stared out the window the whole time, not daring to even breathe in the other direction. Mick Jagger played to her woes.

*Lies, dripping off your mouth like dirt  
Lies, lies in every step you walk  
Lies, whispered sweetly in my ear  
Lies, how do I get out of here?*

When Ray stopped the truck in front of her house, she had jumped out and rushed up onto the porch, not turning around to wave or anything. Cecily had been asleep when she got out. When she closed the door behind her, she just leaned back up against it and took a deep breath, coming in to find Lucia cooking an omelet.

"Emily, dear," Lucia clucked from the kitchen, "Come in and have something to eat. I'm going to wake your father up and we can get on our way."

Emily ducked into the bathroom and scrutinized the dark rings under her eyes and the way her dark hair fell in straggly clumps from her head. She needed a shower. Emily stepped into the kitchen with the sight of a delicious breakfast laid out before her. Despite her grumbling stomach, Emily felt like she had no appetite.

"Where's Dad?" Emily asked.

"Sleeping," Lucia sing-songed. Her step-mother's beautiful brunette hair was done into a tight-bun that highlighted her Hispanic features. Her full lips smiled sweetly at her as she sat down beside Emily. Even though Lucia was not her biological mother, Emily felt she might as well be.

The food was delicious.

“How was your night?” she asked.

Emily immediately thought of Raymond’s confession and the deep secret that had a trace of presence on her lips. She just smiled instead. “It was good. I think it was nice to have one last time together with them before we all leave.”

Her Dad walked through the kitchen door just then.

“Em,” he smiled as he waved to Lucia. He joined them, taking his usual seat to Emily’s right.

“You ready?” she asked, taking a bite.

“I suppose,” her Dad said quickly. “I just want to get this over with and be on the road to recovery as quickly as possible.”

They piled into Lucia’s car as they headed into Kenosha. Her father looked gaunt, and he kept silent on the ride up. Emily noticed the uneasy silence between Lucia and her father. She couldn’t allow herself to feel despair because she had to believe in her father’s recovery.

So, for now, she focused on the only issue she could worry about. Cecily had eclipsed her in every way last night, proving to be the brighter of the two. Maybe she had unintentionally forgotten about Raymond, and that was why he had felt the need to confide in her. Well, he had done much more than that. A shudder coursed through her body as she remembered the feel of his lips on hers.

For Christ’s sake, his tongue had been in her mouth. Hadn’t she spent years and years dreaming about how it would feel to have him say he wanted her? Why did this not feel euphoric and destined? She did want him, but not like this.

She tried to push that to the back of her mind as she and Lucia took their seats in the waiting room. Lucia had brought a magazine, although Emily noticed she was staring at the same page, obviously not reading it. Emily's mind raced uncontrollably at a million miles per hour. She drank cup after cup of coffee, trying to stay awake. Her exhaustion was overbearing and it kept leading her mind back into last night's events. She felt guilty for even thinking of this while her father was on an operating table. She willed herself to think of something else.

Not too long afterward, a nurse appeared in the doorway and called her and Lucia back. Lucia immediately started having a panic attack, but the nurse assured her that Hank was fine and they were bringing him out of surgery now.

"I thought this operation was supposed to take several hours?" Emily said, calming her step-mother down as she sat down in the hallway.

"Sometimes once the surgeon starts the operation it becomes clear that the cancer has grown too far to be removed completely. If this happens, the operation may be stopped, or the surgeon might continue with a smaller operation with a goal of relieving or preventing symptoms. This is because the planned operation would be very unlikely to cure the cancer and could still lead to major side effects. It would also lengthen the recovery time, which could delay other treatments."

"So you can't cure him," Lucia said, stunned.

"The doctor is coming from recovery now to discuss other options with you."

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When they got home that night, Emily went straight to her room. As she lay on her bed, trying to calm herself down, Lucia knocked on the open bedroom door. Emily beckoned her to come in. "Emily, you need to think about what you're going to do this fall," Lucia said, sitting

down on her bed. “I know you want to go to school, and I won’t stop you if you still want to. But I think you need to evaluate your choices right now.”

Emily nodded at her. She could still go to school. But there was a good chance that when she came home, Hank would not be there. But if she stayed, Hank would still be gone. There was something inevitable about her situation that made her wish someone else could make the decision for her. She took the next few days to think it over. She kept coming to the same conclusion.

It wasn’t until a few days later that she made the decision. Lucia was making dinner when Raymond showed up at the house unexpectedly. She hadn’t spoken to either of her friends since their impromptu Chicago trip. Cecily was on her annual vacation to her family’s lake house, a serene place with limited cell phone service. Emily had avoided any contact with Raymond recently, but she wished she could admit that it was because of the revelations that had spurred their kiss. The truth was, she had no desire to explain her father’s condition to anyone. Raymond was about to leave for school, and Emily was not.

So as Raymond sat down on her bed, looking at her across the room, she realized Lucia was right. If Hank was going to beat this (and she knew the odds—she had read articles on the internet in a matter of hours after the aborted surgery), he would need her. He would need everything he could get.

“Haven’t heard from you in a few days,” he said, treading lightly. “Cecily said you hadn’t texted her while she’s been up at the lake.”

“I’m surprised you’re not there with her,” Emily said, vainly trying to wipe her eyes in an attempt to excuse the crying.

“Parents wanted me to spend my last week at home,” he said.

They sat in silence.

“You haven’t finished packing yet,” he observed, looking around her room.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, looking at the floor. “I’m not going anymore, Ray,” she whispered.

“What?” he asked incredulously. “What do you mean you’re ‘not going anymore’?”

She took in a deep breath. There were a million situations she had imagined in which she would have Raymond’s attention. Since their encounter on Cecily’s roommate’s back porch, they had not spoken. Now she was essentially dropping another bomb. She didn’t know how to put the words into her mouth, so she didn’t.

She just cried. And Raymond came over to hug her, and she cried harder because it wasn’t fair. This was the second time she had cried in front of him in a week, and the second time she had ever cried in front of him during their entire friendship.

“I know going to college is gonna suck at first,” he said, rubbing her shoulder affectionately. “It’s going to be hard for everyone at school, you know. Don’t be afraid. It’ll get better, Em.”

She shook her head. “It’s not that,” she said.

Raymond looked at her, confused, and she suddenly knew she held the power to destroy his perception of the moment. Inside of Emily’s head was knowledge that would break the spell. There was a brief second where she considered not saying it, but Lucia had told her to. There was this tiny part of her that wished she could withhold it, and keep him all to herself. But Cecily was her best friend, and so was Raymond. She couldn’t do that to them.

“My Dad has cancer. It’s terminal,” she finally whispered.

Raymond stopped rubbing her arm. He sat upright, rigid, looking at her as though she had just told him something ridiculously untrue.

“I thought you said the surgery would take care of it.”

She shook her head, and then the tears spilled over again. His face fell, and he said nothing to her for a long time. The few packed boxes still cast long shadows across the floor of her room, drawing over his features. She willed herself to look away, but her eyes kept coming back to rest on his face, so she closed her eyes and tried to will away the feeling of leaving everything behind.

“I don’t understand,” Raymond said after a long time. “That doesn’t mean you won’t be able to go. Your Dad has Lucia, Em, you shouldn’t have to—”

“I’m not staying to keep him company,” she interrupted. “I’m staying because he’s going to die while I’m at school.”

It was the first time she had said that out loud. Ever. Lucia had danced around the truth like it was made of glass, like her figurines that sat inside the curio cabinet downstairs. It sounded weird, though, speaking the truth. He was going to die. Well, maybe not. There was part of her that wanted to believe her father was in that 2-3% survival group.

“It’s pancreatic—”

“There’s got to be something.”

Em nodded, still keeping her gaze directed away from Raymond. “It’s not good, Ray.”

“You can’t just not go to school,” he said.

“I am going to enroll at the community college.”

“Oh, Em, you are so much better than that, and you know it.”

“What am I supposed to do? Go away and get a phone call that he’s dead? Or stay here and at least get to spend *some* time with him?” A look of understanding crossed his features. They sat without speaking for a few seconds; the only sound was the summer crickets chirping outside the open bedroom window.

“I’m sorry.”

Those two words meant nothing in the grand scheme of things, but for that moment, it felt like enough. It was late, and he turned back to look at her before he left, his eyes reflecting his sorrow and sympathy for her and then he was gone. Emily laid on her back, letting a long sigh draw from her mouth. Why did it suddenly feel like she was so tired she couldn’t move?

When Hank discovered Emily unpacking her boxes the next morning, he stood there. So far, the medication he had been taking had eased his pain. He also looked less yellow than he had when they were at the doctor’s office.

“Why are you unpacking?”

She sighed heavily, taking out a pile of clothes from one of the boxes, starting to put them back into the dresser. “I deferred my enrollment for a year.”

“You can’t,” he murmured. “You have to go.”

Her brown hair whipped around in her ponytail when she spun on her heel to look at him. “Dad, you know Lucia’s going to need help. You’re going to need help. I’m staying.”

“Why didn’t you at least consult me before making this decision? Does Lucia even know?”

He sounded angry.

“She talked to me about it, yes,” she said in a calm voice. “It’s been done. I enrolled in CC for the semester, and I’ll be able to take classes there that will transfer. Don’t worry.” The smile she flashed him was plastic, fake, but he didn’t comment on it.

“You’re going after this year then,” he told her sternly. “I’ll not have you missing more than one year of college for me, dead or alive.” Then he was gone, too, and Emily sat down on the

bed, looking at the mess she had created while unpacking. It was just like the mess inside her head.

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Over the next several months, Emily adjusted her life and her habits so she could be at her dying father's beck and call. This deterred Emily from joining any clubs on campus, but there wasn't much of anything she wanted to join anyway. With only 200 students, the community college boasted the Farmers' Club with 25 members and the Crime Club with 15, but Emily found she would rather go to the library after class and do her homework than socialize anyway. She stayed late and made up excuses to Lucia as to why she was only home to get Hank to and from appointments.

Often, her father was too exhausted to do anything besides sleep anyway. Lucia had attempted to try to recruit her as a part-time teacher at her dance studio, but Emily had shut that down with a reminder that the last time she took dance lessons she ended up with a broken foot. Nevertheless, as much as Emily loved her father, she was itching to do something other than help care for him. Emily had made few friends in her classes, and ignoring any invitations to join clubs limited the development of any other potential friendships.

One afternoon, while driving Hank home from chemo, Lucia suggested that Emily apply for a job. Emily protested the idea at first, but she soon thought more about it. Lucia suggested the idea so that Emily would be around people her own age, but Emily saw it as an opportunity to have a forced schedule away from her father, away from the omnipresent thoughts that popped up in her mind, *how much longer does this have to go on?* Seeing the potential benefits (and decidedly not feeling guilty about them), Emily applied to work at the pizza shop in town that she, Raymond, and Cecily had frequented in high school.

The pizza shop, Mama Weegee's, was empty on the Monday evening Emily walked in to deliver her application. No one was at the front counter, but there was the sound of dish-washing in the back room and someone screaming the words to *Ocean Avenue*. She politely waited for someone to notice that the doorbell had chimed when she entered. She wondered who worked here now that the familiar staff had graduated and moved on.

Her question was answered when James Bellby came around the corner, singing the Yellowcard lyrics dramatically into a broomstick he was gripping tightly in his hand. She had seen him here before, when she was out with Cecily and Raymond before school. James was the rich kid from Cherry Manor whose father owned a fleet of Mercedes and had offices in one of the skyscrapers in downtown Chicago. He had just moved to their district last year from Corinth Prep. When he noticed her standing there, he stopped dead with his mouth hanging onto the next line to the song, and it was hard to determine who was more embarrassed.

“Hi,” Emily said nervously, “I just wanted to—uh, to turn in my application.”

Just then, a girl came around the corner, Karen Durgand, and laughed, “You can't seriously want to work here after witnessing his singing?”

Emily smiled and spoke with mock cruelty. “You call that singing? It was more like screeching.”

“No interview, you're hired!” Another voice said from behind the counter. It was Alfie Durgand, one of the well-known practical jokers of her high school.

“All right,” James Bellby laughed. “I'm sorry I offended all of you.” Emily handed him her application. “I'll give this to the manager.”

“Thanks,” she smiled. He flashed a grin at her before turning back into the kitchen. She felt a bubbly-feeling float through her as she drove home. She wasn’t one to get excited about boys, but she definitely thought James Bellby was nothing short of handsome.

It only took two days to get an interview, which turned out to be a game of Trivial Pursuit in the dining room. Greg Sanderson, the manager, just laughed when she said she was surprised by the informal process.

“We need to make sure you get along with the rest us before we take on a new member.”

She sighed, not believing it. Living in a suburb of Kenosha where her father was active in the local church, it was no shock that some people might have heard of his illness. Of course, no one was going to deny a job to the daughter of a cancer patient. But she was grateful, nonetheless. Her first shift ended up being a kitchen lesson in which she was taught the finer points of spreading sauce on pizza dough by none other than James.

“You want to really massage it into the dough,” he joked. “Pretend it’s Brad Pitt and you’re putting sunscreen on his back.”

“James, quit harassing her,” Karen said, coming in to check on them. “We actually need three new orders in the oven in the next ten minutes unless you want the refund to come out of your paycheck.”

“Relax,” James said, “Teaching takes patience.”

The first few nights went back and forth like this, flirting with James and laughing with the rest of the crew. She found that she looked forward to working, especially the shifts that she got to close on. Those were the nights that they could watch the Blackhawks games while sneaking some of the leftover buffet food for dinner.

After a few weeks, Emily had her first night at the cash register alone. She always liked being in the front of the restaurant because it meant she could always watch the games, but tonight it was more like torture with the Hawks down 5-0 early in the second period.

“Ouch,” Alfie said when he came back from deliveries. “Guess they shit the bed.”

“Yeah,” Em sighed. “Oh, you have two more orders out in Newtown.”

“I’ll take them,” James said from behind the counter. “Em, come with me.”

“Fine,” she said, “Not worth watching this game anyway.”

They delivered both of them and were back within ten minutes of closing, but when they walked in, everyone was glued to the television in the dining room. James looked perplexed as they made their way to the front of the room. The score was 5-5, the Hawks had tied it somehow.

“Holy shit,” Emily gasped.

When overtime resulted in the Hawks prevailing, they all cheered. She wished she could have seen the look on her father’s face, and James asked her why. She looked around the room, where Alfie and Karen were both pointedly not looking at her. She knew they knew.

“He’s got cancer,” she sighed. “The Hawks are his favorite team. We always watch the games together, but it’s hard when he’s really tired from treatments.”

James smiled sadly. “I’m sorry, Em, I had no idea.”

It was a rehearsed line of “it’s okay” and “it’ll be fine” over and over again. But when she left that night, she truly did regret not being able to watch that game with Hank. He would have loved it. The next morning when she told him about it, he couldn’t believe it.

“I fell asleep when it was 5-0. I had no idea.”

“Have to admit, I’ve never seen that before,” Emily said. “I only got to see the overtime goal, since I was doing delivery for the second half of the night.”

“So you like your job then?” he asked.

She thought of James then. “Yeah, it’s great.”

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It took only a few days for Emily to get close with her new co-workers. One Thursday evening she was on the dish line when the Durgands burst through the back door inviting them all to their parents’ political-themed Halloween party the next week. They had to show up in real costumes because there was going to be “actual alcohol.” It was a few weeks after Emily had confessed her father’s ailment, and it was “a way for her to get back into it,” in Karen’s words. So when they arrived at the Durgands’, they stole a plate of boneless Buffalo wings and most of the hard cider in the fridge, dashing downstairs to the party room to keep it hidden amongst all the people in Barack Obama and Bill Clinton masks.

Emily thought that could have summed up the evening pretty well.

Except for one thing.

James kissed her in the hallway upstairs.

She had just escaped from talking to someone dressed as Monica Lewinsky (who was not the same gender as Monica Lewinsky, so she was trying really hard not to think about it) and she was on an alcohol search. She was with Karen, who knew her parents kept the extra Jameson and Grey Goose in a liquor cabinet in the second-floor study. While Karen was in the bathroom, James appeared with a bottle already in hand.

“I found a bottle of Jameson,” he smirked.

“Thanks.” Then she recounted her previous encounter with the man wearing the stained blue dress and carrying the cigar, and he laughed, the musical sound echoing in the hallway. Emily secretly hoped Karen would be a while.

“That’s terrible,” he snorted, still standing in the middle of the hallway. Emily was torn between taking the booze back downstairs, and standing there with him because she could. Because she wanted to. Because being with him made the rest of the problems in her life go away. In the end, he seemed to make an excuse to stay upstairs:

“I’m not drunk enough to be in the presence of grown men wearing cum-stained dresses.”

“Sure, blame the alcohol,” she smirked. “I think you’re using it as a decoy.”

She refocused her gaze above his shoulder, observing him standing in the dimly lit hallway.

“Think I can get away with it?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered, her hand curling around the handle of the dark green bottle, the pads of her fingers applying pressure against the back of his palm. There’s something about the touch, about the dark setting, that just makes her feel like she wasn’t trying to escape the undeniable fact that Hank Vandergrift was going to die.

For a moment, she only considered James. She watched as he moved closer, her lashes going down like a curtain as her lips neared his.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Blaming the alcohol.”

She touched his chin and he dipped his head down to meet her halfway, and it feels like a prayer, an answer, like a *drug*. He tasted like cider, but he felt like a medication, *invigorating*. He felt addicting. If Karen hadn’t chosen that moment to interrupt, she might have dropped the bottle on the floor.

It happened and ended so quickly that Emily couldn’t be sure if she had made it up.

But in that moment, it was real and that was all she cared about. It was all that mattered.

“So can I get you to agree to go on a real date or am I going to have to wade through all kinds of *will-we, won't-we* bullshit?”

She laughed.

“I can't give you any kind of special treatment. You're going to have to do right by me. Treat me like a proper lady,” Emily sneered over the kitchen counter. James was leaning against the heater, which had been turned off because it was ten minutes before close.

“What does that entail? I suppose kissing pretty girls in a hallway on Halloween won't cut it?” She wondered fleetingly if he was not going to try harder because he was only slightly interested or because he did not want to come on too strong. They had only known each other a month, but she didn't think that time could tell the whole story.

She sighed as if she was weighing her options. Her father had two doctor appointments tomorrow morning, and she was responsible for both because Lucia had recital practice with two of her state-champion dancers. She wondered if she will even get another chance to revel in the fact that a guy is even remotely interested in her.

She realized she had suddenly become important. She had value—not that she had none before—but in a different way now. She was still herself, but she was missing the part of her that had overshadowed most of her life. *Cecily*.

“I'm serious,” he told her finally. “Let's do *something*. Doesn't have to be tonight.”

She smiled. “Okay.”

“Okay?” He asked, looking a little incredulous.

“Did I stutter?” she asked as she left, hanging up her apron on the rack behind the door.

She shut the door and thought *oh shit oh shit oh shit*.

It was a clever way of sneaking past making plans. It wasn't that she didn't want to date James—it was that she shouldn't be able to. She knew if Cecily were still here, if it were both of them working at that job, he would be all over Cecily. The reality was, Emily realized, she simply did not know how to respond to advances from anyone, no matter how well-intentioned they were. She sighed as she drove home, wishing she could ask Cecily for advice.

Since going off to school, Emily had only heard bits and pieces from both of her best friends. She knew Cecily was rushing a sorority, and Ray was busy trying to catch up on all the coursework on which he had slacked off in high school. Cecily and Ray had broken up two weeks after they left, and Emily was not surprised in the slightest. But she had no time to concern herself with her friends' romantic problems. She was stuck at home, taking care of her sick father, taking a part-time credit load so she could manage the latter. The unfairness of it all made her angry, but she did not dare express her anger at home.

“Pick up those prescriptions?” Lucia asked curtly when she got in the door.

She nodded, forcing a smile. Lucia's sternness threw Emily off guard, but she regained her composure when she set down the bag of anti-nausea medicine on the table. It was becoming more and more routine in the evenings. Her father was usually asleep, the exhaustion of being alive while his body tried to kill him was becoming too much. Since the failed surgery, he had generally been in better moods, but on the chemo days he was miserable. She had learned to stay away in the hours after they returned from the outpatient center, which is how she ended up at Cherry Manor Park on a Wednesday night with James.

He had bought her coffee at one of the cafés in town. Emily found she couldn't remember when she last had her mind off of anything other than school work or her father. For that hour or so, she did not exist in that part of her life. Instead, she was a normal girl out on a date with a

normal guy. James wasn't clingy or possessive. Their conversation carried a cadence that made her feel warm and wanted, and his cool personality was different enough to convince her that she wasn't using him as a substitute for Raymond. He was not the same, not even close.

This was never more apparent than after they left the café, talking a walk through a neighboring park to get back to James' house. Her arm was casually laced through his, the cool November air surrounding them as they passed the reflecting pond. She pulled her jacket in a little more. A deep sigh slipped past her lips, the sight of her breath fogging her vision temporarily. When they reached his house, Emily couldn't help but gawk. It was every bit as impressive as she could have thought. Instead of taking her inside, he led her around back to the pool house.

"I've been sleeping out here," he explained when they stepped inside.

"How come?" she asked, observing the makeshift bed that was actually a couch. It was nicely decorated in here, almost like an apartment.

"My Dad and I don't really see eye-to-eye," he said lowly, throwing the blankets off the couch. They sat down and James turned on the television and found the Blackhawks game. She had mentioned earlier that she wanted to be home to watch the game.

"Let's just watch it," he said, leaning back. "I'm not ready for you to go home just yet."

Emily smiled. "I usually watch the games with my Dad." He nodded, a sympathetic look coming across his features in the low light. "Lately, though, he is asleep really early. He can watch the early games in the afternoon, but now I just give him the highlights the next morning."

They sat in silence after that, listening to the game take up the empty space between them. It was nice, to sit and have no expectations. They could sit and just be—never looking forward to the next thing. It was the opposite of Ray and Cecily, and it was wonderful. During intermission, James put his iPod on shuffle, and they listened to music. Most of it she had never heard before,

and it definitely wasn't the kind of stuff Ray liked. It was new-age, but she couldn't place the band.

"The Killers," he said when she asked. "Best modern-age rock band there will ever be."

She couldn't disagree, so instead she listened closely to it. He explained to her the meaning behind a lot of the songs while they watch the Blackhawks beat the Kings. They eventually moved into a position where she was lying on top of him, and they made out for a solid half-hour. She was determined not to compare his kisses to the lone one she had received from Raymond.

When he drove her home, she slipped through the door without a peep. She should have felt guilty for not being home to watch the game, but she didn't. Her father would have fallen asleep before it was over, and she would have recapped it for him the next morning. It was better that she watched it with James, someone who could watch it for himself.

The next few weeks in Emily's life followed her new pattern of working, attending classes, and hanging out with James. Every Wednesday during chemo cycles, she would drive her father to the outpatient facility in United and do homework while she waited for him. Those were the nights that she went to James's. He started requesting Wednesdays off for that reason. They would lie on the couch in the pool house and make out or listen to the music he liked.

Before Thanksgiving, the hospital switched her father's chemo cycle so he could eat Thanksgiving dinner. Emily was dreading the prospect of having a family meal that her father might or might not be able to stomach. It wasn't the first time in her life she wished she had extended family.

"You don't have any cousins?" Karen Durgand asked at work one day. Emily was washing pizza trays in the sink when they had broached the subject of the coming holidays.

“Nope,” she said. “It used to just be me and my Dad, but Lucia came in about ten years ago. We’ve always had Thanksgiving dinner, just the three of us.”

“My parents have some expensive politicians’ dinner to go to the day before Thanksgiving,” James brooded. “So we will be having our feast at grandma’s.”

“Is that good or bad?” Emily asked.

“Oh it’s good,” Alfie chimed in. “His grandma makes the best pie.”

“You should come, Em.”

She laughed it off. Later, when it was just her and Karen left to close for the night, she spoke more frankly to Emily. “You need to go have dinner with him.”

“Why does it matter?” she asked, taken off guard with how serious her friend sounded.

“Because it’s been a long time since I’ve seen him really smile about anything other than sports or Saturday Night Live. He’s a lot happier now that he has you.”

“Why wasn’t he happy before?” Emily asked, confused.

“Well...you know that his brother died, right?,” she said.

It struck her right in the stomach. She should have known; he should have told her. But instead of looking like a complete idiot, she went along with it, nodded furiously. He had moved here only last year, but it didn’t occur to her to ask about the *before*.

“Alright, I’ll go to his grandma’s.”

It was the out she desperately wanted anyway. With the invitation, she went home that evening to finally tell Hank and Lucia that she had a boyfriend. Their happiness quickly faded to disappointment when they learned she wouldn’t have Thanksgiving dinner with them. She should have felt guilty. She really should have. This was, after all, the reason she stayed home from

Duke. Lucia did not try to lecture her, but instead insisted that James come around when he had the chance. Emily promised.

The Thanksgiving dinner she had with the Bellby family was nothing like she imagined. Emily realized she had been anticipating a fancy gala-type event where everyone would be dressed to the nines, and there would be five courses of food served by waiters wearing white gloves. Opulence was what she had come to expect with James's family. But here, at his grandma's little cape-cod house in northern Wisconsin, there were nearly thirty people crammed into a living room clearly meant for a half that number. There was laughing and drinking and lots of food. She was introduced to so many family members she couldn't possibly remember any of them.

Before dinner, they all said a prayer, and Emily was surprised that James's dead brother was not mentioned. She wished she had the nerve to ask what had happened, but every time she wanted to, she couldn't bring herself to pull someone away from the present—from their happiness. The room went silent when James's parents walked through the front door, clad in their usual Nieman Marcus style clothes.

“Sorry we're late,” his mother apologized. “Got stuck behind a pile-up on 94.”

Even with his parents' arrival, there were enough other people there that James could distance himself from the unwanted discourse he was sure to find with them. It reminded her of what she now had with her own father.

On the way home, she told James of the promise she had made Lucia and her father, about him coming over. He seemed reluctant, but he agreed. James would come over for a hockey game on Saturday afternoon. Hank would be awake, and they could all attempt to bond over something they enjoyed.

She could tell immediately how uncomfortable he was in her house from the moment he arrived. After seeing him be carefree and spontaneous at work, he was closed off and reserved here. She wanted to ask why, but it was difficult to find a way without being insulting.

“I’ll tell you,” her father said, once they had sat down and had food, courtesy of Lucia, “this is the year. I’ve never seen this team win a championship in my lifetime, but if they don’t win this year, they’ll never win again.”

“Yeah, 1960, huh?” James asked, taking a long sip of water.

“This is the year,” her father repeated.

“Well, it’s still early,” James reasoned. “If they get out too far ahead of themselves, it could be disastrous.”

After that, there was not much talking. Her father ended up falling asleep anyway, and she walked James out to the car afterwards. He was silent, his face expressionless.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, finally unable to take his silence without offense.

“Yeah,” he said, “why?”

“I don’t know, maybe because you aren’t being anything like yourself?”

He was facing the car, unlocking the door, but he turned around. “Have you looked at him lately? Like really looked at him? He’s more yellow than a banana.”

“He’s *sick* James,” she replied, angry. “He’s supposed to look like that.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t be around sick people.”

“Why? Is it because he’s going to die?” she asked sarcastically.

“No!” he said loudly.

“He’s my father,” she said haughtily. “The least you can do for me, your *girlfriend*, is come around every now and then.”

“I’ll be there for you when you’re upset over him,” he whispered, “but I can’t be around him.”

“Does it remind you too much of your brother?” she sneered.

“How do you know about Michael?” he asked, looking shocked.

“It doesn’t matter how I know. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Don’t turn this around on me,” he said bitterly.

“Okay, look,” she said. “I get it. I spend most of my time with you or at work because I don’t like to be here either. But you can’t completely avoid being around my life because it makes you uncomfortable.”

He looked at her and sighed, defeated. “Can we just take this one day at a time? If something comes up that requires me to be here, then I’ll come. But you said so yourself, you don’t even want to be here.” Not wanting to escalate the argument, she agreed reluctantly. She kissed him and let him go, wishing she had a better reason to argue her position.

“He seems like a great boy,” Lucia smiled. “Nice of him to come over. I like him.”

Emily nodded. “Me too.”

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Two days before Christmas, Emily was invited to Ray’s house for what was supposed to be a small get-together for all their old friends who were home on break from college. Cecily had texted her saying she might show up, but she had friends that she was going to bring so she could avoid talking to Raymond. She was uncomfortable at the prospect of facing her former best friends alone, and so James volunteered to go with her. She had agreed, but a tighter sense of dread filled her stomach at the thought of introducing her *boyfriend* to a group of people who had known her only as Emily Vandergrift, Cecily’s friend. Now she had to prove she wasn’t just living in

someone else's shadow. She felt even worse since learning of her two friends' break-up. It might be awkward to bring James, but she didn't think she could stand being there alone.

She knew going to the party was a mistake from the minute James picked her up. Her shirt had snagged on the car door and ripped. It was enough to be slightly embarrassing but not enough to go back and change. Besides, it was the only clean dress-shirt she had. Lucia was behind on laundry in preparations for Christmas, and Emily wasn't about to complain about laundry, least of all things.

"Don't worry about it," James had told her. "They won't even notice." That was a lie. Something was warm in the way James was able to lie to her. If she didn't know any better, it was as if they were a happy, normal couple that was going to a high school reunion.

"You know, I never told them I have a boyfriend," she said nervously, watching outside through the window as they passed along the highway. The snow was deep in the banks, but it was a clear night. Clear and cold. If James was surprised, he hid it well. He just made a low hum in the back of his throat and continued to drive toward the outskirts of Kenosha.

"You shouldn't have to," James said, seriously. "They definitely haven't told you everything they've done since going away to school."

Well, that was true too.

"Yeah," Emily said. "Oh, that's Ray's house."

They pulled into the driveway of a brick ranch, nestled in an open field with no neighbors. Perfect for a kegger. Ray's parents were in Florida, finishing up the week at their timeshare before returning to snowy Wisconsin for the holidays.

"Yep," James said, turning off the car. "Now, let's try to have fun."

They entered the front door and found themselves in the living room. There were people everywhere—absolutely everywhere. She could feel the stares behind her back as she walked around, probably whispering and asking each other why she was there. Didn't she have a dying father to take care of? She imagined them scorning her for leaving him alone so close to Christmas, pitying her for even having the issue in the first place. The only thing she was really aware of was her anger. She was pissed that Ray had told her it was going to be just a few people. It was a Christmas rager.

James had followed her into the house, but he was gone now. Emily found herself sitting on the couch, surrounded by people she used to know but not anymore. A girl named Debbie was sitting across from her, smoking a cigarette. "So what made you come here?" Debbie asked.

Emily just shrugged as she waited for James to come back.

"I heard about your Dad," Debbie said loudly. "I'm so sorry."

"I need another beer," Emily said quickly, grabbing her still half-full cup and getting away from Debbie. Her luck would have it that she ran into Raymond then—literally, spilling what was left of her beer all over him.

He laughed when he realized it was her, and scooped her up into a big hug.

"Jesus Christ, Emily!" he yelled drunkenly. "How's your Dad? How are you?"

She just laughed and hugged him back, at a loss for really doing anything else. This was the first time they had spoken face-to-face since that conversation on her bed all those months ago. He looked different. He had a tattoo peeking out from underneath his shirt collar, but she looked away, forcing herself not to care about it.

"I'm good, I'm good," she repeated, "just trying to find something else to drink."

“Well, I got you,” he led her away, onto the back porch. It was freezing out there, but thankfully it was much quieter. Ray disappeared and came back a few seconds later with two full cups. They were the only two out on his back porch. She shivered.

“You know,” he started, “I wanted to call. Like a bunch of times I—I even tried to write a letter but I didn’t have any stamps and—”

“Ray, shush,” she said loudly. “It doesn’t matter. Truly. I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

Then he leaned his head down onto her shoulder, whispering a bunch of incoherent words that she didn’t want to hear. His breath on her skin was irritating and she wished she knew what to do. Six months ago she would have given anything to be in this position, but now all she wanted was to escape it. She needed to tell him about James. Before this situation became something it wasn’t.

“Ray, I’ve been meaning to tell you, since—”

“Emily, *relax*,” he said in a mocking voice. His lifted his head off of her.

“You’re not taking this seriously,” Emily informed him, not completely obscuring the anger in her voice. He picked up his cup, took a sip of the orange-brown liquid, and paused. Then he spoke.

“You want to talk about Cecily?” he inquired, and his tone warned her that that was the wrong question to ask. When she remained silent, he set his cup back down and addressed her mockingly, “Think I’ve gotten over that.”

“Yeah, I just haven’t heard much from her, since I’ve been home. No one bothers to care about those of us that didn’t leave.” Maybe it was a little melodramatic, but her blood was beginning to boil and part of her wanted him to feel bad.

“Don’t blame me that you’re stuck here. Just because you decided to skip out on college doesn’t mean you get to drag the rest of us back with you.”

“I’m perfectly okay in my decision to stay. Not sure what you’re trying to get at.” She spat back, the more convincing arguments lost in her anger.

“Yeah, I know,” he sneered and took a large swig of the orange-brown stuff. “You told me fifteen times that it was the ‘right thing’. But you haven’t told me why. How is it *right* that you give up your future to watch your Dad lose his?”

“I didn’t have a choice!” she exclaimed. “Would a soliloquy outlining my logic be more to your liking? Jesus Christ.”

He laughed, breaking the tension, and took another gulp. “It’s not the logic. That would be sound. You’re right,” he says, with a pause for a drink, “Your Dad is very sick, and he deserves to have his daughter at home for the time he has left.”

Emily ignored the implications of his statement, not caring anyway. “Great. So we’re on the same page again. Glad we had this talk.” She made to get up and find James, her last bit of patience gone. Ray grabbed her hand tightly, and she cried out when he forced her back down.

He looked amused. “My point, sweetheart, is that you don’t know why you wanted to stay. Logic aside. Just gut feelings. I bet yours are nothing but guilt. You wouldn’t be able to live with yourself if you did something for *you*—not for me, not for Cecily, not for you Dad. For you. It’s like you’re obsessed with being the martyr.”

Emily felt her face flush. “So now you’re an expert on my emotions?”

He shook his head. “You’re just now realizing that? I thought our moment on the porch in Chicago would have given you a clue.” He mentioned it, and she felt sick to her stomach. He

must have realized it, too, because he looked away. Maybe he felt bad, too. The things he was saying to her, they were not mean. They were the truth. The plain, ugly truth.

Her gaze narrowed. “You said ‘if our situations were different.’ I wasn’t the only one being a fatalist. I thought I was just reading your mind.”

“Or was it me reading yours, knowing how you’d read mine?”

She rolled her eyes, wondering how that made sense even though she was sure he was just talking. “Is there a point somewhere in your insanity?” Emily asked, deciding that she could be here all night if she was expected to figure out what he thought he was getting at.

“You know there is,” he said, handing his cup of whatever-it-was toward her. “Have some of that. You’ll feel better.”

She frowned at the half-empty cup. “And that’s supposed to help me figure out what’s going through your drunken mind?”

He chuckled darkly. “Levels the playing field.” His eyes were fixed on her now.

“Where’s Cecily?” she asked, tired of playing cat-and-mouse.. “She said she was coming.”

“Who cares?” he laughed, looking at her. “You’re here, you’re the one I care about—”

“Ray, stop,” Emily warned.

“I keep thinking about that kiss, and I wish I would have said something earlier, and I’m sorry—” His hands gripped her shoulders tightly, and she felt sorry for him.

“Ray—”

He tried to kiss her then, but the backdoor opened and James was standing there. Emily leapt off the deck, “Meet my boyfriend, James.”

She watched Ray’s expression turn dark, but he recovered quickly, “James Bellby?” She nodded. Ray turned around and let out a loud, dramatic sigh.

“Hey, Em, I hate to do this but my mom called and wants the car back tonight,” James said, obviously interrupting on purpose. *Thank god thank god thankgodthankgod*, she silently thought.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a minute,” she said quietly.

Ray looked at her as soon as James shut the door.

“You’re dating *him*?” His voice wasn’t so much venomous as it was jealous.

“Why does it matter?”

“He’s not your type.”

“You don’t know my type.”

“Em, you don’t even know him. He’s crazy.”

“You don’t know him either. And he’s not crazy.”

Raymond locked eyes with her then, and she gleaned the sense of emotion he had within him. He looked defeated.

“You think I’m guilty, but you’re the one groveling,” she reasoned. Emily surprised herself in how calm she remained despite her boiling blood.

“What are you talking about? Do you want me to apologize for something? I’m sorry. For everything. For not telling you how I felt, for lying to Cecily. Jesus.”

“If you were really sorry you would have called.”

Their gaze held steady until she turned to leave. Her hand was on the door handle when Raymond spoke again.

“So I guess you’ll just give it out to anyone these days? I shouldn’t be offended that you didn’t wait for me?”

“Shut up.”

“I just think it’s ironic. I would have always thought you would be the one of us to wait. But I guess I shouldn’t say that when you go around *fucking* another guy.”

She stopped dead, turned around to look at him directly. Their eyes met, but she didn’t dare look away.

“I’m sorry,” she said sarcastically. “What are you more upset about? The fact that I have a boyfriend, or that it’s not you?”

She didn’t give him a chance to answer because she opened the door and began pushing through the crowd of people. James was waiting for her by the front door, and she surprised herself by waiting until she got in the car to cry. James just drove toward his house, staying quiet and letting her sob. She appreciated it.

“Thanks for that,” she said finally, when they got into the driveway.

“You looked like you didn’t want to sit out there much longer,” he reasoned.

She smiled, wiping away the rest of the tears. “So what now?”

“How about we go listen to some music? I’ll spike the hot cocoa with some peppermint schnapps and drive you home early tomorrow so Lucia doesn’t get suspicious.”

\*\*

There was a ravenous ache that devoured the hearts of broken people. Bones with the marrow sucked out snapped and shattered under the weight of desperation. And love. Love took and took, rarely giving back to those who whispered it. And there was bitterness. So sticky and sweet; it was syrup clogging the arteries as it dared the heart to pump harder and faster. Emily supposed that she and James were two of the most unlovable, bitter people in the world. James had so much, but he wanted none of it. She had nothing and wanted more.

People were expected to take and take and take until they had taken their fill. *But what about the ones who give?* She thought, *what did the world think about them?* Since that night that she had spoken to Raymond, she wished that she had a better understanding of her own sacrifice. She did not wake up regretting her decision to defer from Duke, but she realized that if she had not, she would never have started dating James. And James was no different, sacrificing his desire to escape his home by inviting her in to abscond from her own. Two people who took too little and gave too much.

They stood with a barely noticeable hunch, the set of the shoulders balancing, attempting to stay upright against the heaviness of their circumstances. They sat together in the darkness of despair, their restless minds wandering together into the vast empty cavern of hope. Emily wished she could know more. She wished she could ask him about his brother. Every time her lips drew closer to asking, something in her head would shoot the idea down.

She didn't want to hurt him. She could tell from his general attitude that he did not like to talk about things. He wasn't Raymond. He didn't have a mind that was set to think about the deep cosmos and point of existence or argue about the ethics of the Patriot Act. Instead, he knew pain. He knew so much pain, and she didn't want to drag him to that place because Karen had said he was finally coming around. He loved his brother enough that he had completely closed off that part of himself.

Love was a powerful entity, but it was not kind. It was malice found in the ephemeral stopping of hearts, and the quick breaths released from lungs that were constricted by its black hands. Love stifled those who searched for it. It laid poisonous kisses onto skin and grabbed hold to flesh. It was a costly safety. It was a skeletal shield for those who wanted to protect the ones

they cared for. It was a conscientious objection in the middle of a war; it forced the feet of a young boy to send him away from his family. And it is what broke those who gave and rarely took.

The world was indifferent to the plights of two half-empty souls who really had nothing to give to each other in return for their love.

Emily thought about all of this while she watched James sleep. They had watched the end of the Blackhawks game, but James was tired from his earlier shift at the pizza shop. They had lost to the Canucks, which soured Emily's mood. She had been sleeping at James's regularly since New Years'. Emily suspected that Lucia knew by now, but as long as she was home to take her father to and from appointments while keeping her grades up at CC, she was fine. Her step-mother was not about to argue with Emily finding something to take her mind off the constant despair that was heavily present in their home.

James stirred slightly, rolling over to face her. Their eyes met, and she settled in closer to him. It was nice like this. They would talk about music and hockey, but beyond that she supposed that their relationship was more of a supporting act: helping each other when the other could no longer stand. It probably was toxic and unhealthy, but it allowed her to escape. She suspected it also helped James forget about his familial problems. He never did elaborate, just as she never said much about her father.

It was just understood between them.

And she liked that. They would hang out with Alfie and Karen a lot, going ice skating when they all had an off shift, or drinking in James's pool house on a Friday night. It felt almost normal, yet it would never be enough. Somewhere deep down, she could feel the emotional disconnect between them. Like part of him was never really there. James was someone she could cry on if she had to. If the pain at home became so unbearable that she had to let it out, he would

comfort her in the only way he knew how. She never returned the favor because he seemed to always be able to manage it himself. But he understood her, and if she closed her eyes, she could pretend it was enough for now.

It was easy to be at work, to avoid time at home. Her six-week winter break was becoming a bit overwhelming with her father's state regressing since Thanksgiving. They were trying a new kind of chemo, some kind of trial drug that had supposedly cured two people's early forms of pancreatic cancer somewhere in New Mexico. Emily wasn't holding her breath, especially since her father had been reacting to this drug therapy worse than the previous one—his weight had dropped by nearly 10 pounds in the first two weeks alone. He never wanted to eat anymore.

"If you don't try to eat something, you know they're going to hook you up to a feeding tube!" Lucia had said one night. Her voice was on edge, and she sounded more than exhausted. Emily listened from up in her bedroom, wishing she could have picked up a shift tonight to avoid hearing them.

"That's not the point," her father replied calmly. "Lucia, if they find out that it has spread to any organs at the end of this treatment plan, I'm done. I'm not doing any more experimental trials. If this cancer doesn't kill me, these drugs will." He sounded weak.

Home had become this impossible refuge for Emily. She could escape the drawbacks of her relationship with James, but it only made her face the true despair in her life. It was like walking into a hospital every time she slipped her shoes off in the mud room. It smelled like the cancer ward of United—they had been there so much it was as if their house had mutated into a different form of it. She supposed her father had become a permanent patient, confined by his limited ability to walk. Just yesterday they had moved a spare bed from upstairs into the living room so he no longer had to climb the stairs and expend energy on fighting gravity.

She told James as much the next day when she arrived for their overlapping shifts. He seemed more and more unsympathetic to her father's debilitating situation. Emily would have minded had she not wished so desperately to escape it herself. He replied with, "At least you won't have to worry about him falling down the stairs now." After that, she stopped talking about it completely in front of him. Any questions at work regarding Hank Vandergrift were answered quickly and uninvitingly, almost like a warning shot.

She and James spent more time doing things together to avoid their own families at home.

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When April came around, Emily was studying for her finals and everyone at the pizza shop was eagerly discussing prom. This was one of the times that her age-difference came into play. Karen seemed to notice.

"You must hate having to redo all of this," she said.

Emily smiled. "It's not really re-doing it. I wasn't dating James when I went through senior year, so it was a little different."

"Are you gonna go to prom with him?"

"Honestly, we haven't talked about it. If he wants to go, I'll go."

Later that evening, James asked her by reenacting the scene from *The Princess Diaries* with M&M's on top of a pizza. He had made the pizza, and he informed her of that fact after she had said yes.

"So technically I'm better than that lame-o in the movie."

"Whatever," she laughed.

Since her first prom had been solo, it seemed fitting that the second one would be with her boyfriend. At least that is what Emily tried to tell herself through the pain of the entire night. She barely knew any of the underclassmen, so dinner was awkward.

It was different when she would hang out with James and Karen and Alfie. They were all co-workers, and even though they were all underclassmen, at least she knew them. But Karen and Alfie were juniors, so they were not allowed to sit at their table. James tried to hold her hand once under the tablecloth, but Emily shrugged it off, still annoyed that he had refused to come take prom pictures at her house.

She put on her dress and Lucia curled her hair, and Hank smiled and told her she looked beautiful. Emily could tell he was disappointed that James did not come to the house for pictures. He looked away when she kissed him goodnight.

*“You said so yourself, he’s almost always asleep.”*

*“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t want to see us for prom!”*

*“He saw you last year.”*

Emily’s blood had boiled at his nonchalant refusal to come to her house, and she knew he probably didn’t want to take pictures anyway. He probably didn’t even want to go to prom. Instead, they had lined up in front of the pizza shop and made funny faces with Karen and Alfie and their dates, and taken pictures in front of the Mercedes that James’s father had given him for the evening. His mother had been licking her fingers and slicking back his hair, and she had this look in her eyes that made Emily feel like she didn’t belong.

“You look so much like Michael,” she had sighed quietly, so as Emily had not been leaning to her side at the time she would not have heard.

It was becoming routine to hear other people mention James's dead brother. And she felt like the loner. Emily knew he had been close to James, but the only time she had ever brought it up had been over winter break. She respected his right to remain mum on the matter, but she felt like he was holding something back, something she needed to know.

Dancing with the rest of the crowd was fun, but she could tell James was not enjoying himself, despite his smile and screaming along with the lyrics. They drove towards the after party in silence, having stayed mostly pleasant toward each other all night. Emily wondered if she might break up with him. She thought James might be thinking the same thing. They were changing in the upstairs bedroom, listening to the music blaring from the floor below. James unzipped her dress and put his mouth on her neck, the soft spot he knew she liked. She whipped around, her body bare except for her blue underwear.

"Tell me about your brother," she whispered as he leaned in to kiss her softly.

He stopped.

"Not tonight, Em," he said, padding his fingers on her bare shoulders.

"No," she pushed him away. Her anger had come harshly in that statement, and she found herself not regretting it. "I'm sick of you pretending like your pain doesn't matter." His gaze changed from lust to confusion. "James, if your dead brother—" he winced "—has *anything* to do with why you're avoiding my other life, you have to tell me, or at least talk about it. Because I can respect your decision to not see me at home, but I need to know why." He was looking directly at her, like he wasn't afraid. It made her angrier. "My Dad is dying! My own father is lying in his chair every night in complete and utter pain. He's practically already dead. He's dead and I'm here, and I don't understand why you *don't even care*."

She wasn't crying. Just complete white anger. That's what was flying out of her mouth. The anger hung in the air, enveloping her, and she kept her gaze fierce. James stood, stolid, unmovable, like an anchor.

"Fuck you, James," she seethed, "you're a fucking hypocrite."

The second the words slipped past her lips—crass and harsh and childish and mean—she knew it was a mistake, could see the flash of anger light his eyes as they widened almost comically large; could hear the sharp intake of breath, could see the tension that pulls his body even straighter as his fingers flexed once, twice, at his sides before curling slowly into two tight white-knuckled fists.

And for a moment she felt fear.

Real and true fear.

Cold and prickling dread crept its way up her spine as panicked threads took root inside of her, growing and spreading and settling deep in her gut. For a moment, a few brief seconds, she considered taking it back, considered blowing out a slow breath before calmly asking him to see reason.

But then, in the blink of an eye, the world shifted and she found herself being pushed backwards—the wall, hard and cold, slamming into her back as he hovered over her, eyes dark and angry, mouth twisted into an ugly sneer—and the rage came roaring back in a firestorm of unforgiving wrath, even as something else, something warm and tingling, began to swirl inside of her—anticipation rushing hot and thrilling her senses.

"You want to know about Michael?" It was almost sarcastic, like a bite, the way he spoke. She searched his eyes for something. He was hurting, regressing, doing that thing where he started to pretend nothing else existed. She found him in his words.

“When I was in fourth grade, my Dad came in on a Tuesday and pulled me out of school. When we got home, Michael was already there, watching the Twin Towers fall on live television. My parents had explained to me what happened, and they were calling their friends on the telephones and crying about it. But I sat with Michael. We watched the attacks together.

“He told me that we were going to go to war. That it didn’t matter that Dad needed him to take over the family business because the country was going to have to go fight. I just remember being so scared that my sixteen-year-old brother was going to die on a battlefield somewhere. My Dad didn’t understand. He told Michael that if there was a war, there still probably wouldn’t be a draft, and he could still go to college. But he disagreed.

“For two years, my brother ignored my father’s wishes to apply to college. Three weeks after he graduated, he shipped off to boot camp for the Marines. He did two tours over in Afghanistan, and he always believed that he had to go. He was so determined after watching those attacks.”

James grew silent, and Emily reached out to touch him, nervous fear flooded her stomach when he flinched. She loosened his bowtie. He cleared his throat. There was an obvious question to ask now, but she felt a lump in her throat. She sat him down on the bed, grabbing her sweatshirt from her overnight bag. She kissed the side of his face softly, her lips lingering out of comfort. “Did he die...over there?”

James laughed darkly. “No.”

She shot back. “Then what happened?”

“A drunk driver ran a red light downtown three years ago, just twelve hours after he got home from his second stint.”

“Oh my god,” Emily whispered, her hands covering her mouth.

James sat, expressionless, not looking at her. “He was lying on I-94 with a fucking steering wheel through his chest. And you know, my Dad didn’t even want to display the flag from the coffin in the house. So my mother kept it tucked away in a closet. I’m so fucking tired of putting up with my Dad’s bullshit. He thought Michael had a death wish. He actually told him that he wrote him out of the will when he joined the Marines. And it ended up not mattering because he was dead within three years anyway.”

Her hand found its way into his, and they sat there, the sound of the party beneath them, unwanted. “I’m sorry I didn’t come to your house for pictures.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” James said. “It’s not okay. My father refuses to remember him. He doesn’t want to even recognize him in the house. And you know, all I can think about is him. When I sleep I dream about it. He was just the most amazing guy, Em. He could shove five Oreos into his mouth. He said “Wednesday” more like ‘Winsday.’ He liked his scrambled eggs with ketchup. When he drove a car he always took his shoes off. Every time the Blackhawks were in overtime he would sit on the coffee table, and he would—” the last sentence was cut off by his breaking voice. She brought him closer as they sat together.

They sat like that for a long time, unmoving, the party downstairs continuing without them.

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The day the hospice nurse arrived to care for her father, she jogged—no, *ran*—all the way to James’s house. Her father was in bed, knocked out by some painkiller. Lucia was crying at the kitchen table, and Emily couldn’t take it anymore. She felt her chest begin to constrict as her heart pumped uncontrollably, and a strange lightweight feeling took over her body. She felt like a

feather being thrown, only to fall gently to the floor. The three-quarter moon was enough to light the sidewalk into the gated community of Cherry Manor.

All she had to do was knock on the door to the pool house and he was there, holding her, kissing her forehead, trying to calm her down. When she stopped crying she started hyperventilating. He left the room briefly, and when he returned he stood by the door.

“Em,” he called her. When she turned her head, he threw a ring of keys to her, which she caught deftly. “Drive.” They got into his car, and she started it, trying to calm herself down, stop herself from shaking.

She headed toward Interstate 94 because it’s the only major road she knew that would get her the hell out of this place. James didn’t say anything, and they drove in silence. They passed the town, the people, the pizza shop where they worked. They passed the cemetery where James’s brother was buried.

When they hit the interstate, she floored it. It was dangerous and stupid and lethal. The speedometer was getting close to 100. James didn’t tell her to slow down; he just sat there, watching her. It was making her uneasy, his gaze. “Put on music,” she demanded.

“The Killers?” he asked, even though she knew he knew the answer. She gave a stiff nod, and she entered the left lane, passing cars that weren’t worth her time. He put a CD into the player, turned up the volume the whole way to 60. It was poisonous to have this kind of person in her life, she thought. *He was going to let us die.*

But then the familiar guitar started up, and she couldn’t think of anything except how angry she was, how tired and upset and pissed off she was at the hand she had been dealt. She was reduced to nothing but a time and place in her life where nothing mattered except the fact that someday, somehow, everyone and everything she loved and would ever love was going to be dead.

Nothing would matter.

There was no point in living.

“What do you want?” James asked.

There are a million things she wanted. To go back to junior year of high school and tell Raymond the truth. To eradicate cancer from the world. To have a clue about what she wanted to do with her life. To kiss James. To slap him.

Mostly, she wanted to crash this car.

“To die,” she said.

“Well you can’t,” he told her indignantly.

“Then I want my Dad to die,” she countered, loud enough to make him cringe.

Neither said a word. He looked at her, and she inwardly cringed when she thought about what she had just said. An exit sign appeared, and she changed lanes and rushed off, stopping the car in the parking lot of a dimly-lit BP station. She remembered how he talked about death, the destruction it caused in his family. And then there was his brother, his body horribly mangled in a highway accident, and she hated herself for ever asking about him.

James liked to ignore death, and she thought it was because he had become so accustomed to dealing with it that it didn’t scare him anymore. He wasn’t the type who had the collected works of Poe and Lovecraft and a bunch of macabre indie films. Instead he chose to ignore their message and dwell just outside the confines of someone else’s life. But for now, he chose to be there with her, listening to music too loudly in the car. It was as close to her as he had ever been.

She could capture The Killers’ lyrics perfectly in her mind. They had been a source of comfort during all the hospital visits and long waits in doctors’ offices. Now, she looked at James and thought only of this music, of its calming effect. It was like James.

*You better run for the hills before they burn  
Listen to the sound of the world  
Don't watch it turn  
I just want to show you what I know  
And catch you when the current lets you go*

James was someone that had experienced so much loss, yet he remained composed, intact. Unlike her. She turned the radio off. It wasn't helping.

"He's going to die," she whispered. "I can't stand to look at him anymore." Tears were dripping off her nose, and she switched to an ugly kind of sobbing now. "He's a skeleton; he's not a person anymore. There's nothing left for him to live for in that kind of shape, James."

She fingered the outside of a mug that sat in the lone cup holder of car, as she struggled to tuck the sobs away. It was a souvenir from Congaree National Park with a John Muir quote on the side: *The clearest way into the universe is through a forest of wilderness.*

*Fuck you, John Muir,* she thought. *You don't know shit.*

She kicked her feet at nothing, turning the car off. "IT'S NOT FAIR," she screamed. "IT'S NOT FAIR THAT I HAD TO STAY AND WATCH HIM DIE AND GIVE UP COLLEGE."

"It's not," he agreed quietly.

She continued in a softer voice. "Life's not fair, I know. It's not fair that your brother died. He served two tours in Afghanistan and some dumb, drunk fuck kills him on the highway."

"Believe me, I'm aware of the irony."

"This is all my fault," she whispered. James shot her a perplexed look, but she did not have to see it to explain. "Before the summer, before the death sentence, before you..." She trailed off, remembering the night on the porch with Raymond. She had wished for something. "I wished things would be different. I wanted to feel something for real, and now here I am. And I don't know if I would go through this again because of you. Don't you see? If I had to pick

between my father dying and never meeting you, I think I would still pick you. And I hate myself for it.”

James looked at her again. “So what do you want?”

“Revenge.”

He didn’t say anything. In her peripheral vision, she thought he might have nodded but she was too intent on staring at the steering wheel and the hot tear that had slid off the end of her nose and onto the insignia. His hand was on her shoulder. A light squeeze is all she felt. She thought maybe there would be time in the future to care about how nice he was being to her, but right now she couldn’t think of anything other than the fact that she wanted to blindly destroy something.

Punch until she blacked out.

His phone vibrated and she looked up at him. He sighed. “Hawks lost.”

“Jesus Christ!” she yelled, slamming her fists into the steering wheel, the horn blaring. When she finally looked back at him, he was gazing at her with the most concerned expression, and she only hated herself slightly when she understood just how much he had come to care for her. But her father was going to die and the Hawks were going to lose again and life was nothing but a vicious cycle of pain and suffering with no way of escaping.

“What do you want to do?” he asked again, more politely though this time in a somber tone. His eyes traced her own, and all she could do was shake her head.

“Let’s go back,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

His arms awkwardly held her across the small cab of the car. She was shaking while she cried silently, her eyes squeezed shut because she could not bear to face the world in this moment.

“Is this what it felt like after Michael died?”

She wished she hadn't asked the moment it left her lips, but she had to know. Had to understand that the world did not stop spinning the moment another person's heart stopped beating. There was no equivalency in death; nothing that could be considered a balancing act in the net flow of the human life cycle. James knew this, and now Emily was grasping it too.

"Yes," he breathed.

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Her father's eyes used to light up when she entered the room. Now, in his deteriorated state, his eyes were her only indication that he was even aware of her presence. Tonight she had a 7-11 shift, and she had decided to no longer just hope he would be awake when she returned home. From now on, she would say good-bye to him before her shift started. Lucia watched from a chair in the corner, sewing a hole in Emily's other work shirt.

"Thanks," Emily smiled, giving her a quick hug before walking to her father's bedside. He did not turn his head, but the rise and fall of his chest from the oxygen tube let her know that he was cognizant of his daughter's presence. She turned on the radio near his bedside, tuning it into WGN so he could listen to the game while he dozed in and out of consciousness. She touched his hand and received a twitch in return, to which she kissed his forehead and mumbled an "I love you" out of the corner of her mouth before leaving. The television echoed from the den, where the nurse on duty was (probably Rosalie, since it was Wednesday).

Emily tried to keep her mind focused off her father, but that only meant being distracted by Game 6 of the Stanley Cup Final. Though the Hawks had managed to come back and steal Game 5, she wasn't feeling certain about tonight. When she entered the shop, James was working the counter and gave her a weak smile, which she returned and headed into the kitchen. Alfie was finishing up and was all-too-relieved to be able to go home and watch the game.

“Got a good feeling tonight,” he laughed as he clocked out. Karen then handed her a list of orders, and she got to work in her favorite spot.

Karen turned on the game in the dining room, but almost no one was eating in-house tonight. They had at least seven outstanding deliveries, with six incoming calls every half-hour. James was working at the counter and rolling dough when he had a break, but when the game started, the calls stopped coming in.

Karen took the last deliveries out and was back near the mid-way point of the second period, and then it seemed like they finally had a break. Two orders were left, but they were both pickups, and right when she walked back in the Flyers tallied the go-ahead goal.

A collective sigh was heard around the kitchen, and Emily took a seat in the back by the oven. James clocked out for his break and came to sit beside her. He didn’t say anything about the game, for which she was grateful. She wasn’t in the mood to discuss the anxiety she felt over a sport. But she wasn’t sitting here, praying for her father to still be alive when she got home, so that was a happier difference.

“You asked me about Michael the other night.”

She suddenly felt so guilty about it. “I know and I had absolutely no right, and I’m so sorry—”

“I realized something,” he said, his voice soothing and quiet. She stopped speaking. “The grief that you feel in anticipation, at the certainty of the whole thing, it’s totally different. You have time to mourn before the actual event. You are so lucky,” he whispered.

Her breath was shaking before she found the words to respond. “How can you consider it lucky that I have to watch him die?”

“Because you get to say goodbye.’

“SCORE!” Karen yelled from the front. The unanimous inflation of mood around the kitchen derailed Emily’s thought train. When she found her footing, James was up at the counter, checking out a pickup order. Instead, she answered the phone, and passed off her shaking voice as elation from the tied game, rather than shock from James’s admission.

The influx of orders increased during intermission. Emily took her break then, calling Lucia to check on Hank. Nothing had changed. She was somewhat relieved and impatient at the same time. The Hawks scored early in the third period, and Emily had a small-silver of hope that if her Dad could hold on for just another 17 minutes of play time, he could live to see another championship. She silently hoped that if the Hawks blew it, that Hank would not live to see another disappointment.

When the Flyers scored seconds later to tie the game back up, she felt a brick drop in her stomach.

The threat of overtime hung in the air when they received two more delivery orders, both near the same side of town. Karen was scheduled for a break, so Emily offered to take them out. She hated the idea of watching them lose anyway, when she would have to go home to see Hank look even more upset.

“I’ll go with you,” James said, sitting up from the counter-top. “I can’t stand this waiting game, anyway.” Emily felt like there was another reason for him wanting to come, possibly having to do with the unfinished conversation about his dead brother, but she let him follow her anyway. They didn’t talk, and he flipped WGN on in the car, John Wiedeman’s voice emanating from the car radio.

The overtime period started after they turned out of the parking lot. Emily was about to ask where they were going when James told her. It was a fifteen-minute ride to the limits of their

delivery circle, so it would be easy to get the whole first overtime period in with a trip there and back. It was nice to listen and not watch. Emily felt less control in listening, which was silly, because there was no control at all. But regardless, it would be easier to stomach a loss without seeing it. Wiedeman continued his play-by-play, and James turned it up as they crossed Broadman.

*“Here’s Kane now... to the lower left corner...SHOOTS, HE SCORES! Oh no, that’s turned wide by Leighton, loose puck in the crease...and now it’s in the net, THEY SCORE! IT’S IN!”*

“Oh my god,” Emily said, pulling over to the side of the road. “Oh my god.” She looked at James, whose expression seemed as elated and excited as he could muster. They both stared at each other for a few seconds, silent, basking in the feeling of happiness.

*“IT’S IN THE BACK OF THE NET THE HAWKS HAVE WON THE STANLEY CUP!”*

“Emily,” James said when he found his voice, “you have to go see your Dad.”

She turned to face him. He was right. And, in truth, there was nothing else that she wanted to do in that moment. She did an illegal U-turn at the next traffic light and rushed back toward her house, both of them yelling and cheering the whole way.

*“LORD STANLEY’S NEW ADDRESS IS SWEET HOME CHICAGO!”*

“Oh my god,” she kept saying. “Oh my god, forty-nine years, oh my god.”

They reached her driveway in ten minutes, and she was rushing into the house and into the living room, where the lights were still on. Hank was sitting up in bed, awake and alert. He was holding the radio in his hands.

“They did it, Em,” he whispered as she came into the room. She hugged him lightly, trying not to hurt him. He was shaking, she realized, with tears he was trying to hold back. “I got to see it. I finally got to see it,” he sighed. “Isn’t it *wonderful?*”

“Dad,” she said, pulling back, looking at him, “I’m so happy you got to see it. So happy. I’m just...I can’t find the words, I’m sorry.”

He smiled at her, pulled her close again. It was minutes before either of them spoke again, but it was her father who broke the silence. “Please bury me with championship gear.”

Emily’s tears broke through in a half-laugh, half-sob, “Of course, of course,” she managed. It was so ridiculous and morbid that she really had no choice but to go along with it. She wished she could have had more time with him like that, just happy.

In the coming days, she would try to remember the moments like this. The way her father’s fingers had cradled the back of her head when he held her close. It was probably the most energy he had expended in over a week. When she had grabbed onto him, hurting as much as he was, allowing him to save some face while they hurt together. When his voice filled the empty space between them, giving him a lighter sense of being.

James came over later that night, after her father had fallen asleep with a smile on his face. Emily was in the kitchen watching the post-game celebration on the small television on the counter. He came up behind her, kissing her shoulder lightly.

“Was he happy?”

“It was more than that,” she turned around, facing him. Their eyes met, and she felt a heaviness in her stomach. A weight that she finally felt she could share. “It was like he was forgiving something. I know that sounds crazy, but it was like he—”

“Like he was forgiving himself?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Exactly.”

He followed her upstairs into her room, and they lay side-by-side, staring at the ceiling, listening to the post-game on her radio. They fell asleep and were awakened a few hours later by

a loud burst of static. Sunlight was streaming through the windows, and for a moment she was disoriented. James rolled over, attempting to go back to sleep. She sighed and turned off the radio. The idea of returning to sleep seemed impossible, so she got up and dressed quietly, the memories of the Hawks victory coming back to her all at once. Lucia appeared in the doorway, her face streaked with tears. She just shook her head.

A strange kind of emptiness enveloped Emily. An aching, knowing the grieving was coming, but not quite accepting of it just yet. Also relief, flooding her veins like cool water, leaving her limbs loose and relaxed. James seemed to understand it best. Lucia wept in the bathroom the rest of the morning. Emily and James made coffee and sat on the back porch. There was a quiet stillness, a serene mourning that reflected the tone her father had had the night before.

“Are you okay?” James asked eventually.

“I will be,” Emily said. “It doesn’t last forever.”

That was true. Nothing would. The ephemerality of the moment supported the weight of everything that had occurred within the last few hours. The Blackhawks would be champions for the summer, her father’s memory would not always be so fresh, and she and James would probably not last forever. She knew all of this. But for this moment, for now, there was peace. No anxiety of winning games, no rushed prayers for her father, no fighting. Just this.

*“Isn’t it wonderful?”* her father had whispered.

It was.

## Woman of the Year

### Natrona, Pennsylvania December, 1941

In the days after Pearl Harbor was attacked, the streets of the small mill town hummed with a mixture of anticipation and dread. Radios were broadcasting in every house, listening for news or advancements down the draft lottery. Conversations had an electrifying tone and occurred in whispers, full of questions and anxiety. Children asked their mothers what war meant. Wives gathered their strength to answer their children and assure their husbands. Men faced themselves, charging their souls with the daunting task of war.

The case was no different in the red-bricked row house on Nelson Street. Betty and Leo Czekalski sat at their kitchen table, hands set in their laps, staring each other down. Leo's lottery number had been called before the Japanese had dropped any bombs, and he was to report in the morning for Fort Knox, Virginia. He would not be going overseas. At least not yet. Instead, he was one of the training officers.

"Tomorrow's the day." His eyes began to set like the raging sun, falling and falling downward, trailing down to the ground and far away from Betty's eyes. They landed on the dying fire, running a slightly shaking hand through his thick hair. Leo's voice hardened. Tomorrow was the day.

The people, these children, the world; they had all been waiting for this day. It was only a matter of time before America was dragged into the rest of the world's mess. Betty just wished it

wasn't done so by the violent and terrible events in Hawaii. Tomorrow was the day to set the record straight with the world.

America could not, would not, fail.

"I know," Betty nodded.

"I was born ready for this," he told her. He had a cocky air about him in that moment.

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or maybe it was the bitter feelings that she'd been bottling up for so long now that caused her to snap so harshly, her palms sweating and mind racing. But the sick, sticky feeling in her stomach that she refused to acknowledge urged her on. She had to be prepared, had to be brave. For Leo, for the baby. Their son, Wally, who was not even a year old, who would never remember the terror she felt in her own country.

For herself.

Maybe the knee shaking, deep worrying and heart wrenching was all driven by a fear she did not want to possess, but all she knew that something was there, and she couldn't stop it. She was angry because he was being thoughtless. Because there were women down the street who were about to lose sons. And her son (*their son*, she corrected herself) could lose a father.

"Born ready?" she spat, "Leo, you know with every measly bone in your body that is a lie."

His eyes flinched; his curled and buckled up fists protesting at his side. But he didn't do anything else, nothing but purse his lips and swallow down a scream. "How could you say that?" With a thrust of his finger, Leo jabbed the air toward her. "You know how much we've—including myself—have been preparing for this! You know we're ready, you know it! How could you say such a thing?!"

From where she sat, Betty suddenly found herself pushing herself to her feet, ready to face the recoil of her own words.

"I know you have prepared—I've seen it—but that's not what you said. You said you were 'born ready' for this."

Before he could open his mouth, she pressed on.

"You, Leo, are an army man through and through. You, were born into a time of war. You grew up during the Great War. You've seen this before. And I may be a poor farm girl, but I did study my history. I know it. You know it. Wartime is a place where a man must live, and the woman must serve."

"But—"

"And if it weren't by some lucky chance out of millions, you would be the one going onto the front lines, facing the unknowns of death and fear."

"How dare you—"

"No one was born for this. There might be a man down the street that dies in a few days. Are you going to come back to me then and tell me you were born for that? Are you going to come home in a year and see me and Wally and tell me you were born to be away from us? You were born to serve your country. You were not born to go and train hundreds of men to march off to Europe and die."

And he stopped.

His hand fell to his lap, everything he was going to say dying at the breath of his chapped lips. "You're right," he was finally able to breathe. "But I'll tell you one thing." Although a steady churn settled in her stomach, boiling and coiling up at Leo and his testy ways of always jumping at every little wrong thing she said, she held herself down. Looking up, he continued.

"I may not have been born ready for tomorrow; I think you should know that I am ready and fully prepared for anything that happens. Because I know men are going to die. I know I could

die. But I also know that you can take care of yourself, and I know when I come back everything will be alright again.”

Leo fell back to his seat, a taut line stretched across his face.

The knee shaking, deep worrying, heart wrenching feeling came back.

"I know Leo, that's what worries me. Y-You were never meant to be like this, but here we are. And you're more ready than me."

Softly, and slowly, like the high moon in the sky, she crept over next to him, wrapping her arms around his neck tightly. Into his neck she breathed a thank you, inhaling the scent of lingering ash from his pale skin.

"Don't worry about me. Don't ever worry about me."

Betty nodded, locking his eyes on her as she left his warmth, stepping back into the cold air between them.

Tomorrow was the day.

### **February, 1943**

Walking down the road at this time of day, Betty felt like she was the last person on earth. The once-lively streets of Natrona were empty and silent as she marched on, pulling her coat in tighter. Her breath was visible in the sub-zero temperatures, causing her face to burn and eyes to water anytime she peered out over her scratchy scarf. There had not been sunlight without clouds in over a week.

The local union had posted flyers on every street lamp advertising coal availability, but Betty knew that their supply had long run out. This was her fifth trip to the Red Cross this week, and every time she had come back empty handed. It was unlikely that this endeavor would be any

more fruitful, but she had to try. Not trying would mean giving up, and that just wasn't an option. So she continued on, burying her fingers into her thinning pockets. Before the bombing in Pearl Harbor, they could have burned wood in the winter to stay warm. But since then, lumber had become scarce and coal was their only source of heat.

Betty would have burned less and tried to ration it if she were by herself. But she loved her son, Wally. She hated to hear him cry from the cold if she could prevent it. Wally was really what kept her going since Leo had left. Her sun didn't rise and set with her husband, but it had been a new adjustment to live without him. She kept this in mind as her eyes stung with the cold.

The minute she opened the door to the Red Cross Center, the old man behind the counter shook his head. The sinking feeling of disappointment returned to her as she sighed.

“When will there be coal?”

“The shipment is delayed. Other people are cold too,” he said.

Betty didn't even blink before she spun on the heel of her boot and turned back.

*La naiba*, she thought as she braced the cold yet again.

When she was young, the thought of even *thinking* in Romanian was inconceivable. Her parents had conditioned her to speak only English, and if she or any of the others had disobeyed, they found themselves kneeling on corn for hours at a time.

“*Do you want to get a job here? Do you want to find a husband?*” her mother used to yell when she would find Betty and Helen whispering in Romanian on the porch outside. So she had trained herself to use English most of the time, but since Leo had left for officer training in Virginia, she had found herself alone with her thoughts more than she'd like. It was comforting to think in her parents' native tongue.

It was foolish to wish for escape, because those who found it so rarely lived without the consequences. Two of the neighbors had lost good men, and she had to hope that no more would follow. Her own husband's post was not very dangerous, but the same could not be said for everyone else. Not everyone came back, she knew (and how could she not? she was fighting this war too, cold numbed her fingers, and her heart felt as if it was about to burst with every letter that arrived, every knock on the door). She wondered, too, which of them will make it out, which of them will be mourned later; wondered which it would be better to be. It was hectic, war; something she had no preparations for, and she found herself scrambling at the moment for something to hold onto, as if that would get her through this.

When she arrived back at the house, the factory whistle was sounding for the shift change, and she looked over her shoulder to see a group of workers exiting the steel mill. The bustle of the workday had begun as she clambered up the stairs of the row house porch. Inside was slightly warmer, but her breath was still visible. She set about the house to kindle the last of the newspapers she had saved. Her hands were shaking as she balled up the newsprint, white-knuckled from the cold. An advertisement page fell out beneath her and landed face-up, a sign for the Salvation Army staring back at her with a local phone number. Wally started to cry upstairs as she went to the telephone.

“Salvation Army, Western Pennsylvania Center for Relief,” a woman's voice said over the phone.

“Hi,” Betty said nervously. “My name is Betty Czekalski. I live in lower Natrona, by the steel mill. I've got a small boy at home, and we sure are cold.”

There was a pause, and Betty held her breath. The grip of the phone was tighter than ever.

“If you give me your address, I’ll have someone deliver a week’s supply of coal this afternoon.”

“Oh, of course, thank you so much,” she sighed, relieved. “Bless you.” She relayed their address and rushed upstairs to grab Wally, still crying. She held him close, her breath coating her kisses, whispering a prayer as her fingers itched for warmth.

They spent the night sleeping by the fire.

### **August, 1943**

The letters always started the same.

*Dearest Betty.*

Cut and dried from the same mold each time. No unique style. Never a photograph.

Always a signature without a closure, and always asking after the baby. She liked to follow the postmarks, all the way from Virginia’s rolling hills and humidity. The papers often smelled of coffee and grass, two scents she associated with him everywhere. The parchment was crinkled in the corners, and she liked to imagine Leo sitting at a desk in the early morning hours, writing her the letter that now sat in her lap. It was easy to get lost in her head. She often wrote him that things were well here, and she would describe Wally, how much he was growing. But it was difficult to find things to write about that wouldn’t worry him.

She sat at the kitchen table with a cigarette, waiting. Always waiting. For the war to end, for Leo to come home, for the world to not be so dark. Darkness enveloped everything now. It wasn’t like the darkness before—this darkness was within. When she was a child, electricity was a luxury and oil-lamps burned into the night, but the world seemed brighter then. They had lived on a small farm in Mount Union, Pennsylvania. Her father had put them to work, but when her

parents started renting apartments to immigrants working at the sewing factor, Betty had been given the responsibility to collect their monthly payment.

Her shoes had splashed in the puddles on the way to the row houses on Market Street, reflecting the darkness above, ash-like rain falling down on her shoulders. Collecting rent had been one of the few tasks her parents had given her that she enjoyed doing. One could only take milking cows for so long before they grew bored. Charged with demanding money—now *that* was something that took accountability and a level head. The instructions were to count the amount and make sure it was correct, and to demand the agreed upon sum if it was short. The eight units that were in Foxview were all inhabited by the migrant workers hired by the factory. Betty had gone the month before to collect their fares as well, but number five had a new family now. Her mother had told her they were European, brought here to work hard and make a life for themselves.

Dutifully, Betty collected the money from each tenant. She even waited for the family in number two while they counted pennies from a jar they kept on their table. She saved number five for last—she was curious to meet the new residents. One woman answered the door, small and frail-looking. Her eyes turned down to look at Betty, and she handed her the exact amount of rent, all in coins. Betty counted it all out one-by-one, and the woman turned to leave when Betty looked up at her. How odd that she said nothing, Betty thought.

Now, sitting at her kitchen table nearly ten years later, Betty wondered what had become of that woman. Maybe she had left when the factory shut down. Maybe she had become a nurse. Maybe she was just dead. It didn't matter, she knew. Her childhood was so far behind her that it might as well have never have happened. The life she lived now bore no semblance to her mother's or grandmother's. The war had made sure of that.

Wally woke up, calling for his mother from upstairs. He could walk and talk a little bit now, and she wrote all of this to Leo every week, and sometimes she sent him a package or two. She put the paper down on the table as she ascended the stairs.

The letter sat on the table, unread.

*Dearest Betty,*

*I received your letter and was glad to get it. Glad you are well and Wally is fine. Did you have an extra drink or two or what, you only sent me half of your letter. Sheet three and four was gone.*

*Last week I received your package of Yardley's soap, which is quite a rarity down here. Thanks for the package. Send some snapshots of Wally in your next letter. The boys want to see him.*

*Today the weather is rainy and miserable. Hopefully we will get some better weather soon.*

*Leo*

### **November, 1944**

She was so preoccupied with Leo's whereabouts that they might as well still be at war. It was a similar kind of tension, her unwillingness to accept him being home and his unwillingness to admit he was back. Betty was in no position to refuse help, but when he was the one offering she couldn't let herself accept it. She allowed him to plant the bushes out front and bring bread to the house, but she didn't speak to him or go to him like she used to. She was so used to fixing the coal stove, to cleaning out the gutters, that it was unnatural to have him doing all of those things.

It made her wonder what it was she exactly did before he went to war.

Sometimes she sat up all night, avoiding sleep, and watched the lights in the houses across the street. When they were with each other, she was polite, vacant, quick to leave. He always looked tired, but he had regained some weight. She supposed she had, too, though she couldn't say for sure. Betty had an inkling that she might be pregnant, but she struggled to find a time when she could confide in him. Despite the fact that her husband was home and at least three other women on her street alone were pregnant as well, she felt more alone than she had during the Winter of 1943.

Leo came home daily to eat lunch with her (by request, because having him home meant he needed to be there), and she would make jumbo on bread. He entered through the kitchen door without knocking and often without acknowledging her, and she didn't protest. Sometimes they ate together in silence. The day she announced she was pregnant again, he stared down at her stomach, his jaw tight.

"How far along?" he asked, almost void of joy or expression or anything. She actually laughed, feeling herself slipping into a mode of existence that people got institutionalized for.

"I'll find out," she said, giving him a cold stare. His unemotional response was making her angry.

He looked at her, even though she knew he was probably secretly prideful, his mouth remained in a straight line. She laughed at the idea of trying to get a rise out of him, turning away to clear the plates. When the speech about the financial feasibility of two kids didn't come, she just watched him eat the sticky buns she prepared as if he was suddenly ravenous, or wanted to get this over with as soon as possible to get back to work. He continued to look impassive, but didn't

say anything, which only made her angrier, and that much more resolved not to say anything herself.

Being pregnant this time was much easier. The threat of war was not hanging over them—all the radio shows said so. She found the radio comforting in the mornings when she was kneading bread or cleaning. The ladies next door had noticed her showing by now, and occasionally they would pop in and interrupt her listening, coaxing her into sitting for a slice of pie or weekly gossip. She didn't have much time to be dedicating to that nonsense (not that she ever had, after all), but she found the peace of being without Leo a comfort. Wally would play with the other boys down the street, and she would be a housewife.

Her life seemed to be at a standstill after three years of being a single mother. It had been lonely, and she had been responsible for not only her own well-being, but her son's. Leo was back now, and she found that she didn't quite know what to do with herself. It was difficult to revert to being dependent after spending so long being the leader of the house.

“Do you think you'll still want to live here after the baby is born?” he asked her one day over breakfast. The shift change whistle was blowing, and he was going to be late. She grabbed his plate as if to signify her answer, and to get him moving. They could not afford any less than he was already making.

“Answer the question Betty,” he said sternly, letting go of the plate.

“Where else would I?” she asked incredulously. “And you best get to that factory. We can't afford you clocking in any later than you have been.”

Leo stood and grabbed his pail. She turned around, her hand instinctively going to her growing stomach when he stepped forward. They stood watching each other, and she regretted thinking that if this were three years ago, he might have touched her hand or given her a kiss before

he left. She also would have looked forward to him coming home, but they both knew now that neither of those things would happen again with the same excitement or joy that once enveloped them both.

He left and the door shut behind him, and only then did she realize that he had circled a listing in the newspaper for a piece of property out in the country.

### **May, 1948**

It was Springtime, and Leo was standing out in the church yard in a suit-jacket and a tie that fit pretty uncomfortably, looking out of place. Trees were in bloom, pink blossoms fluttering delicately to the ground. Chatter everywhere, girls in bright spring dresses and smartly dressed young men with their heads ducked together, looking adorable.

*Husbands, huh*, Betty wanted to say, and wished there were someone next to her for her to elbow and to share a little chortle with.

When they'd left the house two hours ago, he had had given her a real hard look, and said, "I'm busy," waved his hand, and gone right back to cleaning his shotgun, all the parts laid out on the table, where Wally was looking at each one, inspecting them closely.

Betty had flung a dirty dishrag into the sink -- which was not a reaction to anything Leo had done, it was just what she did all the time -- and frowned and held her belly even though there wasn't a baby in there anymore, and said, "Well, I don't think it would be too much of a sacrifice for you to put the damn gun down and come with us."

"Language," Leo had chided.

"You insist on putting them through catechism, so you will attend," Betty said, throwing Leo a hard glare before turning back to the stove. Wally was dressed in his First Communion suit,

looking up at his mother. He knew better than to challenge either of them. She'd given him a little smirk then.

So, they all attended Sunday Mass, followed by the Sacrament of First Holy Communion. Betty held Barb, the newest addition to their family, and Leo sat with his legs crossed. He was tight-lipped until they were standing in the churchyard after. She said her goodbyes to the ladies she was friendly with, and started walking towards Leo, to signify that it was time to go.

"I want to buy that land," he said, his hand on her back as they started to walk home. Her heels clicked in the silence that followed. They had been icily broaching this topic since she had discovered the listing he had circled in the paper back in the fall. Every time, it ended in silence.

"The property on Route 908, out in the country?"

"Yes, that one." He sighed. "You know it's only a ten-minute drive from town. I wouldn't call it country."

"Regardless of what you call it, we can't pay for it. We can barely afford our rent as is."

"Imagine if we didn't have rent. Imagine if we only had a mortgage."

"How do you propose that we pay for both?"

"We would only have both for a year at most. Maybe less if we can build quickly."

"Are you asking my permission, or my approval?"

"I don't need your permission, and I can do it with or without your approval."

"Then I have nothing more to say," she snapped. Her pink skirt of her dress whirled as she turned back around to call the children. Leo walked home without her, and Wally asked where he had gone. She didn't answer.

**June, 1951**

The decision to buy the land came later than Leo would have liked, but logistically it made sense. He had been promoted to shift manager in the winter of 1949, and with that came a decent wage increase. Betty had relented in her insistence that they stay in town. They financed a car with Leo's Christmas bonus, a gray Chevy that sat on the street, looking shiny and new.

With fifteen acres, a stream, thick oak trees, and a peaceful charm, they purchased the country property in January. Because they had a mortgage, car, and rent payments, Betty urged him to get the house built sooner rather than later. Leo seemed to be enthusiastic and was gone every night that the weather was good. He had the foundation dug by the time winter faded, which pleased Betty enough.

Betty enjoyed the quiet that Leo left in his wake. It was nice to have the house to herself most of the time. It probably didn't make for the best marriage, but it kept them from fighting and getting angry with each other. She wanted the kids to enjoy their time as children, and she felt that was best if she and Leo were not on bad terms.

Wally took a liking to the manual labor that was building a house. He would join his father after school in digging the foundation, and as the summer months approached, he was able to help more. Barb wanted to join them a few times, so Betty would pack a picnic and sit on the grass with her, playing and watching the piles of wood and brick become a home.

The war was over and left behind, so they were trying to rebuild.

Leo with his hands, Betty with her mind. They were flimsy excuses that broke with a sharp word or misplaced intention, but whatever broke was fixed. And they were best at fixing themselves. Even though they were by no means rich, they could still afford to try to build a life. So when Leo promised, with a stern expression, that everything was going to be all right, Betty answered with a smile and a silent prayer.

She had Leo build a chicken coup, and she started raising fowl and selling the eggs at church. Any supplemental income helped with their payments, and her experience as a child on her parents' farm was still available for her to rely on. It proved to be a good decision, too, because Leo started hearing rumbles of a potential strike at the mill.

Betty had her face in her hands the night he mentioned it. "Oh, how can we make payments if you're not working?"

In that moment, he was human, he was emotional, and he took her hands and held them softly, looking at her, "We have enough saved up to get us through the summer. We just have to be smart with our money. Keeping selling those eggs, maybe plant a garden in a few weeks when we know the danger of frost is over." She smiled through her worry, and felt comforted by her husband for the first time in years. It gave her a weak kind of hope. But hope nonetheless.

The summer dragged on, the strike started, and the house started to take shape. Betty played with Barb and taught her how to garden while they raised chickens. Wally could help the direction of Leo. They sawed boards and nailed them in place. The late summer brought a heat wave and no promise of the end of a strike, and so they began work on the electrical and drywall.

They took some of their own chickens and vegetables to eat, but most of it was sold. They earned a bit of reputation, and people would buy from them often. The kids would come with her to church and sell with her while Leo continued to finish on the house.

Wally turned ten years old in July, and Leo gave him his old .22, a rite of passage. Betty had been skeptical of giving the boy a gun, but Wally came back with a squirrel a few hours later, and her doubts evaporated. They felt like a normal family, living a normal life. Betty enjoyed the least amount of stress she had in years, but silently she wondered how long it would last.

“Probably will be able to finish this before the strike is over,” Leo told her one day. “We’ll be moved in by the end of September.”

He ended up being an over-estimator, because they were in by the 5<sup>th</sup> of September.

They made their last rent payment in August, and boxed up all of their possessions.

Standing in her new kitchen, where her only view was the oak trees, she felt less alone than when she had when she had been surrounded by row houses and the bustle of the mill. Wally and Betty each had their own bedroom, something Betty was very proud of. She felt like she had a rich lifestyle, with a private house, a garden, and a life. Leo was outside, teaching Wally something about skinning the latest kill he had gotten. Betty was glad that Leo was a good father, even if he was not a good husband. Barb was playing with dolls.

Betty basked in it. She saw so much opportunity.

### **November, 1956**

When he started coming home later, she suspected it.

She knew his shift schedule like clockwork. Every Tuesday, she made dinner at 4 instead of 6, and took the kids to Catechism classes. Leo didn’t get off until 5, so he would have to wait to eat until she returned home (unless, of course, he took it upon himself to prepare his own supper). But in late November of 1956, she began to notice that he never asked her to make anything for him upon returning home. At first, she thought he must have made dinner for himself. But then came the late-night phone calls and the locked office drawer.

Then she knew.

Once upon a time, many years ago, in a life that every day seemed to have less and less to do with the one in which she has found herself, Betty thought all the time about doing something brave.

Not a little girl's impractical conception of *being free*. For her it never felt like there was home to break free from and anyway, what would she do? What was out there? She got married and rather than inspiring her it only made the rest of the world feel more unattainable. More unreal. Made her feel caged. Chained to what was happening to her, as it got worse and worse and worse. Her unknown dreams got away.

And if she didn't make it, if she never was actually free, if she got hauled back, everything would just get worse—because yes, that was possible and she knew it. It wouldn't even be about punishment. It would be about *reminding*. She wouldn't be allowed to forget her place. Who and what she was. A housewife. Maybe a divorced one, soon enough.

But she did think about it. About that. Leo was going to leave, and she knew it was only a matter of time. Instead of pining, she found time to think out her next move. It was a tiny secret rebellion. Lying awake at night on her groaning mattress, wrapped in sheets, hurting and tear-streaked and trying to find her way back into the world, she would stare up at the ceiling or out their single window at the night and she would think about somehow sitting at a desk, cashing her own paychecks, and not as a secretary. How maybe Leo might come back and try to take the children, at least for a while. How they would probably fight about that, too.

The future scared her. And she had no way of figuring out everything just yet. But as she lay in her bed, her mind drifted back to those days when she had worked for her parents. The only job she had ever truly known. Maybe she could get back in the business of rentals. But she had no money to invest. It was a constant problem of finding a worthwhile risk while still being able to provide for her two children. What would they think of all this? Would they be ashamed?

In another world, where he had made different choices, they would live happily. They could take long walks on the weekends down dark roads with no people and no light but the moon,

the stars—or sometimes a brilliant sun—and they wouldn't have anywhere to go. Nowhere to be. They would simply drive, ride the road like an asphalt horse all black and faintly sparkling, and it would be perfect. Better than perfect: it would be *okay*. For a little bit of time she would slide into another universe and she would be free.

He hadn't come home in two days, but all of his clothes were still in their drawers. By the third night, she was waiting at the kitchen table for him to come bursting through, declaring that he was going to leave. But by eleven o'clock, she grew tired and followed her children's lead and went to sleep.

When she woke up it was dark through the blinds in the bedroom's single window. She was curled up, wrapped tight as a ball, like she was actively trying to make herself smaller. She uncurled and immediately it seemed like a questionable decision; all her muscles yelled at once and she bit her lip to keep from yelling along with them. Once the pain subsided, she managed to stretch everything out, roll onto her back and stare up at the shadowy ceiling, the grid of dark framing and white squares barely visible.

From the next room, she heard the faint mutter of the radio, saw a little light down the stub of a hallway. He was home. So now she had to figure out what the rest of her life is going to consist of. She ventured out into the kitchen, and he was sitting there, smoking a cigarette and listening to a late-night radio show.

"Where've you been?" she asked, her arms crossed, trying to make herself bigger now.

He took a long drag. Didn't answer.

"So that's it then?" she asked. "You're just going to up and leave and walk away?" She was *not* pleading. The last thing she wanted, she realized now, was for him to stay. But she did

want him to understand the seriousness of his transgressions. If not against her, then against their children.

Leo nodded stiffly, and he turned to face her then.

“What are you going to do, Betty?” It was a mean, cruel grin that followed.

She looked him in the eye. “I’ll drive a Cadillac,” she sneered.

### **January, 1957**

There was a sense of relief that followed the days that Leo left. It was difficult to quantify exactly, but even as the rest of their lives seemed to take on the weight of the unknown, her stresses about her marriage were no longer there. Maybe there were too many other things to worry about. But for now, her only concerns were for her and her children’s futures.

She started cleaning houses the Friday after he left. Maybe the women felt bad for her, but she didn’t have time to take on their pity. Betty supposed that she ought to feel a little sad that her marriage had failed, but she figured she could feel it later. Reminisce about it when she did not have to think about putting food on the table.

They had no money. They had a mortgage payment to make. Betty taught Barb how to dress a chicken, and Wally would kill them (quickly, with the gun he had been given for his tenth birthday). They had food, for now. But they couldn’t kill all their chickens (or even most of them because they needed to eggs to sell).

Those first few months were difficult, but when Winter released its grip from Western Pennsylvania, Betty got an idea. She had been driving through the Fox Chapel area on the way to one of the houses she cleaned—The Dawson House, an enormous white brick mansion—when she

noticed a For Sale sign in the neighborhood. The agent was leaving the house, locking the door as she jumped out and spoke quickly.

“How do you get licensed to sell land?” she asked.

The man looked at her a little warily, but he was polite when he responded, “You need certification classes in the Business Training College.”

Betty thanked him before getting back in her car. It seemed like divine intervention: She had been regularly cleaning the Dawson’s house in Fox Chapel, and Mr. Dawson taught Business Training College in downtown Pittsburgh. She might not be able to invest in rental properties like her parents, but she could manage them. She just needed a Real Estate License. One afternoon, she took longer than she ought to sweep the downstairs, and happened to catch him on his way home.

“Afternoon,” he greeted her politely.

She asked him about the school, about its price, and about whether a woman could attend. The next morning, she took a bus to downtown to register for classes that Spring.

### **May, 1957**

As much as Betty loved the house they had built out in the country, it was too hard to afford the mortgage. With the divorce finalized, Betty was able to sell the house on her own and keep the money. She was attending night school in downtown Pittsburgh to become a licensed real-estate agent, but she was still a few classes away.

Reluctantly, they sold their chickens and the house (Betty took meticulous notes during the entire process, not wanting to let a minute of free education go to waste). Wally was in high school now, and Barb was growing up too. Moving back into town had its perks—the school was better

and there were more opportunities for after-school employment. West Tarentum was not expensive to live in, and with cheap rent, there was more money for other necessities. Betty still cleaned every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday in addition to attending her classes.

Women would ignore her in the supermarket—as if being divorced had the equivalence of being a leper. She had no friends, and it made it easier to have an excuse of studying and cleaning. The women of Fox Chapel didn't seem to mind that a divorced woman was cleaning their two-story mini-mansions. Maybe it made them feel charitable and Christian.

She felt worse about not being home often, but the nicer thing about living in West Tarentum was the neighbors and the activities that the kids could participate in while she was gone. It had been hard to say goodbye to their home so quickly, but it was for the best. Too many memories, too many inconveniences, and not enough to make up for all it lacked.

Now, she was more than half-way complete with all her education to get her real estate license. The terrifying part was going to be finding employment after she was able pass her certification exam. She had already tried calling three different firms in the area and all of them had promised to phone her back with no intention of doing so.

There was one left, Krutz, on Freeport Road. It was a bit farther than she liked but it would do. Two weeks before her final exam, she called them to see if they might be willing to take on a trainee. The man on the line asked her if she would be willing to do secretarial work as well, and Betty agreed. It was less than ideal, to be considered lower than them. But she supposed working people had to start somewhere, and no job was so beneath her that she could not also take a healthy dose of humility. She was still scrubbing floors in Fox Chapel and Findlay Township, so she might as well be a good example of hard work.

She passed with flying colors, and started the following Monday.

“Does this mean you won’t be cleaning anymore?” Barb asked her.

“We need the money,” Betty replied over dinner. “Not a single coin is going to be wasted in this house. If you need a new pair of boots, best wait until Christmas.”

The next morning, she was the first one up. She sketched a few rough outlines for her introduction to the rest of the office, made a pot of coffee and pancake batter, and mapped out a route to get from her job to the houses she would clean in the late afternoon. Everything was going to be fine.

### **November, 1957**

Everything was not fine.

After five months of working in a real estate office, she figured people would know what time her showings were. Every Wednesday evening, all the realtors got together to view Multi-List showings. She was always last (and she knew, it was because she was the newest agent, it made sense). But what was downright unfair was the entire staff not even appearing at the showings.

Betty waited thirty minutes in an empty house before she became indignant and left. This was the third time in the last two months that the Multi-List Group had ignored her listings. She would have complained, but there was no one to complain to. She would have voiced her frustrations to her husband, but they were officially divorced and hadn’t spoken in over a year. There was nothing to do about it, or at least there was nothing anyone outside of *her* could do.

So, as was becoming the trend lately, she took it upon herself. Betty called two of her most loyal house cleaning clients and told them she could no longer tear herself away from work long enough to make it to Fox Chapel. They understood, and offered for her to come on weekends

instead (this was a much-needed ego boost, as they liked her work so much they were willing to have her do it while they were home). She agreed, and took her now-free Monday and Tuesday evenings to show even more properties. Make even more connections.

Later that summer, she got so many high-end listings within the Heights that they *had* to attend her showings. It was almost a dreaded chore for them, and they didn't often bother to be polite about it.

In August, she got a listing for an industrial property, and the new owner personally requested her to be his agent. It earned her a nice commission, which immediately went to paying rent, student loans, and the kids' back to school uniforms. When her son asked her where the new uniforms came from, she told him.

“I made a big sell on the industrial property by the river. The Foundry.”

“That's fantastic,” he told her happily. There was a pause over dinner (one of the rare nights she was able to be home for it). Wally looked at her seriously. “Do you think you could ask the owner for a favor?”

“Depends on the favor.”

“Can you ask to get me a job at the Foundry?”

Betty was not shocked, but surprised nonetheless. She felt bad that this was even something she would allow her son to do. But she nodded and agreed, and the next day she called up the owner on the telephone.

“Yeah,” he said, “Yeah, no problem, Betty.”

**May, 1962**

There was no mention on her five-year anniversary of working at Krutz. Maybe they truly didn't care about that milestone, but Betty did. She had a little more enthusiasm in her step that morning as she poured everyone coffee in the breakroom. They were sorting through the mail.

"Oh, Betty, there's a letter here for you," John said. "It's from that Clark guy."

"But he bought a FISBO," Mace said. "How many properties did you show him? Eight? Ten?"

Betty had shown Jerry Clark over ten properties a few weeks ago. She knew he was a more difficult client because he was so particular. She had done her damndest to show him everything she could think of, but in the end, it was no use. He had felt sorry that nothing she had shown him had worked out, and because he had been so nice, Betty nudged him toward a For-Sale-By-Owner house that was her last hope. He had loved it so much he bought it the next day, but that meant no commission for Betty.

"Eleven," Betty said a bit more despondently than she actually was. "Give it here."

She opened the letter, which was a short note of thanks. But the surprise was the check that fell out onto the table, signed by Jerry Clark, worth \$15. The memo read, "Thank you."

"Well, lookie here," Mace wolf-whistled. "Commission."

"What do you mean, 'commission?'" Betty asked incredulously. "It's a thank you gift."

"It's the same as commission from a sale," Mace said. He was the broker, and if that FISBO had been one of their listings, he would have been entitled to the correct percentage of that commission. But this check was made out to her, and she told him as much.

"It's mine," she said. "If I had made the sale, you know that—"

“Hey Mace,” John interrupted her. “If Clark had bought Betty a dress, would you like her to cut it up so you could take forty percent of it too?”

Mace was red in the face, but he kept his cool.

“I’ll take my cut of that money in a personal check from you, Betty.”

She quit the next day.

### **June, 1962**

“I’m here to register a corporation.”

“Name?” the board secretary asked, popping her gum in her face.

“Betty Czekalski.”

“No, the name of the corporation.”

“Oh,” Betty exclaimed. “The Betty Czekalski Agency.”

There was a pause, and the secretary looked up at her. “Can you spell that?”

### **June, 1963**

Wally got married that summer and Barb went to beauty school. Starting a new business was very demanding financially. Still, Betty would rather be strapped to debt and working for herself than be flush with money and working for someone who was not respectful of her. Nevertheless, she could not afford to help with Wally’s wedding and support Barb going to school.

She told her daughter-in-law how sorry she was that she could not give them a better wedding present. She wanted to encourage Barb to go to school, and she explained this to Janet and Wally the night of their rehearsal dinner.

“It’s fine,” Janet had said. And it was.

They got married and moved to the Okinawa army base in Japan. It was lonely for a while, especially after they left. But there was work to be done, and since she had taken a lot of the clients from Krutz, she had to deal with their harassing telephone calls at least once a month.

Betty worked out of her house as the lone agent in The Betty Czekalski Agency. She sold row houses, town houses, and estates. She became the manager of an apartment complex called Fair Haven that had been repossessed by Savings Loan. Betty figured it would be like collecting the money from those folks back when she was a girl. But this place was something else. There were motorcycles in the hallways, ceilings falling through the roof, doors off their hinges.

“I want all of them out by next week,” she told the bank manager.

“You can’t kick them out. Those are good people,” he told her.

“How good can they be if they were living like that?” She wanted to help, but she never would take the easy way out. If she was going to do something, she was going to do it right.

### **August, 1969**

“You’re sure you want this one?” Wally asked her. “You don’t want the white?”

“No,” Betty replied steadily. “The gold will do.” Her granddaughter, Michelle, was on her hip, while her other two grandchildren climbed into the 1969 gold Coup DeVille was about to be in Betty Czekalski’s name.

She smiled as she was handed the keys, and drove her son and his children home to their house on Third Street. She could have gone home, but she decided to take a drive by herself down the highway. If nothing more than just because she could.

On her way to the highway, she passed the building that was currently the office of Czekalski Real Estate, Inc. She had changed the name after Janet and Wally had returned from

Okinawa. They worked with her now. Janet sold real-estate with Betty, and she was planning on getting her broker's license as well. Wally took up appraisal work, and suddenly Betty had a business, not just a sole-proprietorship.

This summer they had gotten a big sign painted to hang in the front, and now the bright red letters were visible from across the road. Betty wondered if Leo ever saw it. She hadn't seen him in years, but she knew he was aware of her recent successes. If she was honest with herself, she was not even the slightest bit concerned with her ex-husband. She had discovered so much that she could do in life, and this was only the beginning.

When she returned to her house that night, she parked her new Cadillac in the garage, and took one last look at it before she locked the door and went inside. On her way to bed, she passed pictures of her and Leo, of her and the kids, of Wally's wedding day, Barb's wedding day, and the grandkids at Pymatuning Lake.

Despite everything and all the hardships, she saw nothing but blessings on that wall. Betty accepted the bad that came with the good. And when she went to bed that night, she said a silent prayer of thanks. She was one lucky duck.

*Betty was the first woman elected to the Allegheny Valley Chamber of Commerce in 1971. She was named Woman of the Year in 1978 by the Allegheny Valley Business and Professional Women's Club. When Leo Czekalski passed away in the 1990s, Betty sold her Cadillac to buy a Buick. She much preferred it. She worked until the late 2000s, when her health required her to retire. She passed away in 2009 and is survived by her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.*

# ACADEMIC VITA

**Academic Vita of Kathryn N. Czekalski**  
katieczekalski@gmail.com

## Education:

**The Pennsylvania State University Class of 2017**

University Park, PA

*Schreyer Honors College*

- B.S. in Chemical Engineering / Honors in English Minor
- 2016-17 recipient of the **Saverio Fioravanti Award for Excellence** in Chemical Engineering
- 2016 recipient of the **Edward Nichols Award** in Creative Writing

## Work Experience:

**Armstrong Group of Companies (AGOC)**

Butler, PA

*Legal Intern*

May-August 2015, 2016

- Created database categorizing real property based on tax and geography research
- Consulted with FERC regarding licenses and permits for engineering projects
- Analyzed TV contracts for technology implementation and Franchise Agreements per FCC regulations
- Gave presentations with Excel and Power Point to Executive Counsel
- Tasked with responding to informal agency complaints, researching corporate dissolution documents

## Activities & Leadership:

**Penn State IFC-Panhellenic Dance Marathon (thon.org)**

2014-2017

*Committee Member (2014-15, 2016-17), Fundraising Leader (2015-16)*

- Was selected for committee membership based on application and interview
- Organized and planned committee events including retreats and fundraisers
- Planned alternative fundraiser of themed bags for THON 2016
- Certified to regulate crowd safety during THON Weekend at the Bryce Jordan Center

**Penn State Newman Catholic Student Association**

2013-2017

*Webmaster (Elected, 2014-15)*

- Led website redesign using HTML and PHP coding knowledge in 2014 (clubs.psu.edu/up/Newman)
- Organized meetings and was tasked with leading two meetings per semester
- Served as peer-to-peer mentor for new and returning students

**Schreyer Honors College Orientation**

*Student Mentor (Selected)*

2014-2015

- Mentored group of twelve incoming honors engineering students
- Formed relationships with new students and facilitated their first experiences at Penn State
- Organized and led career and internship discussion panel