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**ABSTRACT**

*Secondhand Heartache* is a novella that centers around heartache in its various and unsuspecting forms—from the realization that we may never fulfill our childhood dreams to the shattering feeling of losing a loved one. The story accompanies Lena throughout her journey of balancing empathy with her well-being while struggling to find and take care of her own heartaches.

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To my parents and sisters: thank you for unconditionally loving and supporting me and for cheering me on in spite of the various zany ideas I have had during my academic career (committing to writing a novella being only one of many).

And, finally, to my friends—thank you for your warmth, your sunshine, and your love.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

The writers who have most inspired me and who continue to do so include, but are not limited to, the following:

George Saunders, for his quirky, confusing style. I came across Saunders' writing in *The New Yorker* towards the end of high school and went on to read *The Tenth of December*, quickly becoming fascinated with his pointed style of writing—I struggled to grasp every detail but somehow, I didn't need to. In some way, I understood exactly what he meant. I have attempted to apply the style I learned from Saunders—one that toys with the rules of writing—to both this novella and to other stories I have written.

Markus Zusak, for his talent in personifying fear. *The Book Thief* holds a special place in my heart, for the ways in which universal fear—specifically, death—are personified. Zusak creates an empathetic character from the thing we fear most: Death, and attempts to help readers understand the daunting idea of death through encouraging empathy, rather than terror, regarding the inevitable end. Inspired by Zusak's use of "Death" as a character, I attempted to manifest another pain, heartache, into a tangible character, and hope to change the dread surrounding the vulnerability and hurt that accompanies heartache.

Jodi Picoult, in how she so gently but firmly describes the seemingly indescribable magic of sisterhood, specifically in *My Sister's Keeper*. *My Sister's Keeper*, a story I read in the seventh-grade, was perhaps the first novel that made me cry for weeks (two, to be exact). Her story taught me the power of familial and, particularly, sisterly love. With Picoult's tender writing in mind, I aimed to apply this soft tone in describing the relationship between Emma and Lena.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in her description of society's undermining and detrimental view of women in "The Yellow Wallpaper." *Secondhand Heartache's* main issue lies in the skepticism of women—in the refusal to believe women. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" helped solidify this challenge that women continue to face daily.

Finally, Elena Ferrante, for her candid and casual methods of describing the complexities of friendship in *My Brilliant Friend*. From Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, I derived inspiration from a deep-rooted friendship being even more painful than romance. I love Ferrante's focus on friendship rather than romance as a source of pain.

While my style of writing is inspired by my favorite writers, my family is my true source of inspiration. This story centers around family dynamics but it does not reflect my own. I have two sisters, who continuously leave me in awe of their beautiful souls, and two incredibly loving and supportive parents—I am very lucky. My family's influence on this story lies in their incredibly strong senses of empathy and in how I've been raised to feel emotions in their entirety. My mother would always tell me that crying is a sign of strength, not weakness, and I take this to heart whenever I feel ashamed that my emotions physically manifest through pouring tears, uncontrollable laughter, or a smile I cannot erase.

This story comes from my belief and insistence that heartache can be felt by those who have never been romantically in love. And so, this story serves two purposes: to illuminate the effect empathy has on those who tend to feel emotions too strongly and, perhaps more importantly, to undermine the idea that the most painful heartaches only stem from romantic relationships. The worst heartaches are derived, in my experience, from a sudden shift in perception—from the friction between belief and reality.

## Chapter 1

### Lena

I found my first heartache at four years old—a brilliant yellow among hundreds of dull, grey stones.

My father had taken my sister and me to our favorite place in West Haven—Painter Park. Most warm Sunday afternoons were spent swinging far too high for a child my age and, yet, still insisting that I be pushed “higher! HIGHER!” or “tagging” my sister and running away in hopes she would follow, though she hardly ever did, explaining as I sprinted away giggling that “tag” was not played like that. On this particular Sunday, we were treasure-hunting, searching the outer perimeters—those seemingly forbidden bounds, where the trees stood tall and daunting to my three-foot two-inch self—for any sign of pirate goods. Our dad challenged us to find the most beautiful stone, stick, leaf, and pinecone we had ever seen, and bring them over to him as swiftly as possible.

In my erratic search, an insistent radiance caught my eye, and I immediately felt like Princess Aurora, hypnotically following an anonymous glow. I took the stone and placed it in my coat pocket, excited to show my family, anticipating high praise for not only finding the most beautiful stone I had ever seen, but one that glowed! I quickly collected the rest of the scavenger items and rushed towards where my father was patiently waiting. He smiled proudly for the entirety of the time I took to reach him, my frantic, padding feet narrowing the distance between us. When I finally reached him, out of breath but exhilarated, I began trying to explain what I had found.

“Look, Daddy! Look! It’s glowing!” I was jumping with my arm raised, trying to shove the stone in his face but too small to reach his height. His smile melted into a frown, his face a vibrant red, eyebrows crinkled.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you see it? Isn’t it BEAUTIFUL?” A dumbfounded stare in response.

My sister came running over, panting and out of breath.

“Lena! How did you find everything so fast?” I turned to her, my father remaining silent but staring quietly at the stone I clutched in my hand.

“I don’t know! I just did! Look! This one is glowing! Looooook!” I waved it in her face.

“Lena, rocks don’t glow.” My father. I looked back up at him, triumphantly.

“This one does! Hehe!” I retorted.

“Lena, can I please see that rock?”

“Mmmm...here,” I continued gripping the stone, drawing it closer to his face so he could better inspect it. I suddenly felt protective about it, not wanting to let go, ever. The feeling of complete warmth and content ran through me.

“Lena—can I please *hold* the rock?”

“No! It’s mine!” I turned my body away from him, hugging the stone firmly against me, believing my tiny hands and forty pounds could function as a barrier.

“Lena. Give it to me. Please.” That stern tone he reserved for dire situations.

“Hmph. Fine. Here!” I pouted but raised my arm high to hand it to him. “But BE CAREFUL with it!”

He stood there quietly, as though debating what the next surgical procedure would be. He held the stone in his palm, running his thumb over the surface.

“Lena. Where did you find this?”

“Over there!” I smiled proudly, pointing towards the pile of stones.

“Ok. We have to put it back. Do you want to or should I?”

“NO!!! WHY!!!”

“Because, Lena, it doesn’t belong to us. It belongs to the park.” I was not a possessive or selfish child—typically, I gave up my toys with ease so others could play with them. But this stone, for a reason I couldn’t immediately pinpoint, meant more to me than anything ever had.

“Papa, can I keep it? Pleeceeeaaaassee?”

“No.” And, to my devastation, he threw it farther than the pile of stones, beyond the trees, too far for my little legs to reach before I was being dragged away by my father. Emma, who was confused both about my sudden obsession with stones and my father’s sudden resentment towards our favorite park, walked alongside us as I kicked and screamed.

I spent the rest of the day isolated in my room, refusing to eat dinner that night, despite my father’s insistence that, if I did not come down *right this minute*, we would never go back to Painter Park.

To my father, maintaining our family tradition was incredibly important—dinner was always spent together, no matter what. Every night, the three of us would sit around our circular table and discuss the day’s events. I always looked forward to our meals, but my desire to find the stone overpowered how badly I wanted to eat the lasagna he had prepared for dinner. I stayed cooped up in my room until I fell asleep, dreaming of glowing and colorful stones.

We never went back to that park—no matter how often I begged, my father was adamant about avoiding the dangerous Glowing Stone Park. Instead, we found other places—parks with

beautiful ponds, with ducks, with actual complete and stable swing sets, but I had no interest—I wanted to go back to the park of the glowing stone.

When I realized my father would never take me back, I began planning my Great Escape. I would sneak out the front door and *walk* to the park. On my own. All alone. My sister and I shared a room at the time—as a result, I constructed a plan which involved feigning sleep until I knew for certain that she was in a deep slumber and tiptoeing downstairs, out the back door, sometime around eleven—a time that was late enough to assume my father would also be sleeping. When the red numbers on our digital clock finally crept up to eleven, I slipped out of bed, put my slippers on, and crept downstairs. Reaching the doorknob felt victorious enough, but, as soon as I opened the door, the alarm sounded. I slammed the door shut in hopes the ringing noise would stop but as I turned around to scurry back upstairs, I ran into my father, wearing a shocked expression. I immediately stiffened, afraid he would link the desire to find the stone to my attempt to sneak out; to my relief, however, he gave me an out. A question that allowed me the space to lie with a one-word response.

“Lena, what’s going on? Were you sleepwalking?”

“Yes.” Because I was beginning to develop manipulation skills, I yawned and held my arms out towards him, indicating I wanted to be carried back upstairs. Too tired from my grueling sleepwalking to walk on my own.

The next morning, a stone landed in my pocket during breakfast—a *glowing* stone. I excused myself, explaining I had to pee, and locked myself inside the bathroom taking out the contents of my pajama pocket. This stone was not the exact one I had seen at the park—instead of blue and red fissures, these were pink and purple.

“Wow.” I was enamored. “Beautiful,” I whispered as I held it close, hugging it against my cheek.

For two weeks, I was able to collect and hide these stones without my father sensing anything out of the extraordinary was occurring. I had been hiding the stones in the bottom drawer of my dresser, under my pajama sets. The problem with being five years old, however, was that I was not yet autonomous. My father still did the laundry, folded my clothes, placed them back in the drawers while I was at school. I had collected fourteen stones by the time he found them. He brought me to a therapist, who probed me with questions about my childhood and, when she could not find anything that could justify my deep held beliefs that stones could glow and beat, she began to ask me to describe them. The what’s, the where’s, the why’s. I would calmly explain that certain stones would either stand out to me or land directly in my pocket, on my desk, in the corner between my bedroom and the bathroom I shared with my sister, in my closet. I found a stone in my backpack once and another in my cubby. There was one on the sink of the school bathroom and another on my pillow. Once, I even found one under my pillow, I excitedly explained. My therapist, despite being specifically meant for children, did not find my anecdotes amusing.

Although I noticed her nodding distractedly, I continued describing all the heartaches I had found. One on my desk, another tucked gently between the cushions of our couch. Eventually, Miss Martin asked if I thought my imagination was simply running a bit wild, but I refused to give in to the disbelief. When I did not give up my stubbornness, she determined it was normal for a child to imagine—to create, to believe.

When we arrived home that day, my father asked me to bring him all the stones I had. I dutifully did so, knowing more would come my way. Every day, I found another. I grew to learn

that if I hid the stones in Emma's room, I would risk fewer chances of my father finding them. Initially, my sister was annoyed to find stones hidden among her clothes, in her desk drawers, under her bed. When I begged her to keep the secret from our father, desperate tears threatening to tumble down my cheeks, she agreed to.

“But, Lena, you can't keep putting stones in my drawers—it's annoying.” I nodded in agreement.

“Can you help me find a place to hide them?”

For a year or so, we were able to keep our secret. Emma could not see the glowing or the fissures, but she understood the effect these little stones had on me. I explained that some were blue, others red. Some were pink and my favorites were yellow. The yellow ones were usually warm to the touch, the blue ones a bit colder. The red ones seemed angry—I did not like those so much. The orange stones were pretty but felt too fragile, like they could crack at any moment. The beating patterns were different as well—the yellow ones were slow, as though moving through sand. The blue ones barely had a soft, almost undetectable beat—I had to be very still when holding those stones. I began to categorize these stones—red was angry, yellow was sad, blue was calm. In the midst of the chaos, I found organization. A way to process.

My pediatrician told my father not to worry—this was normal for a child. Nothing to be concerned about. Just a six-year-old's mind learning to sense, detect, and categorize. If I continued to speak of these stones when I turned twelve or so—we would need to reevaluate. But for now, I was fine. My father, however, agonized over my stones. He began to ask where and when I would find them, but I knew that if I told him, he would try to search for them too, to find them before I could. I told him I would simply collect them from our yard. Eventually, I tried telling him that it was all part of a game in my mind and that I did not *actually* think that stones

could glow. He didn't buy it. My sister, ten years old at the time, suggested synesthesia—her friend had told her about how she could associate colors with letters and sounds. For a few months, he subscribed to this idea. God, was I thankful for my sister.

Emma had never questioned whether or not I could actually see the glow, the color, the beat. She told me she only saw them as grey, cold, unwavering and still. And yet, she believed me. She wished she could see them as colorful, too, she would tell me. She would patiently listen to my descriptions of each stone before asking whose I thought they were. She encouraged, engaged, and enabled me when I most needed human understanding.

I will always remember the day Emma told me that our mother could also see heartache. She smiled fondly, her mind usually wandering towards the moon when she spoke of Mom. I was jealous of my sister for having memories of her, mine were blurry, cloudy. In exchange for my descriptions of heartache, Emma would describe a different kind of heartache: our mother. According to my sister, Mom had green eyes, long, brown, curly hair, and olive skin. I knew she had smelled of lavender and vanilla because whenever those two scents would waft by, whether I was passing a boutique or simply washing my hands with fancy soap at a friend's house, the combination would remind me of an endless hug, a soft voice, burying my head into the space between a warm shoulder and neck, lying next to her when I had night terrors and could not sleep.

Emma would tell me our mother was not dead. My father would ground her for lying, threatening to change the entire layout of our home so that we would no longer share a room and so that, according to him, I would no longer absorb this nonsense. But Emma refused to change her narrative. Throughout my life—even after we eventually *did* have separate rooms—she maintained that our mother was still out there, alive, either wandering or settled. Perhaps she was

married. Maybe she had more children now, we would speculate together. Perhaps a son. Had she wanted a son? Were two daughters not enough for her?

My father's refusal to speak of my mother except to tell me she was dead countered my sister's immeasurable stories of Mom when she would take us to the park or dance in her green cat pajamas every morning; of the banana bread she and my sister would make together on Sundays. My sister's stories brought this faceless woman to life—we would lie in her twin bed together nearly every night, Emma's whispers filling the void my endless questions would leave.

“What was her favorite color?”

“Yellow.”

“What about her favorite song?”

“I'm not sure—she loves Phil Collins.”

“Favorite book?”

“Hmmm I think *Harry Potter*—we would always read that together.”

“What was her voice like?”

“Like silk.”

The questions would continue until I would eventually fall asleep, smiling to the beat of my mother twirling into sunshine. Over the years, I had accumulated dozens of heartaches. The one I had found at the park was my sister's. For several months, I only found hers and another's who I could not identify. My sister's came for varying reasons—when she was twelve and her friends had all had a sleepover without her after her seventh-grade dance. The heartache landed in my lap while my father and I were eating dinner one night—I was about to put a spoonful of soup in my mouth when I felt the thud. Peeking over at my father and trying to maintain my cool, I snuck the little stone into my robe pocket and rushed through the rest of dinner. When

dinner was over, as declared by my father placing his cloth napkin next to his plate and leaning back, I ran upstairs to inspect the heartache. It was a bright blue—the color of a Smurf. I hid it in my bottom dresser drawer and kept it there for years, unsure of how to heal it. Sure enough, when my sister came home later that night, the first thing she did was run up to her room—what used to be our playroom until we regrettably decided to stop sharing a bedroom—slam the door shut, and fall onto her bed, sobbing.

When my sister was fifteen and her boyfriend broke up with her, another heartache landed in my pocket. It was a soft violet, its hue yellow and its beating smooth. A few minutes later, Emma came home crying—she was fifteen and had just gone out to the movies with him. The slammed door indicated that she was not ready to talk, but I walked into her bedroom nonetheless, the heartache clutched in my hand.

“Emma?”

“Len, please go away,” she responded, through muffled tears. I sighed and placed the heartache by her hand.

“Here.” Her head popped up and she inspected the little stone through her peripheral vision.

“What do you see, Len?”

“It’s a light purple and...there’s some orange around it!” Emma smiled ever so slightly.

“I wonder what that means—you said all my other ones were red.”

“Maybe purple is when you’re sad. And red is when you’re angry.” She chuckled a bit.

“Thank you, Len.” I tilted my head, confused.

“For what?”

“For my heartache. I feel better now.” I hugged her one last time and ran excitedly over to my bed, proud that I had been able to help my sister out.

Emma had placed the heartache on top of her dresser and we both quickly fell asleep—she, from the exhaustion of a broken heart and I, from the fatigue that came as a side effect of secondhand heartache.

The next morning, I waited until Emma was downstairs eating breakfast to stand on her bed and reach the top of her dresser. I turned the heartache over in my hands, spotting tiny red and blue veins that I had not noticed before. It looked a little greyer and beat a little more slowly. I did not know whether this meant it was healing or getting worse—I was not sure what Emma’s thoughts or feelings were in that moment. I put the stone back on top of the dresser and slowly made my way downstairs, peeking over the railing, into our living room, where I could spy on Emma eating cereal and staring blankly ahead. I remained like this for several minutes, trying to detect from her body language whether she was more or less upset than she had been the night before. After being unable to read her mind, I walked over and sat next to her on the couch, hoping she would turn and start talking to me. Instead, she ignored me, continuing to stare blankly. I shrugged and went to prepare my bowl of cereal, wondering what the next appropriate words would be. I tried my tactic a second time—sitting next to her, staring straight at the side of her face in *clear* expectation. When, once again, she did not move, I spoke.

“Emma, are you okay?” She remained motionless. I poked her. “*Emma*, are you OKAY?” She turned to me with a startle.

“What? Yeah.” She looked down into her empty cereal bowl. “I’m fine.”

“Do you feel better today?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Wanna play Barbies?”

“Not right now, Len. Maybe later.”

I pursed my lips but kept quiet—I understood she needed time. I walked over to our kitchen window to peek out at what my father was doing. He was in our backyard, gardening. We had tomato plants growing that summer and he checked on them almost every day. Saturdays, however, he spent the most time outdoors snipping, watering, strolling around our tiny garden with a proud smile.

When I went to grab more cereal from our pantry, I noticed a yellow stone lying on one of the shelves. It was hot and its beating was erratic.

“Emma, I found another one!”

“That’s great, Len.” At this point, I was not sure whether Emma still believed me or whether she thought I was placing random stones all over our home, claiming they were colorful and rhythmic. Instead of showing her my new stone, I brought it to our room, tucking it between the clothes of the bottom drawer of my dresser.

There were the heartaches I could identify—and those I could not. For the first few years of my life, I found only my sister’s and those I did not know how to go about figuring out. When I was around eight years old, I found my father’s. His was a deep navy blue with a light beating and a smooth surface—like glass. I wasn’t sure what to make of his heartache—it was not something I would ever be able to mention, so I cared for his heart, quietly. At times, I tried to subtly bring it up—I would ask if anything had happened, if he was hurting. I asked if he was lonely, sad, depressed. I asked about every negative emotion I could think of—emotions we had been taught by our school counselor during an assembly on mental health. My father, each time,

would look at me questioningly but would not bother asking *why* I had these questions, only denying he felt anything other than content.

Without being able to address the problem, I was unsure of how to cure my father's heartache. More would trickle in, slowly. I found one on my desk at school—a purple so dark it seemed to be black at first. Another on the floor of our living room, which I was lucky enough to find before my father could notice. There must have been hundreds I could not find, or that he had already taken and tossed, but little stones continued appearing everywhere.

Soon enough, the heartaches began to adapt to my father's anger, no longer appearing in public spaces. They would manifest in my pockets, in my drawers, in my backpack. All the heartaches my father had hidden, composed of his, my friends', my sister's, I eventually found—years later. Looking out our kitchen window one morning in October, when it was dark enough that I could spot any light from miles away, I noticed a glowing in the woods behind our house. I was nine at the time—old enough to choose my own outfits but too young to wander off on my own, I knew I would have to wait until my father was distracted enough that I could sneak outside, grab the heartaches, and run back up to Emma's room to hide them. My father walked me to the bus stop every day, but that morning, I struggled to follow him down our driveway, across the road, and a few feet away to the stop sign in front of our neighbor's home. Periodically during our walk, I would turn around to see the glowing growing brighter and brighter, appearing like a rising sun. The heartaches knew I was aware of their presence—they had been abandoned, growing more painful every moment. I did not know how long they had been buried there—my father must have placed them all there over the years in hopes I would never find them, or, perhaps, in hopes that the sense I had that these were not regular stones would somehow vanish. The school day was the hardest I'd had up until that point—I struggled

to pay attention in class, my mind wandering to the heartaches. *How many were there? Whose were they? Had my father found his own heartaches, perhaps?* When we were released from class for our recess break, my social studies teacher approached my desk and asked if I was alright—why was I not speeding out of the classroom to go run outside with my peers? Was everything alright at home? Did I need to talk? I shook my head, knowing the more I said, the more I would reveal. I gingerly followed the rest of my class outdoors, forgetting to grab my coat from my cubby.

Outside in the cold, I stared off into the distance, my friends asking if I wanted to play tag. I distractedly conceded, accidentally committing myself to something I did not want to do. During the game, I was the first to be tagged, my thoughts too far to control my movements. When it was my turn to be “it,” a glow caught my eye. I began to run as fast as I ever have, the ground becoming a blur of pavement and grass. My friends screamed in astonishment, taking off as fast as they could, but I was not following them—I had somewhere else to be.

I ran past the fence surrounding our playground and out the door, towards the glow in the trees nearby. When I reached the heartache, lying there, a bright orange, I grabbed it just before the teacher on recess duty caught up to me. I slipped the stone into my pocket.

“Got it.”

When I was brought to the principal’s office, grilled on where and why I was attempting to run away, I tried to justify my actions by saying I had thought I saw one of my friends run out into the woods during the game. Although I knew the administration did not buy my excuses, they let me off with a warning instead of trying to dig deeper into an issue that would open a can of worms and turn me into a huge liability for the school. They would have to look into my history, send me to counseling, write every single detail down. They would have to watch out for

signs of strange behavior—every teacher I had and would have for the rest of my life would need to be made aware. It was too much of an effort for a child such as myself.

When I got home from school that day, I was prepared to be confronted by my father. I thought the school would have called him and told him. I assumed that he would be waiting to ask just *what* I thought I was doing, running away from school. He would know the heartaches were behind my impulsiveness—I was afraid he would toss all the stones away, that he would hide them from me forever, further than I would ever see.

When he did not ask, I became more serious about pretending that I could no longer see heartache. Every stone he found, he would ask what I saw. No matter how it actually appeared, I would describe what every rock looked like—grey, round, and smooth. I began to find ways to describe them differently ever so slightly but generally enough to fit what a regular rock looked like. My father was finally convinced.

While I am certain that he did, in fact, receive a call from school that day, despite never mentioning the matter, when I arrived home that day, I found him chopping vegetables in preparation for a lasagna. He simply asked how I was and how my day had been. I must have worn a shocked expression because he looked at me quizzically.

“Is everything okay, Len?”

I nodded and told him that I was simply tired, that it had been a long day. Luckily, he chuckled, finding it easier to believe me than to challenge my words, and tussled my hair.

“Ok, kiddo. Work on your homework, we’ll eat an early dinner once Emma’s back from practice.”

The glowing heartaches were still off in the woods, shining like an endless sunset, taunting me. The fact that my father could not see the bright glow baffled me. Years passed by

and the glow continued to grow, stronger each moment. Whether the heartaches were individually growing brighter or whether my father simply kept finding more of my stones and adding them to the collection, I had no idea. I agonized over the heartaches, wondering how and when I could finally go off, on my own, to find the pile of heartaches. I wondered what my father thought of the fact that I could supposedly no longer see the heartaches but that tiny stones continued appearing around our home. Did he think I was still picking them up and hiding them? Did he think that my shoes tracked them in? That my sister had been the one bringing the stones in the whole time and that we had invented this convoluted game we'd been playing for years? The contempt my father had for these heartaches was so strong—enough that his mood changed each time I mentioned a heartache—I couldn't quite place why he was so upset. My sister was also confused, but she brushed it off. She wasn't sure whether to believe me or not, but she chose to give me the benefit of the doubt. She believed that, in my reality, these stones glowed, even though she couldn't see them.

When I was fourteen, after several years had passed since I had last told my father about a heartache I had found, I was allowed to go off on my own with my friends—the only rule was that he would be the one picking me up and dropping me off. He wanted to make sure I was not going anywhere on my own. I do not know where the somewhat sudden mistrust stemmed from, but the first place I suggested to my friends was Painter Park. I had not been in seven years, but I had a feeling there were heartaches all around, waiting to be discovered. The woods would be a harder place to convince friends—and parents—to explore, but my father said it would be fine if I asked my friends to meet me at the park.

Fourteen-year-olds, however, tend to believe they are “too cool” for any park that has a playground. My friends immediately rejected my idea and suggested we go to our local mall

instead. Apart from the fact that I did not love spending my time in malls, I was disappointed that no one could not be persuaded to go to the park. Instead, we sat in the food court for hours, observing the passersby. We would whisper funny stories to each other, guessing who the people were in their private lives, whether the blond boy and girl walking together looked enough alike to be siblings or walked awkwardly enough to be on their first date together. Whether the group of boys wearing plaid khakis and button-down collared shirts had fathers who were lawyers and who might just sue us for even *daring* to make fun of their sons. I was able to distract myself from the heartaches for long enough to enjoy time with my friends, something I had been struggling with for a while.

My transition through high school to college was swift. Fourteen turned to fifteen and I breezed through my courses. Fifteen to sixteen and sixteen to seventeen—I expected the worst throughout these years, but I avoided heartaches my friends went through by simply ignoring boys during that time, choosing to disassociate from the drama surrounding high school romance.

I expected college to be easier—for the jealousy of middle and high school to dissolve, however, I soon realized that the heaviest heartaches come, not from romance, but from those relationships we never expect to end—the ones into which we enter without anticipating an expiration date. A romance puts everything out on the line—a sense of urgency raises the stakes.

I went into each relationship assuming the worst, expecting to break up in a few months or years. What I did not anticipate, however, was for the first friends I gravitated towards in college—the three best friends whose promises to be my bridesmaids, those who held me during my hardest times—to break my heart. While I struggled with keeping everyone else's heartaches safe while simultaneously searching for my own, I made it my goal to care for every heartache I

found—without favoritism or bias. Continuously questioning where my worst pains would wander off to—where the pain from arriving at the abrupt realization that I was, in fact, only an above-average English student and that I was much scholastically lazier than I had always thought.

## Chapter 2

### Sebastian

Kiera and I met in college—at Dartmouth. The story isn't romantic or Nicholas Sparks-esque—the fact of the matter is, simply, that I hit on her at a party. I was a freshman in a fraternity at the time—Psi Epsilon. That night, it wasn't my turn to stand by the door—I was actually allowed to partake in the party scene. Granted, I had to serve the alcohol, but I was in the middle of it all. The sweat, the bright lights—the horrible quality strobes. The music that thumped against our sticky wooden floors.

Kiera had come up to ask for a beer and the first thing I noticed were her brilliant green eyes. Her hair wasn't clear in the light—I couldn't tell whether it was a light brown or a dark blonde, but her eyes reflected everything. I became nervous and my hand shook as I attempted to coolly pour beer from the keg. Fuck. There was too much foam and I struggled on deciding whether or not to make a dirty joke about it or simply hand a cute girl a drink and keep my mouth shut. If she was in the sorority we paired with—and, if she was older—I would get into trouble with the brothers for flirting. Ultimately, I decided to make an innocent joke before handing her the beer.

“ID, please?” She stiffened immediately.

“I didn't know you carded, sorry.” She started turning away but I grabbed her arm and cracked a smile.

“I'm joking.” I stuck my hand out. “I'm Sebastian.”

“Oh, haha.” She relaxed a bit. “I'm Kiera.”

“Are you a freshman?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice...same.” I began swaying back and forth, nervously. I handed her the red solo cup.

“Here ya go.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem—see ya around.”

There was our oh-so romantic meeting the girls would always ask me about when they were growing up. I wasn't sure, for a while, whether or not to tell them that we met at a frat party—I was always telling Emma not to talk to frat boys when she got to college—they were all dangerous. Stick to the nerds, I'd say. Meet a nice engineer and avoid any and all business majors. Especially finance. Emma would roll her eyes, assuring me that I didn't have to worry, frat parties were stupid anyway. I smiled knowingly—her mother would say the same thing when we first started dating, whenever I'd ask if she'd come to any social event.

“Sebastian, that house is so gross—can we just go to Anna's instead?”

“Li, I have to be there tonight. Do you want me to meet you out when it's over?”

“No, it's fine—let's go.”

We dated for years before moving to New York together—she was working for a publishing company and I was for a tech startup. We lived in the basement, what was listed as a “one-bedroom apartment”— of a unit in East Village and slept on a mattress on the floor for months before we turned twenty-five and decided we needed a bed frame in order to mark our true adulthood. Our first trip to IKEA together made me certain that I could live with this woman forever—we ran around, falling into all the beds, acting out the rest of our lives.

“Bastian, would you like your eggs sunny-side up or scrambled?” She would ask, standing at a stove of a display kitchen.

“Hmmm...sunny side up please! Do we have hot sauce or do I need to go get some?”

“Hmmm oh, well, let me just look inside our brand-new and shiny fridge!”

This continued until we realized the actual purpose behind what turned out to be our two-hour-long trip to IKEA—Kiera was ooh-ing and ahh-ing at all the modern furniture, running her hands across smooth granite countertops, glass tables, leather chairs. We sat in couches, swung on hammocks, ran through the food section and bought meatballs and chocolate cake and those flaky cookies with the raspberry filling that seem like they’d taste awful but are actually quite good. We tried pronouncing the Swedish words, laughing at our terrible American accents, competing for who could exaggerate our American-ness the most. We left with things we didn’t need and would never use. Our bed arrived days later and we descended into what would become the most transforming years of our lives together.

We had our first daughter, Emma, when Kiera was on the cusp of twenty-eight years old. I was a few months older, something Kiera wouldn’t ever let me forget, teasing me about being an old man, asking what my generation thought of hers. Emma was the spitting image of Kiera—green eyes, brown hair. Four years later, we had our little Lena. Lena had light eyes—Kiera and I would always argue about whether they should be considered grey or blue, ultimately deciding we would let Lena settle the debate when she would, one day, have to state her eye color on her driver’s license. We placed a bet—if Lena wrote blue, Kiera would have to sing “Who Let The Dogs Out” at the karaoke bar we would frequent in our early 20’s. If Lena wrote grey, I would have to go skydiving with Kiera—something I swore I’d never do.

When Lena *did* finally get her license—at seventeen years old, something she considered an embarrassment because she had failed her first test, the first thing I asked was to see her ID. We were sitting in the parking lot, she beaming at the wheel and I at the passenger seat.

“Okay I don’t look great but whatever!” She flashed one last smile at it before handing it to me. I held it gently with both hands, between my pointer fingers and thumbs, inspecting every detail.

“SEX: F; HGT: 5’05”; Eyes: GRY. Grey. So she had grey eyes. Grey. Funny how that works—what I saw as blue in my daughter’s eyes, my wife saw as grey. What my wife saw as vibrancy in stones, I saw as dull. Funny.

It was maybe a few weeks—five or six—after Lena was born that Kiera began collecting heartaches. The first one she showed me in urgent whispers, when I was trying to sleep. It must have been around midnight and I had just shuddered—the quake that comes right before falling into a deep sleep—when I heard her whispery voice.

“Bastian, if I show you something that I know is going to sound crazy, do you promise you’ll believe me? And still love me? No matter what?”

I mumbled in agreement, too tired to make the effort to turn around or argue.

“Bastian, this is important.”

I sighed and turned. In the glow of our bedroom, she pulled a stone from underneath her pillow and watched me carefully. When I didn’t say anything, she brought it closer to my face.

“What do you see?”

I turned my bedside lamp on and sat up, sighed.

“I see a rock.”

“What color is it?”

“Grey.”

“Here, hold it.” She placed it gently into my hands.

“Yep—still grey.”

“Do you feel anything?”

“Yes. A rock. A hard rock.”

“Is it warm? Any weird lines running through it?”

“It’s neither hot nor cold, Kiera.” She looked deplete. I sighed and tried again. “I don’t know. I guess it’s somewhat warm, probably because it’s been sitting under your pillow. It’s smooth.” I handed it back to her. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“This stone is purple. And it’s beating. And it has veins running through it. Here. Oh, and here!” I chuckled and looked at her lovingly—my first mistake.

“Babe, are you on acid?”

“No, Bastian.” Her face grew serious. “I’m not kidding.”

“You’re probably just tired.”

“Sebastian. I found this stone weeks ago. I was closing our curtains and saw the most beautiful glow outside and went to see what it was. It was just on our sidewalk. To me, it’s warm and soft. And it has a pulse.”

Again, I sighed.

“Kiera, maybe you just have a very active imagination. Or maybe you need to get your eyes checked. It’s not a big deal, we can figure it out tomorrow and call your doctor or something.” My second mistake. She looked down, defeated, rolling the rock over in her hands, and nodded.

“Yeah, okay.” She placed the item on her nightstand and lay down on her side, facing away from me.

“Are you upset that I can’t see what you see?”

“No, Bastian, I’m upset that you don’t believe that I actually see it differently than you do.”

“Kiera what is this? Some kind of metaphor for something?”

“Whatever, Sebastian. Never mind. Goodnight.” Another sigh.

“Goodnight.” I switched the bedside lamp off.

“Oh and, by the way,” she looked at me from over her shoulder as she was lying, faced away from me, “it’s a stone, not a rock.”

That was the first night we had ever gone to bed angry. The next morning, I woke up alone and the rock—sorry, *stone*—was no longer on her bedside table. I expected to find her in our kitchen area—maybe sitting around our tiny table, but she wasn’t there either.

“Kiera?” I checked the bathroom, under the bed, in the coat closet. Our home was by no means big. My instincts told me to look out the window. I spotted her across the street, picking up stones that lined the sidewalks, placing them into her pockets. Strolling along, as if it were normal for a woman her age to be collecting rocks, pretending they were colorful, or beating, or whatever. I made coffee while waiting. When she finally came up, almost an hour later, I ignored her. My third mistake.

Kiera continued collecting stones, recounting stories about them—their past, whom they belonged to. They were heartaches, she insisted. Heartaches. I scoffed. She would tell me they belonged to someone, but she didn’t know to whom. She wanted to figure it out, she said. She thought someone needed her. For the first few months, I accepted this—it wasn’t a big deal, I told myself. She could live in her fantasy world and I would adapt. When Emma began going to school, however, I began to grow tired of this nonsense. The first time Kiera forgot to pick Emma up, I forgave her. The second time, I came up with a plan: I would text Kiera from work

as soon as she had to leave the house to pick our daughter up at school. The third time, however, I knew my wife needed help. She was so distracted by these stupid stones that she was putting our children's well-being at risk. I brought her to see a psychiatrist and he prescribed a medication that she said made her feel sick. With two young girls, I grew concerned. Kiera had begun to hide the heartaches from me. She had stopped taking her medication. I didn't know what to do.

Emma must have been around four when I first considered filing for a divorce. She was five when the process was complete.

I was left with no choice. I did what I thought was best for my girls. If it had just been me and Kiera, forever, I would have stayed with her. But I had to protect my girls. Eventually, when custody and a divorce didn't prove enough to stop Kiera from coming to our home, her arms filled with stones, begging us to take back our heartaches, I filed a restraining order against her. Emma was old enough to remember what her mother looked like, but Lena—Lena forgot. My baby would ask where Mama was and, initially, I didn't know what to say. I would immediately change the subject, insisting she finish her meal through her cries and screams of "Where is mommy?!" Throughout these tantrums, Emma would remain silent, quietly observing me. Ultimately, I decided to tell them she had passed away. In my moment of bottomless desperation, I couldn't come up with another way to prevent my daughters from both resenting me and searching for their mother.

When Lena first came to me with a heartache and big brown eyes filled with innocent delight, a large crater took root inside my stomach. How could she remember? Did Emma tell her? I didn't believe that Lena could actually see the heartaches. I knew her mother was behind

this, I knew she had found a way to convince the girls—or, at least, Lena—that she could see heartache, too.

When I found the heartaches Lena was keeping, I began taking them and hiding them myself. I struggled to throw them away, wanting so badly to understand what she—and my wife—saw. I hadn't heard from Kiera in years—the restraining order prevented contact from her until the girls were both eighteen. She was deemed by court as posing a threat to her family until she was considered fit and mentally stable by her psychiatrist. The fact that she refused medication hinted at how irresponsible she was, they said.

Was I a monster? Most likely. But was I doing what was best for my daughters? Absolutely. I was afraid Lena would get bullied, made fun of, ostracized. Sure—the first few years, it was cute. Endearing. Her friends' parents would tell me what she had said—that she tried to hand Mrs. Kimble a stone the other day, describing the colors and pulsations. I tried to excuse her behavior for years, thinking she would reach an age where make-believe was no longer a whimsical game. When she stopped believing in Santa and the Tooth Fairy, I thought she would for sure stop believing in these ridiculous rocks. When that did not prove to be true, I imagined it would come when she finally stopped believing in the goodness of the world. And yet, she continued collecting stones. I tried burying the stones I would find deep in the space behind our house—but Lena would somehow always find them. When I went to bury more, they were all missing, the grass she had teared apart neatly sitting atop the holes in our yard. I searched every inch of our home—the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom and bathrooms, but the hundred or so stones were nowhere to be found. I was afraid she was bringing them to school, telling her teachers and classmates they were heartaches. Synesthesia, my ass. My girl

was suffering from a serious disease—not simply associating colors with objects. I felt helpless and hopeless.

## Chapter 3

### Emma

I remember my mother perfectly. My dad does not believe me when I recall stories about her, but I know that my mother was the most beautiful woman in the world. When she first told me she could see heartache, I believed her—I was three at the time, having very little understanding of what heartache was but seeing the enchantment in my mother’s eyes was enough to adore the idea. I was amazed, wanting so badly to understand. She told me not to tell my dad and we kept it our little secret. We would go to the park to find more heartaches—I would try to guess, picking up stones at random and saying, “Look, Mommy! A heartache!” She would smile and pocket it, playing along. Sometimes I would ask, “This one? This one, Mommy? And this one?” She would always tell me yes, but I eventually grew to learn that she could notice a clear difference among the stones.

I took Lena to a perfumery with the intent of finding a new scent for myself—something more mature, more my age. We walked around the store for hours, smelling every single perfume bottle—there must have been hundreds. The store employee was eyeing us skeptically, knowing we could hardly even afford to breathe the same air as her. Lena found a bottle called “Sunday Kisses” and ran up to me, excitedly telling me to buy that one—it was the best scent, as she said, “in the whole wide world.” Before I even got the chance to unscrew the lid entirely, I began bawling. The faintest whiff and I knew it was our mother’s scent—of course Lena loved it. If I bought it, I would never wear it, fearing that our dad would take it from me.

“What’s wrong, Emma? You don’t like it?”

“No, Len. I love it. It’s just, that’s exactly what our mom smelled like.”

“Oh.” She put the bottle down.

“Well—can we still get it?”

“No, Len. Dad would be pissed. You know he would.”

“But what if they stop selling it? What if we never find it again?” I sighed. She was right.

“Okay—we can get it. BUT we *need* to hide it really well and never open it. Promise?

This is just so we have it.” Lena nodded, her eyes wide and trusting.

“We need to get something else in case Dad asks what we bought.”

“Hmmm, okay! How about this one?” She grabbed a perfume called Midnight Moon and I shrugged.

“Sure.”

After spending over seventy dollars on two bottles of perfume, we were ready to leave. I knew we would never re-visit that store, and, perhaps, any perfume store, ever again. I recognized my mother’s scent from the ascots she owned—they smelled of her, and when I first started kindergarten, crying at the thought of leaving my mother every morning, she gave me an ascot so I could smell it whenever I missed her. To reassure me that she would not abandon me, she gave me her favorite one, joking that that was a guarantee that she would come back, every day, at exactly noon, to pick me up. I was in the morning half of kindergarten—from nine to noon. My mother loved spending the afternoon with me—watching movies or shows, playing games, reading books. I would always have lunch at home, and the two of us would recount the day. I would tell her what I was learning at school and she would tell me what she did within the three hours I was not with her. My father worked the entire time, as they had moved to Connecticut from New York for his job, but my mother was smarter, I think. Dad switched from

working in the tech industry to being an actuarial, surrounding himself with numbers, facts, and statistics. Before I was born and, before my parents moved away from New York, my mother worked in publishing. She adored books—they sat in every corner of our home. I learned to read at a very young age, as she encouraged at least one story every night to be read to her. We would build forts in my bedroom and hang lights inside the intricate space, curling up with my favorite books—we swiftly moved from reading *Goodnight Moon* to *Where the Wild Things Are* to *Charlotte's Web*. When I had to decide my major, I knew I could not study English. I was afraid of losing sight of the beauty books held for me—of associating stress and papers with the words I had learned to love. I felt guilty for not following in my mother's footsteps—she had studied English and gone straight into the publishing industry, and I felt as though I were betraying her by not doing the same. I knew, however, that she would have wanted me to be anything—to do anything at all, as long as I was happy doing so. Lena went on to study English and, as much as I envied her, I was relieved that at least one of us was doing our mother justice by pursuing her passions. I wondered if she and my mother simply used the right sides of their brains and whether my father and I used the left side of our brains—they the creative ones, my father and I more scrupulous beings. For years, I theorized that this was why both my mother and Lena could see heartache—I knew my mother had found stones. She had told me one day, when she picked me up after school and while my father was still out at work.

“Emma, if I tell you something—you can't tell Daddy, OK?” I nodded my head, confused at this sudden urgency and secrecy. I had always been told to never keep secrets from either of my parents, but my bond with my mother was stronger than with my father. I do not think I could have ever kept anything from my mom.

She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a stone—it was grey and dull. I thought she was going to tell me an interesting fact about it—perhaps that it was a fossil, maybe it was from Greece. When she asked what I saw, I wanted to impress her, to illustrate the rock as beautifully as Daniel Handler could and would have. I racked my brain for fancy words—words I had learned from the stories I had read. I described the stone as glossy and polished—as lustrous, I said. I told her it was a dreary color, silvery some might say. I said it seemed featureless—a word I had learned just two days earlier. She smiled sadly.

“Oh—anything else?” I shook my head no, sorry to have disappointed her.

“You know what I see, Em?” I looked up at her. We were sitting on our living room floor, playing Go Fish, but I could not remember whose turn it was.

“I see colors—pink and red. I see sparkles and veins. There’s a bright glow—here,” she pointed towards the center, “and here.”

“This is a sliver of yellow but it’s been turning more orange over the past few days. I can feel a beating when I hold it in my palm.” I was delighted. To a three-year-old, my mother’s imagination was fantastical. She had never failed to believe me, no matter the things I would say. My mother had always believed my stories of Luna—my imaginary friend. She was purple and sparkling, I would tell her. She had long blonde hair and eyelashes that reached her forehead. My mother always enabled my imagination. No matter how ridiculous, my mother believed me. Looking back, I realize she was not simply entertaining her child’s silly stories, but that she genuinely, truly and really, trusted that I *could* see Luna. My mother’s understanding of my world led me to believe Lena—in all her thoughts and stories. Lena had always been the more imaginative sister—whereas my imagination always sprouted from stories I had heard, books I had read, or movies I had watched, Lena fabricated her world out of the blue. She had a pet

named Lobart. Where she got the name, I have no idea—but she drew pictures of it as though it really existed. The pet was not based on any actual animals—the drawing was not of a creature with the head of a dog and the body of a cat, tiger, or lion. Instead, Lena had drawn a figure with six legs, huge ears, large blue eyes. The fur was spiky but soft, Lena said. Lobart was shy—he did not like humans. In that sense, at least, I could relate. Lobart ate books, Lena told me—that was how he learned. She would sneak into my room when she was little—maybe four or so—and take a book from my mini library each time, “feeding” it to Lobart. After a few weeks, I began to notice that my bookshelf was slowly depleting and my favorite books were disappearing. I asked Lena about it and she turned red, shrugging her shoulders. I ran into our playroom, knowing my books were in there somewhere. I found them in piles under her bed—pages torn, the bindings ripped. I began yelling, screaming. Lena began crying. The books I had read with our mother—my favorite books—were all destroyed. The pages lay in mangled piles, colored over in marker, ruined. I collected each page—each piece of my childhood memories, every recollection of my mother, and brought them back to my room, trying to tape the remains together. Mom had left notes on the inside of the cover pages, but they were illegible now. Lena must have chewed on the pages—my mother’s handwriting smudged and bleeding. I almost tattled—one more breath from yelling out to Dad and showing him the evidence, but I stopped myself, the words dying at the back of my tongue. If I told my father, he would act strange—he would tell me it was time to let go of the objects that reminded me of my mom. He would recommend I throw the books away, insisting he could buy me new books—brand new books! Better books. That was my father’s solution—to cure with cash. He believed his credit card could heal with its stupid, meaningless numbers. Instead, I hid the evidence under my bed,

hoping I could conceal the broken binds and torn pages with newer books I would pile in front of them.

I could hear Lena sobbing from across the hall, not knowing why I had gotten so upset with her. It must have been the first time I had directly yelled at her. With my face still burning from tears but trying to keep it together for my little sister—for a child who was trying her best—I hugged her, offering to go to our favorite park and push her on the swing set. Because it was a warm Sunday, my father agreed to take us. As soon as we arrived, Lena ran towards a pile of stones and picked one up, shouting that it was glowing. My heart sank in my chest. My father became very angry and he took the stone from Lena’s tiny hand and threw it—out of reach for a child her size and age. He began pulling us away, telling Lena that rocks did not glow. That it was her imagination running wild. Lena became obsessed with the stones, forgetting about her imaginary pet altogether. She began collecting stones, to my father’s irritation. She told me they were heartaches—that she could see their colors. I wanted to tell her that our mother could see them too, but I knew she was too young to keep the secret from our father. I would wait, I decided, until she was older. In spite of my mother’s death, I would take her secrets with me to my grave. I did not know whether telling Lena eventually constituted as breaking the promise I had made to not tell anyone—Lena had not been born yet, when my mother told me.

When my father was finally convinced that Lena had grown out of her “make-believe” phase, we were able to hide them around our home. I wished, so badly, that I could see what Lena saw—she described the colors so vividly, the sounds the beating made. Some, she said, went “bup-bup, bup-bup.” She said she had found some of my heartaches—she handed one to me, telling me it was my heartache from a sleepover I had not been invited to in the seventh grade. I was amazed—I immediately felt calm, not realizing that there was a part of me that had

not healed until then. Holding the stone took me back to the moment in which my three best friends at the time—Anna, Margaret, and Jess—had had a sleepover without me. We had been friends since elementary school and got ready for the seventh-grade dance together. I had invited them to our home to get ready—a pre-party, I called it. Excitedly, I went with my father to buy all of our favorite snacks: Cheetos, Doritos, tortilla chips and guacamole, salsa, and cheese dip for Anna, who loved cheese dip. We bought three different kinds of soda, my father asking me to choose just *one* but I insisting that we needed to provide variety. He laughed when I enunciated each syllable of the word “variety,” which I had just learned in my English class. My father could tell I was nervous—that I wanted to impress my best friends. He slipped from his usual cold character when he told me I reminded him of my mom—that she was always nervous to host her friends as well. That she would enter a mindset of perfectionism that he had never seen before. As soon as he told me, his smile dropped, and he asked if I was ready to check-out. I asked if we could buy some chocolate-covered pretzels and brownie mix. Maybe ice cream. We bought all three. As I cleaned our entire house, sweating from anxiety, not knowing why I felt so pressured to put a façade of perfection for three of the people I was closest to, the doorbell rang at seven on the dot. My friends all arrived at the same time, their dresses all a different shade of blue—a memo I had apparently missed, as I was wearing a bright yellow dress. At the time, Belle was my biggest inspiration—I tried to fit into the mold of a book-loving, motherless princess. We took hundreds of photos, posing in a million different ways. My dad drove us to the dance, chuckling at our guessing what the gossip would be come Monday. Who would dance with whom? Were people taking *dates*? At this, we snickered. As twelve and thirteen-year-olds, we indulged in the topic of boys but stayed away from the subjects themselves. We danced until the chaperones declared that it was time to go—we had to wait inside until our respective

guardians came to pick us up. My father, as per usual, was late. Anna, Margaret, and Jess all left together. Margaret's mother pulled up to the curb—we could see her car through the school doors, and the three got ready to go. I asked why Margaret's mom was picking them all up—if someone needed a ride home, my dad could also help in dropping off. Anna lived closer to me than she did to Margaret—I had offered her a ride earlier that week. They became nervous, skirmish.

“Oh, uhm, that's okay!” Anna said. “Margaret's mom is already here so...I guess I'll just go with her. Bye, Emma!” She gave me a quick hug and a tight smile, and left.

To this day, I do not know what made them change their minds. Was it something I had said? Perhaps the way I looked or talked? Were they embarrassed that I could not bring my mom to the mall, or out to lunch, when they went with their mothers? Was it strange that my father—a man in his late thirties—was single? I looked for a million reasons, unfolding the crevices of my self-esteem, burrowing further into the depths of my fears, my insecurities. I wondered about things I had never worried about before—did I smell weird? Had I forgotten to brush my teeth once and, maybe—*just* maybe—they thought my breath smelled? Was my hair too short, too brown? I wondered if it was because I read a lot or because I did not care much for watching sports. Was it because I liked Star Wars? Could it have been that, once, I told Anna I thought she would look good with bangs and maybe, just maybe, she thought I was telling her that I did not like her current haircut? Maybe it was the fact that my father was not detail-oriented and did not buy flowery-smelling hand soaps and our home lacked decorations. Maybe it was because I had cried once, in Jess's kitchen, when her mother asked if grilled cheese was okay for dinner.

That stone, when Lena brought it to me, healed me. My sister sat patiently beside me on my bed as I laughed, cried, shuddered, trembled. I was hit with a surge of emotions—going

through the seven steps of grief. I would never be friends with these girls again, no matter how the hurt I felt each time I would see them on my way to class. I would never know why they suddenly rejected my friendship, squeezed me out of the warm space I used to occupy. I was not friendless—I had another group to fall back on, one that welcomed me with open and sincere arms. But the insecurity, the fear of losing a friendship I was so certain about, remained until the very moment in which I held my own heartache.

After the wave of emotions passed and I finally came back to the present, I asked Lena to describe the heartache to me. She told me that the stone turned had turned grey as soon as I held it, that initially, the heartache had been a clear blue—like a Smurf!

“Can I keep it?” My heart started racing, afraid she would say no. Nervous that for some reason she needed to take the stone back.

“Of course, Em,” she smiled reassuringly. I slipped the heartache under my pillow, the pain subsiding to a residue.

## Chapter 4

### Lena

I always wondered where my own heartaches had gone. I remember things most people forget when they become adults—things that should no longer affect me as much as they do. A sly comment about my weight, made by a middle school friend. An explanation from my best friend that the reason I was not invited to a sleepover was because one of the girls did not like me. My heart had cracked in half so loudly that I knew it had to have physically manifested somewhere. I realized I could most likely not find my own heartaches, but I became frustrated at this realization. I had found several of my father's heartaches—his heart clearly broke when Emma left for college. Although it did not show on his face and did not seep into his words, the ache was there—lying on our doorstep as soon as we arrived home after dropping Emma off. I ignored it until I knew he would be busy enough that I could sneak out the door and swiftly grab the stone.

I found many of Emma's heartaches that year—her first year of college was difficult, as she carried the insecurities from her childhood into the new burgeoning friendships she was supposedly creating. The first time I realized that Emma's acknowledgement of the heartaches was the most healing force was when I handed her the second heartache I had found of hers—the one from the seventh-grade dance. The first heartache I had found, I could not let go of. It was what sparked an entire adventure of looking for radiance where it did not exist to others. The heartaches were comforting to find because I knew I could identify them, for the most part, and hand them back to their owners. My father's, I would never be able to hand back. I tried to—

once. Years after I had stopped telling him I could see heartache, knowing he would never believe me.

During a soccer scrimmage my junior year of high school, I spotted a sharp radiance from beyond the other team's net. I scored quickly, my adrenaline propelling me past the fastest girls on the other team, dodging them left and right. The goal gave me time to sprint behind the net and grab the stone—green. The color of a replenished forest after a fire. I knew whose it was but did not know where it came from, what the source of pain was. I had found only a handful of my father's heartaches up until that point. He had been ignoring grief for so long that his body no longer recognized his own agony.

I sprinted off the field to tell the coach I was feeling ill and needed to be picked up early that day. She hesitated but changed her mind once I vomited right in front of her. Normally, she would have had me sit and watch from the sidelines for the rest of the game, sipping cold water. But because I had just scored, because it was a scrimmage that didn't count for anything other than practice, and because I was on the Junior Varsity team, she let me leave early that day. I called my dad and he arrived almost immediately. He was nothing if not a committed father, always putting us first. His tendency to be early increased as he grew older and more anxious about our whereabouts and safety. I think his urgency also had something to do with the fact that my teammates were beginning to learn to drive at the time, and he didn't want to risk an inexperienced driver taking his precious daughter home, risking her life. As soon as I got into the car, I asked how he was. His voice shook.

## Chapter 5

### Sebastian

I am not sure how Lena had discovered her mother's secret. I had never made any mention of it and I had always assumed the girls were too young to remember their mother's insistence that stones could glow, beat, and change color. Occasionally, I would catch Kiera whispering to our daughters as she tucked them into bed, rambling on about the colors and lights the stones emitted. I once found Lena sleeping with a pebble in her crib, something I considered so absurdly dangerous that I violently yelled at Kiera that night, waking her up by furiously shaking her, calling her ill, sick. Screaming. Yelling. Telling her she disgusted me. Accusing her of trying to harm our children—our *babies*. Kiera seemed to come out of her trance and into her senses, finally. *Finally*. With tears pouring down her face and a permanent frown, she nodded along to everything I said. She agreed to more psychiatric help—nothing worked. I would come home at night after working from nine to seven, only to find the three of them sitting on the living room floor amid a circle of stones, our two girls trying to “guess” which colors their mom could see. Lena was right about two-thirds of the time, and I finally understood. I thought—I *hoped*—that Kiera was simply whispering the answers to Lena so she would not grow frustrated with their games, but I now realize I was wrong. So wrong.

When I discovered that my wife was endangering our children—not only emotionally, but physically, I reported her. Filed a restraining order until the girls were eighteen. I struggled to find a way to tell my parents and to explain to my daughters without seeming like a monster—especially Emma, as she was old enough to remember her mother's crinkled eyes, echoed laughter, thin but

sturdy frame. How do you look into your five-year-old daughter's eyes, ones on the brink of tears, and tell her that she cannot see her mom for the next thirteen years? Instead, I decided to lie.

This was, perhaps, the first time I remember lying in vivid detail. I am sure I lied to my kids about other things—questions they would ask about whether or not I have ever punched anyone, why they couldn't have another cookie, why the Tooth Fairy's gifts varied by tooth. But the first lie in which I would become entangled was this one—this very one.

The first day without Kiera, the girls were seated around the kitchen table when the matter came up. I was pacing in the kitchen, too nervous to sit.

“Daddy, where's Mommy?” Emma.

“Uhh...here. Here's some more chicken,” I stammered as I slid another piece onto her plate.

“Daddy. Where is Mommy.” No longer a question. A demand. A deep sigh later and I was seated at the table, unable to make direct eye contact with either of my daughters.

“She—” I choked tears back. “She left.” A gurgling noise began sounding from Emma, something that was climbing higher, higher up and I knew that, soon enough, it would be a full-blown tantrum.

“WHERE? Where did she go?” Emma, again. Lena still couldn't speak in full sentences, let alone comprehend most conversations. She was only two years old.

“I...I don't know.” Another voice crack, perhaps a dead giveaway that I was lying. I was making my wife into the bad guy. She was the enemy here, not me. I was innocent. My daughters would hate her, love me. Or, perhaps, they would resent me, believing I pushed their mother away.

To be a parent, however, is not to do what makes your children favor you—it is what you believe to be in their best favor. Too many nights finding Lena cradled up next to tiny pebbles—

pebbles that, if swallowed, could kill her. A choking hazard without the warning. Countless angry outbursts from Kiera when I told her it simply wasn't real—it was all in her head. The times the three would disappear for hours, with no signal or warning. Nothing. Hours of waiting, patiently but angrily, not knowing where my wife would take them. Hours. Only to see them come back on a Saturday night, after having been gone all day, with rocks in their pockets. Stones, my wife continuously corrected me—these are stones, *not* rocks.

“I don't give a damn what they're called, Kiera,” I whispered that night. “You can't take our children away for an ENTIRE DAY without telling me anything. You can't. It's not fair. I was worried *sick*.”

She looked down, nodding slowly in agreement, knowing I was right.

The girls didn't suspect anything—they had had a wonderful day with their mother, prancing around looking for colorful stones. I checked their belongings when they all went to bed, looking for anything I could hide or toss. I found three tiny pebbles in Lena's shoe but couldn't find anything in Emma's belongings.

Emma's unwavering brown eyes stared deep into mine, her jaw jutting out past her top lip. I stared back, apologetically. We remained this way for what felt like hours but must have only been about two minutes. I snapped out of my stupor when Lena began crying, throwing her food around, picking the broccoli that remained on her plate and throwing it everywhere.

“Mommy!” A shrill scream. My hands clutched my ears, the sound echoing everywhere.

“Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!” Emma joined in, looking directly at me as she did so.

“WHERE IS MOMMY?!” I don't remember what happened next—I couldn't explain it if I wanted to. The world became dark and silent. White noise. A ringing in my ears. I awoke to find myself sitting on the kitchen floor, leaning against the counters, sweating. My daughters had

disappeared. As I struggled to stand, my hands lost their grip on nearly every surface I touched—the sweat placing a barrier between surface and stability. I limped to my daughters' room, peering in but neither was in her respective bed. My bedroom—nothing. I began panicking, checking every room in our home. In this house.

I found them sitting on our porch swing, asleep. Lena cradled in Emma's arms. Quietly, I carried them both in my arms, holding Emma as she held Lena—like Russian dolls. Emma's arms tightened around her sister and I brought them both to Emma's bed, letting them sleep there together. Going back to the bed I had shared with my wife felt strange, alien. Instead, I slept on our living room couch, feeling unworthy and undeserving of a comfortable place to sleep. I dreaded the next morning—the next few days. Weeks. Months. Years. The rest of my life.

How would I do this without my wife? My partner? My love? Quickly, the situation became unamusingly funny, because as soon as I processed what I had just done—as soon as decision was finalized—I began to regret everything.

## Chapter 6

### Lena

I wandered into Highland Park, walking as though time had been eradicated. How does one heal after trauma? I found a somewhat sturdy swing to sit on, dragging my feet across the woodchips as hours passed lethargically. My dad would be wondering where I was, but I struggled to stand. I struggled to move. Looking over to where the picnic tables were, trying to picture those beautiful Sunday afternoons filled with frisbees, fruits, and sunshine. I saw a woman sitting there, staring back quizzically at me, but none of my survival instincts kicked in. On the contrary, I felt safe. We watched each other for several minutes without breaking our gaze. Slowly, cautiously, I stood. As I approached the picnic area, her features grew more and more familiar. I could tell her hair was greying, but her eyes were a bright green. Vague memories blurred my mind. A deep, shaky breath later, I spoke.

“Mom?” I whispered through the cracks in my voice. She smiled knowingly, gingerly nodding her head. I buried my face into my trembling hands, collapsing into myself. How much time passed, I don’t know—certainly not enough to justify the gap between then and now. We finally pulled apart, wiping our drenched and salty faces, laughing nervously.

Silently, my mother reached into her coat pocket and pulled out several pebbles, making a motion for me to stretch my own hand out. I did so warily, not knowing what to expect. When the stones landed in my hand, I collapsed. I woke up on the ground, surrounded by my mother’s arms.

She had been collecting my heartaches and I, hers. Every day, her heart broke. Every day, I found a new glowing stone. She explained each heartache, handing me each individual one,

narrating where they came from, when they arrived, what had caused them. She waited to give me the ones I knew were the most painful—those from all the years I thought I had no mother.

“These, Lena—I can’t heal for you.” She placed them into my hands. “These you have to heal yourself.” I held them in my cupped hands, trying to count them. They were tiny—like pebbles.

“Why are they so small?”

“Because, eventually, Lena, you adapt. The gap I left was filled with other love—from your father, your sister. Perhaps a few boyfriends?” She smirked.

“But I guess you must’ve missed me, at least a little.” She winked. I smiled sadly—an acknowledgement that I knew she was trying to make me to feel better while reminding her that I wasn’t prepared to heal just yet. Rolling the little pebbles around in my hands, I came to understand that, for the first time in my life, I would have to not only recognize, but mend, my own heartaches.

This presented a new challenge—something I had never before encountered.

Dealing with others’ heartaches had become a mechanized process after the first hundred or so. A simple hug, text, call. Any gentle reminder that I was—still am—here. That I would always be. I could distance myself from those foreign heartaches—the ones that required the minimum. My heart was never on the line—never at an immediate risk.

My own heartaches were heavier to hold and I struggled to inspect each, the glaring reality too difficult to consume all at once. There were heartaches that still had not completely healed and those I could barely afford to touch. My mother watched as I tried to hold each. When she would notice that I struggled to carry certain ones, she would quietly offer an open palm. I would place the heaviest stones into her hand, knowing she would care for any and all heartaches

I had and would ever have. I could directly address a few of the other stones. The first time a boy broke my heart, in the fifth grade. That one was tiny, dull. The rejection from the high school musical I had auditioned for in ninth grade was small as well and I couldn't help but smile when thinking of how dramatic I had been for weeks after that initial dejection, thinking my entire career was OVER.

When I had gone through all of the smaller aches, I began to slowly confront the larger ones. One by one. Small steps towards healing—not completely, but partially. I would nod to my mother when I was ready for the next heartache, letting her place each into my palm and clinging onto them when they first landed. The first was the ache from when Charlie began phasing me out of her life, still beating brightly. When I first felt it, I gasped—a release. Coming to terms with the fact that, this friend of mine—the first to guide me home after a drunken night in college, stumbling against each other, laughing along the cobblestone path leading to our dorm building. The first girl I'd ever kissed—a gentle, soft kiss. One that ignited an onslaught of unadulterated euphoria. A physical confirmation that she was, and would remain, my purest, truest love. There were several heartaches stemming from my friendship with Charlie—from the time she and a few of our other friends had planned a trip together, failing to include me until all the concert and museum tickets had mysteriously sold out—until there were no more available spaces in the hostel they had chosen. Oops, they said. Sorry, they consoled—it was an accident. We forgot.

I struggled to decide which of those stones hurt the most. Holding them felt as though I was finally solidifying the fact that Charlie was, and would always be, a permanent part of my past. A time and place for everything. A time and place for everything. There is a time and place for everything, I reminded myself. For absolutely everything. Surprisingly, the nostalgia didn't

make the aches grow brighter or stronger, but created new aches altogether. Perhaps because recognition and acceptance feel like a fresh new fissure. It is no longer the shock of realizing that the future is entirely malleable—that silhouettes will fill what seemed to be clear pictures of those we imagine to be in our lives forever. These second, third, fourth winds—these heartache ripples, for lack of a better term, are heavier. Denial is bliss—acceptance is hell.

The next set of heartaches caused me to keel over. I recognized them immediately—Bailey. Flashes of her begging eyes, pleading to be understood.

I began to contemplate whether there was a clear difference between heartache and guilt. Had my guilt manifested into a separate stone or had it joined the heartache to become an even brighter glow? I wondered what role guilt played in my pain—the question of whether there was more I could have done; whether I was part of the end. Ultimately, I decided that I simply missed my dear friend. I missed what she meant to my seven-year-old self, who always looked forward to sharing a seat on the bus, confessing our extreme, albeit exaggerated, dreams from the night before. Bailey was the first face I would look for in the daunting cafeteria—the first I’d call to compare middle school class schedules with, year after year. We grew apart organically—no decisive breaking point. No moment I could pinpoint and declare: “Here! This is it.” Simply different interests, different ways of seeing the world.

A warning sign, perhaps—when she asked to grab coffee in the middle of a college summer. A Facebook message with a lengthy explanation of how she wanted to text me but wasn’t sure if I would have the same number, so this was the safest option! Haha. Smiley face. And—would I like to grab a cup of coffee or tea or something sometime? If I was around, of course. No worries if not. Hope you’re doing well.

Bailey

My response was confident: “Sure, are you free Thursday?” Her response was shaky, eager—too gracious, too grateful. We met for coffee and concisely summarized our lives between sophomore year of high school—when the end of the friendship was officiated—and the now, the summer after our freshman year of college. I had a boyfriend, I told her. Well, just seeing this guy, actually—but we have been for five months and I think we’re exclusive—at least, I’m not seeing anyone but him. Ya know? She told me she was studying art and history. She wanted to be a high school teacher.

“But...I don’t know. This time of our life is really strange, don’t you think?” I wasn’t sure what she meant. I was on a path I was certain about at the time—a five-year plan to study English, go on to grad school, receive my MFA, and write a novel. The “now,” to me, seemed perfect.

I didn’t empathize—I was too distracted to keep up. I left the coffee shop without the slightest care for what she had meant by “strange.” Strange because it was confusing, maybe? Because college was different than high school? Well, yeah, Bailey, duh. I thought. Duh.

I assumed this would become a yearly tradition—grabbing coffee with Bailey when we both came home for break. I texted her “Happy birthday! ☺” once after that initial coffee chat and her response of “Thanks so much, Len! How are you doing?” went unanswered. I was a sophomore, dealing with too many different facets of being a 20-year-old to explain in a text. I wasn’t doing well—my courses were harder, my friends less invested. In October, I found out the boy I had been seeing had about five other partners. Charlie was still my glue, reserving study spaces for us to work on our homework for hours on end, occasionally breaking the silence to show me funny videos she would stumble upon. She got me drunk enough to make out with three boys in one night and the next day insisted I was a “total badass.”

“See, Len? You can get any guy you want—why are you still hung up on this one?”

She would bring ice cream, boxes of candy, and an HDMI cable to my room before ‘suddenly’ coming up with the *brilliant* and novel idea of going out instead.

“Fuck it,” she’d exclaim. “We’re going out!” She would proceed to jump out of the bed we had prepared—covered in snacks— and raid my closet for the skimpiest tops and bottoms she could find. Twice, this happened, before I explained that she didn’t have to create a façade of staying in and moping along with me every time she wanted to go out.

Charlie was the friend Bailey had needed—not me. Three months, two weeks, and four days after the “how are you?” question was left, hanging, alone and abandoned on the battlefield, Bailey surrendered to her enemies. A girl from her floor found her in dorm bathroom, overdosed on several different kinds of pills she had been collecting for months, doused with a bottle of vodka.

How are you? How are you how are you how are you. One question—a simple, I’m good, how are you? would have sufficed as an answer—we often expect nothing more than that. How are you? How was I, in that moment, that I was too busy to respond? Instead, I acted as though it were a daunting task, something that would have taken me ages to work on. I must have texted a million other people that same day—I was probably distracted by the boy who wouldn’t text me back; or one who had ended his text with a period instead of an emoji. I don’t know. I don’t know how I was—I was fine. Better than she was. The response sits in my damp brain every time I encounter those three, simple words. How are you?

“Hey Bailey, I’m good! [I’m feeling bummed but I won’t tax you with that emotion even though it may make you feel a little less alone, in some strange way]. It’s been a busy semester so far haha [I am trying to balance my own heartaches along with the ones I have been tasked to

handle—whose do I prioritize? Where are mine?]. How are you? [I'm here. I'm listening, Bailey]. Are you still thinking of becoming a high school teacher? [Tell me how to help]. Any major updates?! [Talk to me, Bailey. I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.]”

What surprises me about Bailey, to this day, is that I never did find any of her heartaches. Perhaps I was never equipped to deal with the kind of pain she suffered from. But, I think, more likely than not, Bailey didn't let her heart break. She was—and I am completely speculating here—entirely numb to wounds. What might shock me as a sudden wave of ache, she welcomed with open arms—feeling anything at all is ultimately better than feeling nothing. Bailey was dispositioned to swim in heartache forever, sifting through those broken beats nonchalantly, pushing each new one she encountered aside to try to reach the shore—some kind of relief. Swimming decisively for years, to no avail. Like running on a treadmill forever. On the contrary, I would dip one toe into the water only to decide it was too cold, and would walk back to my towel and lie in the warm sun.

So many heartaches. Some crumpled, some wheezing. It was difficult to watch as they slowly faded to a dull grey—I so badly wanted to tuck them away in the warmth of my covers, healing them—but I knew that, as these heartaches weakened, their owners would heal. Not all at once, not recognizably. But they would.

Ah, the beautiful, twisted paradox of heartache. What ultimately hurts the most—walking away from a soul you cannot fix; refusing mistreatment at the hands of a someone you once loved; smothering toxicity during its growth—is part of the healing process.

Discovering that my mother was still alive, however—that one hurt like a bitch. As I found my mother, I lost my father. Or, perhaps, he lost me. It would have been easier to deny, of course. To go home and forget the silver in her hair, the crinkle in the corners of her eyes. Go

home and trust the man I had always trusted so indisputably. I held that heartache in my hand as I confronted those demons—as I accepted that, in spite of what he thought was best, he deprived me—and my sister—of not only my mother’s love, but his own.

When I felt strong enough to deal with the remainder of my aches, I said goodbye to my mother, filling my bookbag with all of my own stones, carefully placing the heaviest at the bottom and the lightest on top—a trick I had learned from being a cashier at Trader Joe’s during my high school summers. The heartache that stemmed from the discovery that my father had prevented me from growing under Kiera’s nurturing shade—my beautiful mother, Kiera. Mom? Kiera! Mom. My mom. Mom—this particular heartache, I cupped in my hands as I walked home, determined to face the many monsters awaiting me. The stone went from being a pale yellow to a deep, dark purple, its climb towards total and uncontrollable shakes was steady. I was crying, of course. The harder it shook, the harder I cried. My relationship with This Specific Heartache was a directly inverse one—as it grew feeble, I became strong.

For so long, I had cherished these little, helpless wonders, wanting so badly to mend them—to use them as agents of relief for the broken-hearted. To truly view and consider them adversaries, rather than allies, took more time than I had anticipated. Watching seemingly innocent stones convulse in pain, the sound of their shrieks piercing my ears, while I remained still, doing nothing, was the most difficult task I faced after confronting my father.

Up the front steps our driveway led to. Before turning the doorknob, I peered inside the long windows on each side of our front door. The house was dim—shallow, yellow lights gleamed in the very back. A twist of the knob, gentle footsteps. Footsteps creaking down the hallway leading to the living room. I tried channeling Miss Peacock from one of my favorite

board games, *Clue*. Trying to find the murderer—which room? Where? And the weapon? Which one?

Ah, yes. The murderer—Mr. Sebastian Williams, asleep in the armchair, facing the television screen, remote dangling from his hand, threatening to fall and waken him. Scene of the crime? Home. *Our* home. His own home. Weapon used? Manipulation—a dagger disguised as affection.

I approached the armchair—the same one I used to share with Emma when we were tiny enough to fit there together. I stood over him, heartache clutched in my hand. But he looked so pure, so kind. He had only wanted the best for my sister and for me. For his girls.

If he only knew.

If only he knew the years of repressed heartache I had suffered at the hands of his lies. The feeling of loss that would carve itself into my soul every time I found a heartache I could not quite place. How disheartening to fail at a task I was born to perform.

“Dad?” My voice cracked. He didn’t stir. Louder, this time. Steadier. “Dad.” No longer a question—a demand. His eyes jolted open and he looked around in confusion, dropping the remote in the midst of his daze.

“Len.” A buttery, easy smile. “Hi. Where have ya been? You hungry? There are some leftovers from dinner in the fridge.”

“With Mom.” His eyes blinked lethargically, trying to process which question I was responding to.

“Huh?”

“Dad. I was with Mom—your wife. Kiera. My mother.”

“...With Mom? Len...What do you mean?” Genuine confusion. I felt my confidence beginning to crumble, but I held my ground.

“What I mean, Dad...” A gulp, trying to push down a bag of tears waiting in my throat. “is I was with Mom. My mom.”

“Where, Len.” This time, no question—a demand. No longer an invitation for meaningless discussion.

“What does that matter?” My sadness turning into anger—this was easier. Irritation was easier than a feeling of utter defeat. “What the fuck, Dad.” Frustrated tears forming in my eyes, threatening to tumble. No more questions, no friendly banter. No *how are you’s* going unanswered. Not this time. “What the actual fuck.”

And even though I tried to prevent it, my bottom lip quivered, the space where my tears had been collecting for several minutes finally burst—a flood that eroded the dam I had worked so long to build. I began shaking uncontrollably and, quickly, my anger manifested into swollen eyes, tears mixing with snot and saliva that I couldn’t prevent from my blubbering mouth. Violently crying but wanting to seem calm enough to listen to his alibis—to appear adult enough to hear everything he had to say. For an explanation as to what, exactly, was going through his head when he decided to drive a wall between the women he claimed to love the most. No response. Unbelievable. I sniffed, wiping my face.

“Does Emma know?” I asked as I tilted my chin defiantly, a sign of power. My question was genuine—did my sister know? Had he ever told her? If I couldn’t bulldoze through the entire wall at once, I would chip away at it, slowly and steadily.

He shook his head, staring down at his feet. But he remained seated and silent.

“Are you going to tell her, or should I?” A conditional question metamorphizing into a demand. “Did you think we’d never find out? Did you think we’d go our entire lives without asking? What was your end goal here, huh, Dad? Huh?”

It was his turn to cry, burying his face in his hands, shaking his head. Seeing this man—a figure I had once regarded so highly, whom I had looked to for every answer, whose intentions were to save us from ourselves—in such a vulnerable position caused another heartache to plop right into my coat pocket. I didn’t want to fight, I just wanted to know. But it was late and I was tired. Drained. Shattered. Emotionally, physically, needlessly. I knew I wouldn’t get the answers I deserved right away. I had dipped my toe in the water, and I slipped, barely fighting against the current pulling me farther and farther from shore. I should have fought to pull myself out. Instead, I whispered goodnight and retreated to my room.

Sitting on my bed, turning stones over and over around in my palms, I waited to see if he would come upstairs to tell me that nothing that had happened within the past few hours was true—that my mother had actually passed away years ago and the woman in the park I had met was a long-lost aunt who lived nearby. Maybe she was my maternal grandmother’s sister and that is why I confused her for my mother. Perhaps she was an older cousin—someone, *anyone* else. Anything that I could latch onto to pull myself from the rip current.

He didn’t come upstairs that night and neither of us directly addressed the situation for weeks. He would try to converse—to chat. To talk about banal things like the weather, sports, our current political situation. I would roll my eyes, take whatever I had with me—my meal, my laptop, a book I was reading—and seek shelter elsewhere. Anywhere that wasn’t there.

Emma didn’t live at home anymore—she had moved to Boston right after college. I didn’t know whether to call her and immediately unleash everything onto her, or to wait until I

visited her. I did not want to risk leaving my dad on his own—as much as I resented him, I cared about him. Hundreds of his heartaches popped up on our doorstep during those weeks. Each one larger than the previous one—the more I dismissed him, the more his heart would break.

Initially, I tried placing his next to the ones I still had of my mother's, but to no avail. I do not know what I expected to happen, exactly—maybe for the stones to morph together, to mend. To mold into one. To unite. At the very least, to find solace in each other. Eventually, I created a designated space for my father's heartaches, ones that would not disturb my mom's.

My own heartaches, I placed next to Emma's, in the bottom drawer of my dresser. When I checked on them for the first time since placing them there, I found them tucked away together in the very corner of the drawer, arms around each other in a puddle of sisterly support, guiding and comforting each other as if to say, “Shhh—it's okay. We'll get through this together.”

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As these heartaches continue to wither, shrieking, begging that I postpone their ultimate and inevitable death, I cannot decide whether to throw them all away—each and every one, letting them fend for themselves, or whether to continue believing I have a duty to these little beings. To care for them.

For years, they have drained me. They stole everything I had and used it to become craftier. These leeches I have mistaken for friends for too long. But to so carelessly dismiss these stones, which have provided me with a sense of purpose and comfort, in which I found relief in their constant company, is difficult to do. I have urges to destroy them myself, throwing them against each other, breaking them with a hammer, trying to chip them away as quickly as possible, to weaken them immediately. While I stupidly believed that I was helping their owners when I healed them, they fed off all the energy I could muster. Every day, every night. For years.

What angers me to the point of obliterating them, however, is not my lack of emotional energy. I can handle feeling temporarily numb as I try to heal myself. What angers me to the point of completely mutilating them is that they stole my mother away from Emma and me—they converted her empathy into a tool used to break her. And they took my father, as a result. Thieves. Dazzling, magnificent thieves.

Ah, the irony of those brilliant aches.

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# Cecilia Mabilais-Estevez

## ACADEMIC VITA

### EDUCATION

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<b>The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College</b> <b>The College of the Liberal Arts</b> Bachelor of Arts, English and Italian	University Park, PA May 2019
<b>IES Abroad-Study in Tuscany</b> Studied Italian language, literature, and art	Siena, Italy Jan 2018 – May 2018
<b>IES Abroad-Metropolitan Studies</b> Studied economics, German language, urban studies, biopolitics, and gender studies	Berlin, Germany Sept 2017 – Dec 2017
<b>Study Abroad Program in India</b> Studied culture, history, and economics of India	Delhi, Dahanu, Pune, Jaipur July 2016 – August 2016

### RELATED EXPERIENCE

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<b>Penn State University Press</b> <i>Editorial Acquisitions Intern</i>	University Park, PA Sept 2018 – Present
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- Process manuscripts
- Update databases
- Administrative tasks such as filing, photocopying, and data input

#### **Writers House**

<i>Editorial Intern</i>	New York, NY June 2018 – August 2018
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- Supported offices of Senior Agents Stephen Barr and Rebecca Sherman under supervision of their assistants, Andrea Vedder and Alexandra Levick
- Evaluated queries, full manuscripts, and partials
- Generated reader's reports, pitch letters, rejection letters, and editorial letters

#### **Università degli Studi di Siena**

<i>Administrative Intern</i>	Siena, Italy January 2018 – May 2018
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- Assisted mobility abroad office in administrative work
- Translated documents from Italian to Spanish and English

#### **Lumbermens Merchandising Corporation**

<i>Finance Intern</i>	Wayne, PA May 2017 – August 2017
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- Developed a comprehensive understanding of the financial reporting and accounting operations of corporations
- Conducted full analysis of stockholder member's financial statements to evaluate for creditworthiness
- Assisted in preparing written reports outlining aspects for analysis to be presented to LMC Finance Committee

#### **Demographic Suicide in the West and Half the World by Alejandro Macarrón**

<i>Translator</i>	Remote Jan 2017 – March 2017
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- Translated book from Spanish to English for a self-published author
- Provided editorial guidance after translation to support publication

#### **Casterline Associates PC, Certified Public Accountants**

<i>Administrative Intern</i>	Valley Forge, PA May 2016 – July 2016
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- Formatted accounting data for creation and submission of financial statements for local government agencies
- Processed seminar registrations, compiled proposals to clients for owner of firm, addressed incoming calls

### LEADERSHIP & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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<b>The Presidential Leadership Academy at Penn State University</b> <i>Member</i>	University Park, PA Aug 2016 – Present
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<b>Paterno Fellows at Penn State University</b> <i>Member</i>	University Park, PA Aug 2015 – Present
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<b>GLOBE, a Schreyer Honors College Special Living Option</b> <i>Communications Officer</i>	University Park, PA Aug 2016 – May 2017
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### SKILLS

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**Computer:** Microsoft Applications (Excel, Word, PowerPoint & Outlook); Facebook, Instagram, Twitter

**Language:** Native fluency in Spanish and French; fluency in Italian