

UNKEPT

BY ERICKA CLAY



Unkept

Ericka Clay

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events
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UKEPT

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A Note From the Author

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature;
the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”*
- 2 Corinthians 5:17

Rewriting *Unkept* has given me insight into the heart I used to have. And as I've read each one of the words in this book, I've discovered I was searching for God all along.

Like Vienna and Heather, how often have I struggled with clutching to what I convince myself I need while God waits patiently for me to figure it out? He's the potter, and I'm merely the clay pot. He's the designer of my destiny, and I'm the traveler waiting on the itinerary. But far too often, I believe I'm the one writing this journey.

These two women are the two sides of my heart, the two sides of my brain. The bullish, overconfident front that is Heather comes to mind when I feel my weakest. The delicate, codependent spirit that is Vienna is there when I don't have my mind on Christ. And both women face losses in a world of their own making. It's only when they lay down the work of their hands and exchange it for forgiveness that they can take on what they've desired from the very beginning: a sense of newness.

And ultimately, I pray that prayer for all of us—that we can set aside the goals, and dreams, and desires we've managed to claw our ways to so that we can allow God to nurture the dead root inside our hearts.

- Ericka Clay

Loss
We are all
That little girl
Whose mother
Dies,
And the loss
Is potted,
Another
Good plant
Set in the sun
But won't
Turn its face
To drink.

- Ericka Clay

Chapter One

Vienna

The smell is sweet, and when I was younger, I had a hard time not thinking of pickles. Oblong, green. Floating in jars of brine. And that's what pops up now when I look down and take account of Parker's five tiny fingers. Little gherkins. It's a mistake looking at his hands.

I throw up a small puddle at my feet as my father walks in, and discontent pulses between us. He leaves and comes back with the mop and bucket and streaks through vomit while Parker watches.

"I told you not to have the tuna," he says. "You know how she loves her bargain basement mayonnaise." I nod and pretend it's the mayonnaise, and he looks at me looking at Parker.

"Don't get too attached. Into the fiery pit with this one."

"You can't be serious," I say. I glance at my father's mopping hands that are a red sort of raw from the saccharine formaldehyde. The salty streaks at his temple tell me he's getting older, and I have a "When did this happen?" moment. Just a few hours ago I was twelve and standing on the curb at the Manor Market, the squeal of wet tires stinging my ears. And now we stand shoulder-to-shoulder, peering into the casket of a dead boy.

"It was in the notebook." The leather-bound book on my father's desk—the one Loretta calls "The Death Bible"—is stained with notes about impending wakes before they're logged into the computer. I've checked it like always, but the details blurred with the truth of Parker's combed strands of doll hair.

"Picked out a nice mantle urn from what I remember," he says. He taps out the organ beat piping through the speakers with a mop-free hand, and I watch his raw fingers ravage the wood.

He leaves me to dump the dirty mop water in the guest bathroom, and the nausea doubles with the image of Parker's mother with her boy in a jar in her arms.

"You ready to lug this thing to the back?" He walks to the opposite end of the casket carrier and gives it a little push while I take one last look at Parker's alabaster face.

I feel the second wave of vomit rising before I can even lie and say yes.

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"HE WASN'T BAD, WAS he?" Rosa walks softly up next to me in the break room. She's in her socks, a pair of black patent heels in her hand. She wears the cream pantsuit Loretta fished out of one the church charity boxes, hand-tailored now to fit Rosa's curvy frame. Even though she's spent hours in the morgue, she looks like she's just gotten dressed.

"Not at all. Very natural. You keep at it, and I'm afraid the Clinique counter will snatch you up from under us." Dad chuckles at a joke that isn't a joke as he pours his millionth cup of coffee. It's a reference to my mother, who once landed a three-day stint as a Clinique lady when I was eight. I had thought she was a scientist in her white, lab-inspired smock, and I stupidly told everyone that at school. I also remember how Heather Hammel told our class that my mom was fired for storing emergency booze in empty perfume bottles just a few days later. Dad catches my eye. He can see I'm not smiling.

Rosa grinds the ball of her foot against the ground, the sound lost in her white sock.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere. Not with Maya still at home." My father begins to bob his head.

"Hmm, well, tell Maya we love her, and I'm still counting on her to be here Friday. I know we have a few things to teach the new graduate." He glances at me, but I refuse to meet his eyes.

“Oh, and your check will be in the office if you want to stop by tomorrow. Vienna will let you in,” he says. I always let Rosa in. I’m the one who cuts the checks, and oils his desk, and burns my hand changing his light bulbs. I’m the one who says he isn’t available whenever my grandmother rings and calls me a “a liability by association.” I’m the one who looks out his window when he sneaks off for afternoon trysts with Loretta, his longtime girlfriend who I love, even though she’s insisted on me calling her “Mama Lo” for the past seventeen years and knows full well that it will never happen.

But when it’s my father’s turn to speak, none of this is relevant. It’s his office. His money. His routine that would send the stars searching through the heart-stopping dark if it were ever allowed to flounder.

“All right, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then,” Rosa says and bends down for a hug, her forearms traversing the small estate of my back. The wet heat swells against my lids again so I shut my eyes.

“And let me know the schedule. Keeping the old bats happy at the senior center this week. Or at least I’m supposed to be.” Rosa speaks into the hollowed cave of my ear, but Dad is the one who nods and says “certainly” as my best friend carries her shoes, her purse and makeup kit to the foyer.

I breathe out as the front door clicks shut.

• • •

I’M NOT CATHOLIC, BUT Rosa is. We used to play confession at Rosa’s house when her mother was wrist-deep in a bowl of Cheetos watching one of her telenovelas. In my best friend’s room, I could feel the quiet smoothing over every raw nerve even as Jaime and Victor would be running up and down the hallway outside the door. Their naked feet would slap against the hardwood floors and gather speed until they propelled themselves onto their mother’s floral bedspread, the headboard having words with the wall.

“Bless me father, for I have sinned,” I’d say, and Rosa, wearing her mother’s pink terry cloth robe would play priest, anointing my head with two fingers she dipped into her glass of Coke. A few years ago, Rosa told me there’s no anointing during confession. She just wanted to see if I would let her soak my hair in soda, but it didn’t matter then whether we played by the rules or not. What mattered was ringing my soul dry like a dirty washcloth.

“What’s on your mind, daughter?” Rosa would say, sitting Indian style, the soles of her feet peeping from beneath the robe. They were moist black from smacking the hard earth in her chained off backyard.

“My mom. I’m afraid she’s going to die.”

“That’s not a sin, you freak. And besides, you say that every time we play.” A shoestring of sugary candy would wind its way through Rosa’s fingers, and then she’d smile.

“But I can’t stop thinking about it. Maybe that’s the sinful part.”

The last time we played confession was in the sixth grade. Summer vacation was just two days away. So was my mother’s death.

Rosa wouldn’t let us play anymore after that. She said it was bad luck. “Mala suerte,” and I knew she meant business when she dipped into her mother’s Spanish. But I had needed it, the comfort of Rosa’s room and the opportunity to watch my world soften and submit to the force of her hands. Talking to my grandmother on the phone, I could use it now.

“Louise was Satan.” Gram’s voice is bacon in a pan, snapping hot oil against my ear. She calls a handful of times nowadays, but today is the anniversary of my mother’s death, so I’ve been expecting her call since eight this morning. She’s four hours late.

“A thousand times, Fran, Frannie, can I call you Frannie?” I ask.

“No.”

“A thousand? Maybe a million times we’ve been over this. My mother isn’t Satan, wasn’t Satan. She was the victim, okay?” I pause,

careful not to taste my words because I don't feel like reminding myself who the culprit is. Yesterday evening was hard enough with my back against the morgue door knowing what my father was doing on the other side with Parker. So, I don't let my brain function this morning. I simply answer the phone and stare at the computer screen. I listen to Gram's labored wheezing.

"You know she had nothing to do with your situation or even Granddad's for that matter. And you know how hurt and sorry I'll always be for you, for the position you're in..."

"You know jack about my position."

"What about the doctors' bills? The leg medication? Granddad refusing your visits?" I sizzle right back, and I can practically hear Gram's skin beginning to scar. I hate when it gets like this, when she drags me down to her level, and I realize it's not even that far of a drop.

"He doesn't refuse them. I do." I don't say anything. I sometimes read Dad's emails from my grandfather at the prison, and I can sense Granddad's unhappiness with Gram, but I never thought my grandparents would let their wounds fester at the same time. They always loved each other too much for that.

"What are you doing right now?" Gram asks, and I know it's because she's lost the urge to fight. I look up and watch the afternoon sun unabashedly leak its stream across the office floor. The chips, the nicks, time scraped perfunctorily into the wood. Dad too cheap to fix any of it.

"Manning the fort while your son's off playing." I hear her snort, and the old Gram appears before the mahogany desk—barefoot, skirt swirling in sherbet shades of color. Her finger still ringed with gold.

"Still with the other 'Lo,' huh? You think he stays with Loretta because he's trying to replace her?" I know Gram means replacing my mother, and I swallow the lumpy truth of it. I play piano on the top

of the desk to keep from looking at the framed oil painting of my mother nailed in the wall across from me.

“Nah, Loretta’s nothing like mom.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Clipped and sharp, her words are at my throat. In the past, it hurt when Gram would call. Age thirteen, fourteen and onward, my grandmother phoning, hurting me with words, me callusing over to protect my core. Rosa asked me once why I kept picking up the phone. I changed the subject and asked her if she uses the same makeup on the old biddies at the senior center as she does for the dead. She answered with a smile.

“He’s back,” I say, the door near the driveway creaking so it isn’t a lie.

“Tell your father to go take a hike off a tall cliff for me,” Gram says. I nod through the phone, knowing full well I won’t.

“And you. Eat something, okay?” Gram’s words are awkward, heavy. I’m taken back to when she would watch me and my brother in the afternoons at our house when our mother was curled up asleep. Gram would force feed me peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and tell me that my mother was sick, that I wasn’t fat, that I wasn’t a nothing. She must think I’m still a slave to my mother’s words even all these years later.

She’s absolutely right.

“Gram? Do you think—”

“No, I don’t think. I know. I can’t see you, Vienna. It’s too soon.” Gram doesn’t know the times I’ve seen her in Blythesville—the town over from Burling Gates—sitting alone in the food court at the mall with a cup of coffee in her hand, or at Roper’s Family Diner sitting alone with a freshly filled plate, or once at the gas station, a trip that resulted in an accidental splash of gasoline down my pale green skirt. I hid, each time, not because I wanted to but because I was worried Gram would hurt me harder than my grandfather, Deluca, had ever hurt her.

“It’s been fifteen years,” I whisper. My mind is searching for Dad and Loretta, the beats in my heart navigating their route to the office.

“Too soon. Now eat something. Please.” The click is soft. I’ve never asked that before. To see her.

“Why so grim, slim?” my father asks. They shift in quick through the doorway like slips of paper, Dad’s yellowing stationary to Loretta’s neon post-it note. They’re so wrong for each other, it wouldn’t be right to witness them apart.

“You know why.” I don’t ask them where they’ve been. Loretta’s black sequined dress is still hitched up, revealing the controlled part of her panty hose, and Dad is lightly dusting off cat hair from his jacket. They were making out again in the back closet of the cat shelter, the image permanently burned in my retinas after reluctantly volunteering there once under Loretta’s insistence only to make a very unwanted discovery. As much as my father hates leaving the home, hates leaving his responsibilities, I often think he hates leaving the security of that closet even more.

“All hot air, my mother. Let her squawk. We’re happy, and that’s all that matters.” Dad grabs Loretta’s waist, and she squeals, her plastic, triangular earrings shaking in a fit of pleasure. Years ago, Loretta had shown me the donation boxes in the basement of Burling Gates Baptist where she volunteers her time on the weekends organizing the clothing closet for families in need. Her “personal closet” as she put it one time, picking her way to an asymmetrical sheath dress she changed into behind a floor plant. Sections of skin peeked through the fronds, surprisingly taut for someone whose face reflects the whole world over. I almost saw it in me to forgive her for her after hours shopping with abs like that. I can’t, however, forgive her for the earrings.

“There were other calls. A Mr. Eckhart. Needs to come by and make arrangements for his mother. Tobey asked about refilling the Cadisol supply. Told him we’re all set. A few vendors called about

setting up booths for the open house,” I say, watching Dad’s lips worm into a frantic knot at the phrase “open house.” It’s his first year hosting for the Burling Gates Business Society, and he’s already spent a surplus of moments bellyaching over the cost of food and drinks for the event that’s still a few weeks away. And Loretta’s been no help, offering to showcase a few cats from the shelter to “keep the crowd in good spirits.”

“Oh, and Rosa came by and picked up her check.” I think of the card Rosa gave me. She’s done this every year since we’ve worked together—gives me a card on the anniversary of my mother’s death and scribbles a meaningful quote that makes the day suck a little less. This year it’s, “Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.”

I look up, and Dad is nodding his head, but I can tell his mind is still cavorting amongst Loretta’s caged cats and prices for sandwich trays. He hums along with the nauseous tune that’s constantly leaking through the overhead speakers. “Sets the tone for prospective clients,” he had claimed when he first popped in the elevator music. I had silently argued they’re already suffering enough.

I turn to get up and take lunch in the break room, but my father stops me. “Look at you. You look like a dump truck backed over you.” His head is cocked, and Loretta is nodding her own in agreement, her earrings swinging their noisy concession.

“What do you mean?” I say, although I already know what he means.

“I’ve been worried about you lately, Vienna. Loretta, too.” Loretta nods again, and I fear her whole head will take flight with the volition of her earrings. “Take off the rest of the day. Loretta can help me get things in working order around here.” I fight the urge to let him know things are working perfectly as is.

“I’m fine.”

“Oh, honey, no, no you’re not fine. You look like a cat is clinging to the bags under your eyes.” Loretta pokes out from behind Dad’s shoulder and makes a clawing motion with her devil red nails. I know they’re right, and if my father is willing to let me off early, then I really must look like death. I need a break, I need...something. But I’m no longer sure where I can go to find it.

“Maybe visit her.”

“Okay,” I say, but I know I won’t be going by the cemetery. The seventeenth year, like all the other ones, won’t change a thing.

“Need my car?” Loretta asks. Mine’s still in the shop from hitting our mailbox. I claimed I was swerving so I wouldn’t hit a squirrel, when in reality, my heart squeezed tight. Panic attacks suck.

I tell Loretta no, that I could use a little fresh air but don’t mention it’s because the weight of Parker’s cremation is still burdening my mind. I grab my bag that I always keep next to the desk, and I drop the card Rosa gave me in it. I watch as it settles amongst my wallet, the worn and torn University of Chicago pamphlet I keep to remind me that the world doesn’t stop existing past the Burling Gates exit (right smack in the middle of Missouri), and the bottle of pills I’ve ignored for the past three months. I walk outside and head quickly down the porch stairs only because I know Dad and Loretta are probably spying on me through the dark wooden slats of the office window. When I’m out of view of the home I stop, my wrists grazing my short floral dress, the sun bursting the brush of color into flames. I grab my cell phone and call him because there’s nobody else left.

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WHEN I THINK ABOUT my brother, the first image I always get is his fingers twisted in our mother’s hair. One time, when I was eight, we had found our mom out in the front yard, and Troy had looped his fingers through so hard, her eyes ballooned through their

sockets. My brother had been folding coagulating piles of socks and underwear, and I had been working on my drawing project, sprawled belly flat on the living room floor. My second-grade art class had been given the assignment of illustrating different stages of our day, and because drawing was the only thing I could do to quell my daily bout of anxiety, I had gotten pretty good at it. The picture I had been sketching while mom was supposed to be sleeping was named “The Wake-Up Call” and featured a girl being woken up by her mother for school. The mother was beautiful and looked like mine, except the sketched version wasn’t attempting to jump on a mini-trampoline partly naked in her front yard.

“Should we call Gram?” I yelled, scrambling to catch up to my brother, who was already out the front door. Gram had just left earlier after washing our clothes, making our lunches, preparing dinner for us. She was the one who always got our mother to bed, and usually Mom would sleep straight through until evening until she’d get up to either sit with Troy and watch TV or drive around and pretend she was going out with friends. Dad was working and going to mortuary school because he had finally heeded Gram’s advice to start living for himself for once instead of that “bleach blonde devil,” so Gram grumbled about the arrangement but never outright complained.

“No, just wipe her up real quick. We’ll get her inside.” Troy had swiped the “drinking towel” from one of the laundry piles before heading to the yard, and it slung around his neck like he was preparing for a round of boxing.

“Let me jump!” Mom yelled outside, and Troy grabbed a fistful of her hair. At eleven he was already tall but lanky, and each time our mother bucked forward, I thought she’d send him to the ground. Mom’s face was slick with sweat and tears. I wiped it cautiously, careful to avoid her snapping mouth.

I looked around the lawn strewn with weights, an exercise band, the mini-trampoline. Her bedroom window was propped open, and I marveled at how she managed to get everything out without us hearing her. She must have found the emergency booze Dad stored in the footlocker in his office. Before our father came home from his late-night job at Manor Market, Troy would always measure out our mother's morning and afternoon doses if Gram wasn't around. But even at eight, I knew there was a hunger in my mother that played through her veins like anxiety always played through mine, and no matter how often she filled it, it still gnawed away, unsatisfied.

"I did it for you, Vienna. You can lose weight. I saw it on the TV," our mother gagged before Troy stuffed the towel in her mouth to shut her up. I glanced at the trampoline, wanting to bounce straight into the sky.

"Open the gate. Open it," Troy shouted.

"It's locked."

"Snap out of it, Sausage. It's fine, I'll take her through the front." I shook my head and started breathing the way Troy had taught me to do whenever my chest began to feel tight. I began cleaning up the yard by carrying each weight in both hands and straining them up the house's dirty blue shingles back through my mother's window.

Troy manhandled mom through the front door, his hands jammed against her spine. I tried not to watch my brother's vein pumping out against his skin as I dragged the trampoline up the crooked stone steps and forced it into the entry where Troy's upper body heaved with breath. He collapsed onto the tile floor and cradled our mother on his lap with his fingers back in her hair.

"What do you think our time was?" he said, smirking at me, and I began to laugh as the exhaustion, the typical madness, ravaged my lungs.

Our mother. She started laughing too.

This is what I think about so I don't have to think about time and what it's most likely done to Troy, who's waiting for me at Mason's.

"I didn't peg you for one to meet a scuzzy hobo for a drink at a bar," Troy says as I walk from the bright outside into shadow, his arms wrapping around my shoulders as smoothly as his words. It's been over a year since I've seen him last. He only lives twenty minutes from Burling Gates in Blythesville—the same town Gram now calls home—but he's made it a habit to avoid his past. Unlike me.

"Usually, I'm not one to meet anyone for a drink anywhere." I smile slow and shy at him. Dirt and time have made their beds in his pores. The lines in his forehead look like they have been sliced with a knife, and these details remind me that he doesn't have the power to calm me anymore.

"Why is that, Sausage? Why don't you get snockered more often? Why don't you get a little blitzed with a new friend?" He raises his eyebrows at me and wiggles them. I want to say, "because you've cornered the market in getting snockered with strangers," but I don't because he struggles out a Dixie cup from his pocket, and his dried, bloodied spit on the side of it tells me there's nothing funny about the truth.

Instead, I run my fingers over the slick wooden counter and say, "Not much for getting blitzed. Never have been."

"Here's to changing that policy." Troy winks a glassy eye at the female bartender, who nods at him. We did the same thing the year before, met at a pub to shoot the breeze and talk about everything our parents had done to ruin us completely. But the last place had been cleaner—I could see through the windows, and the air didn't smell like the sleeping bum at the end of the bar, farting in his sleep.

"So, how's the swindler? Burying the dead, making the bread?" The bartender brings a glass of bone-chilled vodka—straight—and I can tell she's trying to ignore the Dixie cup on the counter with its red smears around the lip. Troy devours the liquid in one swallow,

then wipes his wet mouth with the back of his hand. This gesture, his clean nail beds, our mother's eyes conjure up his younger self, and not even the deep red patches on his cheeks or his dirty jeans can snatch the image away from me.

"The same. Dad doesn't change much. Neither does the arm candy." I swallow a cold gulp of Bud on tap—nothing fancy, no frills because it's bad enough I'm feeding into Troy's addiction as is. It's bad enough I'm drinking period. But I don't get to see him often, and if I didn't drink with him, I'm afraid all we'd share is the same genetic strain of grief.

"How is luscious Loretta? Still cat happy?"

"Quite. She's trying to convince Dad we need a funeral cat—black, of course—to strut through the legs of the grieving. I actually think it's quite creative on her part."

"A kitty for the inconsolable. Well, it seems like I misjudged Loretta. I'd offer to take her out to one of my local haunts, but I have a feeling she's still sore over the last time we caroused." Troy laughs too loud, and I swig another bitter swallow of beer. "The last time" is indexed in a locked file drawer in my head, nestled safely between the time I threw up in front of my sixth-grade class on a field trip to downtown Kansas City and catching my father feel up Loretta to the tune of unrestrained meows.

"Even if she may—emphasis on the "may"—have looked a bit like a sideshow tramp in her Christmas get up," I say, "you didn't have to mention it."

"Woops," Troy says, and I smile at him despite myself. I know he's masking his hate for Loretta with a joke because he can't love the woman who shacked up with Dad after mom died. I've long ago forgiven Loretta. She helped me a lot growing up and Troy, too, before Dad kicked him out.

"I wish you were around more, you know."

“I know. I miss you, too, Sausage.” He makes a show of slapping me on the back. I try not to get hung up on the name Heather Hammel generously gave me back in the sixth grade and stuck long after she and her evil cohort, Amber Fritch, transferred to the all-girls high school. Troy’s called me “Sausage” ever since, and when I had burst into tears the day I turned fourteen and told him to cut it out, he told me he wouldn’t until the name meant nothing to me and neither did Heather Hammel. I can feel the tears coming again, so I stab my thighs with my fingernails. I try not to picture what Heather is doing at this very moment so my heart doesn’t go hysterical.

“Do you think it would be different if Mom were still alive?” I’m tackled down to the evening my mother died as I ask it. The beer has failed me because there in the corner where the bum sits, I see a younger version of me at the Manor Market, accepting my mother’s arm, then pushing it against her until I can feel the wind between us.

“You always ask that,” my brother forces through a burp. The farting bum snorts but resumes his snoring.

“But do you think, maybe...maybe it wouldn’t suck so much?” The world is under water when I blink. I watch that night at the Manor Market drown.

“I suppose I’d at least have a drinking buddy,” Troy says. He turns to me, and I expect to see him smile, but he doesn’t. “Amy left. I mean, she kicked me out. I guess that means I’m the one leaving.

“Where will you go?”

He shrugs, and the bartender notices his glass is empty. He nods at her for another.

“I’d offer you my place, but you’re not exactly fond of my roommates,” I say.

“Tell me about it.” He’s straining now, trying to get the bartender’s attention, even though she’s blatantly ignoring him. I spy the feathered scar on his neck from the time he flipped off his skateboard in front of the house. It shines when he turns his head.

“What about Gram?” It doesn’t feel right to suggest it, considering if Gram isn’t a last resort, I don’t know what is.

“That crazy troll? I’ve got enough insanity going on right here, thank you very much,” Troy says, pointing at his skull. I don’t argue with him. “But maybe. I need to do something quick.” He takes counsel with his empty glass. “What about Rosa?” he says.

“You can’t, Troy.”

“Why not?”

“Because of Maya. Rosa can’t have you around her daughter.” I wait.

“Mine, too,” he says on cue. The bartender brings his second round and glances at me. I shrug, not knowing what the woman wants me to say or do. If I did, I would have done it a long time ago.

“Here. For a hotel tonight,” I say. I make a show of fishing for bills in my wallet, the secondhand leather one Loretta found in the charity box and gifted me on my last birthday. I ignore the sequestered lump of money in my bank account. It signifies making a move with my life that ventures beyond deciding which brand of toilet paper to stock the bathrooms with (the cheapest one, according to my generous father). Even though I feel guilty keeping my savings a secret from Troy, it’s the only thing that has the potential to separate me from the town I was born in, the town I can’t seem to shake.

“I don’t need your money,” Troy says as his hand reaches out to grab the three, freshly pressed twenty-dollar bills. He grasps on a pair of imaginary suspenders and looks at me above his imaginary glasses saying, “Well, I don’t know, Portia, should I charter a yacht or take the family to the villa in Paris?”

“It’s all I’ve got,” I lie.

“Then it’s all I’ve got, too.” He winks at me, his cheek freezing a second too long as if he’s wincing.

“To Louise,” he says, pumping his glass into the air.

“To Mom,” I say, glancing at the corner near the bum again. There’s nobody there.

We drink one more before Troy mumbles, “Now, time to get back on the bus before I’m stranded in this sorry butt town. No offense.”

“Minimal taken,” I say.

“See you around then, Sausage.” I watch as he pounds down his fresh glass of vodka. He hugs me, hard this time, my right shoulder squeezing tight into itself until the shock of pain rights the buzzing in my head.

I hope he’s right.

Troy walks out, and the bartender hands me a second beer and a shot of tequila as the door swings shut.

“On me,” she says, shaking her head, and I know she’s thinking Troy’s a handful. I stop myself before filling her in on our mother. Instead, backside soldered to my barstool, I think of something I’m no good at forgetting.

I was eight, my brother, eleven. It was a few days after we had shoveled Mom back into the house after the trampoline incident. We had been playing hide and seek as Friday evening neared midnight because Mom was “out on the town,” as she’d often put it, and we were tired of listening to our father make the usual phone calls to see if she was dead somewhere on the highway. Our breathing bodies stayed tightly sardined in the coat closet beneath the stairs until the front door cracked open, and our mother sang her arrival.

“You know what, Elbert? You know what’s wrong with you? You don’t live, you don’t live like no one’s watching. You’re an...uptight...a closed for business...nun of a man,” our mother had gagged in the foyer, grasping her buckling knees that glimpsed beneath the short hem of her blue polyester dress. It was an outfit she had sewn during a sober moment, and even though it was a decade out of fashion, it at least stayed zipped and fully covered her five-ten frame. With each

hard jerk of her angry arms, the shoulder pads in her jacket nestled against her cheeks like they were comforting her, and I remember being glad that at least something was.

“Louise, the children can hear you. Why don’t we go to the bedroom and talk about this?” The cordless phone roamed with Dad’s words, looping a wide figure eight in his hand. My peeping eye surveyed the scene through the crack in the closet door and rested on my father. His hair—seeming to have grown two inches that evening alone—was pleading with his wife, his locks outstretched like lonely pairs of arms. He was crumpled, an adjective I frequently paired with him. Worn house shoes with holes near the toes, the hair on his feet poking through the pencil thin cavities. Green striped cotton pajama bottoms with a mysterious stain near the crotch. Matching top with two buttons missing at his neck. His eyes, confused. Misplaced maybe, like they had traveled off course and ended up on the wrong face.

I hadn’t lived long myself, but I figured my mom was right that my father was pretty lousy at it.

“See, there you go. Telling me what to do, not wanting me to make a scene. Well, too bad so sad, Elbert. I made a scene all over Burling Gates with my girlfriends tonight so stuff that in your pipe and spoke it.” *Smoke it*, I had thought as my mother wheeled around on her blue pumps, reenergized by announcing her girls’ night out. In reality, our mother didn’t have any friends except for Margaret Turnbull, Wyland’s mother, who probably took on her friendship as a charity project. Margaret was a real estate agent’s wife whose idea of a nice evening out was wearing her pearls to Gypsy’s Steakhouse, not drinking a forty in the dumpster behind the Manor Market in a dress she sewed herself.

“Mom’s cracked,” Troy said in the soft light of the closet. He turned his head into the shadow. I could only make out his ear lobe in the dark as he stuffed the arm of our dad’s overhanging windbreak-

er into his mouth. I kicked at the pairs of unwanted shoes that grew in our closet with each passing year and tried to ignore the breaking within me, a sadness that jimmied the clefts between my organs and cut them loose.

Looking up through the crack again, I was just in time to see my mother sway an intense shade of blue and stumble over her high-heeled feet. Mom hit her head against the entryway table, and my stray organs gave way as she slowly tripped to the ground. The side of Troy's face stared horrified while I vomited all over the galoshes I hadn't worn since kindergarten, but nobody had the sense to throw out.

Dad made use of the phone again and called the ambulance. He shuffled Troy and me into the station wagon once we had tumbled out of the closet, and Troy swiped the drinking towel from the down-stairs bathroom.

We had waited while mom lay prostrate on the operating room table. I couldn't stop clutching my brother's teeth-worn sleeve until a nurse told us Louise Oaks was alive and would be discharged in three days. The nurse then took me to her station and cleaned me up with tissues and alcohol wipes, removing the last traces of vomit that had defied the towel.

The car ride home that night was the one that all future car rides would be measured against. The three of us, snug as supine bugs, arms melting into our sides except for our father's, whose knuckles locked around the steering wheel.

"That one, that one's called Louise," he had whispered, playing one of our usual games, naming a bloodied cat in a puddle of light beneath a streetlamp. His face recognized what his mouth had just said, and the tears came because he was in no shape to stop them.

Troy cried with him so hard that I thought the force of his shaking would kill me. I remember wishing it would.

“You okay?” The bartender invades my vision. The woman’s face is round, freshly scrubbed and her cheeks remind me of thick peaches. She’s too pretty to wear that much make up. But I like her. I like her lips and the way they refrain from closing. The dark slash between them is inviting, like a warm place to sleep.

“You need me to call you a taxi?” The bartender asks. I wonder why my hand feels funny when I notice my fingertips have plunged into my beer. I look around for Troy, remembering he’s already left, but I can still smell my brother. The scent reminds me of Mom.

“No, I walked here.” I remove my fingers, cold and wet and tune into the painful rumble of my hungry belly. I grab my purse, strap it to my shoulder, and walk a blurry line out into the afternoon sun. I place a hand on my stomach—the bud of life inside of me—and pray the drinking has washed my sins clean.

Chapter Two

Heather

“Life’s what happens when you’re busy making plans.” It was something her father had said, just once. She couldn’t quite place the exact moment, but if she had to rely on her gut, Heather knew full well it was when he was hitting her mother.

Sometimes, she didn’t blame him.

Heather rubbed the sore ball of one foot with the toes of her other. She rested in the recliner, the ugly patterned one Wyland had bought in college and refused to sacrifice. Now Heather was forced to contend with a chair that belonged somewhere in Navajo country and made her seriously consider purchasing a one-way ticket back to Chicago.

But as ugly as the thing was, she had to admit it was comfortable.

A good thing, comfort, because lately she had imagined life growing thorny spikes seeking her spine, the thick flesh that sat smugly on her hips. The Ackerman curse. She looked like her mother’s side of the family, like the lot of them had placed their orders and out popped Heather—a thick-bellied, squatter version of her mother. It had been a cruel cross to bear, but all her life Heather had been well-versed in cruelty. She claimed it as a second language.

She thought now—the greens, the taupes, and Indian reds blending beneath her backside—how “cruel” was a dialect her mother knew most fluently. It wasn’t her fault, though, could never be Caroline Hammel’s fault because doing dishes was a task in futility, and walking to retrieve the mail was death in sunlight, and throwing anything away was an arthritic spasm waiting to happen so every-

thing bellowed inside their three-bedroom home, but nothing ever got out.

A plate of cookies watched from the side table as Heather thoughtfully picked at her lips. She touched the cookies with a curious fingertip, then poked them until their sides began to crumble. She couldn't eat them. They reminded her of her mother's face, utterly perplexed as to why a child wouldn't eat a casserole with the bulbous head of a maggot popping out of it.

According to Heather's father, the meals used to be decent. Her parents had married in Florida in a northern town called Sopchoppy, home of the Ackerman line of descendants and more notably, the Sopchoppy Worm Gruntin' Festival. Heather had regretfully discovered this tidbit of information when she had first started dating Wyland, and he insisted on knowing everything about her. They had stayed up one night at his apartment—drunk off amaretto sours—scouring the Internet for more insight into the “ticking beats” of Heather's heart as Wyland had put it, only to find that she belonged to a sect of necks so red, they could probably be easily identified by the Hubble telescope. “I forgive you,” Wyland had said, giggling until he passed out on his bed, leaving Heather to wonder what it was she was apologizing for and why the entire evening consisted of exposing her heart when his was still soundly shielded.

Heather stopped rocking the recliner, her toes extended into the shaggy square of rug. She had set up the fan, so it blasted a stream of air directly into her face. The ceiling fans were on and so was the A/C, but she could never cool off completely unless she could feel air freezing the edges of her nostrils. The fan reminded her of being seven, her father setting up three electric fans in their feverous kitchen back when there had been room to do something like that. Her mother had gone to bed early because the lighting in the living room was searing her eyeballs, which meant Heather had her father all to herself.

“She was no Julia Child, but she knew how to make a solid meat-loaf.” Her father had nodded as he talked, wholeheartedly agreeing with himself. It was a strange occurrence to be up long enough to see him dressed down in an old Disney World t-shirt, Donald Duck busting out of the logo with his white-feathered fingers grabbing for her. Usually, her father came home sometime around eight, sometimes later, still wrinkled and lifeless in his suit.

At that time, the meals hadn’t gotten out of control and neither had Heather’s mother. Mostly, the food was just burnt or void of seasoning. Heather figured it was her mother’s way of sticking it to her father, who refused to let his wife paint, or write poetry, or go out and see her friends.

“It’s a waste of time, Caroline. You can’t even keep this house clean so why should you be able to do whatever you want?” Heather’s father had said one evening when the mashed potatoes resembled tasteless lumps of puss. Her mother hadn’t put her to bed, but Heather was under her comforter by 9:30 like always, setting a rhythm to her evening that wrapped itself around her arms and legs like ribbon. Her Polly Pockets loomed large on her bedside table, and she sometimes spoke to them in her thoughts, figuring anything that looked so large in the shadows should be able to hear what she was thinking. They never talked back.

“I can’t do it all. Criminy, Ben, look at this place. How am I supposed to tackle all of this?” “All of this” consisted of eighteen hundred square feet, three bedrooms and two bathrooms. The house was older, and sure, sometimes the faucet leaked, and the toilet ran like the tub was chasing it, but Heather figured those were grown up problems, and her mother, being a grown up, should have known how to solve them.

Heather had tried to work it out in her head when she heard the smack—loud and crisp—and could practically see her father’s hand connecting with her mother’s jaw. She always got a sick feeling when

she heard the sound, sick because it pleasantly settled in her stomach. She liked knowing her mother, the woman who was as stingy with hugs and kisses as she was with salt and pepper, got exactly what she deserved. Heather sometimes counted them, checking off the delicious sounds on her fingertips, knowing she was storing them deep inside of her so she could use them some day. And one day she did.

Vienna Sausage. The girl's real name was Vienna Oaks, and even though Vienna was the one with long, lean legs, and Heather was forever cursed to drag along the Ackerman stumps, Heather decided the nickname "Vienna Sausage" suited her better. She noticed Vienna only because she was the girl who spent part of the summer living at her grandparents' funeral home and the entire school year being best friends with Heather's crush, Wyland Turnbull.

Vienna's mother was a drunk. Everyone still remembered the incident in kindergarten, the evening before the Christmas party when their parents were invited to help decorate their classroom. Louise Oaks attempted to make out with her husband and a few other unsuspecting fathers under the guise of mistletoe before passing out in the book bag closet. Heather had been too young to grasp the significance of this. She had been too young to pluck the ripe lump of Vienna's pain and mold it into a weapon to nurse the wound springing from her own mother dropping her off and refusing to come in to help decorate for the Christmas party. But in second grade, lines were drawn sharper, and Heather knew exactly which ones to cross.

"She wears a white coat and everything. I think she works with microscopes." Vienna was at her usual spot in the cafeteria, disturbingly close to Wyland, whose blond curls inched closer and closer to Vienna's right ear. Heather was sitting farther down the table with her clump of cohorts, Rachel Osterhaut and Amber Fritch—two people she hated almost as much as Vienna but did her best not to let on to the fact.

Heather knew Vienna's mother only worked at the Clinique counter. She overheard her mother chattering on the phone about it to one of the few friends she still had left. Heather's mother would cover the speaker with a cloth napkin she plucked from one of the mounds of dirty towels spilling out of the laundry room as if covering her mouth negated the fact that she was disobeying her husband. Heather sometimes felt the urge to swipe the napkin and stuff it down her mother's throat.

"Microscopes? That's so cool," Wyland had said. *Poor, stupid Wyland*, Heather thought, feeling the need to place his curly blond head at her prepubescent chest just so he could hear how much she loved him. She stilled her breath and savored the way her spine sparked on fire whenever something brilliant came to her.

"She's not a scientist, you dip shit." Heather was proud that she had correctly remembered the name her father had called her mother the evening before after throwing what sounded like a ceramic bowl at the wall. All morning she had to pinch her arm to remind herself not to say, "stick shift."

"What?" Vienna looked up from the opposite end of the lunch table. She was so pretty that it made Heather even angrier. Aloof, as if to say, "Who me?" with her blue-orbed eyes and a lower lip that gently quivered. *Yes, you, you stick shift*, Heather thought, biting her tongue for saying it wrong in her head.

"I said your mother isn't a stupid scientist. She works at the makeup counter at the mall. And I hear she drinks alcohol out of the perfume bottles." Heather swallowed the power of her words, each one a comfort in her belly. "Some mother," she added, trying not to think of her own, who was probably peeling at a curled corner of wallpaper or taking a nap after throwing away all their spices down an already clogged kitchen sink.

"You're mean," Wyland said, breaking the silence and simultaneously breaking apart his crustless peanut butter sandwich. He hand-

ed over half of it to a sniffling Vienna. In that instant, Heather saw a part of herself she always had a hard time pinning down, the desire to make everything better.

Heather tore from the table. Rachel and Amber launched their mouths open like water-craving fish. She ran to the bathroom, locking herself into a stall. She cried with her head against the toilet's cool, dirty porcelain.

That day she vowed never to eat during lunch again. She was going on a diet, and she would make Amber and Rachel go on one, too. It was a vow that tattooed itself permanently on the inside of her mind once she got home later that day and realized that her father had left and was no longer coming back home. Eventually, she would read it like brail with her imaginary fingertips, once the food on her dinner plate began to move, and her mother turned their messy home into a filth-clogged artery.

The front door opened. It was Wyland. His suit was still sharp from Heather ironing it earlier that morning, but his tie gnarled with afternoon heat. It negated something in her, his tie, because even though Heather's vision had blurred from the pain shooting through her sciatica, she had pushed forward the last seven months, refusing to let laundry, bills, the overhead lighting get the best of her. But that tie snapped inside of her chest. It rubbed her heart raw.

"So who died?" Wyland said. She caught a glimpse of the shorn curls limp at his ears as he passed the recliner.

"My mother," Heather said, betting whether or not her husband would listen to her ticking beats now.

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"FOOD POISONING," HEATHER'S father had revealed an hour earlier on the phone. "The woman whose stomach could survive a jar of rancid pickled beets couldn't survive a day-old container of milk." Heather nodded to no one, the fan drying out her eyes.

“Isn’t it ironic?” Ronnie, her father’s longtime girlfriend, sang softly in the background. She laughed, her noise loud, strong, and Heather had a hard time processing the sound of it. They lived in Maryland, had opened a boutique pet grooming shop, and referred to the dogs they shaved as “clients.” Her father had become the antithesis of the man she used to know, but Heather figured this might have been because she didn’t know him very well in the first place.

Heather had to agree with Ronnie, even though doing so fed her already pounding head. It was ironic. And disgusting. Perverted. Sad. Heather imagined all these words billowing in the fiery cloud of heartburn assaulting her chest. There was no good way to get rid of it. Amber had told her to drink hot lemon water and lie completely still. Amber was an idiot.

“So, what position did you two do it?” Amber had immediately asked the night Heather had told her she was pregnant. The three of them, four including the baby Rachel had insisted strapping to her chest, had gone out to dinner one Thursday evening like they did every week. Heather had felt like that particular meal was an initiation into a cult. It didn’t help that Rachel and Amber had shown up accidentally wearing the same outfit.

“What are you talking about? What position?” Heather asked. Her eyes darted from Amber—milky white and red headed—to Rachel, tanned and obscenely curved.

“The position. The Shettles method. What did they teach you at that college of yours?” Amber lifted her glass of wine and took a satisfying gulp. When she lifted her arm, her blue and white striped top had sunk in where her breasts should have been. For as long as Heather could remember, Amber had prayed for breasts, lighting candles at the chapel at their school, St. Mary of Sorrows. She’d cut class and sneak in during community masses to pay homage to a God she only cared for based on his ability to provide her a stellar rack. But God had ignored Amber—even after popping out two

kids—and bestowed this gift on Rachel, whose breasts were trying to sneak out of their identical scooped neck top. Heather felt like she was looking at the “before” and “after” versions of the same pathetic woman.

“They taught real things. Math.”

“Oh math, schmath. They should have told you how to get knocked up properly. Doesn’t seem like you’re using math much anyway.” Amber smiled, her teeth smug and stained a light shade of lavender. That was the problem with moving away. Her two best friends had found themselves or at least their uteruses, so when Heather had the misfortune of finding her way home to Burling Gates after college, she was no longer the leader of the group. She was the pledge hopelessly awaiting her acceptance into “I Crappa Kids” sorority.

“Doggy style for a boy. Missionary for a girl. Oh, and no orgasm if you want a little princess,” Rachel said to Viola, whose head was attached to her mother’s giant bosom. Heather hated that—the way Rachel just whipped them out in public. She had mentioned this to her mother once while the woman was hunched over on her kitchen floor. “Some people just have no shame,” Caroline had said to Heather while clipping coupons from an out-of-date circular, her toes comfortably buried beneath a pile of rotting trash.

“That’s depressing, isn’t it? Letting him have all the fun?” Heather said. It was for show, that comment. She hadn’t even received as much as a kiss from Wyland since the tryst that had led to her mess of a pregnancy. They just weren’t that way anymore. Wyland had stopped wanting to know the little things that buzzed constantly in her head, and even though she used to think he cared too much, it had been a good deal better than knowing he cared too little.

Amber smirked and set her now barely filled wine glass down near the edge of her plate. Heather was surprised Amber hadn’t licked the glass clean.

“Only if you care more about yourself than your children. From the moment of conception, you are their caretaker, their everything, their whole entire world. And it’s up to you to determine from the get-go who they’ll be, what they’ll achieve in this life. So yeah, depressing if something like that doesn’t appeal to you.” Rachel nodded, and Heather stifled the knee-jerk reaction to launch her water glass at Amber’s satisfied face. It was hard to take anyone seriously who had dropped out of college to spend countless weekends in Kansas City, loitering outside of the UAMS College of Medicine. Amber had taken such pride in landing a pediatrician for a sperm donor that she attempted to bring it up sporadically. Like the time Heather tripped over her shoe and chipped her tooth during their morning walk. “Brent would know how to fix that. I mean maybe not personally, but he can recommend someone to you.” Fortunately, a cardiothoracic surgeon had moved in next door to the Fitches. Now Amber just brought up the audacity of the surgeon’s wife sunning topless in her own backyard.

“I don’t know what position. I hadn’t researched the issue further than sixth grade sex-ed class,” Heather had said, and the subject was dropped, Rachel cooing into a sticky baby face and Amber fitting a breadstick into her mouth, a peg in its hole.

They dirtied it, Heather had thought later that night when insomnia took over, and she quietly escaped the confines of Wyland’s unconscious arms hugging her in the dark. Heather walked the path of their kitchen—crisp white tiles beneath her feet—and blamed her two friends, her only friends since moving back to Burling Gates for the reason she was unhappy to be pregnant. Her eyes played with the shadows, moonlight streaming through the window above the sink. Heather had buried the truth under her skin like a splinter. It festered there alongside other truths, including her warped relationship with the man haunting her on the phone. Her father’s quick shock of breath through the earpiece jarred Heather into the present. When

he said, “We shouldn’t joke,” it was barely audible, and Heather assumed it was out of earshot of his unfiltered girlfriend.

“Your mother was a good woman. Loony, but good in her own way. So, listen, Ronnie and I are swamped with the store, and frankly, I don’t think we’ll be able to make it out for the funeral.” Heather held her breath, the word “funeral” knife-sharp in her ear. “You’re covering the arrangements, right? I’ll wire you my half. Just let me know the cost.”

Heather had agreed, “i’s” dotted, “t’s” crossed. She would arrange what needed to be arranged, but still, she was surprised by his offer. It had met her skin like the edge of a can, the truth biting and snagging at her: her father was there for them in death, not life. The thought snapped at her like someone jolted out of a nightmare.

“How do you know she died?” Heather had asked, rubbing her arm until it began to hurt.

“She called me. Can you imagine? She’s crumpled on the floor breathing her last breath, and she calls me,” her father said a million miles away, clipping the stray hind hairs of a Pomeranian. His voice reached its feelers through the earpiece, but she didn’t give him an inch. “Funny, how love never dies,” he said. Heather thought it a shame to have no way to dig her fingernails into his throat through the phone.

“Hilarious,” Heather had lent as an afterthought, hanging up. She had picked the phone back up, cryptically calling her husband to come home after several failed attempts at reaching her mother, and she waded through the past she had shared with her mom, her dad, and a regret named Vienna until her hips had gone sore.

Wyland stepped in front of where she sat in the recliner. His contrary tie filched her attention.

“Should we go check?” he asked, and she wanted to strangle him, to hold him, to cry until she felt loose, undone. She wanted to say,

“Of course, we should go freaking check,” because it was cruel for him to have to ask.

She grabbed her bag and waved him away when he came to help her up from the recliner. She slowly followed her husband to the driveway, a small sliver of hope that her father had only inhaled too much fur to think clearly guiding her way.

“What happened to your door?” Heather asked as she waited for her husband to unlock his car. There was a streak of paint missing from the passenger’s side.

“Don’t know. Angry buyers, maybe.” He put his sunglasses on, putting an end to the discussion. Heather had a fluttering thought as to whom the culprit was, but she refused to grasp it.

“I don’t know why you’re worried. Your mother’s stomach is stronger than a frat boy’s,” her husband said, starting up the still-warm engine. “I’m sure we’ll get over there, and she’ll invite us in for cockroach a la mode.”

Heather’s head rested against the cool glass. She watched Wyland’s fingers tap on the wheel. He was still in his button-down but had removed his jacket and went to relieve his tie. He jerked it until it made a limp noose around his neck.

“Work?” she asked.

“It’s work. That’s for sure,” he replied, jamming his A/C vents closed. He was always cold by nature, wearing a sweatshirt around the house even in the heat of summer or tangling his limbs around hers in the evenings, stealing her heat. “There’s an open house I have to set up a booth for. Some Burling Gates Business Society thing. Hollywood’s being a creep and won’t give me the details.”

“So, he’s not letting up?”

“What would the use in that be? If he didn’t have me to mess with, he’d have to acknowledge his wife is knocking boots with the yard guy.” Heather lent a weak smile out of habit. It was an old

joke between the two of them at the expense of Mark Hollywood, Wyland's father's right-hand man. But the humor in it had curdled.

A couple of days after moving back to Burling Gates from Chicago and into their home on Middle Dale Lane, Wyland had paced their living room floor, muttering, "It's not fair. It's not fair, right?" His feet were bare; he had no t-shirt on. They were in between loads of laundry and wading amidst peanut shells. Bubble wrap popped deliciously beneath Heather's bare toes.

"Mark's been there longer, you know." She could see Wyland shivering. His lower jaw refused to set right with his upper one and he concentrically moved his fingers into his biceps. He hated her for being late on the laundry, for keeping him cold. For wrecking the way things were supposed to work.

"I know, but I'm his son, Heather. We moved back on the promise that I'd get to be co-owner and now my dad's making me Hollywood's pet. You just don't get it. You don't have to work." She suffered on that last sentence for a moment before she walked soundlessly into their cubicle of a laundry room and started the washer.

Later he would find her in their tub, sunk like a stone in a tepid pool of water. He would slip in behind her, and she would place the back of her head on his shivering chest. He wouldn't even have to say he was sorry because all she needed were his arms locked around her belly.

"What time do you need to get back?" she asked as the car's A/C blasted doubly hard against her face. The streets, old and familiar, sullied her view. Her old house—her mother's house—was in the older part of Burling Gates, a subdivision called Otterman's Village. She had always hated the sound of it and the fact that living in Otterman meant not being raised in Green Acre Estates like Amber and Rachel. She never invited her friends over, bullying Amber into hosting middle school sleepovers at her house. Heather would stay up those nights when her friends would pass out, sugar drunk

off Skittles and would jot down notes in “the fat book,” a kitty-covered spiral notebook she used to write down everyone’s weight during lunchtime at school. On those evenings she would walk the hallways of Amber’s home, writing down “eggshell paint” and “antique Queen Anne chair,” pretending she could redecorate the inside of her own house and turn it into something it could never manage to be.

“You trying to get rid of me so soon? You know I don’t have to be back at any set time. Perks of being the boss’s kid,” Wyland smirked, jerking the wheel to the right as the car glided into the driveway behind her mother’s rusted out van.

“No. No not at all.” She looked up and smiled at him, even though she hated to smile, knowing her face was wide enough at seven months pregnant. He smiled back, initiating their usual dance, but she moved her hand when he went to touch it.

“Moment of truth,” her husband said, killing the car, birthing the silence.

Chapter Three

Vienna

When I leave the bar, I lapse. My mind is already at Turnbull Realty, at Wyland Turnbull's car, and by the time my feet catch up, there's no mending the situation. I'm a sore thumb in the Burling Gates main square with my flowery dress and inability to walk a completely straight line.

I stumble into Mr. Markie, manager at The Green Grocer and longtime admirer of Loretta. He looks at me like he's seeing a tipsy ghost.

"Vienna, it's been, well, it's been a long time," he says, righting me up with his broom-less hands. Years ago, he'd sweep in front of the sliding glass doors and greet customers as they trickled in. But when the Manor Market was built midway between Burling Gates and Blythesville, Mr. Markie stopped sweeping and started spending more time in his office. I remember as a girl watching him through the mirrored window of the wood paneled back room as my mother pretended to glance at the liquor aisle with minimal interest, and I'd study his glistening bald head in between his hands. I remember adulthood looking absolutely dismal.

"Thought I'd take myself out on the town," I say and twirl around to show him my beer-stained dress. He feigns interest, his eyes darting, probably hoping someone is keeping an eye on me. The feeling is irritating.

"Hope you find your broom," I say, not without malice, and again he gives me that slightly surprised, slightly confused look. I know it's a rare sighting to see me in town. It's a rare sighting to see me anywhere. If I do leave the home, I head to Blythesville—sometimes to the mall, sometimes to the Manor Market. Even though my heart loses a few beats every time I'm standing outside the glowing

entrance of the buy-in-bulk mega store, I don't think how it's the last place I saw my mother breathing or what my hands are capable of mastering.

I think about well-priced toilet paper and nobody knowing my name.

"Oh, all right. Say hello to your stepmother for me!" Mr. Markie says, and I roll my eyes at him as I turn away. Loretta's not my stepmother. Dad has never made an honest woman of her, even though she's the one who fronted the money for him to buy the funeral home from my grandparents. Alongside, of course, the pathetic settlement Manor Market forked over to him, his wife's death having been inconveniently staged in front of their building.

Loretta used to work as a kindergarten teacher for years at Blythesville Elementary until she retired and cashed in her 401K to help make Dad's dreams come true. She's the one who consoled him the nights he borrowed my anxiety and would come down the stairs looking for Mom, even though Mom was already in the ground. She's the one who cut the crusts off my sandwiches and begged Dad not to kick Troy out. She's the one who does everything and gets nothing in return.

Welcome to the world of pleasing my father.

"Hey, watch it!" someone shouts from their car, and I try to give them the finger, but my hand is stuck in my purse, rubbing the stiff beads of the rosary Rosa gave me the day of Mom's funeral. I straighten out my walk and ignore the parents clutching their children closer and the sound of a teenage boy in a Royals cap, offering me a low, long whistle as I pass by.

The police station is around the block, and even though I can't see it, I know it's there. It's always in my breastbone. I imagine Detective Morris, the detective who worked Mom's case, perking up at his desk, sensing the wrong I'm about to deliver next.

When I finally reach the car, I check the handles but know there will be no curling up in the backseat. Wyland always keeps his doors locked.

Logically, I know he's parked in front of the curb at Turnbull Realty, and if I start pounding on his side doors with my heel, someone is bound to shout at me, or arrest me, or Wyland will catch me mid-kick. But it's worse if I don't because then he won't see me at all.

I rear back my foot and punch it through the air until I hear my high heel scrape across his decades old BMW. There's metal where paint once was, and I ignore the man stepping out of the photography studio who's gaping at me as I fall to my knees, dizzy with the sting of being unable to cope.

"Vienna?" I hear the voice, and even though I know it belongs to a woman, for a second I pretend it belongs to Wyland. I'll look up, and he'll run to me. He'll tell me he's being stupid. He'll tell me he's leaving his wife.

"Vienna, get in," Rosa says. She's parked her car in the middle of the street, and as the honks serenade her sprint to where I crouch on the sidewalk, she waves at the honkers like she's sitting on top of a parade float. She tugs at me, and my body gives way to her warm brown hands. I'm inside Rosa's car before the sun can set me on fire. Before Wyland can see the mess I've made of myself.

We drive a ways before Rosa asks, "What the heck was that?" She knows I don't hang around in town. She's been aware of my anxiety since we were in the second grade, and Mrs. Piedras took the both of us and Rosa's brothers to a carnival in Blythesville. Rosa's mother spent the entire time with me crouching against a bright blue port-a-potty, dousing me in holy water because it would keep my "crazies" away. It worked long enough for me to eat a bag of cotton candy. Soon after, I broke free again and nursed my panic behind a tire of a Ford Explorer in the parking lot. It took them two hours to find me.

“I was getting some air,” I say to the window. I cover my face with my hands when looking out the speeding window becomes too much.

“Ha.” Rosa pushes breath through her glossed lips and looks me over. “Have you been drinking?”

“No. Have you?”

“Vienna.”

“Fine. Yeah.” It tells Rosa more than I want it to because everyone knows I usually only drink when Troy’s around. Rosa swallows and nods then flips open the glove compartment and pulls out a package of peanut butter crackers.

“Eat.”

“I’m not—”

“I said *eat*.” I rip open the plastic with manic fingers, and two crackers flop onto my lap. I can feel the unsettling welling within me, and I hesitate.

“I know you don’t want to, but you need to,” Rosa says. I place the cracker at my lips and take a small bite. It’s salty and sweet, and I start to cry.

Rosa doesn’t say a word. She just lets me study her through my tears. Her hair is in a chignon, and because I didn’t tell her how pretty it looked when she picked up her check earlier at the home, I try now, but I’m gasping too hard. Rosa doesn’t speak until I’m quiet.

“You ready to tell me what’s been going on?” Rosa asks.

“I’m pregnant,” I say and listen to the numbing buzz of the A/C blasting my skin raw. We sit nestled in the memory of Rosa’s pregnancy in the eighth grade. The moment she told me, the moment Rosa’s mother ripped her away from our family, the years we lived separate lives until the day Rosa walked back into mine when Mrs. Adalpe—the home’s former makeup artist—up and left for New Port, Rhode Island with a man she found on the Internet. All of it

circuitously blends in the space between us, and in my blurry state, I cautiously poke a finger out, imagining I can feel it.

I keep waiting to hear Rosa's voice, but she's put the kibosh on talking, and all I can think about is how stupid I was when I first found out I was pregnant.

"It seems like you're going to have a little one," Dr. Walker had said when the results came back. My first appointment with him was three weeks ago when getting my anxiety under control seemed like a good idea. To keep from springing out of the exam room, I concentrated on the wiry tufts of hair inching out of his nose, his flat mouth, his sun-spotted hands fidgeting with his tie stay, like he was the one blindsided by a stick bobbing in a cup of urine.

"Seems like it," I managed. He said he could still change my anxiety medication, something that wouldn't interfere with the pregnancy. He handed me a new prescription as he left the examination room to see if he had any samples. I had smiled, thinking it was really the worst thing that could happen, but maybe that meant it was for the best. Maybe he'd stay.

The nurse came in and handed me the samples along with a new mother's bag filled with literature on the logistics of baking a baby.

"Congratulations, Mrs. Oaks," she said, and I could tell she had caught her tongue slip as quickly as I did. The swollen-faced woman blushed and guided me out the door, her meaty haunches nervously dancing back and forth in their scrubs through the room's threshold. I was certainly no "missus," and the truth of that punctured through my picket-fenced hopes of a life with Wyland.

I had left Dr. Walker's office with a plastic bag in hand, samples of formula and a book on breastfeeding jangling at odds with one another. The outside smelled like an early March frost, and it was cluttered with snotty-nosed children reaching for their distracted mothers' hands. One woman with chalk-colored lips leaned her face in close to her daughter's and hissed "stop being a brat" through the gap

in her front teeth. The morning sickness tightened in my belly, and the smooth rhythm of anxiety cramped my knuckles.

There was no way I could be a mother.

“Then you need to take your anxiety meds, Vienna. We’ll figure this out. You’re only three months along. You have until fifteen weeks, and even then, you can fly out of state if you need to...” Rosa says, finally breaking her silence. I know she’s stuck at thirteen, researching ways out of her trouble behind her mother’s back. It makes a little more sense, the reason why Mrs. Piedras wouldn’t let me stay over at their home anymore or why she didn’t raise a big stink with the school when she found out what Troy had done to her daughter. Why she cloaked her family in darkness when reality came to butt heads with Sundays spent at Mass. The shame is thick-skinned, difficult to penetrate, and working through it feels futile. Sometimes, covering your face with both hands is the more viable option, and I hate having to know that firsthand.

Rosa pulls the car into the side parking lot besides Buster’s Grill. She turns off the engine and watches me take out my frustration on the peanut butter crackers. The food is heavy in my belly, a feeling that would usually click an anxious switch in me, but I’m too drunk to care. I look at the salted disc of cracker and see Mom’s face, calling me heavy, Heather Hammel’s “fat book” clutched in her fist. The baby pudge is long gone if it was ever there in the first place, and my legs run thin, my stomach flat. But my mother’s sentiment is always in the back of my mind, my cruel and reliable friend. With each bite I shut off my mom’s disapproval, Heather’s pinching fingers. My mind goes loose, and I relish the feel of uncaring.

“How’d it go at the center?” I say, eyes closed.

“The old biddies think my work is a ‘tad too progressive.’ I’d rather look progressive than like a dried-up old prune,” Rosa says at the windshield. A squat couple walks from the grill to their car, white plastic boxes in hand and get into a Tahoe with a faded “Missouri

"Loves Company" sticker plastered on the bumper. "Told them I'd be seeing them all again at the funeral home soon enough. Do you think they'll call?" she says. I painfully laugh my reply.

As my teeth grind into the last bits of cracker, Rosa says, "So, how is he?" She nearly whispers it.

"Looks terrible. I'd say something like 'a dumpster fire,' but I'm not so sure I can judge right now." I try not to look at Rosa's face, but I do anyway. It's a mistake. Rosa's eyes are so brown they look like hot coals smoldering, and I can't ignore the tears that line them. I can never forgive my brother for this, for loving Rosa and leaving her without a fight. And I'm not sure I can ever forgive Dad for kicking him out of our lives in the first place.

"Good," Rosa says, and we leave it at that. Rosa hasn't seen Troy in seventeen years, even though he's only a town away, which makes the blow that much harsher. When Rosa asks about him, I know she's daring herself.

"So. Is it whose I think it is?" She nods at my belly, wanting to know where the other twenty-three chromosomes are coming from. I take off my seatbelt and curl my legs into my seat. Rosa wraps an arm around my shoulder, and I rest my head in her lap. We sit like this on the bench seat, Rosa gently forking her fingers through a million strands, and we both watch as the sun through the windshield snags on my hair.

I can't say his name out loud. I close my eyes instead, and dream-like memory greets me: Wyland and me sitting with our backs against our high school building, pretending we don't notice Heather Hammel, who's pretending to read a book in her Corolla.

"He hit me again last night," Wyland says in the memory. Our chests crush collectively, even Heather's I'm sure because I know there's a wire soldered from her heart to Wyland's, even though he still calls her a troll for my benefit. I can see the wire firing between them. I've always gotten the sense he's enamored by her. Maybe he

doesn't love her—maybe he's not in love with her—but I know he sees something in Heather I don't have, that he doesn't have—control.

“Why does he do it?” I ask. I don't want to know the answer, not really. I know Mr. Turnbull. He welcomes me into his house, tells jokes, pats his son on the back as he laughs and pokes fun at his inability to clean his room. He's good-natured, has a lot of friends. He compliments his wife's cooking. He doesn't accidentally call me “Louise” like Dad does sometimes. It's a hard turn for me to hate him.

“I'm not my brother.” Wyland's fingers work the back of his head and struggle with the curls I've studied for ages.

“You hit him back this time?”

“Heck, no. Only a few more weeks here, and then I'm in Chicago. He's not really worth it anyway,” he says and studies our shoes. He wears an expensive pair of Nikes, and I wear a scuffed up, hand-me-down pair of Doc Martens. We're no good for each other—even our shoes say it—but no part of me wants to hear it.

“You're scared.” I reach for his hand, but before I can make contact, he's placed it safely in his lap. I look out from my left as if I'm looking beyond Heather and watch her studying us as she mimes putting on Chapstick in her car.

“I'm not scared, I'm smart. I go off to college, work hard, do well, come back and become part owner. I take half of everything he's ever worked for,” Wyland says. The smile is small but still curls at the corners of his mouth. “That's what I do. I make a killing and offer you a ride in my Corvette,” he adds. I smile, hoping it's the truth. That he'll come back because I know I'll be stuck here waiting for him.

“She's going.”

“What?” I ask.

Wyland nods at Heather in the Blue Phantom, wedged between a minivan and our shop teacher, Mr. Osterhaut's, moped. “Heather.

She had said she wanted to go to Chicago last summer. I emailed her, seeing if she ever got in. She did." I try to not let his words break through my skin, but the wounds are raw in the afternoon sun. If I even say "Chicago seems nice" he'll change the subject. But when Heather gets into Chicago, he sends her a congratulatory email. I want to cry, the kind of cry that will leave me more hurt than healed. But I nod. It's all I can do.

The thought sneaks into me. I ignore it, but it's burning loud, bright. I can taste the spark, and for a second, I don't spit it out. But I let it go and tell him because if I don't, he'll leave me forever, and I know he'll never be coming back.

"I killed my mother."

"What?" Wyland looks over at me. He is so beautiful, and I wish I had said "I love you" instead.

"The night she died, I pushed her off the curb and then that car hit her." Swallowing is an act of stifling my nerves, my grieving heart. It was a mistake to tell him. He'll never want to see me again. He'll regret knowing me.

Wyland nods and settles the sound of my words in his head. And then he tells me, "You'd never do something like that, Vienna." He glances over at Heather and for a moment it seems like he's talking to her. "You're not that kind of person."

We look up to the sound of Heather starting her car in the teacher's parking lot. She has to pull in and back out a few times before she can angle herself out onto the road. Wyland waits until Heather turns onto Westbury at the other side of the school and then he tells me he loves me and that's when I know he could never really love Heather. He could never regret knowing me. He presses his lips against mine, and his kiss triggers my forgiveness, if only for a moment.

He tastes like water.

“You ready?” Rosa whispers, and I sit up groggy with thought and the ruthless aftertaste of alcohol. I say, “Yes,” lying with my eyes still closed.

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THE NEXT DAY LORETTA greets me with, “Morning, Sunshine!” as she smacks the side of the coffee machine with her hand.

“Morning,” I say, feet moving toward her and her cheetah print robe. One of the pamphlets in my “baking a baby” bag talked about not drinking caffeine while pregnant, but I’m sure it would forgive me if it knew I had to deal with animal print this early in the morning.

“I take it you had fun yesterday. We didn’t even hear you come in last night.”

“Mm-hmm,” I say. Loretta loves gossip even more than homeless cats and secondhand clothes combined. So, I can only assume she’s hanging out of her chair to hear my answer. When I turn around, she actually is. And so is her freckled chest.

“Umm, your...” I point and Loretta quickly covers up.

“Oops. Sorry. Sometimes I think they have a mind of their own.” I nod, quickly filling up “The Goal of All Life is Death” mug Loretta bought, and Dad begrudgingly accepted for his last birthday. They came to a compromise. He promised to use it if he could cover the quote with a piece of masking tape out of respect for the clients, so when I hold it in my hands, it feels like the words are trying to imprint my flesh.

Using Loretta’s runaway breast as my ticket out of there, I head into the hallway and pretend not to hear her when she asks if I ended up meeting anyone.

As I walk to the office, I start feeling better about today than yesterday. It’s a little easier now that my secret isn’t solely mine. After leaving the parking lot at Buster’s Grill, Rosa had dropped me off

three houses down from the home so I could sneak in. Not having to answer Dad or Loretta's questions and hugging a toilet were the only two things I was concerned about.

"This is what has to happen. Eating and making an appointment. You need to talk to an OB. You need to gain a little weight. It's up to you if you keep it or not, but either way, it's important that my best friend gets healthy." I had nodded at Rosa from the passenger's seat, the slits in the leather biting at my legs.

"Okay," I said. I concentrated on a peeling part of dashboard to help keep the crackers down. Rosa stretched across the bench to hug me. Her smell is always patchouli—sometimes with hints of formaldehyde—and I inhaled it until my lungs burned and the crackers ominously danced in my belly.

After sneaking upstairs and avoiding a few creaky steps, I walked the wooden floor of my room. I sketched on loose pieces of lined paper because I keep forgetting to buy another pad. I shaded pictures of my face, of Dad's. Mom's. I threw up twice in the toilet, each time a shameful attempt at guessing whether it was because of the pregnancy or because of the booze. I felt like my mother and decided that was the last time I would ever allow myself to feel like that again.

I have to be better.

The vacuum snorts me lucid as I walk past it in the viewing room on my way to the office. Dad—already crisply dressed in his best funeral suit—makes straight paths against the wood. More efficient than sweeping, a time saver, as he always says. The one time he caught me with a broom he jokingly threatened to dock my pay, although I'm still not sure how much of a joke it was.

"You look nice," he says, not looking at me. He's wedging the head of the vacuum cleaner around the base of a potted plant.

"Thanks." I have on one of my staples, a cream knitted dress with rose blooms the size of cabbage heads silk screened onto it. My make-

up is done as always, hair loosely curled and settling beneath my shoulder blades.

“Back-to-back today. Etta Gunther at ten and Adil Sharma at one. A viewing. A funeral,” Dad says. I know this, considering I’ve already talked to the families, but I’m sure he’s still wary of my outburst over Parker and my subsequent memory swipe of the Patterson’s cremation plans. If only he knew the truth, maybe he’d give me a pass.

Maybe not.

“Overdose. Car accident,” I say, and he nods.

“You did your homework.” Because there’s always a test. He’s slicked his hair back, and I know it’s only a matter of time before a few strands make a break for it. Mom always called it “finger in a socket” hair, and my parents would laugh as she’d run a shaky hand through it.

“Have fun yesterday?”

“I did,” I say. As Dad works the cleaner, I spy his cuff links popping out from beneath his jacket. It’s the pair Granddad gave him before his sentencing and the pair Gram treats like the Holy Grail.

“Did you tell him ‘hi’ for me?” he says, and I pretend I can’t hear him over the noise, the unnatural sound of vacuum cleaner against wood. “You know who I’m talking about,” he says. He turns off the vacuum.

“Sure,” I say to my shoes. “He said you two should go fishing some time.” My heart. It can’t decide if it wants to stop or break through my ribs. I don’t know how he knows I met with Troy, but maybe he figures it’s because yesterday was the anniversary. Or maybe he knows Troy’s hand is automatically the one I reach for when life gets a little rougher.

“You know he’ll hurt you, Vienna. Troy’s genetically conditioned to hurt,” he says. It’s true. Almost.

I think about the pink plastic trash bucket, mom’s head angled so it could catch the drunken contents of her stomach. Once when

I was ten—years after Mom became a Clinique counter dropout—I ran my fingers through my mother’s hair the way Troy used to do and tried to find the reason he’d leave them snagged in the mess for so long.

My brother wasn’t with me because by this time—he had started hanging with an older crowd—and even though he would still sit on the couch with Mom in the evenings, he’d grow restless and go hole up in his room. So, I was now the one in charge of doling out Mom’s weekend doses of alcohol whenever Gram was busy at the home. And that weekend, after pestering us with a shrill chorus of “Are you sure you guys will be okay?” Gram attended a funeral directors’ convention in Kansas City to work her “magic” for better deals on chemicals. I tried to not resent being alone, watching Mom swig her drink down while she critically studied my body with a squinty eye until she fell victim to sleep.

After I took off her house shoes and propped a pillow beneath her heavy head, I decided to sketch in my room. I had a whole collection at that time—portraits of everyone in my class, including my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Donovan. I loved those sketches and hated them too. The rush of moving my hand in vicious tics was one thing but having to look into Heather Hammel’s eyes after I completed the dead curve in her mouth was another. I kept them in an empty manila envelope I had found in the cramped bedroom my father used for an office. I then placed it between my mattress and bedspring, my whole world, a lifetime of embarrassment flimsily protected in a ten-by-ten room.

I knew Troy had been stealing my sketch pads because Dad would bring one home for me after work at the Manor Market, but he’d never bring something home for Troy. Since I knew my brother wouldn’t be home until my shadow completely disappeared from the floor in my room, I ventured down our short hall to where he sporadically slept and opened his door to an abomination. It used to be

cleaner than mine, but considering he refused to let Gram near any of his stuff anymore when she came to clean, I wasn't surprised that it smelled like Mom's toilet when it clogged.

There were dirty clothes in tiny mountains on the floor. No sheets on the bed. I didn't want to touch anything but realized I didn't need to. Troy probably reasoned I wouldn't dare walk into his room and simply tossed my sketch pad under his bed. I pawed around until I found it, still bound and intact. I brought it out onto my lap and noticed a red smear across the grainy cover. I dipped my finger into it. Blood.

I should have run and pummeled my fists into Mom's snoring back until she groaned awake, but instead, I did something that wasn't at all me. I reached under again, felt around—my heart now a throbbing cyst in my ears—and pulled out a tin box, crusted and stinking. I dared the little girl inside of me to open it and look at everything my brother was made of. And when I did, I was met with the bulbous mess of rotting hearts.

"I was afraid they'd get Mortimer." I turned, and there he was, eyes so wet they looked sticky.

"But Mortimer's dead, Troy," I said, referring to the bird Gram and Granddad had gotten me the week before that had fatefully choked on a seed and croaked.

"I'm sorry," is all he could say, and I retched up a warm puddle of saliva. He took the box from my rust-colored hands and shut it. It was a dull sound, like patting a pillow.

"Don't say anything, okay?" He sat on his bed on top of a brown stain on the mattress, a dried-up puddle that came to three points like a box elder leaf. "They don't need to know." He nodded out the door to where Mom burped and drooled in heavy sleep. I shook my head and picked up the scent of our mother's favorite drink on his breath.

“I just...I just don’t know if I can stop, you know?” He took my face with both eyes. He was pleading with me, but I could only grasp for straws when answering him.

“I won’t tell.”

“I know you won’t,” he said. The blood was drying on my hands, forming cracked branches around my fingers, and it’s all I could look at when he said, “You’re my sister.”

I look at my father, the dead vacuum cleaner in his hand. A strand of slicked down hair is already bulging at the side of his head.

“I’m not the one who abandoned him,” I say. He looks like I’ve jammed the vacuum into his gut.

“He’s not your son. You have no clue what it’s like.” He clicks the vacuum cleaner back to life, and it’s as if he’s been battling the potted plant this whole time and not treating me like a child. I want to scream, “I’ll know sooner than you think!” but I keep the nervous thought in my colon where I know it will pester me the rest of the day.

“Tell Loretta to put some clothes on,” I say above the racket. He bobs his head in recognition, a naked Loretta being bad for business.

In the office, my head hurts. I reach for the aspirin I keep in one of the desk drawers but stop. I’m not sure pregnant women can even take aspirin. I’m not sure of anything anymore. I sit in the chair, solid navy-blue leather against the floral messiness of my dress. I’m not showing—not yet—but when I sit, my paunch seems to grow, and I place a tentative hand on it. It’s a gift I’m afraid to unwrap, so I search online for the courage to tug at the bow.

Before we open at eight, I spend a half hour searching pregnancy facts, scarring myself with pregnancy pictures, and checking our business email. There’s one sent from our contact page on the home’s website. The body and subject are empty, but the return email address catches my eye. Hturnbull@linkmail.com. I think I’m going to be sick until I know it and barely make it into the wastebasket next to

the desk. I'm a wilted flower when I hear the bell tinkle over the front door—soft, padded footsteps making their way through the open office door to the desk. A pair of flip-flops and their set of poorly painted toenails meet with my face.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you're pregnant," the flip-flops murmur. I grab the desk, lifting myself up with shaky hands and am met with Heather Hammel's full belly, the dead curve in her mouth.

Chapter Four

Heather

Standing in the yard of her childhood home with her husband, Heather already knew her mother's death inside and out.

"I thought you wanted to be, um, an accountant?" her mother had asked her three years ago during Heather's first week back in town. That morning, Heather had clawed through boxes, cursing whenever she'd accidentally rip open one with Wyland's old business management books or his DVD collection instead of the one with her dresses. He hadn't labeled any of the boxes, even though that was his only job besides "managing" his friends who moved his futon and ancient television set out of their tiny Chicago apartment. Heather had a suitcase packed with clothes, of course, but she had wanted to wear a dress. It had been four years since she had last seen her mother. She had wanted to seem different. Changed.

Sitting at her mother's greasy breakfast table, she could have kicked herself. She had taken an entire hour to get ready, smearing on lipstick and straightening her already pin-straight hair as if she were going on a first date, not pretending to drink a lukewarm cup of coffee and holding her breath in her mother's kitchen.

"No, I never said that. I've always wanted to be a math teacher," Heather said, dancing her cracked cup of coffee between her hands. A lie. Heather had never planned to be anything. Thoughts would cross her mind sometimes, like in the bathroom during lunch when she'd pinch the fat of a few classmates, and she'd think to herself as she'd scribble their weights in the kitty notebook, *maybe I could be a nutritionist*. But that changed when she entered college and lost all sense of background and expectation. She could be anything, do anything. It was only later as she struggled through her classes that she discovered how wrong she was.

“Oh, so, will you teach around here?” her mother asked, making friendly conversation as she wiped a blood smear from her chin. A slice of what Caroline Hammel referred to as “apple pie” sat on a chipped dish in front of her, but the metallic smell the sliver emitted told Heather something different. She was almost certain her mother was slicing into the heart of an animal she at least hoped was edible.

Heather had known she should be doubled over, dry heaving or running like a bat out of hell into the fresh air of a normal Saturday afternoon. But the truth was that her mother’s kitchen *was* hell, and Heather became overwhelmed with believing her skin deserved to crackle and burn. She hadn’t graduated with a math degree. She hadn’t graduated with any degree. She had spent the last year in Chicago sitting on Wyland’s dirty futon in their apartment, slicing and consuming hunks of cheese as big as baby fists. And there was no greater reward for failure than watching her mother ingest the rotting organ of a sacrificial bird.

That day, she had told her mother she wouldn’t teach—that Wyland had wanted her to stay home, relax a little after working so hard in school. There would be enough time in the world to get a job later. The lie was easy to say because the reality was crushing in comparison. Wyland wanted her home, wanted her pregnant so that she could feel “fulfilled” when she knew it was because he wanted to be the breadwinner. He wanted to be the man of the house if only to please his father. She resented him, silently refusing any potential pregnancies and keeping track of the birth control pills he asked her to throw out. He had been hounding her about having a baby for the five months since their “wedding” at the courthouse in Chicago, the ink still fresh on their marriage certificate. Their elopement was a particular point of contention with Mrs. Turnbull—another reason Wyland thought a baby would be in his favor and another rea-

son Heather dutifully fulfilled her prescription until the one time she gave in.

Three years and a missed pill later, nothing had changed from that moment on the courthouse steps except Heather's growing belly and the heaviness that burdened her womb and her heart.

"Yeah, I can't. You'll be all right," Wyland said, puncturing her thoughts with his shirt-sleeved arm fastened against his nostrils. He never came to her mother's house, so she should have been grateful that he walked her to the threshold. She was not.

He waited in the front yard as Heather pushed the white, composite door with the side of her body. It creaked open against her weight, and her eyes adjusted to the dust floating in a dirty, bulbous haze. Two inches of filth crunched beneath her feet in the foyer, and she quickly stepped onto the cleared path her mother had made for her once she knew Heather was pregnant.

"You won't be visiting me anymore." It was the first thing her mother had said when Heather had told her about the pregnancy. She should have been angry that Caroline had taken the moment and manipulated it into something about herself, but Heather was too exhausted, too disappointed in the nine months that lay ahead, to feel anything other than sadness.

"No, no, I will. We'll just have to figure something out." So, with Heather's help, her mother had cleared a path from the front door to the kitchen, fixed the jammed back door that Heather used when her belly had made it harder to walk from the front of the house, and kept the windows open when her daughter came over. It was a stupid thing for Heather to do, to keep visiting like their visits had ever accomplished anything. Like the air wasn't polluting Heather's insides. But the intensity of her mother's hands shifting piles of brittle newspapers and dark-stained recipe books moved her more than a hug, a kiss.

And now Heather waddled down the path, her flip-flops meeting bare wooden floor. She should have gone around to the back door, but she wanted to walk the pathway one last time. She wanted to prolong the inevitable.

“Mom? Caroline?” Heather called out. She remembered her father always urging her to call her mother “Caroline.” “She’s no real mother, bug. She’s no real mother at all,” he’d say, picking a random pet name from the stash he accumulated watching sitcoms. “Cat,” “Sweetie,” “Babycakes,” were all marbles in his mouth, but when he wanted Heather to do something, he’d use one, plucking at her heartstrings with two determined fingers. It worked, and then later, at night, she would cry because it never felt right, like wearing a shirt backward or skipping fat check during lunch. And to think that her mother chose to call him in her last moments—not her only child—made Heather wonder if dying messed harder with a person’s head than she could even imagine.

“Mom!” she shouted, walking past the staircase, past her old room that had become another bin to contain the waste. She stood at the kitchen’s door frame at the back of the house. She blurred her vision, not wanting to see what would be waiting for her. She placed her ring-less, swollen fingers on the frame and spied her mother lying on her back as if making an angel in the trash at Heather’s feet.

She stood for a moment, realizing she had left her cell in the car and knowing Wyland would pretend not to hear her even if she screamed at the top of her lungs. She took the house phone, the cord wrapped around her mother’s arms, and attempted to ignore the halo of digested food around her mother’s head. She failed and vomited on a kitchen chair.

She called 911 and maneuvered her way out the back door. The light stung her eyes, so she closed them, allowing the dizziness to wash her clean. She considered giving into it, passing out onto the grass, and forcing Wyland to take care of everything, but a memory

took her, forced her upright. It was one of the first nights alone with her mother after her father had left them. The house should have felt emptier, and after a day of studying the curve of Wyland's ears (moon snail-shaped like the shells the museum curator brought to show the class) and listening to Amber drone on about how getting glasses would ruin her second-grade existence, Heather assumed that half the mess in the house would be gone because her father had probably sent for it. But after she got off the bus, walking two blocks in the opposite direction so Amber and Rachel wouldn't catch on, then circling back to her dismal street, she found the house to be teeming with cookbooks and canned food and an overwhelming sense of her mother's enthusiasm.

"Heather!" Caroline had called from the kitchen. She poked her head out, her salty-caramel hair crusted white with flour. She was smiling, and the effect was maniacal, like the Cheshire cat Mrs. Donovan had read about during story hour. Heather ventured through the living room, wading through the tissue entrails of empty cookware boxes. She stumbled back, startled by a life-sized cutout of a woman in an apron, her hair curled close to her head, one high heel lifted behind her. When she finally made it to the kitchen, her mother was dressed the exact same way.

"I see you've met Beatrice. She was right next to the display for these aprons. Thought I'd pick her up while I was at it." Her mother trilled like a bird with a broken wing. She was making haphazard circles, a metal bowl and whisk in her hands. The string of pearls that snaked her neck flapped heavily against her collarbone.

"Oh, that look on your face. I know, I know I went a little overboard. But Heather, I have to tell you. I feel free. I feel, well, uncaged, you know? And when I saw Beatrice, I thought, that's it. That's what I need in my life. A little Gingham. Some lipstick. You never know what a person needs to become exactly who they were meant to be."

Heather could feel her daisy-printed backpack slipping from her shoulders, and she did nothing to stop it from plopping onto the kitchen floor. If this is what her mother was meant to be, then Heather had a new mess of worms to jam carefully back into their can.

“He’s never coming back. That man. He’s not coming back and good riddance too. We don’t need him. We’ve got our pearls and our cupcakes, right?” Caroline shoved the metal bowl at Heather’s face and blinked, once, twice, three times. “Right?” she asked again, her voice breaking into two rough-edged pieces.

In one smooth reach, Heather ripped it from her mother’s hands, and the lip of the bowl hit hard against the wall. Globs of yellowy batter iced the anchored phone and slid downward. Caroline seemed to gasp to the beat of their steady trail.

“Mom?” Heather asked. She came to, her anger dulled but her senses still lightning-struck. A fine splatter coated her favorite shirt—white with a yellow lab puppy, his tongue lapping out of its mouth as if trying to clean up the stain.

“No.” Caroline curled her legs under her and sat on the floor. She moved the whisk, swiping tick-tock motions in front of her face. “No, no,” she whispered. Heather watched two black rivers snake down her mother’s cheeks. This was the sort of delicious thing that made sense when it was someone else’s mother—Vienna Sausage’s or some other loser who picked their nose or ate clumps of dirt during recess. But not Heather, who knew the beats of the usual orchestrated chaos in her home but was frantically thumbing the sheet music to find her place.

A thought buried in her brain germinated and vined its way down her spine and around her limbs. She did the only thing that came to her: she hugged her mother, cradled Caroline’s warm and heavy head in her lap. She took her mother’s love forcefully, the only way she knew how.

And now, standing at the threshold of her mother's death, Heather dared herself to relearn Caroline's face and inwardly wheezed through the overwhelming need to hug her.

The sirens worked hard, frantic in their blaring, so Heather wiped beneath her eyes and walked around to the front of the house. The next couple of hours were technical and unfeeling, reminding her of the trigonometry classes she would sit through, looping her fingers inside the biting, metal spiral of her notebook. The police determined there was no foul play ("Surprising," Heather had heard her husband mutter beneath his breath), and her mother's body was sent to the county morgue. Heather waited for the news that her mother's home would be condemned, that she would be fined for the filth and junk crammed tight in the corners. But everyone pretended not to notice the mess and stench, possibly believing they were paying a kindness to a grieving daughter. All Heather wanted, though, was for someone else to watch how easily the decay in a wall could spider, snake its way into an uncovered pore, and poison the host.

The sky had turned to dust by the time everything was said and done. It was a little past four when she and Wyland returned back home.

"You don't have to go back, do you?" Heather figured Wyland's father, Owen, as work driven as he was, would make an exception this one time.

"It's just, I have a lot of work to catch up on and then with this open house thing..."

"Okay," Heather said, standing in their driveway.

"You'll get through this." He pressed his wet lips against her forehead, and she watched him head back to work in his maimed BMW.

As she jammed the key into the lock and went inside the house, Heather's body told her to sleep. The cookies had grown stale on the plate next to the recliner. The fans still buzzed, and Heather could feel them whirring inside her. There was no way she'd be able to nap.

Instead, she warmed up the computer and searched for a place to send her mother.

Heather squeezed into the small nook off their living room that now housed Wyland's old desk from the apartment. Their second bedroom—the old home office—was now the nursery, and when she thought about that room, the way it was with its unfinished crib and bags of pink clothing Wyland's mother delivered on a weekly basis, she shuddered and felt guilty for shuddering. She had taken to cleaning the rest of the house, even awkwardly scrubbing the grout in the guest bathroom with a toothbrush, but the nursery was a different animal. It was a definite sign of change. It was full force motherhood without the benefit of braking.

She gasped and shifted her weight in the chair. She typed “funeral home Folkson County” into the search engine and found there were three funeral homes in the area. Bauer and Sons in Blythesville, Allman Funeral Services in Summit, The Oaks Family Funeral Home in Burling Gates. Heather remembered calling it The Addams Family Funeral Home in the third grade, alluding to a show she'd only known existed when her mother's headache would strike her paralyzed on the couch and the TV would run unguided. She looked up Oaks—fully aware she was inching into forbidden territory—and found their web page in the search engine. A few headlines that popped up below it caught her eye.

“Funeral Homeowner Charged with Illegally Selling Chemicals to Drug Dealers”

“Funeral Homeowner, Deluca Oaks, Behind Bars”

“Deluca Oaks’s Son to Purchase and Run Oaks Family Funeral Home”

She scanned through the articles, found one from the Burling Gates Gazette that began, “Deluca Oaks, 59, owner and facilitator of Oaks Family Funeral home was arrested late last night at his place

of business. He is charged with supplying chemicals to a local meth den..."

She found other articles, blog posts about how Deluca couldn't pay the bills. How he had to fire the drivers, the grounds keeper, the local churchwomen who, alongside his wife, helped keep the home clean. How Vienna's father, Elbert, bought and took over the business. Heather even stumbled across a picture of an older, heavy-set woman spitting at Elbert on the home's front porch, officers pinning her thick, naked arms behind her back. Frances Oaks, the caption read. Elbert's mother.

"Dang," she whispered. Heather found a few pathetic grains of pleasure in knowing that there was at least one family in Burling Gates more messed up than her own. It made it sweeter knowing it belonged to Vienna Sausage.

She clicked on the funeral home's link. She was met with the image of the two-story stone house she knew from when she was younger when she, Rachel, and Amber would run past it during Halloween screaming, "That's where the wicked witch lives!" Heather remembered Vienna eyeballing them from her grandparents' front yard, dressed as a toilet papered Mummy or something even more pathetic, her brother Troy throwing them the finger.

Heather's insides began to slightly cramp, and she clutched her globed stomach pressing against her thighs.

She winced through the contraction then clicked on the "Staff" link and scrolled through the pictures. She saw Elbert, a man she had seen in passing when she was younger and who had always looked as nondescript as all the other adults who lumbered over her as a grade-schooler. But in his picture, he was heartily three-dimensional. A hooked eagle's nose, thin-rimmed rectangular glasses anchored against his pale skin. Graying hair that was packed tight against his head except for a loose strand that seemed to bulge near the side of his crown.

She was surprised to see Vienna's picture listed among the others. She hadn't thought Vienna would end up working at Oaks, but that was as good a place as any. *She does have a life-sucking quality about her*, Heather thought.

Heather had only spotted Vienna in town one time since moving back to Burling Gates, an incident she didn't savor recalling. Once, during a party at Amber's mini-mansion, she had learned Vienna had turned into an oddball hermit. But Heather had changed the topic when she couldn't stop picturing Vienna in pearls, fluttering whisk in hand.

A purple dress and the same damp blue eyes, Vienna didn't look like she belonged at a funeral home in her picture. "A runway, maybe," Heather mumbled, hunger twisting its claws and making her ache. She finished her quick scroll, skimming a list of drivers and a woman named "Loretta," a part-time administrator, who looked as if she'd rolled around in a hooker's closet before coming to work that day.

Heather clicked "Contact" and typed in her email address. She looked at the blank subject line. "Dead mother," she typed. She looked at the large, empty square beneath it. "What do I do now?" she wrote in the blinding white box. Heather quickly deleted both boxes, abruptly aware of how tight and restrained she felt in the office nook. She wished to all things holy she didn't have to wear a pair of suffocating black yoga pants, the maternity bra that wrapped like an angry bow around her chest. She was alone. Wyland wouldn't be back for a few hours. So, she slipped her swollen feet out of her flip-flops, danced the slow awkward waltz of undressing, and unfolded into their secondhand computer chair with a hopeless offering of breath. She traced the spidery light limbs that patterned her stomach and could feel her pulse pumping everywhere.

An ache erupted out of her mouth—the visceral, verbal moan of everything she felt curled up in her cells. Her mother was gone, had

left her lonely. She had no one now but a man who no longer loved her and had been seeing someone else behind her back. She banged her fist hard on the desk, and when she looked up, she saw a message on the screen. “Thank you for contacting us. We will respond as soon as possible.”

“No,” Heather said. “No, no, no,” she repeated, swiping hard at the sides of her face. There it was—proof of her stupidity. She couldn’t even work the computer correctly, let alone stand up for herself.

For the past twelve weeks, she’d known about Vienna and Wyland. She knew about their tryst a few months back that had ended on the carpet of a house Wyland was showing, this information extracted after cracking her husband’s password to his email account. Her hate, anger was something she couldn’t even define because it stood in the face of a relationship that definitively excluded her. It wasn’t the betrayal so much as it was the act of feeling alone that had hardened the world for Heather.

In the beginning, it was this feeling that plagued her whenever Wyland would show houses on his lunch break instead of coming home to her. “I just want to prove I can do better than Hollywood,” he’d say, and Heather made herself believe him. She also believed the little boy who often showed in his eyes and smile, the one who wanted to please his father the way most people wanted to win the lottery.

“Okay,” was always her reply, and she’d try not to think about it. “Pregnancy hormones,” she’d say aloud, walking the cool wooden floors in their home, barefoot. She ate a lot, gained weight, grew questionable hairs, and sweated in the wrong sorts of places. “Why not go crazy while I’m at it?” she’d ask their cat, Frankenstein, who’d curl up like a black tumor in her lap.

But one day she decided to answer the question with a strong declarative sentence. She got into her car and drove around with a printed-off listing of houses for sale in the area. Wyland would never

say where the houses were located, just that they existed, so Heather and her belly took to the streets, navigating with one hand while the other was highlighting, circling the next find.

The day she came to it, the sky was too clear. She stopped several houses down and decided to pretend she was merely out for a walk, exercise good for the baby and all that nonsense as loneliness fed on her fingers and toes.

Heather walked slow, spotting her husband's car in the driveway. It stood empty and alone, and for a second she was relieved, but she forced herself to venture further. She walked down the side of the front yard and worked her way to the back. She didn't have to go far. She looked through the kitchen window and then stepped back, the house's vinyl siding cutting into her buttocks. She didn't have to look again. She knew it was Vienna, sitting at the kitchen table, Wyland at the other side. They were both smiling.

Heather reasoned it would have been easier if she had seen them blatantly embracing on the black and white tiled floor. She loved that floor, the quick view of crown molding, the marble countertops. That's the reason she began to cry. Because she loved a house she did not live in.

Because this time, Wyland's indiscretion was with Vienna Oaks.

Instead of saying a word to either of them, packing up and leaving town, Heather had sat daily for the past three months in the ugliest piece of furniture known to man, recovering her history to find the very instant her life went wrong.

But this time she was tired of sitting, so Heather set to the arduous task of redressing. She could feel Frankenstein eying her as one foot found her flip-flop and the other tried to maintain her balance.

"Entertained?" she snapped, and the full-bellied cat lifted his rear at her and hissed. She grabbed her burlap bag off the floor and waited until she was shut tight inside her Corolla.

“This is stupid, so stupid.” Her voice was the only thing louder than the pulse ripping against her skin. She drove without feeling. She edited her yelling down to just the one word, “stupid,” until it was written everywhere she looked.

Navigating the streets she had walked as a kid for Halloween, she arrived at Oaks, and it was like she had always remembered it, except shabbier, worn down. *Looks like we have something in common*, she thought.

She pulled up alongside the curb and struggled out of the car. She almost forgot her bag, and when she bent back down to grab it, fear pounded between the vertebrae in her spine.

“I can’t do this,” she said to the newly shampooed interior. It was a stupid task she had found on some baby site, some woman bragging how her husband had shampooed the insides of her car. Heather had asked Wyland if he could do the same thing for the Corolla, and he had rolled his eyes and told her the baby wouldn’t care if it was driven home in the Weiner mobile. So, it was Heather who had vacuumed it out and worked the seats into a lather. It was Heather who started crying because she had used too much soap, and now the seats were hard and suffocating with their sickly-sweet stench. She had ruined her car. She would ruin a baby.

“Hey, there. Come on in, we still have twenty minutes till closing.” Heather took one last intake of vulgar breath and looked up. It was the hooker.

“I’m sorry,” Heather swallowed. “I think I’m lost.”

“In our driveway?” the hooker asked. She was wearing a black sequined dress and what looked like doorknockers at her ears. The woman was on the home’s front porch, the door held open by her lifted heel. Heather could hear a man complaining that she was letting the air out.

“Seriously, come in.” Heather did what the woman asked because she did feel lost, and something in the man’s tone convinced her it was shameful to keep a door open for too long.

Inside the lights were dim. The shades were open in the room to the left and some light had eked its way through. There was an empty space near a podium surrounded by ferns in pots. It was the place a casket should be, Heather realized, and everything that had been crashing her heart minutes, hours, and months before came to a halt staring at that dead space.

“Let’s sit in the break room. Elbert’s working a few kinks out for our open house in the office,” the woman said, and Heather counted her teeth with her tongue, trying to remember what Wyland had said about an open house. She wondered just how hard he’d break out into a sweat if he knew he’d be running a booth with Mark in his ex-mistress’s front lawn. Maybe he already knew.

The light in the break room shifted violently off the canary yellow walls and into Heather’s eyes. The room contained a small kitchen, and she could smell something cooking in the oven.

“Pasta bake. Ziti. Elbie’s favorite,” the woman said, blushing like a teenager. Heather kept taking inventory on the inside of her mouth. She remembered blushing like that in high school. How the sting would take her cheeks at night, in bed, dreaming of Wyland.

“I’m Loretta, by the way,” the woman said, extending a set of red-flamed nails. Heather took it and allowed her arm to be bounced up and down. She told Loretta her name.

“So, Heather, how can I help you?” Loretta asked. Heather had to pause and roll the question around. She studied its angles. She wanted to talk to Vienna. She wanted to tell her she was a real nightmare for sleeping with her husband. She wanted to scratch the other side of Wyland’s car and bust out his windshield. She wanted to paint over the break room and get rid of the fluorescent lighting. But she couldn’t stick with one train of thought because Loretta’s plastic

earrings were having a seizure at the sides of her head, and she could hear “Elbie” steadily humming into the phone in his office.

“My mother’s dead.”

“Oh, dear, I’m so sorry. Okay, well, one sec,” Loretta said, patting for the pockets that were noticeably missing from her dress. She stood up from the rod iron table to retrieve a pad of post-it notes and a pen from a drawer near the fridge. She wrote down Heather’s name. Purple lines looped and scrawled into letters.

“Okay,” Loretta said, looking back up at Heather. She seemed to be waiting for something.

“Is that it?” Heather asked. Loretta’s mouth twisted into an “o” and then she wrote down “dead mother” underneath Heather’s name.

“I’m sorry. I’m not very good at this. Vienna will be back later so if you could come in tomorrow to give her the details...”

“She’s not here?”

“Vienna? You know her? No, Elbert gave her the day off. She needs it if you ask my opinion. The poor thing looks wretched. For the past three months at least, she’s been the same shade of gray, and if you know Vienna, she’s never gray. Colorful I’d say, always wearing one of those pretty summer dresses. But lately, she’s been...off,” Loretta said, moving the purple pen through her fingers like a baton. “I’m worried about her,” she quietly added.

Heather watched one of the fluorescent lights buzz above her head and hoped it would blind her. Her grip was loosening. She could feel the fight leaving her.

“Is she going to be okay?”

“Should be. It’s the anniversary of her mother’s death, so I know it’s rough, but this time it’s different.” Loretta got up to check on the ziti. “Maybe she went to the movies or something,” she sang from the oven. Heather’s thoughts quickly turned to Wyland’s scratched up car door. Well, at least Vienna wasn’t reconciling with her husband.

“That’s good. Don’t tell her I came in. I want to surprise her tomorrow,” Heather said. Her fingers searched for Dolores in her swollen abdomen to keep her in the moment. She felt light-headed. Her adrenaline was wearing off, and in its place came that often underused drizzle of empathy.

“How far along are you?” Loretta asked, returning to the table and nodding at Heather’s belly.

“Seven months. Seven months today.”

“Wish we had a little one running around here. Hey, if you know anyone we could set Vienna up with, let me know. Maybe that would bring her out of her funk,” Loretta said. Heather said she’d do her best then followed Loretta’s sequined dress out of the room.

“So yeah, come by tomorrow morning. Vienna will be back, and she’ll get everything taken care of. I assume your mother’s being held somewhere manageable?” Loretta asked in the entryway, and Heather could feel her empathy dividing and extending to the lady with plastic earrings who didn’t look quite right in a funeral home.

“Yeah. The police told me she’d be held at the morgue tonight and to contact a funeral home to make arrangements.”

“Perfect,” Loretta said, then cleared her throat through her enthusiasm. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude. I really feel terrible about your mother, it’s just Elbie’s on the phone with that floozy from the storage place, and she wants to set up a booth here for the open house. I mean, how would you react if some harpie was after your man?” Loretta asked, fidgeting with the front door.

“Not very well, I’m sure,” Heather murmured. She began to walk out when she mentioned accidentally sending the contact form to the home’s email address.

“No worries. Vienna will delete it. Can’t figure out that computer mumbo jumbo for the life of me,” Loretta said from the porch, and Heather nodded at her red nails dancing across an imaginary keyboard.

In the car, the soap in the upholstery burned Heather's lungs. It flirted with the air, her senses, the agonizing lump of shame between her eyes. Vienna was the wrongdoer, the reason for the mess that sat in Heather's lap as solid as Dolores did in her stomach. But Vienna had lost her mother, had lost her best friend when Wyland moved to Chicago, and maybe Heather didn't have to sit through it all, but she didn't have to make things worse either.

She wanted to find that part of herself again, the part she had spotted in her husband all those years ago when they were kids in a lunchroom, defenseless to the world and the hurt that clawed through them.

Heather just wanted to make everything better.

Chapter Five

Vienna

I can feel my brain snapping me out of my zombie state in the office. The colors in the room, the desk beneath my hands, Heather Hammel waiting patiently with swollen fingers locked over her belly. All of it is processed at once, and as I wipe at my mouth with a chewed-up Kleenex, I feel a small consolation in knowing the entirety of my vomit has at least made the trash can.

“Excuse me.” I grab the soiled basket and move around Heather, and for an instant, our bare arms touch before I tremble down the hallway to the bathroom.

“Hey sun—”

“You’re not dressed,” I say to Loretta who stands near the bathroom, still in her silk robe with a newspaper under her arm. My stomach lurches because she’s used too much air freshener, and thinking of why she’s used too much air freshener makes me feel faint. “We have a client in the office,” I manage.

“Oh, she couldn’t have seen me. I’ve been in here the last twenty minutes,” she whispers behind her hand.

“Listen, it doesn’t matter. Just...the lady in the office—a Ms. Hammel, I mean Mrs. Turnbull—did she call? Yesterday maybe when I was out?” There are only two possible reasons why Heather’s standing in my father’s office, and the spineless sixth grader in me prays it’s the one involving death.

“Oh yeah. Her mother passed away,” Loretta says. I’ve never met Heather’s mother, and even though my dealings with her have always been less than pleasant to say the least, it still makes me sad for her.

“You okay?” Loretta nods at the fingers I’m twisting into the budding headache at my temple.

“Yeah, I’m fine. But I need her information. Please tell me you used the notebook?”

“Um, oh here.” Loretta says. She fishes in the pocket of her robe and hands me a note scribbled with purple ink. I pinch it with my thumb and forefinger and scan it quickly to see it only contains Heather’s name and the phrase “dead mother.”

“Loretta, really?”

“I got nervous, and Elbert was on the phone with that cow from A1 Storage, and I couldn’t concentrate. Apparently, wants to set up a booth for the open house, but I know she has the hots for him ever since he did her aunt’s funeral...”

“The notebook next time. Please.”

“All right, all right, the notebook. I’ll use it, and I’ll put on some clothes. Listen, I can pick you up some tampons today...”

“Not on my period.” I softly shoulder past her into the bathroom and close the door. The world spins, and I don’t know how I’m going to face Heather, how I’m going to get through a conversation without letting on to the fact that I’ve spent hours thinking about her. About what I’ve done. I slink against the papered wall, a forest of green vines snaking behind me. I prop my forehead on my knees and sit through the attack, the vertiginous panic crawling in and out of every orifice. I wish for cotton candy, the tire of a Ford Explorer. Of being young and innocent. I swallow a rounded pocket of air and right myself against the hallway wall as I head back to my father’s office.

“She’s here, right?” Heather asks, sitting round as a marble in one of the guest chairs.

“Loretta? I already talked to her and reminded her about our protocol. Again, my apologies.” I sit behind the desk again and dig beneath a thick layer of skin for my most professional tone, but my voice flattens, rusted and robotic.

“No. My mother.” I redden and try to ignore Heather staring through me to find an answer.

“Of course. Yes, yes she’s here,” I say, even though I’ve forgotten to confirm this with Loretta. But the county morgue tends to make late night deliveries, so while I was soaking my regrets in the claw foot tub in my bathroom last night, Mrs. Hammel was being heaved onto a cold slab of metal in our basement. “At this point we’ll just take care of the details,” I say and turn to the computer and open a pre-formatted program that keeps track of every service. It documents each funeral, each wake. It notes the specifics—the flowers, the coffin, the music. The details that will curl themselves in the bellies of all who attend, weighing heavily inside them.

“So, are you?” Heather asks, and from my peripheral, she’s the ghost version of herself.

“I’m sorry?” I cough wetly into my fist to fight off another surge of nausea.

“Pregnant. Are you pregnant?” I turn toward her and process how awful she looks. A rumpled men’s button-down. Black yoga pants. Flip-flops. Heather’s hair is a shoulder length curtain with a bar of blonde bangs cutting frankly across her forehead. I take stock of the details to still my nervous stomach although I doubt there’s a way I could manage to make it any emptier.

“Yes.” The word is gone before I can wind it back in. I might have been wrong about the empty stomach thing.

“Well, then, join the club.” The corner of Heather’s upper lip lifts, and I’m given a quick shot of her broad teeth. I’m numb through the seconds ticking with the grandfather clock in the corner. She doesn’t ask me whose it is, and I take it as a good sign until I realize why she doesn’t. She already knows.

I force a toothless smile and turn back to the screen, typing Heather’s name into the allotted space. My fingers stretch and curl, clicking letters and forgetting the present. I think of our middle

school bathroom with its moss green tile and sinks designated for the height impaired. I wrap my head around the image like a tongue engulfing a hard-edged candy.

“Amber, you’re next,” Heather had said in the bathroom of Burling Gates Middle School, the same day my mother died. It was the last day of school—lunchtime—so the sixth-grade girls met in clumps in the bathroom, coagulating and bound only by Heather’s plasmatic will. She forced and pumped through us, around us, until a hushed swishing sound played in our ears, and we all believed that this was what we wanted. To be Heather Hammel’s friend.

Amber tripped forward, her gingered ponytail twirling around her scrunchie like a helicopter. She had been the skinniest girl in class and one of Heather’s friends, a relationship I always imagined was crafted from Amber’s fear and Heather’s craving for it.

“Ow!” Amber said, then quickly covered her mouth. Heather made welts in Amber’s skin that turned white then red then faded completely.

“Rosa, your turn,” Heather said, and my hand unconsciously gave my friend’s back a gentle push. Rosa was wide-eyed, seemingly stunned that this was a natural part of her day, and I wrongly assumed it was because she didn’t understand what it was worth to be friends with Heather Hammel.

“I think somebody should lay off the burritos,” Heather said, and the bathroom erupted, giggles pinging off the walls, the clackity-clack sound of dangly earrings irreverently shaking. Rosa didn’t answer. Her face looked faraway to me as if the bathroom didn’t exist and neither did the rest of us. She was usually quiet during fat check, but the way she kept her chin up, her gaze steadily above Heather’s head worried me.

Heather pinched with her fingertips, stopping to check Rosa’s eyes, but Rosa didn’t move. A new sort of panic pecked at my breastbone. I thought maybe I should get Mrs. Donovan, or I should just

say something—anything—but I knew that neither was an option, considering my bravery didn’t extend far beyond stuffing my breakfast into the bus seat cushions on the days my mother said I looked bloated.

“Fat!” Heather said, and Rachel scribbled the word next to Rosa’s name in the notebook with the kittens on the cover. Rosa trudged back into a crowd of girls who were too hormonally hostage to stand up for themselves, let alone her. I tried to get her attention, but Rosa wouldn’t look at me.

“Vienna Sausage.” My throat closed, and the mossy tiles built a small, square wall around me. “You’re up, piggy,” Heather said. I took in a strong breath of air and sucked my stomach tight. I applauded myself for giving Troy my microwavable bacon that morning.

“Huh, well that’s something.” Heather pinched along the sides of my biceps, my stomach, tense and straight as a slab beneath my shirt. I watched a soft, brown curl play in the smattering of acne bumps across her cheek. “You’d be a whole lot thinner if you dropped that last one hundred and thirty pounds of pure booze hound,” she punched, stealing my breath. I wanted to tell Heather she was wrong, that my mother had started going to AA meetings, was trying to be better for our family, but just that morning I had found Troy tossing the vomit towel into the hamper. And anyway, I knew Heather could smell a lie a mile away.

If I could have taken every good inch of my mother and sewn them together just to have something tangible for the nucleus inside the bathroom to see, to understand—or at the very least—to wrap myself in, I don’t think Heather’s comment would have broken me like it did. But there was nothing but the quiet tiles, and Rachel’s scratching pencil, and the unwelcome knowledge that the best parts of my mother could be fashioned into a pitiful handkerchief at best.

“You’re a monster.” The voice snapped off the ceiling and my hair pulled tighter at the roots. I wasn’t sure how the words had come out of my mouth, but then I recognized they hadn’t.

“You think you can treat us all like dirt because you feel like dirt. How dare you say that about Vienna and how dare you talk about someone else’s mom when my mom says yours is a crazy hermit!” Rosa was no longer vacant. Her eyes had gained purpose and focused solely on Heather who looked like she had just stepped on a scale. “You should just leave us alone,” Rosa said, and it seemed the cleft in her reliable heart whittled each word. I waited for everyone to cheer, to pat Rosa on the back and tell her, “Thank you,” but no one moved because nobody knew what happened when Heather didn’t have a leg to stand on.

Heather’s throat rolled with a hard swallow, and I waited for it, the screaming, hitting. But she merely emitted disappointment like she had lost her favorite earrings and didn’t know where to look first. She shouldered through us, our knots forced to release, and we were all singular again, backs against the cold wall, watching as the only thing that connected us sulked away.

The mossy tiles break and settle into a fine green powder when Heather asks, “So who’s your doctor?” I’ve avoided seeing a doctor after the incident at Dr. Walker’s and feel my old familiar hate for Heather a bit too much to be having this conversation. I look down and spot a slight watery stain on my dress from the vomit. My tears are traders, and one is gutsy enough to slide down my cheek.

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business, really.” Heather reaches into the burlap shoulder bag she had dropped onto the desk when she came in. She hands me a tissue, and I see the swelling hasn’t stopped at her fingers. Her arm is ballooned, puffy. Her girth suffocates her as she relaxes back into her chair with a grunt.

“It’s okay. It’s just a difficult situation,” I say. I hide behind the tissue, not looking Heather in the eye.

“Whose is it?” Heather finally asks, and I feel the relief but don’t rely on it. Deep down, I’m sure Heather knows about me and Wyland because when I look at her, I still see the girl who knew more than the rest of us growing up—the girl with all the power. So, I lie and pray it’s the one time she won’t catch it.

“This guy named Lucas. Mailman. Moved to Kansas City a while ago.” The lie begins to weave itself until I’m wearing a colorful sweater. Lucas liked horror movies but couldn’t stand anything about the supernatural. He shortened his words, gave everything a nickname, which drove me batty. His parents divorced, then remarried, then divorced again. His brother died. I watch each white thread saturate in color, and I fashion each fiber until it consumes me and feels more like reality than the soft piping of “Tears in Heaven” pumping off the ceiling.

“Why did he leave?” Heather says. If she thinks I’m lying, her hard-set mouth doesn’t betray the fact.

“The pregnancy. He said he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t be like his parents. He was afraid I’d force him into marriage, and we’d be living this lie until it was time for us to die. It’s scary thinking of it that way.” I’m watching Wyland’s face in my mind as I say it. The last day of what we had was brittle and grew an even weaker spine after we had sex in an empty house he was showing. The carpet was beneath me, devoid of color like a boiled egg. His mouth, his teeth and tongue, all of it saying, “We can’t do this anymore,” so we didn’t. He followed it up with an email, telling me it was nice to “reconnect like old times.” I haven’t heard from him since, and all I’m left with is the aftermath, the receipt from a couple of weeks forgetting who I am and hoping I’d never have to remember again.

“Now what? What are you going to do?” she asks me. I look out the office’s window, but all I see is Heather’s reflection.

“Pray,” I say. I swallow and begin prying all the necessary information from Heather, even though my thudding chest muddles with

my thoughts. Flowers: gardenias. Coffin: wooden with brass fixtures. Music: Ave Maria. Heather's answers are butterflies she pinches mid-air. There is no calculation or predetermined focus in her planning, and I can tell she doesn't know her mother the same way I never knew mine. Heather decides on a date and her lips strain in anticipation as if I'm a game show host, and she's waiting for me to reveal the correct answer.

"Sunday, June 5th then. The funeral will be at one, the burial immediately after. Will you be needing pallbearers?" I catch a familiar look I see often, a client silently considering if they might be a member or two short for the pall bearing when in reality, they might be the only family member, the only friend in attendance.

"There won't be many people there," she finally confesses. Heather looks pained, but I don't press on.

"All right, we can provide those. Now, may I ask how you'd like to pay?" The worst part of the job. Heather slaps a few things around in her bag until she retrieves a free-floating credit card and pushes it across the desk. It has his name on it.

"I married him. It's not awkward to talk about it, right? I mean, you've been calling me Mrs. Turnbull for the last half hour anyhow." It's only been fifteen minutes, but time doubles in the office. She's probably surprised I haven't mummified before her eyes. I nod at her, giving her a pinched smile that I try to pass off as "Well, imagine that!" but it comes off as if I'm chewing through a lemon.

"Wow, that's wonderful," I say with strained lips. I quickly type in the numbers, my thumb rubbing the raised letters of his name. Heather sighs at me and adjusts her weight.

"He's a jerk. You were right for losing touch with him." Her voice echoes and condenses in my head. It had always bothered me, how Heather and Wyland found each other during college in Chicago. I was the one who had spent my high school years tempering Wyland's anger with his father, while I'm sure Heather was up to her usual

game, making everyone's life a living nightmare at the all girls' school across town. I couldn't take knowing Heather was the sort of woman my best friend had found hope in, so I had stopped calling and emailing Wyland while he was away at college with my grade school enemy. It wasn't until he contacted me six months ago that I could forgive him only to realize where the act of forgiving would get me three months later.

"I wasn't wondering." I struggle the words loose and give Heather the copy of her receipt. "I'm sorry for your loss," I add. Heather blinks at me for a second until she realizes she's being dismissed. As she grabs her bag, her chair nursing its cratered dent, she turns and says something I'm not expecting.

"Do you remember Amber and Rachel? From school?" I twist my lips as if I'm trying to place them.

"Yeah. I think."

"Well, I get together with them. Thursday nights. They have kids so they know about this kind of stuff. And they're different now." The way she says it hints it's not true, but I nod anyway. "Amber's doing this girls night in thing. You should come with us." I look at my hands, an all too familiar fear walling around me like cold, green tiles.

"This is a hard thing, for everyone I guess," Heather says, pausing. "Pregnancy," she adds, and a quiet chill passes through me. "So, you have my cell. Call me before seven if you want to come. I can give you directions."

"I don't know."

"Okay, I know, it's weird. But think about it." She smiles, and her face is a swollen moon hanging above me. Her bag is stained brown at the bottom with what I pray is coffee, and her bangs hang dejectedly from her forehead. For the first time, I don't rationalize her as Heather Hammel. I just see her as another woman, sweeping the dust, changing the bulbs.

Heather shuffles out, her burlap bag smacking at the girth trailing her. I sit back down and save Heather's page to the "Services" file on the desktop. With a wayward pulse, I try to determine if any of what just happened was based in reality. The air is changed, the smell of men's cologne from Heather's button down-playing with my first trimester senses. Wyland. The budding in my belly multiplies.

• • •

DAD WOULDN'T LOOK AT me. Even when one of the pens on the guest book table ran out of ink, and I could tell he was visibly pained by it, he didn't ask me to get a new one. He nodded at Loretta instead who—puzzled at his miming—fanned out the memorial cards in a "pick a card, any card" gesture at the guests gathered for Adil Sharma's funeral.

"I give up," he whispers at me now in the break room as all the mourners sit sandwiched in their seats except for a lone straggler burping a baby in the hallway. The wet, stale scent of spit up flirts with the stale scent of baked ziti from the oven. I take a breath through my mouth just to be on the safe side.

"She's just off her game today."

"Not Loretta. I mean, you're right, she's being a pain in my arthritic backside, but I love her." He grabs the mug Loretta bought him, emphasizing his point, and pours a cup of coffee. He artfully covers the masked writing on it with the flat of his hand, the faint "G" curving a sharp slice through the gap in his fingers. "I'm talking about you. I don't know what you're going through, Vienna, but now is not the time. It's summer, and you know how summer goes. Hiking, boating, motorcycling—a slew of possible accidents. Which means a full home." I look at him as he blows on a stream of heat curling up from the mug, trying to remember the last time anyone confused Burling Gates with Club Med, but I allow him the worried knot between his eyebrows.

“No, you don’t really know,” I say. The baby coos, and I catch glimpses of its dark feathered hair, its flesh-colored nails as the mother rocks her hips side to side. She doesn’t look much older than me, and even from the back she seems to have surrendered to exhaustion. A smudge of something white stains her black pants. A lone, long curl falls out of its ponytail.

“Then tell me. Enlighten me. I know you’ve suddenly grown some sort of familial bone and need to reconnect with your brother. I know you, Vienna. You think you’re locked up all alone in that tower of yours, but you’re not shackled. I pay you well, you could get an apartment. Start dating. Do whatever it is you need to do, but don’t tell me that I haven’t given you an opportunity here. Don’t tell me you can’t do this anymore.” He lifts his cup, and a slight wave of coffee flows over the lip. He curses softly and grabs for the towel looped through the oven handle. As his hand smacks against the glass door, light is shed on what we’re really talking about. He’s worried I’ll leave him.

“At least I know you can’t go anywhere,” he used to say to me after Mom died, and Troy started spending too much time out at night. One of those evenings when the living room was dark except for the glow of the TV, my father wrapped us both in a blanket, and I could feel his face against my hair. He said, “I love you” and started crying, and even as my hair dampened and matted at the back of my neck, I knew he wasn’t talking to me. Even now, I wonder if it’s me potentially leaving or the new void he’d have to contend with that’s prompted this little speech.

“I’m not leaving. And I won’t talk to Troy anymore.” I say it because it’s habit. Because if I don’t, his disappointment will eat through any shred of resolve I have left, so I do the damage for him. I listen to the muffled boom of a voice delivering the eulogy, the creaks of chairs and crinkles of programs. I imbibe the noise of waiting and

boredom so I don't have to focus on the type of woman I've become. Tall as a weed and just as easily plucked.

"Good. You need to stay focused, Vienna, and your brother is the very definition of unfocused." An older gentleman with a little girl walks into the room, and Dad dumps his coffee in the sink, rinses the mug. His hairy knuckles work the soap and water, and for a minute I'm hypnotized. He places the mug in the back of the cabinet and shuts the door with measured force.

"I know you don't understand why I did what I did with Troy, but you'll understand one day when a few of my grandkids are running around here, and you have no control over anything. Their happiness, their pain. That right there isn't easy," he says beneath his breath, nodding at the gentleman handing a juice box to the girl. She squeals and squeezes the box too hard, sending a stream of watery liquid down the man's suit jacket. The truth is right there before me, my loneliness underscored as the man wipes at this suit with a dry hand. I can't take care of myself. I won't be able to take care of a child.

"Dad, I need to tell you some—" I start but don't finish. The music courses through the speakers again and my father makes his way to the front of the home to open the front doors. Our driver, Earl, is outside, the hearse's engine already grunting on idle. The smell of gasoline wafts through the foyer as the pallbearers raise Adil like a king on his throne, and the guests amble directly behind. Mrs. Sharma's wailing sets the rhythm to their every step. The pounding hurts the walls of my skull.

I make my way to the morgue and close the heavy door behind me. I see Rosa and the panic takes me.

"I have to—I can't do this. I can't Rosa, I can't." Rosa turns in time to keep me from falling to the floor. I'm lightheaded because despite the promise I've made to her, I merely pecked at my lunch. I made a big show of tuna on toast, a side of strawberries and even a few chips from Loretta's stash for good measure, but I broke it all in-

to lumpy pieces and ended up throwing the majority away. And now I've surrendered to the gnawing threat of hunger and even worse, truth.

"Okay, we'll go. We'll go to the clinic. I'll do anything you need," Rosa hums into my hair. I breathe in a lungful of patchouli from Rosa's shirt. The air pickles my skin with cold, and I like the feeling, the fluorescent light beaming off the white linoleum floor into my eyes. It's uncomfortable, and honest, and lets me know that my intuition is absolutely right. I can't handle a baby.

Rosa searches through her bag and retrieves a dwindling package of tissues. "Here," she says, patting under my eyes and wiping my cheeks. She goes for a tube of concealer and a blush compact from her kit. The look on my face stops her in her tracks. "They're dead. Not contagious," she says. She sighs and rolls her eyes. "I cleaned the brushes, Vienna." I give in and let her work her magic because I like the feeling of Rosa mothering me. She sits me down in her wheeled chair, and I look around at the place I always try not to look at too closely.

There are books on an empty stainless-steel table pushed against the wall. Of all places, the morgue has always been Rosa's reading room of choice. She'll stay an extra hour or two after the deceased is prepped and ready to go, and she'll sit in her chair with a novel on her lap. It's the quiet that keeps her content and the formaldehyde that has fried her brain enough to think this is in any way relaxing.

The embalming machine sits on a shelf above a body—Mr. Eckhart's mother—whose information I had the misfortune of finding on another of Loretta's straggler post-it notes in the office. It pumps pink embalming fluid through a curlicue tube, and I remember thinking how it looked like a vat of bubblegum when my grandfather used to let me assist him during summers in high school. That was back when the morgue felt safe, and I'd listen to his stories about the people on the table, often people he knew personally. I liked that

about my grandfather, that his job wasn't just a job but a payment of respect.

Mrs. Eckhart is sheeted and fixed with a toe tag. That's another thing that always gets me about this place. Sure, there are dead bodies and chemicals to keep their bodies from deteriorating, and that, in and of itself, is scary to most people. But the most uncomfortable thing about the fluorescent lit morgue is seeing a life dwindled down to a slim five inches of paper.

"I don't know how to tell him," I say. I scrunch my nose when the bristles of Rosa's makeup brush begin to tickle.

"Your father?" she asks me.

"No."

"Well, I'd let you know what I think, but I don't know who 'he' is," Rosa says. Her lips shrivel into one another, and I know she's lying.

"Yes, you do. You knew when you caught me kicking his car."

I sneeze into the tissue when her brush stops. Her eyes are unavoidable.

"I told you it was a bad idea." Rosa clicks her tongue hard and begins to swipe at my cheeks again, this time pulling at my skin. "You know I hated her as much as the next girl, but it was years ago, Vienna, and it's not right anyway. That's her husband, and she doesn't deserve this." The guilt metastasizes. There's no swallowing it down.

I close an eye when Rosa smooths my brow with her thumb. "You had to know it was him. Wyland," I say. His name hasn't been on my tongue for a while now, not since the night when reality blurred, and I let myself down. Saying it feels like jinxing myself.

"Of course, I knew. But you had to tell me, Vienna. You had to own up to it. And now that you have, you have to fix it. Does Heather know?" Rosa stops messing with my makeup and searches my face.

“No. I don’t think so. She was here today, actually. Her mother died.” I see the shock in Rosa’s eyebrows, in the way they begin to arc high on her head.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” she laughs in disbelief. Rosa’s lips reveal pink gums and smoker’s teeth, a habit she kicked the year before, but she still perches her eye shadow brush between her fingers like a long cigarette holder.

“No, I’m not.” This doesn’t feel like it used to when our legs would lock like pretzels and Rosa was my priest. There’s no healing in telling her any of this. There’s not even the simple satisfaction that it’s all out of my head and into the open. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything and having to own this fact hurts. It makes me think we’re changing, I’m changing. And not for the better.

I look at the long, thin fingers of my right hand cupped in my lap. My flesh is nearly nonexistent, a gelled membrane stretched over each and every knobby bone and inked vein. I poke at it and watch the colors turn. When Wyland would hold it, he’d press his thumb lightly over my skin and press his lips into it. He told me I was perfect the way I was—thin and long—and it made me happy to hear his theory that everyone else was jealous, proving their envy with every offer of a turkey sandwich. I think of the heavy weight in Heather’s belly, her hips that can’t stop growing. How Wyland’s love for me wasn’t love but a reaction.

“She invited me to dinner,” I whisper.

“Oh wow, she does know,” Rosa says, packing up her stuff. I watch her stack the books she’s reading, her curled-edged favorite, *HERmoine*, placed on top.

I shrug, not really knowing if that’s the truth or not, or at least praying it isn’t. “She wanted me to join her and her friends tonight. You remember Amber and Rachel?” I tell her about talking with Heather, my awkward vomiting, how Heather thinks Wyland’s a royal jerk.

“Well, at least she’s not completely brain dead,” Rosa says, strapping her purse to her shoulder. She clicks the metal clasps of her makeup kit shut, and the sound echoes off the floor.

“No, not completely, I guess.” I concentrate on what I’m going to say next, hoping it will make sense. “So, she thinks they might be supportive, about the pregnancy thing. Guess she could tell I’m not head over heels on the whole idea of baking a baby for nine months.” I pray Rosa at least cracks a smile, but she doesn’t. She just studies me, weighed down with books, and her bags, and more than her fair share of reason.

“You think it’s smart to go with her? I mean she’s obviously grieving over her mother. She probably has no idea what she’s doing right now.”

“I didn’t say I was going to go,” I mumble, the redundant thud in my chest saying otherwise.

“I know you. You want to go. You want to prove to all of them that you’re better than them. That you’ve changed. And you want to pay Heather back for all those years of torment. But I think it’s safe to say that you’ve already beaten her at her own game.”

“That’s not fair. And that’s not even it.”

“Then what is it?” Rosa says. I concentrate on the neat edges of Rosa’s lips, nude gloss shaped against her dark skin. I wedge my tongue between my teeth so I don’t tell Rosa the sick thought that’s been whispering its assault at my ear all morning. That I want to be Heather Hammel’s friend.

“Listen, Vienna, I love you, you know that, but I don’t think you have a clue what you’re doing.”

“Yes, I do.” I shred the tissue in my hands and watch the pieces fall to the floor like snow.

“No, you don’t. Heather’s going to hurt you. She’s done it before, and you know she’ll do it again.”

“It’s different this time.”

“Why? Because you slept with her husband, and now you’re pregnant?” Rosa smacks hard, and I feel like my body’s bruising beneath my skin.

“It’s not like I’m a kid,” I say, and I know it’s the wrong answer. Her face reflects the time when her world had spun grotesquely on its axis, and she learned at thirteen she was going to have my brother’s baby.

“Now you’re the one not being fair,” she whispers. This is the point where the apology should seep out of me and drown my ankles. But then the anger comes, and I know the change is real and vicious, and the past sidles up next to my cheek like a cold glass window.

“And it’s not like I’m a skank who slept with my best friend’s brother.” My heart stops. “And it’s not like I planned to kill his baby.”

Rosa doesn’t wait for my apology. She walks out, this time with her heels on. They pummel the ground, and the quick color of beige flashes at me as I chase her to the foyer. The doors tear open, and I watch her dwindle down to a speck of herself through the window as she crouches into her Volkswagen and screeches away.

I’ve torn out the only person who’s anchored neatly in my corner like a rusty hinge, and I won’t give myself a moment to fully realize it.

Instead, I quell some of the bite in my stomach and the nervousness in my hands by shutting down the computers and cleaning the toilets. I can feel my father’s voice flittering through the home, tactfully teaching Loretta the merits of dressing for work. I go upstairs—his background noise at my heels—and start to get ready for whatever the night decides to throw my way.

I grab my cellphone to call Heather, and I see it. Gram’s number. It’s something I’ve needed to see for so long that I’m confused as I try to make the numbers work in my mind. I decide not to call my grandmother back, the sprite-like version of Dad resting angrily on

my shoulder. If he's upset I met with Troy then I reason talking to Gram wouldn't make him much happier. I do my best to refrain from assessing why it is my father's happiness is always elbowing my own right out of the ring.

I look down at the cloudy smudge of ink on my palm that I transcribed earlier in the office. I start to dial. I'm lost at the thought of talking to Heather Hammel, my tongue fattening and consuming the void inside my mouth.

"Hi," I say when Heather picks up, and suddenly it's sixth grade all over again. But Rosa's not here to hang up the phone.

Chapter Six

Heather

I t could be worse, Heather thought as the steering wheel rotated into her belly, but she knew she was wrong. She felt dissolved, mush-like, whereas before pregnancy had made her feel like a block of ice. Even though she hadn't let on at Oaks, learning Vienna was pregnant had melted Heather, her cells loose like drops of water skimming down a sidewalk grate.

It felt like losing her husband all over again.

Heather was thankful to leave the dark wooden cavity of the funeral home, and now, in the natural light of Thursday morning, she was kicking herself for inviting Vienna to Amber's. She didn't even know why she considered going because all she wanted to do was lock herself in her tiny laundry room and cry rhythmically with the washer. But Amber's would be brimming with noise, and gossip, and thoughts that didn't matter, and more than anything, Heather wanted to feel like nothing mattered.

She thought Vienna could use a dose of that, too.

She was starting to regret telling Amber about Wyland's affair with Vienna. She knew she'd be in danger of becoming even more of a target for Amber's feigned sympathy, but releasing her secret to someone whose opinions didn't reach far beyond the dangers of formula feeding was, in a way, cathartic.

"Mess with her a little," Amber had said two weeks ago when Heather was having coffee in her friend's massive kitchen. The way Amber had said it launched Heather back to the days when they would prank call Vienna, hoping to get her drunk mother on the phone.

Amber's twins, Sierra and Sienna, had begun to whirl around each other, a red-headed cyclone disturbing the tumble-marbled peace.

"Mommy, Mommy, Tootie Face ate my Oreos!"

"Stop calling me Tootie Face, Pig Butt!"

"Organic," Amber smiled at Heather because real Oreos were Satan's treats and wouldn't be touched with a ten-foot pole in the Fritch household. It didn't seem to be working because unlike Amber who was a twig growing up, her daughters were plumper at their middles. Heather thought it a wonder they hadn't eaten themselves into oblivion with a mother like theirs.

"Girls, go upstairs and play. Daddy buys you a thousand-dollar indoor tree house, and you don't even touch it," Amber said, the diamond in her ear shooting its ray at the Travertine beneath her feet.

"Kids," she said to her cup of coffee. Heather concentrated on the floor, on the absolute lines of crisscrossed grout and wondered if telling Amber was a mistake.

"So, you set her up. Teach her a lesson. Listen to me. Women who think they can get away with that kind of thing need to be put in their places because they'll only keep messing with the rest of us, and heaven knows men can't put an end to it. We'd be doing womankind a favor. Seriously, girls. Upstairs. Now!" The twins tumbled out of the kitchen and onto the hardwood floor of the living room. Heather couldn't concentrate. She felt itchy and hot underneath the knit maternity shirt she paid way too much for, and Wyland had reamed her about. But she couldn't wear her uniform of yoga pants and flip flops around Amber, whose closet resembled a mini-Club Monaco factory. It was bad enough her life was a nightmare. She didn't have to dress the part, too.

"What good would that do? I play with her head and then what? I'm still pregnant. He leaves, and I do this all on my own? Maybe if I talk to him..." Heather lost the words at the notion. She hadn't said

anything to Wyland. There was something in finding out the truth that had stricken her silent. Every time he came home at noon after a few months of not coming home for lunch at all, her throat scabbed over until the thought of confronting him felt like a punishment.

“All I know is if Brent was banging some floozy housewife from down the street, I’d make sure even her kids would disown her.” Amber looked through her kitchen window to where the surgeon’s wife resided next door and forcibly swallowed a sip of coffee.

“I don’t know. The thing is, I don’t even feel this is so much about Vienna. It’s about him,” Heather said. Their marriage hadn’t been easy, that part was true. Heather shouldered the responsibility for that even if she did so privately. Her depression, her failure at graduating with a degree, graduating at all had broken and delivered its shrapnel as hard and fast as a grenade caught mid-air. She had always been less aware of Wyland’s needs because he had always been focused on hers. But that was forever ago, and forever’s hardened pill had soured in her mouth.

“All I know is Vienna is still in town and has turned into some sort of weirdo recluse. Mom said she thought she saw her working at Aurelio’s once, but mom’s losing her marbles. Pathetic if she’s never left this place,” Amber said, grabbing a tea towel and blotting at a renegade drop of coffee on the counter. Heather refrained from reminding her that spending a summer searching for a potential husband in the city wasn’t exactly leaving either.

“You’ve never seen her in town?”

“People in the Applewood community usually don’t venture too far to rub elbows with the townies,” Amber winked then stopped mid-spasm. “Oh, no offense,” she added, and Heather gave her a blank smile, spinning her spoon around her cup of lemon water. She remembered wishing it were whiskey.

In the car, Heather righted the wheel and slowed at a stoplight. In the convertible next to her were two teenage girls, one applying

lip-gloss, the other—the driver—texting on her phone. She thought about Vienna, the hell Heather had put her through during school. The hell Heather had lived herself. She felt sorry for Vienna knowing she had barred herself off from the rest of the world, and even though these feelings mingled with anger toward the woman who tried to steal her husband, Heather felt partly responsible for Vienna's misery. She had seen no point in searching for her, gathering the bits and pieces of her life like crumbs down a crooked trail because she felt like Vienna had been violated enough. And truthfully, Heather feared what else she might find.

That was, of course, until her mother had died.

It was powerful how lonely Heather felt knowing Friday was only a day away, and it wouldn't be spent in her mother's kitchen, searching for something like love in her glazed-over eyes. Instead, she'd probably be glued to a computer screen, trying to find out more about Vienna Oaks, the reason why her husband no longer snatched at Heather's wily heart or fingered the bumps of her brain.

When Wyland and Heather had first started dating in college, he'd stay over at the Reese dorm, the all-girls dorm Heather had hated until she felt the thrill of sneaking a boy in for the first time. Her roommate, Nora, was never there anyway. She was a stoner type, a long, dirty ponytail trailing the bony rod to her waist. Heather once walked in on her toking up and praised the gods when Nora moved most of her stuff over to her boyfriend's.

“Really? You and Vienna never...you know?” Heather asked. They had split a box of wine while Pearl Jam gutturally delivered its sound between the room's four cinderblock walls. Heather remembered what Wyland had been wearing—a pair of jeans, a hole threatening one of the legs and a checkered long-sleeved buttoned-down. It was opened, his white t-shirt hiding a faint muscular ripple, even though his diet primarily consisted of pizza and Gatorade.

“No. I promise. I never did...that with Vienna.” He looked guilty. Maybe not because he had done it but because he had probably wanted to. They were lying on the floor, their faces inches from each other with their feet pointed at the opposite end of the dorm room. His eyes weren’t green or brown but a hybrid of the two. Heather forced herself to stare at them, trace the outline of his gold-etched irises with her mind’s eye. She wanted to believe him. “We kind of tried once,” he added.

Heather’s stomach would have fallen to the floor if it hadn’t been there already. Her dull wine buzz turned knife sharp, bringing everything to her attention: the soft roll of fat heaving over the waist of her jeans, the hairs on her left arm, dark and demanding, the thought of sex with Wyland, and how it always played shadowy, and wine-soaked, and the way he never seemed to mind.

“How?” Heather asked.

“How? You know they did teach us ‘how’ in fifth grade...”

“No. How? You know what I mean.” Heather’s mind traveled to the Vienna she knew from elementary school, the one with the flat chest and orbs for eyes, her knobby knees and a wave of dark silk hanging to the middle of her back. She thought of the Vienna she had caught glimpses of in high school. Even after she had transferred to Saint Mary of Sorrows, Heather would sit in the new Corolla her father’s guilt had bought her all the way from Maryland, and she’d watch as Vienna and Wyland would leave school together, shoulder-to-shoulder. Vienna moved, curved but long, her sweater tight against the only parts that had grown larger than her eyes.

Heather hadn’t mentioned this to Wyland in the three months they had been dating. She didn’t know how to tell him that the evil bubbled and popped so loudly in her veins, it snapped her apart and made her angrier. She couldn’t tell him that sitting there in the cold—in her dead-engined Corolla—she cerebrally blotted out Vi-

enna's existence and could only make out the golden curls springing at the sides of his face.

"Um, in my room. I kissed her a little. My mom came home. We didn't try it again." His lips artfully shaped the words, made them pretty. She wanted to meet his mother, send her a gift, a lock of her hair. It was an irrational thought, but the wine softly buzzed again, and she allowed the truth—that providence had brought them together, had severed Vienna Oaks from their lives like a dead and useless limb.

There was honking behind her. The teenage girls were gone. She moved through the green light, gaining momentum, and eased the car onto Conch Street. She pulled around the square, passing Oberman's Pharmacy, The Green Grocer. She glided by the photography studio where she had posed with a black piece of fabric against her breasts while Tracy Filmore snapped pictures of her naked belly, an extravagance paid with the money Heather's father had curiously sent when she had sent word of her pregnancy. There in the mix of storefronts was Turnbull Realty. She could see Mark Hollywood through the window at his desk, waving his magician hands at a slightly overwhelmed young couple.

As Heather lumbered to the doorway, shifting her weight until she heard the tinkling bell above her head, she could hear Mark's enthusiastic spiel on the upside of short sales.

"Sure, a short sale can be scary. But so can open heart surgery unless you've got the best surgeon in the biz." His thumbs snapped at his chest, and his lips revealed a stark-white grin. Mark mimed a wave at her—not looking up from his two, pint-sized clients—and continued with something about "releasing a previous mortgage."

She walked to the back and found Wyland on the phone. He held up two fingers.

“Yes. Yes, I know. Okay, I’ll be sure to do that. Talk to you soon.” She waited as he placed the phone back in its cradle for him to mention who he was talking to. He didn’t.

“So, what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’m back. From the home? The funeral home.”

“Oh, right. How did it go?” There were papers stapled together on his desk, and it seemed like he was talking to them, stroking the top page of one with his distracted finger. For a second, she lost herself in that motion, calling to mind his habit of guiding his fingers through her hair when they watched TV or when he came up behind her, her swollen knuckles battling soapy dishes. His hands in her hair in the nighttime when a nightmare paralyzed her, awoken from a dream where she hovered unwillingly above her body.

His hands.

“Which one did you choose?” he added, his eyes meeting hers so quickly that she forgot he hadn’t been looking at her in the first place.

Heather breathed deeply. She was nervous, and she knew she wasn’t supposed to be the nervous one. But she wanted to watch his face when she told him, especially after he had spent the evening before trying to convince her to go with Bauer and Sons because Mark said his grandmother’s funeral was done “tastefully” there. She hadn’t told him she had already gone by Oaks and spoken to Loretta. There she had sat in the recliner as Wyland danced around and waved his arms, talking about how some dead stranger’s funeral was a soul moving sight. *He should have spent it consoling me, not convincing me*, she thought.

“Oaks. Met with Vienna,” she said in a rush of breath. Wyland looked as if she’d taken his stapled papers and threatened to slice his neck open with them.

“You didn’t have to do that. Drag the past into this,” he said, crinkling the sharp sides of the stack. “Haven’t seen her in forever.” He

managed to wedge it in at the end, but his eyes were still on the paper.

“I’m not dragging the past into anything. I researched the home. I like it. Vienna is good at what she does.” He looked up at her, confused. It was another moment, one of many she’d had standing naked with him in the shower or watching his mouth move when reciting lines from *Top Gun*, and she’d take him in his purest form. He’d become the boy she fell in love with again, and she’d pray with all the fragments of her soul that they could just exist and be happy with existing.

“I invited her to dinner tonight with the girls,” she said. Wyland pinched his lips white, and all noise left her, even Mark’s boisterous account of the perks of living in a home some poor dolt couldn’t afford to keep. She watched her husband run a hand through his hair and open his lips to speak, his father’s voice booming through him.

“Wyland, I need to see you for a second in the office. Oh, Heather. You have my deepest condolences.” Owen Turnbull floated to her, and his arms took her before she had a chance to bring him into focus. He smelled peppery, a delicious fragrance that would have reminded her of a grandfather if she had known one. Owen pulled away from her and held her awkwardly from the elbows, waiting to pull her strings and make her dance.

“You hanging in there, kid?”

“Yeah. Yes. Just stopped by to give Wyland the details about the funeral. Sunday at 1:00. They’ll put the announcement in the paper. They do all that.” She said it clumsily and could feel her body heat up as Wyland and his father stared at her. She wondered if Owen could feel the warmth emanating from her elbows.

“Well, I’ll certainly be ordering the flowers from all of us here at Turnbull Realty. Margaret sends her best as well.” Heather bit her tongue, having thought the Turnbulls would show up for the funeral, but she knew she should consider herself lucky that at least

Wyland would be getting off work, and she wouldn't have to deal with Margaret's overly sweet sympathy. She could already see the dreary clump of people at her mother's funeral, a living and breathing embodiment of Caroline's tenuous life. Owen offered his full-face smile, and Heather knew that was her cue.

"I'll see you at home. This afternoon?" she asked and watched Wyland smile and nod. His dimples caught her, fish on a hook, and the thought of losing everything kept snagging at her clothes. "I love you," she said because she meant it and couldn't help questioning if he still did, too.

"Love you," he said, and it trailed behind him like toilet paper stuck to his shoe as he followed his father into his office. She wondered what Vienna had seen in him, needed in him. Heather was afraid it was the same things that kept her unreasonably grounded in a man who had a hard time looking at her.

Out on the sidewalk, the sun abused Heather's eyes. She figured it was a fit punishment for not screaming "She's pregnant, you idiot!" and running out of Turnbull Realty like a madwoman. And she began to laugh a little because she knew that's what her husband and his father would have thought of her—that she was the crazy one, even though Wyland had managed to knock up two women simultaneously, not to mention ruining them. Heather could see her mother's anguish over her father running off and finding Ronnie and how Heather used to roll her eyes and pray her mother would grow a pair. It was amusing how the tables jerked when they turned, leaving Heather with her own pair shriveled and out of commission.

In the car, she turned on the radio. "Here Comes the Sun" flooded the interior, and Heather drowned in memories of her father, outside humming the tune while raking leaves into piles, inside with his head in his hand, cerebrally vanquishing a string of dirty clothes snaking its way into the living room.

All these years and she hadn't seen her father's face, not since he had left. There was the car and her schooling he paid for when Heather decided she wanted to study math in college and needed a high school education that required holing up in her room with her books, away from her mother's kitten-like whimpering. There was the newspaper article when he had started the grooming business, a three-inch clipping featuring his partner, a Veronica Stanheimer, who looked tan, and healthy, and able to cook a meal without lacing it with bug bits. Heather's mother had highlighted Veronica's name over and over until the yellow ink soaked and marred the clipping, searing a hole into the heart of it. That wet-edged hole had made Heather angry, and to retaliate she told her mother her father had called, had said he and Ronnie were getting married, and would Caroline be so kind as to send her wedding gift to their new address? She had watched her mother buckle, bleed out a rotten pool of tears from the landing upstairs. That was the last thing her father had ever sent other than the alimony and child support checks. She found it funny, the way his void became larger than the body that used to fill it.

"Quit calling him 'Dad,' Heather," her mother would scream, but it came out hoarse. She looked like a lunatic at that point, her hair heavy and long, clusters of it dividing and rising above her head. Her nails were yellowed and shot out from her toes like tiny razors. When she'd grit her teeth, there would be bits of what she mistook for food around her gums. The normalcy of it stabbed Heather's temple relentlessly.

"What do you want me to call him? The guy that knocked you up?" It was high school, Heather's first year. She was scared and hated the uniform. She hated that nobody knew her except Amber who had already secured a position on the cheerleading squad before school even started. Instead of being feared, Heather was merely forgotten. Unknown.

“I am your mother,” Caroline said. Maybe genetically but the lump of flesh on their dirty floral couch was something entirely different. Caroline sat in her threadbare sheath—her “house dress” as she called it—but the fabric was soiled from the burned cooking oil clinging to the air. Gone were the years of poorly made bundt cakes, flour in the hair, and pearls around the neck. The cardboard cutout of Beatrice had long been neglected, and now her main task was to collect the cobwebs that would otherwise hang from the ceiling.

“And he’s my father,” Heather said. She rocked on the dirty floor beneath her feet and winced at the unnatural crunch beneath her shoes.

“You keep chasing him like this, wishing him back into our lives then you’ll be doing it until the day you die. And don’t think that need will ever go away,” Caroline said. She roughed up her nose with the blunt palm of her hand, and when she was finished, there it sat, an inflamed welt on her face. “Even if he kicks the bucket tomorrow, you’ll still be craving him. You’ll be willing to replace him with anyone.” Her mother went to retrieve a feather from her teeth. She was picking at bits of a baby bird she had found unconscious in the backyard and had roasted in a pan with garlic cloves and half-moon slices of onion. She had left the feathers on the wings so that the dead bird was an aberration, its span blackened and ash-flecked, taunting Heather with its wrongness.

“No. Not true,” she had whispered. Heather ran upstairs and slammed the door. She welcomed the clean lines of her room, the space to walk one foot in front of the other unhindered. Heather had looked out her second-story window into the tangled heap of their side yard, believing her mother had cursed her, knowing full well that it was her own belief that kept her cursed.

The car groaned into the driveway, and Heather parked, facing the chipped white planks of her and Wyland’s tiny two-bedroom house. It was only 9:15 a.m. She watched the afternoon stretch be-

fore her eyes, and she could hardly stomach it. She grabbed her phone from the dark insides of her bag and scrolled through. She thought about calling Vienna and canceling because what would Amber and Rachel say if they found out Vienna was pregnant and realized whose husband had done the damage? Vienna wasn't showing yet, but Heather imagined her friends' lips locking in disbelieving rings, their eyes ballooning like a set of suburban kewpie dolls if they even caught whiff of a pregnancy.

"Forget them," Heather whispered, placing her phone back in her bag, determined to believe in nothing.

Chapter Seven

Vienna

My room glows pink, even in the evenings when the light on the third floor is dim, and I've shut the door at the top of the stairs, cutting me off from the rest of the home. It used to be my grandmother and grandfather's room, a suite crafted out of vacant attic space. Dad gave it to me when we first moved in because he couldn't stand sleeping in a place designed for his parents. I don't blame him.

After my shower—the plucking and pulling, dressing my warm body like Rosa does the cold ones—I'm as pink as my room. I stand in front of the floor length mirror near the stone fireplace and take my time figuring out what bright and pretty thing I should wear to help me forget how I've ravaged the workings of my best friend's heart.

I choose a navy-blue cocktail dress that hits mid-thigh and is cinched at the waist with a black belt. I sometimes wonder if someone snuck their way up the stairs during a wake and came face-to-face with my closet, if they'd assume I travel, that I go out a lot. That I have someone in my life that likes me in my dresses as much as I do. Or if they'd peg me for a recluse who's taken to online shopping.

I wrestle into my bra, a pair of panties, and slip the dress over my head. I don't look like me—like a vulnerable little girl or an anti-social monster—and I suppose that's the best defense against a line of women I'm hopeless against.

When Heather had first asked if I wanted to go to Amber's, I wavered a little. Rosa is right—I really do just want to show up the girls who made my life miserable, but now that Heather has given directions over the phone to Amber's home in Applewood, that's no longer an option. They're married to rich men, take their kids to a

rich school, and drive around in their expensive cars to pick up cleaning products for their maids to use. Considering I have dealt with my fair share of cleaning products, I probably have more in common with their maids than with them.

I know there's no real reason for me to go, and there's no reason for Heather to have asked me, which makes me nervous. A couple of hours ago, just thinking about being in the same room as my past snapped an anxious switch, so I went ahead and took a pill. Again, Rosa is right, but I try to not think about her. She's angry at me. She deserves to be angry at me. But she's always questioned my reasoning and has never trusted me to make my own decisions.

It would be nice for once to feel like I have something in common with someone. Maybe I can find that in Heather. Maybe this time, she's not being malicious. Maybe she's just trying to help.

Before I can spend too much time deciphering Heather's motives or the loneliness that's propelling me into a dumpster fire of an evening, I grab my bag, my heels, and I spritz myself with a bottle of perfume my father bought me last Christmas. He said it smelled like the viewing room when it's brimming with flowers and that the scent reminded him of me. I just pretend he said, "It smells like Spring, so it reminds me of you."

As I'm leaving, he's at the foot of the stairs already in his pajamas and the robe I bought him for his birthday in February. It's the same shade as my dress and gives him a royal feel. King of a funeral home.

"Going out?" he asks. I nod, and I consider telling him what I intended to earlier at Adil Sharma's funeral. That I'm pregnant, I'm lost, I need him. But the moment's passed, and the only thing I can imagine happening if I utter the truth is my father short circuiting like a robot doused with water.

"Yeah, Loretta gave me her keys earlier."

"Car still in the shop?"

“That or they’ve lost it, and they’re too embarrassed to tell me.” I smile but he doesn’t.

“So, where you heading?”

“Got in touch with some old friends for a dinner party.” It’s weird saying it because it’s the sort of thing I always say when I go out at night to see a movie in Blythesville, or head to the Manor Market, or drive around in circles, putting miles on Loretta’s Prius it doesn’t need. I always wonder what he thinks when I lie to him, attempting to make him think my life is a little more exciting than it is. I wonder if he feels as sorry for me as I feel for myself.

“Okay, be careful.” He acts like he’s going to say something else, and the thump-thump at my throat swallows my tongue as I imagine Rosa has called him to quit. But he just nods, and I nod back, and with that I’m released into a firefly night. I watch them zip around me in the dark, sending light to the points of my shoes, the silver studs in my ears. My trail is lit as I head to the Prius, and it’s a beautiful send off to a night that will most likely ruin me.

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I TURN INTO AMBER’S driveway and park behind the blue Corolla, the one Heather drove in high school. I almost said that, too, “The one you drove in high school?” when she told me to look out for her car because I couldn’t believe it. She still drives the same car Wyland and I would spy following us around when the bell rang, and we’d be out in the open, navigating life with our hands twisted in our pockets.

I remember Wyland calling it “The Blue Phantom.”

Amber’s home is the type you have to breathe in. The place is so large, I can feel it in my lungs, and even though I expected to pull up to a nice house, I wasn’t aware *how* nice. I didn’t know pediatricians made this much, but considering it’s Applewood, anything’s possible. Our CPA lives in Applewood, and even though the communi-

ty's only ten minutes away—stationed smack dab between Burling Gates and Blythesville—I've never seen the guy in person. If I lived in a place like this, I can't imagine I'd leave much either.

Heather gave me a few details about Amber over the phone. It was after a long pause that we were both having trouble filling, and she let me in on Amber's husband, her two kids, the neighbor lady who always sunbathes topless who Amber can't stand but will still probably invite over tonight. I guess she was trying to give me a heads up, and parking in Amber's circular drive next to a fountain the size of the Prius, I'm aware of how much I'm going to need it.

I head up the walk and push the doorbell. Its boom can only be matched with the throbbing in my ears.

"Come on—" Amber says, slicing off the "in" at the end of her sentence. She shrivels her eyes at me, and faint traces of crows' feet gain momentum from the corners of her eyes. She's herself—red hair, and all—and I do my best not to remember the time I stumbled into Wyland's room to find her in his bed.

"Uh..." I say just as Heather shoulders past her and grabs my wrist.

"We're leaving, Vienna," and I don't argue because Amber slams the large wooden front door behind us.

"What happened?" I ask as I do my best not to scratch a Mercedes parked in front of Heather as she pulls me behind her.

"I was talking about my mom, the funeral, and the subject changes to the color of Viola's feces." I ask, "Who?" and she screws her lips at me. "Viola. Rachel's baby. The thirstiest child known to man." I let her circle around me, her flip-flops scraping and smacking against Amber's stained concrete driveway.

"Then right before you show up, I mention you're on your way, and they look at me like I'm crazy." Heather turns back at the massive house, and yells at the front door, "She can't even afford this freaking house, and *I'm* the crazy one!" I'm frozen thinking Amber will

march out here and punch one or both of us in the face. Heather stops moving and places her hands at her temples. Her burlap bag has slunk off her shoulder and is caught in the crook of her elbow. She doesn't look much different than earlier. In fact, Heather seems to be wearing the same crumpled men's shirt and yoga pants she was wearing in my father's office. She's all shades of wrong standing in front of Amber's mini-mansion, and when she laughs like she's surrendering, I start to worry.

"She thought you were Bonnie when you rang the bell."

I jog my memory for a "Bonnie." "You mean the topless next-door neighbor?" I ask.

"One and the same. Apparently, her husband's mistress is okay to invite over for dinner, but when I want to invite the skank burying my mother, it's a whole other story!" Heather screams again at the house, and I try not to notice my bowels loosening. "I'm sorry. I don't mean this, I'm sorry," Heather wheezes. She's facing her car now. She's staring at it like it's embedded somewhere in her past, and she needs to pry it loose.

"I was just hoping they wouldn't be jerks for once."

"Listen, maybe we should do this another time," I say. Relief claims my lungs, and I'm already thinking about my bed, the warm rose glow of my room. The somewhat satisfying chill of being on nobody's radar.

"No, I'm starving. I need to talk. Something." Her gaze breaks from the car, and she takes a bold look at my face. "Just meet me at a diner or something, okay. Please?" she says. It's the please part that startles me, makes me wish Heather would have had the good sense to walk into any other funeral home than the one I work at. But there's a spark in being needed, and I want to hold on to it until my hand begins to burn.

“Okay,” I say, and my flesh is match-stroked, hot and scalding to the touch. We get in our cars, and as I follow Heather to the diner, I scorch the earth beneath me.

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I WAS TWELVE WHEN MY ovaries first began to ache. Time had dashed through the surface of the sky, and one moment my mother was alive at the Manor Market, the next she wasn’t. As time ticked and scarred the dark the night she died, I eventually fell asleep on my grandparents’ couch to the sound of Gram humming *Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra*.

And then the dream came. Heather was balancing on a straight tower of books, looming over me. She hunched over—hair swept up in a hot wind—and I realized I could feel the sensation everywhere. Heather’s body crushed mine, voided it of all substance. My lips, chest, thighs turned to a powder that sprinkled down to my feet.

When I woke, there was blood everywhere. I had forgotten about tampons because my mother was dead. Gram helped me wash up and change clothes. She flipped the cushion on the couch.

It was that motion, burying the truth in the sofa, that shriveled pin straight and stabbed right through me. Anyone could sit on the same spot and never learn my secret. I just had to know how to hide it.

“It’s hard, right? Seeing dead people.” Heather runs her knife down her stack of pancakes with a surgeon’s precision. We sit at The 56 Diner, a restaurant named after the highway that runs along Burling Gates’s tree-lined spine. In our booth we’re face-to-face, and I can’t stop staring at the dried flecks of skin on Heather’s lips.

“We don’t, you know, have to talk about that part.”

“If I didn’t want to know, I wouldn’t have asked.” Heather stabs her triangular portion of pancake and kneads her lower lip with her teeth.

“I don’t see them often. The bodies. My work is mostly in the office. But I do other things. Keep the Kleenex stocked, make sure the bathrooms are tidy during the day, make sure Loretta’s wearing clothes...”

“That’s the crazy lady, right? I met her a couple of days ago,” Heather says. There’s a sweet string of syrup at the corner of her mouth, and she retrieves it with her tongue like a lizard. In the diner’s cold light, I can see I was right earlier—that Heather’s a mess. Her curtain of hair is tied back into a ponytail, strands of it arcing out near her ear. Her mascara is smudged into the shadowy skin beneath her eyes.

“I guess, depending on what day it is. She’s my father’s girlfriend and technically kind of raised me.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude,” Heather says, forcing the words through a barricade of pancake.

“Don’t be. She means well, Loretta, but she certainly is her own breed.” I think of our charade earlier, the one where I asked to borrow her car, and Loretta—morphing into Mama Lo—laid down the law.

“Plenty of coffee if you stay out late and no talking on your cell while driving. And?” Loretta had said at the staircase, one purple-socked foot crossed over the other. She was wearing one of her favorites, a stained Tweetie Bird shirt. The character carefully balanced on a cartoon heart, cracked with too many tumbles in the dryer. The shirt reached down mid-thigh, and I tried to ignore the fact that both of Loretta’s legs were painfully bare.

“No changing the preset radio stations.”

“That’s my girl.” She handed me the keys she fished out of her purse. Loretta had left her bag on the floor near the stairwell, and I could already hear the mindless argument between her and my father when he would undoubtedly find it there, yet again.

“Glad you’re going out. Your father and I have been worried about you lately. I know you’re no Miss Hardy Party, but it’s good to know you’re still seeing friends. When those go, life isn’t as kind.” I couldn’t help but smile even as I spotted a few stray hairs sprouting out from around Loretta’s knee. I remember the day she came to our house with bags of used clothes for me to wear to school, and when I started crying about Troy, she told me there’s nothing so hopeless in the world that it couldn’t be mended.

“She’s not so bad, I guess,” I say to Heather, poking the tines of my fork into my omelet. It’s a hard game pretending to eat, especially when your opponent looks like they do it for a living. I break off a piece and let it settle on my tongue. I can tell my meds have worn off because the taste is vile and conjures up images of wastebaskets, gin and tonics, Loretta leaving the bathroom. I breathe deep to quiet the booming in my brain.

“You’re like a bird,” Heather says, forgoing her straw and swallowing a few messy gulps of water. “So, the home. Didn’t your grandparents use to own it?” Heather dances the question so it maneuvers like a cellular squiggle across my naked pupil.

“Yes,” I say. I pray the answer will suffice.

Heather sighs and rubs a paper napkin over her mouth. “I’ll be straight. I researched your home online. I didn’t really know much about, you know, the process. And I ran across a few articles about what happened. About your grandfather.” I clench my stomach through a cramp. I had gotten used to not having to hear about the arrest, the trial, the jail sentence. Gram, of course, periodically reminds me, but Burling Gates is a town where everyone knows everyone else’s business. Deluca’s mistake was old news. Until now, I guess.

“He was, *is*, a good person.” I shrug, my bare shoulder swiping cold against my cheek. I don’t like thinking about it, Heather knowing more about me than I’ve allowed her to know. I wonder if she’s gone further, researched the few articles on my mother’s death, how

the man who hit her with his car in the Manor Market parking lot sped full force into the side of an abandoned warehouse so he wouldn't go to prison. How some people claimed my grandfather went crazy over his family falling apart and how he wanted to get caught for supplying chemicals to the meth ring.

That part, I trust, is absolute malarky.

“Good people can mess up too. Everyone messes up.”

“Yeah. But this was, well, it was a royal mess up. He lost his job, his life, really. The woman he loved for so long, you know. And she's not the same.” I think of Gram, her phone number tattooed against my lids every time I blink. I think of Granddad in his cell. Of me not having the stomach to visit him, of him refusing to see me in the first place.

“Your grandmother?”

“Yeah.” I feel like my old sadness is flinging off the covers again, rising to meet the morning sun. There were so many things Gram had made better—cookies, jokes, television shows because she used to dance along to their theme songs. And sometimes Granddad would dance with her. A tall, slightly limping shadow connected to Gram's solid block of color. There were smiles on their faces like they had been carved with a sharp set of tools. And even Troy laughed, the sound cobwebbed but real.

“So, what about you? How are you holding up?” I say. I set down my fork and rest my arm on the chrome-plated tabletop. My wrist sticks to it, its feather light hair matted with the grime and oil of assembly-lined food. I wipe my arm hard with a napkin then stop. Heather is staring at me.

“You've picked at your plate all night. What's the point of going out to eat if you're not going to do just that?” Her mouth glistens, sticky with the same shine in her eyes. “The baby needs the nourishment. Didn't your doctor tell you that?”

“I don’t have one.” The truth slips through, and the result lightens the load tied to my chest.

“You don’t have one?” Heather asks, an eye squinting as her lips contract. I can tell she is trying to process this, using the back of her forked hand to push back hairs pasted to her lip. She breathes hard through her mouth, and I can smell her, a sweet scent that overtakes the frying oil slick at my shoulders.

“No. Listen, I don’t really feel like—”

“I don’t care what you don’t feel like. You chose this for yourself, so do something about it.” Heather spits each word and with it, wet clumps of cooked batter. The man in the booth behind her settles in his chair. I want to trade places with him.

“I didn’t choose this. I didn’t...I didn’t set out to do this.” The cold comes at me from an overhead vent. I feel stupid in my dress considering most of the clientele are truckers, and the restaurant is blasting everyone coherent with its goose-fleshed air.

“Then what exactly did you set out to do?” Heather’s face is blank. Neutral. Her muscles have liquefied, and I can only make sense of her smudged lash line, the noise of her utensils punishing the table with a metallic blow. *She knows*, I think, my secret glowing, pounding loud inside me, but I refuse to let it play like this. I guide my fingers along my insides, where my memory thrives. I can read the bumps. I stroke the bruises and see Wyland’s lips saying, “She’ll never know about us.” I intend to keep it that way.

The waitress comes by, lengthening an already awkward pause. She’s uniformed, and the name “Beth” is judiciously sewn near her collar. It feels wrong to me to know something like that about a person without asking first. Beth nods at Heather’s empty orange juice glass, and Heather’s swollen fingers deliver it to her for a refill. My pulse filters wildly through my veins. I don’t know what to say to her when Beth leaves but then I do.

“I set out to fix things.” The cramp returns, and I try to not let it show in my face.

Heather slowly nods then asks, “If you could have changed one thing about...your situation, what would it have been?” I can tell she needs to know. I have a feeling my answer is her answer, too.

“I wouldn’t have been so hard on myself. Or anyone else for that matter.” I blink through my mother weaving her ache in my bones. I shut out her hand, her fingers grasping mine before I shoved them away, and she fell free and unbalanced to the curb and into the parking lot. I don’t think about the car.

Heather nods at the window, the full weight of her face in the reflection. “Yeah, well...” She breaks her trance and turns back to me. “You know I’d suggest we go out again, invite Wyland. But I’m not much on having dinner with imbeciles.” She smirks, and I tentatively smile at her. I don’t know what she knows about me and Wyland, but honestly, I’m sure it’s everything. I almost reconcile with the notion because Heather living with her life held in unsteady hands offers me a sick sense of relief. At least I’m not the only one.

“He’ll probably be calling you soon,” she adds, and I pinch my leg hard. “About the open house.”

“Oh, right. We’ll be expecting his call,” I say. It’s a possibility I’ve been dreading, hoping really that Mr. Turnbull takes pity on me and declines to take part in Loretta’s budding three-ring circus. But knowing what I do about Owen Turnbull, any opportunity to take on new clients is something he’d never pass up. The dread is harvesting my insides, but I keep smiling like an idiot.

“So, what will happen with you and Amber?” I ask. Heather masters another bite of pancake, and I wait as she swallows it down with more juice.

“She’ll talk smack about me behind my back to Rachel and smile to my face. It’s pretty much her M.O.”

“Then why be friends with her?” I catch her off guard. For a moment I can see she doesn’t have an answer, so she rubs her mouth, and I have to still my hand from picking white bits of paper from her lips.

“Because I’m a glutton for punishment.” She returns to the window and studies our figures—hers overpowering, mine meekly breathing. “It’s like hating someone, absolutely not being able to stand them but all the time knowing your hate is more about you than them.” Heather’s eyes are barely open, feeling what she’s saying almost more than she’s saying it. “Sometimes when Amber talks, I feel like freaking sitting on her just so she’ll shut up. But I feel like that because she has everything, and it’s not just about the money either. It’s more about how terrible she is, but no matter how terrible, she’s still happy.”

I’m given the moment I’ve always wanted. Heather Hammel is miserable. Instead of closing my own eyes and relishing the moment, I say something I don’t know that I truly believe.

“People like that aren’t really happy.”

“But they think they are. Maybe that’s the point.” She takes another bite of pancake for emphasis, and I watch her mouth work hard at it.

Heather takes a break from her plate to rummage through her bag and retrieves a tattered business card. “Take this. My doctor. Call him and see if he can squeeze you in.” She swallows, her throat undulating against her skin. “You may not have meant this but neither did that kid of yours so make the call. You don’t have to be weak or hopeless. I’ve seen how that can play out, and trust me, it’s no good.” She turns again to the window as if watching that same thing play out against the glass. “You’re strong enough, you know,” she adds. It feels like smoke when she says it, and it travels up my thighs, the thickening middle of my belly. It touches the tissue lining of my heart, and the words become real. I’m strong enough.

The waitress brings our checks, and as I reach for mine, Heather takes it.

“His treat,” she says and pays the bill. We grab our things and walk together in silence until we’re outside. My flesh is still pickled with cold, and the rain doesn’t alleviate the chilled buzz running through me, but I don’t want it to.

“You have plans Saturday?” Heather shouts. There is no reason to shout, but there’s something about the rain that makes everything feel hurried, urgent.

“No, why?”

“I need help at my mom’s. It’s, um, a mess at her place, and I need help going through a few things. We need to get it on the market. And I thought I could pick out her outfit for, uh, the funeral. Wyland has a golf game with his dad. Won’t cancel it so...”

“I can help,” I yell, and the ringing feels good. The raindrops thump against my crown and make dark puddles on my dress.

“All right, I’ll call you Saturday morning,” Heather says. I nod, and we break and float to our separate cars. When I’m inside, I turn the engine on and crank the warm heat from the vent. I am shocked by it, the bumps in my skin coarsening then smoothing over until I’m fully myself again.

I can feel the cushion turning.

Chapter Eight

Heather

After arriving home from the diner, Heather took stock of her day from the dark confines of her Corolla. Earlier that morning—after arriving home from talking to Wyland at his office—Heather had turned off her car’s engine in her driveway, so the only thing keeping her company was the sweat flushing through her pores. It pooled in the crevice beneath her nose, and Heather had wiped it, allowing her hand to slide over her face. She kept rubbing over and over because when she looked through her windshield, the sun glinted off the hood; it had shone in a way that reminded her of her husband, of the past that sweltered inside the car.

“You just can’t be happy,” Heather remembered Wyland saying the first year they had lived together in Chicago. It was a couple of days before Christmas, and Heather had refused to fly back with him to Burling Gates. She didn’t want to spend the holiday with her mother, and she was nervous about spending time with Wyland’s parents. She knew Vienna would be invited to the Christmas party Wyland’s mother threw every year, and regardless of whether Vienna showed up or not, Heather didn’t like knowing she was welcomed in the Turnbull home with open arms.

“That’s not it.” He didn’t say anything. That’s when she knew her grasp was weak, and she could no longer hold on to the collar of his shirt. He was floating from her, his bags packed and already in the taxi. He clipped her cheek with both lips and left her alone in an apartment for Christmas. It wasn’t their last kiss, but it would always feel like it, and every holiday afterward until they moved back to Burling Gates would always be the same. Heather at home, Wyland where he belonged.

“That’s it,” Heather whispered to the mute Corolla. The notion fostered a pain cleaved somewhere between her chest and neck, but no sound would come out.

She glanced through her window and spotted Erma, her next-door neighbor, walking outside in her nightgown for the daily “sacrificial leak” as Wyland always dubbed it. Erma watered her lawn every morning, hoping to attract bits of gossip like a magnetic pole. The salted-haired woman turned toward the Turnbull residence—buckled over on her arthritic hips—and started to wave when she found Heather sitting in her car.

“Of course,” Heather muttered, grabbing her bag and forcing herself out of the driver’s seat. Her doctor said it was safe to drive while pregnant, but the acrobatic twists it took to get in and out of a vehicle seemed counter-intuitive, and at times, almost deadly.

“Miss Heather up at the crack of dawn. Almost thought I had on my old prescription,” Erma said, dangerously close to the Turnbull’s property line. She pointed at her glasses and left her finger lingering there. Heather felt awkward enough to say something.

“My mom died.” Heather regretted it immediately, the quick delivery sounding like a kindergartner who just announced she peed her pants. Plus, it was a hook Erma was willing to bite and not let go with her plastic teeth.

“Oh honey, what happened?” Erma was now indeed on the property line and her hose muddied a circle of earth near her feet. Heather sighed, knowing it was the sort of thing Wyland would have an eye out for.

“Food poisoning.” She had thought about lying and saying Caroline tripped and fell. People would believe something like that. There wasn’t any shame in losing control of your feet, but there was immense shame in losing control of your life, even more if your only solution was to eat the spoiled efforts of your broken kitchen.

“Did she go to Chester’s? I swear to you they undercook their burgers. Not to mention they freeze their key lime pie. Made from scratch, my backside. My poor niece nearly chipped her tooth!” Erma was talking with her hands, the stream of water looping and un-looping in the air. Her nightgown was pale pink, practically threadbare from wash after wash, and it would have reminded Heather of her mother’s old house dress if the outline of Erma’s seventy years hadn’t been so sharply defined beneath it. Heather internally shuddered.

“No, I don’t think so. Listen Erma, I’m getting a headache. The pregnancy,” Heather pointed to her stomach and let it linger there until it was Erma’s turn to quell the awkwardness.

“Oh honey, go lie down. I remember what it was like with the little ones. I remember,” Erma said, her stare venturing beyond Middle Dale Lane. “Let me know later where you’re having the funeral. I’d like to send flowers, of course. And you can count on my famous chicken fried steaks at your doorstep this weekend!”

“Thanks Erma,” Heather said, careful as she stepped the stones that led to her front door. It was nice in a way, knowing at the very least she had booked Erma’s weekend. In the three years they had lived on Middle Dale Lane, Heather had never seen Erma have any visitors, although she boasted about her kids who lived over in Blythesville. It was unfortunate knowledge, the fact that there were people who still had parents, parents who made real food and lived in tidy homes but still were no real use to their children.

Inside, the house was dark. Heather kept it that way for a beat. She closed her eyes and walked through the home in her mind because it was easier than moving her legs. Their cat was somewhere—Frankenstein—buried in a kitchen cabinet or making his bed in the tub. He was technically Wyland’s cat, a living, breathing monstrosity of a creature Heather didn’t know how to handle when she had first moved into Wyland’s apartment. She wasn’t allowed a

pet growing up because they were too messy, a fact that played along to Ronnie's rendition of "Isn't it Ironic?" in Heather's head. But now Frankenstein was a necessity. She thought of him as the cat version of herself and decided however terrible life turned out, it may actually be a blessing that she was knocked up and married. Otherwise, she'd turn into the lady who owned an army of cat "children," dressing them up to reflect the sentiment.

Her phone began to ring. It cued her out of her thoughts, and she struggled with her bag as she walked to her bedroom. It was Amber.

"You think your husband's a creep, wait until you hear about mine."

"Hello," Heather said. Her eyes rolled on their own volition, an automatic response prompted by a typical Amber phone conversation. It was even worse this time knowing she had invited Vienna over without Amber's permission, and something told her to keep that particular piece of information under wraps for the time being.

"He's cheating on me, okay? But not with some used-up loser who works at a funeral home. He's sleeping with Bonnie."

"Who?"

"Do you listen to nothing I say? Bonnie, the floozy from next door. Miss 'My Husband's a Cardiothoracic Surgeon and I Sunbathe Topless in My Backyard.' Topless, Heather!"

"She brags about what her husband does for a living? I've never heard her mention it." Heather had met Bonnie Carmichael a few times, a frequent guest at Chez Fritch, even though Amber was the ever-reluctant hostess. She had asked Amber why she always invited Bonnie over if she hated her so much, and Amber mumbled something about keeping enemies close. The significance of this wasn't lost on Heather.

"Well, no, but you can see it all over her smug, veneered smile. Ugh, I hate that woman. And now Brent is sleeping with her."

Heather could hear the tears. She could also hear the twins arguing in the background and Amber's short screech to "knock it off."

"How do you know?"

"What?"

"How do you know he's cheating on you?" The question was the same Heather had asked herself time and again, sometimes when she was taking off her makeup, and her eyes were forced to travel the crows' feet that bled into her skin. Or when she was pounding wet chicken flesh, and bits of it would stick to the just cleaned sink. It became a song lyric in her head. A bumper sticker. A note jotted on the calendar next to the trash pickup date.

"How can I not know?" Amber sniffed into the phone. "He's always making comments—I don't know—'Doesn't Bonnie look nice, honey?' 'Oh, hey, ask Bonnie if she and Mark want to come over for dinner.' Stuff like that." Heather kicked off her flip-flops and curled into the fetal position on the bed. She wanted to punch Amber in the gut. She remembered that not too long ago a simple look would have rendered Amber spineless, a simple bag of skin. But things had changed since middle school. They both had changed. Amber's vertebrae had fused, and Heather no longer knew how to keep time with her fists.

"My mom died," Heather squeaked into the phone, again feeling young and exposed like she had with Erma. She could see her dresser from this position, a framed photo of her and Wyland from college. It was the day they had captured the rat, a whiskered submarine on legs. They had heard it for weeks until they assumed it was part of the walls, the plumbing. But it had been a free agent, paid in opened bags of cereal and those disgusting sour candies Wyland used to be addicted to. Renee was there, their next-door neighbor in Chicago. She had taken the picture—Wyland's foot on the overturned laundry basket, trapped rat inside, Heather searching the afternoon sun sneaking through the window as Renee fingered the trigger. The only

thought in the room was Heather's, a truthful kernel built on loose strings of recognition: Wyland was in love with Renee.

"What? Are you serious? Your mom actually died?" It sounded like an accusation, a popped gumball between Amber's lips. *No, I'm just trying to shut you up*, Heather thought. It wasn't true. Wyland hadn't been in love with Renee. At least that's what he had said when Heather caught both of them in bed together. It had been an instinctual retort to forgive him. To hold him even closer. To realize that his betrayal was solely based on Heather's unhappiness and not because his heart was still anchored in the past. It had been easier when it was Renee.

"Pretty sure. Set up the funeral arrangements. At Oaks."

"Wait, wait. You set up your mother's funeral with the woman who's been sleeping with your husband? Please tell me you've hit your head, Heather." Amber's voice painted the setting. Her children were outside now in the thousand-dollar tree house or inside in the thousand-dollar playhouse, and Amber was in the kitchen, barefoot, no makeup. She was sipping at a cup of green tea and eating one of the Snickers she kept stashed in a coffee tin high up in the pantry so the kids wouldn't squawk that she was keeping secrets. So, she didn't have to share.

"She's good at what she does. And I feel bad for her," Heather said. It was all wrong. It sounded horribly obscure. But when Heather pictured Vienna at the desk at the funeral home—typing away with Wyland's baby in her belly—there was a loneliness that pierced the bulbous parts of her. Her ear drums, her lungs, the pumping, struggling organs. Her body relieved of all its air, and the only thing left was the act of feeling bad, of empathizing. Knowing Vienna was struggling with another year without her mother didn't help matters either. But then there was the other thing she didn't talk about with Amber, the thing that had trailed closely to Heather's ankles all the way into adulthood: her envy of Vienna Oaks and the way

she was woven through Wyland more colorfully than Heather ever could be.

“You feel bad? For her? Heather, I’m praying that this is some moment of insanity you’re suffering right now because people like Vienna, people like Bonnie are out to chew us up and spit us out. I mean what happens if we get a divorce? The poor kids,” Amber smacked into the phone, and Heather imagined a smear of milk chocolate lining Amber’s lips. She won’t notice it, won’t even take the time to wipe her mouth with the back of her hand so when her kids come into the kitchen from whatever thousand-dollar monstrosity they were previously affixed to, they will pummel her to the ground and take the secret she’s been hiding. “Heather? Heather?” Amber searched.

“I feel bad for you, too.”

“Well, thanks. It’s just been hard knowing Brent could hurt me like this—”

“Not for that. Not for the Bonnie thing. I feel bad because you can’t see past yourself.” Heather waited a beat, waited for the sugar to stop stinging between Amber’s teeth.

“What does *that* mean? Listen, I’ve got a lot of stuff going on, Heather, and I don’t need to worry about your silly mind games...”

“See,” Heather said. She felt like hanging up the phone, but that hopeless gnawing took her again like it did every time with Amber. That little voice that wanted to impress Amber, be her friend, prove to everyone that she wasn’t as hopeless as she always felt. “I’m sorry,” Heather murmured into the phone. “I haven’t been myself. I miss my mom,” she said blankly, not feeling the words she was saying.

“It’s fine, but for crying out loud, Heather. You have to get a hold of yourself. There’s more than enough stress to go around for everyone.” Amber paused, and the air went dead. “You’re coming tonight, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there,” Heather said, biting her tongue before she let slip Vienna would be there, too. Maybe they’d all get along and cease being women who were kept to the usual politics of distancing each other at arm’s length.

Maybe not.

Heather hung up, stunned by how quiet a room was without Amber in her ear. She looked at the trapped rat picture again and then to the right of it, another photo, the only one they had of themselves as kids. It was a quick shot, Wyland sitting Indian style on the floor during a class party. Heather was in the background, a little blurry but staring straight at the camera. Vienna’s left arm, cut off near the end of the photo, rested close to Wyland’s leg.

Heather shut her eyes and felt sleep creep beneath the door. She let it take her.

• • •

WHEN SHE WOKE, IT WAS noon, and her husband wasn’t home. Heather had figured that much after her morning visit to his office. He would come up with something—a showing, clients at his desk, lunch with his dad. And she would nod her reply, smile. It was the only dance she had learned.

She had forgotten to put on the fan before she fell asleep and woke up drenched in herself. Her clothes stuck to her—Wyland’s shirt, her yoga pants. She wouldn’t mind burning both—her whole closet, really—but she knew it would be pointless to ask Wyland for shopping money. “You won’t be pregnant forever,” he’d say, and she knew he said it out loud to remind himself as much as her.

The shower was slick, cold. Heather didn’t bother watching where she washed because most of it she couldn’t see anymore. The parts she could, she wanted to ignore. The stretching in her skin, the road map veins. Her thighs. Her thighs were the worst simply because they were difficult to adore before the pregnancy, almost as

much as they were now. Pants made her seem larger. Shorts rode up into unflattering crevices. She was made to feel inhuman, less than, and pregnancy had a startling way of making her feel more than necessary but just as insignificant.

When she was dried off, robed, hair wet and riding on her shoulders, she knew she had to make the call.

“Hello?” her father sang. It wasn’t like it had been with Amber. Heather couldn’t make out where he was, what he was doing. The pieces were there: dogs, grooming, girlfriend. But the version she cut out in her mind was a paper doll, a cartoon. There was nothing real about the voice on the phone.

“Hi. I went ahead and made the arrangements.”

“Who *is* this?” he asked. Her breath skipped, and her thumb rested painfully close to the “off” button. “Kidding. Bad joke. So, what’s the damage?”

“No damage. It’s taken care of.” Heather walked into the kitchen, feeling like a royal float in her white terry cloth robe, a gift from Wyland—one of many that signified the change in the way he viewed her. Lingerie one year, a subscription to Bon Apetit the next. He had gone from insatiable to satiated, and all she had to show for it were recipes stapled and sent in the mail.

“Well, I’m sending flowers, and I’m all over the card thing.” He breathed into the phone, and Heather tried to remember what his breathing sounded like in the kitchen all those years ago when she had a moment to study him, but she couldn’t.

“How are you holding up?” he asked.

“Okay. I don’t know. I have to figure out what to do with the house.”

“Oh geez. I didn’t even think of that. I’d suggest torching the place, but I’m afraid the thing would shoot straight to the sky.” He cut short a chuckle, and again she tried to place the chords in his throat, their sounding chime. “What are you going to do?”

“Try to clean it. I guess. I haven’t really figured it out.”

“What does Wyland say?” *He doesn’t*, she thought. Wyland hadn’t really said anything about getting the place in order, just that they were better off lighting it on fire than messing with it. Maybe she really did marry her father.

“He’s been busy with work and all that. How about you? How are you guys?”

He went quiet on the phone, and the air felt void of a pulse. “Slow day today. Just thinking a lot of things through, I suppose.” He stopped talking, and Heather racked her brain for something else to say, a way off the phone. But then he said what couldn’t have come naturally. “I’m sorry, Heather.”

“Well, it wasn’t your fault.”

“No, I mean yeah, I’m sorry about Caroline. Your mom. But I just...I just need you to know how proud of you I am. How wonderful you are. And I hate myself for not saying it sooner. Not really saying it at all.” Heather closed her eyes. There was an image there. Her childhood house was quiet in the dark, and the shadows that the stacks of newspapers made painted the floor, the couch, Heather herself. She felt wrapped in an absence of light, and it scared her how right that had felt. She had no need to see, to wake up her mother or crawl into bed with her. It was a strong moment realizing that the normalcy in the dark, the discord in wanting her mother in the present had both sprung from her father, the lack of him. And when she opened her eyes to her dismal kitchen, all she heard were his words. Too empty. Too late.

“Thanks,” Heather said. She was at her refrigerator, and she opened the door, taking stock of its contents. She wanted to eat everything.

“Okay. Yeah, no problem, I guess. Listen, give me a call Sunday. I want to see how you’re doing, how everything goes.” She expected him to say, “Break a leg!” but he didn’t. She offered an “All right,” and

kept the phone to her ear even after she could no longer hear him breathing.

There were shows on TV, ways to waste time on the Internet from the comfort of the recliner. She visited a baby forum she'd peruse from time to time and watch usernames explode at each other. Pregnancy hormones and anonymity were a hopeless combination. By the time six grinded to a halt, she was immersed in a debate between two women arguing over the use of breast milk from a stranger. She had eaten the contents of the fridge, leaving a smattering of well-placed condiments to fill the interior. She didn't hear the door open.

"Hey," Wyland said. He entered behind his scent. Cologne his mother bought him every year and the soft stench of his body. Not overwhelming, not like most men but just enough.

"Hi."

"About before, this morning..." he said. *Always to the point*, she thought, taking care to cover her plate on the side table with her napkin. "Sorry I was weird. I just haven't talked to Vienna in a long time, and I didn't want it to be awkward. Since we were friends so long ago and—"

"Don't worry about it." She watched his face relax.

"Hollywood told me more about the open house thing. It's at Oaks, so I just want things to go well. I'll need to meet up with her, about the details." Heather nodded. She let the idea of Vienna and Wyland meeting up soak in slowly. She knew what the real talk would be about and tried to ignore the loneliness in being extraneous, not needed in the decision-making.

"I don't know what I'm going to do about the house," she gasped from her lonely corner. "I was thinking Saturday we could go through a few things at Mom's. Maybe get breakfast first."

"I have that golf tournament with dad. I'd get out of it if I could..." He set his briefcase down by the floor and walked into the

living room. His smell was everywhere. “We’ll figure something out, H.” “H,” an old pet name. Wyland salvaged it out of the attic, dusted it off, and expected her to take it without sneezing.

“I need to get ready for Amber’s. I invited Vienna,” she said. A few muscles gathered and tensed in convention with one another, but Wyland’s head continued to bob. Heather thought about what she was going to say next and relished the way he was innocent to it. “She’s pregnant.” The second Heather said it, the words turned vibrant. They emanated with the swishing tail of the cat clock in the kitchen. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

The muscles convened again, this time dragging Wyland’s face into a reluctant smile. “Tell her congratulations for me.”

“I will,” Heather said, gathering her weight in her hips and lifting off the recliner. She walked past him and breathed in, in spite of herself. The edge of memory was a paper cut to the brain. She could feel the crying coming on but made sure he couldn’t see it.

She had dressed, retrieving her crumpled clothes from the floor. Her belly hurt, and the only thing keeping her focused was the thought of dinner at Amber’s. Food greased and swamped in sticky sauces, glazes coating roasted birds. She cursed herself when her mind traveled, arms out, to her mother.

When there had been nothing left to keep her busy, she called Vienna to give her the directions.

“Applewood? Yeah, I’ll be there,” Vienna had said on the phone in her pretty voice, the “a” in Applewood sounding exquisite in her mouth. Heather had waited for Vienna in Amber’s mini-mansion, nauseated at Rachel’s detailed account of Viola’s green feces, and nobody would listen about her mother’s poisoned insides, her mother falling dead on her kitchen floor. It had nothing to do with babies, or money, or half-naked neighbors named Bonnie, so nobody cared. And when Vienna had shown up it was like their bolted down world

broke free, and Amber's only fear was on her front stoop. A real life, breathing mistress. Even worse, a glimpse at her past.

It hadn't mattered that Amber was angry with her because Heather knew she could rely on Vienna. The diner had glowed wet and pink in the dark, and once inside, Heather read the layers in Vienna, consuming them with every tablespoon of syrup that coated her throat. A lawless grandfather, a stunted appetite, a need to rub her skin raw with a napkin. These things were Vienna Oaks, and Heather took no qualms in relishing them and wishing they were her own.

They agreed to meet again on Saturday, dig through the trash and the grime of Caroline Hammel's existence. Heather would see if Vienna had the resolve to stare down the rot and try her best to salvage it. She hoped with a loaded heart that this would be the case.

Hours later in her driveway, the clock's neon green numbers searing her vision in her parked car, everything turned the color of bile. Heather waited in the dark for somebody, for Erma to notice how wrong it was for her to still be belted in her seat at this time of night and to take Heather by the arm. To lead her back inside.

Chapter Nine

Vienna

The “I love you.” I’ve never heard it. But as I wake it’s Wyland’s voice breaking through the sleepy membrane, saying the words he never has before. It’s also Maya’s.

My niece is a flesh and blood secret we never used to talk about. But then Rosa started working at the home, and she became a real thing, a child toddling up the creaky steps, sketching her name into the dusty glass table under my mother’s portrait before I began to clean. It was like having a small shadow, watching Maya while Rosa painted dead faces in the morgue.

Maya visits on the weekends sometimes under the guise of learning my father’s trade, but in reality, it’s time spent with our side of the family. There’s still tension with Rosa’s mother who probably has fashioned a series of voodoo dolls out of my brother’s likeness, which is why we didn’t get to see Maya accept her diploma, and we won’t be going to her graduation party tomorrow. Forcing her to learn the custodial intricacies of running a funeral home is apparently a close second in my father’s book.

“I love you, too, Pop,” loiters up the stairs and into my room. My door is open. I had come home feeling drunk, even though I was sober at the diner, my mind sharp and strong. That word, “strong.” It numbed me when Heather had said it—still does—and even though Maya’s at the home, ready to curve into the crook of my father’s elbow, I’m uncut knowing that’s a place I no longer fit.

I dress quickly, humming to myself. A dress ripped from the back of my closet, an unmatched set of shoes. I replace them, grab a matching pair, and walk to the small bathroom off my room to face what waits in the mirror.

I do look like a bird. My skin is cream and nestles beneath the bones in my cheeks. My eyes are wide. Round. They're blue like words saturated in ink. My hair is dark, a shade stronger than the half-moons under my eyes. I cake the soft skin with concealer. A little blush, a fresh glossed pout. My teeth are slightly yellowed, coffee-stained. Malnourished. I feel thirty-five in the face, fifteen in the eyes. The number twenty-nine beats behind my sternum. I am strong. I say it out loud, "I am strong." I grab my purse, know the phone has bitten hold of Gram's number—the three, the eight, the nine locked between its teeth. I head out of my room and ignore the clock. I'm ten minutes late.

"Nice of you to join us," Dad says when I hit the break room.

Maya nods "Hey." It's different from the "Auntie V!" and elbows-out-run I knew after senior graduation when Rosa came back into my life, and Maya swayed no higher than my hip bone. But time and truth have ruined my purity, and all Maya can sense now is a brittle-boned woman who didn't have the foresight to move out from under her father's roof.

"Hi, Maya. Ready to tackle the woes of a funeral home desk jockey?" I ask. I feel like my feet are touching nothing. My father is pinned in his chair against the wall. I can imagine the metal sinking deep into his back, the way he'd spring to fasten my feet to the ground if he could.

"Well, Maya and I have been talking a little. She thinks she might want to assist me. In the morgue," Dad says. The words dance against the black contents of his coffee cup. I want to look at Maya's face but don't because I know what I'll find there. Pity.

"That works. I have a lot to do anyway. Burying the dead, making the bread..." I mumble off. I don't look at either of them, but Maya's face is there, stitched in my mind. The girl is physically wrong with blonde hair, dark brown eyes. Her skin is a clean shade of olive, but

it's more than that. It's Rosa and Troy. Some of my father. But really, she reeks of my mom.

I walk to the front office, my purse pummeling against my hip. No calls, two emails. One from our casket supplier sending news of a discount, the other from Granddad. I don't open the message because I never do before Dad does, but I star it so he remembers to check it later.

I don't visit him. Granddad. I was never allowed when I was younger, but he never added me to his visitors list even after I turned eighteen. Dad just mentioned it once in passing when I was heading out to meet Wyland at the mall the summer before he left for college.

"Your grandfather loves you, you know. He just doesn't want you to see him this way." There was no follow up explanation, just my father's back heaving up and down as he climbed the stairs to his room. But I knew what he was talking about all the same. Granddad was ashamed.

My father, on the other hand, visits twice a month. He brings along a care package Loretta whips up and then heads out to make the four-hour round-trip journey to visit his father, forever destined to meet with the man who left him everything and nothing.

I exit out of the home's email account and log into my personal one. I wait as the page whirs in my mind, serving up a plate of thick cut spam. But my eye isn't focused on the downloadable Pottery Barn catalog. It's his name, Wyland's, in the middle of the stack. I click it, cells barely held together. But then, the message:

We need to talk.

I suppose I have more in common with my father than I'd like to admit.

"You okay?" I look up and it's Loretta. A noise rushes through my lips, and I quickly exit out of my email. "Didn't mean to scare you. Just wondering how you were holding up. Elbert told me last night he was going to see how Maya felt about the morgue. I know

you wanted to show her around the office.” It doesn’t surprise me that my father has already planned this. I once watched his face suffer in a blond stranded mess of Maya’s hair. He needs Maya to remember my mother.

“I’m fine. I’m sure she’ll do great in the morgue.” I know the stain is still there, a purpled mass traveling the lines of my face like an ugly birthmark. My beats are off, so I keep moving my hand to my hair then my lips. Why did he email me?

“Are you sure, sweetie? You’ve seemed...” Loretta works her frame around the corner of Elbert’s desk and props a heavy leg onto its wooden top. She’s wearing a long, loose dress with cap sleeves. It’s the color of a messy diaper. “...off.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” I look up and am met with the coiled bangs framing Loretta’s face.

“Well, let me know if you need anything. Elbert wants me to get started on the open house thing, so I’ll be out getting some more brochures printed,” Loretta says, still unmoving on the desk. I wait. The words stack high at the back of my throat.

“You’ve never had kids, right?” I say. I know the answer, so I spend the gelatinous quiet examining Gram’s framed artwork on the walls. Rough mountains of oil on canvas. Gram’s soul, unequivocal as braille.

“No. You know that.”

“I mean, pregnant.” I look straight ahead at the portrait of my mother. Gram had painted it as a wedding gift, and it used to live in our garage, wedged somewhere between the tools and empty bottles of booze. I had found it searching through the box of our unwanted belongings, saved for a garage sale that never came to fruition. I had wanted my favorite hoodie back. I knew Troy had taken it, hidden it somewhere, and I figured my best bet was looking in the one place discarded clothing always found refuge.

I had searched until it became hopeless. I went to search somewhere else—the hamper maybe—when the frame caught my eye. It was a new glint, even though I should have seen it a million times over by then. I touched it. I expected it to be hot. Accusing. But when I pulled it out it was only my mother. And I remember thinking that exactly—it's *only my mother*. My hoodie was on the floor, squeezed in the space behind the frame. I had hated my brother immensely.

Loretta moves her weight, slightly wheezes. The thinking seeps in the three slices between her eyebrows. “Once,” she says, searching me. She comes up empty.

“A friend is. That’s why I asked.”

“If your friend needs help, I know a place. On Rogers, two streets behind the deli. And if you need someone to talk to, because I know it can be rough, being the friend, you can always talk to me.” I can tell she doesn’t believe me, so I nod at my hands that have reconvened in my lap. I say something that sounds like “thank you,” and Loretta leaves. There’s breathing room now and too much space to think. I open my email. I begin to type.

There are not enough words in the world.

I send it, and my heart chides me. I think it might stop. But then I hear the ping. His response:

Please.

I swallow, write, “Lunch, Monday. 56 Diner at noon” and look away as Louise, prostrate on the wall, watches my fingers dancing.

• • •

THERE’S NO TIME TO call Gram. I want to during lunch, but the Pattersons will be arriving to pick up Parker. At least that’s what a purple post-it note stuck to the desk tells me. It didn’t take but the five minutes I used to pee like a racehorse for Loretta to forget to use the notebook again. There’s no energy left to remind her, though, be-

cause my thoughts of facing the clinic alone, of Saturday afternoon with Heather and lunch with her husband, of hand delivering the remains of a little boy to his family have soldered themselves together and trapped me in the dead space between the bars. I want to step outside and listen to Gram's hateful voice because for once, it would feel mercifully stingy, like swallowing a gulp of air.

I don't want to be staring at Parker's urn.

The bell trickles and footsteps mock the quiet in the foyer. I only hear one set, so I prepare myself for Mr. Patterson's strong handshake, but he's not there. It's only April, his wife.

"Hi," she says, sneaking the words in while I lock my fingers together, quieting them.

"Hello, Mrs. Patterson."

"April," she says, and I nod. She comes into the office, and maybe it's the way she looks that throws me off. I'd be okay with stained sweats, eyes puffy, mascara trailing into the soft lines beneath her eyes, but what I'm faced with is navy slacks and hairspray, pearls in her ears. And then I realize what's happening here. She's dressed up for her son.

"My condolences again, April." I've done this before several times—handing off an urn to a grieving family. But this time I'm extraneous and unnecessary. I'm the sixth finger that serves no purpose. She looks at her son like she's seeing him for the first time.

"I didn't know what this was supposed to feel like." She stands completely still between the two guest chairs in front of my father's desk. Her lips are long and ropey and knit tight together.

"No one ever knows," I say. No one ever does. After the dead are gone—buried or burned and the cap is screwed shut—there is a rush of feeling and there is a void of it. It's the dealing with that sort of sensation, the running your fingers through its loose and grainy scraps that can rip the human part right out of a person.

April sits in one of the chairs, slumps into it so she's more sound than movement. "I didn't know really, what birth would be like. The physical part, pain, the pushing—you know, that wasn't what got me. What really hurt was holding him and not feeling him. Not loving him yet." She looks up at me, and I don't know what she wants or needs. So, I listen. "And it happened again when he died. Like I couldn't really...I couldn't feel it. I couldn't allow myself to understand it. And I know all of them, our friends, our family think I'm insane because I haven't cried yet. Oh, I just..." She stops, and that's when she takes him—her boy—and works him gently into the nook of her arm. She cries, and this time she's all movement. All sound. I couldn't understand it before, the losing him again all over to the fire and keeping his remains within arm's reach. But I know it now because I can see it. I can see how letting go is a forever thing.

I wait, and then I nod when my father comes to the doorway. He moves soft, and I can always give that to my dad, the way he moves feather light when all else becomes its weight. She doesn't startle when Dad cups her elbow and helps her to her feet. She doesn't look at me anymore, only him—only Parker—and I watch the two of them slow their waltz to the foyer.

I call Mrs. Patterson a cab, and then I count the sharp stabs of my broken heart.

• • • •

IN THE VIEWING ROOM, I've counted all the way to a million, and the pain is still vulgar and aware of itself. I don't give into it, though, because there's showing Maya the chemical list. There's trying to ignore the way my niece clips her consonants like Mom always did.

"Cadisol. What's that?"

"Dries, disinfects. You'll have to talk to your grandfather about the details. I do my best to ignore them." We're in the viewing room,

side-by-side in a wooden pew. Dad has finished his lesson with his reluctant pupil, and Rosa has come and gone, kissing Maya on the forehead. I was air to her.

I nodded at the balled-up tissues, the programs that are rendered useless on the floor after the funeral for Mrs. Lennox an hour before, when Rosa asked if she'd see me tomorrow and her voice tore inside of me. "I'll be busy," I said. "I'm helping Heather clean out her mother's place," because I run on power now, but it tastes more like brutality. Disappointment, and the small beginnings of a head shake before she caught Maya's eye and smiled. Rosa walked away from me, and I can't feel the nauseous rhythm lining the walls because the music is dead.

"Ew. I mean I find it interesting, but still. Ew." Maya's ankle is dancing against her shin. Her legs are crossed. Grossly grown up. It's been a while since I've seen her, studied her. School and work and our shattering pasts have kept me away as well as the sadness knowing it shouldn't at all be like this.

"No, you're right. Ew." I look and can see Maya's half-face, the other side shielded by Mom's blonde hair. It's hard to handle her singularly, and instead, I watch through her like a piece of stained glass. "How have you been?" Maya stops rustling the thickly stapled sheets of papers, the ones that know how to de-naturalize the dead. She licks her lower lip.

"Good." She goes back to the rustling, her eyes twisting knots through "Flex" and "For-Jey."

"Oh, well, how are things at home with Rosa? Your mom?" The clarifier is a rock rubbing a blister on my tongue. I feel the sweat beads lining up to push through my pores. I've forgotten to take my meds. When I close my eyes, I see an urn.

"Dating. He's a loser."

"What? She is?" Now the chill. It works at my skin, pursuing my blood. Why didn't she tell me she's dating? The abandonment

is settling in all over again, and I can't stop the tumor of hate that's lumped in my stomach since she got pregnant with Maya in the sixth grade and left me for a world I'm barely entering now.

"He's just...corny. She could do better," Maya says and looks up at the dead space where a casket should be. "Do you ever see my father?" I can feel the chill slipping into my bloodstream. I'm physically shaking, only slightly. I rub both arms to gain some authority.

"Yeah," I say. Maya turns her head. The eyes are brown, Rosa's gift. "I saw him Wednesday."

"What's he like?" Maya asks. I rub harder. I imagine feeling my own bones. I can't imagine anyone not knowing what Troy is like.

"He's wrong. All wrong. But wonderful, too." I can feel the snags in the calcium. I scratch at a renegade blood vessel. "He's made me realize it's not always the worst thing in the world to feel so messed up. But it is the worst thing if nobody's willing to feel that way with you." And then the core. It's cold and unyielding. I imagine what my pills would taste like in my mouth. "I'm sorry," I say, looking at Maya. My niece nods. That's the best thing.

"No. I get that. I wish Mom would let me meet him. I wish he wanted to meet me."

"He wants that more than anything in the world." I can't help myself. I've said it to the mirror, written it down so many times it's a part of me like nerves in my skeleton. Ever since that night when Dad stormed into Troy's room and started packing.

"You are ruining your life," I heard from Troy's doorway seventeen years ago. My fifteen-year-old brother had his arms at his sides, his palms facing me. The universal stance of losing.

"You think? I thought this was just a practice run." Even then his mouth was smart. He winked at me winding around the doorframe. I did my best to smile.

"She's pregnant, Troy, and still, everything's a joke." Things weren't so funny for Dad, for any of us really. Mom's death was only

three months stale. The house was rocked with a collective shudder—our shock packed in boxes, sprawled out in the corners. We were moving. Dad was in the process of buying the funeral home with Loretta's savings and the pitiful amount Manor Market gave him to save face. Granddad was already sitting in a barred room, and Gram had moved to an apartment in Blythesville with a bathtub filled with bills. Her hate was festering. It was sprouting feelers, reaching out for all of us. I had never felt smaller.

"It's not funny. But it was our decision," Troy said. His face was straight, no smirk. Just a clean scratch where his mouth should be.

"Your decision? Let me guess, you in all your wisdom, thought it was a good 'decision' to knock up a thirteen-year-old?" Dad's fingers left quotations in the air. I imagined smoke where the marks should have been. "I gotta say, Troy, it does seem to have your signature on it." Dad tangoed through the room with his sleeve numbing his nostrils. His feet pirouetted around mounds of clothes, CD cases, stinking piles that were once likely edible. I knew the cat hearts were still there under the bed even two years later. The stench had procreated with itself.

"What else was I supposed to do? Mom kicked the bucket, and you started getting handsy with the cat freak. That reminds me, if you're thinking of rounding the bases, let me fill you in on the condoms you shouldn't use—" Troy didn't make himself stop talking, our father's hand did. The sound was painted by number with my trembling lip, my dad's aching knuckles. My brother's loss for words.

"You will not talk to me like that. You hear me? You don't know anything." My father's back was blocking my view of Troy. I couldn't see Dad's face either, but I knew they both were crying because change, it couldn't keep from wronging the both of them.

"You pack your stuff. I talked to your grandmother. Can you imagine that? I talked to the one woman on the planet who'd rather see me dead, my own freaking mother," Elbert shouted. The sound

plucked and tugged the woven threads in the room. I thought my vision was failing me.

“I talked to her about you, Troy. And she’s agreed to take care of you. The woman can’t pay her own bills, and she’s so angry everyone can taste it, but she feels sorry for you, Troy. She loves you. But you know what?” Dad paused. He was wearing a white undershirt, pajama bottoms with stains on the crotch. But none of that sobered me. His hair was quartered, divided, seeking every wall in the room. “I don’t feel a thing.” It was a whisper, and the sound of it was worse than the slap. Nobody moved. We simply disappeared.

“You were his decision, too,” I say to Maya, and I’m startled to find I’m no longer wrapped in Troy’s old room.

“Do you think I’ll get to see him again?” Maya asks. The list of chemicals tubes in her hands. The pages flicker and wear at me.

“I really hope so,” I say, giving a non-answer. “I don’t like asking you to keep secrets from your mom but don’t mention this conversation to her. All right?” Maya nods in my peripheral.

“You all set, Sport?” Dad says. I almost say “yes” but catch myself. Maya follows him out into the foyer where Loretta is standing, holding Maya’s bag. “Thought we’d take our newest student out to celebrate graduating and her first day of learning the family business.” He smiles at Maya, and Maya smiles back as slowly as her lips will allow. “Wanna come?” he asks, and I realize the afterthought is directed at me.

“Oh, no. I have a few things to finish up here.”

“All right, suit yourself,” Dad says. Loretta turns back as Dad and Maya walk out onto the covered porch.

“Let’s talk later. About the open house. Okay?” she asks. My “sure” metastasizes and is scalped from my mouth.

With the door closed, I run for my bag in the office. I take my phone out and head upstairs, jolts of life surging with every step. I check my email, read Wyland’s “Okay,” and sort through the disap-

pointment, the excitement, the regret, the pain that burdens intestinally keeping a secret from Heather, from Rosa, too. I scroll through my contacts, find Gram's number and press "call."

I think of Troy.

Chapter Ten

Heather

Wintertime, four years ago, and they were all sanctioned to their apartments except for those like Wyland who felt the need to forge forward and heat the Chicago snow and ice with each bundled step. He was completing his business degree, his father's one requirement for entering the family business. He wasn't the smartest, but he worked hard, pushed the limits, sacrificed until he could nestle a solid "A" between both hands. It took everything for Heather to shear the image of his pretty professor from her brain and pretend good grades came solely from benign requests for extra credit.

"When did you learn to cut hair?" Renee had asked that morning in their kitchen, perched on the trash seat. It was a three-legged chair, the fourth leg anchored miraculously with duct tape. It smelled faintly of urine, and Heather hated how pitiful it looked. It was hard to see it and not think of the stinking mess inside her mother's home, but it was swiped off a buddy of Wyland's for free. Wyland was always going on about saving money for a better life in Burling Gates, so the monstrosity stayed in their tiny eat-in kitchen. Heather had scrubbed its fabric seat until a cuticle bled.

"In my teens. My grandmother was a hairdresser," Heather lied. It was easy to say when wet logs of Renee's hair were clumped in her fingers.

In truth, there had been no learning, just the rote recitation of "An inch off the ends. And for the love of Pete, no bangs." Then Caroline's giggle, a mass of vibration from her naked, rounded body on a dusty kitchen chair. Heather had started cutting her mother's hair once her father left, and before that, the job was his. That was the odd note soiling the air—that her father could hate her mother, that Caroline could blacken his dinners and collect figurines the shape and

size of fat little cherubs, but with a clockwork effort, they would still sit down at the kitchen table every two months, and Ben Hammel would cut his wife's hair.

"Hope your grandmother's a good teacher," Renee laughed. Birds, warmth. That "nobody else is in the room but you" feeling. Heather studied her client in clips, in the quick sight of a full lower lip, a wimpy upper one in comparison. Too much gum, too little teeth. A sweep of long brown bang and hair cut like a boy's. It should have made Renee look like a middle schooler, but her long legs and the "V" that always snuck out of her blouse were the antidote.

Heather snipped delicately, wet tips scattering on the "Life's a Beach" towel secured around Renee's long neck. "Isn't she shaped like Vienna?" Heather had asked Wyland when they moved into the apartment in Chicago and met their next-door neighbor for the first time. Wyland's father was footing the bill unknowingly for the both of them, and the perk was moving out of her all-girls dorm for something that made Heather feel grown up. The downside was staying glued to the couch and stuffing clusters of cheese into her mouth, knowing someone who looked like Renee was only a few feet away.

"What? What kind of question is that?" Wyland asked. No answer. She shrugged, and later that night, Heather had cried silently in bed until she thought the shaking would kill her.

"How do you like your classes? Wyland told me you're studying math," whistled the damp part of Renee's scalp. The scissors sliced and relaxed at their hinge. Heather could picture her husband with Renee in the elevator, his shoulder stuck to hers like dried gum. "She's a math major. Wants to teach. College level," he'd say because saying it made him the prince who wasn't too far removed from girls who wore glasses. Renee studied chemistry. She was looking for her prince.

"They're good. Hard," was Heather's answer. And then a quick change of topic. Heather couldn't remember what they had talked

about because five small hours later Wyland was in Renee's bed, and Heather was in Renee's bedroom. She waited a few minutes before she cleared her throat. The act was stunning, welcomed in a sick way because it whispered "Aha!" in Heather's ear and proved she had been right about Renee all along. It proved she wasn't crazy.

The forgiveness part wasn't as hard as Heather assumed it would be. When the pair of them had looked up, startled deer pawing at the sheets, Heather didn't say a word. She went back to her and Wyland's apartment and took up where she had left off. A plate of cheddar, Ritz crackers, Oprah on the TV. Her fiancé's shameful feet shuffling in like a steady gush of blood. Later that night she submitted herself to Wyland's arms, and Heather ignored how similar love had become to placing the sharp ends of everything against the worming vein in her neck.

Parked outside her mother's home beneath Saturday's morning sun, Heather took note of how she was no longer vulnerable to life's razored edges, not like with Renee. There was power now, the needle in a vein feeling of being better than Wyland, feeling sorry for Vienna, and housing their indiscretions like jewels in a box.

The night before, Wyland had been asleep when Heather finally went inside after coming home from the diner. It was a pretend slumber, but she didn't test it. She was too tired, and sticky, and unwilling to feed him what he already knew so she took a shower. She washed away the diner's pancakes working through her bowels and the eggs in her teeth. She scrubbed the heat she used to have for her husband before he became her husband and watched it slurp through the shower drain. She closed her eyes to memories of cutting his hair.

When he left that morning, it was her turn to pretend to sleep, and when she had woken up, she had to come to terms with her situation, the reason she stayed with a man she did not love and who couldn't possibly love her in return. The reason for confronting him or Vienna was the furthest thing from her mind.

If she looked at it in the sunlight that beamed off her cracked dashboard, Heather knew it was because of the feeling that had always won her over. She wanted to be in control.

Now in the car parked outside her mother's home, Heather accepted the car engine rumbling beneath her. Its noise was in her teeth, distorting the equilibrium in her ears. What she couldn't accept was how dismal her mother's house looked framed in the passenger side window. An askew black shudder, a taped-mouth door the color of rusted metal. Rain settling in the cracks of the walkway because the walkway buckled and held on to everything. The faceless gnome in the garden. One of the few evenings Heather had partied during high school, she had come home drunk as a skunk. It was a terrible night, the kind of night that made the next morning's school day seem like a dark hole into oblivion. The cheerleaders had made fun of her, and she would have never gone if Amber hadn't begged her to. In Tina McCafferty's basement they had said she was a cow, and the only reason they invited her was for the sheer entertainment of it. This, after she had confessed her love for Wyland, her loathing for Vienna, and had imbibed enough hot whiskey to thunder her insides. Amber had just smirked, sucking on Heather's delicious confession. And when Heather arrived home after walking the night with unsteady feet, that garden troll, that obnoxious plaster gnome hunkered in the wet earth, had look at her with two smug-colored eyes.

"You know, screw you," she had said, teetering on her thick but diffident legs. They wouldn't heed her command to go inside, to sink beneath the sheets of her bed. Instead, they wobbled and bucked, keeping her chained to a small circle in the front yard. They kept her close enough to smell that stupid gnome's breath.

She had felt the bat before she spotted it, the sort of feeling she'd revisit years later in college—the way alcohol could make her feel all things, even the things she had bullied herself into forgetting. It was

a baseball bat in the neighbor's yard—a long, hard tongue against her shin, snug against her spine. It was cold and unbreakable in her hands. It reminded her that she wasn't wearing enough clothes, low-slung jeans, a tiny top. She had wanted to look like the other girls, but she only looked like what she always looked like. A cow.

She swung. She missed at first and stumbled into the stinging brick of the house. She felt the open wound in her shoulder, and it made her angry. She swung again but this time she didn't miss.

Her mother never knew about the gnome. How could she? It was out of view from the window, and Caroline hardly took to the windows anyway. If she ventured outside at all, she'd stick mainly to the backyard, never the front. So, for years the creature with a gap for a face had twitched in a sad patch of dirt, and Heather had never done anything about it. Not even when she had come back to Burling Gates for good.

Heather took a donut from the pink cardboard box in the seat next to her. She wasn't sure why she had brought it, why she even brought a thermos of decaf. The house wasn't fit for breathing, let alone ingesting. Maybe she just wanted to make this seem normal. Maybe she was just nervous.

Cheeks packed tight with bear claw, Heather watched the Prius sparkle down Gulling Boulevard. She felt drunk, like Vienna was navigating her sternum with all four wheels. She could feel Vienna's smile in the orifice of her ear. Her rod-thin fingers in the spaces between her ribs. Heather's excitement sparked a cluttered mass of flames, and the thought of combusting was of no consequence. The feel of a match between her fingers was intoxicating. Like smoke in a lung.

"Hey," she said when Vienna had pulled up and parked behind her. The girl was wearing a turquoise jumper and wedges at least two inches tall. Straps the color of snake tongues wound up her calves. "Oh."

“What? What’s wrong?” Vienna asked. Her mouth twisted into a kewpie “o,” a small section of teeth exposed. Heather caught herself wondering what her husband saw, his face so close to Vienna’s. But this was nudged out by another thought. The way Heather’s fingers had felt digging into Vienna’s starving bicep in middle school.

“Nothing, it’s just dirty and cramped in there. You think you’ll be okay in...that?” Heather let her finger float to Vienna’s middle. The bump seemed to have multiplied its cells overnight, but Heather reasoned this was only because she knew whose baby it was. She noticed because she was shackled to Vienna’s gut. Its breath and life were essential to the oxygen pumping erratically in Heather’s lungs. To the baby girl swishing her solid strokes in Heather’s belly. Dolores Caroline.

“Yeah.” Vienna smiled and piloted a route around the puddle on the walk with deft feet. She pointed at the maimed gnome and mused, “Your mom wasn’t a fan, huh?” and Heather just shrugged and shouldered by her, leaving the coffee and donuts to stale in the car. She put the key into the lock, and when it clicked, so did her heart.

The smell. It curdled and blanketed their shoulders. It kept them warm with the gut rot stench of decaying animal parts and the musk that comes when water sits and soils itself.

“Oh,” Vienna said, instinctually grabbing for the facemask Heather fished out from the wide pocket of her sweats. This was stupid, Heather could hear rote and recited inside her skull. But Vienna circled around her and walked in, a type of curiosity Heather was sure coupled nicely with the desire to work with the dead.

“Should you be doing this? In your condition?” Vienna asked. Heather didn’t have the heart to tell her their conditions weren’t so different, so she said it was fine. She did it before, and she could do it again. “But we can’t possibly move all this stuff. Or anything, really,” Vienna added.

“No. I brought a notebook in my bag. I’ll list the things that can be sold. I’ll pick up Mom’s outfit for the funeral, and I think I can get Wyland’s dad to gift us some money to rent a cleaning crew to trash the rest of it.” It was worse than wishful thinking. It was the stuff elves and wicked witches were composed of, but Heather couldn’t stop babbling, pretending she had drafted any sort of plan, because if she didn’t, she would crumble as easily as the gnome’s delicate face.

“Heather, it stinks in here. You couldn’t get her outfit dry cleaned in time, and even if you did, I’m not sure it would...” Vienna let her sentence dangle when she saw the golf club in Heather’s hand. Its metal offered a small glint in the anemic light.

“You’re right,” Heather said, dry-eyed. She took the lamp down first, the Tiffany’s reproduction her mother was certain would cash in a couple thousand. There was the oil painting of a Lassie-inspired collie, a nice find courtesy of the Home Shopping Network. She stabbed the dog in the eye and drew the metal shaft down until it hit frame. She could hear Vienna gasp and move backward into a brittle stack of newspapers. The papers quaked downward, sending with them a swirl of jaundiced snow. The TV next. The stupid box had been a third parent, and when Heather came after it, the burning behind her shut lids could only be matched by the burning in her belly. Scattered glass chimed at her feet.

“Heather, please stop.” Vienna was coughing behind her mask. The sound was muffled, but her eyes were not. She was choking.

Heather suddenly saw the golf club as something separate from herself. She dropped it, expecting to hear a hard clank against the floor but instead, a smothered thud.

“Just breathe. It’ll be okay,” Heather said to a mass of spice-scented ropes, Vienna’s hair. She settled Vienna’s breathing with her own—a slow, strong inhale, an even slower exhale. “You okay?” Heather asked, and when Vienna’s ivory fingers ceased their shaking,

she took a step back and looked Heather in the eye. She removed the mask.

“Outside,” she managed, and Heather followed her out the front door.

Neither of them spoke. Heather waited for Vienna to turn on her corked heals, wasting no time to avoid the rain puddle. But she didn’t.

“How long?” Vienna said when her words finally charged at the air.

“How long what.” Declarative. No question in Heather’s reply. Heather touched her ripe belly and dreaded searching for the answer. She could feel Dolores’s desperate kick.

“This. This, Heather. How long has your mother lived like this?” Vienna teetered tall, head cloud-bound. It was hard for Heather to look up at that angle and see the sun’s frankness to the right of Vienna’s head.

“Years. A long time.” A final strong kick against her hand. It was admitting failure somehow. She couldn’t help her mother. She couldn’t save herself.

Vienna removed her hand from the back of her neck and let it fall unchecked against her thigh. Heather would have looked like a squat monkey making the same motion but everything Wyland loved about Vienna was in that one fluid drop. It hurt, infected her like a cavity.

“Are you kidding me? You lived here? Growing up you lived here?” Vienna took a step toward her.

“Yes.” Heather felt her chin protrude against her will.

“While you were torturing me for being ‘fat’ and for who my mother was, for who you *thought* she was, you were living here? Like a lunatic? *With* a lunatic?” The cavity festered, and Heather almost placed her hand at her mouth. She was used to it from her father,

from herself. But it had been a long time since someone else said the simple truth out loud, and to hear it was a scalpel slivering her liver.

“She wasn’t... She wasn’t that. She had her hang ups, sure. It was just that we couldn’t afford any help. I couldn’t help her.” Maybe she whispered it. Heather wasn’t sure if her lips were even moving. Only a throb in her teeth. A cold sweat in her liver. The incessant need to pee pulsing in her groin.

“You forced me into a nightmare. My whole existence was a fraction of a life, and you made me think my mother was evil.” Vienna stopped, and the sunlight lit her crown on fire, a halo of white circling her scalp. Her eyes were expelling the truth. They were wide, angry. But her lips kneaded it, letting it sink through her skin into her bloodstream. “I had the hardest time looking her in the eye because of you. I had the hardest time...” Vienna’s jaw unhinged itself and her eyes were frantically trying to make sense of the busted walkway. “...because of you and your crazy mother.” Her shoulders straightened, and she seemed to grow six feet in front of Heather. Heather embraced how warped it was, Vienna having any right to spit hate at her when she had taken her husband, his boundary-breaching love. But then she figured it was only the response to a lifetime of wrong, of wrong Heather had a hand in sculpting. “How dare you,” Vienna said. The word “crazy” read like a ticker in her pupils.

Heather sucked in a deep breath, swallowing what she was planning to say before she regurgitated it. “How dare you for sleeping with my husband.” There it was, out in the open. Heather could physically feel her control slipping out of her hands, and if she were forced to place it, she was sure it was culminating heavily in her bladder.

“What are you...”

“24 Field Grove. The marble. The checkered floor. The crown molding. The place you go to be with the father of my kid. Ring a bell?” Heather watched the blue in Vienna’s eyes freeze then break.

A nerve jumped in her perfectly crafted lip. Heather waited for a second wave of shouting, but none came. Just the sound of a swallowed tongue and cork splashing through water.

Heather watched Vienna fit herself inside the Prius, her moves not so graceful this time. She jerked, and tugged, and slammed the door shut so hard, Heather was sure it could have woken her mother.

On the concrete walkway, Heather licked the delicious crumbs of catching her opponent defenseless, passing her tongue over her chewed up lips. She'd worry about the outcome later. The separation, the divorce. The knowing that she was absolutely alone in the world except for the suddenly frightening prospect inside her stomach. But for now, she'd relish the taste of an unwanted victory and momentarily ignore the pool of urine soaking through her pants.

Chapter Eleven

Vienna

My hand instinctually dives between my seat and the console, and I ignore the sensation of pulled skin and tiny cuts until I remove one of the fruit pies I bought at the gas station. They're stashed throughout the car in a messed-up game of hide and seek I play, the girl who eats and regurgitates like a spawnless bird.

I drive off away from Heather, and as I stuff my cheeks with pastry and gelatinous fruit, I suffer a panic that only rivals the one I had the moment I killed my mother.

It's one of those facts that has always cut so thick, so solid for me that I'm sure it's printed somewhere in the reference section of the Burling Gates Middle School library. But nobody else has ever believed me except my brother.

Definitely not my father.

When I told Dad, there was only the glow of our mute television in the living room and the burning joint Troy pinched between his fingers high in the oak tree in our backyard. It was before the fight, before my father kicked him out and Rosa became pregnant, so he hung around in secret sometimes, and I know it was because he couldn't stand to leave me.

"No," Dad said. He sat in his pajamas. He wore the same pair every evening since my mother died, and they started to take on a stench representative of the way he looked.

"It's true."

"No, it isn't." He placed his arm around me and initiated the usual dance. He cried, and it was hot in my hair, and I couldn't tell him he was squeezing my shoulders too tight. He whispered, "I love you" to his dead wife and fell asleep that way, his warm, unkempt body forcefully lulling against mine. I struggled out of his grasp and placed

the blanket that was draped on the back of the couch over him. I looked through the window to the oak tree, but the tree didn't light with fire because Troy was at the back door. He lifted his hand at me, and when he walked away, I wept hard and ran to my father's toilet to vomit.

"She's in shock," Dad had said to Gram the next morning, the morning of my mother's viewing. Gram and my father were talking in the office at the home, and Gram kept mentioning how cold it was, her heels hollow against the wood floor as she warmed up her fat arms with both hands. It hadn't been cold. If anything, the place was sweltering with grown up bodies pretending to know my mother.

"Vienna doesn't know what she's saying. We have the report, Louise was hit by a car, it was raining. The guy who hit her, well..." Gram choked through the facts, stopping when her son plummeted to the ground. He fell to his knees, convulsing with grief while Gram looked on not knowing whether to touch him or run.

I knew it was all true. Eugene Machado had run over my mother and then sped off to slam his car into the side of an abandoned warehouse. People said things—that my mother was a tramp and Eugene was a scorned lover—but no one could connect the two of them. My father reasoned it was an accident, that Eugene was scared to go to prison and ended his life before reaping the consequences. All I know is the way my mother's bare arm felt in my hand as I released it and watched her swiftly spin to the ground before Eugene's car washed us in light.

A black suited portion of my father wedged through the crack in the door where I was snooping. His face blistered, swollen with knowing his bottle-hungry wife had left him alone with two slighter versions of herself. I took two fingers in front of my eye and pinched my father's disheveled tie straight, only for it to stay mercilessly crumpled. *I know exactly what I'm saying*, I thought as grieving bod-

ies floated and bumped around me, white blood cells sent to heal my pain.

“Oh, Vienna, Vienna.” The nasally song set the tone for the seconds ticking through my mother’s viewing. Wyland’s mother pulled me from the doorway and embraced me, smothering me with her overly fragrant chest. The scent was terrifying, like a rose choking a gardenia, and for an instant I rolled my eyes backward and succumbed to the delicious feeling of being breathless. But just as quickly as my suffocation commenced, she pinched my twiggy biceps with caffeinated fingers and pulled me back, inching her face too close to my nose.

“If there’s anything, and I mean anything you need Vienna, you call me. I will come at two in the morning and check for monsters under your bed if I have to. And I will treat you as my own, you understand?” I searched Margaret Turnbull’s half-moon lids because looking her in the eyes was not an option.

“Yes,” I whispered, hoping it was adequate, and it was because again I plunged face first into Margaret’s chest and counted the seconds until I would black out onto the hardwood floor. I wanted to tell her she could help me by calling the police, by turning me in, but I hadn’t even told Wyland what I had done. And besides, if my father didn’t believe me, why would anyone else? Mrs. Turnbull was gone, replaced by the shuffling feet and rumpled pants legs of other mourners.

It was only after the funeral, after Granddad’s arrest and Rosa became pregnant that somebody believed me. My brother.

“Where’s Daddy Dearest?” Troy rasped into the phone. I could hear the black in his lungs, see him stitched into Gram’s couch with a cigarette snared between two fingers.

“Morgue,” I said, the word slipping my lips like the sliver of evening sun dripping through the window. Fortressed behind stacks of boxes, I sat in one of the extra rooms on the home’s second floor. I

had found our old house phone and plugged it into the wall next to Dad's box of cadaver books. It was only weeks ago I had hovered in his hands above my mother's coffined body, kissing her chalky mouth goodbye, and now I slept footsteps away from where I had suspended mid-air.

"You should lock the door on him. So, what's up?" Troy said. I shivered partly from my bare feet glued to the September chilled floor and partly from the fear of not being believed.

"I did it. The night mom died."

"Did what?" Troy paused, and I imagined him dragging on his cigarette, our grandmother too entrenched in bill sorting to look up and say anything.

"I killed Mom." The seconds were there swimming beneath my skin. The dying sun seemed to billow with them.

"What are you talking about, Sausage? You didn't kill mom. That degenerate and his car killed her."

I looked up at one of the wood-paneled walls and concentrated on the rounded edges of a nail hole. "No. I killed her. I pushed her, and she lost her balance and that's how she died." I had sunk to the floor. It was strong and solid beneath me and ran cold against my skin. The warmth couldn't reach me in that room.

I waited for the click or a string of carefully braided curse words. Instead, I could feel Troy's head bobbing through the phone.

"You didn't mean to," he said. I didn't argue with him although every inch of me knew he was wrong. "It's okay, Sausage," he added weakly, listening to me cry. I never questioned why he thought I could be capable of something like that because we both knew the way our mother had enclosed her fingers around me, the way she tugged and pulled until my seams grew weak.

As I force bits of pastry through my strained lips, I don't allow my mind to index the details, the worst moment of my life. Instead, I curl the car to a stop at a light and glance over to my left at a man in

a BMW. He looks me over, and his right eye squints when he smiles. It's a sewn together slit, tailored like the small-mouthing buttonholes in his suit, and the shock of blonde fringe across his forehead is the color of Wyland's. He looks away when he processes my sticky face and the tears trailing through the crumbs.

How dare you for sleeping with my husband. The notes had been quick drawn, still smoking from Heather's scabby lips. I wanted to tell her I'm sorry. That I'm tired of everything.

The time I had spent with Wyland—the married man version—was brittle and loose. Sand through my fingers, in my shoe. I found grains everywhere but never had the patience to count them. Those moments bound in a three-month span weren't definitive. They felt like loose change in the couch cushions.

So, when Heather had mentioned the marble, the tile, the street name like she had tattooed it in her skin, I couldn't place it exactly. But now it starts to color as my foot finds the gas, and the Prius lights a burning trail to Gram's apartment.

Our affair wasn't expected, hadn't happened as easily as two fingers snapping. I had first learned Wyland was back in town three years ago, and the way I learned it made me feel like a townie. I had been birthed from the Burling Gates cloth, and knowing the one boy I had loved forever and truly had moved back to town made one thing evident: I had never moved away.

"You knew him, right, Vienna?" Mrs. Marks, the school librarian had asked me as our hands brushed past one another folding sweaters, whipping straight wrinkled pants. We were in the gymnasium, setting out clothing for the school's charity drive. I had volunteered for the last eight years, breaking my strict "avoid Burling Gates like the plague" policy every winter because I knew full well that Loretta hadn't just brought me and my brother clothes from the church's basement when we were younger. I knew Loretta picked from these same rectangular folding tables when the home was of-

ficially purchased, and the pot of money between Dad and Loretta was more like a coin purse. And even though Loretta had scrimped, saved, and sacrificed for a man who would always be committed entirely to his dead wife, I knew she had never once mentioned to the volunteering mothers who the stacks of shirts and pants were for, the soft scent of bodies in their seams. I was eternally grateful for that.

"Yes." That's as much as I could offer my old librarian, whose fingers were sucked dry and whose skin reminded me of thinly sliced headcheese. It was as if Wyland had walked in that moment, and I was caught in the thick of it, the reality that venturing out and becoming somebody was never an option for me.

After that day, I started to do my hair and slick my lips with the best shades of lipstick. I started dressing better, opting for spring-time dresses, knee-high boots instead of cut-offs or galoshes. My paycheck was saved for the mere purpose of pretending I earned more than I did. But for the longest time, I didn't see him. Six months. Six months until courage balled its fist and knocked against my breastbone. I drove by Turnbull Realty. I parked near the curb a couple of storefronts down. I waited.

What I hadn't expected to see was Heather behind the wheel of the Turnbull's old Lincoln Town Car. "The Boat" as Wyland coined it when I would sit next to him strapped in the back, and Mrs. Turnbull would arc her gnat-like body with the wheel's direction. We'd get ice cream—a treat for Wyland, a secret for me—and Mrs. Turnbull would smile and nod to no one in that way she did. The spark from her diamond earring would set our booth ablaze, and a feeling washed hard at my dirty creases. Respect.

It was part of the reason why I've avoided Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull since graduating high school. Their door was "always open." They were "here" for me as was evident of Margaret Turnbull suffocating me in her chest the day of my mother's viewing. But their offers fell on my scarred ears, and the message was received like static through

a speaker. I didn't want them to know how hot my failure stung. I didn't want them to know me as the girl who never left Burling Gates, so I became accustomed to swerving around aisles in the grocery store, avoiding the packed waiting room at the doctor's office, just so I wouldn't have to compile a list of lies to caulk the cleaved joints of my life.

When I had seen Heather stumble The Boat into a space just two spots in front of me, it was this same avoidance that punched the clock in my heart. I wanted to strain my car around and sit locked in my cold, shelled room, stabbing my pencil in circles until I could shade the exact shape of my misery. But fear glued my thighs to the seat, and instead, I watched as the one woman who knew how to break me—even better than my mother—dissected the dirty fall leaves with purposed feet. Heather was still with him, which meant he wouldn't be with me.

That night, Rosa had drug me out to The Watering Hole, a club crusted with locals, built with obnoxiously loud women and men looking for a conquest or forgetting their last. The place had malted, sticky with breath and spilled drinks. In my knotted gut, I knew there might be a few people I'd recognize there, the fistful of classmates who were left behind alongside me and Rosa and the misguided who were more than pleased to call Burling Gates home. I was scared someone would spot me, and I fingered the dark with both eyes but already knew Wyland wouldn't be one of them.

“Just tell me why,” Rosa said. We perched on tall stools at a round table, two birds in a tree a stone's throw from the floor. We drank martinis—Rosa's contribution, claiming I deserved a drink, and even though I never drink unless it's with Troy, I took her up on the offer. The stabbed line of olives kept poking at my lip.

“I don't—”

“Don't tell me you don't know. We both know how long you've loved him. And we both know how long you've been aware that he's

married. So why bother with him?" There was no avoiding Rosa's question. With a mane of hair, pony-tailed and draped over her sleeveless shoulder, Rosa was a body with force, curved and unavoidable.

"Because it's not okay. Rosa, I don't think it's supposed to be this way. I wasn't supposed to fail. And now he'll know I did." When my tongue moved the "f" through my teeth, tears fell. Rosa stood up and came to my side, her anchored arms sliding around my waist, and I found a mound of hair, a nest to fall into. Someone in the club had whistled at us.

It would be okay because of Rosa, and because I had a job, and because it probably wasn't the most soul-sucking thing in the world to live where you were born even if the thought felt akin to the concept of defecating where I ate. I was determined to take a new approach, enmeshed in the intricacies of a working funeral home, setting up easier modes of information storage, making myself known with the different distributors that kept the home stocked with chemicals and coffins. For over two years, I became accustomed to Dad looking at me differently, filling up my coffee mug a minute before I entered the break room. His version of "thank you."

It had felt almost right for a while, and there had even been chatter in my head of sewing up a pair of big girl panties and putting a down payment on a house. I looked for a while, opting for an agent with Kiplinger Properties to show me around because I was over Wyland. I was an adult now.

"As you can see, this one won't stay on the market long. Updated, fresh paint, enough closet space to fit a family of five!" Eleanor Kiplinger was more scent than woman. She was a petunia with two stumpy legs and a behind that fought against her pantsuit. Her voice talked to the double-paned windows, the Berber carpet. Soon I was wrapped so tight in Eleanor's sound, I hardly noticed the way it never paused to breathe.

I had touched everything in that house until it felt a part of me. Everything seemed cold, but in a good way, a clean way. The faucet bit, the toilet chilled, the floor ran up my arm, an army of bumps. Eleanor raised an eyebrow when I had crouched down, but I hadn't cared. I wanted this place. I wanted this future.

"Hello, hello, hello!" A voice, a man's boomed through the front door and caught Eleanor's off guard. I immediately stopped touching the floor.

"I'm sorry Eleanor, I think we're a little early. You mind if I show these folks around? I have an appointment at two." There could have been one or a hundred of them. I didn't notice how many people had elbowed through the doorway because I could feel my organs moving in my stomach. He didn't look the same, not the high school Wyland. Not the Wyland who had sent photos from Chicago until I had stopped writing back. His hair was cut, shorn as close to his head as I had ever witnessed it. A few curls struggled to straighten themselves. They looked confused.

"That's fine, Wyland. I think we're finishing up here." Eleanor glanced at me, sizing my reaction. She was given a side profiled fish stare, my lower lip disconnected from my top, my eyes popped and bright as bulbs.

"Hi," he said to me, and the couple behind him nodded. The child at their legs raced his tiny car across my freshly painted windowsills. I could see my adult dream pop a hole with each furious squeal of the car's plastic wheels. I smiled and followed Eleanor's scent out the front door.

"So?" Eleanor had asked, and I replied with "I have to think about it." And, of course, I did but not about the house.

He called three days later. Said a buddy of his worked with Eleanor "The Ice Queen" and snuck a look at her planner to find my number. Wyland's voice on my cell re-invited itself into my ear. I lost

a real sense of Vienna Oaks from that moment on. I lost sleep, lost weight. I lost my nerve.

“What if she finds out?” I had asked in the kitchen, the one with the black and white tile. My mind finds its fingers, kneads the memory. In the car, my skin paces a snail’s crawl, and it feels like it’s a being beyond myself. The thought of Heather’s back against the outside wall—her head and hands heavy with grief—buries its splinters so deep, I have to pinch and pull to feel them.

“She won’t. All she does is stay at home. It’s pathetic.” He had taken a swig of the coffee I had brought him. I watched the way his lips curved around the plastic lid in someone else’s kitchen. I had wanted to feel those lips, the ones I had sketched in my room. The ones I’d think about in bed, in high school when I’d shut my eyes and pretend he was breathing there with me. So, it made sense to me, sitting at a table in someone else’s house, discussing the detailed steps of an affair I could taste along with the air freshener Wyland had soaked the living room with. The soured notes of chemical lavender had made their bed in my teeth.

“I’m sorry,” I had said before I could stop myself. I struggled my hand across the oak table and toured his bared skin with my fingertips. The apology hadn’t been for him at all but for his wife, the woman who had made my minutes into nightmares as a child. And even though Heather had changed the very DNA that danced and twirled to the beat of who I was—made it fearful, made it tremble—it no longer mattered. Heather Hammel was pathetic. Heather Hammel was on the losing end.

The car clips a curb as I turn. A soft “dang it” escapes my lips. I straighten the wheel and drive into a parking spot, and I watch as the nerves in my hands quiver. I have a hard time turning off the engine.

I know the impossible—that my love is stacked and assembled for a boy, a girl, and a ghost. A hard-edged love for Wyland. A fearful love for Heather. A love for myself before I ever pushed my mother

into a permanent sleep. I think how I'm the only one in the world who's screwed as tight as a nail in the wall.

But then I look up and see Troy through the window.

Chapter Twelve

Heather

There was an intense resilience that came with every bite of sweet and sour chicken. The food court was too bright, and the sounds were candied, dripping with sugar. People were not people but the carnival versions of themselves. Teenaged girls were barely dressed. Children screamed bright red. Blood vessels were bursting in their cheeks. But the chicken blurred her recognition with each sweet bite.

Flesh in teeth, Heather listened to the soft and welcomed sound of grinding. She remembered the first day she had started truly eating again, breaking her middle school pledge to avoid all food, especially the stuff that caked the pans in her mother's kitchen. If it hadn't been for plucking the good parts from Amber and Rachel's lunches and later inhaling plastic cupped samples from the Manor Market, she probably wouldn't have survived long enough to create the plan linking her to Wyland forever.

It was a warm afternoon the summer before her senior year, just a few weeks after the gnome lost its face. She started working at Aurelio's, the Italian sandwich shop two storefronts down from Turnbull Realty. It was the only place she had applied to, the only place within walking distance of Wyland's summer job that she knew would automatically hire her. Aurelio had a temper, and none of the kids in the competing high schools wanted anything to do with him, not even for a paycheck. But Heather was willing to sacrifice for even the smallest glimpse of Wyland answering the phone, a pencil distracted with the curls above his ear.

The work was easy enough. Ten o'clock in, six o'clock out. Heather's father had recently wired her money for a new car, a present wrapped with an imaginary bow as wide and long as his guilt.

She took the bus by herself to the lot pretending she knew enough not to get swindled, and when she left, she fit snugly in a powder blue Corolla. Her palm was slick from shaking hands with a salesman named Gabe, who kept eying a blond walking through the maze of cars in her stringy pair of cutoffs.

“Want to trade jobs?” Heather had been wrist deep in pizza dough, kneading a fleshy mound and beating her palms into the subconscious worry that a slanted stack of papers would surely fall onto her mother before six. She looked up and there his face was, his green eyes. The two determined lips she had taken to describing in the journal she stuffed nightly in her underwear drawer.

“Only if your father isn’t hell bent on minimum wage,” Heather said. She regretted the personal taste of it, mentioning Wyland’s father as if she willingly swung from every branch of his family tree. But Wyland just smirked in his blue button-down and green checkered tie, his shirt sleeves rolled up so a fine golden sheen haloed from his forearms.

“How have you been?” he asked.

The truth was trying to swivel up her spine to find her tongue, but she quickly smiled and said, “Great. Really great.” The truth never changed clothes. It was always dressed in her mother’s cotton nightgown—in the stink that carpeted their hardwood floors and the late-night trips she took to Manor Market for packs of bras and economy sized boxes of tampons she bought with the money her father sent to support them. Sometimes, the lady would still be working, the one peddling Swedish meatballs or nacho cheese the color of a dying sun. Heather would take a tiny bowl of orange glue from the lady’s gloved hand and furtively scoop it with its accompanying shards of tortilla chips. Her fingers, warm and coated. Her mouth, sticky. It felt like sinning.

She smiled when Wyland smiled. “What can I get you?”

His order was for the whole office, but when it came to his sandwich, he made sure she knew it was for him. "White please, can't stand wheat." She nodded and got to work on the four sandwiches and three salads and tried to still the nervous chill threatening to loosen her bowels. She watched him sit in one of the booths, his back to her so she could play with his hair in her mind. He paid, a check scribbled with his father's name, and when she said, "Bye" she bit her lip and refrained from obsessing over the fact that he hadn't called but ordered in person.

Bologna on white, lettuce, tomato, and pickles. Mustard no mayo. Swiss cheese. She made it for break, putting a handful of grimy cash into the register and ate it in one of the booths as Gina, Aurelio's wife, complained about the lack of customers. There were several starts and stops in Heather's chest as the fear of Wyland walking back in to find her eating his favorite sandwich ruined her gut. She couldn't finish it, tossing the mess of it in the trash and then locked herself in the bathroom. She vomited it up. The taste of bologna plagued her breath into evening.

She made it every day though, after he'd come in, and they'd deepen their conversations. Favorite TV shows, places they'd visited (Heather had lied through her anxious teeth), colleges they'd apply to in the fall.

"University of Chicago? Me, too," she said, and his smile was golden, his broad mouth taking on a shade close to that of his curls. A lie, of course. She hadn't even thought about Chicago, but she liked that it was far away from her mother. And close enough to Wyland.

It seemed like thousands of afternoons of conversations, of half-eaten sandwiches, of toilet bowls filled with her nervous stomach. Then the afternoon came that split Heather like a hair.

"Shut up, I'm not. You are." The voice was silk, laughing through Aurelio's opened glass door. The bell tinkled. Heather's stomach said "Hello," in her ears.

“Hey Heather, the usual. And what do you want, Vienna?” Wyland said, shoulder-to-shoulder with something that towered beautifully above Heather’s five-two frame. Vienna Oaks. It was like seeing a celebrity in person. Or the one human being Heather would have liked eradicated from the earth.

“Oh, um. I don’t care. Whatever Wyland’s having.” She didn’t look Heather in the eye. Even the high school version, the full-breasted, small-waisted Vienna was still scared of Heather, hair net and all. Heather nodded and assembled the meats and cheeses like cards in a deck. Her hands processed each order until she forgot they were strictly a part of her and not something gratefully separate from the struggle inside her chest.

“It’s ready,” she said when the sandwiches were packed cigar tight in white paper and the salads were housed in their boxes. She wanted to say more as Wyland came up and stood at the register, Vienna still invisibly straight-jacketed in a booth. But a line formed behind him. For the first time in weeks, a solid stream of lunch customers.

“Thanks. See you Monday?” he asked, and she nodded. She served straight through until break when the crowd calmed, and no one was left except for Heather and Gina, who complained about “Heartbreak Hotel” drifting through the radio. Heather didn’t pay for one sandwich that lunch break. She paid for three. She couldn’t feel Gina’s eyes burning through her back as she made each one with a determined set of hands. She couldn’t hear the sad leak of music or the cars snorting out in the street when she sat down to eat. All she could taste was bologna and mustard tangled in lettuce and the pleasure of knowing she would be attending college with Wyland in the fall if it were the last thing she did.

She didn’t vomit any of it.

The sweet and sour chicken was gone. Heather had been staring into space, and now that space was filled with the damaged heads of teenagers. One of them, a boy with a hook in his lip mimicked

her, staring like a dead fish until she blinked and gathered her plates. The table erupted in laughter; someone called her an idiot. Nobody stopped, not even as she managed her belly in full view. Her throat was burning. She wanted to release her tears so badly that the thought worked methodically at her muscles. But she kept them in, swallowed the heat. She threw her trash away and hitched her bag up on her shoulder. Heather headed to the women's department.

She hadn't been shopping in a large stretch of time. She purchased a few things online, things she prayed would make themselves scarce on their credit card bill before Wyland saw it, but there was no use hoping for that. She was always let down.

"A hundred and fifty dollars. For pants?" Wyland would read off the bills like table reading a script. He'd wait a beat then hit the punch line with inscrutable force. "A pair of pants that will last you a few more months and then what? You planning on starting a hand-made tent business?" Ba-dum-dum.

She'd sit as still as possible during these monthly reports, her bladder reaching into all parts of herself, sneaking into her ears and saying horrid things like, "Just release me, it will feel wonderful. Plus, this is his favorite chair. That'll show the jerk." She'd ignore the voice no matter how much sense it made and opted for growing Wyland's curls in her mind until he became the boy she had known by heart.

"It's just hard being around Amber and Rachel and not having anything nice..." She'd become those girls she always hated during these conversations. The girls she'd label mousy, spineless, their song fashioned from repetitious squeaks and the overwhelming need to please.

"Nice? I'm working my tail end off for 'nice'? We have a plan, Heather, a budget. And if we actually stick to it, we'll have money to—oh I don't know—retire one day in a place that has a roof and indoor plumbing. If your friends are so concerned with how you dress, then why do you bother with them anyway?" His face was not the

boy's she had known by heart. The boy she had known by heart had bought an ugly recliner on a whim. But the man she lived with had a face that twisted like his father's did when the holidays came but the sales didn't. There would be turkey and a side of silence while Owen Turnbull worked reality out in his head. His youngest son functioned the same way, his thoughts hardwired in the nerves of his face.

"I have no one else," Heather would reply, and the conversation would boil forth, but she'd be stuck in that one moment no matter how high and hard Wyland's arms would reach to the sky. She had no one else. Yes, that was the truth of it. But the other truth was a stone she set to polishing in the evenings, the mornings, and the chunk of time sitting fat and squat in the middle. It was knowing that her friendship with two people whose husbands made more, did better in life than her own, was to spite Wyland and to make sure he knew what it felt like to be "less than." She wasn't sure it was working.

Her eyes adjusted to Macy's, a dull light that lit the path of Heather's thoughts. She avoided the mirrors knowing they were only good for noticing panty lines and her goiter of a stomach. She pressed her palm there, felt for Dolores's jumpy limbs.

Her husband had wanted a boy. So did his father. It was an unsettling string knotted around her ankles knowing other people had wanted to place their bets on her uterus and knowing full well that all they'd get in return was disappointment. That was the sharpest pin that stabbed, that someone could take something so perfect and send their expectations through it like a hairline fracture.

But Dolores didn't seem to mind. She was strong, and punching, and reminded Heather that bucking up was the only option on the table. And that's why Heather couldn't blame Vienna for trying to break her down, slicing her chest and opening her wide. Vienna's child wasn't a real thing inside her yet, a purpose. Vienna had nothing to stop her tongue and straighten her upright. She could only

fold cheap, table-like, and pray that the man who had done the damage would free her on his own accord.

Heather felt unnaturally sorry for Vienna Oaks.

“Can I help you?” A saleslady said, “Melinda” engraved on her nametag, sharp sticks poking out of the bun in her hair. Her lips were too red and were the only things Heather could focus on, especially when the lady snarled her nose. She could smell the urine that had dried in the fabric of Heather’s sweats.

“No. Just looking for something for my mom.” Heather shoudered through the racks and touched a set of blue polyester jackets for effect.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Melinda squawked ten feet away from Heather, the stench pushing her back practically to the purse counter. Heather nodded and kept smacking the hangers with her swollen fingers, the sound crushing the realization that her pregnant brain had driven her to the mall in a pair of urine-stained pants.

“The maternity section is upstairs.” Another voice but this one inches behind her. Heather didn’t want to turn around. She spotted the exit mere yards ahead and weighed her options. Sprinting would probably not be in her best interest.

“Or are you picking out an apology gift for me?”

Heather turned around, slowly soaking in the dull-colored racks under the dull-colored lights until Amber’s jolt-red hair seized her pupils.

“My mom needs an outfit for her funeral tomorrow. She’s dead. Remember?” Heather said, turning back to the racks, a circuitous prayer wrapping around her fingers like rosary beads: *Please don’t let her smell the pee.*

“I haven’t forgotten. In fact, I want to say I’m sorry. I was going to call you later, but now that you’re here... Do you smell that? Geez, this place is really going to pot. The least they could do is clean

their carpets.” Heather nodded, a laugh escaping her nostrils. She disguised it with her hand and pretended she had sneezed.

“Are you okay? You don’t look too great.” *That makes two of us*, Heather thought as Amber forced her way into Heather’s line of sight. Amber’s eyes were lost in the dark heavy flesh settling beneath them. Her teeth were stained with pink lipstick, and where the concealer around her nostrils had faded revealed a pathway of intersecting blood vessels. A button on her top was nestled in the wrong hole, and when she moved, Heather could see her bra peeping through the gap.

“I know it must be rough because of your mom. Heather, I just don’t think you really understand what you’re doing with Vienna. It’s not healthy.”

“And you know healthy?” Heather bit her lip, but the words still slipped. For a moment she could see it in Amber’s eyes, the empty bottles of wine, the messes her daughters made, paying a mortgage that teetered sky high above a pediatrician’s salary. Waving all of it away with her diamond-ringed fingers.

Amber swallowed, and Heather waited while her bladder and nerves started to speak up.

“Listen, I’d like to be there for you tomorrow. I put Sienna and Sierra in that preschool program I was telling you about, so I’ll be free.”

Heather could feel her bladder releasing but she quickly put a stop to it. “What?”

“Got them the best program in Blythesville, seven days a week. Wouldn’t dare put them in at Burling Gates. Gag me,” Amber said, her pointer finger reaching for the back of her throat. Amber reverted to her typical antics, and Heather felt compelled to roll her eyes high in her head but restrained herself.

“I just need some time to recuperate from the Bonnie thing. That’s why I let Rachel drag me to this poor excuse of a mall while

she buys that kid another outfit it doesn't need." Amber looped her pointer finger through the delicate chain of her necklace. "I mean, how am I supposed to raise the girls when I can't even get my head together?" Heather didn't know how to answer that. Despite Amber looking a tad off her game, she was the one with gold bangles on her wrists and diamonds in her ears, whereas Heather was the one scented in her own bodily fluids.

"But anyway, I want to be there for you. And I don't want us to fight." While Amber studied an unruly cuticle, Heather assessed her situation. She wanted nothing to do with Amber, but she knew Wyland wanted her to have nothing to do with Amber too. Her spite won out.

"Sure. That would be great. I'm sorry too," she added, the lie dissolving like a bitter lozenge in her throat. At the very least there would be someone in her corner when the casket closed, and her existence boiled down to herself and a being that hadn't even witnessed life's globed brutality yet. Even if Amber's motive was purely guilt alleviating, Heather would take it, if not for her own sake, then to punish Vienna and Wyland for abandoning her. For leaving her powerless.

"Good. I'll be there in the morning. And call me tonight if you need to talk or anything," Amber said, bull rushing Heather into a wine-scented hug. The past seeped through their skins, and Heather's memory kick started, landing into a sleepover at Amber's years ago. Amber had woken up in the middle of the night catching Heather mid-cry in the bathroom, and the white-cold feel of that moment traveled through the racks in the department store. Moonlight had segmented an orange slice onto the tile floor. Heather's body silent, a wind shaking through her nerves like loosely tethered leaves. Amber nodding in an oversized Alf t-shirt, an "I'm sorry" quiet on her lips because Heather's dad was gone. He would never come back. And Amber would never say a word to anyone about it.

"Thanks." The word was weak and traveled to Heather's feet, but Amber smiled at her anyway.

"Do you guys smell that?" Rachel shuffled in behind Amber with both fists clutching a series of Macy's bags, Viola seemingly duck taped to her front in a wrap carrier.

"Yeah, let's get out of here before the stench premeditates," Amber said.

"Permeates?" Rachel asked.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, this year's spelling bee winner has graced us with her presence," Amber said, whipping her arm out and barely missing Viola's head. "See you tomorrow," she said to Heather, who nodded as Rachel hissed, "Sorry about your mother."

They left to enter the cavity of the candy-coated mall, and Heather did the only thing that would make the moment easier to cradle in her hands. She stole.

It wasn't the nicest outfit. It didn't even look like her mother. It was the color of a swollen bruise, and the skirt was the type of thing nobody would be comfortable wearing a lifetime in death. But it didn't have a security tag, and nobody said the thing had to fit. So, Heather shoved it into her bag, a stench-scarred Melinda at the parameter of her vision. She decided to go out the exit to her right and walk around to her car parked near the food court. The air would do her good or at least keep her knees from buckling.

As she walked scot-free to the set of glass double doors, she glimpsed herself in a trailing mirror.

She really needed a shower.

Chapter Thirteen

Vienna

A mess of *National Enquirers* puddles onto the floor beneath Gram's coffee table. It had been my job as a child to go and rearrange the "newspapers" in the home's downstairs bathroom—the client bathroom—and place them back in the basket next to the toilet. "Might take their mind off things," Gram had said.

Troy finally makes contact with my eyes. He's strung out. His pupils have no place to go, uncomfortable in their sockets. His fingers are nicotine-tinged, grasping an empty bottle of Jack, and I remember those fingers stroking our mother's hair when she would lie on her back on the living room floor. "You are the greatest thing, Troy," my mother's breath would say. Her arms and legs would swim like a snowless angel. I would watch them, knees to chin, affixed to the living room recliner. Now Troy's fingers pull and pinch at a scab on his face.

"She here?" Gram's voice is lighter shoved against four walls than inside the earpiece of a phone. She walks into the living room from the short spurt of hallway space. She makes sounds that are hard for me to digest.

It's even harder to look at her.

Beautiful. That's what people called Gram when she was still Frances Molony and her cinnamon hair flirted with the curve above her buttocks. But she isn't Frances Molony or even Frannie Oaks. She's just Fran now—hair grey and curled, defiant against the crown of her head, her limbs fat and burdened with the crux of living and a tooth is missing at the side of her mouth. She reaches down to tie her shoe, and the bandage on her left leg buckles and spreads the mouth-watering reek of infection.

“Yeah.” A simple syllable from Troy’s direction. “She’s here.” I can feel the world stumble and start as Gram works her breath and body upright. I think “beautiful” and believe it, even though it should taste like a lie.

“Welcome to my humble abode.” She shuffles around to the recliner and pops its footrest like an erect tongue. It’s the same chair that sat in my childhood living room. The same chair my mother used to stuff vial-sized bottles of alcohol into. He couldn’t stand it anymore, my father, so he donated it to his mother’s apartment—a “parting gift,” as Gram put it. It’s the color of dishwater. Dingy and lifeless. It fits the apartment perfectly.

“Thanks for finally having me,” I choke. My skin cures with sweat, and there’s still a hint of fruit on my fingers, even though I’ve washed them clean with a handy wipe from Loretta’s glove compartment. There is no air pumping through the vents, no windows open. The outside stays where it belongs behind an accordion shade and a sheer curtain stained from the curls of Troy’s smoke. In the car, I had swallowed a handful of chalky meds after Troy stopped peeking from the window, and the blind popped back in place. I should have swallowed the bottle.

Gram grunts and picks at a twisted cluster of hair above her ear. “I’m not the one having you. Your brother—” Fran pauses and rubs hard between her breasts. A wheeze drives a bullet of spit onto her slacks. “Ow...your brother orchestrated whatever the heck this is, and I told him I’d be willing to talk to you.”

“Don’t make it sound so innocent,” Troy says. His finger works the roofed sections of the shade. It zips with each hard swipe. “You need her.”

“For what?” I ask. I rub my nose and look at the corner of Gram’s peeling apartment. The odor is dancing, talking, running its perverted fingers through my hair. Greasy taco wrappers heap into a wobbly mound around the trash can in the kitchen. They’ve become a

tiny, wet, sweating monster. I concentrate on it to keep from staring at Gram's flirting wound. To keep from tasting it.

"He won't talk to me."

"Dad?"

"No." Gram nods at the photo of Granddad on a warped sofa table shoved against the wall. There's a small TV there, a blank-faced plastic box keeping watch over a man who smiles gaunt-faced in a suit.

"You don't visit him."

"Would you?" she asks, addressing the wound that rots on her leg. *No, I think. I wouldn't want him to see me that way either.*

"I write him, though. I write him every week, and he used to write back, and now he refuses to." Gram strums her clump of hair. Her nail is eclipsed in a dirty shadow. When her hair used to be auburn, and she would fit the stiff drum of her body into multi-colored swirls of rayon, she would watch Troy and me for the summer at the home while Mom used the time to "sober up." I would watch my grandparents from Granddad's office floor, paper and crayons a mere excuse to feel the way they interacted in my skin. Two people who loved each other, a modest, heart-sparking sort of love. The only time I saw something similar from my parents, it was my mother contorted into my father's heavy, tired arms, and in the act of leaning into each other, they began dancing, swaying at their hips. It could have been something lovely if Mom would have quieted her dreadful sobbing or if Dad wasn't drying a small clump of vomit on his shoulder. But still, there was a quiet beauty there in our living room that night, an intimate need for their bodies to keep them upright.

"You don't know how it feels," she whispers. Her hands are out of her hair. They are lost in her lap.

"No, I don't know," I say.

Gram pulls a wilted tissue from her pocket. She blows with her entire body, and the last shake she takes into her hands leaves her

body still. "Uh...his last letter. That one was a real groin kicker," Gram says. She massages her lower lip with her upper one, a line of wrinkles along her mouth working like piano keys. "He said I'm disgraceful or something. Doesn't like what I've said to you, your father, that money hungry fool clinging to Elbert like a foot wart."

"Loretta isn't a foot wart," I say. It was hard to understand as a child how Loretta—the woman who swept in moments after my mother's death—could be anything other than a flesh disease. It's easier as an adult knowing how she sacrificed just so I could go to school with clean clothes on my back, and my father could play house in the home. A woman who would spend all her time, all her money without a chance of a ring on her finger is hopelessly hopeful. But a foot wart she isn't.

"Defend her all you want. It was her money and that grocery store's that took away the only life I ever knew." Gram's brown eyes are expiring. Death ash black, the same color they turned the early morning Granddad was arrested, and she stood barefoot in our living room, speechless. Her feet were as dark as her irises, having walked the half-mile to our house. I don't argue with her, don't say it was Granddad's poor choices that ruined everything Gram was accustomed to. I don't say Granddad may have hammered the stake, but she was the one who wedged the divide.

"So why now? Why does he care now what you've done to us?" I give one of the bland white walls of Gram's apartment my meanest stare, and as my vision hazes, I become entrenched in my mother's viewing. "Forgive me," my father had said that day, his arms hooked around his dead wife's neck. An anchor. A blabbering fool. An embarrassment in a pair of wrinkled pants. His knees kicked against the coffin having a fit with the lacquered wood. The crowd had thinned out. Troy was outside getting high behind the shed where coffins were sheltered and stacked. Gram was in the bathroom, presumably reshuffling a heap of Enquirers to keep from watching her only child

collapse like a dead star. Granddad was there, close to my shoulder. His quiet was always the loud sort packing my ears with the vital hum of existing. He placed a heavy hand on my shoulder, a guilty hand knowing if he were ever caught for illegally selling bottles and bottles of formaldehyde, the only person who could stand in his place was clawing at a cold body and buckling at the knees.

“He sent that letter a while ago,” she admits. “But I haven’t stopped writing.” I want to ask her how long it’s been since she’s heard from my grandfather, but I’m afraid I’ll lose her if I do. I wonder if my father knows any of this—that Gram doesn’t visit Granddad, that Granddad has stopped writing. He doesn’t talk about his visits. He keeps them all for himself.

“Then why are you asking for my help now?” I ask.

“She’s lost. She has no purpose.” Troy’s voice moves slowly at me, but it’s so soft, I can hardly grasp it. The light of his cigarette quickly catches up to his fingers. He digs it into a plate on the coffee table, smoldering out any leftover spark. “She’s finally realized this.”

I look up at Gram, and she avoids my eyes. Anyone else and Gram would have summoned the energy to pop them in the mouth but not Troy who’s smirking at the dirty air.

“What do you need me to do?”

“He’d talk to you. So, I need you to see him. Tell him I’ve changed,” she says. “I’m changing,” Gram adds and rolls her eyes to the water-stained ceiling.

I can’t speak for a small moment. He is different and old now, Granddad. He lives in a cold little room, and that’s where he sits in my mind, his long limbs clothed in pajamas, his suits having been burned into stale heaps of ash. He only exists now when I need him to—when Wyland has broken me, or has gotten me pregnant, or my father buries his affection under the flint-sharp stones of reality. But all the other times Granddad’s placed back in his cinderblock room,

a dolly no longer needed. A man whose heart is lost and possibly ca-vorting out in the ether with my own.

“Okay,” I say, not the way Troy would say it for Gram’s benefit, for the benefit of keeping their damaged wounds smothered in the same salve. I say it for myself. “I don’t know if he’ll add me to his vis-itor list, but I’ll send him an email. See what he says.”

“Okay” Gram mumbles, her attention stolen by a stash of bills and their envelope tongues papering the counter in the kitchen. “Send this too, will ya?” Gram grunts out of the recliner and limps with precision to the TV stand. Next to the framed picture of Granddad, there’s a box and Fran reaches her hand into the cavity and retrieves a sealed envelope. “Give him this if you can. And don’t read it.”

“Wouldn’t think of it,” I say. Gram nods and stands in front of me. The shielded glow from the window burns her edges, and this dark version of her is more like her old self. I stand up inches in front of my grandmother and swallow Gram’s lump of “criminy,” as her thickly cut arms hug me tight.

“Eat something. Seriously. That brother of yours knows where the good tacos are if you haven’t noticed,” Gram says nodding at the overflowing trash can. I smile and receive the empty feel of standing alone.

“All right, enough of the family reunion. I’ll show the Sausage out.” Troy picks himself up and sways, finding his balance. He takes me gently by the wrist, and I trail my brother as Gram shouts, “And don’t mention this to that busybody father of yours! And tell him I want those cuff—” Troy shuts the door behind us on “links,” and my eyes take a beating from the sun. We walk out to the Prius, and Troy kicks the busted-up bumper. “What happened here?”

“I had a lot on my mind, except for the curb apparently.”

“That’s what you get for going eco-friendly, my friend.”

“Actually, that’s what Loretta gets for going eco-friendly. I just get to save up and have her bumper replaced.” The density of the situation takes a swipe at my stomach, but I hardly notice. I’m focused on Gram, Granddad, the thought of mending relationships I had deemed broken and placed in the garage sale pile of my mind.

“The cat lady lets you use her ride, huh? Pretty sweet deal.” Troy reaches into his back pocket for his smokes. In the sun, he is out of place. His khaki shorts hang low on his hips and are stained with splashes the color of coffee.

“Why is it she gets on to me for not eating when you look like you could use a sandwich?” I say, nodding at Gram’s apartment.

“What can I say, Sausage? T-Rex is untouchable.” I laugh and roll my eyes at him but stop when I see his unlit cigarette limp against his thigh.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. He shakes his head. His hair is our mother’s, his daughter’s. It’s the only golden thing about him.

“That thing I said. About Gram and regret or whatever.”

“You mean her feeling lost and finally realizing it?”

“Yeah. That.” Troy flicks the cigarette into his mouth and brandishes a flame that licks the tip. He puffs and his cheeks form hollow caves. “I feel it too.”

I nod. I want to sit down and plan out his future, help him save up, get him to the doctor. My stomach bottoms out when I realize I know all the ways to help my brother and can’t even summon one way to help myself.

“I miss her. Maya. And Rosa if you want to know the truth. I’m just...tired. Of being this way, feeling like my heart could stall in a blink. I want to see her.”

“Troy, I don’t know—”

“Yes, you do. You could help me out. I know Rosa probably doesn’t want anything to do with me, but if I can at least see Maya, be there for her, maybe Rosa would give me another chance.” His eyes

are cozy, thickly blanketed in delusion. I just nod, knowing if I don't, he might do what I know he's capable of. It doesn't matter that Maya is seventeen and on her way out the door or that Rosa is too smart to fall for someone whose blood courses with booze. What matters is nodding and saying, "I'll help you" because I love my brother and loving my brother is a lot simpler than letting him down and suffering the consequences. The cat hearts flirt with my mind, but I stave off their advances.

"I'll see what I can do," I say and stabilize myself for Troy's inebriated hug. He pushes into me, and I push back to keep from falling off the curb of the sidewalk. We're dancing in the sunlight, in the parking lot of the Royal Pines apartment complex, in front of a crooked-nosed Prius. My full belly spins, and I wait for my mind to halt and engulf the sound of our shoes scraping against concrete, but it doesn't. It keeps moving to that horrible night. To the sight of my mother's eyes confused and questioning as she falls to the ground. I push hard and take him in, swallowing my breath as fast as I can.

"Thank you, Sausage. Thank you!" Troy laughs as we spiral in a sloppy loop. I look up to see Gram spying on us from the window. My grandmother squints then rolls her eyes. The shade snaps back in place, blocking the sun.

I leave Troy in the parking lot with his hand lazily shading his eyes. I want to pretend everything is okay, and I do for the few moments it takes me to pull out of the apartment complex to find a clearing on the side of the road. I pull over, and the traffic passes me by—flashes of color dashing past my shoulders, my shaky hands. I lean over into a ditch lined with weeds I would have mistaken as flowers when I was a little girl and set my stomach free.

Chapter Fourteen

Heather

Heather watched her husband chew a bite of broccoli, tough it out with a mouthful of chicken, and recount his golf game as if he had been personally invited to the U.S. Open.

“You should have seen Mark’s dumb butt shank it. You could tell he was pretty burned up over my drives.” Wyland shook his head, the ligaments in his tieless neck straining against his skin. She wondered where in his thoughts Vienna’s pregnancy played. He didn’t seem overly worried about it—an act probably but the thought scared her, how he could keep his world spinning with a smile on his face even as chunks of it flew off mid-rotation.

Heather smirked at her plate. He had something in common with Amber that way.

Heather’s thoughts ventured to the mall, how she had left the department store stiff in dried urine, stolen goods snug in her bag. She had thought of going home to shower first, but a sympathy bubbled where she imagined Dolores’s heart rested. She decided to go to Oaks first and give Vienna her mother’s suit. She’d try to make things better because she felt as sorry for Vienna as she felt for her pee-soaked self. She didn’t know where they stood after Vienna sped off, and Heather festered in her mother’s front yard. But she was tired of intensifying Vienna’s pain and needed Vienna to absolve her of it. The sobering thought of relying on nobody but Amber at the funeral also played its part in keeping her foot pinned to the accelerator.

“Hello, welcome,” Elbert Oaks had said when Heather arrived at the funeral home. He had walked over to her and gently took the hand floating at her side, jiggling it in two fluid shakes and placing his hand on her shoulder. “Now, what may I do for you?”

“Um, I’m just here to see Vienna. I have my mother’s outfit for her funeral tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s right, forgive me. For Caroline Hammel?”

“Yes,” Heather said. Elbert shook his head, and his hair took flight. It was an odd thing, a grown man with strands bursting forth from a layer of gel, but Heather took to the way he looked her in the eye like he could accurately place her grief. She could forgive him his appearance since he had apparently forgiven Heather hers.

“Let me get our makeup artist. She’s been working with your mother this afternoon, and I know she’ll be ready to dress her soon. Excuse me a moment.” He walked down a hall that curled to the right. She could hear a door squeaking heavily at its hinges. It was cold in the foyer. Music cackled through an overhead speaker. She categorized it somewhere between “background noise” and “pain.”

Heather walked to a large, framed oil painting on the wall. It was of two people, a tall man—his eyebrows cleanly arched and his mouth set tight—and a woman the size and shape of a barrel but with a face striking like a hot tipped match. “Deluca and Frances Oaks” a small, rectangular plaque drilled into the wooden frame read. *His mom and dad*, Heather thought, revisiting the small Internet knowledge she had of the Oaks family. Must be a treat seeing his mother every day, she thought, looking Fran square in her oily set of eyes.

“Can I help you?” Heels clicked to a stop, and when Heather turned around, she found a new face. Rosa Piedras.

“Hi. Rosa? It’s me, Heather.” The eyes knew exactly who she was, so Heather felt strange saying it. She waited for something monumental, like being heaved out the door, a clump of her hair still attached to Rosa’s claw.

“I know. Sorry about your mother,” Rosa said. Her sixth-grade face was attached to a woman’s body. She was all hills and no lumps. It was the worst thing to witness while pregnant.

“Thanks. I was just going to give this to Vienna.” Heather reached inside her bag and pulled out the bunched-up suit. Rosa took it and squinted one of her perfectly almond-shaped eyes.

“I thought Vienna was with you. Helping you...move a few things,” Rosa said. Vienna and Rosa were still friends. It made perfect sense that Vienna still had her childhood best friend supporting her, watching out for her. But pain flickered hungrily at Heather as she remembered the last day of sixth grade fat check when Rosa had Vienna’s back and outed Heather’s mother for what she was, a crazy person. Heather hadn’t been able to place what hurt more, having no argument for Rosa’s accusation or knowing she’d never have anyone like Rosa at her side to alleviate the burden of living.

“She was, but she had to leave. An appointment.” Heather’s tongue allergically reacted to the lie. She felt embarrassed originally thinking Vienna was like her, all alone in the world with no one left to starve the fire when, in reality, Vienna had more than her fair share of supporters. “I need to go. I’m having lunch with my husband,” Heather coughed. She watched Rosa’s face contort, and then another truth pummeled her in the back. Vienna had to have told her best friend about the affair, about the baby.

“Was Rosa here able to help you out?” Elbert reappeared, locks first, and placed his arm around Rosa’s reluctant shoulder.

“Yeah, yes, she did. I have to leave but um, Mr. Oaks, I just wanted to congratulate you,” Heather said. She felt like she did that night with the bat, that forced pump feel of anger in the vein moving her words against the enemy with a steady swing. She recognized now it was the same feeling that had overcome her when confronting Vienna earlier in her mother’s yard.

“On what?” Elbert said. His face spread and a smile engulfed it. Heather noticed he was the sort of man who shouldn’t smile.

“On becoming a grandfather,” Heather said, one heel already out the door. “I’ll see you all tomorrow,” she called out, legs weak with the quick shifting of her belly. She didn’t look back.

Heather blinked through the day’s soul-draining events and stared at her husband who had taken a break from recounting his miracle on the links. The chicken tasted like chalk, and the broccoli wept in her mouth. Dinner making had been a riotous act—pots and pans flailing, diving to the bruised wooden floor. It had hit her then, her husband upstairs showering off a hard day’s work of impressing his father, ignoring his child in Heather’s stomach, the one in Vienna’s, too, while Heather worked in the kitchen, conjuring the ghost of her mother in pearls and heels. The thought of having to confront all those people at tomorrow’s funeral was almost as terrifying as looking into her mother’s empty face.

“So, uh, how did it go today? Did you get any cleaning done at your mom’s?” Wyland said through a mouthful of food. Heather wanted to yank his head up from the face of his cell phone. She wanted to see his eyes and watch for flashes of Vienna.

“Yeah, spic and span. You could eat right off the floors.”

“Really?”

“No, Wyland,” Heather scoffed. An abridged sigh left her throat, and she knew what was coming.

“You don’t have to be rude, Heather.” His head was locked securely in front of their wide-bellied fridge. Heather hurt with the need to pound the butt of her hand into his nose just to hear the crack of skull against metal. Instead, she swallowed the wet mess in her mouth and started over.

“Vienna helped me. We were there all morning, didn’t get a thing done, but we talked, you know. It’s good to have a friend like her.” She had snapped the link between her husband and his phone. He was looking at her now, all eyes.

“Oh. I’ve been thinking maybe you shouldn’t be so friendly with Vienna.” His hands weakly grasped his fork. It made music against his plate and the wooden table, keeping time with the erratic twitch in Heather’s left eye.

“Why’s that?” Heather asked. She noted the evening was weak in their kitchen. The June sun refused to burn out, so it stained everything with a dirty shade of gold. It made the kitchen that less bearable. It lit streaks of dirt in the grout of her countertops. Handprints on the fridge’s front burst into flames. Crumbs stacking, rats gathering, women sleeping with her husband shot sparks of fire, and not even the hint of a black and white tiled floor was present to ease the pain.

“Because of all the stuff she used to say about you.” A smirk, a genuine lift of his upper lip. Wyland’s golden hands released its utensil. His sun-tinged fingers worked into his network of curls. Heather couldn’t hear anything, just watched the slow-moving yellows and golds as her husband stretched out comfortably in his chair.

“Well, I’m sure she had gotten fed up with me talking about her mom every day.”

“It was more than that, Heather. She nearly convinced me not to marry you. She said you were cruel, fat, lazy. And I told her she didn’t know the real you.” He watched his plate, and the past played in his eyebrows. For a moment she expected an apology. “But I guess maybe she did.” He pushed his chair back. That sound, that sound she could hear, and it whipped her hard in the face. She watched as he collected his plate and glass, his fork and knife. She could see out of the corner of her eye his wide-shouldered back, his trimmed waist. There was a haunting feel to hold him, to forgive him. To beg for forgiveness.

But Heather was tired of begging.

NIGHT HAD TURNED INTO morning, and Heather had awoken on their leather couch in the living room. It left her body sore and soaking, her white cotton nightshirt stuck like a bandage. She could hear the shower going. Having to remember that she had a husband and that he was a royal pain in the neck crept into her morning cup of decaf.

She dressed in the only black outfit she owned, a pair of leggings and an oversized sweater that would keep her adequately roasting in the home's cramped viewing room. She looked out of place next to Wyland who wore a sharply altered black suit, an investment that would help him "drive up sales" and show Hollywood "who's boss." And get laid, Heather thought. They didn't talk while getting ready. They rotated, gears cranking in their bedroom. In the car, there was no movement, only music and the sound of her husband humming that made her taste tears.

"Do you remember any of it?" she asked the passenger-side window. The tears were loud in her throat. She could hear them in her ears, but she didn't make any noise. Heather wouldn't let one fall.

"Remember what?"

"Us. Any of it. When I worked at Aurelio's, and you were working for your dad for the summer. Or boxed wine and pizza nights." *Or the times I couldn't breathe it hurt so hard to think of mom, that house and how you told me there's always treasure buried in piles of rubble, and in this case, that treasure was me*, she thinks, but doesn't say. "Do you, do you ever think of any of that?" They turned onto Halfway Drive, leaned into the driveway of Oaks Family Funeral Home, but she kept staring out the window. Heather couldn't look at Wyland because doing so would make her forget everything about their past.

"Sure," he said, and she felt her regret at being the first to speak melt away. His hands in her hair, wrapped around her sweaty waist after a panicked sleep. Trinkets of a lost past that could possibly be found again. "When I need to remind myself how far I've come,"

he added. Heather sneered at her window; her reflection's teeth set against the thick trunk of a chestnut tree. Her tears lost their flavor. Her regret froze over.

Elbert greeted them in the home's dark foyer. Heather couldn't look at his eyes, and it was Wyland who shook his hand and took ownership of their presence.

"It's good to see you again, Wyland," Elbert said, and his hand pumped Wyland's up and down. The funeral director nodded at Heather—she could feel it in the way the atmosphere parted, his head slicing through it—and he made no mention of his future grandchild.

"Wish we saw more of you."

"Been busy," Wyland said, and Heather wished he had the guts to say with whom.

"Well, we'll move into the viewing room first. Allow time for everyone to visit with Caroline," Elbert said. Heather stifled a wrong sort of smile at this. She imagined her mother sitting upright in her wooden bed, shaking hands with strangers and offering a slice of her fresh from the garbage, mincemeat pie. Heather imagined her mother placing a hand on her daughter's unyielding gut, the baby kicking. Caroline flinching.

"That won't take long," Heather said more to herself, but Elbert heard her. He lost his place in his undertaker's manual but found it again with a quick finger.

"Yes, Vienna informed me that you'll be keeping a close-knit group this morning." At Vienna's name, Heather caught Elbert's eye. They were brown, mud-stained. Ribbons of wrinkles fluttered from them. Heather considered the concentric circles of his irises and looked for the pockets where he had stored love for Vienna's mother, the hopeless drunk.

"I have to um..." Heather said, pointing to her stomach. "The restroom," she managed. It felt like looking at her father's face, the

misplaced man who left her home but had spent a lifetime unknowingly dismembering her strongest parts. “Men, you can’t live with them, and well, that’s it,” her mother would say at one of her prettier moments when there was still an ounce of room on the floor, and she’d sit, back straight against their floral papered wall. It looked like the outside was in, consuming every bit of Caroline Hammel, and Heather would feel herself failing and believing every word her mother baked and delivered.

“Right down the hall,” Elbert said with a finger jabbing their air-space. Heather followed it, listening to Wyland play concerned husband as the force of her movement gathered in her knees. The bathroom was cramped. There was an aging stack of *National Enquirers* on a glass and iron rod table wedged in one corner. The toilet paper lined every shelf in the cabinet above the toilet. Heather took her time. She learned the porcelain of the sink and memorized the beveled edges of the mirror that hung above it. She relieved her bladder in a slow stream of warmth and sat on the toilet until she could feel every droplet dry. She flushed, and washed, and waited until she realized what she was hearing—Wyland and Vienna on the other side of the vine papered-wall, talking.

Heather crept out slowly. Their voices were mingling in the inner void of the break room. Heather waited outside the block of fluorescent light, a place where coffee rings reigned along the formica countertop. Vienna was brilliant in a jewel-toned shirtdress. There was no mistaking her figure or the sleek river of hair streaming between her shoulder blades. There was no mistaking Wyland’s eye establishing an opinion on the matter.

“How are you holding up?” Vienna asked Wyland. There was an intense burning through Heather’s fingers to slap the words from Vienna’s lips, but she kept her limbs quiet. She needed more.

“It’s been rough. But I’m more than happy to play my role. It’s been hard for her, but I like to think I’m helping make things a little

more tolerable.” Vienna nodded, and Heather swallowed her tongue. She leaned hard against the doorframe until she could feel it pierce against bone. A lovely couple, that’s what anyone else would think seeing Wyland and Vienna standing, coffee cups in hand, but no one else was there to see it except for Heather.

“We’re still on for tomorrow, right?” Vienna whispered. Wyland nodded with the Styrofoam edge of his cup between his lips. Coffee splashed against his jacket, a hard felt “Dang it” hot in his mouth. Vienna grabbed a towel from the oven’s handle and soaked it in water. She dabbed the stain with hands already familiar with the job.

“Oh, honey, feel free to go in.” A voice behind her startled her as it did the other two, deer frozen in fluorescent headlights. Loretta’s cherry lacquered nails gently curled into Heather’s shoulder.

“Heather,” Vienna said, and she noted it was Vienna’s, not Wyland’s voice that was concerned enough to sound. Heather didn’t even look at her husband because it wouldn’t have mattered. She turned around, and the motion was dreadfully slow. It hurt, moving. She came face-to-face with Loretta, and the woman’s mouth looked tattered at its edges, a perfect respite for runny lipstick so even the tributaries that led from her pout were a light shade of cranberry. Heather wanted to bury herself in Loretta’s arms.

“Thanks, but I’m fine,” she said, and she breathed in spurts to gain her composure. It was worse than the basement. Heather would have paid any amount of money to hear Tina McCafferty moo at her than be surrounded by her husband, Vienna, and her dead mother who looked like she was drowning in a coffin teeming with purple Kool-Aid. Worse, she had forgotten Amber was planning to show up. She headed to the viewing room but was road blocked by her barely sober friend whose arms had never been wider.

“We’ll get through this, we always do,” Amber whispered to Heather as they stumbled into their pew. Heather’s eyes were too exhausted to roll themselves.

“There, there,” Amber said as Heather let herself suffocate on her friend’s expensive blend of oils. She cried hard and choked even harder on the best perfume money could buy.

Soon, Heather’s hand was turned to mush, furiously kneaded by Amber’s creamy white one. Amber’s fingers were short but thorough, and when they moved to the left, the side of her diamond band dug into Heather’s hand. Heather found herself looking forward to the short, sharp jabs. It woke up her skin, and her nerves seemed to follow suit.

Amber stopped kneading and reached for her bag. Heather looked as her friend subtly snapped the lid off an orange bottle and handed her a pill the color of urine-drenched snow. She raised an eyebrow, but Amber waved her off.

“It’s fine. The baby will be fine,” Amber whispered, hardly convincing. Heather took it anyway, remembering quickly becoming a welcomed hardship.

She couldn’t even feel it when Wyland came and sat next to her, when he wrapped his arm snugly around her, and it felt like nothing more than a heavy coat draped over her shoulders. It was the sort of thing her neighbor, Erma, would call “a small blessing.”

Later, after the funeral, after her nap that lasted until the next morning, after waking up and relishing the short feel of existing without consequences, this is what Heather recalled:

Her mother had never looked cleaner, more beautiful, and less likely to roast dead vermin than when sleeping heavily in a coffin.

Heather had kissed the clergy man’s cheek after her mother lowered a jarring six feet into the ground, and she had kept laughing at the burial, her feet digging into the earth as if her belly intended to bury her, too.

When she had been delivered home, there were chicken fried steaks on her front stoop from the lonely lady next door, and when she had closed her eyes to sleep, the sun was still glowing, her blood

rushing her inner canals, and she listened to the vociferous noise of loneliness.

Heather never knew existing could be so loud. That it could be so delicious.

Heather devoured it all.

Chapter Fifteen

Vienna

All three of them in a pew. It was worse than an out of body experience because I was fully in my body at Caroline Hammel's funeral yesterday morning, and if it weren't for Loretta shooting me a series of concerned glances, I wouldn't have taken the time to rummage for an anxiety pill in my bag in the office. It took the solid body of crushed up powder to keep me lucid, to keep me from locking myself in the morgue.

I took another one this morning, and watching Wyland's wedding ring twist rhythmically against his sweaty water glass, I'm glad I did. I can still taste Amber's bright fire hair, the way she kept kneading Heather's hand. I can still see Wyland's arm around Heather, his fingers lightly grazing Amber's shoulder. The pill is lessening the sting of lemon spritzed in my sore, the base reality of relying on someone who has a hard time finding a use for me.

"Loretta was in rare form yesterday, huh?" Wyland says. The diner is a noisy hive, plates and silverware clattering, the chatter of hungry voices, so I watch his lips intently to catch each word.

"She did manage an interesting number with her plunging neckline. Poor Dad never knows how to handle her. I actually owe her a couple hundred for her front bumper. I cracked it over the weekend," I said. Loretta hadn't reacted as I thought she would when I had driven home Saturday afternoon from Gram's. I expected a parental chiding on her behalf, but instead, she had been frantic, asking if I was hurt when she caught me out in the driveway. I'm sure our clinic talk had something to do with it.

Wyland nods. I'm not sure he's paying attention to me, and I can't say that I'm in this moment either. Wyland had hugged me when we first awkwardly met at the diner door, and the smell was

high school. It's still in my nose, aggravating my senses, and my mind creeps to his bedroom, watching a body beneath the white sheet on his bed. It was breathing, it was warm when I placed a hand on it. It was Amber when it turned to face me.

“Sausage. What are you doing here?” I was lost. For a moment I asked myself what it was I was doing there because I never questioned Amber or her cruelty. After she and Heather had transferred to the all-girls school, Rachel picked up where she had left off, and it was almost like she wanted to show Heather and Amber up on how evil she could be to me. One time I locked myself in a bathroom stall after Rachel spread the rumor I was anorexic. I fell asleep on the stinging cold tiles and was woken by the janitor who poked me conscious with his broom. The worst part was that no one had been looking for me. The second worst part was knowing that Amber had fueled the rumor's flames over at Saint Mary's, and the third was having to consider that Amber and Rachel might be right.

“I, uh, I thought you were Wyland.” I was stupidly fixed to my spot, too close to Amber's partial nudity. She gave me a look that said back up, and I did. When she removed the sheet and started to dress, I felt faint and turned my back to her.

“Well, he's not here. Said he needed to get down to Turnbull and talk to his dad about something.” I nodded trying to place why Mrs. Turnbull wasn't there carting off Amber by her porcelain ear. She was probably at her women's group, raising money for some disease Burling Gates had never heard of before. The back door was unlocked like it always was, so I had run upstairs, not thinking to knock. Not thinking I'd be stumbling through a conversation with Amber.

“Oh...okay.”

“Listen, no need to mention this to anyone. One time thing, before he leaves for college. Thought I'd give him a parting gift since he helped me get through Sister Warner's English class from hell.” So, this is how it was then. My best friend was walking away from me

and apparently with a girl who couldn't even master the English language. Amber touched my shoulder and turned me around to face her. Her eyes took me in, really noticing me, and her lips twisted into a smile.

"You love him, don't you. You're really—" The door opened downstairs, and Amber lost her footing.

"Hello?" Mrs. Turnbull called through the home. We waited until we heard her bedroom door close and snuck down the stairs through the front door. We ran until we hit sidewalk and were out of view of Wyland's home. She looked at me, Amber, and it was the only real moment I was ever offered from her.

"He's not that great if you want my opinion," she yelled at me before skipping off across the street.

"Listen, we both know why we're here," Wyland says, and Amber fades, but the words "he's not that great" are written like a caption beneath Wyland's chin.

"It would be the end of me," he says. We're a table away from the booth I had shared with Heather, and I glance at it too many times until the older black gentleman sitting in it looks up and smiles.

"Don't you get it?" Wyland continues, leaning on his arms, his head a pointed missile at my chest. "I don't want this."

I smile back at the gentleman in the booth, fractionally listening. I am lost in limbo, lost in my thoughts that are now cavorting into yesterday when Heather had buried her mother in the ground. I wasn't there for that part, the part that always features the squeaky creak of turning wheels and the sudden realization that the end is as final as it sounds. Instead, I sat in an empty pew in the viewing room, the same seat Heather had taken alongside Amber Fritch who looked like the overgrown version of her younger self—larger, still flat chested but layered with a sense of entitlement. I didn't like seeing the two of them together, Heather frankly disheveled and Amber decked in glittering diamonds. It was unfair the way life had been sweet to Am-

ber, ripe for the plucking. It was unfair how the intolerable always manage to get so lucky.

In that pew, I couldn't help thinking of Heather's face when she had caught me and Wyland in the break room. Caught. That's not the right word; we weren't doing anything except tolerating each other, Wyland doing a better job of it than me. I shouldn't have wiped at his tie when he spilled a drop of coffee, but there it was again, another habit snapping at my flesh until I manage to do what I do best: what's expected of me.

My father had joined me in the pew, bothering my thoughts. His suit rubbed against my bare arms, and I pretended for a moment it was my grandfather sitting next to me. "I need to talk to you," Dad said.

"What about?" I was hoping Rosa would join me, but we only exchanged a few terse words when she had left earlier instead of staying to read in the morgue like she usually does. I ignored Loretta's raised eyebrow and mumbled something about Rosa being on her period. For some reason, that excuse always goes unchecked with Loretta.

"Yesterday, Heather came in to drop off her mother's suit."

"I know. Loretta told me," I said.

"Before she left, she said something odd. She congratulated me on becoming a grandfather." Ow. One of my ribs was spearing my heart, and all I could feel was a relentless stabbing. "I asked Rosa what Heather had meant."

"What did Rosa say?" I spoke up too soon. Dad's head teetered on its neck.

"She said she had no clue." I sighed, and just as quickly, swallowed my breath back up. "So do you know?" he asked. I felt like water was rushing inside of me, churning. Drowning me. "Do you know what she was talking about Vienna?" he asked again when I didn't

answer. It was my moment if I wanted it. And I realized I desperately did.

He listened. I'll give Dad that. And he didn't ream me out on the cost of a child or how he refused to babysit for free. He just sat there, and for a few hard minutes, I saw my own grief reflected onto him, and I was grateful for the reprieve. But still, I couldn't tell him whose it was. And he didn't ask.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

"No clue."

"Well, whatever you decide, let me know. You might need to take maternity leave, and I'll have to calculate that," he coughed, partly grunting as he wrenched himself out of the pew. "You know, Loretta. She likes talking. She'd be good at this," he said, almost in a daze. And I hated him so much at that moment. I had given up my childhood for him to cry in my hair, and he couldn't even think to hold my hand.

"All right," said the mouse in my throat. He walked away, and he was good at walking away. I'll give him that, too.

The salad I ordered is watching me, mocking me because I've only stabbed it with my fork twice. "I don't care what it will do to you," I say more to it than Wyland.

"What?" he asks, his white-sleeved arms coming dangerously close to the leftover omelet on his plate.

"I just don't care if it's the end of you."

"Vienna, what are you saying? You want this? You want to have this thing and out yourself to Heather? We can't do that to her." He grows quiet, and again I can feel the love we used to have, now divided and parceled out to someone who isn't me. I look away from him. I try to still the nausea that is conquering my stomach with quiet breath.

"What happened?" I ask.

"What?"

“What happened? Why didn’t we end up together?” I’ve never asked him that, not when he went off to college, not when we started sleeping together for the second time in our lives. I felt like asking it would ruin everything, and I could never let the horrible reality, the idiocy of that hit me, but it pummels me now, and I don’t let it stop.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and I realize I’m not. The pain becomes carnivorous, different than the nausea that’s become routine. It’s radiating from my pelvis and wrapping tight from my spine. My legs move without my permission.

“Just answer me. Please.”

He sighs and manages his fingers through his curls. “You know everything about me, Vienna. I needed that. When we were kids and the stuff I went through with Dad and you with your mom, we needed each other. But I feel like, I’ve moved beyond that. We’re older and our worlds are different.” His eyes. I remember them young and unlined, but now the crinkles around them radiate in time with my pain.

“I love you Vienna. I always will. And I’ll remember you as a friend even if you hate me, but things are changing. And when things change, you’ve always just stood still.” I can’t tell him I could have changed. I could have gone to Chicago with him because I know it’s not true. He never wanted me to go, not because he didn’t want me to but because he knew I couldn’t handle the world on my own, dragging him down with me.

“I have to go,” I manage, lifting my weight from my chair. I feel a million times heavier, and my legs feel unsteady. They don’t know what to do with the pain.

“How are we going to fix this?” he says, looking up at me.

“We won’t.” I grab my purse, an excruciating task. I follow the beat of pain taking my belly hostage to the front door.

“What about the open house?” he calls out behind me, but I ignore him. I’m too busy looking for the sun, its warmth guiding me out into the parking lot.

In the car I feel unholy. The light is leaving me, and it’s something more than the physical pain. It’s the voided sense of being alone.

I decide to head for the clinic. I have time to stop in and talk to someone, maybe take something for the pain. I start to cry because I’m kidding myself. I know exactly what’s happening even as I take corners and stop at traffic lights. I find my father’s windbreaker in the back and cover my lap with it.

I pull into the parking lot and kill the engine. A group of uniformed high schoolers sway and chant with signs. One on the fringe stabs at his nose, and I can tell he doesn’t want to be there. He holds a “Life is the Only Choice” poster board, and it wilts in his hands, bowing to the ground while most of the others wield their signs upward, penetrating the sky. They chant and dance around each other. The pain blurs them all together.

I’m held hostage along with the others who sit idle in their cars, some looking for imaginary change under their seats, others cramming their chargers into the orifices of their cell phones. I hold on to the ache in my belly with my skintight arm, the bone in my wrist vulgarly bulging. I can’t stop thinking.

“Excuse me. Excuse me?” There’s tapping at the passenger-side window. I look over and see one of the protesters, a girl with long blonde hair twisted into a tight braid at the nape of her neck. I pause for a moment, breathless, sweating. I roll down the window.

“I just wanted to tell you a little bit about why God hates abortion.” The girl digs into a messenger bag slung across her shoulder and feeds a stack of pamphlets through the two-inch gap in the window. They rain down and slap into a puddle on the seat. I look up and roll down the window until there is nothing between me and the girl.

“Oh, uh, usually I’m waved away or practically ran over,” the girl says. She’s wearing a plaid skirt, a white button down and a vest with St. Mary’s insignia. It reminds me of the times Wyland and I would spy Heather Hammel in her uniform after school. We saw her once at Manor Market—her cart loaded with socks, underwear, freezer meals—and I remember the way Wyland dropped my hand when she glanced over at us.

“Are you okay?” the girl asks me, and I stare at the brick building before me where the nurses have gathered outside for a cigarette break, withering beneath their smoke. I want to ask the girl to help me, to drag me inside. But the words dry inside me before I can deliver them. I just shake my head at her.

“Uh, okay well we’re made in his image, and well, if we kill what’s made in God’s image then we’re sinning. Life is never ours to take.” The girl looks like she might faint. I swallow my spit.

I concentrate through the windshield on an Asian nurse streaming a long line of smoke out the side of her mouth. The girl fishes inside her messenger bag as if checking for her cheat sheet. I turn the car back on with shaky fingers and creep Loretta’s damaged Prius away from the girl with the braid, the protesters, the car-dotted lot. I turn away from the clinic and onto the street.

My heart is windblown, frost bitten. It’s dead in my chest. The truth is a blatant road sign as I force my eyes open to the traffic. It’s something I remember reading on Heather’s lips in eighth grade when Rosa’s world stopped turning, and Troy was forced away: *God doesn’t hate you. But you sure as heck do.*

I make peace with the roads, numbly navigating their crooked turns with weak hands. I’ve ruined Loretta’s cloth seats, and beneath the windbreaker I found in the backseat, my lap is mangled with the aftermath of losing.

As I park in the driveway of the home, Loretta pulls up in the hearse behind the Prius, and I watch from my side mirror as her slight reflection grows massive.

She taps on the glass, and it requires everything I have left to push the button and watch the window disappear. "Hey honey, how was lunch with your friend? Vienna are you okay?" Loretta has opened the door now, sticking her head inside and too close to my shoulder. I'm strapped with the safety belt. It's the only thing keeping me upright. "Honey, you look really pale. You want to come in?" I shake my head "no" because I don't want to leave my baby there, alone in a seat. I don't want to rest my head.

Loretta grabs at the windbreaker. I can hear her scream, yelling for my father to come outside. My father's hands grip my shoulders, cradle me in his arms. I don't want to leave my baby, but I don't want to stop hearing his heartbeat either.

I think about the girl at the clinic, what she had said about life, and I have a raw thought that maybe she's right seeing I can't even handle my own. But I can't focus on her uniformed body, her hazy-edged face for long because the outside sun begins to dim.

The inside sun, too.

Chapter Sixteen

Heather

Amber Fritch had stayed the night. This was evident as Heather gathered her swollen limbs and steadied herself upright only to kick Amber in the head.

“Ow,” Amber mumbled. She massaged the place where Heather had skimmed her.

“What time is it?” Heather asked. She searched her right side to find her alarm clock but found her somber television instead. “Why are we in the living room?” she asked. Her head felt cotton-stuffed, her mouth its equivalent. She glanced at an exhausted flower arrangement on the side table and saw from the white envelope poking out of the stems, it was from her father. She looked around the room knowing it was the only one she’d find.

“We couldn’t move you off the couch,” Amber yawned. She stretched a reckless arm inches away from Heather’s face.

“We?”

“Yeah. Me and Wyland.” Heather’s stomach was weak. The act of remembering set sharp upon, her but something else attacked her senses too. Burning.

“What’s that smell?” Heather asked.

“Oh crap!” Amber scrambled, her copper hair and frantic limbs reminding Heather of a spooked crab as she headed to the back of the house. Heather noticed something else that didn’t settle completely right with her. Amber was wearing Wyland’s t-shirt and a pair of his basketball shorts.

Heather entered the kitchen, dusty with newborn sun. It streamed in through the slatted blinds and caught Amber in her frenzy sending a soft, white puff from the fire extinguisher onto a blackened skillet on the stove.

“Where did you find that thing? I didn’t even know we had one.”

“Back of your pantry,” Amber yelled over the sound of the extinguisher emptying itself. “Mothers are always prepared,” she chirped, her voice failing as the white puff pattered out. Amber stared for a vacant moment at the mess of black and white on the stove. Heather watched her shoulders sink. She tuned into the hostile tick of the cat clock on the wall.

“I had made breakfast. Fell back asleep,” Amber said. She turned slowly around, and Heather watched Amber’s face shrivel with grief. Her day-old mascara leaked Rorschach wings across her cheeks. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, um, no don’t do that,” Heather said, her hand hovering above Amber’s back. She was uncomfortable watching a woman like Amber break down, especially with her feet bare and cold against the tile floor. She wanted to pack Amber up in the Corolla and drag her across town where she could dry her tears in her satin sheets and give Heather her husband’s t-shirt back. “Seriously, it’s fine. House is still standing. Nobody’s dead.” Heather took the extinguisher from Amber’s hands and placed it on the counter. She wanted to ask Amber why she was standing in her kitchen and not at home with the twins, but she didn’t. Heather let her arm rest against Amber’s shoulder, and she felt Amber’s body quivering with something more powerful than pain.

“Not for that,” Amber managed, rubbing her face against Heather’s collar bone. Heather winced at the thought of having to rub out the mascara from her top.

“Then for what?”

“Brent left me,” Amber exhaled into her hands. She wheezed and coughed, and Heather had to bite hard on her tongue to refrain from asking her to stop.

“I’m sorry.” It was a lie. Heather wasn’t sorry. She didn’t want Amber in her kitchen. She didn’t want to play “friends” with her any-

more. She didn't care if Wyland was irked by her make believe friendship with someone who turned her nose up at knock off handbags. All she wanted to do was to curl up in bed and call Vienna.

"He kicked me out. Said I was crazy for accusing him of cheating all the time. And he was sick of...of me drinking. Taking the pills."

Heather stared hard at her friend, at the one person she mistook for the very definition of perfection. Amber's right hand shook slightly, the whites of her eyes worn with yellow. Heather wondered how Amber was even able to function if she was hooked on the pills she gave her at the funeral.

"He has my house, my kids. Who's going to remind him to cut the crusts off their sandwiches? Who?" Amber rubbed her fingers under her eyes until the mascara streaks faded into light gray clouds. She looked awful, and Heather wanted to pity her, but she couldn't when Amber was wearing her husband's shorts.

"So, what happened last night?"

"What? Didn't you hear me? About the crusts? On the kids' sandwiches?" Amber said, her right hand frantically slicing at her left palm.

"I heard you. And I'm sorry, Amber, I'm just—where's Wyland?"

"Work. It's Monday." *Thank you, Sherlock*, Heather thought, shaking her head to work out the leftover buzz from the day before.

"Yeah, okay. But what happened last night? I don't remember anything after taking that horse tranquilizer you gave me." Heather walked over to the kitchen table and sat down; her legs relieved their load. She rubbed her belly, took stock of Dolores, and felt her daughter's limbs kicking wild and unfocused. Heather sighed her relief through her lips.

"Oh, well I followed you guys home. I told Wyland I'd help him get you to sleep, keep an eye on you. We got to talking. I told him what's been going on with me and Brent. He was attentive. He lis-

tened to me," Amber said. Her face lightened as she walked to where the sun puddled in the kitchen. Heather felt her hand twitch.

"That's Wyland. Mr. Attentive."

"I told him I didn't have anywhere to go. I mean I've been staying with Rachel, but she said I was messing with Viola's sleeping patterns," Amber said, rolling her yellow-tinged eyes. He asked that I stay over, and I thought you'd be fine with it. And don't worry, no hanky panky." Amber smirked through a hiccup.

"Well, I really hope you wouldn't sleep with my husband while I was unconscious...or otherwise," Heather said blankly, shifting in her seat. It felt like Dolores was maneuvering her foot somewhere near Heather's spleen.

"I was just kidding. I mean because of our history or whatever."

"What 'whatever' are you referring to right now?" Heather asked. Amber's face blanched, the blood beneath her skin traveling to the area under her chin. There were splotches, hives that paraded like dime sized hickeys down the tendons of her neck. She wouldn't stop looking at the nicks in the table.

"He never told you, did he?" Amber whispered.

"Apparently not." Dolores's foot dug deeper, and Heather willingly experienced the hurt.

Amber sighed, her eyes swinging with the tail of the cat nailed to the kitchen wall. "We used see to each other in high school. Wyland and I." From somewhere in the back of the house Frankenstein purred, and Heather imagined he was curled in the cabinet under the bathroom sink. She wanted to join him.

"You two had a relationship?"

"What? No, oh no, no we would just hook up sometimes when I was with that slob Gary, and he was with Vienna."

"What do you mean 'with' Vienna? You mean as friends?" Amber's inflamed neck said what her voice couldn't. It was something Heather had feared and shuffled to the back of her thoughts for

years, but it was always there, poking her brain with its forked tongue, its steel-tipped horn. Wyland had lied.

She had seen them together before, of course—countless times in her Corolla, and one particularly embarrassing time in high school when she was at Manor Market pushing a cart that screamed “pathetic.” It had been a hard day of avoiding Tina McCafferty, Amber, and the rest of the cheerleaders on the Monday after the basement incident, so Heather tried to focus on everything in increments. Classes, lunch, bathroom break, more classes, car, Manor Market. She needed Midol and socks, her mother needed underwear, and, of course, she packed the cart with enough Pepto-Bismol to keep Caroline functioning. Heather walked the long, wide aisles of the store wondering what each person she passed thought of her. In her uniform, she was sure they assumed she was privileged, maybe a doctor’s kid. Perhaps her cart was filled with goods she would ship off to charity, for the needy suffering from period cramps. She smiled a little, but then stopped when she saw Wyland, Vienna. They looked at her, their hands dangling inches apart, and she knew they had just been holding them seconds before, but she ignored that part. They turned left, and she turned right, and Heather sighed with relief that the Midol was buried at the bottom.

Amber shook her head and rays of light sparkled across the kitchen. “I mean he never said they, you know, did it or anything. I just figured they did because they were always together.” “Always together” echoed in Heather’s head.

“And I would have told you about me and Wyland, but I thought you knew already. I mean you two are married. And I wanted to say something about Vienna, but Rachel said it was useless to bring up the past, that if you hadn’t figured it out already then, well, it probably wouldn’t do any good to stir things up,” Amber said. She removed a snaking path of snot beneath her nostrils with the back of her hand. It was the truth really. It probably wouldn’t have mattered if Heather

knew about Wyland and Vienna or even Amber's indiscretion beforehand. But it was a reminder that there was nobody left for her, not even a fake friend.

"Just leave."

"Listen, let's not let this ruin our friendship." Amber offered her hand to Heather, and Heather stared at the nothing she held in her palm.

"I need you out of my house." Heather's body lifted from its seat. Her thumb and pointer finger curled into a starving "o." She unlocked them and set into the flesh of Amber's upper arm.

"What about my clothes?" Amber said as Heather forced them both to the front of the house and opened the door to a sky full of light.

"I'm sure they'll make a lovely donation to the women's shelter," Heather said, thanking everything holy Amber's purse was within reach. She shoved it at her ex-friend's sunken chest.

It was that look of helplessness that was flame hot in Heather's belly. Amber's eyes as slack as her mouth, her hands at her sides, purse slapping against her bare legs. It was her fear that Heather inhaled, but it didn't feel the way it used to in middle school, when girls would line up like deer anticipating their slaughter. It was an empty high, and on the exhale, she wanted to find her bathroom, open the cabinet, and shove her whale-sized frame inside without the least bit of worry as to how she'd shove herself back out.

Amber's eyes found gravity and sizzled at Heather. "You're living a lie, Heather. Be mad, whatever. I don't care. I have enough stuff to worry about right now. But the last time I checked so do you. There's no hope for you either, you know." Amber swallowed, her two bare feet balancing the threshold of Heather's front door. "You're no better than me." She left, managing the stones of Heather's walkway with embarrassing focus and shoeless feet. She climbed up into her Mercedes, its nose propped up onto Heather's front curb.

Heather closed her eyes but could still feel the rhythm and beat of Amber's vicious words.

Later, when Heather opened the cabinet door beneath her bathroom sink, there he was, a black jolt of hair in the corner beneath the plumbing. Heather laid her head down against the tile, the cold spreading against her temple and stared at the cat until she could see him when she closed her eyes.

Her dream ballooned around her—trapped in a mall, everyone in the food court mooing at her, her mother wading through sandwich wrappers between the tables, discarded refuse clinging to her waist. It popped gracefully when her cell phone began to ring. Heather slunk on hands and knees—her belly grazing the tile—and found her phone in her purse on her bedroom floor. It flashed Vienna's number.

"Hello?" she said, feeling minutes, eons misguided and putting the only hope she had left in the voice on the other end.

"Uh, hi." It was Rosa. Heather listened to what she had to say, and when Heather hung up, the only sound was the clock in the kitchen, ticking.

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HEATHER DRESSED IN the dusky pink light decanting through the windows. She had been asleep for hours until Rosa's call, and by five-thirty, Wyland still hadn't come home so Heather had driven herself to the gas station, picked up a bouquet of slightly wilting flowers, and found herself sitting in a plastic-chained waiting room with Vienna's family. She kept glancing at her cell phone in one hand, crinkling the plastic wrap of the bouquet with the other. She almost wanted her husband to call.

"Who's this one again?" Frances Oaks said in the seat across from Heather. Heather recognized her from the Internet, the oil painting in the foyer of the parlor. When taunting Vienna on the front

lawn of the funeral home, it was a stout, smooth-faced Frances who would shoo Heather, Amber, and Rachel away with a wave of her arm. Heather remembered it now, Frances's dresses, colorful material that rushed in and around her legs. Heather remembered wanting that—a grandmother dressed in colors who could make everything bad go away with a wave and a look.

The woman sitting before her wasn't the one built from Heather's memories. She looked like she had seen hell firsthand.

"She's Vienna's...friend." Rosa talked through her fingers on Frances's right, discreetly closing her mouth and nostrils to the stench the woman's wounded leg delivered. First trimester and Heather would have been knocked out for the count, but sitting with belly engorged, hands on her armrests, Heather took in Frances's leg with interest, and against all reason, began to like her.

"I told her I was glad she's been out seeing friends. I thought it was doing her some good, and then this happens," Loretta said, placing her chewed-up Kleenex against her cheek. She was seated on the other side of Rosa who seemed to be having trouble maneuvering between Frances's scalp itching and Loretta's blubbering.

"It doesn't affect just you," the man next to Frances said. He seemed even worse off than Vienna's grandmother with his blood-shot eyes and sores across his cheeks. He kept a Dixie cup with him that Heather assumed he used for spitting dip, but a light pink smudge across the lip told her it was blood. She tried not to stare.

"I wasn't saying it affected just me. I just..." Loretta started to sob and couldn't finish her sentence. Rosa's arm lifted like a robotic appendage and started to swipe at Loretta's back. She glared at Heather until Heather looked away.

"Knock it off, Troy," Frances grunted, a drift of dandruff snowing onto her shoulders with each tug of her fingers. Troy. Heather had forgotten about the incident that had tested the foundation of their eighth-grade year. She looked over at Rosa despite the gnawing in her

stomach telling her not to, and she crafted the past as if she could see it before her.

“When I’m right, I’m right,” Heather had said to the rest of Mrs. Stark’s eighth grade class. The news had just been delivered. Rosa Piedras wouldn’t be coming back to Burling Gates Middle School because she was pregnant by a high schooler. Troy Oaks.

Mrs. Stark had put Roger Torres in charge of the class while she hunted down the health teacher’s video on safe sex. Heather’s puffed-up chest had carried her to the front of the room where she turned around, and in every desk, she saw one person: her mother.

“Piedras the skank and Oaks, the hapless rogue,” Heather had said, her heart smiling at using two of the words she’d stockpiled from the word-a-day calendar found under her mother’s dresser. She walked to the second row of desks and settled in front of Vienna who was clutching something inside her purse.

“What’s that?” Heather said, nodding at Vienna’s hidden fist.

“Nothing.”

“We’ll see about that,” Heather said, clutching Vienna’s arm. She was wearing that oversized army jacket again, the one with the stains that Heather swore were swipes of dried blood, but Vienna claimed were from paint that had spilled in her garage. It smelled, but at least it kept the shock of neon orange Vienna wore as a top from outright blinding Heather. “Rosary beads? You’re praying for that tramp you call a friend?”

“Stop. Please,” Vienna said. Heather lingered for a while, making a figure eight in front of Vienna’s desk. She felt like the male peacock she read about in an animal science book dug out of the fireplace in her living room. She spread her colorful wings wide hoping Wyland would catch a glimpse, but when she smirked at him, he looked like he could kill her.

“You think God is going to save your trampy friend?” Heather said, jutting her chin out and slanting her head like she had seen Erica Kane do on *All My Children*.

Vienna’s pale cheeks flooded with color. Her mouth looked angry. “I don’t know okay. Okay, Heather?” The class grew tense with quiet, and even Heather shut her jaw to the sound of Vienna standing up for once. “Maybe God hates her,” she said, kneading one hand with the other. “Maybe he hates all of us,” she whispered.

Heather couldn’t think what to say. It would become the first of many times she’d be quieted, stalking her thoughts for words that would explain away her failure in college, her failure of a marriage. But now she found the answer even as Wyland’s balled-up fist twitched to punch her, and Vienna’s eyes were too spent to look at her.

“God doesn’t hate you. But you sure as heck do.” Heather heard herself say. It came out before she could stop it, the words vile as the original moment she stole them from. Her father and mother in the kitchen and her mother saying one of those nonsense things again, something along the lines of “God hates me. Maybe I should just kill myself.” And the worst part, her father’s face blank as a white-painted fence, his lips saying, “God doesn’t hate you. But you sure as heck do, Caroline,” and that being the last thing Heather would ever hear her father say in person. The finality of it was brutal enough, but the honesty of it was torture.

Heather had stopped talking, walking until her back felt the hard surface of her seat, and Mrs. Stark rolled in the TV announcing, “Time to learn the truth.”

“Heather, Vienna’s ready for you,” Elbert Oaks said, quietly shuffling into the present with his funereal feet.

“Oh. All right.” Heather hoisted herself up off her chair, nodding at Vienna’s rag tag cast of family members who either didn’t look at her or waisted hopelessly into their tissues.

She followed behind Vienna's father and concentrated on the noisy flowers in her hand to keep from focusing on the real thought that tugged at her. But as Elbert opened the hospital room door and Heather caught a glimpse of Vienna's life-torn body covered in bed, she thought it in spite of herself: Heather was tired of giving God a run for his money.

Chapter Seventeen

Vienna

She begs me to go out with her. She's minimally drunk, maybe just tipsy because she's managed to do her makeup, and she looks nice in her jeans, her mauve colored blouse. She looks pretty. Normal.

"I don't want to go, but if I don't..." I'm at Troy's bedroom door. He's sick with the flu, and my mother is too lucid for us to call Gram. She's in "mom mode" and thinks she can handle a sick kid and take a healthy one out to pick up groceries. It's a school day, and our second-grade class is taking a field trip to the children's museum, but Mom waits until our father has left for work and calls the school to take both Troy and me out of class. She says there's nothing I can learn from a museum that I can't learn from her.

"She came in. Looks okay. Just don't drive anywhere." My brother is shirtless in bed, and the sheets stick to his perspiration. He takes a half-hearted spoonful of the cold soup Mom dumped into a bowl and canvassed with crushed Ritz crackers.

"You'll be okay?"

"Just peachy," he says and rests his head against his wall. I nod at him and reluctantly shut his door. She's downstairs waiting for me. I walk the stairs, a gangplank beneath my feet. Mom hands me my coat, even though we're minutes away from summer. I ask her where we're going, and I'm relieved when she says "The Green Grocer" because we can walk there, but the feeling is held hostage by my fear that somebody will see my mother walking in daylight.

"I can't believe you're in the third grade already," she says when the sun meets our stride. I don't tell her I'm in the second because we're on the sidewalk. I watch her feet to make sure she doesn't trip off the curb.

“Beautiful day.” She shields her eyes as we walk, and I nod my head, even though I’m sweltering beneath my jacket. It’s one she found in the coat closet, and it’s too tight. My arms jut out at soft angles at my sides, and she mistakes this for me holding my hand out to her. She grabs it.

It feels like an “I love you,” or being trapped in a hole, or losing where you end and the universe begins. She smiles at me, but I don’t think she sees me because the sun is still in her eyes. I look away at my feet. I’m wearing my jelly shoes, purple and clear so I can see the shape of my toes. They don’t feel like they belong to me even when I try and wiggle them.

We walk and nobody seems to be staring at us, but I don’t venture to check much. Mr. Markie greets us with his broomed hands at The Green Grocer, and he tries to hide his surprise at seeing my mother, but he’s rotten at it.

“Louise,” he says, and she smiles as if the last time she saw him was just last week, not months ago when she stockpiled a cart full of vodka and claimed she was throwing a “soiree.”

“Graham,” she nods. She grabs a basket, and we walk to the soup aisle, and she fills it until it goes heavy in her hands. She has me fetch another, and as I walk to the front near the double doors, a woman walks in the color of Tang. She’s wearing a long orange dress that swishes at her feet. It’s covered in hair, from a cat maybe. I look up at her, and she crouches down a little.

“Hi, there,” she says.

“Hi.”

“I’m Loretta.” She extends her hand but not in a patronizing way. She smiles, and it seems to make sense, so I grab her fingers and watch her shake my hand up and down. “And you are?”

“Vienna,” I say. She nods, and my answer seems to agree with her. She releases my hand and grabs a cart. “See you around, Vienna,” and she smiles again. This time, I smile back.

For a moment, I can't remember what I'm supposed to be doing, but I see an empty basket and carry it over to my mother. She's in the place I knew she'd be, and she's running her teeth over her lip as if she's really trying to decide if vodka is a necessity this trip.

"Oh, just a few won't hurt," she says. She grabs a handful of the smaller bottles and places them in my basket. She adds a few things to cover them up, a bag of chips, a pair of sunglasses, a magazine with a woman whose smile looks a lot like Loretta's. I see her again as we move up to the register. A young woman with short black hair and a gnarled hand checks us out. The process is slow, so I watch Loretta walk around, moving her cart in her dress. I like how it sleepily dips and curves around her ankles.

I don't want to stop watching her.

"All set," my mother says, and she gives me one of the bags, the one without the bottles in it.

We walk, and on the way back we go another way, so we stop by Miller Park.

"Let's have a picnic," my mother says. I think about Troy. He'd probably be fine without Mom bothering him with cold soup. So, I follow her.

"Okay."

We sit on the top of a picnic table, and it feels like we're breaking a rule. Mom kicks off her shoes and sits Indian style. She fishes out a tiny bottle from the bag she's holding and swigs it with her thirsty lips. I think about that Loretta lady. How her idea of a picnic probably doesn't involve vodka.

"This has been a fun day? A good day, right?" my mother says.

"Yes," is how I answer her because this is the best day I've had in a while.

MY DREAM DISSIPATES, and I wake with a pillow under my head, a darkened window in my view. I notice the pain in my abdomen and the absence that is lulling all parts of me to sleep again. But I keep my eyes open because I hear shuffling behind me. I know it's my father.

“Vienna? Heather just got here. Rosa says you asked for her.” Dad stops moving. I can feel the exact place he’s standing in the curve of my spine. “Didn’t know you two were such good friends.” He doesn’t leave to retrieve Heather like I hope. He sits down in the visitor’s chair on the other side of the bed. In my mind, I can see his ankle propped up on his knee. “I’m not sure if now is the time to talk.”

“Probably not.” I lose the words. Too late to grapple for them.

“I know. But you can’t struggle like this,” he grunts, like gears changing. “Not alone.”

“That’s the only way I know how to do anything.” The word “alone” floats through my mind as a tear breaks free and snakes my face. There are covers, a hospital gown, but I feel naked. A baby in a bath. A baby.

“Oh, Vienna.” His breathing whirs around. It says more than he probably wishes it does.

“Can I ask you something?” I say. He doesn’t answer, so I ask it anyway. “Why did Mom have us?”

“What do you—”

“Why did she give birth to us?” I wait for the typical “because she wanted you, she loved you, she wanted to bring some good into this world,” but that’s not what I’m given.

“She thought it would fix things,” he says through his nose, and it innocently whistles around us. There is so much sense to it, and I’ve always figured that was the case, but I shut my eyes tighter because I’m burning on the inside, and I hate how much I suddenly miss her.

“My turn,” Dad says, shifting against his seat. I watch him in the reflection of the window and try to place the last feeling I have of him, the one where he was holding me in his arms. “Who?”

I want to lie, but lying is a futile thing I’m tired of piling in my heart. “Wyland.” No response, just quiet. “Him.” I can’t think of anything else to say, and there is a delicious freedom in that.

“He’s married to Heather.”

“Yes.” He doesn’t say anything. What’s there to say? He has to realize somewhere in that indifferent soul of his that his daughter has turned out as reckless as his wife. “Well, I’m sorry. For you, for the Turnbulls. For...the baby.” He waits. “And...” Dad trails off, getting up and heading to the door.

“And?” I ask, watching my father’s reflection crack open a door lost in another world.

“I love you.” He closes it behind him, and I squeeze my eyes closed to the heat, and wet, and the raw-throated effort of having to believe him.

Moments later I hear the door give in, and I feel defenseless. Heather’s belly glimmers in the window. So do the flowers in her hand.

She sits in Dad’s chair and succeeds at an ungraceful plop. She sighs, and I try to find my words.

“I don’t care,” Heather says, and I keep the “How dare you?” silent. “Oh no, not about...” Her hand goes to her lips, and I watch her shear it bare of its skin. “I mean I don’t care about the past. I care very much about this, about you being in the hospital.” Heather sighs again, and in the window she’s scratching hard at her head with the hand holding the flowers. It looks like a wilting garden is springing through her hair.

“About my miscarriage,” I say for the first time. It sounds like “mistake,” or “misstep,” an accident that can be repaired with very little effort.

“I’m sorry,” she says. I nod, but I don’t know if she can tell. I think about what I’ll say next, and I quietly apologize to the woman in the window and her sad host of flowers.

“I slept with your husband.” It’s not powerful. It leaks from my mouth and wets the bed.

“I know,” she says.

“I know you know. But I had to tell you.” I twist to my other side so I can face her. The dull pain follows me, something I’m sure will never let up, but it refuses to match the pain in Heather’s eyes.

“What was he like in high school?” she asks. Her ankles are crossed, the paint on her toenails are starting to chip. I take too long to remember my friend, but something comes to me and snatches the wind in my lungs

“Honest.” I choke it out. I remember one particular bruise on his stomach when we were young and lifting our shirts had no shame in it. When I touched it, he winced, and when he cried, I cried. Then we both laughed and stuffed our bellies with Hawaiian Punch until we forgot why none of it was funny in the first place.

“Oh.” She studies the skin she’s snagged between her fingers. “He was my first.” Mine, too, I think but don’t say. There’s no need to bring up how Wyland was my first in high school—my only since then—and I’m not sure if I keep quiet to spare Heather’s feelings or my own.

“What do you think happened?” She is solitary when she asks it, and I have to realize that even though Wyland isn’t at my side, he’s not at his wife’s either.

“He’s a guy.” It’s a lie, and it tastes sour like one.

“You know it’s not just that.” She flicks the dead skin, and I watch it arc slowly in the air.

“Okay. If you really want to know what I think, I think we’re older, different. And he is too.” I look at Heather, and she’s exactly what I always hoped she’d be when I was younger. Fallen, no longer a threat.

No longer strong. And maybe that's why he no longer loves her like he should; he conquered her.

"But you know what I miss most?" I ask as she studies a new shriveled piece of skin.

"What?"

"The feeling of being new."

She thinks it over, and I can see it wearing on her too. There's something cruel in rubbing bare, that worn dance of being expected. And I think maybe that's it—that when it comes to me, Wyland always expected me to stay in one place, to be the safe choice.

"Ha. What's that?" she says, and she smiles in spite of herself. She coughs through it, and her body quakes, the stomach that's popped ripe as a pearl. "You could have won," she adds. Her eyebrows knit a long dark scarf. "But I couldn't let you,"

I look at her face, and despite the newborn crow's feet, her chewed-up mouth, she reminds me of her younger self. I'm transported inside Caroline Hammel's home, four paper-flaking walls growing weed-like all around Heather. Her feet are soldered to the floors, but she can't see them because she's knee-deep in old newspaper. How to survive this way? The thought flips on like a lighter, and I worry through the answer. You make everyone else suffer.

"What now?" I ask. It's not directed at Heather. It's directed at the flowers that are now napping on the linoleum next to Heather's ankle. My ache keeps me company, but it's still evident—the emptiness between us, the reason I'm talking from a hospital bed, and Heather's hands are tied to her belly.

"We let him lose," she says, and I hold on to every word. I let them burden my lungs.

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THE MORNING OPENS WITH my eyes, and a nurse—her cheeks rose-warm and flushed—hovers above my face. My head is

weeded by dreamlike memory, by the dry bed of my throat. She hands me a Dixie cup of water before I ask for it. I look around, even though I know Wyland isn't here.

"There you are, hun. Thought you'd sleep forever," she says, and for a moment, I close my eyes. I pretend she's my grandmother.

"You're released today. I have your clothes. Need me to help?" I shake my head "yes" as I sit up in bed because I don't trust myself to breathe let alone put on anything to wear. She helps me out of my hospital gown, and I see a pair of black stretch pants and an oversized Tweety bird t-shirt. Apparently, Loretta has been given the role of my stylist.

The nurse's name is Mariam, and I concentrate on the smooth sound of the "m's" so I don't have to concentrate on facing the world alone in a hand me down t-shirt with a cartoon bird on it. I don't want to get into the car and note the weather, the construction on Mendel Street. I don't want to get into Loretta's car.

"Knock, knock," someone says, and it's Rosa, arms at her sides. Her hands are empty except for the key chain with the rubber ducky in her left that she squeezes methodically. "Your father already came and picked up your flowers. I have a bouquet from my mom and brothers in the car." I smile, my mind caught up in the idea of my father floating around my unconscious body, gathering flowers for me. I smile at the thought of Mrs. Piedras sending flowers, but my face jerks into a freeze when I realize what it took for her to reach out.

"She's all set," Mariam says after she slips on my flip flops, and as I stand, I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror attached to the inside of a storage cabinet. The outfit is worse than I thought.

Rosa comes over to me and takes me by the hand as Mariam rolls in the wheelchair. I feel my friend's pulse through my skin, and I feel shame working the nerves in my face. I can't look up at her, but I know she's looking at me, loving me, and the thought wounds me all over again.

The nurse walks us into the elevator, and we descend with two older women, one clutching a pink plush bear, the other discussing how awful the name “Harmony” is.

The doors open, and the light is too loud. Not bright, but loud as if I can hear everything the moment I see it.

“All right, Ms. Oaks, your father has all your paperwork and your medication. He’s been instructed to give you a pain pill when you get home. Dr. Roper says you have one refill after the medication is gone, but you shouldn’t need it.” Mariam’s face comes into view again, and I can still find what I’m looking for even beneath her professional stare: pity.

The nurse leaves us right outside the covered hospital entrance, and Rosa tells me she’s going to pull the car around.

“You okay here?” she asks. I nod and watch her walk away. My nerves work through my face and consume the rest of me knowing we haven’t talked since I ripped out her heart in the morgue. I’ve felt Rosa’s hand on my back as I lay distraught in the hospital bed listening to the doctor murmuring the details of my hemorrhaging, but no words came out between the two of us. Her fingers threaded through my hair as he went on about the pills in my system. I had taken too many, and the tears stung hot between my pillows and my cheeks as Rosa’s hand stroked deeper.

I don’t have long to ponder what I’m going to say to her in the car because something is blocking my peripheral, and when I turn to look, my heart is ripped out too.

“Just one sec, Liz. I’ll get the van. You don’t need me to get the nurse to wait with you?” The voice disperses from a man not much older than me. He looks un-showered, and I’m sure if I scooted closer, I’d be able to smell him.

“No, I’m fine here.” Liz, the woman in the wheelchair smiles at the man who’s already jogging backwards to the parking lot. It’s not

her pleasant, plump red face or his frantic legs that get me. It's the baby in her arms.

"Harmony," she says at me, her silly grin still locked firmly in place. I don't have time to say anything because the older women who were in the elevator with us have made their way out of the hospital, and the one who had criticized the baby's name before tells Liz how beautiful it is. I want to punch her in the face.

Rosa finally pulls up, and I've never been more relieved to see that hunk of metal she calls a car. Sitting is only slightly painful, and I know it's because I'm strung out on whatever was pumping through my IV. I'm worried about what happens when the pills are all gone and the only thing I'm prescribed is the act of feeling.

When we're in the car, I think Rosa is reaching to blast the music louder, but she shuts the radio off altogether.

"You're right. At least you're not a child."

"Rosa, you know I was being stupid when I said that. And the other thing I said, the horrible thing..." I trail off, but we both relive that moment. Rosas squeezes her eyes shut.

"You love your brother." She says, her shoulder grazing her cheek. "But I want you to know that you're right, you're not a kid, Vienna. You shouldn't be made to feel like one either."

"No one makes me feel like that." She lifts her eyebrow, raised and defiant on her forehead.

"I don't want to get into you and your father's relationship—you'll figure that out on your own—but I was just thinking about your situation, about how you feel about your dad and how I never knew mine and...I can't do that to Maya anymore." A tissue is tucked in her fingers, and she presses gently against her lower lid like she does when applying eyeliner. "She told me you two talked," she says, slowly guiding the car out of the hospital's parking lot. I force my thoughts to cooperate through the drowning feeling from

my pain meds, but I remember sitting in the pew with my niece and the long list of preservatives in her hand.

“I’m sorry about all of it. I shouldn’t have said anything to her about Troy, and I’m so sorry for hurting you, Rosa.” She’s crying, and it’s taking a toll on her shoulders. The car sways with her gasping breath. A truck honks at us, and she grabs at me to make sure my seat belt is locked in place.

“It’s okay. It’s just...” She steadies the wheel and drops her tissue in her lap. The rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror slap against the dash. I still the crucifix with my hand. “Vienna, Maya’s pregnant,” she whispers, and I feel like the world is mocking me. It’s strange though, because even though I’m hurting everywhere, and the loss has sucked me dry, I’m not sad because my niece is pregnant, and I’m not anymore. I’m sad because I see her three-year-old face when I blink, and I think how quickly that freedom is lost.

“Wha...why? Who’s is it?”

“College kid. Goes to Mizzou. I guess his buddy’s from Blythesville, and Maya met him at a party. She’s called, texted, emailed the guy. Can’t get a hold of him.”

I try to breathe long, steady streams of breath, but the ability has left me. “Can you pull over?”

“What?”

“Please, now. Over,” I manage. Luckily, Rosa has already taken our exit, and we’re on the frontage road. She inches the car onto the gravel, and I stumble into the grass, my vulnerable toes itching in the mess. I vomit, and it feels good. It feels better than crying or screaming combined. I feel almost hopeful in the letting go it gives me.

Rosa helps me back inside when I’m finished, and I reach for where she keeps the tissues in the glove box. I wipe my mouth, and we restart our path back home.

“I want him in our lives.” She doesn’t look me in the eye, but I know she means Troy, and I know what I have to do to make that happen.

I feel wrecked—the physical part, the mental too. But I’m confronted with my power and know exactly where it lies. It’s in my ability to mend the broken shards in the people I love. To give up everything I have left. For them. For me.

I know exactly what I have to do, and the prospect is terrifying.

I ask Rosa to pull over one more time.

Chapter Eighteen

Heather

In her car in the hospital parking lot, Heather could feel her phone, even though it was buried in her bag. Her father had called earlier, his message awkward and cloying in her ear as she took the hospital elevator down to the lobby.

“Anything at all I can do, you let me know. I’m your family now,” he had said. *Now*. She had wanted to chuck her phone into the trash bin at the door. But she didn’t. Instead, she broke down and called her husband.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m at Mom and Dad’s,” Wyland had said when Heather mentioned she’d pick up something for dinner, an excuse to hear his voice and pretend it still meant something.

“Come over,” he said, suddenly cheery, and she knew his parents must have walked into the room. “Mom has a few more things for the baby.” Her gut turned with Dolores’s hard movements. She agreed only because she knew if she didn’t, Margaret Turnbull would be having the “I just don’t think she really likes us” conversation behind her back.

As she drove to her in-laws’ house, she tried not to think about Vienna in her hospital gown, unmoving and stuck to her bed like a piece of lint. It made it harder being pregnant, knowing she wasn’t entirely out of the woods with Dolores still in her belly, but the worst thing was knowing the parts Heather had played in Vienna’s life had led up to a moment noted for its sadness. Its paralytic loss.

She turned into the Turnbulls’ driveway behind her husband’s car and took a few breaths. She massaged her neck with both sets of fingers. It was a ritual to calm herself down before Margaret worked her right back up. A futile practice, but one Heather was a slave to.

“There she is!” Owen said, grabbing her by the elbows when he answered the front door. Heather awkwardly patted his back and willed her face to smile. She never addressed him directly, never feeling comfortable enough to call him Owen and feeling too comfortable to call him Mr. Turnbull. So, she continued to treat him like a man whose name she could never quite remember, and the effect made her feel overwhelmingly stupid.

“Hey,” Wyland said as Owen directed her to the living room. He stood up and kissed her on the cheek. She watched his mother watching them, pride galloping through the veins in her un-still hands. *You have no clue*, Heather thought as she smiled at her mother-in-law, and she took the kiss for Margaret’s sake.

Heather sat down next to Margaret on the couch in front of a sweating glass of water. She knew it was for her because in the Turnbull house, drinking never meant water unless, of course, it was mixed with something stronger. She gulped it down, relished the feel of it cooling through her chest and wiped her lips with her fingers. She always forgot the water part, how she was supposed to walk around with a life-sized bottle of the stuff like other pregnant women so when she found herself with a glass, it took all she had to keep from swallowing the whole thing down.

Heather looked up to everyone staring at her.

“Uh, so I was just telling the boys that Betheny mentioned there’s this 3D ultrasound you can get at these boutique sonogram places,” Margaret said. She handed her daughter-in-law a napkin, and Heather ignored the way it stung to receive it. “She did a little research for us and found one at our mall. Wasn’t that sweet of her?” Margaret asked, a fresh Seven and Seven delivered into her hand by her husband.

Heather nodded and smiled and tried to ignore the image of Margaret’s other daughter-in-law in a Donna Karen pantsuit at the Turnbull’s Christmas party two years ago, telling Heather that going

on a no carb diet wasn't as scary as she'd think. She was thankful Betheny and Wyland's brother, Webber, lived three hours away.

"So?" Margaret asked, a blinding strip of teeth flashing from her mouth.

"So...what?" Heather asked. Owen laughed and shook his head. He placed his hand on his son's shoulder, and with a "Your wife," headed to the bar in the corner of the living room to refill his drink. Heather felt her face turn a blistered shade of crimson.

"The ultrasound. Owen and I got you this and would love to have a copy of the picture."

Margaret released her fingers from her short auburn do and retrieved an envelope from the bag of pink baby clothes.

Heather took it, remiss to read "Sweet Memories Ultrasound Shop" on the front of it. Inside was a gift certificate to "see the future, your bundle of joy." Heather swallowed.

"Margaret, thank you but we've already had all our ultrasounds, and I've read that doing them unnecessarily can cause harm..."

"Heather's just worried that the gift is too expensive," Wyland butted in. The look was one everyone could read, even Owen who leaned against the bar and leisurely curled his right foot around his standing ankle.

"Oh. Oh, well don't be silly. Money's no object, especially with our little one on the way." Maragaret placed her manicured hand on Heather's belly. The motion was suffocating. Heather looked at the hand with its opalescent pink nails, its bobble-headed diamond balancing on a thin band. It was a gesture that poked holes in her theory that Dolores was all hers. It wasn't true. Dolores belonged to everyone.

"I'm sorry. I need a little air," Heather said. She grabbed her bag, tossing the certificate inside it and walked out to the foyer. She could hear Wyland excuse himself as she stepped into the night. She was mid-way down the walk when he called to her.

“What was that?” he whispered at her, already at her side. She turned and looked at him. She did something she was loathe to do. Heather put herself in her husband’s shoes.

“You’re scared,” she said. She licked the sweat about her lip. The salt battered her tongue. She wished she still had her glass of water.

“What? Scared of what?” Again, he became the boy, the one she used to know, but this time he didn’t change back. Wyland kneaded his finger into his thumb, and in the light from the lamps snaking down the walkway, his wedding ring glinted at her.

“This.” She placed her hands on her belly. It was comfortable, quiet. She thought of Dolores peaceful in sleep. “And being married. Maybe knowing there’s no more room to sit and wallow in your past or try and change it.” She didn’t want to listen to herself. But she knew if she expected her husband to, then she’d have to do the same. “She had a miscarriage,” Heather said.

“Oh.” He looked almost pained.

“Yeah.”

“Did she...ever say whose it was?” He wasn’t looking at her. He was looking down the quiet street, probably contemplating breaking out into a run depending on what she said next.

“Yes.” She left it at that and watched his shoulders break, his spine give out. He started to cry. It’s hard keeping something like that inside, she thought. She knew it from experience because in every space inside of her, something or someone lived. Her mother, her old house, her father’s furry clients, Ronnie’s mocking tone, Dolores’s thrusting elbows. Vienna and her ghost-white face. Vienna and her lips moving, saying she misses the feeling of being new. Heather did too.

“Heather, I’m—I’m so sorry. You don’t believe me,” he said before she could say she didn’t. But on some level, she did. She could have done the same thing, often felt like doing the same thing. Find some guy, have a fling with him behind her husband’s back. Laugh

when she thought of telling Amber and Rachel what she was up to in her spare time. But she never did it because she couldn't work up the confidence and because she had come to realize there was always more power in playing the victim.

She felt ashamed realizing this, even though it was her husband who was hunched over, holding on to his knees like he might vomit. Heather had learned it from her mother, the simple act of widening her eyes and pretending it was the world's fault for breaking her down. She had pretended the passivity in it was stronger, meant more than taking any real action. But it was also the tactic that hurt the most because defying the world meant losing the world, and all she was left with was her misery.

"It's okay," Heather said rubbing Wyland's back. He flinched at the feel of her hand. They hadn't been intimate in months besides a few forced acts of public affection.

"He's right. Dad's always been right," Wyland gasped. He came up for air, straightened upright. "I'm a screw up, Heather. I've damaged my life, Viennas, yours. And he's always said how it's all going to catch up with me, and it is. But you have to—you have to believe this, Heather," he said. A sigh dropped from his chest, and Heather could feel it dropping from her own. "I love you. And I don't want to be this way." He rested his head on her shoulder, and she felt the back of it, the curls she had sheared off weeks before. The thought clung to her lids, and she closed her eyes, remembering her father and mother in a kitchen, hair clippings on the floor. How you could always find that one person you wanted to lose more than anything.

"I know," she said. And then she stepped away and looked into his eyes. "I know Wyland. You were always—I guess you were good to me because you saw something you liked. Something you needed." She paused and tried to measure up her words carefully, afraid they'd spill over. "But I was never in control of anything." Heather released air from her lungs and tasted the honesty coiled in each puff of air.

“And I’m definitely not in control of anything now. I just—I can’t be with you anymore, Wyland.”

“But Heather, what will they think if—”

“What will you think if I stay with you?” she asked. “Would you respect me for that? Would you think I’m making the right decision for me, for her,” she said, her hand already calming her stomach. “Forget the rest of the world, Wyland. Let’s just do something for ourselves for once.” He watched as she walked to the Corolla and started the car. His eyes were still on her as she turned over the engine and backed out, navigating the Turnbulls’ wordless street.

Her heart. It was everywhere.

• • • •

HE DIDN’T COME HOME. Not the next day, or the one after that. On the third he must have stopped by the house because his clothes had gone missing from the closet, but Frankenstein was still thudding about, keeping her company. She was grateful Margaret was allergic to cats.

Heather spent her days lonely but almost gratefully so. She saw a movie by herself, sat outside and listened to two birds arguing at each other, drove to the grocery store then had lunch at a cafe dangerously close to Turnbull Realty. She didn’t filter her days according to her situation. She just lived and took joy in what living really felt like.

She thought about calling Vienna, but she didn’t. She couldn’t, not yet anyway. It was selfish wanting to put reality out of her mind for a time, but she just wanted a glimpse of existing with only Dolores, and she wasn’t prepared to let anything take that away from her, especially her guilt.

She stepped into the nursery the day she was officially eight months pregnant.

The half-painted walls were a shade of meringue, and near the window were two streaks of paint—a light pink and a cream.

Wyland had made the streaks with his brush to compare the colors, but there was something about yellow that had won Heather over. She touched the wall as she looked out the window into their side yard and wondered if her daughter would ever do the same, wishing she were somewhere else.

Heather tackled the crib on her own, a job she was expecting to be a lot more difficult than it was. She washed up the bags of pink and folded and put away blankets, layettes, and vibrant-colored burp cloths. She set out the silver-plated piggy bank her father had sent because even though her mind unsettled having to think about him, her heart would unsettle even more if she denied her daughter a chance to know her grandfather.

When she was finished, she looked around and decided it was a pleasant room even with its uneven walls. To treat herself, she grabbed her purse and drove to the mall to see her daughter's face.

It wasn't that she had hated the gift when Margaret gave her the certificate. In fact, it was something she had wanted but feared telling Wyland about because she knew he'd think it was a frivolous expense. What had set her off was the finality, the no turning back abruptness of having to take inventory of her child's nose, and eyes, and mouth. She was already in the middle of her third trimester, so it was foolish to think this way, but the world her daughter would be entering had a way of batting at her thoughts.

It didn't matter though because Dolores was beautiful. And everything else had a way of flickering to ash as Heather stared at the screen and watched her daughter open and close her mouth.

"What's her name?" the technician asked as she guided the wand across Heather's sticky belly.

"Dolores."

"Sorrows," the technician said.

"You're good."

"Comes with the job."

Heather smiled. She had picked it because it was an odd way to name a child, to give her firstborn the burden of everything Heather had ever endured. But her thoughts on the name were changing because it was the sorrowful things that seemed to break open while watching two birds argue over a berry, washing a pair of pink pajamas, or stroking her face against Frankenstein's back. It was the sorrowful things that showed Heather just how beautiful the littlest wins could be.

"A beautiful name," the technician added, and Heather had to agree with her.

She walked out into the mall and let her belly guide her. She was hungry again, and the trail mix she stashed in a plastic bag inside her purse couldn't convince her to give it a try. So, she walked to the food court and absorbed the colors, the gracious scent of fried foods, and this time, nothing overwhelmed her. Except for when she bumped into a table where she found Amber sitting alone.

"Oh, for the love—" Amber said, her mouth full of chewed-up sandwich. Heather hadn't recognized her at first, but there was no overlooking her bright red hair, even if dirty strands of it hung against a makeup-free face.

"I'm sorry," Heather mumbled. She started to head to Wong Palace to drown the awkwardness in sweet and sour chicken, but Amber stopped her.

"No. I'm sorry." Amber pushed the chair next to her to give Heather a place to sit. She removed her purse from the seat and sent it to the ground, a dangerously expensive leather bag making friends with the floor. "I should have told you. All of it." Amber took another bite of sandwich and didn't bother wiping the mayonnaise from her face. Heather grabbed a napkin and wiped it for her. "Thanks," Amber whispered to the remains of her sandwich.

"It wasn't your responsibility. He should have told me."

“Yeah, but I didn’t on purpose and not for some lame reason like Rachel telling me not to. I never listen to that twit,” Amber said, keeping her eyes on a couple sitting a few tables over with their little boy. “When you came back, Heather, I thought I had my chance, you know. Here I was, the doctor’s wife living it up in Applewood, leading our neighborhood playgroup, putting on dinners for my husband’s colleagues. I thought...I thought I had a chance to show that witch Heather Hammel who had really made it in this world, but you know what? I’ve made absolutely nothing.” She coughed into her hand, and Heather noticed the topless orange bottle next to Amber’s soda. “My claim to fame is marrying right and having a working uterus.” Amber trailed off and followed Heather’s gaze.

“How many did you take?” Heather asked. She reached for the bottle, but Amber stopped her.

“Haven’t yet.” Amber went back to her sandwich, eating quietly while Heather let her words line up.

“You know, you were always a kind person, Amber. When we were younger, you were always...good.” Heather thought back to the girl Amber had been—unconfident, a bright red thumb sticking out from the rest of her classmates. But she always had Heather’s back, and Heather figured if she hadn’t been so mean, so dominating, that maybe Amber would have had a chance to thrive. “You’ve always been better than me.”

Amber didn’t look at her, but Heather could still see her eyes well up. “Well, then, you must be pretty crappy,” she laughed, and Heather laughed too. Amber wiped beneath her eyes, the lines around them, radiating, glistening.

“Can’t argue there.” Heather hoisted her bag to her lap and dug around for the sonogram picture. She handed it to Amber, who smiled and mouthed the word “beautiful.”

“That’s what I’ve been told,” Heather said. Amber studied the picture, traced Dolores’s miniature nose with her finger.

“How are things with Wyland?” Heather thought she was prepared for the question, but it snuck around her shoulder with no warning. There was dread in her belly, harsh enough to scar her. Against all reason, she just wanted to lie down next to her husband in bed and close her eyes.

“Staying at his parents. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You and me both.” They sat for a while, unwillingly confronted with the weight of their decisions. Heather eventually got up and loaded a tray with sweet and sour chicken. She finished it as Amber dug into her cheesecake and all noise in the food court was blocked out, the two women chewing through their thoughts.

When the plates were empty and each sat back in their chairs, their bubbles burst.

“I need rehab,” Amber said to no one.

“I need a therapist.”

Amber smiled and shook her head. “Ditto.”

They got up to leave, throwing the remains of their meals in the trash and walked single file out into the afternoon sun. In the parking lot, they hugged. Not the kind they used to do in Amber’s circular driveway, her polished nails pinching into the soft flesh of Heather’s back, but the kind that enveloped them both until they weren’t sure where the dividing line stood.

“You know how to paint a wall?” Heather spoke into Amber’s diamond earring.

“What color?”

“Yellow.”

“Okay, yeah. I can do yellow.”

“Come over tomorrow if you can. Dolores’s room,” Heather said, and Amber got into her SUV, rolling the window down when Heather tapped on the glass. “I was just thinking how Rachel mentioned paint fumes are right up there with mercury poisoning for a fetus.”

“Rachel who?” Amber said with a smirk. “Hey, do me a favor.” She stretched to the passenger’s side to rummage through her purse. She handed Heather the pills through the window, and Heather took the warmed plastic bottle in her hands. “Throw them out. I have another long night at the hotel, and I, well, I want to make sure I’m up and ready to paint tomorrow.” Heather nodded. They said their goodbyes, and Heather watched Amber, such a tiny woman, manage a car that was entirely too big for her with ease.

In the Corolla, Heather put the bottle in her cup holder and drove to the gas station. She threw the bottle away and listened to the pills rattle on the way down. She filled up her car, and as she went to sit back inside, her phone dinged with a voice message from her father.

“I’m at your mother’s. Please come see me.”

She instantly regretted throwing away the bottle.

• • • •

TIME HADN’T DONE ENOUGH to destroy him. Standing in a circle of sunlight in her mother’s front yard, Heather watched her father shield his eyes with his strong, tanned arm. He was as tall as she had remembered, and his hair was the same—ashy brown, parted at the right. But his temples were graying.

Heather pulled in behind a red Taurus, presumably his rental car, and sucked down an endless supply of air. Her hands were still shaky after nearly rear-ending a truck. Her thoughts had gotten lost at the possibility of looking into her father’s eyes. She swallowed a ball of tears and tore at a loose thread in her shirt to keep from crying.

“Heather,” he said when he heard her silence the engine and shut her car door. He didn’t walk toward her, knew enough to keep his space. A small win.

“So, why?” she asked. She didn’t want to dance around the fact that he was standing back in Burling Gates, tangoing through the

“You look great!” and “How was the flight?” nonsense that didn’t mean a thing to either of them.

“Her lawyer called yesterday after he read about her funeral. She left the house to me.” Pummeled. Heather looked down at her feet—the same spot Vienna had maneuvered with her wedge sandals—and expected to see bits of herself all over the walkway.

“Apparently, she had called him up and made arrangements a few months ago after watching an episode of Law and Order. I don’t know, your mother...”

“Your wife.” Heather looked into his eyes now and noticed what her mind would never allow her to see when she would fashion his face from old memories. Sadness.

“Yeah. Yes.” He finally removed the hand shielding his face and wrapped his arms around his chest. The white polo looked sharp on him. His khakis were impeccably creased even after hours of riding in the air. *Ronnie must be a genius with an iron*, Heather thought, and her eyes involuntarily rolled.

“I should have called first, I know, but when her lawyer called yesterday, I just figured...I guess I figured you wouldn’t want to see me. I thought it would be better if I just showed up.”

“Is it?” Heather asked.

“I don’t know. All I know is that I went earlier to the lawyer’s, signed the papers, and the house is in my name. You don’t have to worry about anything.”

“Except the fact that you get everything, I get nothing. And you did absolute jack for her.” Heather lied hard enough to feel it slither between her teeth. She didn’t care that her mother hadn’t put her in her will. But she did care that her father seemed to savor playing the hero.

“Please, Heather, don’t be angry. She loved you. I love you, too.”

“Sure.” Heather looked at the gnome at the front of the house staring through her. “How are you going to clean it up? She leave you a genie in a lamp, too?”

“She left a note,” he said, ignoring her question. “It said, ‘Screw you.’ It also said, ‘Take care of her.’” Her father moved toward her, and she let her feet make the first reaction. She stumbled backward a bit, and her cheeks burned when she saw his hand outstretched with a yellow post-it note. It was written in her mother’s handwriting. She lightly traced the letters, afraid to break them. “I cashed in my 401K.”

Heather snorted and caught the laugh with her hand. “And I bet your girlfriend was absolutely thrilled by that.”

“My girlfriend left me.” It was his turn to study the ground, and when he did, she could see the coin-sized bald spot spreading at the back of his head. “Said she was tired of me living in the past.”

“Funny you live in it now when you didn’t back then.” Heather turned to her car but didn’t move any further. She felt nailed into her mother’s parched lawn.

“I’m moving back. I’m going to start a grooming business here after I sell the house.” She wanted to turn around and tell him to just fly back to Maryland where he belonged, but she felt tears and would have rather died than let him see them. “I want to know you, Heather. I want to know your little girl.” All of it came out of her, through her, and she could feel the gnome watching her belly quaver with her fear, its current of pain. She felt her father’s hand on her back.

“I love you,” he said again, and this time she didn’t brush it off, she felt it, and she couldn’t stop her body from surrendering its fight.

Heather didn’t stop herself from burying her swollen face into his shoulder, where she watched her world go dark.

Chapter Nineteen

Vienna

I t's freezing, and I've forgotten a sweater, but my arms are almost numb to the cold at this point. It's been forty-five minutes since I arrived, and after a quick entry through a metal detector, a pat down by a short, squat lady with a face the color of thick ash, I was escorted to this bench next to a skinny teenager with Mickey Mouse earrings, cornrows, and a look that tells me she could snap me apart just by blinking.

I had emailed him the moment Rosa drove me home from the hospital. I sat with my laptop, sandwiched between my room's bubble gum pink walls, and poorly ignored the toaster waffles Loretta had sat on my bed. I ate them, feeling them more than tasting them. It was a nice surprise to eat without regret.

He got back to me a day later, and we scheduled a time for me to visit. But now I want to leave.

"Visitors," a guard calls, a man with washed-out red hair and whiskers jutting out from his upper lip. Me, Mickey Mouse earrings, and a small bunch of others work into a line behind him, and as we file into the metal tabled visiting room, my eyes are instantly drawn to a man I used to know.

I go to hug him, forgetting what I've been told so a female guard shouts, "No contact!" and the embarrassment worms through me. And then I unexpectedly think of Dad, how he hasn't touched his father in years.

"That one's a real peach," Granddad says with a soft smile.

"Seems like it." I don't know where to go on from here.

"How are you feeling?" He asks. I know it's not a general question. I'm sure Dad has filled him in, and I even made reference to it in my email. But the question has too many possible answers.

I go with, “Better.”

“You frowned you when you said better,” he gently says.

I take a breath, my skin realizing that the cold is fiercer in this room, so my legs and arms begin to dance with bumps. “My body is feeling better. And for some reason that makes me a little sad.” I’ve always known time to pass too quickly, but the last twenty-one days have slowed, uncomfortably so, and I know it has everything to do with the pain in my womb healing without my consent.

“The important things often hurt the most. And healing is important. It means new things, a fresh start.” His eyes are blue like mine, and I let my pupils get caught up in them. I want to tell him how right he is, the start I have in mind that will change everything, but I’m not ready to release the details that are only now beginning to make sense.

“Why did you decide to see me?” I say and watch him fidget in his bright orange jumpsuit.

“Your father wrote me. Told me what happened to you. I couldn’t put it off anymore.” The orange does nothing for his complexion, and his hair is distressingly white. But his eyes are wet like they used to be. With dew, he’d always say. His mouth still straightens out wide as a wingspan. “I have to put my pride aside.”

“She just wants to see you,” I say, and I think how I just want to see my grandmother too. Gram visited me in the hospital. She brought a small painting she did for me, the first in a long while. The color of mud swept up in a devastated circle. She didn’t tell me what it represented because she seemed separate from it like she didn’t want much to do with it. I could tell she didn’t want much to do with my father at the hospital either.

“That’s on her.” My grandfather stares into me, and I can see the day they carted him away. Troy and I were asleep and motherless. Gram lost her mind. My father lost his father, and nobody was left to pack my lunch for school.

“She told me to give you this.” I hand him the envelope Gram had given me at her apartment. I didn’t look at it just like she asked, but the entire drive over I could feel it staring at me.

He takes it out and places the glasses that are sitting on the edge of our table onto his face. I’m sensing the others around us now, the hushed whispers of people at tables with loved ones. There are only a handful of us, visitors and inmates alike. I wonder who’s missing. Who didn’t show up. Who’s in their cell wishing they could light it on fire. I see the girl with the Mickey Mouse earrings with an older woman who looks just like her—same angry eyes, same angry mouth.

Granddad clears his throat. His fist meets his lips. “She says she’ll divorce me if I don’t write back.”

“Sounds like her.”

“I’m going to take her up on that offer.”

“What?” I check his eyes, and they’re still wet but more so. They want to spill over.

“Sometimes, it’s better to break away than keep pretending. I’m not getting out of here, Vienna. I can’t have her holding on to me, hating her son for doing the right thing by turning me in. I can’t live knowing she’s dying.” He wipes his eyes beneath his glasses and keeps his fingers in his sockets. He drags them along the sides of his face, and the sagging skin beneath his lids turns pink with the force of his fingertips. “It’s my penance. If I’m ever going to find forgiveness in my heart for this mess I’ve created, I can’t be selfish anymore. I have to let her go.”

My face is twisting. I can feel my skin cells cavorting and tugging at each other. He looks bewildered.

“But that’s selfish just to give her up because you can’t take the pain. You can’t do this.”

“I have to do this.” He doesn’t ask me if I know what it’s like to be in love, and I’m at least grateful for that. I don’t know if my father

filled him in completely about my situation, my indiscretion with another woman's husband. I don't know what it's like to be loved the way Granddad knows it, my grandmother too. But I can see the sacrifice in him, and I realize that's the ingredient that I've always been missing.

"What do I tell her?" I ask. He mulls it over, glancing up as the guard in charge quiets down an animated visitor, a woman who sits a few tables over from my left and whose gold hoop earrings knock hard against her head.

"Tell her I love her too much. Same goes for you," he says, and I realize what this is. He's cutting himself off from all of us, not just Gram. It doesn't feel like letting go. It feels like punishment.

I have a hard time seeing his face clearly because my eyes are waterlogged, and my hands are averse to touching my face and acknowledging my grief.

"And Vienna, if it's true what you said you did all those years ago to your mother, well..." He waits until I look up at him, and as I do I feel my cells aging. "There's no greater prison than your own heart."

The guard announces over the intercom that it's time to leave. There's no physical contact allowed, so I hug him hard in the way my teeth bite my lip, in the way I cry two feet away from him. He cries, too, and with each of my grandfather's tears, I see my past wash away.

I'm left clean.

Later, in the car heading the hour drive home, I test this new pain with my finger, and it doesn't hurt as nearly as it should, and that's when I know it for what it really is.

Forgiveness.

• • •

WHEN I DRIVE UP TO the home, there are several people in the yard and a block of cars in the driveway, but Heather's Corolla is the one I notice first. We've only talked to each other once since the hos-

pital. She called me, and our conversation was short because neither of us knew where to lead it. I've been grateful for the break from her. I miss her, and in another way, I don't. I like the feel of life without having to look at my misery reflected.

"Hey," Heather says when she steps out of the car. I can tell it won't be long now. Her belly dwarfs the rest of her, and she's having a hard time walking my way, so I meet her in the middle of the front yard.

"Hey," I say.

"Looks like a circus." She nods at the litter of cars in the driveway. The sun beats down on my crown, so I rub at my hair. Heather is in her yoga pants and a black long-sleeved t-shirt. I can't help but think she must be dying under it. I can't help but notice she's not wearing Wyland's button-down.

"Open house tomorrow. A few of the vendors are already showing up to set up their stations."

"I'm surprised your dad let you play hooky."

"Me too," I smile. The truth is, Dad's been extremely un-Dad like lately. It's there in my freshly poured cup of coffee or the laundry he folds and places on my bed during his lunch break. I can't tell him to stop, and I'm afraid it's because I don't want him to.

It was actually his idea for me to leave earlier this morning to visit Granddad, even though I know he definitely needs my help. I told him about Gram, about how she needed me to see him, and I expected his protest. But he told me he thought it was a great idea, and I suspect it's only because he knows I need it as much my grandmother does.

"He doesn't live with me anymore," Heather says, and it takes me a moment to place who she's talking about. I nod but don't really know what to say. "He's at his parents. I have a new roommate, though. Amber." I look up, a crowd of people dancing behind her head. She's gone mad.

“Amber? Fritch? Really?” Everything is coming out like a question, and a small feeling of betrayal is welling up inside of me. First, Wyland. Now, Heather.

“She’s in rehab. She lives with me, and I make sure she doesn’t kill herself. Plus, she’s not a bad painter.” I nod, dumbfounded, having no clue what she’s talking about.

“I guess her life isn’t what I always thought it was. Perfect,” she says. A van pulls up, the Burling Gates Cat Shelter. They start lifting out crates of cats, and I have to hold my tongue from laughing. Loretta.

“I guess not,” I say. I try to find the joy in the thought of a newly downtrodden Amber, but there’s none there.

“And my father’s in town.”

“Father?” I knew Heather’s father had left when she was younger, but nobody really talked about it, Heather especially.

“Yeah, he was living in Maryland. Apparently, my mom left him her house in her will.”

“Heather, that’s wonderful. You don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” She goes quiet, and I can tell this is where our road ends. There’s a severed cord between the two of us, between us and Wyland. We don’t need each other anymore.

I give her the hug I couldn’t give Granddad and don’t mind feeling her belly curving into mine. Even though loss’s phantom limb keeps buzzing through me, I don’t mind it at all.

“Thank you,” she says into my hair, and I nod. We let go, and there is Heather Hammel on my lawn thanking me. I take the image, crop it, and keep it for myself.

“Goodbye, Vienna Oaks,” she says and lumbers through gravity to her car. I hear cats meowing, brochures rustling, my father gasping when he comes outside to see the menagerie in his front yard, but I don’t hear Heather Hammel leave.

I never want to know that sound.

• • •

IT'S MY MORNING. AFTER visiting my grandfather and growing succinctly apart from Heather Hammel, last night was nothing but pencil and paper and faces critically drawn with my steady hand. I place them in a manila envelope I find in my father's desk and place the package in my purse along with a note to the one person who needs it most.

"Ready for the insanity?" my father asks, two mugs of coffee in his hands as he steps into the office. I reach for his face with my eyes, and it's no longer a surprise how time has ravaged him. It's ravaged me, too; it's just that for the first time, I'm aware of it.

"Yeah, I think so. Is Loretta dressed?"

"Surprisingly so," he says. I wonder what he thinks of me. I know he's reached out, been kinder, but I wonder if it's because he's making up for his mistakes or mine.

"How'd it go?" he asks, and I know he's talking about me visiting Granddad. He didn't mention it yesterday, so I didn't either. I can't say it feels any less sore thinking about it today.

"He's going to divorce her," I say, and I'm surprised to see my father's face falling to the floor.

"He can't." He places the coffees on the desk and sits in one of the guest chairs across from me. "Why?"

I work out the "why" in my head before I tell him. I didn't think it would hit him like this. His mother hates him, and his father's locked away. I'm not sure how much else could destroy him.

"He doesn't want to hurt her anymore. He thinks by him being in there and Gram still relying on him, that's the reason why she carries so much hate, why she's always hurting you. She can't let go, so he's going to do it for her." I don't have the guts to look up, so I stare

at the computer keyboard in front of me. The letters waltz in pairs when my eyes blur.

“It doesn’t work that way.”

“He thinks it does.”

“He’s wrong.” I do it. I look up. It’s the wrong choice but the right one because he’s the same father that cried in my hair when my mother died.

“I love you,” I say. I hold my stare, even though it’s agonizing to see him lost in a chair. I stand up and walk around to hug him, until my freshly curled hair goes flat with tears. I feel his body straining as he leans into me instead of away. My calves burn from crouching down to his level.

“And I, you,” he says, and I know he can sense it. The way this pain feels something like forgiveness.

“I’ll go check on Loretta. Make sure she’s still dressed,” I say, and he chuckles into his handkerchief. I grab my bag that I had left near the door when I came in, and my mother watches me leave him from her spot on the wall. I touch the frame of the painting then close the door behind me, my heart pounding out the sound of her name.

“Hey there, Sunshine,” Loretta says. Exiting the office, I spot her in the viewing room. She’s sitting in a pew toward the back.

“What are you doing?” I walk the center aisle and sit down when she scoots over. It’s six, the Open House won’t start until nine, but my father was right. She’s dressed, and lucid, and working a cream-colored blanket with her hands.

“Thinking,” she says. She smells sweet, and I know she’s spent the morning preparing, wanting to make my father proud, even though representing the cat shelter probably isn’t the way to do it. Trying and never measuring up. It seems to be an epidemic around here.

“I shouldn’t have ignored it. I knew you were pregnant; I knew you were talking about yourself and not a friend. I just didn’t want to overstep my bounds. You know how I don’t like to interfere.” I give

her a look, but don't say anything because this is the first time she's mentioned my miscarriage. She's kept busy instead, offering to bring me breakfast, lunch, dinner, a cat to cheer me up. She had her car repaired without telling me and brought mine back from the shop.

"It wasn't your problem to fix, Loretta. You didn't do anything wrong." I watch her pull her fears through the blanket, fingers linked through the yarn. She tugs and tugs.

"I didn't do anything right. I never do." The door to the office opens, and I wait for my father to enter, to change the subject and save us, but he doesn't. I can hear him shift his weight up the stairs.

"Well, then, we're not that different." I'm looking at the wooden holder at the back of the pew in front of us. It contains a tissue box and cutouts of the serenity prayer. I remember Loretta sitting in the break room, snipping squares of paper with this prayer on it and an excess waterfalls off the side of the table. My father had commented on the mess, and that's all he had commented on.

"Thank you."

"For what?" she asks.

"Everything." I hug her and hope she can feel the years she made me feel human—made my lunch, combed my hair, clothed me. I forget those parts because I sometimes see her the way my father sees her, a stand-in. But I know this isn't the filter he wants on his heart. I don't want it on mine either.

"Oh. I don't know what I've done, but you're welcome." She is truly mystified, and this is something I'll miss about Loretta. Her humility.

We sit, and I watch from the corner of my eye as she pats her eye with tissues from the box in front of us. Her hands are gentle on her face, and I remember the way it felt when she took my palm and shook it for the first time at The Green Grocer. I felt like I had mattered.

I'll lose that feeling, I think as the quiet bubbles around us, and for an instant, the air goes black. If I follow out my plan today and sever myself completely from my mother's face, I'll lose what it feels like to be human.

Bitter, medicinal, the measured taste of losing to win.

I don't even flinch when Loretta takes my hand, and the baby blanket falls to the floor.

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BODIES EVERYWHERE. My purse has become my best friend, and I follow its lead, taking corners, revolving around the staircase, drifting through the lot of business owners here to showcase their services. I find the morgue, enter it. I greedily take the last crumbs of comfort Rosa has to offer.

"You look nice," she says, and I repay her the compliment. You would never know she has a teenaged daughter who's heading into her second trimester. She doesn't keep the worry and stress in her face, but I glimpse it in her hands. They have nowhere to go.

I take them, and she's surprised how close I stand to her, but I need to drink in those little moments when I sat on her bedroom floor, and she'd absolve my sinful heart.

"What's this for?" she asks, but she doesn't let me go.

"It's a thank you. And an apology." I step back, and she's eighth grade all over again. Scared, alone. Without her best friend.

"For what?"

"I wasn't there for you when you were pregnant with Maya." I've said the thing we've never talked about. Even when Rosa turned twenty-one, graduated from beauty school, and came to work for my father, we didn't talk about it. Even when she told me she applied for the job because she wanted us to start over, wanted Maya to know her aunt and grandfather, we didn't talk about why we needed to start over in the first place.

“We don’t need to—”

“Yes. I do.” We’re bright and clean in the white room. The effect sends a shiver on its course through my skin. My pride loosens through my pores.

“You were right. I was wrong to be with Wyland. I was wrong to talk to Heather. I need time for myself now. I need to figure out what’s next.” I don’t tell her that I already know, and I wish I could, but I know she’d chain me to her metal chair and tell me to stop being stupid. But it’s not a stupid thing. It’s the only thing.

“Thanks. You take some of Loretta’s emotional truth serum or something?” She smiles, and her teeth bounce the cold white light into my eyes.

“No,” I smile, and I let my vision go. The sound of her voice leads me.

“I don’t know how to handle this, Vienna. I haven’t told anyone about Maya, not even Mom. Just you. But I, I need someone to help me with this, and I just wish for all the world I could rely on Troy.” Her voice goes small, and my eyes snap open.

“Let me talk to him.”

“I don’t know...”

“Let me.” She feels her collarbone, and she studies the pros and cons invisibly suspended mid-air.

“Okay,” she says. I hug her again, and the grief in her hands finds her throat. She cries, and her tears heal me. They’re sticky sweet like Coke on my forehead. Like candy through her fingers.

“It’ll be okay, right?” she asks.

Before I answer Loretta pokes her head in. “Vienna, um, I need to speak to you. There’s someone here. To see you.” She looks concerned, but I smile at her. I look into Rosa’s almond-colored eyes for the last time and whisper, “I love you.” She says, “Me too,” and lets go.

I don't turn around to see her fortressed in her books and her makeup, but I configure the image in my mind, and I don't allow it to pry itself loose.

I start to turn left out of the morgue, but Loretta turns right near the back door. She stops me and says, "He's here." I know she means Wyland. My father wanted to call up Turnbull Realty and request Wyland didn't man their booth, but I told him not to. I'm assuming Mr. Turnbull doesn't know the exact reason why Heather left her son, and I have a hunch everyone involved would like to keep it that way.

"You'll be okay?" she asks, and I nod although I'm not sure.

I open the back door and the light takes me. It's a devastating truth how dark the inside of the home is. I move out onto the deck, and there he is, his back to me. He's facing our old oak tree out in the yard.

I walk out to meet him, and he turns around when he hears my steps. His face isn't the one I pretended it was at the house on Field Grove the first time we broke Heather's heart. It's not the face of the boy who told me I wasn't capable of killing my mother, either. It's just Wyland, a relic of time and disappointment, a weak vestige of my former friend.

"How are you?" he asks. His hands grip the railing behind him, and it looks like he's waiting in fear for me to pierce his chest with a sword.

"Been better." I walk up until I'm shoulder-to-shoulder with him, and his arms relax. He smooths his hair with his hand. When it falls, he takes my fingers. A spark snaps alight, but I quickly suffocate it.

"I'm sorry," he says. I can tell he means it, even when I let his hand go.

“I know. Me too.” There is noise all around us. People inside, outside wandering about from booth to booth, but nobody nips at our peace. Here, we’re all alone.

“Everything. For everything, I mean the diner, not telling her, for...you know.” He can’t say “baby,” and that’s the line between us. I know it’s more than that. He knows it’s more than that. But the difference is in his regret and in the lack of mine.

“We both chose this. We’re both at fault.” The question I want to ask speaks up. There’s no use ignoring it, not now. “Why didn’t you want to be with me?” He doesn’t move. He’s still, and the little boy edges out. He’s twelve, and he’s scared because his father beats him. He’s sixteen, and he’s scared because his father beats him. He’s eighteen, and he’s leaving, and he’s not taking me with him because when he sees my face, he sees his old pain.

“She doesn’t know, you know, about me. About what it was like growing up for me.” He’s talking about Heather, and I note how he can’t say her name. He’s sweating in the heat, in the truth, and the sharp cut of his curls around his ears is dark with salt.

“I used to feel guilty about it, always asking her about her life, knowing the crap she went through and making her believe I had this golden childhood.” He moves inches away from me, a clearing between us where the sun breaks through and drowns the deck we stand on. “But she gave me what I needed. I needed to be the hero.” He pauses a beat, and I catch the worst image of his lips slightly parted. “That’s stupid,” he says, and he shakes his head, the dark at the edges of his hair turning in the light. “You were always that for me, Vienna. Escape, safety. Salvation. But I needed to know what that felt like for once. I needed to be that man my father has always said I couldn’t be.” He sacrifices his eyes to the sun, and his hand instinctively travels to his forehead to shield his face.

It’s strange to hear. He was always saving me from myself, from Heather Hammel, and he never even knew it. All those pictures I

sketched of his face, all those times I looked at my work, and all I could think was there he is. My way out.

“I guess when we slept together, I just needed you again. I needed you to save me,” he says. My body is petrifying and moving is a need I can’t fulfill. It’s horrible how I didn’t understand any of this from the beginning. I’ve lost minutes, I’ve lost everything about myself, and all this time I’ve been the hero. I can feel it in him now, his need for me. I can feel how tired he is from losing all the time, from not believing he’s capable of a win. For once, I can see beyond myself.

I don’t do it because I want it but because he needs it. I don’t even check to see if anyone has walked around the side of the house. Hearing has left me, so I’m not sure if the back door opens, and the inside of the home is privy to us standing alone in the cold glare of sunlight. I step in and make his lips meet mine. It’s the past and our present and the pain of three hearts whittled to their nubs. He doesn’t taste a thing like water.

“I have to go,” I say. His face is pained and beautiful, but I let it go. The rush propels me forward, and I can only feel my purse throbbing against my leg, the manila envelope emanating its heat from within. I walk around to the front, past people as quickly as my legs will take me, and then I turn around on the sidewalk, and there it is. My home.

I see Gram and Granddad dancing on the porch. I see Troy in a tree, hot smoke piping through his lungs. I see Heather Hammel besides me, dressed like a princess on Halloween shouting, her angry fist clutching Halloween candy. Rosa with her makeup case, Loretta with her hitched up skirt. My mother, dropping me off and letting me go and stumbling back to her car. They’re all there. I pinch the image of the home through my fingers. I ignore the ruby red-mouthed woman at Hair Today’s booth who’s staring at me. I ignore the noise and sounds of the front lawn and make it what it’s always been between my two fingers. My life.

I walk away. I start down the sidewalk and turn from Halfway Drive onto Bristol. I keep walking, and my veins pump, my muscles move. I go the way that passes by the park and see my mother and me sitting on top of the wooden benches. We are beautiful together, and I'm sad I always missed that part. I watch her put her hand in my hair, the bottle still at her lips, and I forgive her because she's wearing her mauve shirt, and her feet are bare, and she opens my chips and smiles as I crunch my way through them. She's never looked better.

I walk, and it feels like my heart is leading me. I pass by The Green Grocer knowing Mr. Markie is alone and overwhelmed in his office. A piece of my organ breaks off for him, for him loving Loretta and for that love going unfulfilled. I pass by the fruit, colorful, hopeful in their wooden boxes, and I don't even see April Patterson before I run into her.

"I'm so sorry," I say and then recognition washes over me. Parker's mother looks a kind of tired I've never been faced with, but she weakly smiles at me. I look down, expecting the urn to still be in the crook of her arm, but instead, she's holding her daughter, Montgomery's, hand.

"It's no problem." She goes quiet, and I think it's easier if I just walk past her, but she finds my arm with her fingers and gives it a slow squeeze. "Thank you, you know." I nod. I'm going to miss that part. Planting the tiniest seeds of hope in a person and watching them birth through a layer of grief.

She's the one who walks away, and with her, another piece of myself. I watch April Patterson breach life without her son. He's placed on a mantle or maybe tucked with the things she needs most in the back of her closet. But he's lulling in the outside more than anywhere. I spy the way he's harbored through her when she doesn't let go of her daughter's hand.

I carry on to the post office with a lighter chest and see the blue box waiting for me. I fish for the manila envelope inside my purse

and hug it to my chest like I'm contemplating whether to mail it or not, but I know I will. I know it's best because on the inside are memories and truths I've shaded with pencil. Dad with his hair reaching for the sky. Loretta, her hand nestled against a cat's black fur. Gram in her swirling skirts. Granddad in his suit standing against the doorframe of the home. Rosa, a tube of lipstick in hand, and Maya, three-years-old with a grin the color of sunshine. Troy in his army jacket, his hand in our mother's hair. Wyland with his curls haloing from his head.

Heather, her belly filled with promise.

I mail them all to my grandmother. The letter inside says to make sure they get to their rightful owners. It also says Granddad has set her free, and even though there's pain in that, there's also opportunity. I tell her I've wired some of the money from my savings account to her. I tell her to get Troy into rehab, and when he's clean, to help him reconnect with Rosa and his daughter. I tell her to pay off her bills. I tell her to find the ties she has to her son because I know they're there no matter how hard she pretends they're not. There's nothing extinguishable about the burning roots that connect a mother to her child.

I listen to them venture down the steel belly of the mailbox. I stand awhile, stalling, but I force my feet until they've arrived at their last stop.

I pause at the front doors, and before I walk inside, I dig out my phone from my purse. I think to call Troy because there's no one else left, but that's the rote thing, the habitual thing, so instead of calling my brother and using him to settle my nerves, I experience the fear triggering my senses. I have to trust that Gram will take care of him better than I ever did.

I go inside, and I'm tuned into everything. The door handle is cold, and slick, and refracts the shape of my face. The tiles are black and white, and some of the white ones have been battered with black

scuffs. At the desk, I give the officer my name. His tag says Officer Tran, and his face is apathetic to the shaky sound of my voice. I tell him why I'm there, and then I sit, waiting for someone to relieve me from sitting. I try to take in more details of the station, but she creeps in, even though I try and stop her. In my head, I'm screaming "We made peace at the park," but she's still walking with my hand gripped tight in hers. I'm too old for this, for hand holding, but it hurts to break free. Her heels splash the parking lot of Manor Market, and the rain is sticking her hair to her head. I feel like I'm being dragged against my will.

"It's fine, Vienna. I'm fine. Stop worrying." She's shouting above the sound of water hitting the ground and cars starting their engines. The whole time in the car, I was shouting at her, something I never do, telling her she drank too much, and she shouldn't be driving. I could have stayed home, but my guilt outgrew me and is firmly locked in my mother's hand. I can't shake it free.

"You're not fine," I say too low for her to hear.

"You don't need to worry about me. I'm the adult, you're the child. You can't even begin to understand," she says. She uses her other hand to wipe strands of hair out of her eyes. I protest in my head. I understand—I of all people understand what's wrong with her because I'm always receiving the brunt end of it.

I see the car coming as we step up on the curb. It feels like a chance, and even though my guilt has grown a foot taller from where I stand, I turn my back to it. My mouth tastes like metal.

"Not true," I whisper again. My hand hurts with a wet ache. My fingers tremble against my will.

She turns to me and bends down like I'm a child. She levels her eyes with mine, and they're blue, streaked, and cold. I lose her when I look into them.

"You won't do it differently either, you know," she says, and the drink on her breath breaks into my nose. "You'll be just like me." I

feel like screaming, crying, and I don't know if it's the words or the way she practically sings them. All I can see are the headlights round and bulbous, shooting stars in our pathway, and then my hand finally escaping the sharp feel of her fingers. She turns to stand back up, but before she can stretch her legs straight completely, I push with all the might I've tensed inside my twelve-year-old body and watch her dance slowly to the ground. The sound that comes next. It's life, surrendering.

"Ms. Oaks? Don't know if you remember me, but I'm Detective Morris." A man a few years older than my father stands in front of the bench. White shirt, tie, gun slung around his waist. I'm launched out of thought as he outstretches his hand.

"I hear you have some information on your mother's case?" he asks, and I nod. I say, "Yes," and he motions me to follow him, so I stand up, but before I move, I breathe everything in.

It batters my heart, this moment. The plaque on the wall, the flag anchored and floating above our heads. I know what I'm going to say won't change anything. But before I catch a bus to start over, start new in Chicago, I have to surrender my past.

I want the detective to hold me because being this free is almost harder to bear than being kept, fastened tight in the past, in memory. I keep my distance, though, and feel the crack of ribs, of opening up.

I watch my ruined heart take leave.

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