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Bella ran her fingers over the hair she remembered as being long enough to touch the dip where her waist met her hips. What was left of it stuck out from her head in pixie-like tufts. During a moment of insanity or bravery, she still wasn't sure which; she'd dyed the scanty strands purple. The effect, combined with anguish in her eyes, made her look like a teenage runaway. Tori Amos crooned through the speakers of the black Crown Victoria and her ferret Icarus rode shotgun in his cage, asleep with his tail curled over his eyes.

As she drove through the last of New Hampshire toward Maine, she rolled down the window and let the August breeze ripple her baggy jeans and thermal t-shirt. She smiled to think of the days when she thought she could never be skinny enough. A former cross-country runner, Bella had been trained to believe that there was no such thing. She made a mental note to devise a weight loss plan based on surviving severe trauma. Weight Watchers had nothing on her. She rolled on toward her old college campus, attempting to put as much distance as possible between herself and the place where she'd left the ghosts.

The campus was simple and beautiful. Nestled along the Maine shoreline, the water came up almost to the grass. Rustic buildings stood among the hilly terrain of the campus, and all the walkways were lined with brick. Bella fell in love with the school on a tour with her high school at seventeen. The fact that they had a pretty solid cross-country team didn't hurt, either. The only stumbling block was the annual price tag of thirty thousand dollars.

One running scholarship and a good chunk of financial aid later, she was officially enrolled. Universities can be kind to running prodigies of single parents. Now, at twenty-seven, and more gaunt than she'd ever been as a varsity runner, she headed toward the shelter of the

past. She could tell she was getting close by the tang of salt air, the undercurrent of warmth in the breeze. It was about six AM when she pulled into a spot in the visitors' lot. She was relieved that little had changed. Except for her. She had been whole when she lived here.

Bella could remember the day she first arrived at school with remarkable clarity. She had stood in the student union building waiting for her orientation group and embracing the sense of infinite possibility. Four years felt like an eternity, during which she could accomplish any number of miraculous feats. She felt insulated by her friends and cross-country teammates. Once a month, her coach invited the team over for a spaghetti supper. It was a place at which to pursue any number of dreams.

Sitting in her car full of luggage and ferret supplies, the details of Bella's stay now accosted her. Where would she stay? Should she have called first? If so, whom? There were a number of people she wanted to visit—friends, professors—but none of them at six in the morning. She thumbed through her cell phone directory and smiled at the sight of one name.

Levi and Bella had forged what some might consider an unlikely friendship during the summer after her freshman year. She'd spent the summer training with the cross-country team and working as a lackey at the library. Levi had been one of the librarians at the reference desk and used to make fun of the sound her flip-flops made as she replaced the books discarded by harried students. That summer, she was eighteen and he was twenty-seven.

Levi had always worn polyester pants (sometimes paisley) or corduroys. He was the only guy Bella had ever met who never wore jeans, which impressed her. The campus was relatively quiet that summer, and she had started hanging out at his little cabin with a few other townies. Levi had silky black hair that hung to his shoulders, always falling in his eyes.

Some of Bella's best memories of Levi were from when he was stoned. He obtained a sort of Yoda-like wisdom when he'd been smoking, unlike other people Bella had known, who just got silly. One night, they were lying on the shoreline, the water soaking their clothes and mucky sand coating strands of their hair. His stomach was a comfortable cushion beneath her head.

"I think," he said, and scratched at the scruff that was more than a five' o'clock shadow but less than a beard, "that people don't really die."

"I think someone sold you a bad stash," Bella said.

"According to some schools of thought, a being lives on for as long as at least one other person remembers him. If people pass down these stories through infinity, then it would be possible to live forever."

She turned to face him, eyebrows raised. "Thank you, Socrates."

Despite her sarcasm, it was something Bella had thought about for a long time afterward. Levi had found his own way to make sense out of the universe. It was that sense of order she

found herself craving almost ten years later, as she sat in her car with her cell phone in hand.

She knew that at least one person would understand a phone call at such an ungodly hour.

Levi's voice sounded gravelly from sleep. "I haven't talked to you in weeks!" It was true that she'd been a little reclusive during the past few months. "Where are you? I'll come pick you up."

"I have my car. Can I come over?"

Ten minutes and five miles later, she was pulling into Levi's driveway. His house was really more of a log cabin, and its proximity to the ocean made it a prime spot for bonfires. The air smelled like salt and trees and she sucked in a big breath of it as she got out of the car.

She heard the creak of the rusty screen door hinge and turned around. Levi covered the ground between them in four steps and lifted her off her feet. She hadn't seen him since the funeral. He'd looked old then, which scared her. During the nine years she'd known him, he'd always looked the same. That day, though, he'd looked his age, a few silver hairs punctuating the expanse of black, stubble and the first webbing of wrinkles across his face. She probably hadn't looked much better, but she couldn't really remember.

Beware the Ides of March. Bella had never expected the date of Caesar's assassination to hold any more significance to her than the extent to which it was mentioned in her grade-school history book. As it happened, March 15th became her D-Day—except there was nothing patriotic

or heroic about a dead twenty-seven year old. On the day her boyfriend died, Bella woke up at seven to the sound of the CD player alarm clock filling the bedroom with the Doors' "Break on Through to the Other Side." She groaned, and turned toward Ducky, whose black, floppy hair was covering most of his face.

"Tomorrow, I get to pick the CD."

"Unnnnn."

"Hey, no falling back asleep! You're the one who wanted to go hiking today." Bella left her sleeping boyfriend and padded down the wood floor in the hallway to the pale blue linoleum of the bathroom. She pulled back the shower curtain. The water that spurted from the faucet was chilly, and Bella let it run. She noticed that Ducky had placed a thick copy of Webster's dictionary on the back of the toilet tank next to her copy of David Copperfield. *Jackass*, she thought with affection.

While she waited for the water to heat up, she surveyed her reflection in the mirror. Her long, blond hair hung in a thick tapestry almost to her waist. She considered cutting it, maybe just a few inches for the summer.

"Can I come in?" Ducky's voice cracked into her thoughts. She opened the painted wooden door to find him riddled with goose bumps, clad in only a pair of yellow checked boxer shorts.

"Is the water warm yet?" he asked. Bella stuck her hand through the shower curtain.

"It's getting there." She stepped into the shower, and picked up a bottle of shampoo. After a few minutes, Ducky slipped in behind her.

"You know, I think you have more shower crap in here than I do," Bella said, surveying

the collection of bottles containing musky scented conditioners and scrubs. She was a soap and shampoo kind of girl. She didn't wear makeup, and only slathered on cocoa butter lotion to keep dry skin at bay.

"It's not my fault you're a dirty hippie," Ducky said, washing his face with granular, piney smelling goop.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Let's Go Hiking at the Crack of Dawn on a Sunday Morning." Bella rubbed some soap onto a face cloth and scrubbed. "Nice dictionary, wiseass."

"Hey, some of us have trouble with words like disuntransubstantiate."

"That's not even close to being a word! And even if it was, Charles Dickens would never use it."

"Fine, bookworm."

"You love it."

"You're right. Getting to hop into bed with a librarian every night is almost as good as the Catholic school girl fantasy."

"You're so dirty."

"That's why I'm in the shower!"

Bella laughed as she rinsed the suds through her hair, which hung like a heavy, wet shawl. She reached through the curtain for her towel.

"Hey," Ducky said.

"What?"

"I love you." The familiar warmth spread like a swig of brandy through her stomach. She smiled even though she wasn't facing him.

“I love you, too. I’ll make the pancakes.”

In the kitchen, she pulled a blue ceramic bowl from the particle-board cupboard and began assembling the ingredients for pancakes.

After setting two places at the table, she flipped a pancake onto each plate with a spatula. She had just filled the dirty dishes with water when she heard the even thumping of Ducky descending the stairs. His hair was damp, but not dripping on his long-sleeved t- shirt, which he wore with a pair of tan Carharts. He was barefoot.

“I’m the pancake monster!” he said, covering Bella’s face and neck with nibbles and kisses.

“Knock it off; I’m going to spill syrup on you!”

“All the better to eat you with, my dear.”

“You’re hopeless!”

She put the maple syrup on the table, in its sculpted maple leaf bottle. She’d never been able to stomach the store-bought stuff.

“Think you can keep up with me today?” Ducky forked a pancake square into his mouth.

“I’m the athlete in this relationship,” Bella said, “so I don’t see why not.”

“Going out for a run five times a year doesn’t make you an athlete.”

She raised her eyebrows, feeling mischievous. “Are you calling me fat?”

Not for a minute did he take the bait. “Give me a break,” he said. “By the way, the pancakes are prime.”

Later, Bella packed sweatshirts and windbreakers into an L.L. Bean backpack, along with two quarts of water and a flashlight.

“Wuss,” Ducky said.

“You may not have noticed, but officially, it’s still winter.”

When they pulled out the driveway in Ducky’s maroon station wagon, they didn’t really have a destination in mind. Ducky wanted to find a hiking spot swimming in spring sunlight, and there was no shortage of trails in woodsy central New Hampshire. A picnic lunch sat in an orange canvas bag on the backseat. Bella had spread the New England map across her legs like a dinner napkin, and her long, blonde hair kept blowing out the window.

“Why is this stuff green?” she said, looking at the bottle of Odwalla juice in her left hand.

“Spirulina,” Ducky said, without taking his eyes of the road.

“What?”

“Spirulina. It’s like seaweed or something.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re pretty smart for someone who needs a dictionary to read Dickens”

He leaned over to kiss her on the temple. Bella could remember the irritation that would itch beneath her skin whenever he knew something that she didn’t. It was strange how trivial those annoyances seemed now that he was gone.

“I think there’s a good place a few more miles up,” Ducky said, and grabbed the juice from her hand to take a swig. “Are my teeth green?”

“You’re such a dork!”

“Well, are they?”

“No,” she said, “your teeth are not green.”

Bella wished her last words to Ducky had been more profound, but they weren’t. She’d

always thought of death as having an element of grace, of glamour. It didn't. Instead, it came in the form of a tractor-trailer that was barrel-assing around the curve that lay before the little maroon station wagon. What happened next came to Bella in pieces. When two vehicles met, she closed her eyes.

2

The seashell smell that she so strongly associated with Maine filled Bella's nostrils as she entered Levi's weathered log cabin, which happened to be only a short walk from the waterfront. Bella loved the remoteness of Levi's place. It was set back in a grassy area close to one of the uglier stretches of shoreline, unlike the waterfront beach houses rented by upperclassmen. The stretch of beach was punctuated by surf-smoothed rocks. The sand was dark and hard-packed, littered with glass and stray trash. The only shells that washed up on the beach were fragments, pieces of something beautiful and broken.

The flimsy outer door creaked painfully as they stamped the sand from their shoes. Bella deposited Icarus in the single spare room upstairs and settled onto the orange-upholstered couch in the living room. After the long drive, it was relief to spread out. This, she thought, was it. She was doing something real, something brave. The whole trip had seemed somehow surreal,

even when she had packed the final box and turned in the keys to her apartment. But this, being here at Levi's house, was the first step toward whatever she was looking for. Levi handed her a mixed drink that reeked of gin, and placed his own on the table he'd made from a lobster trap (complete with plastic cherry colored lobsters). He leaned deeply into a padded rocking chair, his knees fanned out.

"To fucking up at life," he said, raising his glass. Bella toasted with a healthy swig from her own glass, involuntarily shuddering at the potency.

"Drink up, Bel," he said.

"Maybe I should," said Bella, "at least it'd kill the pain for awhile."

Levi smiled drowsily, "You know, these days you're an alcoholic if you drink champagne at weddings. I don't care what people say, there are worse ways to deal."

"Sometimes I feel like people are waiting for me to lose it, making sure they have front row seats." Bella sipped her drink, suddenly feeling as bitter as a pitcher of cheap beer. "Might as well make them happy."

Levi moved to the couch and released a low sigh. "Newsflash: Falling apart is a gift."

Bella stared harshly at him, wondering how he could possibly consider her crisis a gift.

"Your situation is the worst thing in the world. It's a train wreck. But this is the one time in your life when you don't have to have your shit together. You can lie in a puddle of your own piss and it's okay."

Bella allowed herself a smile as she conjured up a visual. Clearly, Ducky's death had warped her sense of humor. She sipped her drink and tried to distinguish one taste from another: orange juice, 99 Bananas, hot searing rum.

Levi closed his eyes for a few moments, and then let a slow grin spread across his face.

“Remember the night you fell asleep in the stacks?”

Bella groaned. As a sophomore, she’d pulled an all nighter, and worked the closing shift at the library the following night. She’d crashed in periodicals while re-shelving *Time* magazine. The library had been dark when she woke up.

“That entire fiasco could have been avoided if you’d actually been doing your job,” she said. It had been Levi’s responsibility to make regular rounds of the building.

“I’m a slacker. You know this.” Levi laughed. “The best part was when you called me for the code to the security system.”

“It’s not as though I had any other options. I was petrified I’d get fired!” Bella shook her head. “It would have been nice if you’d kept the story to yourself, though.” Within twenty-four hours, the escapade had circulated to the entire library staff.

“I couldn’t help it,” Levi said. “It was one of my favorite Bella moments. It still is. And you know what?”

“No, but I bet you’ll tell me.”

“It had nothing to do with Ducky. It was just you.”

Bella rubbed her eyes, trying to focus her thoughts through the alcohol-induced haze.

“What’s your point?”

“Nothing.” Levi shrugged. “I was just thinking.”

Bella woke the next morning with no recollection of how she’d made it to bed. Sitting up made her head feel tight, but stretching felt delicious. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been black out drunk. Despite the mild hangover, she felt rested and free for the first time since

Ducky died, but too tired to move in the first few minutes of wakefulness.

Ducky never seemed to need as much sleep as she did. On Saturday mornings, she would lie in bed with her tangled blonde hair in a matted mess that made her look like Swamp Thing while Ducky lay awake beside her, reading a magazine.

“Why don’t you get up and do something?” she asked him once.

“Because I want to wait for you,” he said.

Levi was working nine to seven at the library, and the house was quiet. Eventually, she managed a shower, and assessed clothing options. She fingered several articles of Ducky’s clothing. She’d been wearing his clothes a lot since the accident. His T-shirts were too big and his jeans too baggy, but no one said anything although they must have thought it was strange. Bella rummaged in her duffel bag until she found some faded jeans and a short-sleeved, paisley button down.

It felt good to wear clothes that fit again. As she smoothed the denim over her hips, she realized that even her own clothes were a little big. Bella had never considered herself skinny. As a cross-country runner, she was always trying to drop pounds to run faster and spent years trying to mold her short, muscular body into the gazelle-like form of the fast, graceful girls on other teams. After college, her body had filled out, much to her dismay. With her clothes sagging on her frame, it occurred to Bella that she’d finally achieved the ideal runner’s physique without even trying. She should have been pleased, but instead missed the slopes of flesh covering her hipbones, the curve that gave her stomach shape.

Bella drove to campus around noon, parking in the nearly abandoned student lot. She noticed that it seemed far quieter than the summer she’d spent there almost ten years ago. She

moved slowly, gingerly toward campus, like someone easing her way into the chill of the ocean, one toe at a time. Last time she'd been there, her life had been a very different color, and she found herself navigating a minefield constructed from pieces of her past.

Follow the yellow brick road, she thought as she walked over the brick paved quad. Memories tugged at the lining of her brain-- I'll get you, my pretty, and your little ferret, too. She didn't want to be reminded of how far she'd fallen. She pushed through the glass-paned doors of the student union and surveyed her surroundings from a cushioned wooden chair in the center lounge. The bookstore was still crammed into the front left corner of the building. To her right was the hallway leading to the fitness center, to her left, the door to access the pool. Her life had changed so drastically, but everything there had, of course, stayed the same.

She'd met Ducky her senior year of college, because she'd cut herself on a beer bottle. She was carrying a bag of empties to a nearby dumpster and a piece of broken glass sliced through the bag to lodge in her bare calf.

She yelled profanity into the darkness. The cut was in the shape of a crescent moon, and quickly filled with blood.

"You look like a dame in need of rescue."

She turned toward the voice to see a silhouette smoking a cigarette. The smoke circled his head, an unorthodox halo.

“A what?”

The silhouette exhaled another silver cloud and moved toward her. He yanked the bag effortlessly from her grip.

“Thanks,” she said sarcastically at his retreating back. Realizing he wasn’t going to stop for her, she sighed and tried to catch up.

“So what’s your name?” she said.

“Ducky,” he said, and heaved the bottle over the lip of the dumpster.

“Seriously?”

“As a heart attack. My painfully normal parents gave me a painfully normal name, but it turned into Ducky when I was little and my cousins were just learning how to talk.”

“So it has nothing to do with the John Cryer character?”

He laughed, tipping his head skyward. “God, no. I hate those movies.”

“So then, what’s your real name?”

“You first.”

She sighed. “That’s mature. My name’s Bella.”

“Your name means beautiful,” he said. “That’s pretty cool.”

“My family’s Italian.”

The corner of his mouth turned up. “Any mob bosses?”

“Like I would tell you!”

He laughed then, an easy rumbling sound that let her know he wasn’t as caustic as she’d pegged him. “So are you at the same party as me?” she said, as they meandered away from the dumpster.

“Depends. That apartment over there?” he pointed.

“That’d be the one. My roommate’s boyfriend lives there.”

“So does my friend Kieran. I’m hanging out with him for the weekend.”

“So you’re not local?” Even though she’d just met him, something in her dropped.

“I go to school in Vermont, but my parents live in New Hampshire.”

“Mine too,” she said. “Well, my mom does. So, what *is* your real name, anyway?

You’ve managed to avoid that topic.”

He laughed again. “David. David Bach. It’s good to meet you, Beautiful.”

Bella shook her head as if to pull back from the encroaching memories. She walked back out onto the quad and sucked in the summer heat seasoned by a bite of chilled ocean air. She started walking, aimlessly at first. Then her stride became more purposeful, her destination a small gem shop on a main road about a mile from the heart of campus.

3

The walk was familiar, but somehow different, like a railroad track that had rusted. Little things jogged her memory--the rock in someone's yard that had been painted to look like a ladybug. The distant sound of waves gave her steps a rhythm, and she noticed that many of the houses looked exactly the same as they had when she'd been in college, right down to the peeling white paint on the porches.

Bella sold jewelry at Glitz! on and off for her entire college career. The shop itself was neatly contained on the first floor of a small, subdivided house. Molly, who owned the building and ran the shop, rented out apartments on the second floor of the house, and Bella had lived there during her senior year. The outside door was propped open when she got there, so she stepped inside. To her right was a door that opened into Molly's ground floor apartment. On the left was the two-room gem shop.

Working at Glitz! was the next best thing to not working at all. Bella applied because she loved the jewelry, but the real perk turned out to be her friendship with Molly. Molly had been thirty-three when they met, but could have easily passed for a college kid. Bella spent many evenings in her funky apartment drinking wine and talking to people about politics and philosophy, while classical music played in the background.

One night, Ducky and Bella stopped at the shop on their way upstairs to pick up a book

she'd left during her last shift. Light from the lampposts beamed through the windows and illuminated the display cases.

"You know what would be cool?" Ducky said, lurching into an end table.

"I can guess," she said, "and don't even think about it!" Bella flicked on the lights in the back room where all the supplies were kept. "Besides, I have the book. Let's just go."

The two large display cases were set up perpendicular to each other along the walls. A cash register was perched on one of them. Ducky caught her by the arms and lifted her onto the other one.

"The blinds aren't even down," she said, and tried to push his hands away. "Come on, this is ridiculous."

"That's the point."

"Molly would kill me if she knew what—"

"She would not, and you know it." He lifted her dress over her head. She wanted to protest more, but he pressed his mouth over hers and barred any further comments.

Now, as she stood in the doorway, Bella saw a girl she didn't recognize reading on a stool behind the jewelry case with the cash register. The cases were still in their L formation. The jewelry was stylistically unchanged: fat gemstones in silver settings or strung on black cords.

The girl looked up. “Hi,” she said. “Just looking?”

“Actually,” Bella said, “I’m looking for Molly.”

“She’s showing an apartment right now. She’ll be back...” the girl trailed off. She wasted only a few seconds before returning her attention to the book in her hand. Bella began to climb the tread worn stairs. Sun illuminated dust particles that hung in the air, and the wallpaper was still the hideous gold-on-white pattern it had been when she’d lived in the building. She could hear Molly’s voice ringing out before she even reached the second floor. When Molly caught sight of her, she immediately wrapped her in a hug. Eventually, she finished business with the renter and ushered Bella into her ground floor apartment.

Molly’s home was every bit as exotic as one might expect a gem shop owner’s to be. In the doorways, she’d hung curtains of hand strung beads. A large piece of quartz served as a coffee-table centerpiece, and the living room walls were painted aquamarine.

“I was hoping you’d turn up eventually,” she said, placing a mug of black-spice chai tea in front of Bella. She perched on the yellow couch.

Molly was one of the most exuberant people Bella had ever known, but earthily serene. Still, she had her moments of chaos. One time, they’d almost gotten arrested for indecent exposure while skinny-dipping at a public beach in the middle of the night. Molly let the cop have it.

"You should spend more time harassing people who're polluting the ocean instead of just enjoying it!"

Bella and Molly’s girlfriend Alexa had been in hysterics on the way home, marveling at the fact that Molly had dissuaded the cop. He hadn’t seemed to know how to respond to the

dripping wet lesbian who was telling him off. Spending time with Molly was like praying in church; nothing bad could happen to you.

Bella pulled at a piece of her hair. "I felt like I was suffocating."

"Is it better here?"

"I feel like there are fewer pairs of eyes on me."

"That's an evasive answer." Molly chuckled.

Bella focused on her tea. She was tired of crying, and talking about her state of affairs all but guaranteed tears.

Molly moved on. "Where are you staying while you're in town?"

"Levi's," Bella said, curling her knees into her chest.

Molly nodded. "We'll make plans soon, then." It was a statement, not a request, but Bella found her friend's take-charge attitude comforting. She'd taken charge of far more than she was used to lately.

The next morning was sweltering hot, the type of day only bearable at the ocean. She writhed in bed, stretching the tautness from her body before venturing downstairs in her pajamas. Levi was sprawled over the couch with his bare feet dangling over one of the armrests. Bella's bare feet made flip-flop noises on the way to the kitchen. She smeared peanut butter on a slice of wheat bread and fed it to Icarus. Then, she turned her attention toward the tangy smell of the sea.

The sand was still cool between her toes, but she knew it would absorb the heat of the day by noon. She left her pajamas on the beach and intercepted a wave on its way to shore. The weight of the water knocked her back, and she let herself be washed up onto the beach.

The ocean felt monumental, like touching God. The same water that lapped at the edge of Levi's beach was feeding fisherman on the other side of the world. Somewhere up north, icebergs were floating in it, and people drowned in it every day. Her grandmother had told her to look at the moon when she was younger and missing someone far away.

"We all see the same moon," she'd say.

The ocean was like that, Bella thought; the same water touching everyone sooner or later. As she stood up in the water, she felt connected to things that mattered, and to Ducky, wherever he was. She hoped it was sunny there.

After she'd toweled off at the cabin, Levi came into her bedroom and flopped across the bed. "So what's next for you?"

She cocked her head. "Next how?"

"You seem like you're on a mission," he said. "I'd love you to stay for awhile, but I get the feeling that's not in your plans."

She sighed. "I *am* on a mission. I just wish I knew what it was."

After Levi went to work, Bella found herself heading toward Glitz! and decided that

another visit with Molly might help clear the clutter from her mind. When she got to the main entrance, she saw Molly at work in the gem shop. Two girls wearing headscarves perused the jewelry cases, and Molly had an assortment of tools, stones and wire spread in front of her. She smiled when she saw Bella in the doorway.

“Come back here and pull up a stool.”

“I didn’t know that you were making jewelry now.”

“Just dabbling, really. Haven’t made anything marketable yet, but we’ll see how it goes.”

Bella smiled and shook her head. It was comforting to know that even a forty-something could evolve. Maybe there was hope for her yet.

“Levi and I were just discussing my next port of call.”

“Which is?” Molly picked up a pair of pliers.

“Not sure yet, that’s the problem.”

“I don’t know that I would call it a problem, per se. You’re certainly always welcome here.”

“I feel like I have to move,” Bella said, “I just don’t know where to go.”

Molly was silent for a moment. “Are you sure you’re not just trying to run away from ground zero?”

Bella sighed. “That may be exactly what I’m trying to do. Is that so bad?”

“No, honey, it’s not that it’s bad,” she said, “it’s that I want you to be careful.”

“I know,” Bella said. She knew, factually, that she couldn’t run away from what had happened, but wasn’t sure how she was going to deal with it either. She picked an opal out of Molly’s pile of stones. It looked like an opaque ice cube that someone had frozen glitter into.

“That one’s pretty, huh?” Molly said. “I got it in a discount shipment because of the flaw.” She pointed to what looked like a crack in the smooth stone.

“Broken,” Bella said, “just like me.”

“Flawed, not broken.” Molly took the stone from her and turned it over in her hand, so that the glittery pieces caught the light and reflected a rainbow of colors. Then, she picked up a piece of wire and went after the end of it with a pair of pliers.

By the time Bella left Glitz!, the clouds had knitted together and turned an angry pewter. A warm, wet wind slapped her face and caused the slack wires between telephone poles to rock like hammocks. She pulled the hood of her sweater up and walked quickly back the way she’d come.

The sky kept darkening, and the small, hard raindrops began their descent. Bella felt suffocated by the darkness. *Where are you, Ducky? Where are you now, when the sky is so angry?* The raindrops grew fatter and faster, and she started to run, trying to beat the storm. It felt good, her arms pumping, her feet clenching her sandals in place. *This used to be me*, she thought. *I used to run*. Then, she was soaring for a few moments too long, and the ground seemed to tilt sideways. Her toe had caught on a rock.

Both knees were bleeding, and her palms burned from trying to break her fall. Her clothes were soaked through right down to her underwear. She could feel her cheeks heat up despite the coolness of the rain. Her throat constricted, and slowly, she realized that what she was hearing was the sound of her own tears escaping. She felt cold and torn, sitting in the middle of the sidewalk.

Since Ducky had died, she'd blamed every mishap on his absence. It wasn't intentional,

and sometimes it was even subconscious. She wouldn't have burned this toast or gotten that flat tire if he'd been around. She wouldn't have skinned both knees in a rainstorm. Sitting in a puddle and bleeding, Bella yelled into the turbulent sky.

“Damn you! Damn you for dying!” Her tears flowed less freely. “Don't you know I can't do this without you? What were you thinking?” She stopped and took a deep breath. “What was I thinking?”

A few weeks after the funeral, when she'd put herself together enough to get out of bed in the morning, Bella spent an entire weekend with friends packing mismatched socks and dog-eared books by beat poets and philosophers.

“Trash this?” someone would say, holding up a pair of black sweatpants with the knees worn through.

“No!” she would say in panic, and run over to rescue the pants from the trash. Everything he'd touched had become precious, a relic she could never replace.

Bella stood up and attempted to wring out the rain from her clothes. She'd tried so hard

to hold onto the pieces of him that had been left behind, but obviously it wasn't enough. The rain was falling with less fury and the wind was not as sharp as it had been. Bella closed her eyes and let it wash her clean.

In the entry way, she stripped down to her underwear and balled up her clothes so they wouldn't drip on the floor. She could hear Icarus gnawing on the bars of his cage as she crossed the threshold of the guest room. Her cell phone, plugged in on the nightstand, glowed with a new message. She flipped the phone open. It was Kieran.

If it hadn't been for Kieran, Bella and Ducky would have never met. They would have been simply another missed opportunity and maybe he'd still be alive. As it happened, Kieran was Ducky's childhood best friend, and he and Bella ended up at the same party on a weekend that Ducky was visiting from his own school.

Beyond his name, Bella knew nothing of Kieran. He was an animated blonde boy who wore clothes from American Eagle Outfitters, and Bella pegged him for the kind of guy who would have stared right through her in high school. It took some time for her to learn that he was a passionate music lover and a former Dungeons and Dragons geek.

Kieran also happened to be the first person she knew to arrive at the accident site. He didn't bother tearing the keys from the ignition before bolting from his car. He was crying, but unlike Bella's own tears, his were silent. Without saying anything, he lifted her in a hug. She dug her nails into the cotton of his t-shirt, desperate for something to hold onto that might lead her through the storm of broken metal and bones, smoke and lights.

"I knew I'd get here, and one of you would be gone." His sobs hitched against Bella as he struggled to get the words out.

“I’m sorry it wasn’t me.”

“Don’t ever say that,” he said.

The strobing lights from the ambulance and police cruisers tinted everything purple as Kieran wrapped himself around her, a human shield from all the strangers who were trying to help. Newspaper reporters descended and every time she turned her head toward the sound of her name, a camera flash exploded in her face.

She’d never understood why people called the press vultures, but the events of that day brought that line of reasoning into crystal clear focus. They stepped all over the open wound of someone else’s tragedy with salt on their shoes. The worst part was they were just doing their job. Bella knew she’d never be able to work at a job that asked her to turn off her morals. Not after the accident.

A clump of formerly blond hair fell over her left eye, the corn silk strands stained pink with blood. The gash in her scalp by now was bleeding less fiercely. Blood from two bodies smeared her shirt and the knees of her jeans, and a police officer was trying to pull her up from where she’d collapsed by the side of the road. Another flash as she struggled to her feet beside the mangled car--that was the picture that ran in three papers the next day.

When Bella’s first boyfriend broke up with her at fourteen, she cried herself into an exhausted, fitful slumber, ripe with the tragedy of first love. In the morning, there was one suspended moment in which her mind forgot the excruciating pain of her broken teenage heart. Then, the moment fell and shattered, covering her with pieces of catastrophe. At fourteen, there was nothing more painful. When she woke up in the ICU the morning following the accident, she experienced that same delay. This time, when the pain came down, its weight more than she

ever knew a person could sustain.

When she opened her eyes, Kieran was there with her oldest friend, Ava, who'd driven through the night from Rhode Island. Ava's eyes were a glassy pink and shadowed by the remnants of her makeup. Shackled to her bed by a respirator, Bella frantically shifted her gaze from one friend to the other while she choked on questions she couldn't ask. (Later, she learned that she'd stopped breathing after choking on her own vomit in an ambulance).

Ava's face wavered against the strain of new tears. She squeezed Bella's hand.

Kieran cleared his throat. "Your mom stopped by."

Ava and Kieran were silent. In retrospect, it might have been best that Bella was temporarily muted by the tube down her throat. Both her friends knew her mother was not a topic Bella cared to discuss.

5

Bella left the hospital four days after Ducky died, with explicit instructions on how to protect her concussed, but miraculously fracture-free, head. She had developed a nasty little case of pneumonia from having liquid in her lungs, and her shorn head bore a railroad map of stitches. The doctor, whom she'd never met before being admitted, said that she was lucky to have

bounced back, considering the amount of blood she'd lost. It occurred to her that she should have felt grateful, but what she felt instead was deflated and decidedly *unlucky*. Just as there is a word for a soul without a body, there is one for a body without a soul. Bella left the hospital feeling very much like the latter.

Kieran was the one who drove her back to the apartment. They made the drive in comfortable silence, saving their words. Bella had spoken so little since the accident that her throat felt rusty and rundown. It felt tolerable to sit on the grey upholstered seat and watch out the window as things passed her by. Speech did not have a place in her delayed state of shock.

She and Ducky had rented a third-floor apartment from a middle-aged Jewish woman who, physically, resembled an ogre or other stout fairy-creature. Her personality, however, was more along the lines of fairy godmother. Her name was Elmira Fierstein, and she let them have the top floor of her weathered house for four hundred and nine dollars per month. The nine dollars, she later joked, was rent for Icarus, whom she always pretended to despise. The apartment boasted three rooms plus a bathroom with a window through which one could see the thick maple trees in the yard and the mountains that framed the central New Hampshire landscape.

Elmira was the first person to reach Bella when she slipped out of Kieran's SUV and was stunned motionless by the sheer size of the gathered mob.

"Little girl, little girl." Elmira cried into her shoulder while engulfing the younger woman with her matronly form. After disentangling herself from Elmira's grasp, Bella realized that the landlady had opened her home to the assembled mourners. Friends and family members, some of whom she hadn't seen for years, filtered through from the third floor nest she'd shared

with Ducky down to Elmira's ground floor abode. The night blurred into a blend of other people's shirts and scents, and warm yellow lights against the rain that had started to fall.

During the weeks that followed, Kieran was the most stable thing in Bella's life. He cooked soup when she couldn't handle solid food and dragged her out of the apartment on mundane errands just so she'd get a few hours' worth of sunlight. Without realizing it, she got attached to him in a way she wasn't comfortable defining. That may have been why she felt betrayed when Marnie entered the scene.

Bella and Marnie met because she was the office manager at the building that Ducky worked in. She was an elfin person, with white-blond hair cut short. In Bella's first memory was wearing a cropped t-shirt and black leather pants. She was bubbly and unpredictable, as wild as Bella was cautious, but a friendship was forged. When they went shopping, Marnie tried on pleather miniskirts while Bella slipped into cardigans, but they both loved the salty Chinese cuisine served at the mall food court. It amused Bella to think that someone so formerly benign was the source of so much angst for her now.

The semblance of order she was trying to piece back together had unraveled quickly on the Fourth of July. She was headed to Kieran's for a barbecue. She put on one of Ducky's faded black T-shirts and a pair of her own corduroy pants. The metallic purple of her severely cut hair glowed against her skin.

When she walked in the door, Bella felt cocooned, safe despite how little she trusted the world these days. Kieran's home was a small, two story brick house set at the lip of the surrounding woods. At Kieran's place, there were no crowding strangers, no constant hum of passing cars.

She encountered those whose gazes were uncertain as she made her way from room to room. To them, Bella was a time bomb with nothing to indicate her moment of detonation. She spotted a mutual college friend of hers and Kieran's. He held an arm out as she made her way over, immediately curling her into a hug.

"How goes, Bel?" he smiled.

"Been better," she said, voice slightly muffled against his yellow hooded sweatshirt. She had been better, but she'd also been worse. The day of the accident, that had been worse. Waking up in the hospital, and the day after that. Surrounded by friends, her pain was manageable.

Bella wove a pattern through the crowd, surprised at the ease with which she connected with people. Since the accident, she'd been a little skittish around crowds. In Kieran's living room though, standing in a circle of friends, she lost herself in discussions about the upcoming presidential election and merits of watermelon vodka. There were whole moments that she didn't think about Ducky.

Her comfort, however, was short lived. Making her way out to the porch, Bella caught sight of Kieran and Marnie. She felt as if an icicle had lodged itself in her chest plate. This was not a development her functional self would have missed. How could she not have known that something was going on? Lips sealed to hers, Kieran had lifted Marnie off the floor. Her legs were wrapped around his waist, and he had one arm tunneled into her hair while the other gripped her ass. The scene was so publicly carnal, so utterly unlike Kieran that Bella almost couldn't breathe. Almost. Instead of asphyxiating, she succumbed to the bolt of unexpected nausea. Afterward, she sat on the bathroom floor, shaking and crying tears that she couldn't

quite explain. She wanted a cigarette even though she'd never before smoked a single one.

Now, as she looked at his name on her cell phone, the muddled feelings Bella had for Kieran resurfaced. She certainly didn't plan to engage in a love affair with her dead boyfriend's best friend months after the accident. That was too *Jerry Springer* for words. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that some sort of trust had been violated. Before, he'd been a safety net, arms outstretched to catch her should she fall. Now, his arms were occupied by Marnie.

The room filled with the sound of Bella's sigh as she speed-dialed the number three. He answered on the second ring, which was surprising since he was often tied up with work until dinnertime. He seemed happy to hear from her, and she spent a few minutes getting into the details of her trip.

"Did you get my message?" he said.

"No, just saw you called. What's up?" No point in beating around the bush.

"Just wanted to check on you."

"I'm surprised you have the time. What with your new girlfriend and all."

"I don't see how that's any of your business."

This, Bella knew, was a valid point. Still, the combination of her hurt and anger had placed her on a warpath, and she couldn't bring herself to turn around. "Just making an observation."

He snorted. "I wish he could see you now." That was the comment that undid her.

"Fuck you, Aberzombie." She hung up before he could tell her how monstrous she was being. She already knew that part. Her throat was tight, but she'd used up all her tears. Icarus chittered and looked at her with questioning eyes. She glared at him.

"Don't talk to me." Bella pulled the pillow over her head and gave herself over to acidic thoughts that threatened to burn right through her soul.

6

"Eww! Is that a tentacle?"

"I don't know, but I don't like it."

A few days after Bella's conversation with Kieran, she and Levi decided to hit the drive-in with Molly and Alexa. Bella had thought that the sci-fi double feature would be more along the lines of *Star Wars* or something, but the first one had turned out to be a B-movie creep show featuring squid-like monsters that lived in a lake. Her friends perched on lawn-chairs while Bella sat on the hood of Levi's car, with her back against the windshield. It was a warm night, but the air was light and comfortable. The drive-in was in a wooded area and there were pine needles blanketing the dirt.

“Man, I’m parched,” said Levi.

“Me too. I’ll get you something.” Bella slid off the hood of the car. She noticed the couples who were cuddled together under blankets or the families whose children had snacks packed in Ziploc baggies. She tried not to think of them as reminders of what she’d never have. On her way back from the concession stand, someone grabbed her arm. Irritated, she turned around with a soda cup in each hand.

“Sorry. I think you dropped this.” A guy not much taller than Bella handed her a five dollar bill. Her hands went to the pockets of her jeans.

“Thanks.”

The guy had short hair the color of olive oil. He had both ears pierced and wore jeans with a black Orange County Choppers t-shirt. He looked like the kind of guy that owned a pickup truck and listened to bands with gravelly-voiced lead singers.

The guy, whose name turned out to be Carlos, brought lawn chairs and beer over to Levi’s car. Bella was a little wary of inviting a perfect stranger over, but her companions didn’t seem to share her concern. Carlos offered to share his beer and Alexa filled their stomachs with the candied walnut trail mix she’d packed in quart-sized ziploc bags. The conversation came comfortably against the backdrop of the movie.

By the time the second movie started, Carlos had moved to sit next to Bella on the hood of Levi’s car. The hair on her arm prickled in response to his proximity. When their hands bumped reaching for more trail mix, she could feel the heat radiate from her face. He smelled like laundry soap, aftershave, and cigarette smoke. This wasn’t something that should’ve happened. She had a boyfriend. He just happened to be dead.

If Bella had a type, Carlos wouldn't have been it. He was attractive, but not in a way Bella was used to. There was something, though, something flammable enough to light the furnace in her chest.

"Bathroom break," she said to no one in particular, sliding off the hood of the car.

Alexa followed, rising on her long legs. They walked for a few moments in silence, until they were out of earshot.

"So, that guy..." Alexa smiled.

"I know," Bella said. "It's awful. I'm awful. What's wrong with me?"

"Hey, we were built to have sex!"

"I feel like I'm cheating."

"It's not like you're gonna marry the guy tomorrow. And even if you were..." She didn't finish her sentence, but Bella knew what she meant. Even if she was, you can't cheat on someone who's dead.

Before they left that night, Bella programmed Carlos' number into her phone, but she knew she wouldn't call him. There was something about him that turned her insides into a taffy pull, but she still woke up every morning expecting to roll over and see Ducky's face.

By the time they got back to Levi's, she was pleasantly drowsy, her stomach full of beer and trail mix. She fed Icarus and noticed she'd left her phone plugged in all day. A voicemail from the library inquired as to why she hadn't cashed her final check. Final check?

Prior to being a road tripper, Bella had been a librarian. After graduation, she wasn't really sure what to do with herself. She thought she'd do the librarian thing because Levi seemed to be good at it, but never planned on sticking with it for six years. Because her degree

wasn't in Library Science, she could only get a lackey job at the university library, but the local public library was satisfied with a B.A. in English Literature. She generally worked in tandem with another librarian and four part-time assistants. She loved it. People were quiet and mellow, and authors and radical politicians frequently stopped in to make presentations.

Bella's favorite part of the library was the children's section. The colors were bright, and bean bag chairs were strategically placed all over the floor. She'd sewn each bean bag cover by hand with material bought at Wal-mart on clearance. Bella had wanted the children's' section to look like a home, and the library director had been thrilled when she offered to redecorate. She sometimes thought her true calling was as a kindergarten teacher.

When she left, the director had been supportive. He'd let Bella know that she would have a place there if she ever decided to return and he'd wished her well. This whole final check thing was news. When Bella woke up, she called the library before she even got out of bed.

She made small talk for a few minutes with the director before cutting to the chase. He had indeed mailed the check to Elmira's, unsure of where else to send it. Bella dialed Elmira's number in hopes of tracking down her elusive check. Amidst a profusion of excited greetings, she managed to learn that Elmira had sent the check to her mother's house in Windham, NH. That just figured.

Most people would have been able to call their mothers and arrange something. Bella,

however, was not on speaking terms with hers. After her father died, Bella's mother seemed to age in reverse. She dyed her hair an unnatural shade of red and started shopping in the juniors' section. She traded her job selling real estate for one as a cocktail waitress. So, she lost her husband. Bella got that, and all of the dysfunction was tolerable until her mother practically disowned her during a holiday spat.

Ducky and Bella spent their first Thanksgiving together at her childhood home in Windham with her mother, her grandparents, and her aunts. Daniela was divorced and had an eighteen year old son, and Marina had a pair of fraternal twins who never came to holiday gatherings anymore.

New Hampshire's first real blizzard of the season had left the trees bowed beneath the weight of the snow. When they drove into town, the icy arms of tree branches reached out to the car. Bella's mother greeted them on the porch and showed Ducky to the guest room even though he and Bella were living together by then. Later, as they had dinner at the oval dining room table, Marina's husband asked what Ducky did for work.

Ducky wiped a glob of gravy from his lower lip. "I'm an architect," he'd replied.

Marina surveyed his unkempt, but didn't ask any questions. Later, over drinks, Bella's mother revealed that she'd enrolled in a hip-hop class.

"It's just so lively!" she said, hands fluttering in the air. "The music makes me feel twenty years younger!"

"I'm sure the outfits make you look twenty years younger, too," Bella muttered.

"Honestly, Bella. You should be more of a joiner," her mother said, completely ignoring the rudeness of the remark. "It's too depressing to be holed up in that god-awful library all day.

You're so pale I can practically see through you!"

On the drive home, Ducky teased her while she tried to curb her laughter enough to keep the car on the road. "Be a joiner, Bella! We can both be backup dancers for Snoop Dogg!"

Bella and her mother were never birds of a feather, but the real trouble between them didn't start until Christmas of that year. They had accepted an invitation to spend Christmas with Ducky's family, which seemed reasonable since they'd spent the previous holiday with Bella's family. It didn't take long for Bella to discover that she defined reasonable very differently from her mother.

"Well I never thought you'd choose some boy's family over your own." Bella had come home for the weekend, and her mother was in the kitchen julienning vegetables.

"You know that's not what this is about."

"His parents have each other, Bella. They won't be alone if you don't go."

"Neither will you!" Bella said, crossing her arms. Her mother would have none of it. She was dead set against a holiday spent away from home. She stood with her mouth open and her ears closed, somehow jealous of a family she'd never met. Bella, however, was resolute.

"I'm going," she said quietly. "What will Ducky's parents think if he goes and I stay here?"

"Well you're not coming back then!" her mother said evenly. "If you don't come home for Christmas, just don't come home."

"Mom, this is ridi--"

"No," she interjected. "No. And I want that ring before you leave." Bella fingered her father's wedding band, on a chain around her neck. Her mother was crying now, but no less

angry. Turning on her heel, Bella climbed the stairs to her old bedroom. The paint was pale purple and posters of intricately drawn fairies hung on the walls. Looking around, she realized that there was nothing she wanted to take. She let herself out the back door without saying goodbye, and she kept her father's ring.

Years later, at Levi's, Bella threw the phone at the wall and cursed. The commotion was enough to stop Levi on his way to the bathroom. He was wearing a blue flannel robe and, with his hair unkempt from sleep, he looked a little bit like The Dude in *The Big Lebowski*.

"The goddamn library mailed my check to my goddamn mother's house!"

"I take it you haven't talked to her lately." Levi sat down on the bed next to Bella.

"Apparently I'm going to have to, though!"

"Well," Levi said, "how badly do you need the money?" Bella was silent. Money wasn't something she'd thought of much since she moved out of the old apartment. The specifics of everyday life faded into the background of pain. Her expenses were pretty minimal, which helped. She paid for gas, but didn't have to write out a monthly rent check. She was stocked up on ferret bedding and lab blocks, so Icarus was well taken care of. Given her appetite lately, groceries had practically been a non-issue. Even beyond her own savings, there was the safety net of Ducky's life insurance.

Surely, Ducky had mentioned that he'd signed up for life insurance. Bella just couldn't

remember when. Part of his insurance policy through his job, it paid a year's salary. In comparison to those million dollar deals advertised on TV, a year's salary might seem a paltry amount, but to Bella, it was an unexpected fortune. The company Ducky worked for called his parents to let them know. Apparently, when you fill out the policy, you have to specify beneficiaries. Just in case. He had split it between his parents and Bella, but his parents wouldn't touch it. This left Bella with a significant sum of money.

In theory, her financial concerns should be nonexistent, but they weren't. The insurance money made Bella feel uncomfortable. She felt as if it should've been donated to some noble cause, that if she spent it, it would be like accepting a payoff. Granted, several thousand of it went to cover funeral expenses, but that wasn't the same as spending it on herself. The bottom line was that she couldn't bring herself to spend the money yet, and without that check from the library, her options were going to be limited.

That night, at Levi's apartment, Bella started to pack. It was tempting to stay, but that would have qualified as hiding. Although Bella's plans were pale outlines at best, she knew that they didn't include deliberately playing ostrich. She folded t-shirts and cargo pants, and balled up socks. She shoved Icarus's food and toys into one corner while he chattered noisily in his cage.

"Don't take that tone of voice with me," Bella said, picking him up under his arms. She loved the pear shaped body of her bottom-heavy ferret. He felt like a snuggly bean bag. She kissed Icarus between his ears, where his fur was smooth and fine.

Ducky had brought home Icarus as a birthday present a year and a half earlier, and he probably would have never thought of it if that bat hadn't flown in through the kitchen window.

The heat had been as heavy as shackles around the wrists of prisoners. Ducky was camped out on the couch with Bella, watching reruns of *The Twilight Zone*. Her tank top was damp and clingy, and she'd abandoned her shorts several hours ago. They'd staked out opposite sides of the couch because it was too hot to be touching. The ceiling fan moved like the propeller of a helicopter, but did little to cool them off, and in the kitchen, a breeze ruffled the curtain through the screen.

Engrossed by the velvety voice of Rod Serling, Bella caught a dark flap of wings in her peripheral vision.

"What's that?"

"What's what?" said Ducky.

"That!" she said, as the dark shape dive-bombed at his head.

"Jesus Christ! It's a bird!"

It wasn't a bird; it was a bat. What happened next was that Bella stood on the arm of the couch while Ducky retrieved the fishing net from the closet near the entryway. She chased the bat around the room toward Ducky, who was brandishing the net like a matador's cape. It took several laps around the living room before the bat was securely trapped in the green nylon net.

Bella had never seen a bat close up before, but she knew that they had furry bodies like bumblebees and veined, membranous wings. What she didn't imagine was that they'd be so cute. The bat they caught with the fishing net had a pushed-up nose and black eyes that looked

like large, onyx marbles. His fur was velvety looking and his wings had the same sheen of fuzz as deer antlers. Bella peered at him through the net.

“Hi Batty.”

“Don’t even think about it!” said Ducky, who was still holding the net.

“I didn’t even say anything!”

“I know what you’re thinking, and no!”

“He’d be such a good pet, though. I could have him deliver messages to you at work like a homing pigeon.”

“Bella, he’s probably rabid. Besides, you can’t keep a bat as a pet.”

They released Batty back into the night in hopes that he’d find a nice, cave-like dwelling to inhabit.

“What about a squirrel?” she said, while sitting on the porch with Ducky.

“What is it with you and rabid animals? Get a cat or something.”

She didn’t want a cat, though, and Ducky must have known that because months later, on the night of her twenty-sixth birthday, he came home with a cardboard carrier from the pet store. It was about the right size for a cat, but she knew Ducky wouldn’t have been that stupid.

“Chrrr...chrr,” said the box. Bella looked suspiciously at the yellow plastic pet store bag next to Ducky’s feet. He put the box down on the pinewood table but didn’t offer any clarification. When she popped the flaps of the box free, Bella was rewarded with the sight of a small, snuffly face covered in eggshell colored fur and whiskers that looked long enough to trip over.

“A ferret?!”

“They were fresh out of bats at the pet store.”

Bella lifted the little fuzz ball out of his carrier and cradled his furry rump in one hand, while his head hung over her shoulder. His mouth next to her ear emitted sounds like a tiny motor. She was sold.

At her birthday party that night, Bella wandered amongst her friends with Icarus draped over a shoulder like a live fur stole. She spent the following three days scouring the internet for ferret related information. Among other things, Bella learned that she would have to ferret-proof the apartment. This included blocking all nooks and crannies that her new furry companion could get stuck in and securing all the cupboards with magnet catches. Ducky walked into the kitchen to find her seated on the floor with a power drill.

“So what are you going to name Fluffy?” he said, lowering himself onto the floor next to her. Bella raised an eyebrow.

“Definitely not Fluffy.”

“Well, Miss Bookworm, come up with something better.”

She happened to glance at the copy of Bullfinch’s Mythology facedown on the nubby rug in the parlor. She was in the middle of the myth about Icarus and Daedalus, the father and son who crafted wings of wax and feathers to escape imprisonment. Daedalus, the father, warned his son Icarus not to fly too close to the sun. Icarus, dazzled by the miracle of flight, didn’t heed his father’s warning and swirled closer and closer to the sun. Eventually, the wax that had been sticking the wings to his body melted and Icarus fell into the ocean.

Bella couldn’t help but admire someone who gave up his life just to try grasping a handful of sunshine. She knew most people thought Icarus was foolish, but to her, he was

heroic.

The first time she tried out her ferret's new name, he perked up immediately. He stood very still on his hind legs, as though he was listening for something in the air. Clearly an omen.

In the spare bedroom in Maine, Icarus was heavier than he had been as a baby, his fur a bit coarser. Bella studied his furry face.

"You're a grownup," she said. "What do we do?"

"Chrrr..rrrr."

Bella sighed, and nuzzled his head into her neck. "Where are your wings, Icarus? We could fly away."

7

Ten days later, Bella was sitting at the Agave Café in downtown Hartford. The city was sexy with the heat of the late midsummer night and a waitress with a thick dark braid had just brought her the best mojito she'd ever tasted. It had only been a few days since she'd left Maine, but her mind was so full that it could've been a month, a year, a lifetime.

While she was plotting her course of action, she'd gotten a fortuitous phone call from her friend Jane. With dark hair and crème Brule skin, Jane was Bella's physical opposite. Their physical differences mirrored their contrast in personality. Still, when they'd been assigned to live in the same dorm sophomore year, the two had quickly become friends. Bella often thought that Jane's wild side had only intensified since they'd graduated; her friend's idea of a party was other people's idea of a bona-fide riot. Bella didn't generally bathe her wounds in alcohol, but when Jane begged her to come to Connecticut, she'd said yes. Maybe what she needed was to step out of character for awhile—not that the whole road trip idea had been particularly in-character to begin with. Jane had wanted her to come immediately. Patience had never been her best quality.

“I have to make a pit stop first,” Bella had told her.

“Where to?” Jane said.

“I’m going to see my mom.”

For three years, her only communication with her mother trickled back and forth through her aunts. Leah Sarto had made sure her daughter knew about important things, like births and deaths. Other than that, the wall erected between them had remained intact.

Three years later, standing in front of the house she grew up in, she wondered why she’d even bothered stopping. Eight hundred dollars. Was this kind of anxiety really worth eight

hundred dollars? Her mother had come to the hospital after Ducky died, and since she was family, they'd let her see her daughter. Bella had been unconscious at the time, and her mother hadn't returned. Bella had no idea what they would say to each other at this point, but she was ready to find out. At least, that was the lie she told herself.

It felt strange to knock on the door of a house she'd once had free reign of. Through the curtained window, she could see her mother's silhouette as she answered the door. Face to face with the woman who'd spent eighteen hours bringing her into the world, Bella was torn between anger and forgiveness. Her mother didn't look as shocked as she'd anticipated, and for a long time, neither woman spoke. Eventually, Bella was ushered into the house she once called home.

"I tried to call, but the line's been disconnected," Leah said. They were sitting at the kitchen table, with Icarus in his cage in the corner.

"I've been doing some traveling."

Leah sighed. "I was very sorry about what happened to Ducky. He was a nice boy."

"Apparently not nice enough," Bella retorted. "Or was he too nice, Mom? Was that the problem?" The old anger boiled up between them. Bella felt a rage she'd thought had long ago given way to the silence of a grudge. "Were you afraid of what he—"

"Bella, stop it!" For the first time since her father died, Bella's mother looked old. She crossed her arms and waited for the older woman's words. "This hasn't been easy," she said slowly. "Nothing has been easy since your father died—"

"You don't think I know that?" Bella cut in. "But I'm not Dad and it's not my job to stay here with you all the time."

Her mother looked like someone had hit her in the face. Bella expected a sharp retort,

but none was forthcoming.

“I know,” she said quietly. “I never meant for you to feel like that, but I guess sometimes I’m selfish.”

“Mom, I don’t think you’re self—”

“No, I have been sometimes. Holidays are the hardest part, you know. You’ll see.”

Gradually, conversation found its way to Bella’s plans, and her mother fed Icarus a ginger snap. As they reconnected, Bella began to realize she was just beginning to walk down a road that her mother had been on for years without attaining any final resolution. She felt lighter when she left, though.

The breeze was persistently in her face as she drove to Connecticut. She pushed her sunglasses further up on her nose as U2 powered through the speakers. Frenetic music always made Icarus feel industrious and he was busy digging himself a new nest beside her.

She felt anxiety’s familiar fingers grip her throat as she realized that she wouldn’t make it to New Britain until well after midnight, and her eyes were already grainy with the first hint of sleep. If she wanted to be rational about it, there was always Motel 6 or EconoLodge. She was tired of being rational, though. She decided she’d hit the bar, camp out in her car for the night, and see if the cops gave her any trouble.

Bella's first trip to Hartford had been for some writer's conference Levi had wanted to go to. As a university employee, he'd been able to swing them a discount, and for fifty dollars, Bella tagged along. The two of them weren't much of writers themselves, but they both loved to read, and the conference was teeming with authors.

At the time, Bella was just shy of her twentieth birthday. They stumbled upon the Agave café because it was across the street from a crowded club that was 18+. The line for the club snaked well out the door, so they decided to get a snack at the café beforehand. Levi ordered a round of tequila shots, and discovered that the place didn't ID. Two rounds later, they abandoned the idea of clubbing in favor of the easy atmosphere of the small Mexican bar.

Those memories flowed to the front of Bella's mind as she locked doors to the Vic, and left all the windows cracked for Icarus. Normally, Bella would have snagged a seat at one of the secluded, two person tables, but in a sudden burst of boldness, she slid onto a stool at the bar. She'd just ordered her first drink when a guy wearing a beat-up black cowboy hat sat down next to her.

Hartford struck her as a strange place to test-drive the cowboy look, but this guy looked

authentic. He wore a plain button down shirt and a pair of jeans worn at the knees. He ordered a double shot of tequila but declined the salt and wedge of lime. Bella expected him to say something to her, but he didn't. Instinct called for her to keep her eyes down and her elbows in, to take up as little space as possible. Instead, she shifted toward him in her seat.

"Tough night?" she ventured after he ordered another double.

He drained the shot before eyeballing her. "Not particularly."

"So you drink like this every night?" She had to wonder where the tentative librarian in her had gone.

He smiled crookedly. "You're pretty sassy for a stranger. You from around here?"

"I'm from—" she paused, unsure of how to respond to what should have been a simple question. "I'm actually kind of a gypsy right now."

"As in a wanderer?" He raised a single eyebrow, a feat which Bella always marveled at, despite its subtlety.

"Pretty much," she said. "By the way, you're the first person to ever describe me as sassy."

"If the shoe fits," he chuckled. "I'm local, by way of Mississippi." That explains the cowboy hat, Bella thought. She was enjoying her newfound inhibition, but the fatigue that had been imminent on the road finally caught up to her. Another empty glass later, she paid her tab and said goodbye to the cowboy.

"Where you off to?" he asked.

"Sleep."

"Where are you staying?"

Bella hesitated. Throwing caution to the wind was one thing, but divulging her sleeping quarters to a virtual stranger was quite another. “In Hartford. Anyway, I’m beat. It was good to meet you.” She yawned for added effect. Before he could protest, she slipped through the gaps in the crowd. Once outside, she relished the taste of the new air, unsullied by beer breath and the film of body odor.

“Can I walk you home?” Bella turned like a top at the sound of the voice behind her. The cowboy had followed her out of the bar.

There was something askew in his gaze, and Bella selected her words with care. “That’s sweet, but I’m fine.”

“You know, back there, that isn’t how we say goodbye in Mississippi.” He grabbed her wrist and tried to snake her arm around his neck. All the moisture dropped from Bella’s throat, and when she tried to speak, she coughed. She yanked her arm free and turned to leave, hoping that her panic was premature, that he would lose interest. He followed.

She fought the instinct to run, instead gripping the wad of her keys until she felt them break through the skin of her palm. The seconds that were slipping away felt like eons, and she knew that stalling would limit—if not eliminate—her options. Bella gauged the distance to the parking garage from where she stood. It seemed like the best option, or at least the most feasible.

The small side street was rundown and dark. Without looking back, she broke into a sprint. The cowboy snatched at her shirt, tearing off the right sleeve as she pulled away. The stubs of his nailed grazed her skin, and it was the first time since she’d cut it that she was grateful her hair was too short to grab onto. The sterile light in the parking garage seemed somehow safe

as she careened toward what looked like a security guard's office. She pummeled the thick glass window before realizing it was empty.

Her pause gave the cowboy room to close the gap, but she was faster than him. She could see the familiar Crown Victoria, and was so intent on reaching it that she slammed full force into the car door. She rebalanced, and then rammed the key into the lock before slamming the door and shutting out the night.

Before she could hit the locks, his face was in her window, his hand wrenching the door open, so she fired up the engine and hit the gas. The car's rapid reverse knocked the cowboy off balance, and Bella pulled the car door shut with her left hand while driving with the other. She snaked through side streets until she found a southbound highway. She pulled off at a rest stop and parked where her car was clearly lit by the lights of the building. Icarus was chittering and leaping on the wires of his cage.

Bella could almost see her pulse jumping through the thin skin at her wrist. Her breath came in gasps, and a brood of black dots pranced across her vision. She wondered if this was what happened to people who took chances. Widowed at twenty-seven and attacked by a cowboy, she thought. Someone up there had a sick sense of humor. Her eyes kept filling with tears, but she couldn't help laughing.

"That's okay," she said to no one in particular, "do your worst."

Upon regaining control of her faculties, Bella realized she was far too spooked to follow through with her original plan of grabbing a few hours sleep in her locked car. When she called Jane, her friend told her to come immediately and fill her in on details later.

Although she should have slept off some of the alcohol first, Bella arrived in New Britain

at about five, running on leftover adrenaline. She noticed, as she always did, how deceptively benign Jane's neighborhood looked. The houses were covered in seemingly suburban beige vinyl siding, with elaborate scrollwork around the windows and doors. Inside, though, the houses were divided into small, two story apartments inhabited by welfare families and an assorted variety of younger people attracted by the low rent. Looking closely, one could see windows patched with thick plastic sheeting and barren lawns littered with fourth-hand big wheels. After someone broke Jane's car window just to steal her CD player, Bella stopped taking chances. She parked on the street in front of Jane's duplex and locked the doors and trunk. With Icarus in tow, she opened the screen door, which snowed rust onto the stoop, and knocked. Jane opened the door and pulled her inside.

"Oh my God!" she whispered. "Are you okay?" She pulled an Air Force t-shirt further down over her thighs. "My brother's asleep," she said as they passed by him on the couch on their way upstairs. Jane and her brother Austin were roommates, and after a long night out, the stairs were sometimes too much of a challenge for him.

Once Bella settled Icarus in a corner of Jane's bedroom, she sat in the computer chair and related the evening's strange events to her friend.

Jane snorted. "You should've told him that Yankees say goodbye with a kick in the teeth."

"It's not funny," Bella said between giggles, "but I just can't stop laughing. What's wrong with me?" Jane reached over and smacked her.

"After what you've been through, everything is relative. Besides, this guy sounds pretty fucking ridiculous."

Bella silently agreed. "Can I take a bath?" She unzipped her duffel bag for a t-shirt she could sleep in.

"It's the middle of the night!" Jane said.

"Actually, it's not," Bella peeked out the window to where it was starting to get light.

"Good point," said Jane. "Have at it."

When the water reached her chin, Bella turned the faucet off with her foot. She remembered how, when she was a child, she would run her fingers through the strands of her hair, weightless underwater, and think that it was mermaid hair. Now, no amount of imagination could will magic into her chopped locks. Her quads were sore from running so fast. Without warning, she was in tears. "God damn you, Ducky," she whispered. If Ducky hadn't died, she would've never been attacked by some honkey pervert because she wouldn't have been alone at a Hartford bar. She was homesick and she didn't really know what that meant anymore.

8

When she woke up, the red digital numbers on the clock read 1:12. She felt groggy from her early morning bedtime, but eight hours was more sleep than she'd averaged in a long time. Jane was poking her in the ribs as though she were a frog primed for dissection.

“Wake uppppp!”

“I *am* awake,” Bella mumbled with eyes closed.

“You're not awake enough. We're going shopping.”

“Jane, I haven't even gotten out of bed yet!”

“Okay,” she amended, “breakfast first, then shopping.”

Bella almost recanted her newfound sense of adventure as she stood in front of a dressing room mirror with her eyebrows raised at her reflection. After hitting up the Chinatown Express for sustenance, Jane drove them to the mall in Newington. A loyal thrift store shopper, Bella was most comfortable in cargo pants or broken in jeans. Nevertheless, she found herself in a dressing room attempting to disentangle herself from the twelve shoulder straps of a black satin halter top, wondering how twelve straps could possibly be necessary for one article of clothing.

Jane opened the door, eradicating any pretense of privacy, and took the halter out of Bella's hands. Moments later, she stood before a full length mirror dressed in shiny black pants and a purple Chinese print corset top with about a million eye-hooks that fastened up the front.

“Let me in, let me in!” said Jane from outside the dressing room. She was wearing a black nylon t-shirt that bared a good expanse of her toned stomach. She surveyed Bella's appearance. “The shade matches your hair perfectly, but your roots are coming in.” After procuring grape-colored hair dye from Hot Topic, the two ventured into Victoria's Secret, where Jane insisted they buy matching lingerie to wear with their new clothes. When they arrived back at the apartment, Austin was sitting on the couch drinking coffee and watching TV. He taught high school biology and had a weird fetish for Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel.

“I thought you were only getting here tonight!” he said, getting up to give Bella a hug.

“Yeah, well she was,” said Jane, “until some horn-dog started harassing her in Hartford.”

“I figured it would be safer here,” Bella added.

“Or so you thought!” said Austin, wriggling his eyebrows. Jane hit his arm.

“So what are you ladies up to tonight?”

“Dancing,” said Jane.

“Ooh, can I come?”

“Sure. It must be drag night at one of the bars,” Jane replied.

Austin fluttered his eyelashes and pouted at them while Jane tried to be annoyed. “Just be ready by ten,” she said. “We’re going to dye Bella’s hair and watch some movies.”

Before Ducky died, Bella never imagined she’d ever have purple hair. Then again, she hadn’t planned on having her tresses lopped off due to a head injury. One morning, maybe a month after the accident, Ava appeared in Bella’s doorway, her dirty-blond hair flat on one side from a heavier night’s sleep than Bella could have hoped for in her state of mental disrepair. Her skin still retained its just-woke-up puffiness and she flopped onto the velveteen chaise lounge that Ducky had playfully referred to as “the swooning couch”.

“What’s the game plan for today?”

Bella planted herself in front of the mirror. She’d been up early enough to watch the light warm up when the sun rose, and was already dressed. Her hair, however, was painfully out of

character. It had grown, but not much.

“I look like Mr. Spock,” she complained.

Ava laughed. “It’s so good to see that your sense of humor hasn’t been diminished by this whole ordeal.”

“Let’s dye my hair today,” Bella said slowly.

“What color? Brown?”

“No. Purple.”

Ava raised her eyebrows. “Where exactly do you plan on finding purple hair dye?”

Bella smiled. “No clue.”

Less than two hours later, she was leaning over the bathtub, smearing purple gunk the consistency of toothpaste onto her hair.

“That stuff is disgusting,” Ava said, standing as far away as the small bathroom would allow.

“Yeah,” she said, “but it smells like that grape cough syrup.”

“Dimetapp?” Ava wrinkled her nose.

“Smell,” Bella said, and reached a gooey hand toward Ava.

“It smells like something, but I don’t know if grape is the right word.”

Bella rinsed her hands in the tub, which was streaked with purple tracks. Her hair felt stiff as the dye thickened and dried.

Now, at Jane's, Bella wrapped herself in a towel and attempted to put on makeup for the first time since seventh grade. The makeup had been Jane's idea, and Bella was still wary. Her hair was a more vibrant shade of purple and her clothes were laid out on Jane's bed. She could hear the water running for Austin's shower through the bedroom wall. Jane sat at her computer, head cocked to one side while she fastened a hoop earring large enough to wear as an anklet.

"Almost ready?"

"Working on it." As Bella wriggled out of her towel, her duffel bag emitted a muffled ringing. She plunged through layers of clothes to retrieve her phone. The caller ID flashed Kieran's name. She reached for Jane's bathrobe, shielding herself from his voice as though it could touch her through the earpiece of the phone.

Her stomach dropped as he spoke. There was an unnamed friction in the space between his words.

"You didn't call anyone. We were a worried," he said. She noticed the "we", not a "me". Who was "we?" He and Marnie?

"Well, the whole point of this was to get a little space and perspective." Bella shifted the phone to her other ear. Apparently, avoidance was going to be his method for handling the disaster of their last conversation. "I kind of have to go."

"Well, can you call me tomorrow or something?"

She tugged at wisp of her hair. "I'll talk to you later."

"Who was that?" Jane asked, as Austin appeared in the doorway behind her

"Kieran" she said, experimenting with hair gel. "Things have been kind of weird since

Ducky died.”

“Weird how?” said Austin, crossing his arms.

“We got into a fight last time he called. And he’s been hooking up with Marnie—”

“Eww!” said Jane, who had never liked the bleached-blond pixie to begin with.

Bella felt the betrayal-borne rage she’d felt when she’d seen them together simmer beneath her ribcage, but she forced herself to bite her tongue. She liked Marnie, after all. Sort of.

“Well, screw him!” said Jane.

“I sincerely hope you didn't mean that literally,” Bella said, grabbing her clothes before retreating to the bathroom. Austin’s deep, belly laugh penetrated all the way through the flimsy wooden door.

The next morning, Bella woke early to the muffled sound of her ringing phone. Jane had just left for work, a feat of Herculean effort since they hadn't fallen into bed until four. Eyes still sticky with morning, Bella clawed through her bag.

“Hello?”

“Morning,” said Kieran.

“Don't you have a job or something?”

“Someone's still got her panties in a twist.”

“You were way out of line.”

“So were you. Hang on a sec—” Distantly, Bella heard him spit. She wrinkled her nose.

“Are you brushing your teeth?”

“I’m getting ready for—”

“That’s so gross!”

“Anyway, I was thinking I might come down--”

"No." The single-syllable answer was out of her mouth like a gunshot.

"You're acting like a lunatic," he said, and hung up.

Bella wished she could tell him that most of the time, she felt like one too.

After a luxurious shower, Bella walked into Kiss Thiss, the salon where Jane worked as a manicurist. It catered to the hipster crowd and the place was full of rail thin girls perched on maroon vinyl sofas. Their male counterparts sported expertly styled bed-head and skintight jeans, no doubt swiped from their girlfriends. Bella felt hopelessly out of place in her corduroy pants and plain black t-shirt. The waiting area was carpeted in burgundy and gold, and there were checkerboard tiles on the floor.

“Bella baby!”

She followed the sound of Jane's voice and took a seat in a chrome-trimmed chair next to her station

“Kieran called. Again.”

“I heard.”

“How did--”

“Let me finish up here.” Jane jerked her head toward the blonde whose hand she was holding. “Then, we’ll talk.”

Bella narrowed her eyes, but picked up a three-week old copy of *Us Weekly*, noting that even George Bush had been reduced to tabloid fodder. She watched Jane cash out her customer and schedule another appointment into a computer spreadsheet before making her way back to

her station.

"The reason I know that Kieran called," Jane said, "is because he called me, too."

Bella's stomach began to tie itself into Boy Scout knots. "Why?"

Jane grabbed Bella's hand and began to scrutinize her nails. "He asked if he could come over, and I told him yes."

"Are you crazy?" Bella yanked her hand away. "Keep that acrylic crap away from me."

"I won't give you acrylics, just a manicure." Jane picked up a nail file and started in on Bella's left hand. "And I think that it'll be good for him to be here. You two need to hash this out."

"The reason I left was to escape that whole situation," Bella said. "Kieran included."

"I know," Jane said, coating each of Bella's nails with a clear, shiny gloss.

"What if he brings Marnie?" Bella said. "Did you even consider that?"

Jane raised a well-manicured eyebrow. "The trailer-park queen can stay at a hotel."

Bella was smart enough to recognize defeat. She loafed at Kiss Thiss for awhile longer, chatting with Jane between customers and reading the trashy magazines, which seemed to be the only type available. She was amazed by some of the customers that frequented the salon. One perfectly coiffed woman with Marilyn Monroe hair and ice-pick heels brought her five year-old daughter in for highlights. Eventually, Bella left with a metallic purple manicure and Jane's insistence that Kieran's visit was a necessary evil.

By Thursday, Jane had solidified plans with Kieran.

"Why didn't you just tell him no?" Austin asked his sister, while Bella pulled plates and silverware out of the cupboards for dinner.

"She needs to do this," Jane glared at Bella. "Besides, he's our friend."

At this, Bella rolled her eyes, but knew enough to keep her mouth shut.

Partly, Bella was mad at Kieran for letting his own grief get in the way of understanding hers. She'd wanted him to be her example of how a person could function in the throes of tragedy, but he'd committed the unforgivable sin of humanity instead. She knew it wasn't fair, knew that her expectations were unreasonable, but her feelings were connected to a switch she couldn't turn off. Part of her wanted him to come that weekend just so she could freeze him out.

The night he arrived in Connecticut, Kieran looked great. It made Bella want to throw up. Granted, he'd dropped a few pounds, but his skin wasn't see-through pale the same way hers was and sleep had glossed over the creases of his face that had been so prominent those first few weeks. Her hand went to her short, purple hair. She wanted him to bear his scars externally, just as she was forced to.

"Hi." He didn't try to hug her, for that much she gave him credit. He moved toward her like someone navigating through a warzone, and reached out to touch a piece of her hair.

"You look different."

Bella had abandoned her baggy cargo pants and jeans in favor of a lime green corduroy skirt belonging to Jane. She was a little self-conscious of the slit that reached a few inches above her knee, but she steeled herself against the rush of blood to her cheeks. Her purple manicure sparkled like hard, dark ice beneath the yellow light in the kitchen entryway.

"I am different."

He smiled, but didn't say anything. Bella walked in front of him, leaving him to carry his bag himself.

“Hey cute boy,” Jane said. “Grab a seat. And a drink, definitely a drink.”

Kieran laughed. “So good to see some things don’t change.”

“Austin’s finishing up at school,” she said. “When he gets home, we can plan our evening.”

Jane had rounded up people for a house party the following night, but had apparently decided to ease Kieran in to the chaos that was her social life. He sat on the couch, arms draped over the back as if life was comfortable and sane again. Bella's mind pulled a slide of a picture she'd take of Kieran the weekend they'd both graduated from college. He and Ducky were sitting on the fake leather sofa in her apartment, which was stripped bare. Posters and been taken off the walls and boxes made a maze of the floor. In the picture she took, Kieran and Ducky were sitting side by side. They were each holding a beer and their arms were flung across the backrest. Kieran was laughing, but Ducky was only smiling. They were light and dark, yin and yang, and after all that had happened, Bella was hard-pressed to imagine one without the other. Propped comfortably on Jane and Austin's couch, Kieran could have been plucked right out of the photograph that Bella had thought little of until that moment. He'd said she looked different. He certainly didn't.

The click of the door unlatching brought her back to the reality of the Connecticut apartment.

“Hello, ladies,” Austin said. He dropped his messenger bag by the doorway and slid out of his shoes. “Oh, what’s up man?” he said when he noticed the extra body. “Didn't mean to attack your masculinity.”

Kieran smiled.

“So what’s the plan, sister dearest?” Austin said.

“We were waiting on you.”

“Well,” Austin said, “I vote food. Even the road kill was looking appetizing on the ride home.”

9

By nine o’clock they were sitting at a sushi bar downtown, sucking on a scorpion bowl the size of a small goldfish pond. It was the kind of place with bamboo and rice paper partitions. The waitress, dressed in a plum colored kimono, had led them to a low table near the front window where they sat on cushions in their bare feet.

When they finally stumbled out of the restaurant, it was broaching midnight. Bella was feeling a little wobbly, but Jane kept trying to unbutton her shirt on the street while they were walking to the car. A black Mercedes holding two guys with baseball caps and beer guts pulled alongside her. "Hey, baby. What are you selling?" At this point, Kieran finally shackled her hands with his and walked in front of her.

When Jane was safely sprawled across her own bed with no citations for indecent exposure, Bella bantered with the boys in Austin's room. While she drank water, they drank

more beer. Kieran conceded to exhaustion at one and went to make up his bed on the couch. Bella stretched, burrowing into the blanket on Austin's bed. He sat in his computer chair, the light from his desk lamp making his dark skin look like gold.

"Do you remember that guy that you and Jane hung around with senior year? The one from California?"

"The one that slept at the fair?"

"That'd be the one."

Bella groaned at the memory of the cocky golden boy who'd traveled across the country to go to college. His claim to fame was the fact that he slept in a carnie trailer at the Fryeburg Fair after drinking himself into a near coma. The worst part was that he'd been proud of it.

"I can't believe he thought that was normal. Who does that?"

"Spoiled brats trying to sample the local culture?"

"Anyway." Bella rolled her eyes. "Random topic, don't you think?"

"Just thinking random thoughts," he said. "Didn't my sister hook up with him?"

"Yeah," Bella said. "He may have been a spoiled brat, but he was pretty hot. Why'd you want to know that about your own sister?"

"I didn't," he said, shaking his head, "but that's the kind of information that always seems to find me, anyway." He paused, and rocked back in his chair. "Did you sleep with him?" His eyes were closed.

"What?" She sat up. "Are you crazy? I was with Ducky!"

"I just didn't, you know—"

"Didn't what?" she said.

“Don’t take it like that—”

“Like what? Like I’m a—”

He cut her off. He cut her off because he kissed her. Bella didn't even remember him moving from the chair to the bed, but his mouth was hot against hers.

She'd been with Ducky for two months and twenty days before they'd had sex. He'd been coming to stay with her on campus every weekend since they'd met, and they always slept in her little apartment above Glitz!, he on his back while she sprawled across his chest. There were nights when Bella wanted more than his hands and mouth, but he seemed to know what to wait for, something beyond what she could see.

The campus hugged the coast and the water lapped a few yards from where the lawn ended. They had left Kieran's place an hour earlier, and Bella was standing at the water's edge, playing chicken with the frozen waves. It was exhilaration, to be lashed at by such brutal cold. There wasn't any snow yet, but the sand was frozen against itself, eroding only single grains when Bella walked across it. Her communion with the sea was only interrupted when Ducky said her name, quietly but with urgency she hadn't heard from him before. Her name sounded like song against the ocean and she knew that it was time for them to go home.

In Connecticut, with Austin's mouth on hers, Bella recognized that their needs were not the same, that this encounter would not be perfectly timed or life-altering. The revelation, though, was that she wanted it. After months of feeling like everything in her connected to sex had died in the accident, she wanted all of the weight that he'd covered her with, the teeth at her collarbone and the leg between her thighs. She walled out the guilt, knowing she'd have time for it later.

Her newly found sense of surrender evaporated over her head when he sat back on his heels. "I...this-this is wrong, isn't it? I shouldn't be...this is wrong—"

"No" Bella said. "Just come here."

The weight of his body pressed hers into the cradle of the mattress. When he bent his head over her, tears inexplicably filled her eyes. Austin immediately pulled back.

"I'm okay," Bella said. "It's okay."

Much later, she let herself grieve for the tie that she had severed with her dead lover. The degrees by which human beings lose people after they've already died, she thought, are almost too bittersweet to bear. There may be perhaps nothing sadder.

Bella didn't sleep in Austin's bed. That would have risked complicating things. Instead, she crawled into bed with Jane, who was face down with one arm and leg hanging over the edge of the mattress. It took a long time for Bella to fall asleep.

Although she was certain she'd had the latest bedtime, Bella was up earliest the next morning. Her eyes felt gritty, as if someone had sprinkled them with a salt shaker. Noticing that

Jane was still comatose next to her, she took the opportunity to retreat into the bathroom to scrub away any remaining traces of the previous night. Her own feelings about what had happened were still too tangled to identify, and she certainly wasn't ready to handle anyone else's. What kind of girl, she thought, slept with a guy, just for the hell of it, months after her boyfriend died? Bella felt torn between the desperate need to keep her life with Ducky intact, and the possibility of life without him. She soaked in the tub for a long time, letting the water cover her face. Underwater, everything sounded soft and benign.

Downstairs, Kieran was sitting on the couch in a pair of basketball shorts and a t-shirt worn to softness. Propped up against pillows, he was watching cartoons

"Early riser today," he remarked, not shifting his gaze from the screen.

"You too."

The silence between them was heavy while they watched Wiley Coyote blow himself up while the ever-adorable Roadrunner sped off into the sunset. Bella's discomfort only increased over breakfast, when she was forced to face Austin. She averted her eyes as she poured her Chex into a blue ceramic bowl, as she passed the orange juice to Jane, as she moved across the room to snatch the toast that had popped up noisily. She was not ready for eye contact.

In preparation for the party that evening, the ladies turned Jane's bedroom into a storm of garments, glitter, and hairspray. Jane stood in a pool of discarded clothes, still deciding what to wear. Bella's Chinese corset top and a pair of broken-in jeans were spread across the bed in front of her. She was willing to experiment, but tonight, she wanted to be comfortable, too.

"So things haven't turned out so bad," Jane said. She was lining her eyelids in turquoise metallic. Bella's heart seized until she realized that Jane was talking about Kieran.

"Yet." Bella knew that the civilized charade would only sustain them for so long. If Kieran didn't crack, she knew she would. "So how many people are coming tonight?"

"Just a small group," Jane said.

Bella raised her eyebrows. "Seriously?"

"Well, maybe twenty people," Jane amended. "Some local friends, plus some people from the salon and the school were Austin works."

"Well," Bella said, and stepped into her jeans, "seeing as how I'll be spending the rest of the night amongst people I don't know, I think I should start pre-gaming now."

By ten o'clock, the apartment was a Salvation Army mish-mash of people. Airbrushed looking hairdressers from Kiss Thiss sat on the rug next to teachers dressed in polo shirts and jeans. The kitchen counter had morphed into a bar, and the smokers made a circle on the lawn. Bella had semi-intentionally avoided Austin all day, not wanting to run the risk of anyone detecting awkwardness. When he materialized at her elbow, she wasn't particularly surprised.

"Can I steal you for a minute?"

She let him lead her outside. The fresh air was a release from the stuffiness of so many people talking. It was dark, but there was a streetlamp on the sidewalk.

"I feel like a monster," he said, once they were out of earshot of the smoking circle.

"Because of what happened last night?" Bella said. "I'm capable of making my own choices."

He looked down. "I feel like I took advantage."

Bella laughed; a hard, poisonous sound. "Yeah, well me too."

"I would never--"

"Look," she said, "I'm sorry if you feel bad, but between the guilt and the self-loathing, I've got more than I can handle with my own emotions." She tipped her head back in a last-ditch attempt to keep her tears from spilling. They trickled over her temples anyway.

He let the conversation rest for a moment before he spoke. "I just wanted you to know that I wasn't expecting--"

"I know," she said. "Me either."

He smiled. "The bottom line is that I don't want this to be something you'll regret."

Bella smiled back. "It probably will be, but I think that's part of the process."

He shrugged, and she knew that he wanted to hash it out more, but she had nothing left to hash. Eventually, he went back inside, and Bella sucked down those last precious lungfuls of summer night air.

The next morning, Bella woke up to a whiskery muzzle in close proximity to her eye socket. She groaned, and blinked her surroundings into clearer focus. When her gaze reached the doorway, she saw Kieran with a strangled smirk on his face.

"You know, some people would react violently to having a live ferret put in their bed." She draped Icarus around her neck and climbed over Jane.

Kieran ignored her remark. "Come downstairs." Obviously, Bella hadn't known Kieran when he was ten, but in that moment, she could have painted a picture of his childhood face, the boyish enthusiasm of a child whose best friend had not yet died.

"I'm tired."

"Bella, come on. Don't be a buzz kill."

In the kitchen, he'd set the table with real plates. A stack of pancakes sat in the middle,

flanked by butter and maple syrup.

"Impressive." She crossed her arms and tried to hang on to the remnants of her anger.

He nodded in the direction of the counter, where she saw a ten-pound bag of Krusteaz pancake mix.

"You made pancakes from a mix call Krusteaz?"

"Oh shut up and eat!" he said, cuffing her on the shoulder.

"I refuse to eat store-bought maple syrup."

He sat down. "Best I could do on short notice."

She joined him, and slid a pancake onto her plate. "I'm still mad at you, you know."

"Good," he said. "I'm still mad at you, too."

She glared at him. "That's not exactly fair. You really let me down."

He put down his fork. "How? By having a life?"

Bella could feel the anger heat up and thicken. "You were supposed to be there for me," she said, "but instead, you were busy fucking a poor facsimile of a Barbie doll."

"Leave it to you to use big words when you're pissed."

"I mean it," she said. "I thought I could count on you, but I guess the only men I can count on are the ones who die on me."

His voice became quiet, measured. "You know that's not fair."

"What's not fair?" Bella said. "That you got to cope by having an affair while I was stuck day after day in an apartment that felt like a mausoleum, surrounded by people who had prefab ideas about how a widow should act?"

At this point, he actually rolled his eyes at her. "Everyone there was only trying to help

and you know that."

Again, Bella felt the threat of tears, and angrily swiped at her eyelids. "That's not the point. You were his best friend. How come you got off so easy?"

Kieran pulled at his hair with both hands and looked down for a long moment before he spoke again. "I'm sorry if that's what you think." Bella refused to meet his gaze until he reached across the table and grabbed her face. "Look," he said, "I love you, and even if you're mad, I know you know that. You're practically my sister-in-law, and even if you don't want my help, you're going to get it, because you were the love of Ducky's life."

She'd given up on staunching the flow of her tears. "I'm sorry I got so mad at you."

"That's okay," he said. "I'll forgive you, because you're crazy."

"Don't push your luck."

"Shut up and eat."

When Kieran left, he took a little bit of Ducky back to New Hampshire with him. Bella watched his car pull away from the cement sidewalk with her arms wrapped around her ribs, even though it wasn't cold. Part of her wanted to follow him, to go back and have things be as she remembered. Instead, she headed toward the living room to answer her ringing phone.

"Hi honey," said the voice on the other end of the line. Bella leaned back against the broken-in couch. Her mother's sister, Daniela. The fact that she was calling struck Bella as strange, but not immediately alarming.

"Your mom was in an accident—"

Immediately, Bella's mind filled with images of blacktop stained with blood and her mother lying very still. Her lungs began to feel heavy, as though she couldn't get enough air into

them. The possibility that her mother might be fine never entered her mind.

When Daniela realized the extent to which she'd alarmed her niece, she immediately backpedaled, assuring Bella that her mother's condition was far from critical. "She's sleeping off a concussion, or she'd have called you herself."

It took Bella a moment to adjust to the emotional about-face. As her pulse slowed, she felt a wicked case of hiccups coming on. Daniela filled in the details of the collision and reassured her that all of her mother's medical needs had been met. When she finally hung up, she noticed that Jane and Austin were staring from the couch.

Jane responded to the news in a manner similar to Bella, repeating the words "Oh my God," on a constant loop. Bella tried to reassure her friend, but her throat was only capable of producing hiccups. The corners of Austin's mouth trembled, which Bella felt was somehow incredibly inappropriate.

"Are you laughing at my hiccups?"

He smirked. "Not yet."

Bella couldn't disguise a smile. "This is serious!"

"I know, I know," said Jane. "So tell us what happened!"

"She hit a deer," Bella said, "driving home from Costco. Apparently, it's just a concussion".

"I don't even think I've seen a deer," Jane said.

"Aww," said Austin, "poor princess." Jane glared at him,

"So do you have to go?" she said. "I mean, it's just a concussion, right?"

Bella sighed. Although she hadn't been planning to stay forever, she wasn't quite ready to

leave yet. "I'd rather stay, but I think I should be there."

"I think it'll be good for you to spend the time with her," Austin said.

Bella nodded. "Our mother-daughter relationship isn't exactly thriving yet."

"Well you know you're welcome to come back," Jane said.

"Maybe once things are settled." Bella was fairly certain that she wouldn't return any time soon. Her mind was restless.

10

On the day she left Connecticut, Bella woke up early hoping to get a drop on the day. She whispered to Icarus, who was wandering around in the kitchen, looking for bits of toast or cookie. Bella lifted him off the kitchen linoleum and kissed him on the nose.

By seven, the car was packed. Bella had to wake up Jane to say goodbye, although Austin had been awake to help her load her car. Not that there was much to pack. Jane's tight hug told Bella her friend knew she wouldn't be coming back to stay. She hugged back, offering silent thanks for the harbor her two friends had provided.

Once the northbound car was safely on the highway, and the late summer wind was fluffing Icarus's pale fur through the half-lowered window, Bella began to mentally prepare

herself for what was to come. She wondered if her mother would really be okay and, if she was, if she would notice the change in her the same way Kieran had. She was wearing a pair of Jane's jeans, and a T-shirt she said looked better on Bella than on her. The clothes weren't as baggy as her usual garb, but she had to admit they were comfortable enough.

The speedometer needle never dropped below seventy, and Bella felt odd to be rushing, to have a purpose after so much aimless wandering. She stopped at a rest area to call Daniela.

"How is she?"

"She's fine, honey," her aunt said. "I think she'll be glad to see you, though." What a sad commentary, Bella thought, that it took a near death experience to make her mother glad to see her. Then again, Bella was just as culpable as her mother.

When Bella caught the teenage barista at the rest-stop Panera checking her out, she wondered what grade he'd be in come September. She wasn't used to that kind of attention, and her blush betrayed any semblance of poise. She left with a bagel and a piece of nut bread, which she broke into pieces and fed to Icarus, who nuzzled his damp nose against her fingers.

They pulled into her mother's driveway in the early afternoon. Bella wasn't surprised to see Daniela's car in the front driveway. She *was* surprised, however, that Leah Sarto answered the front door herself. She had an image of her pale and bruised, lying on the couch with a cold compress on her head. Bella had planned out things to say, prefab conversation in case her brain shorted out, but none of them came out of her mouth. Instead, she started crying.

"Jesus Christ, nobody died," Leah said, and gave her a hug. "Calm down and let's get you inside."

Bella felt like a foreigner as she climbed the beige, carpeted stairs to reach her former

bedroom. It was as though she had forgotten the language of her childhood. It wasn't until she opened the bedroom door that she started to feel that maybe she could relearn it. She put Icarus's cage in the corner facing the lone window, which was still curtained in white, against the pale purple walls. The twin bed creaked as she sat down and took it all in. Nike icon Steve Prefontaine riveted her with brown, soulful eyes from a poster on the opposite wall. Two pregnant bookcases flanked her wide bureau, which was cluttered with brushes and hair elastics, and random pieces of jewelry. When she opened her closet door, she discovered discarded high school sweats from cross country, and a few pairs of jeans worn thin. She closed her eyes, trying in her thoughts to connect her present to her past.

In the parlor, her mother was reclined against a maroon chenille pillow with her feet propped against the plush armrest of the loveseat. She took a sip of ginger ale from a plastic mug set on a TV tray.

“So,” she said, “How’s Jane? You were in Connecticut, right?”

“She's her usual, effervescent self.”

“That girl gave me the best manicure I've ever had,” said her mother. Leave it to her to reference fashion in a time of crisis.

“And that brother of hers,” she said, “is sweet as pie.”

Bella kept her eyes low and willed the heat not to rise in her face. “They live together now.”

Leah’s reply seemed delayed. “Well, that must be nice for them.”

“We all went out a lot while I was there.”

It would have been impossible for her mother to know about her rendezvous with Austin,

but Bella felt sure that she did for no reason she could explain. It's an interesting phenomenon, how a parent can read a child, as though the shape of her mouth and the cock of her head are letters strung together to make words, sentences.

"It's different, isn't it? Having fun is always more complicated for us widows."

A tear slipped past Bella's eyelid.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't cry!" Leah said, wiping at her own eyes.

"Look who's talking!" she retorted. "God, I'm such a fucking mess!"

"Of course you are," said her mother. "The beginning's messy for everyone."

The next day, the air held the first nip of fall. Bella sat on the porch, paging through her baby album. She wore an orange wool cardigan leftover from high school to insulate herself against the flirting chill. The turn of a page revealed her birth certificate. Bella Elise Sarto, born to Edward and Leah Sarto on November 9th, 1977.

She watched herself age in fast-forward as she turned pages. Her five-year-old self in a sequined gymnastics leotard, wearing leggings and an off-the-shoulder t-shirt for a junior high school dance. Her first prom dress, which was royal blue and fastened with a collar around the neck, a feature her father would have liked, if he'd been around. And then, there were pictures of her father. He was holding her at her christening, and later, on his shoulders with her tiny fists lost in his brown hair. Her father wearing dress shirts and wingtips, wearing flannel pajamas, her father with her mother.

When she was younger, Bella had worried that she'd forget what her father looked like, what he sounded like. She slept with a picture of him under her pillow for years after he died. It wasn't even a recent picture, taken well before Bella was born. Still, she needed something

tangible, not yet trusting the power of her memory. Fifteen years later, she could call his face to mind clear as a windowpane.

On the Friday before he'd died, Bella had helped him mow the lawn. He walked behind her, his arms over hers, the cut grass clinging in pungent green clumps to their sneakers and socks. She remembered how the sweat had trickled like streams down the creases and curves of his neck.

"This calls for a milkshake," he'd said after they were finished, and covered with grass and sweat. They'd never made milkshakes at home before, but they had an unopened half-gallon of moose tracks ice cream. They'd overfilled the blender, which had spewed ice cream all over the counter. Bella could remember how she and her father had scrambled to clean up the mess before her mother got home from the gym.

Bella closed the album. Loss, she thought. The women in her family were cursed with loss. Bella didn't remember much about how her mother grieved. She was insulated by her sisters, and Bella spent most of that time with her grandmother. What Bella imagined was her mother lying at night on his side of the bed and crying at the scent of him and then walking into his closet and burying her face in his clothes, trying to mask her weary face as she picked out his burial clothes and casket.

There hadn't been time to say goodbye. He wasn't sick, and at thirty-six, hardly old. It wasn't anything justifiable like an accident, and there was no one to blame, which Bella thought was the worst part. He'd had an aneurysm at his desk at home. Her mother woke up in the middle of the night and he hadn't come to bed. She said he looked like he was sleeping, but his neck seemed too weak to hold his head up. Bella thought of Ducky's head rolling on his neck

after the accident.

In April, she and Ducky had climbed a mountain to watch the sun set. They'd packed candles, blankets and fruit, and planned to stay the night. Closing her eyes, Bella could almost see the cloudless sky that had seemed close enough to touch, if she'd just climb a little higher. The air was scented with newborn vegetation and the view from the peak was worth every aching quadricep muscle. From the mountaintop, everything had looked soft and lush, like a colored pencil drawing. For awhile, Bella and Ducky were distracted enough to overlook the fact that the temperature was dropping with the sun.

"We'll just use body heat," Ducky had said, raising an eyebrow suggestively.

"Ducky, we're going to freeze to death! You hear me? To death!" Bella was way past finding him funny.

"Chill out, Bella, it's not a big deal."

"This was a stupid fucking idea."

"Quit being such a bitch."

Bella had felt as though she'd been slapped. She knew that it was time to back down but she was too angry to care.

"Fuck you!"

She turned toward the trail, able to feel her own pulse at her temples, at her neck. She

half suspected that anyone who looked would be able to see her angry heartbeat right through all her layers of thermal clothing. The sky was turning the murky blue of ten-foot deep pond water, and the tree branches were no longer casting shadows.

“You’re fucking crazy!” he said. “I hope you fucking die!”

“I hope so too!” she said without turning around, and started stumbling down the trail that had seemed so well marked by sunlight. She kept waiting to hear footsteps behind her, but they didn’t come. The evergreens had smeared into dark blobs on either side and sky had changed from blue to black.

“Okay,” Bella chanted through angry tears. “Okayokayokayokay.” The rubber tips of her sneakers caught on invisible rocks as her legs cycled over the terrain.

As she wrapped her cardigan more tightly on her mother's front porch, she thought of times her parents fought the way she and Ducky had that night. She could remember crouching at the top of the stairs listening to the angry sounds coming from the first floor. At the time, she was too young to understand that fighting was not the destination; it was merely another stretch of highway on the trip.

If she could have deferred Ducky’s death for say, ten years, Bella didn't know if she would have. How much worse would it be to lose a husband and a father? At thirty-seven, would she have had the same chance? Her mother’s fate seemed so much worse than hers, her

life damaged in the ways that couldn't be repaired.

She wished sometimes that her mother had married a different boyfriend, one whose name she hadn't come across in the obituaries yet. That may have meant she'd never be born, but that might have been okay. Maybe Ducky would have survived a little longer. She wondered whether her existence changed his path, or if maybe everyone just has an expiration date.

For dinner that night, Daniela defrosted some homemade tomato sauce and added it to pasta. Bella's mother ate maybe four bites.

"You're almost as bad as me," Bella remarked.

Leah smiled. "You are looking better, though. A little rosier." She turned to Daniela. "Did the shop call back yet?"

"Not yet," she said, putting down her glass, "but I'm pretty sure it won't be a big deal."

"What shop?" Bella said.

Daniela smiled. "Your mom got a new job!"

Bella raised her eyebrows. "It appears that she neglected to tell me this!"

"I don't even know if they're going to keep me, now that I'm laid up for a few days." Her mother's cheeks had shaded pink, and she looked genuinely pleased.

"Marina's friend opened a new boutique on Sable St." said Daniela, referring to Bella's other aunt. "It's all handmade clothes and everything gorgeous! The owner specifically asked about your mother."

"I quit the Amber Room. No one needs another middle-aged cocktail waitress," said Leah.

"Mom!"

“Well, it’s true! This woman thinks I have a great sense of style, and besides, I’ll get an employee discount!”

Bella shook her head and looked down at the tablecloth, a rusty orange reminder of impending autumn. It was what she’d always wanted, really, for her mother to get her act together. Still, she felt jealous.

A few days later, Bella woke up to the sound of ferret teeth against metal cage bars. “I know you’re hungry,” she told Icarus, “but it’s way too early for this.” Her phone registered three missed calls; one each from Jane and Austin and the last one from Ava. She called Ava first, knowing she would probably wake her up. Ava worked as a waitress to save up for grad school, and rarely saw the morning hours.

“Yeah?” she said into the phone, her voice still syrupy with sleep.

“You rang?” Bella said.

“Bella, are you crazy? It’s wicked early!”

“I’m aware.” Bella preferred not to ponder the question of whether or not she was crazy.

“If I didn’t have a job, I’d still be sleeping.”

“Ava, you do have a job, and you’re still never awake this early.” While her friend was waking up, Bella filled her in on the Connecticut leg of her trek, including her little escapade with Austin.

“What a vixen,” Ava said, and laughed into the phone. “Seriously, though,” she said, “was it a good thing? I mean, I know things kind of suck right now—”

“I don’t know yet,” Bella said. Thinking about the implications of her fling with Austin stung, and she’d been forced to realize that the affair itself, while healthy in theory, had come too

soon. “I feel like I cheated—”

“I don’t even want to hear it,” Ava said. “That’s bullshit. I know you loved Ducky, but this isn’t fucking India where they burn the wife when the husband dies, and—”

“Ava, I get it. Sheesh!”

“Sorry,” she said. “Just don’t think that this one tragedy means that you have to become a nun.”

Bella rolled over in the twin bed of her childhood and looked out the lone window at the red maple that had been spreading its branches in the yard since before Bella was born.

“So how long are you staying with your mom?” Ava said.

“I don’t know.” When Bella left Connecticut, she hadn’t really thought about it, just packed up and hauled out. “She seems to be doing fine, but we’re actually getting along. I kind of want to enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Listen, I called because I want you to come stay for awhile. Like maybe a month.”

“Well—”

“I mean I know you’re doing the whole nomad thing, and actually staying in one place for awhile might screw with your chi, or whatever, but I really think you should come.”

“What I was going to say,” Bella replied, “before I was so rudely interrupted, was that sounds like a pretty good idea.” After a few more sarcastic comments, Bella hung up. She rolled over in bed and studied the pictures on the bulletin board hanging over her bed, tracing her history through them. Her college friends were mellow and loving, and Austin and Jane were just plain crazy, but there had never been anyone who could quite compare to Ava.

Bella remembered the two of them playing together at preschool, on a green platform

with a cardboard tree on one side that the teachers wishfully referred to as “the treehouse.”

“Don’t wanta play house,” little Bella would say. “Let’s play Ghostbusters.”

“I don’t wanna be a boy!” little Ava would wail.

“Don’t worry,” Bella would reply. “You can be Janine.”

In her bedroom, Bella glanced over at Icarus’s cage, and saw that he was sleeping with his nose tucked beneath his tail. That was a sure sign that it was getting late enough to wake her mother. Bella wandered into her bedroom, but her four-poster bed was empty, the bedspread pulled tightly across the mattress. In the hallway, Bella could hear the low static of the television from downstairs.

She found her mother asleep on the couch in a blue cotton nightshirt. The TV was turned on to the 24-hour Nick at Night Station. She turned it off, and Leah stirred but didn’t wake up. She wondered if her mother had a hard time sleeping in the bed she’d shared with her father, now that the house was empty. Dirty blonde roots were starting to show against her bright red hair.

“Get up, get up, get up!” Bella bounced on the couch. Her mother squeezed her eyes shut and put a hand to her head.

“Good lord, Bella! The sun’s barely up!”

“What’s with everyone today?” Bella crossed her arms. “Is there a sleeping epidemic I should be aware of?”

Leah looked confused at her daughter’s comment, but swung herself into sitting position.

“So what should we do today?”

“Don’t you have to rest?”

“Oh, I’ve rested plenty. As long as we don’t go on any roller coasters, I should be okay.”

“Okay,” Bella said, “what did you have in mind?”

Her mother smiled. “Just go take a shower!”

Submitting to her mother's whim, Bella found herself standing amidst a patchwork quilt of colors and textures. As she inhaled, she could detect a pungent aroma of clove in the air. Her eyes scanned the small boutique, taking in the variety of garments hanging from the racks that lined the walls.

“Leah!” said a curvaceous woman with a blunt-cut bob, who ducked out from behind the counter and greeted Bella's mother with a hug. Most of the time, Bella didn't miss home, but at moments like this she felt a twinge for her hometown, where people gave hugs instead of handshakes. “I wasn’t expecting you to be up and about for awhile,” said the woman, whom Bella learned was Martine.

Her mother and Martine made the small talk of women who don’t know each other very well yet, but would like to be friends. “This is Bella,” her mother said, and put a hand on Bella's shoulder.

“Bella,” repeated Martine. “A perfect name for a girl.”

While the conversation continued, Bella inspected Martine’s wares. A few moments later, her mother materialized beside her, footsteps silent on the carpeted floor.

“Try this on,” she said, and handed over a spaghetti-strapped tank top. It was shiny emerald green with strands of aqua beads sewn intricately across the front.

“I definitely don’t have the chest for that,” Bella said.

“Bella!” Her mother lightly smacked her arm. “It’s supposed to drape. It’s elegant.”

Bella stood before the full length mirror, poking and prodding at her skin. She’d rounded

out the sickly, skeletal appearance of the months immediately following the accident, yet there was something different about the way she looked. She decided that she liked it.

Her mother had been right about the green tank top, which Bella bought with a purple corduroy blazer and a patchwork skirt that made her feel like a hippie.

“So what do you think?” her mother said as they were leaving the store.

“I like it,” Bella replied. “I think you’ll fit right in.”

The next few days in New Hampshire passed with the comfortable ease with which one might listen to mellow jazz. Bella’s mother passed the time by bagging her low-rise jeans and baby doll t-shirts to be sent to Goodwill. Most afternoons found Bella perched on the porch swing with a pile of old photos and a glass of unsweetened iced tea. The tension sometimes released its grasp on her muscles, allowing her to bask in a moment of calm. Inevitably, the day came when her mother was due to start work.

“So, do I pass?” Her mother spun around on the heel of one of her plain ballet flats. She actually looked pretty good, in a pair of jeans and a black velvet blazer.

Bella smiled. “Very classy.”

The knowledge that her mother was finally settling down had reactivated the familiar itch. Within a few days, she’d packed her things and called Ava to let her know she was coming.

11

The highway was gridlocked for miles. The backlogged cars looked, from a distance, like a silver-scaled snake of massive proportions.

“Fuck!” Bella punched the steering wheel hard enough to hurt her hand. Icarus woke with a start, and immediately leapt against the bars of his cage. “Not you,” she said. To her right, an Asian family had gotten out of their station wagon and was having a picnic on the vehicle’s hood, and she was pretty sure there was a couple having sex under a blanket in the back seat of the teal sedan on her left. Bella fumbled for her phone. She pressed a few keys and put it to her ear.

Moments later, Kieran’s voice reached out to her. “Hey, how’s Connecticut?”

“Well, I’m not so much there anymore, actually.” Bella explained about her mother’s concussion and the new job.

“That definitely sounds like a better gig than the Amber Room,” he said. Kieran had stayed at Bella’s house when Ducky was still around and had seen the nightmare that had been her widowed mother.

“I’m heading to Ava’s.”

“Really?” Kieran said, and she could picture him raising his eyebrows. “Are you coming home anytime in the foreseeable future?”

Home had become such a complicated concept. “Right now, I’m just focusing on my next step.”

“I just wanted you to know that the door’s always open. I mean, I know you got rid of

your apartment, but—“

“I know, Kieran. Thanks.”

After she hung up, Bella turned the radio up a notch so that the Dave Matthews Band could rock out a little louder. The future was starting to concern her, although she'd never dream of telling any of her friends that. Since Ducky died, she'd survived by living from moment to moment. Initially, she felt philosophical and brave about that. Lately, though, her mind had been straying to a month, two months, to the next year.

Ever since she'd headed off to college, Bella had always taken comfort in a stable home base. No matter how chaotic her life became, she had a safe place to go at the end of the day, a place that soothed her.

The apartment with Ducky had been the first place that felt like a real home since her father died. There were no random college roommates rolling blunts in the living room, no drunk girls throwing up in the communal bathrooms in the dorm. It was an environment she could control.

After graduation, they'd spent a few months at the apartment above Glitz! getting themselves together. Bella worked at the jewelry store full time while Ducky sent out resumes and followed leads for apartments. Although she'd fallen in love with Maine, she knew Ducky was gravitating toward New Hampshire because Kieran was there.

“Let’s go apartment hunting this weekend,” he’d said one night after she’d traipsed upstairs after work. “There were some listings in the paper I wanted to check out.”

Bella emerged from the kitchen with a bowl of ice cream. “Working Saturday. I have Sunday and Monday off, though.”

“I have every day off.” Ducky stretched his face into a grin, and laced his hands together behind his head. “What are you eating?”

“This is the first time in eight years that I haven’t been on a cross country diet,” she said, “and I plan to enjoy every minute of it!”

Elmira’s house wasn’t on the list Ducky had compiled from classifieds. In fact, they might have missed it all together had they chosen to drive instead of walk. The day was hot, but without the swampy humidity that often accompanies high temperatures in New Hampshire.

“Ducky, some of these apartments are two miles apart,” Bella complained.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t be wearing flip-flops!” he replied.

“Well, don’t complain if you have to give me a piggyback ride.”

“I’ll carry you like this!” Ducky fluidly scooped her up and dangled her over his shoulder, anchoring her by her legs.

“David Alexander Bach!” She shrieked against the back of his t-shirt, punching him playfully in the kidneys.

They’d left Kieran’s apartment at eleven that morning, and by three they were headed back. Some of the prospects were promising, but not stellar. Still, Bella was so thrilled at sharing a space with Ducky that she probably would’ve made do with a cardboard box. Sticky and wilted from their quest, they cut through a side street on the way back to Kieran’s. Bella

watched a squirrel maneuver around the wheels of a car and scurry into a large maple tree. Next to the tree, she noticed a black and orange “For Rent” sign rocking gently back and forth on its wire base.

“Ducky, look!” She pulled at his sleeve. It was a real house, with a porch and a doorbell.

Ducky ran a hand through his spiky, dark hair. “It’s gorgeous, Bel. Probably out of our price range, though.”

Bella wasn’t listening. She was already on the porch, finger poised above the round little button of the doorbell.

Ducky sighed. “Or not.”

Bella had expected any number of things when she rang that doorbell. What she hadn’t expected was Elmira.

The woman who answered the door had gray streaked hair pulled back into a bun. She wore an apron over a paisley print smock.

“Hi,” Bella began. “We saw the sign out side and—”

“Of course, of course,” Elmira boomed. “Come in!”

Moments later, Bella and Ducky were seated at a chrome trimmed table munching on crisp balls of fried dough.

“Your apartment is on the third floor,” Elmira said above the hiss of the oil as she dropped in more globs of dough. Their apartment, as though they were already her tenants.

Bella thought the apartment would be like an attic, all open space. However, when Elmira finally led them up a set of painted wooden stairs, she discovered that the space was enormous. Bella wandered from room to room, taking in the bedroom window seat and the

claw-footed tub in the bathroom. The kitchen was large and the living room had three windows. She loved it. All of it. The windows were old fashioned and the woodwork was unpainted. The ceiling sloped downward in the living room and bedroom. Everything was coated with a layer of dust, but Bella could already see herself scrubbing it all clean, a bandanna holding her long hair out of her face. She turned to face Ducky, who'd been watching her dart from room to room like a hummingbird. His arms were crossed and a slight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"This is the one," Bella said.

"I thought you didn't even want to leave Maine!" he said, giving her a wide-eyed, innocent look.

Bella ignored his cheekiness. "Please," she said. "Can we have it?"

Now, the only thing she could control was her destination, and the closest thing she had to a home was her car. Instead of cultivating a new space without Ducky, she drifted in and out of those that belonged to other people. Part of her wanted permission to live that way indefinitely and part of her just wanted to know that she wouldn't always feel so bad.

A marine blue sign welcomed Bella to Rhode Island. Someone once told her that you could drive across the entire state in an hour and she gave serious thought to investigating the claim.

Ava ended up in Rhode Island because she'd gone to college there. The school wasn't

somewhere Bella had pictured her fitting in. The girls all looked the same, wearing tight, flared jeans and expensive leather boots. At first, Bella had worried that her down-to-earth friend would morph into one of those airbrushed catalog models. As it ended up, college was like a silver sifter for her, straining out the gravel and smoothing her rough edges.

As Bella drove, she took in the beauty of the landscape, which mirrored the polish and sophistication of the people who inhabited it. The grass was several different shades of green, and the land dipped in shallow swoops, very unlike the severity of New Hampshire mountains. Icarus perked up beside her, snapping his gaze back and forth like a prairie dog. He seemed to remember the scent of the ocean. Maybe it reminded him of Maine.

When Bella pulled up to Ava's apartment, the sunlight was licking the sidewalk from the far side of the sky. She stepped out onto the smooth concrete and inhaled the welcoming smell of the ocean.

Bella put Icarus's cage down on the porch and rang the doorbell. The rasp of the buzzer signaled that the door was open, and she slipped inside. Ava's building was a few blocks away from the main part of town, sandwiched between a deli and a yoga studio. Bella was winded when she reached the fifth floor, and made a mental note to add some exercise to her daily grind. She heard the pat-pat of bare feet on linoleum. Then apartment door swung open.

"It's so good that you're here!" Ava said. She was wrapped in a green towel and her hair was wet.

She led Bella to a small alcove that served as her study. The futon that was usually in her bedroom had been moved to create a makeshift bed for Bella. A miniature window permitted a view of the little shops and other apartments that lined the street.

"I know the space kind of sucks, but—"

Bella shook her head. "It's perfect."

Ava smiled. "I have to work tonight, but I figured you could come hang out and have a few drinks."

She left Bella to unpack, a task which was accomplished in short order. She was used to living out of a suitcase, and it felt foreign to spread out what few belongings she'd brought with her.

"So ha oo erd om eran?" Ava said from the bathroom.

"What?" Bella went to the doorway.

Ava spit a mouthful of toothpaste into the sink. "I said have you heard from Kieran?"

"I called him earlier. I think he was trying to get me to come back."

"It wouldn't be the worst thing," she said.

"Everything's too raw right now. I just don't want to deal with it yet."

"Fair enough," Ava said, and used a hair pick to tame her straight, dirty-blond locks.

Ava was one of the few girls Bella knew who'd never dyed her hair, and a few years ago, she'd cut it into a sleek shag that suited her personality well. "What about Austin? Heard from him?"

Bella rolled her eyes.

"Have you?"

"No! It was a fling, nothing more."

"Yeah, okay," Ava said.

Bella glared at her friend, but said nothing more.

By five, the two girls were at the Olive Branch, one of the rare non-seafood serving

restaurants in the area.

“You can just hang out at one of my tables,” Ava said, and tied a small black apron around her waist to hold tip money and order pads. She was wearing a black skirt, a plain red short-sleeved shirt, and black tights. The waiters wore a similar variation of the uniform that included black slacks and red button-downs. Bella thought the effect was a little too reminiscent of a mobster movie, but the clientele was apparently charmed because they came in droves.

Bella sat at a small table for two near the bar. By seven o’clock, the place was packed, men and women dressed up and drinking red wine that looked black beneath the muted lighting. At nine, Ava took her break and brought over some bread and dipping oils.

“I’m sooo hungry,” she said. “By the way, the bartender thinks you’re cute, so your drinks are on the house.”

Bella eyed the decanter of red house wine on the table before shifting her gaze to the bartender, who grasped an upside down liquor bottle in each hand.

“I’m flattered. I think.”

“Don’t worry. He’s harmless. Anyway,” Ava said through a mouthful of crusty bread, “what do you think of the place?”

“I like it. It’s classy. Is your boss one of the Dons in the mafia, by chance?”

“I get tipped well enough not to ask questions” Ava said, and took a sip of wine out of Bella’s glass. “Don’t tell anyone I’m drinking on the job.”

“I think you might need an intervention. What time does your shift end?”

“I’m off at eleven,” she said. “I worked a short shift tonight; usually I go in at four. There’s a bar down the street that’s not too scary, if you want to check it out after.”

“I’m kind of beat—”

“Don’t be a pansy,” Ava said.

“A pansy? Are we back in sixth grade?”

“Since we don’t have permed bangs, I’d have to say no. Anyway, I have to get back to work.”

12

Eventually bored with people watching, Bella decided to explore a little bit before Ava’s shift ended. She stepped outside into air that was moist, but warm. It was a stark contrast to the New Hampshire nights that got a little bite to them by late August. People started wearing bulky, patterned sweaters and replacing their Birkenstocks with sturdier shoes.

As she felt the uneven cobblestones of the sidewalk beneath her feet, Bella wondered if there was anywhere in Rhode Island inland enough to not smell the ocean. The salty air tracked her footsteps down the street. The cobblestones gave way in parts to level concrete, not cracked asphalt like the roads and sidewalks where she’d lived with Ducky. Across the street from the restaurant was a two-floor coffee house. She was surprised to see that it wasn’t a chain, like Starbucks or Panera. She could see a clump of people through the second floor windows, and

decided she could use some caffeine if she was going to stay up all night with Ava.

The interior of the coffee house was almost entirely varnished hardwood. Even the walls were honey-colored boards. The ceiling was two stories above her, and the second floor was really more of a balcony circling the perimeter of the space. Stuffed couches and chairs were clustered all over the hardwood floor. It looked more like someone's living room than a café.

"Are you here for the open mic?" said a barista from behind the counter.

"What?." Bella assumed he was talking about some sort of amateur music hour.

"You should check it out," the barista said. Even just to listen."

That was how Bella ended up sitting on an area rug on the second floor balcony near the windows, sipping on the best caramel latte she'd ever had the good fortune to taste. Strangers made room for her to sit next to them, and the whole crowd was silent, with the exception of the person standing at the microphone.

Bella had been expecting shaggy haired boys and dreadlocked women with guitars and bongos, but these people were writers. Poets, actually. One woman looked as though she'd just finished a shift at the bank, wearing a black skirt-suit and heels. Others wore jeans with studded belts, and some of the women had scarves tied in their hair. A few of them had full heads of grey hair and smiles that creased their entire faces. Bella felt stiff amidst so many strangers and started to wonder if she'd made a mistake by following a simple whim.

A man wearing a suede jacket over a t-shirt and jeans stepped up to the mic.

"Let's hear it for Lauren," he said, and the crowd erupted, oblivious to the other coffee shop patrons. "Next up we have a Beanstop virgin! Let's welcome Aaron!"

The crowd responded with even more vigor than before, turning poor Aaron red in the

face before he'd even reached the mic. Bella couldn't help but think that this was something Ducky would have liked. He was always into art events, and was at total ease among strangers.

One night when Ducky was late coming home from work, Bella called his cell phone, only to hear it ring in the other room. She was on the way to his office when she saw him sitting on a bench at a park. He seemed transfixed by a slab-like granite sculpture with a giant-sized handprint in its center.

"Ducky!" she called, crunching through the leftover snow that had frozen.

At the sound of her voice, he looked up. "How do you think they made that?" he said softly. He wasn't wearing his coat.

"I was worried," she said.

"What?" His eyes refocused. "Sorry. I was stopping to get a drink and I got a little distracted." He pointed to the bottle of tea next to him on the bench. He was holding a notebook in which he'd sketched the sculpture in miniature.

It was like that every time they went somewhere artsy. He would hang out in front of a single sculpture or painting at a museum trying to work out the brush strokes, the size of the artist's hands. When Bella worked a Saturday shift at the library, he'd sometimes show up and sit at a table with a stack of books on architecture and artifacts. Because of his artistic bent, she'd always found it strange that he shied away from literature.

She broached the subject one night while in bed with a chenille blanket pulled over her feet. Ducky had been in the living room watching a movie, but it must have finished because she could hear his footfalls as he climbed the stairs. His tall frame shadowed the doorway for a moment before he vaulted over her and onto the bed. Bella shrieked and burrowed into the pillows.

"Beware!" he said, making his voice deep and spooky, "for I am the tickle monster!"

"No!" squeaked Bella, before shielding herself with a pillow. Eventually, she gave in and let the tickling ensue. Afterward, they were both breathless, and Bella's long hair was full of static.

"What are you reading?" He picked up Bella's copy of Sophie's Choice and tried to read it upside down.

"Give me that!" She snatched it away from him and dusted it off, as though he'd tainted it with his touch. "I don't bust your balls for having eight bazillion books on blueprints."

"Who said I was busting your balls? Sheesh!" He sat back against the pillows and feigned innocence.

Bella kissed his temple. "That's okay; I'll be the bigger person. I just don't get how someone with such an intense appreciation for the arts can't appreciate the classics!"

"This is a classic?" Ducky said, picking up the book by one corner of its cover.

"You're hopeless!"

He shrugged. "Literature is too much work. I like to be able to see something and just suck it all in."

Bella tried to summon Ducky's lack of inhibition as she sat in the cafe. The host had stepped back up to the mic.

“Okay, we’re gonna take a five minute smoke break, and then we’ll delve into round two.”

The crowd morphed as some people headed downstairs while others sat oblivious with their notebooks open, pens scratching frenetically at blank pages. A glance at her watch told Bella it was about ten o’clock, and she wondered if Ava would notice her absence. She felt the aural pressure of someone’s eyes on her, and she turned to see a woman with wild, wavy black hair that billowed around her head like a banner. She smiled at Bella.

“First time?” Her deep voice had a husky quality, like the sound of stones in a rock tumbler.

Bella felt her body seize, unsure of how to respond to this unexpected attention. Lately, it surprised her whenever strangers forged conversations with her. This hadn’t been the case, she realized, when Ducky was still alive. She’d had his presence to cling to, but now it struck her as strange that anyone would seek out her alone. She took a deep breath and returned the woman’s smile.

“It’s that obvious?”

The woman smoothed her linen shift with a molasses colored hand. “You had that look.”

“I was just thinking that my boyfriend would have loved this place.” To her irritation,

Bella felt her throat thicken and she had to strain to get the last few words out. Her eyelashes were heavy with water.

“That must’ve been one hell of a breakup,” said the woman, raising her eyebrows.

Bella offered the barest hint of a smile. “It was.”

Fifteen minutes later, Bella was seated across from the woman, whose name she’d learned was Iris. By that point, Iris had cobweb trails of tears on her cheeks. Over a pot of white peach tea, Bella had spilled her entire story without stopping to think about why she’d share such personal things with a total stranger. What surprised her was that it had felt good.

By the time she’d finished talking, she’d stopped crying. She sat back into her chair and picked up her teacup. Iris casually flicked her own tears away with her index finger, the nail of which was painted the color of ripe raspberries. “Well,” she said after a few moments’ silence, “you weren’t kidding about it being one hell of a breakup.”

Bella smiled. “I thought it would be good to get away for awhile, but the truth is, I feel lost sometimes.”

Iris raised an eyebrow. “Sugar, the truth is we’re all lost sometimes, and anyone who told you different has got life confused with something else. If you’re going to pick a place to be lost in though, the Beanstop’s a good one.”

“It’s a trip,” Bella said. “I didn’t realize people did things like this.”

Iris shook her head. “It’s probably a good thing you got lost, then.” She drained the last of her tea. “Do you like bread?”

“The kind that you eat?”

“Is there any other kind?”

Bella laughed. “Yes, I like bread.”

“You should come to my bakery next time you’re free. I’ll feed you the best pumppernickel bread you’ve ever tasted, and you can tell me some more stories.” She wrote down directions on one of the recycled paper napkins at the table. Then she got up to leave.

“It was a pleasure,” she said to Bella. “I hope you stop by.”

“Thank you, Iris.” Bella smiled as the older woman turned to walk away.

“For what?”

“Just thank you.”

She stepped back into the humid night air and wandered back across the street to the Olive Branch.

“I’m almost done,” Ava mouthed as she passed with a tray of drinks.

When she finally emerged from the kitchen, she had traded her skirt and tights for a pair of blue jeans.

“Okay, let’s go before the bartender decides to tag along,” she said, glancing in his direction.

Bella passed the next few days reading the books on Ava’s bookshelf while she was at work. She took long walks through the residential side streets and marveled at the sprawling houses with their astro-turf lawns. Before Ava went to work, the girls would watch ER reruns and sometimes venture downtown to shop at the boutiques.

In the dressing room at a shop called The Fig Leaf, Bella realized that she actually had a sense of style. She’d always chosen clothes that were comfortable and functional, but in the dressing room, Bella had to admit that she was beginning to take more of an interest what she

wore. Clothing, she realized, could be fun.

“What do you think?” she said, stepping out of the dressing room to face Ava.

Ava cocked her head. “Wow.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup. Just wow.”

Three days after she met Iris at the Beanstop, she decided to pay her a visit at the bakery. There was something about the woman’s sassy demeanor that Bella was drawn to. Clad in a pair of new jeans with daisies embroidered down the legs, she was on her way out the door when her phone rang. She flipped the earpiece up to hear the sound of Kieran’s voice.

“Are you busy?”

“I’m on my way out, but I can talk. What’s up?” All she got was a sullen “Nothing” and then some silence.

“Kieran, are you sick?” There was something dull and heavy in his voice, as though he’d swallowed something made of lead. It was out of character, and something jumped in Bella’s chest.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’m glad you’re having fun.”

For the rest of the conversation, Bella kept trying to probe something out of him, but he was remarkably tight lipped. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off kilter.

“Hey Ava?”

Her friend emerged from her bedroom. “What?”

“Have you heard from Kieran lately?”

“No, why?”

Bella opened her mouth, and then shook her head. “No reason. I’m going to the bakery.”

“Bring me back something delicious!”

Bella smiled. “Done!”

Iris’s bakery was called Everything Nice, like in the nursery rhyme. As Bella pushed through the glass door, a small bell tinkled overhead, announcing her arrival. There was no one behind the counter, so she sat on a cushioned wicker chair at one of four glass topped tables. She was surprised by the size of the bakery. Somehow, she’d imagined someplace bigger, more like the Beanstop. Instead, the storefront was tiny, with just enough space for the tables near the front windows. To her left, Bella noticed that one entire wall was a mural depicting a lone woman standing at the edge of a dock, looking out at stormy seas. Bella wondered if the person she was waiting for would ever return.

The sound of footsteps called her attention back to the counter, and Bella saw a teenaged girl emerge from the back room, wiping her hands on her jeans. She smiled at Bella.

“Can I help you?”

“Actually, I’m here to see Iris.”

The girl nodded. “Come on back!” She led Bella around a glass bake case and into the back room, which Bella was surprised to see was something of a cavern. The ceilings were easily fifteen feet high, and the large, open space was filled with long, wooden tables covered in flour. An industrial-sized sink was at the far corner next to a hallway that appeared to lead ever farther back into the building. Iris was behind one of the tables, kneading a mound of tan dough with flour coated hands.

“Well, hey there,” she said when she spotted Bella. “I was hoping you’d stop by.” Her

wild black hair was pulled back with a red scarf. Bella noticed a few pronounced streaks of white that made her look like some sort of mythological goddess.

“This place smells amazing!” Bella said.

“Fresh bread.” Iris nodded toward what looked like an incinerator. “Nothing like it!” As if on cue, a man wearing a spattered black apron lifted the silver door to the incinerator wielding a large wooden paddle. Bella was startled to realize that it was a mammoth oven, with racks that dropped down and rotated in a circle. The man slid the paddle under several freshly cooked loaves of bread and slid them out before closing the oven door.

Iris pulled a stool over to the table. “Come sit.”

“So this is all yours?” Bella said.

“It was in my mother-in-law’s family, but she was never much at cooking. Eventually, she just sold it off to me.”

“Does your husband work here too?”

Iris smiled. “Used to. He died about fifteen years back. We have something in common, you and I.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s an old scar by now. Nothing worth getting bent out of shape about.”

Bella was silent as Iris shaped the dough into a bread pan.

“He was young when he died.” Iris picked up the dropped thread of conversation.

“Probably about the same age as your boy.”

“Sometimes I wished I’d married him,” said Bella, “and sometimes I’m glad I didn’t.”

“Why?” Iris said.

“If we’d been married, then I’d be a real widow.”

Iris laughed, a sound like a puff of smoke. “Honey, it doesn’t take a marriage to make a widow. But I know what you mean.”

13

The afternoon had settled comfortably by the time she returned to Ava’s with half a dozen scones in flavors that ranged from chocolate chip to peach green tea.

“What’d you get me?” Ava sat on the couch watching an ER rerun. She was wearing a pastel pink tank top that matched the sherbet she was eating straight from the carton.

“Scones.”

“Aren’t those some sort of British thing?” Ava wrinkled her nose.

“Trust me,” Bella said, passing the bag to Ava. She went to retrieve Icarus from his cage, draping him around her neck.

“Aw, you’re so cute,” Ava said, stroking the bridge of his nose. “It’s too bad mommy gave you such a weird name.”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, Icarus. It’s not your fault that Auntie Ava’s illiterate.”

Ava smacked her forearm before abandoning her sherbet to bite into a rhubarb scone. Her eyes widened. “Oh man. This is the best thing I’ve had in my mouth since my last boyfriend!”

“Ava!”

“What? It’s good!”

“Chrr...rrr” Icarus nuzzled into Bella’s neck.

“I know, I’m getting you some,” she said, and broke off a piece of a green tea scone. “Iris, the woman who owns the place said she might be able to get me a job.”

Ava swallowed. “Why would you need a job?”

“I was thinking of sticking around for awhile. That is, unless you’re getting sick of me.”

“Sick of you?” Ava lunged at her, wrapping her into a hug that squashed Icarus against her neck, which caused him to chitter loudly in protest. “We haven’t lived in the same city for almost ten years! There’s no way I could get sick of you!”

“Iris knows the guy who owns the coffee shop near the Olive Branch. She said he’ll probably hire me.”

“Damn,” Ava said. “I was hoping you’d be able to bring home more scones!”

“She provides all the baked goods for the Beanstop, so there's hope.”

“Well,” Ava said, “then clearly we need to party.”

By eight o’clock that evening, Ava was slathering lotion onto her skin while Bella tried to arrange her hair in the mirror. She carefully laid out a pair of clingy black pants and the green shimmering top she’d bought at the shop where her mother worked.

Watching her friend dress, Bella wondered when they’d become so different. Ava, in her

pastel yellow dress, seemed so much more polished than Bella, more feminine. Ava had always been the daring one, but the friendship that had always been so comfortably familiar suddenly felt different.

When they were fourteen, the two girls went to hang out at the park with a group of older friends. Two years is the kind of age difference that matters when you're young. That night, Bella could remember talking to a cute boy with dark hair and the feel of the grass on the backs of her calves. Things were pretty mellow until another boy showed up with an L.L. Bean backpack.

"Let's go," said one of girls. Ava grabbed Bella's wrist and they followed the boy with the backpack onto a trail that led a little ways into the woods.

"What are we doing?" she whispered to Ava.

"Shhh." Ava was looking around, her eyes bright and excited. Clearly, she did not share Bella's fear that they might be herded into the woods to commit ritual suicide.

"Okay," said the boy with the backpack, "I've got Jack Daniels, Smirnoff, and Bud Light." His backpack with filled with bottles that had been padded with socks. Bella felt a slow panic start to build beneath her ribs. Ava poked her.

"Do want some?"

"Are you serious?"

“Don’t be such a freshman, Bella.”

“We *are* freshmen.”

Bella followed her, though, as she walked up to the boy with the backpack and handed him four dollars. He gave her two warm bottles.. In hindsight, Bella didn’t know why she’d expected them to be cold. She’d just always thought that her first drink would be like the ones on beer commercials: a frosted bottle with condensation dripping down the sides, and vapor at the mouth when the top gets popped.

“I wonder if anyone has a bottle opener,” she said, holding her drink.

“I don’t think we need one,” Ava said. She glanced around before squeezing the cap and turning. It came off in her hand. Bella opened hers, too, and they took small sips of the citrus-flavored beverage.

Later, when they were walking home, heads afloat and limbs wobbling, Bella asked her how she knew to give the money to the boy who had the drinks. Ava smiled.

“I just watched everyone else go first.”

Now Ava, who drank beer at fourteen, who never blushed or skinned her knees, who never had scaly elbows, stood behind Bella in a dress that made her look like a princess. She looked pure and delicate and Bella felt, for the first time, that she was the one leading the way. She had weathered a storm Ava couldn’t begin to understand, and suddenly, their roles were

reversed.

Bella raised her arms over her head and the rich material of the skinny-strapped tank crept up her torso. She liked the way her stomach peeked out. It made her feel almost sexy, which was something she hadn't felt in ages

"What are you doing?"

Bella turned at the sound of Ava's voice. "Just making sure the new outfit fits okay."

"Well are you almost ready?" she said. With her skin glowing and the delicate fabric draped over her curves and angles, Bella could scarcely recognize herself. She felt brave. It seemed impossible to be more ready than that.

Their shoes clacked hollowly against the blemish-free pavement as they walked down the street. It was beginning to get chillier when the sun went down, but the ocean breeze carried in waves of summer warmth.

Ava's purse started ringing, and she dug around the clutter of its contents until she produced her phone. After a few clipped responses, she snapped it shut.

"Who was that?"

"Just a friend." Ava looked straight ahead.

"What's her name?"

"Actually, it's a he," she said.

Bella smirked. "Ava's got a boyfriend!"

"Oh, who's in sixth grade now?" Ava retorted, and swatted Bella on the arm. "His name is Leo. I met him at the gym—"

"Fabulous," Bella said. "A bodybuilder."

“—and he’s bringing his friend Eric.”

Bella stopped walking. “Ava.”

“I don’t want to hear it! This’ll be good for you.”

Yeah, in that destructive kind of way, Bella thought.

“You’ve already crossed that line with Austin, anyway.”

“That was different,” Bella said, grasping at any straws that might shelter her from what Ava was suggesting, “because he knew me and—”

“Bella, it’s just drinks!”

“I hate the name Eric,” she lied.

“So call him something else,” Ava said. “Let’s go.”

Bella wanted her old, long hair to hide behind. She wanted her jeans that were two sizes too big, and she wanted to cover herself with a blanket and nuzzle Icarus into her neck like a scarf. Instead, she kept walking with Ava, toward a bar she’d never been to, to meet boys she’d never seen.

Two drinks later, Bella decided that Eric was bland, but nice. Sort of cute, too, in the way blond guys with good teeth are cute. She was proud of herself for sitting at the bar and nibbling on mozzarella sticks, sipping a beer—basically doing a good job of pretending that she was a well-adjusted human being. Ava, who was always so poised, was pink cheeked and tongue tied around Leo, who had fierce blue eyes and brown hair. Watching them proved to be far more entertaining than talking to Eric. Then, her Ken-doll companion startled her by putting his hand on her forearm.

“Do you want to step out for a minute?”

Bella looked at his expensive jeans and blue polo shirt, at his white teeth and sculpted biceps. She wanted to tell him that it was a mistake. She was a mistake. She usually never wore makeup and never normally flashed this much cleavage. She wanted to tell him that she was a lie that night.

Instead, Bella swallowed the excuses building behind her lips and followed him out of the bar. He offered her a cigarette before lighting his own. She didn't smoke, but took one anyway, the feel of paper foreign between her lips. She thought of Ducky then, and the way the cigarette smoke had wreathed his head the first time they'd met.

"So I think your friend likes my friend," he said.

She used every muscle in her chest to keep the cough from breaching her lips. "He'd better be a nice guy."

Eric laughed. "He is. An all-American boy, that one."

Bella couldn't decide if that description was comforting. She felt that she should have been making small talk, asking questions, feigning interest in Eric's life, but it all seemed like such a waste of energy.

When they slid back into their seats, next to pink-cheeked Ava and all-American Leo, the room seemed too warm. Bella suddenly felt like everything was moving underwater and tried to remember what normal behavior was like. She took a sip of her drink, a bite of a nacho, chewed, and repeated. Her sense of orientation had deserted her and her chest felt tight. She momentarily considered the possibility that she was having a stroke before she excused herself to the bathroom, navigating narrow hallways and bursting into a stall. Her stomach convulsed again and again as she emptied its entire contents into the toilet. A small voice began to whisper

to her.

Faker.

Cheater. Who do you think you are?

When you take off these clothes and this makeup, there won't be anything left.

No, Bella thought. Nononononono. She started to feel as if she couldn't spread her lungs wide enough to get any air. Her hands curled in against her wrists, paralyzed and useless. She tried to pry her fingers apart with her teeth. Her arms were ringing with the needle-pricks of numbness and her tongue thickened in her mouth.

She was going die on the filth of a bathroom floor in a seedy Rhode Island bar. The irony was heartbreaking. Black dots began to obscure her vision. Snippets of memories flashed at her like the shaky projection of an old fashioned movie. Her father in a grey woolen vest, his hair not yet streaked with grey. Her grandmother standing barefoot at the stove while an arid summer breeze crossed through the kitchen on the way to the bedroom, where her mother lay napping.

She could see Ducky, his face and bones the way she remembered him before they put him in the ground. His wake had been at a convention center in a motel because Ducky's parents hadn't wanted it to be depressing. Bella spent that whole morning decorating, with streamers and balloons, as though it were a party. She cried in waves, set off by the sight of an old photograph or his black fedora hat. Ducky's mother, Sara, draped a piece of canvas across a

table. Next to it was a wicker basket of colorful Sharpie markers.

“To sign,” Sara explained. “Then, we can put it in the casket.”

The casket. Bella had gone with his parents to pick out the box in which her boyfriend's body would be buried, beneath six feet soil and earthworms. To say the experience had been surreal would be an understatement. She couldn't fathom packing Ducky away, like a package to be mailed overseas. Standing with his parents in the funeral parlor lobby, all carpeted in red, she'd felt the bizarre urge slip past them and find the morgue. She'd wanted to find Ducky's cold body and shake his shoulders, wake him up. She could almost imagine how his skin would feel beneath her fingertips.

Instead, the undertaker led them into a room with cross-sectioned coffins displayed in such volume that it was difficult to walk around. The metal ones all looked like bank safes up close. Bella couldn't picture locking Ducky's body into one of those. In the end, they'd agreed on a simple pine box with silvery handles.

On the day of the wake, a hearse from the funeral home arrived while they were still setting up the room. Bella had been so focused on details she'd forgotten that the funeral home would have to transport the body. She began to panic, crying harder and unable to articulate what was wrong. I'm not ready, she thought. I'm not ready yet.

It mattered very little whether Bella was ready to see her dead boyfriend's body because the undertaker and his associates didn't ask. They simply maneuvered the casket onto a metal contraption that was draped with cloth. Bella closed her eyes, picturing Ducky's body beneath the wooden panels. When they snapped open the locks, the tension built in her chest, like the moment before the cylinder of crescent rolls pops, and oozes white goo all over your fingers.

He looked sort of the same. All the fundamentals were there: black hair, nicely arched eyebrows, and thick lips. He was deflated, though. The shirt she had picked out, blue with a Celtic knot embroidered over the stomach, hung more loosely than she remembered. There was makeup creased across his eyelids, at his neck, and she wondered what color his skin was underneath. It was not how she remembered him.

On the bathroom floor now, Bella struggled for breath. This can't be what it's like to die, she thought. She closed her eyes. Remembered. Ducky had Morton's foot, when the second toe was longer than the big toe. Her heart continued beating. His wrists ribbed with muscle, too wide for her to wrap her fingers around. Her chest unlocked, and she felt her lungs inflate. She opened her eyes. Ducky's legs in ripped jeans. Her lungs burned with the memory of the car wreck smell. It seemed like a long time before her muscles did as they were told. Her hands unfurled, and shook from the strain of being pulled so taut and she slumped against the painted metal wall of the bathroom stall wondering what the hell had just happened.

Once her legs were strong enough to stand on, she surveyed the damage in the spotty reflection of the grimy bathroom mirror. She swished a mouthful of tap water before spitting it into the sink. Her face was a few shades paler, but after dabbing at her eye makeup, she looked passable.

"Did you fall asleep?" said Ava, as she slithered back into her seat.

“No, smartass,” Bella smiled as convincingly as the circumstances allowed. “My mom called.” She hoped Ava wouldn’t draw attention to the fact that she’d left her bag at the table.

“It’s last call, so we should probably get going,” said Eric. Leo was holding Ava’s hand under the table, and Bella wondered if he’d be coming home with them.

Once the tab was settled, they went through all the niceties of saying good-night. Bella permitted a kiss on the cheek from Eric and sent a text message to Kieran while Ava bid adieu to Leo. Then, Ava grabbed her arm and wandered down the street in the direction of the apartment. When they’d made it past a few storefronts, she turned around to check that they were out of earshot.

“So?” she said.

“He’s a good one,” Bella replied, “and he seems to be smitten with you. I thought we’d be taking him home tonight.”

“Bella!” she said, whacking her friend with her purse. “What do you think I am? I barely know the guy!”

“That can change.”

“Yeah, but not overnight,” she said. “So what’d you think of Eric? Too soon?”

“He seems sweet, but not my type,” Bella said. “And yes, definitely too soon.”

“I kind of knew that. I just thought it might be good to chill with another guy for a little while.”

“It was fun,” she said. She considered telling Ava about her freak-out in the bathroom, but didn’t. Bella kept thinking about how worried her friend had been after the accident, her puffy eyes streaked with makeup, her smile forced and fake.

14

By the time they walked back to Ava's apartment, Bella's legs felt like Slinkies, and all she could focus on was the quickest way into bed. A ruckus came from Icarus, who'd fallen out of his hammock.

"Oh, silly goose," Bella said, and picked him up. She stroked his light colored fur, feeling his bones beneath his fuzzy skin. Suddenly, she felt inexplicably sad.

"I think I might be losing it," she whispered to Icarus, her throat taut with the tears that were falling onto his fur. She felt scared for the part of her that was still breathless in the bathroom stall in the bar downtown.

In college, Bella had auditioned for chorus during her senior year. It was September in the way it is at the ocean, the air chilly, but not smelling of fermenting leaves the way it does in New Hampshire. When she got to the concert hall, she was overwhelmed to see slender, dark

haired girls and boys with blond highlights lined up in throngs. They were clutching folders to their chests, and popping lozenges into their mouths. When Bella finally found herself at the front of the line, she walked onto the black painted stage to face the panel of faculty members and section leaders.

A man with a gray beard and a newsboy hat spoke first. “Welcome—” he glanced at his notepad, “Bella. Why don’t you hand your music to the accompanist?”

Music? Was that what was in those folders the girls were clutching to their 32AA sized breasts?

“I actually, um, don’t have sheet music,” she said. Great, she thought, now I sound like an idiot. She felt continents away from the sophisticated girls waiting in the lobby. The panel of professors and students exchanged looks of disdain. In retrospect, Bella thought that was the point where she should have thanked them and walked out.

After butchering several major scales and a sight-reading test, she slunk back to her apartment, curled up on the puffy velour couch and poured herself a shot. That was at two o’clock in the afternoon. By the time Ducky arrived that night, Bella was teary eyed and belligerent, sprawled pitifully across her bed. At the time, she was in no state to appreciate his patience, but it was nonetheless astounding. She was bitter, bitchy, and red-nosed. She was flinging verbal abuse, and he just took it. He didn’t say much, just let her be.

In her makeshift room at Ava's, Bella wondered if she'd always been this screwed up. Panic attacks, one-night stands; was Ducky's death just a convenient excuse for her not to try so hard? The thoughts formed a kaleidoscope in her mind while she hugged a pillow to her chest and tried to sleep. Eventually, the colors blurred and faded to black.

She woke up earlier than she expected to. The kitchen clock said it was nine. She tried not to think of the way she'd buckled onto the floor last night, like a wet ragdoll. She felt a hot, sharp flash of anger. Seething with frustration, she pulled a crumpled pair of shorts and a tank top from her duffel bag. She laced up her yellow running shoes and walked out the door.

The air was ripe with the first autumnal hints of September. Bella closed her eyes and remembered how this time of year used to be cross country season. She supposed it still was, for all the athletes at high schools and colleges. It baffled her that something so integral to her former self had become so foreign over the years. She bounced a few times on the toes of her sneakers, as if to test her legs and make sure they were still up for the task.

As she ran down the smooth concrete that lead her away from the comfort of Ava's apartment, Bella felt her muscles really work for the first time in what felt like ages. As her body sweated the toxins out of her system, Bella purged her mind of its own poisons: all the doubts, the demeaning names, and the limitations that had been seeping into her like a slow-drip IV. The first smoldering coals of a fire began to burn in her lungs. As she passed storefronts, apartment buildings, and finally, houses, she remembered when she used to thrive on that kind of fire.

During her senior year at college Bella was the cross country team's fastest runner, clocking a personal record of 19:04 for the 5k. Granted, she wasn't as fast as some of the DII girls, but she was satisfied. She was a senior, she had a great team behind her, and she was the best. Nonetheless, when her coach had asked her to keep up with Legs at the DIII regional, she'd been a little intimidated.

She sat on the grass where she was lacing up her trail flats and glared at him. Legs was the number one on their rival school's team. Unlike Bella, she was built like a gazelle, with protruding hipbones, toned arms, and a bottom half that had spawned her nickname.

"Are you crazy?" Bella hissed, standing up to face her coach, who was a good head taller than her. "She's a freakin' robot! I can't beat her!"

"I didn't say you had to beat her, although I like that idea better." Her coach tapped his clipboard against his chin. "Suck it up, Rapunzel," he said, and tugged one of her waist-length blond braids. Bella kicked up a chunk of the shiny green lawn, but that didn't make her feel any better. She set off for a quick warm-up run, her mind filled with all the injuries she wished upon the long-legged android. A torn Achilles tendon would be nice.

When she returned to the home base her team had set up against a tree, she was no longer seething, but she was nervous, and she didn't like it. She was zipping up her blue and white windbreaker when a teammate called out to her. "Bella, I have something for you."

She turned around to see Ducky, wearing the same beat up suede jacket he'd been wearing when they met, and the vintage black fedora that would come to be so familiar. Afloat

in a sea of wind pants, sweatshirts and baseball caps, he looked ridiculous. And wonderful.

Bella emitted something that could only be described as a squeak, and threw her arms around his neck.

“I can’t believe you’re here!”

He smiled. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“But how did you—”

“It doesn’t take an engineer to decipher a cross country schedule.”

Bella smiled at his smartass remark. “My coach is being so ridiculous.” Bella spit out the entire story while she sat on the grass next to Ducky. “And I’m so nervous I think I’m going to puke,” she finished.

“Want me to hold your hair out of the way?” He was pokerfaced.

“I cannot *believe* that’s all you have to say!” His nonchalance was one of the first hints that this one was going to be a keeper. Only the people who knew her best were smart enough to dispense with canned reassurances when Bella got worked up over cross country.

At the starting line, she stepped into the one spot, right on the thick chalk starting line. She felt fingers squeeze her wrist and turned to smile at the teammate behind her. This was the meet that would determine whether they continued to compete or whether their season ended at the finish line. In a way, she was their leader, but staring down the field, she’d never felt more like a freshman. To her left, she caught sight of a bobbing black hat. It was Ducky, weaving his way toward the front of the crowd with fluid, panther movements. She smiled.

“Let’s bring it, ladies,” she yelled over her shoulder. Her teammates hooted and they all pulled together in a giant group hug. The official raised his empty hand, then the one with the

starter pistol. Bella tensed like an old-fashioned mousetrap, ready to snap at the sound of the gun. When the firecracker pop finally pierced the hush of the crowd, Bella began to push through the wall of nylon uniforms. The ground vibrated beneath her and she could hear the dull thuds of so many feet hitting the ground like horse hooves. As she sucked in air that smelled like twenty different kinds of shampoo, Bella heard Ducky's voice.

"Come, on Bella! Balls to the wall!"

She would have laughed if she'd had the breath, but instead, she stared ahead, not sparing so much as a glance in his direction. She was a heat-seeking missile, and her target was the pair of giraffe-like legs that pumped beneath green nylon shorts. The damp, warm limbs of her opponents crushed in on her from all sides. She fought her way to the edge of the pack and began to pass people. She could see Legs' green nylon uniform bobbing in the distance. She held back, waiting for the pack to thin, keeping her quarry in site.

By the time she hit the first mile marker, she had more room to move, and had slipped into a powerful stride that had her muscles burning. The open starting field had given way to a heavily wooded trail, where the sun glinted in slats through the needles of the evergreens. Bella's mouth was gummy, and she spit onto the needle-covered dirt. On the next hill, she passed five girls, whose long legs weren't as well suited to gritty work of uphill climbs as her own.

"Thirteen-oh-eight!" An official with a stopwatch called out the splits for the second mile as Bella passed the marker. Droplets of sweat were slipping down her back, between her sports bra and her skin, and her face felt fiery. This was her opportunity, waiting to be taken or passed over. She was running out of time to step it up, and Legs' green uniform taunted her like

the sprouting top of a distant dangling carrot. She'd just picked up her pace when a catcall pierced her concentration.

"Come on, Bella!" Ducky yelled through the megaphone of his cupped hands, his hat pinned to his side beneath his elbow. His voice was a salve to all the parts of her that ached and she felt renewed. She counted her steps, trying to make three of them for each breath she took.

By the last half mile, Bella felt like she was flying and her body had purged its pain. Legs was less than twenty yards ahead of her, and she pumped her legs faster, beginning her final push toward the finish line. As they headed back toward the field, she heard the crescendo of the cheering crowd. Ten yards. The grass was slippery under her racing flats, but she was moving so fast that her feet hardly hit the ground, anyway. Five yards. With the finish line in clear sight, Bella pulled ahead of Legs, close enough to hear the other girl's heaving breaths.

Her coach yelled from the sidelines. She caught a blurry image of him holding his stopwatch as she crossed the chalked off line and was shuttled into the finish chute. While other runners were herded into the queue behind her, a volunteer handed over a popsicle stick with the number 12 on it. She was the twelfth best DIII runner in the state of Maine. She laughed, even though her legs felt about as supportive as a pair feather pillows. Another volunteer placed a heavy medal around her neck as she spilled out of the chute and into a crowd of people. Her feather-pillow legs threatened to give beneath her weight as she scanned the crowd for her coach, even though she knew he'd still be calling splits for her teammates. She pressed her palm to her forehead and summoned her last reserves of strength to push through the crowd. Then, she was being lifted from behind, and spun crazily around.

"Eighteen fifty-eight!" Ducky yelled as he put her down.

“What?” Bella wobbled, but he had her firmly gripped against him.

“Your time! *And* you beat that chick! Dude, I though your coach was gonna bust a—“

“Wait, what?” Bella had been trying to break nineteen minutes all season and had just gotten comfortable with the fact that it wasn’t in the cards. She shrieked, her legs suddenly feeling strong enough to support her again. She couldn’t feel the burning in her lungs or the way her sweaty singlet was laminated to her back. There was only the pure, sweet bliss of finally getting what she wanted.

Back in Rhode Island, Bella was very much aware of how she felt as her feet pounded the smooth concrete; bliss was not the first word that came to mind. Her quads felt as though they were two sizes too small and she was pretty sure someone had sneakily filled her lungs with dry ice. As she passed a large Cape-style house with an immaculately manicured lawn, she considered walking, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to do it. She was tougher than that. She had to be. She pumped her legs harder until Ava’s building came into distant sight. Then she broke out into a full sprint. Her feet felt like horse hooves as they came down on the pavement, and the only sound she could hear was the blood pulsing in her ears. When she reached her destination, she stopped with a gasp. Her short hair was plastered to her head with sweat and her face felt hot. She had a cramp in her side and the beginning of a nasty case of shin splints. As she pulled the screen door open, she thought she’d never felt better.

Under the warm shower spray, she let her spastic muscles relax. She knew they'd feel as though someone had torn them apart later, but it would be worth it. As she toweled off, she decided to go see Iris about a job.

The bakery smelled delicious, like spice and yeast. Iris was stamping sheets of dough into shapes that were later to become doughnuts. Bella sat on the stool next to the long, wooden table she'd learned was called a bench.

"I've been holding everything together so well and now I feel like I'm falling apart at the seams." She'd just finished telling Iris about her incident at the bar.

"For heaven's sake, you sound like a Lifetime movie," Iris said, and handed her a spoon. "Now, make yourself useful and stir."

Bella took the spoon and began to work at the custard-like substance in the metal mixing bowl in front of her. "I feel like I'm backpedaling."

Iris put a hand on her hip. "How long has this boy of yours been dead?"

Bella winced at the word "dead." "Five months and twenty-two days."

Iris shook her head. "I was still struggling to get out of bed at five months."

Bella continued to stir the custard and said nothing.

"Nothing's going to make this easier for you," Iris said. "You're just going to have to make friends with the pain for awhile."

Bella nodded. "I hate it, though."

Iris let out a full-belly laugh. "Of course you do!"

Bella stirred in silence, then suddenly remembered why she'd come in the first place. "I was thinking I might take you up on that job offer."

Iris tilted her head. “That’s something I *can* help with.” Within moments, she’d arranged for Bella to meet Jack, the owner of the Beanstop.

“Your interview’s in fifteen minutes,” Iris said. “You’d better get gone.”

Bella raised her eyebrows. “Fifteen minutes?”

“Don’t start!” Iris waved a goopy wooden spoon at her.

Bella laughed. “Point taken. Thanks. For the interview, I mean.”

Iris waved her off. “I’d take you myself if I could afford a new hire.”

As Bella left Everything Nice, it occurred to her that she was nervous about her interview. It felt good to be nervous about something, even if it was only an interview for a minimum wage coffee-slinging job.

At the Beanstop, Bella took in the scent of hardwood and coffee beans. People filled the mismatched easy chairs as they sipped from oversized mugs. Although the shop was full, there was no line when Bella approached the counter. A man with light brown hair and a towel tucked into his belt leaned against the counter. After a moment, Bella recognized him as the host of the poetry open mic.

“I’m here to see Jack,” she said.

Within moments, she was sitting at a secluded table with a man who had close-cropped silver hair and mischievous blue eyes that offered a glimpse of what he must have looked like as a boy.

“Iris is a lifesaver,” he said. “Without her, our menu would be far less enticing.”

Bella was surprised at the ease with which she and Jack conversed. She’d been expecting a formal interview. Granted, this was not the most prestigious job she’d ever applied for, but

she'd been speaking with Jack for ten minutes and they hadn't once talked shop. As if sensing her thoughts, Jack shifted topics.

"So what's your availability, Bella?"

She smiled. "My schedule is wide open."

"Well, we have a few shifts open, and we definitely need someone to cover Thursday nights so Nathan can host the hoot."

"The what?" Bella furrowed her brow.

Jack laughed, leaning back in his chair. "The open mics."

"Sorry." She blushed. "I'm not used to the lingo."

"You'll love it," Jack said. "It's a whole little subculture."

As she left the shop with a latte, Bella whipped out her phone. A glance at her watch revealed that Ava was already at work, so she speed dialed Kieran instead.

"I have news!" Bella said.

"Bell?" Kieran's voice sounded rusty.

"Are you okay? You sound sick."

"I was asleep."

"Why aren't you at work?"

"System's down."

Bella bit her lip. Something didn't quite add up, but she couldn't imagine why Kieran would lie about something so trivial. If he'd lost his job, there would be no reason not to tell her.

"Well, an extra day off is always good," she said. "Speaking of which, I just got hired to work at a coffee shop."

“I didn’t realize you needed a job.”

“I don’t, really.” His lack of enthusiasm was irritating her. Why couldn’t he be supportive? “It’s nice to feel like I’m doing more than treading water, though.”

“Oh.”

If she’d been expecting kudos, she was sadly disappointed. She snapped her phone shut, infuriated.

In the shelter of Ava's apartment, she threw her bag across the floor and kicked the metal leg of the futon, waking up Icarus, who squeaked indignantly.

“Sorry,” she said to him.

“Chrrr.rrr.”

She unlatched Icarus’s cage door and wrapped him around her neck. She closed her eyes, soothed by the vibrations of his chitters against her shoulders.

"He's supposed to be looking out for me," she said quietly to the ferret.

What she wanted to do was pull the blanket over her head and sleep the world away. Instead, she put Icarus back in his cage and changed her clothes. She slipped on some socks and laced up her running shoes.

Bella’s muscles were tight, still recuperating from the shock of her renewed physical exertions. It took her almost a mile to loosen up, but eventually she settled into a comfortable gait that warmed her limbs and her lungs against the early autumn chill. Each time one of her feet struck the concrete, she felt a little less angry. The air tasted like foliage and ocean. She thought of the coffee shop, with its honey-varnished wood and plush furniture. I’ll enjoy it there, she thought, discovering that ultimately, she cared very little what Kieran’s opinion was.

15

The first year she'd been dating Ducky, Kieran had felt left out. He'd brooded like a five-year-old when Ducky started staying at Bella's apartment instead of his. At first, Bella hadn't understood. She saw something unnatural in Kieran's possessiveness. She herself had never had any similar issues with Ava. It wasn't until the night of a beach house barbecue that Bella began to understand the subtleties of loyalty that comes with friendships between boys who grow up together.

They'd arrived together, the three of them. Kieran had taken his jeep, and Bella had ridden in the back seat. Ducky held her hand through the space between the seat and the door while he and Kieran talked about Quentin Tarantino movies.

"*Pulp Fiction*, obviously," Kieran said from behind the steering wheel.

"I don't know," Ducky said. "I think people just naturally gravitate toward that one because it's so main-stream."

"Well, what's your pick, Gene Siskel? *From Dusk Til Dawn*?"

Ducky propped a sandal clad foot against the dashboard. "Nah, man. *True Romance*."

At the party, Bella sat on the back porch with a girl from her cross-country team. A

group had formed around a voluptuous sophomore who'd just gotten her nipples pierced. Bella had shuddered at the sight, although she admired the girl's bravery. Down on the beach, a volleyball game had formed on a stretch of sand, but Ducky and Kieran were in the ocean, up to their knees. They were throwing a football, which kept getting intercepted by a well-intentioned golden retriever who wanted in on the game.

From the porch, Bella felt as if she were watching a movie with the sound turned off. She didn't need to hear them to see how well-rehearsed their interactions were. As she watched Ducky's face crinkle into a smile, she realized she hadn't seen this side of him before. Kieran was very much a guy's guy, that much had always been clear, but Bella had always thought that Ducky was too artistic for that. Watching him grip the football in one hand, his shoulders bunching into muscle, she realized that Ducky's character was more a matter of choice and less one of predestination.

The ride home the next morning was relatively quiet, with Ducky asleep in the passenger seat. After half an hour of silence, Kieran slipped a CD into the stereo and began to sing along with *Someone to Love* by Queen. Bella wasn't sure what surprised her more, Kieran's choice in music or the fact that he was good. Really good.

"I didn't know you were a rock star."

Kieran looked back at her in the rearview mirror. "I have my secrets."

Bella shook her head. "I would kill to sing like that."

"As long as you don't kill me!"

"Seriously." Bella kicked his shoulder with her bare foot. "Why aren't you in a band or something?"

“I prefer to be a closet rock star.”

“You know,” Bella said, “you could be the next Bowie. You could just grow your hair a little bit—”

“And have a torrid love affair with a brooding pop icon?”

Bella smiled. “Now you’re getting the idea.”

Over the years, the depth of her friendship with Kieran at times surprised even Bella. Now, with Ducky gone, he was her greatest source of strength. Regardless, she thought, as she ran the final stretch to Ava’s apartment, feet thumping their final drum roll against the pavement, I’ll be damned if he’s going to bring me down when I’m just started to come up for air.

When Bella reported to the Beanstop for her first day of work, there was a fifteen person line snaking out from the counter. For a moment, she questioned taking the job. After all, she was a librarian. If there was a line in the library, it was a quiet line at least. Here, there was the insect like hum of people talking in a large space.

“Is Jack here?” she said to a woman with a vine tattooed around her left bicep.

“He doesn’t work nights.”

“I’m supposed to start here tonight.”

The woman nodded. “You’ll be training with me. Come on back.”

She brought Bella behind the counter and into a room that looked like a miniature version

of Iris's bakery.

"I'm Mina," the woman said, "and that," she nodded in the direction of a guy wearing a stained apron and assembling some sort of elaborate sandwich, "is Sy."

"I'm Bella."

"You've got that little girl, big city look, Bella"

Bella learned that Mina owned a tattoo parlor with her husband, and had been working at the Beanstop, in some capacity, since she'd graduated from college fourteen years earlier. She didn't really need the money anymore, but Jack had become a friend, and she liked the job.

A guy with floppy hair and tight jeans darted into the room with a handful of dishes, which he slid into the industrial-sized sink toward the back of the room. Then he pivoted gracefully and finally came to rest in front of a six pot coffee maker. Like a magician doing a trick, he lined up five cups of various sizes and waited for the pots to finish brewing. He bobbed his head in time to nonexistent music.

"That," Mina said, following Bella's incredulous stare, "is Danny. He's a college kid, and has more kinetic energy than the rest of us combined."

"You don't say," Bella said, as Danny breezed past them, miraculously carrying all five cups of coffee.

"Don't worry," Mina said. "You'll be fine. Let's start you on dishes, because that's the easiest. Once we're done with dinner rush, and the poetry crowd gets settled, I'll have more time to show you the ropes."

Of course. Bella had forgotten that it was Thursday.

Three hours later, Bella's hands were shriveled into claws from the soapy dishwater. The

chunks of steel wool she'd used on the pots and pans had left her fingers raw. When Mina appeared at her shoulder, she was relieved.

"I'm going to train you on cash," she said. "That's usually the hardest."

Not compared to organizing the Dewey Decimal System, Bella thought as she learned which items had corresponding buttons and which she'd have to enter in by hand. Then, Mina sent her to clear over by the poetry crowd. Bella slipped from behind the counter and climbed the spiral staircase that lead to the second floor. She smiled at Danny as he sped past her.

Nathan, the guy who'd been behind the counter when she'd come to ask about the job, was on the mic, introducing the next reader. He was the assistant manager and Mina said he'd been there just as long as she had.

As Bella gathered people's crumpled napkins and dirty glassware, a girl walked up to the mic. She couldn't have been more than sixteen, Bella thought, but when she opened her mouth, a story spilled out that transcended the confines of age. Bella stopped clearing, spellbound by the words. She'd always thought of poetry as being a quiet art form, but this girl was sassy and strong, and her words were surprisingly evocative.

By midnight, the last of the customers had left. Bella was scrubbing down the sink in the back room while the others worked around her.

"Well, now, I could use a drink!" Bella looked up to see Nathan, who had seated himself on the counter that Mina was trying to clean. His brown hair looked to be the texture of puppy fur and his features were strong. For the first time, Bella noticed that he spoke with a hint of a southern accent.

"Move it, Slick," Mina said, "or I'll hose you down."

“Promise?” he said, standing.

Mina rolled her eyes and snapped her rag at his hip.

“So who’s our new Cinderella?” Nathan said, staring at Bella, who was elbow deep in the sink.

“You’re a grownup,” Mina said. “Go introduce yourself.”

As he approached her, Bella noticed that Nathan’s eyes were an unusual shade of grey. They were luminous in a way that made them look silver.

“Hey there, Cinderella,” he said. “I’m Nathan. I run the show when Jack’s not around.”

“Bella,” she said, extending her arm to shake his hand. “Sorry for the dishpan hands.”

Instead of shaking her hand, Nathan brought it to his lips, all the time keeping his eyes trained on her face. Then, a towel hit him in the back.

“Danny!”

Danny shook his head vehemently, pointing at Sy. Sy rolled his eyes.

“Quit chatting up the help, Nathan,” Mina said. “I want to get out of here before the breakfast rush.”

Once they’d locked up for the night, Bella found herself outside with her four new co-workers. Although she had very little to contribute to the conversation, she was content just to soak it in.

“Let’s move this to The Boxcar before we get arrested for loitering,” Sy said.

“You just want a beer!” said Mina.

“Isn’t it past Danny’s bedtime?” Nathan raised his eyebrows. Danny flipped him off.

“Our boy just turned twenty-two the other day,” Sy said.

“Oh, well then! You’re about ready for the old folks’ home,” Nathan said to his younger co-worker.

“Is it nice there?” Danny said. “I figured you would know.”

Nathan smiled. “Didn’t someone say something about a bar?”

Bella was surprised to discover that The Boxcar was just that: a remodeled train car nestled snugly between two buildings. The bar was set up at one end of the car and three rows of narrow wooden booths filled the rest of the space. Bella found herself sandwiched between Sy and Danny when a waiter in a pair of ripped jean shorts slammed a pitcher of beer onto the table. Nathan poured the frothy beverage into pint glasses and passed them around.

“So we got a firecracker at open mic tonight,” Nathan said, swiping at the foam on his upper lip.

“Someone new?” Mina said.

Nathan nodded. “Name’s Holly. She wrote a pretty potent piece.”

“Wait, what’s her name?” Danny perked up.

“Hold your horses, cowboy, she’s fourteen.”

“Oh. Buzz kill.” Danny resumed his conversation with Sy.

“I think I saw her,” Bella said. “I was clearing when she read.”

“She was something else, huh?” Nathan said. “Wish I’d had that kind of talent at that age.”

Bella took a sip of her beer. “What’s open mic about, anyway? I’ve only seen the one here a couple of times, but I always thought it was a music thing.”

“Jesus Christ, here we go!” said Sy, leaning back against the booth.

Mina patted Nathan's arm. "Our fearless leader is mildly obsessed with the spoken word."

"That's not the way I'd put it, but—"

"Are you all finished?" Nathan cut off Sy. "Because I believe Cinderella asked me a question."

"Oh, Nathan, you know we're just teasing," Mina said.

"Anyway," he turned to Bella. "Open mic is about community. It gives writers the freedom to express themselves in a non-judgmental environment."

Bella smiled. "You sound like a hippie."

Nathan shook his head. "Haven't you ever heard of Kerouac? Ginsberg?"

"Of course," Bella said. "I'm a librarian."

"Then you have no excuse for being this ignorant." Nathan took another swig of his beer. "Clearly, we'll need to educate you."

"Don't let him convert you, Bella," Sy said, elbowing her playfully in the ribs.

Bella smiled as she drained her pint glass, but her mind kept replaying the performance of Holly, who'd delivered her poem with such power.

When she got home, the digital clock on the microwave glowed 1:37, and Icarus chattered furiously from his cage.

"Let me get my shoes off first, sheesh!" In her makeshift bedroom she scooped up the disgruntled ferret, who immediately burrowed into her neck.

"I kind of like the new job," she told him. "It almost feels normal, to be here working. Maybe we really can stay awhile."

“Chrrr...rrrr.”

“I know,” she said. “You’re hungry. And I’m tired, so let’s go to bed.”

Settled beneath the futon covers, Bella knew it wouldn’t take her long to drift off.

Gradually, though, her ears began to pick up a steady disturbance coming from Ava’s room. She rolled onto her pillow to muffle her laughter. It sounded like Ava had a successful night, too.

16

The next morning, she literally ran into Leo, as she emerged from the shower wrapped in a towel. She’d almost forgotten about Ava’s anonymous male companion. Well, not so anonymous anymore.

“Oh—god, sorry.” He picked up the bottle of cucumber scented lotion he’d knocked out of her hands. She stifled her laughter until she could retreat to her alcove to change.

When she emerged minutes later, clad in a knee-length black skirt, Leo was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking water from an oversized mug.

Bella smiled. “I’m making coffee, if you want some caffeine with that.”

He turned with a start, as though surprised to see her there. “Sure. Hey, I’m sorry about almost mowing you down before. I didn’t realize you were home.”

“No big deal.” She scooped the grounds into the filter and set the coffee on to brew. The silence between them was thick and tense. Bella felt like an awkward junior high school student.

“Look, this is ridiculous,” she said. “You’re sleeping with Ava, not executing war orphans. You don’t have to look so sheepish!”

Leo’s laugh was low and rich. “Here I was thinking you were the timid one.”

“Well, I have to be at work soon,” Bella said. “I don’t have time for any bullshit.”

“Point taken.”

“I’m glad the two of you hit it off. Ava deserves a good man in her life.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Bella smiled. “I generally mind my own business, but Ava’s the closest thing to a sister I’ve ever had. Be good to her.”

Leo laced his fingers behind his head, a lazy smile drooping across his face. “I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

As she fished her car keys out of her bag, she smiled. She wondered if Ava had ever had a conversation with Ducky similar to the one she’d had with Leo.

When they moved into the apartment at Elmira’s house, Bella and Ducky had rented a U-Haul. Kieran drove Ducky’s car, which was packed brimful. Bella’s Crown Victoria was similarly gorged.

As she followed Kieran, who was following the U-Haul, she couldn't help but think that they looked, fittingly, like a row of ducklings. She had just slid a CD into the stereo when she noticed that Ducky and Kieran were no longer in front of her. Ducky had maneuvered the U-Haul into the next lane. As soon as Bella managed to position herself behind the two lead vehicles, Ducky migrated into the next lane over.

What the hell is he doing, she thought. After several more lane changes, it became apparent to Bella that she'd become involved in some warped version of follow the leader. She imagined the smirk on Ducky's face as he watched the two vehicles behind him struggle to keep up.

After she almost sideswiped a Range Rover, Bella got angry, and pulled into the far right lane, where she intended to stay.

Bella pulled up to Elmira's house in the late afternoon. The boys had already started to unload the furniture.

"Hi, Bel," Ducky said. "What took you so long?"

"What the fuck were you thinking?" She shoved him, palms flat against his chest. He stumbled backward, laughing.

"Relax, we were just having fun. It was a long drive, I was getting bored."

"I'm glad you think it's funny that I almost crashed my fucking car!" Bella rolled her eyes, arms crossed tightly. "I can't believe I have to live with you." She grabbed a duffel bag off the front seat and slammed the car door. Stalking past both boys, she climbed the stairs to the new apartment.

She dropped her bag in what would become the bedroom. She tried to keep her breathing

even as she walked through each empty room, imagining what it would look like when they'd unpacked. The sound of footsteps on the bare floor made her turn around. Ducky stood in the living room, his shoulders slumped. He moved toward her tentatively, as though afraid she might attack.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know you almost crashed."

She felt the slightest release of her muscles. The venom of her anger had retreated. "Is everything a stupid game to you?"

"No." He lifted her off her feet in a crushing hug. "You and me, that's not a game."

"I hope not."

"Bella," he said, "I would never do anything that I thought would hurt you. I'm sorry."

Unpacking proved to be more work than they'd anticipated. Bella was shocked to look up and see that it was dark out. Ducky went out to forage for pizza while Kieran helped her set up the kitchen.

"He really loves you, you know."

Bella paused her sorting of the silverware. "I know that."

"I've known him longer than you. A lot longer. I've never seen him this head-over-heels for anyone, ever."

"What's your point, Kieran?"

"My point is, sweetheart, that as much as I like you, I'll arrange to have you killed if you don't treat my boy well."

Bella started to giggle. "What is this, *The Godfather*?"

Kieran smiled. "He's my best friend. It had to be said."

“Well, message received.”

“Good,” he said, kissing her on the top of the head.

When she parked her car, the digital clock on the dash read 9:07, almost an hour before her shift started. She grabbed her bag and sweater and walked to Iris’s bakery.

As soon as she walked through the door, she was overcome by a smell so good it could have been one of the seven deadly sins. She followed the scent into the kitchen, where Iris was spooning dough onto a wide cookie sheet. She looked up when she heard Bella’s footsteps.

“Hey there, sugarplum.” Iris gave her a hug, holding her sticky hands out straight.

“I don’t know what you’re making,” Bella said, “but the smell alone is enough to send me into sugar shock!”

Iris laughed, her dark eyes glinting with mischief. “Oatmeal ginger chip cookies.” Her laugh deepened as Bella wrinkled her nose. “Here,” she said, and handed Bella a spoonful of cookie dough. “So how’s the new job?”

Bella smiled. “I think it might be a good fit. I was surprised at how welcoming everyone was.”

“Jack has a knack for finding good people,” Iris said. “Speaking of which, I hope Nathan isn’t busting your chops too much.”

“He calls me Cinderella, but I think I can manage him.” Bella caught a piece of cookie

dough with her tongue as it slid off the spoon. Her eyes widened in surprise. “I don’t know how you can make such ungodly combinations taste so delectable.”

“That’s why I’m a pro,” Iris said.

17

Bella got to the Beanstop just in time for the coffee-break rush. The café teemed with business suits and cell phones. She caught a glimpse of Danny, maneuvering through the crowd with a dancer’s grace as he carried a tray full of dishes. She sighed, knowing that she’d probably be on kitchen duty for at least the next hour.

By two that afternoon, the crowd had thinned, and Bella was wiping the smudges from the counter when Nathan walked in. He was wearing a black button down shirt over a pair of tailored jeans, and Bella was startled to realize that he was actually quite attractive.

“Cinderella!” he said, bracing his palms against the counter. “Just the person I came to see.”

Bella raised her eyebrows. “Why?”

“What time are you off work?”

“Six, but—”

“Perfect.” He reached across the counter to straighten a napkin dispenser. “We’re going to Providence tonight.”

“Wait, what? I can’t—” Bella floundered for words, but it was futile. Nathan simply sauntered out the door without giving her room to protest.

Mina appeared at her elbow. “What was that all about?”

Bella sighed. “Apparently, I’m going to Providence with a man I hardly know.”

Mina laughed.

“I’m holding you fully accountable if he turns out to be a serial killer.”

At six, she hung up her apron and tried to wipe the worst of the flour spots off her skirt. “Remind me never to wear black here again,” she said with a disgruntled sigh.

“Cold water and a clean rag,” Mina said, as she passed by with a tray of Iris’s muffins. “Not paper towels. Paper towels will make an even worse mess.”

She’d eradicated the flour stains by the time Nathan made his entrance. He was dressed the same, but what looked like a postal worker’s messenger bag was strapped across one of his broad shoulders. He winked at her as he passed.

“Sy, I’m starving!” He swung himself onto the table where Sy was chopping vegetables for a quiche.

“Get off my bench, and maybe I’ll help you out.”

“Watch it,” Nathan said to him. “Next time you and the old lady want to go out, I might not babysit the rug rats.”

“That’s why I have Danny.”

Danny swiveled his head around to face them. “Huh?”

Nathan laughed, a sound that made Bella's stomach quiver. "Good luck with that. In the mean time, I want turkey and avocado on sourdough."

Less than twenty minutes later, Bella found herself in Nathan's slate blue jeep, wondering why the hell she'd agreed to go to Providence for seemingly no reason at all with a man who couldn't seem to call her by her real name.

"So I'll bet you're wondering where I'm taking you," Nathan said, as if on cue.

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Good." He proceeded to continue the drive in silence, which was punctuated only by the sound of his chewing as he devoured the sandwich Sy had made.

Bella sighed. "You're really not going to tell me?"

"Nope."

She crossed her arms in defeat. As she turned to grab her sweater from the back seat, she once again noticed the messenger bag.

"So did you have to kill a mail carrier to get that?"

Nathan nearly choked on his sandwich. He swallowed before filling the car with that deep laugh that made Bella almost shiver. "Cinderella, I didn't realize you were so sassy!"

"That's me, full of surprises."

"I actually have a friend who's a post master."

"The murder theory is much more intriguing."

"Ah, the banality of everyday life."

The sun was beginning its slow descent when they drove into what Bella assumed was downtown Providence. On either side of the street, the sidewalks were swept clean in front of

the gleaming glass storefronts. Even McDonalds' looked classier than usual.

Nathan turned down a side street and pulled into a municipal parking lot. They walked down the brick-paved street in comfortable silence.

"Now would be an excellent time to inform me of our destination," Bella said.

Nathan smiled. "We're going there." He pointed to a hanging sign, swinging gently in the autumn breeze.

Bella raised her eyebrows. "You drove us all the way to Providence so we could go to a coffee shop?"

"Something like that."

"You're aware that we work at a coffee shop, right?"

"Yup."

It was clear Nathan wasn't going to offer any useful information, so she stopped asking questions.

Although the storefront was relatively small, Jitters Café was deceptively roomy, with high ceilings and exposed rafters. Not only did they serve coffee, but they also had a full bar which prompted Nathan to order them each a shot.

"What's your pleasure, Cinderella?"

Bella wrinkled her nose. "I don't do shots."

"You do tonight." He turned to the bartender. "We'll have two redheaded sluts."

"We'll have *what*?" Bella was certain she'd misheard him.

"Well now, that perked you right up!" Nathan's smile softened his angular features.

"You'll like it, I promise."

The bartender returned with two glasses full of burgundy colored liquid. Nathan lifted one of them.

“Cheers.” He watched her over the rim of his shot glass as she swallowed. The liquid’s unexpected fizz tickled her nose.

“So what’s the verdict?” Nathan said, pushing his empty glass away.

“It kind of tasted like Dr. Pepper.”

He smiled. “Let’s go get seats before the place fills up.”

“Seats?”

They walked through a doorway that led to a large room with a stage at one end. Small round tables filled the rest of the space. Nathan handed a few bills to a man sitting at a table near the door.

“What’s this?” Bella said, as he led them to a table near the front of the room.

“This,” Nathan said, “is slam.”

Nathan’s explanation did nothing to alleviate her confusion, and it must have shown on her face, because he laughed.

“It’s competitive poetry,” he said.

“But how—”

Nathan pressed two fingers across her lips.

Even after he dropped his hand from her mouth, Bella could feel the warmth of his fingers, the way they’d smelled of musk and salt. She shivered involuntarily, irritated at her body’s reaction to his touch. She hardly knew this man. He called her Cinderella, for heaven’s sake, and he’d practically forced her to down that shot with the vile name. Maybe he wasn’t a

serial killer, but he was most definitely crazy.

A man with a shaved head and meticulously manicured facial hair approached them with what appeared to be a dry erase board.

"Can I talk you into judging tonight, Nate?"

Nathan shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint, but we're just here to watch. It's Cinderella's first slam."

The man turned to give her an assessing head-to-toe glance. "Well, you picked a good night for it." He turned back to Nathan. "If you're not going to judge, do you want to sacrifice?"

"I'd be honored."

"Sacrifice?" Bella turned to Nathan as the man walked toward another table of people.

He reached into his postal bag, out of which he pulled a book bound in brown leather. As he flipped through the pages, Bella realized it was a journal of some sort, each unlined page filled with rows of Nathan's sharp, neat writing. Before she had time to ask any more questions, a woman with deeply tanned skin and a head full of dreadlocks stepped up to the microphone.

"How you feeling tonight, Providence?" The crowd roared in response. The woman, who introduced herself as Malia, looked to be around Bella's age. After bantering with the crowd, she began to explain the rules of the slam. Bella learned that each poet would have three minutes to perform, during which time they could not make use of anything that might be considered a prop. They would then receive scores from five impartial judges picked at random from the audience.

"Providence, are you ready for a poetry slam?" Malia said, revving the audience.

Nathan slipped his book back into his bag.

"What's going on?" Bella whispered to him. He just smiled.

"No, you are not!" Malia quieted the crowd's boisterous reaction. "We have not yet spilled blood on this stage!"

Bella looked at Nathan. No one had said anything about blood.

"Judges," Malia continued, "you are to score this poet as though he were a part of the competition, although he is not. He is your calibration poet and will give you a frame of reference for scoring the competitors. Now, please welcome to the stage, the host of the Beanstock open mic and three-time member of the Providence Slam Team, Nathan Amory!"

The room erupted in applause as Bella watched Nathan stride across the room and take the stage.

He stood in a wide pool of light that made his brown hair look as though it had been edged in gold. A few people catcalled from the audience, but Nathan's features betrayed not the barest hint of a smile. He adjusted the microphone stand and stood silently until the crowd was quiet. Then, he began to speak.

Bella had assumed that Nathan must've been a poet; why else would he dedicate so much time to the writing community he'd created at the Beanstock? What she wasn't prepared for was the sound of his voice. A shiver trickled down her spine and she knew without looking that the downy hairs on her arms were on end, as though responding to static cling. His voice was rich, much deeper than his speaking voice, and it reminded Bella of the commanding crackle of a midnight bonfire. She realized, as she listened to the way his words were fraught with emotion, that he wasn't simply reciting his poetry. He was becoming his poetry.

Only after he walked off the stage did Nathan break character. He cracked his wiseass

smile and bantered with people as he passed them on the way back to the table.

“Damn, I could go for a beer,” he said, swiping at the sheen of moisture above his eyebrows. “I, however, am driving, so I guess I’ll just have to order one for you.”

“Nathan, why didn’t you tell you could—”

“Because it’s something you have to experience in order to understand.” He waved down a waitress.

Bella shook her head slowly as a smile crept across her face. As a librarian, she wasn’t used to being speechless, but words seemed somehow inadequate to express the delicious chaos in her mind.

Nathan cuffed her on the shoulder. “Show’s not over yet, Cinderella.”

“And that gives us a final score of 22.2 for Nathan! Give it up!” Malia’s voice carried over the crowd.

“What just happened?” Bella studied the people around her, some of whom were booing loudly.

“That’s my score,” Nathan said.

“Is that good?” Bella furrowed her brow at the rowdy crowd.

“It’s not great, which is why they’re booing.”

“How is it not great? That was fucking amazing!” Bella had been so enraptured by Nathan’s performance that she’d forgotten this was a competition.

He laughed. “Relax. It’s the opinion of five random people.”

Bella crossed her arms. “That’s still a bunch of—”

“Bella!” He said. “Five drunks in a bar! That’s all! Now pay attention, or you’re going

to miss the main event.”

Bella took a sip of the fruity house ale he'd ordered her. It wasn't until the next poet had finished her piece that Bella realized he'd finally called her by her real name.

18

On the way home, Bella's mind was an electrical storm of words and voices. She wanted to catalogue the whole night, to file it away in neatly organized pockets of her brain so she could save the way it had made her feel. Later, she thought. All she could do, sitting in the passenger seat of Nathan's jeep, was let it wash over her like the sound of the ocean, which even now she could hear out the open window.

“I take it you had a good time?” Nathan spoke softly, so differently from the way he'd performed behind the mic.

Bella turned to face him. “That's the understatement of the month.”

He smiled. “I knew you would.”

“How?”

He shrugged. He didn't reply, but his smile grew wider.

She closed her eyes and leaned into the vinyl upholstered seat. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Cinderella.”

By the time she got home, it was twelve thirty, and she was bone tired. As she lay on Ava’s futon, listening to sound of Icarus’s claws against the bars of his cage, she felt fullness in her chest, a contentment that had become foreign since Ducky’s death. Even though he hadn’t been much of a reader, Bella couldn’t help but think that he would have loved it, anyway. She smiled as she shifted her pillow.

The year after they’d moved to Ashland, the prep school in the neighboring town had commissioned Ducky to do a sculpture. One of the students had a father who’d employed the firm Ducky worked at, and had happened upon the clay creation Ducky had crafted for an odd nook outside his boss’s office. Ducky was out surveying a new site, but his boss gave the father his number. Before he even got home that day, he’d agreed to create a sculpture for the school in exchange for a thousand dollars, a fee which was, of course, a tax-deductible donation from the father.

Ducky had arrived home just as the early spring sun was beginning its descent.

“Guess what, guess what, guess what,” he said, while unlacing his cross-trainers.

Bella had been engrossed in Frankenstein and bit back a startled shriek at his enthusiastic interruption.

“The school wants to buy a sculpture!” he crowed, not even giving her time to respond.

“Someone’s actually going to pay me to be an artist!” His dark hair stuck up in frenzied spikes where Bella knew he’d run his hands through it. His eyes were wide and his cheeks were flushed.

“What?” Bella said, trying to follow the erratic conversation. “What school?”

“That prep school! Some guy at work is gonna pay me!”

“Your boss?” She raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“No!” He sighed, too impatient for her sarcasm. He eventually conveyed the story somewhat coherently, after which Bella proceeded to cover him with kisses. The excitement might as well have been her own. Later that night, while he slept beneath the yellow lamplight, Bella charted the map of his face: the mountain ridges of his eyebrows, the smooth desert plain across his forehead. She was comfortable and content in an apartment out of her dreams with this man, who was filled with so much zest for everything about their life. This, she thought, is what it’s like to be lucky.

After he'd died, the school had added a plaque to the sculpture, with a picture and a brief summary of his life. A dedication ceremony had been held, and Bella had gone. She hated the plaque, though. It seemed to her like nothing more than a glorified obituary. Her feelings for the sculpture were something else entirely.

None of Ducky's art had ever been designed for outdoor display, so Bella was initially curious as to how he'd handle the challenge at hand. He forbade her to see the work in progress, insisting that her first impression be of the finished design. For months, he would disappear on weekends as the weather allowed. When he returned, his clothes would be spotted with dark, greasy stains that he refused to explain. Bella distracted herself with the thickest novels she

could find. One Saturday, he returned later than usual. His eyes brimmed with intensity, but his aura was nothing but serene.

"Let's go." He pulled her by the hand.

"It's dark out," she said, "and I don't even have my shoes on."

He rolled his eyes impatiently as she pulled on a jacket and some sneakers. Ducky covered the distance between their apartment and the school more quickly than usual. He made her close her eyes as he led her across the lawn to the site of the sculpture. When she was finally permitted to open her eyes, the first thing she noticed was that there was a nearby lamp that cast more light than she'd been expecting. Then, she gasped as she took in the piece of artwork before her. It was much larger than anything Ducky had done before. In front of her stood a tree, with a gnarled trunk and bare branches that extended several feet above her head. It was a tree straight from the pages of a fantasy novel, and it appeared to be crafted from some type of bronze colored metal. Unexpectedly, her vision blurred behind a crop of tears. She gripped Ducky's arms as they came around her from behind.

The sculpture that got Ducky the job was of Bella's hands. His boss, who knew about his talent for the fine arts, asked him to design something for the office that would represent the company. The finished result was two graceful hands emerging from opposite sides of a dark wood base. Nestled in the gently cupped palms was a key ring full of old-fashioned skeleton keys. His boss hadn't understood at first. Ducky had to explain that the key was the simplest way to depict their services. In a way, architects were the keys to the visions of their clients. In addition, keys were something connected to all their buildings. Once his boss wrapped his brain around the concept, he gave Ducky a raise.

The concept had come to him almost immediately, and he'd made up his mind early on to use real keys. The only thing he struggled with was the hands. He refused to use his own as models. He felt that they were too large for such a graceful design, so he turned to Bella.

"No way!" she said one night, clearing the dinner dishes off the chrome-trimmed table in the kitchen.

"You'd be my muse. It would be romantic!"

Bella raised an eyebrow as she filled the sink. "Corporate art is *not* romantic!"

His playful demeanor melted. "Thanks for making me feel like a sellout."

"If the shoe fits," she said.

He didn't reply, just turned on his heel and left the room. A few moments later, Bella heard the bedroom door slam. She sighed and threw the dishtowel into the dirty water.

Ducky was still barricaded in the bedroom an hour later, and Bella knew she'd have to sleep on the couch before he broke down first. Since she didn't have an olive branch, she carried a coffee mug filled with cookie dough ice cream.

The door moaned when she pushed it open. He was facing away from her, and the lamp on the nightstand cast shadows in the creases of his white t-shirt. As her eyes traced his spine down to the belt loops of his faded blue jeans, she was overcome by her attraction to him. She felt almost as though she was seeing him for the first time. She cleared her throat.

"Not hungry," he said, turning the page of a music magazine. "But thanks."

"I'll do it, if you still want me to."

He was quiet.

"You're not a sellout."

He rolled over to face her. “That was a bitchy thing to say.”

He lay on his back for a few moments, his eyes open, and his wrists crossed over his head. “Where’s that ice cream?”

“Why?” Bella looked puzzled.

“Because,” he said, “it’s probably melted now, and I can think of a few good uses for it.”

He pulled the hem of his t-shirt over his head and turned off the lamp.

In Ava’s apartment, a smile crossed Bella’s face as she descended into slumber. Her final thoughts were of Ducky’s skin, and the way her curves fit against the planes of his body. She woke up the next morning with a feeling of contentment that surprised her. It was Saturday, she realized, and she had an entire weekend of possibility ahead of her. She laced up her running shoes and decided to make the most out of the cider-scented sunshine of the early fall morning.

When she returned, flushed and damp with sweat, she was surprised to see that Ava was awake, lounging on the couch in a pink satin baby doll nightgown.

“You got in late last night,” she said.

“I went to a poetry thing in Providence,” Bella said.

Ava smiled. “You’re going to turn into a beatnik hippie.”

Bella let the remark pass. “So I ran into your love slave the other day.”

Ava blushed and buried her face in the pillow. “I crnt bllivve yrrr!”

“I’m sorry, what was that, Little Miss I’m Not Going to Take Him Home?”

Ava sat up, her dirty blonde hair afloat with static from the pillow. “I said I wouldn’t that night, not ever!”

Bella laughed. “You know, he *is* kind of cute.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Maybe,” Bella said. “Anyway, I have the entire weekend off and I plan on enjoying it. Any ideas?”

Ava, who didn’t have to work until Monday night, was completely on board. “Let’s have a poker night,” she said. “We can pick up a few bottles of wine, and I’ll make some phone calls.”

“I like how you think,” Bella smiled. “Speaking of phone calls, we should invite Kieran down for the weekend.”

“Go for it,” Ava said, already heading into her bedroom to get dressed.

“Last time I talked to him, he seemed a little out of sorts,” Bella said, and sat on the edge of Ava’s waterbed.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” said her friend. “He probably had a spat with the peroxide blonde blowup doll.”

“Ouch!”

“Come on, Bella. You know he’s wasting his time with her.”

As she retrieved her cell phone from her bag, she had to admit that Ava was right. Although her initial objections to Kieran’s entanglement with Marnie had been purely selfish, Bella was still puzzled by Kieran’s attraction to someone with so little substance. Bella knew he

wouldn't be working on a Saturday, and he never turned off his phone.

"What's wrong with him?" she said to Icarus, asleep in a corner of his cage.

"Chrrr...rrrr," he replied sagely.

She smiled, and shook her head. "You're so smart."

After a quick shower, she and Ava headed downtown to pick up wine and browse in the boutiques before meandering toward the Beanstop for more of Iris's scones, with which Ava was so hopelessly infatuated.

They got there during the lunchtime rush, but Mina caught Bella's eye and waved them back. Grabbing Ava by the wrist, Bella squeezed past the leather briefcases and wool blazers. After expelling a satisfied sigh of relief, she introduced Ava to Mina and Sy, who were both dusted with powdered sugar from the latest batch of doughnuts.

"Ava thinks Iris's scones are orgasmic," Bella said. Ava slapped her arm, tucking a tuft of her hair behind an ear that was turning an increasingly deeper shade of pink.

"Smart lady," Mina said. At that moment, Danny swanned into the kitchen, predictably laden with dirty dishes. His darting gaze caught on Ava's gazelle-like legs. He tripped over a bucket of coffee grounds, nearly dumping his tray. "Hi," he said, after dropping the dishes unceremoniously into the sink. "I'm Dan."

Ava treated him to a smile as Sy tried to muffle his laughter at Danny's blatant ogling.

"Doesn't anyone work around here?" Bella prickled at the sound of Nathan's voice.

"You do!" said Mina, smiling sweetly.

"Cinderella, I don't recall your name being on today's schedule," he said.

"And yours was?"

“Negotiated a trade with Jack,” he said, and took a sip from the Styrofoam cup in his hand. “What’s your excuse?”

“Mostly Iris’s scones,” Bella said.

“We’re also having a party,” Ava said, lacing her arm through Bella’s. “We thought we’d come by and spread the word.”

“Is that right?” Nathan spoke to Ava, but his eyes were locked on Bella’s face.

“I’ll give Mina the address,” she said.

As they walked home, Ava elbowed Bella in the ribcage. “That guy is gorgeous!”

“You mean the one who fell at your feet?”

“I’m not into jailbait. You know who I mean!”

“Yeah, he’s a real charmer,” Bella said.

“Don’t waste your sarcasm on me.”

19

They were a few blocks from Ava’s apartment when a thought occurred to Bella. “I need to make one more stop,” she said.

Ava groaned. “Okay, but you’re carrying these bags the rest of the way home.”

Within minutes, they'd arrived at Everything Nice, where Bella was sure she'd find Iris. The high school girl behind the counter informed her that Iris had been sick all day.

"Sometimes the medication hits her wrong," the girl said.

"What medication?" Bella scrutinized the girl's expression.

"The stuff she takes to keep the cancer from coming back."

Bella had to struggle to keep the contents of her stomach where they belonged while she finished the conversation. She asked for Iris's phone number, but had to scribble it out three times before she finally got the digits in their proper sequence. As she stepped out onto the street, it seemed as though someone had hit the mute button for the outside world.

Ava grabbed her arm. "Bella, you're so pale you're practically transparent."

"I just wanted to invite her to the party," Bella said. "I didn't know she had cancer."

"It sounded like she was going to be okay."

Tears budded against Bella's eyelashes. "It never ends up being okay."

"You can call her," Ava said. "Maybe you'll feel better once you hear her voice."

Bella shook her head. "I'm tired. I just want to go home."

Later, she sat in a bubble bath that smelled soothingly of green tea. Her chest ached, but she couldn't cry. Instead, she let the steam soak into her skin and tried, with every breath, to expel all the fear she carried. She tried to remember what color underwear Ducky was wearing the day he died, and wondered if he would've chosen differently had he known how the day would play out. She popped an errant bubble as it drifted past her face. Ava was right; she'd feel better once she talked to Iris. Later, though. All she could handle at the moment was letting the water trickle through her fingers as she played with the bubbly suds.

When she emerged from the tub, she caught sight of her steam-framed reflection in the bathroom mirror. Her roots were growing out and the color was fading. Her cheeks were pink, though, and her eyes were bright. She opened the bathroom door to the sound of Lynyrd Skynyrd belting out *Sweet Home Alabama*.

"Very festive," she said to Ava, who was wrapped in short, satin kimono. Her face was covered in a mask of white goop, which Bella was sure had something to do with shrinking pores or preventing wrinkles.

Her friend smiled. "Can you vacuum while I do the dishes?"

"Can I get dressed first?"

"No."

Bella tucked the end of her towel more firmly under her arm. "I don't know who you're trying to impress. I already traumatized Leo."

"I just want it to look classy," Ava said.

"Well, if that's what you're going for, make sure you wash your face before you answer the door." Bella smirked as she switched the attachment on the vacuum cleaner.

"You're just jealous of how radiant my skin will be," Ava said, sucking in her cheeks and striking a model's pose.

Bella opened her mouth to respond, but was interrupted by her phone, ringing shrilly over the hum of the vacuum. As she pressed it to her ear, her first thought was of Kieran.

"Well, if it isn't the prodigal daughter." Her mother's voice.

"Sorry, I've been—"

"I'm sure you have." Her mother laughed. "But I didn't call only to guilt-trip you. I

wanted to see if you'd started making birthday plans yet."

"I hadn't even thought about it." She laughed. In less than a month she'd be turning twenty-eight.

"Well, keep me posted."

Bella snapped her phone shut and turned to Ava. "It seems that I have a birthday coming up."

"That's news to you?"

"It may have slipped my mind"

Ava shook her head. "I can't believe you."

"It's kind of been a bad year." She curled up on the couch, pulling the towel over her legs.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't celebrate." Ava sat down next to her. "In fact, I think that you should celebrate more."

Bella sat up. "Maybe."

"Definitely," Ava said. "What about a Halloween party? We haven't done one of those for your birthday since college."

Bella laughed. "Can we just focus on making it through this party first?"

"That's why you're vacuuming!" Ava returned to the sink. "So is Kieran coming tonight?"

"He never even called me back, so I'm assuming not."

"I'm glad we're such a high priority with him."

"I think his phone died."

Ava muffled a snort, but didn't say anything, so Bella let the drone of the vacuum take over as it sucked up what little dirt there was.

By dark, the dirty dishes had vanished and Van Morrison had replaced Lynyrd Skynyrd on the stereo. Bella stood in front of the bathroom mirror wearing a vintage shift. A recent purchase, the lavender material of the dress was only a few shades lighter than her hair. Ava's reflection appeared next to her own.

"Here," she said, and looped a single-row rhinestone collar around Bella's neck.

"Don't you think that's a bit much?"

"That's the point," said Ava.

Bella ran her fingers through her hair, now almost long enough to be considered a shag. "Do you know any good hairstylists?"

Ava raised her eyebrows. "Why?"

Bella shrugged. "I was thinking I'd get rid of this color."

"Thank the lord for that!" Ava said. "It's about time."

"Thanks for the support."

"You know I think you're gorgeous." Ava put an arm around her shoulders. "But purple wouldn't even be flattering on a supermodel. So are you going to dye it back to blonde?"

Bella thought about the long, corn silk mane she'd once had. Then, she thought about the way the strands of hair had turned pink from the blood after the accident. Involuntarily, she shivered.

"Not blonde."

"Black, maybe?" Ava lifted a purple lock.

Bella slowly shook her head. “Maybe red. A really rich, dark red.”

Ava’s eyes widened. “You have perfect coloring for a redhead! I’m calling my stylist tomorrow!”

Bella laughed as she readjusted the rhinestones at her neck.

“One more accessory, then I promise I’ll leave you alone.” Ava retreated into the heart of the apartment and returned with what looked like a black scarf. It turned out to be a fitted, sheer cardigan. She held out the sleeves and Bella slipped it on.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s perfect. Now stop primping and help me with the cheese tray.”

Within an hour, people were elbow-to-elbow playing poker at the kitchen table. Bella felt warm from the glass of wine she’d been sipping on. To her left, Ava sat on Leo’s lap. His gaze tracked her every movement. Bella felt a stab of jealousy, but let it pass.

Bella was surprised that some of her friends from work had shown up. Apparently, Sy and his wife hadn’t been able to find a babysitter, but Mina arrived with Danny in tow.

“Check out my hot date,” she said. “My husband has to work tonight.”

Danny looked, as usual, like a struggling rock star. Neither of them mentioned Nathan, and Bella’s stomach dropped a little bit. She hadn’t realized how much she’d been hoping he’d come. It took her half a glass of wine to convince herself she didn’t really care.

Bella was sitting the current game out, so when the buzz of the doorbell announced a new arrival, she answered the door. The air got stuck in her throat as she took in the tall figure before her.

“Well, don’t you look ready for the ball, Cinderella.” He wore a collared jacket the same

tan color as the one Ducky had been wearing the first time she'd met him, but she tried not to think about that.

"You're late," she said.

He laughed, that sound that made her hair tingle. "I have a note."

Bella could feel her cheeks flush as she stepped aside to let him pass into the apartment. He had, she thought, the body of a warrior. His frame seemed out of place in the kitchen, where he introduced himself to the people he hadn't met yet.

By ten, six empty wine bottles littered the kitchen counter. Bella sat on the living room carpet, listening to the swirls of conversation forming around her. Nothing held her interest until she heard someone mention Truth or Dare.

Ava, who was nestled against Leo's chest, groaned. "I haven't played Truth or Dare in fifteen years! At least!"

"It could be fun," Mina said.

Bella raised her eyebrows. "I think this would fall under the category of bad idea."

The naysayers were the minority vote, though, which was how, less than half an hour later, Bella watched Leo take a shot glass of liquor from another guy's mouth without using his hands. By the time the cycle reached Bella, she'd seen enough dares to stick to truth.

The woman doing the asking was a friend of Ava's. "If you could alter one event in your life, what would it be?"

Bella shifted on the carpet. The expectant gazes seemed predatory, pressing into her skin. She saw Ava's eyes widen.

"I wouldn't agree to play this game, that's for sure." She took a sip of wine.

“That’s a cop out answer,” Mina said.

“Relax, I’m getting there.” She bit her lip and thought about that last day, when she and Ducky went hiking. Would she change it so that they didn’t go hiking at all? Or only that they left earlier and missed the collision with the truck? Should she simply change the direction in which they were driving? Would any of it matter?

“I would’ve fought less with my mother when I was younger.” She took another, larger sip of wine. She knew that her answer sounded cliché, but it had been a cliché question, to begin with. Only Ava, and maybe Leo, knew what had happened to Ducky. Nevertheless, she felt shaken. After passing the turn to Danny, she slipped out of the apartment.

Outside Ava’s building, Bella listened to the sounds of the city evening. Through an open window she could hear a couple arguing, and a token siren wailed in the distance. From that far away, she couldn’t tell if it was a police cruiser or an ambulance. The cool air was soothing against her wine-flushed cheeks, but the rest of her body bristled at the fall night’s chill. She heard approaching footsteps, and turned to see Nathan.

“You’ll catch your death,” he said, pointing to her filmy cardigan. In one hand, he held a small, green plastic bag.

“It was getting stuffy in there,” she said. “Besides, I’ve had about enough of Truth or Dare. For the next decade, at least.”

Nathan laughed. “So I suppose I shouldn’t ask you, then?”

Bella sighed. “Go ahead.”

He took a step toward her. “Truth or Dare, Cinderella?”

“Truth.”

“What would you really change if you had the opportunity?”

“Were you not listening upstairs?”

“I was. I just didn’t believe you.”

Bella crossed her arms. “Too bad.”

He slipped his hands into his pants pockets and was silent for a few moments. Then, he handed her the bag he’d been carrying.

“I thought this might be of some use to you.”

She studied his face, but said nothing as she opened the bag. Inside was a medium-sized book, bound in brown leather. Monochromatic purple gemstones made a Celtic design across the cover, but the book had no title. When she opened it, she found the pages were blank.

She studied him, trying to decipher the intent behind his gift. "It's stunning."

"It's a journal."

"I'm not a writer, though," she said.

He smiled. "Yes, you are."

Bella pulled at her sleeves. She felt pinned by his presence. "You're the writer. The first time I saw you, you were behind the mic."

He cocked his head. "At work?"

"Nope," she said.

His curiosity created a new game. "That's the first time we met."

"True."

"But not the first time you saw me?"

She shook her head. "I wandered into the Beanstop while Ava was working one night,

maybe a few weeks before I got the job."

He smiled. "I don't see how I could've missed you, but I guess I'll take your word for it."

They stood outside for awhile longer. Nathan didn't ask about her Truth or Dare question, and Bella didn't push the issue of whether or not she had any use for the beautiful journal he'd given her. When the chill had cut cleanly through her, she turned to go inside, and he followed.

20

Three days later, she was sitting in a salon not much different from the one her friend Jane worked at. Ava's stylist had painted the dye into her hair and wrapped the strands in sheets of tin foil. Apparently, it was standard procedure, but Bella thought she looked like a TV dinner. She was content to listen to the idle gossip pass between Ava and the stylist—until she heard her name.

"This guy is a doll," Ava said to the stylist, "but Bella won't even throw him a bone."

As her scalp tingled from the chemicals in her hair, she wondered how the topic of conversation had become her love life—or more accurately, lack thereof.

"It's not really like that." Her excuse sounded limp even to her own ears.

"I think you should have a little faith in yourself!" The stylist was perky, in a soccer mom kind of way. Except that she didn't look like a soccer mom. She was wearing skintight black pants and a leopard print top with a plunging neckline. Her hair was blonde and teased, and her eyelashes were caked with mascara. Bella tried to offer her a convincing smile.

When the stylist left to help another client, Ava turned to her. "I know you're not looking for anything," she said, "but this guy is something special. That's all I'm saying."

"It's only been seven months," Bella said. "I'm not ready for someone special."

"Says who?"

Bella felt her stomach tense. "I spent six years of my life with him. I can't act like that didn't matter."

"I get that," Ava said, "but you don't have to be a martyr to prove how much you loved him."

Bella was silent. She felt guilty as she waited for the stylist to come rinse her hair, and she wasn't sure why.

Ducky had never been a jealous boyfriend. He was too laid back for that. Bella had generally tried to follow his example, but sometimes her insecurities had gotten the better of her. One Saturday afternoon, not long after they'd moved into the apartment over Elmira's, they'd been sparring with zucchini in the produce aisle when their antics were interrupted by a deep,

husky female voice.

"David?"

When Bella turned around, her first thought was that the woman was very small. Much smaller than her sex-pot voice indicated. Her second thought was that it made her stomach cold to hear her address Ducky by his given name. She couldn't have been more than five feet tall, and her thin legs were wrapped tightly in black pants that matched the color of her tousled hair. Her makeup was flawless, and Bella felt hopelessly inadequate standing next to her.

"Allison." Ducky's expression was one of guarded tension. "It's good to see you."

"Likewise," she said, her painted lips forming a smile. "It's been too long."

Ducky cleared his throat. "This is my girlfriend, Bella."

Allison nodded, but said nothing to Bella, who felt like a five year old, patiently waiting while the adults were talking.

"Well," Allison said, looking at her designer wristwatch, "I really should be going. Call me." She handed Ducky a pale blue business card. Bella said nothing, but let her discomfort simmer into full-blown rage. By the time she'd driven them back to the apartment, she'd reached her boiling point. As they unpacked the groceries from the beige plastic bags, she broke the silence.

"I thought Allison lived in Vermont."

Ducky's back was to her, and she could see his shoulders tense. "She moved."

"Apparently."

He turned around. "I didn't think to tell you."

"You also didn't think to tell me that she looks like a supermodel."

"Give me a break, Bella. She's just some girl." He slammed the cupboard door.

"Some girl you used to sleep with." Bella concentrated on the cans of beans she was unpacking, not meeting his gaze.

"Look, I'm not going to fight with you about this. I love you."

That silenced her, but she'd refused to let him off the hook so easily. She'd nursed the wound while she soaked in a bubble bath, holding *David Copperfield* carefully above the suds. Her skin hadn't yet pruned when he knocked on the door.

"Can I come in?"

"No."

"Too bad," he said, and the door creaked open.

She rolled her eyes. "Do you mind?"

"Actually, yes." He pulled off his socks, but left the rest his clothes on as he climbed into the tub.

"What are you doing?"

"Showing you how much I love you." He slid his arms around her bare waist and buried his face in the crook between her neck and shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere."

Bella laced her fingers through his hair. "Ever?"

"Ever."

As she left the salon, she thought about how lucky she'd been to have someone so utterly faithful to her. Even though Ducky was gone, she felt a responsibility to him. Nonetheless, she had to admit, at the heart of it all, that he would want her to be happy.

Her phone began to ring plaintively from her bag. It was Mina, asking her to pick up a pastry delivery from Everything Nice on her way into work. She decided to head there immediately, giving herself extra time to chat with Iris.

She turned to Ava. "I have to swing by the bakery on the way into—" She trailed off, distracted by her diluted reflection in a nearby storefront window.

"Red is definitely your color," Ava said.

It took Bella a moment to register her own reflection. The stylist had dyed the bulk of her hair a deep, cherry shade, with lighter, fire colored streaks woven intricately in. At Ava's insistence, she'd also cleaned up Bella's split ends, the end result being a short, swingy shag, subtly layered toward the tips. She smiled. "I could get used to this."

The storefront was quiet when she arrived, an elderly couple seated at the only occupied table. Two high school girls busied themselves by wiping the dried icing off the glass counters of the bake cases. Bella smiled at them as she slipped back to the kitchen.

"Mina sent me to pick up the pastry today," she said.

"Well, hello to you too!" Iris pushed a stray strand of hair off her forehead with her wrist. Bits of bread dough and flour clung to her hands.

"I came by a few days ago. One of the girls said you were sick."

Iris didn't meet her eyes. "I get migraines."

"She said you have cancer."

Iris wiped her hands on her apron. “Had. I had both breasts lopped off two years ago, and since then, I’ve been fine. The Tamoxifen makes me pretty useless every now and then, though.”

“Iris, that’s awful!” Bella sat down on a nearby stool.

“That’s life.”

Bella paused to consider. The loss of her husband should have more than filled Iris's quota for pain. It seemed so utterly cruel to saddle her with breast cancer, too.

“You’re okay, though?”

Iris laughed. “This old girl isn’t going anywhere. At least not yet. Besides, what would the Beanstop do without me?”

Bella laughed. “God only knows. Speaking of which, what do you know about Nathan?”

Iris sized her up. “Plenty. Depends on what you want to know.”

“I think I may be in trouble. He bought me a journal.”

“Doesn’t sound like trouble to me.”

“He says I’m a writer.”

“Maybe you are.”

Bella breathed out heavily through her nose. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“It doesn’t seem to be a matter of sides,” Iris said. “It sounds to me like that man might be taking more than a professional interest in you.”

“That’s the problem.”

“You aren’t interested?” Iris said.

“That’s not it,” Bella said, “which is also the problem. Anyway, I’m going to be late.”

She carried the boxed pastries with her as she flurried out the door.

21

Bella arrived at the Beanstop to discover that Sy had caught conjunctivitis from his two year old, and was consequently out sick. Mina had to take care of the cooking, which left Danny and Bella to run the counter. Mina had left five messages for Nathan, but he hadn't showed. Jack appeared in time for the dinner rush, none too thrilled that Nathan was MIA.

"Maybe he left his phone at his girl's place," Danny said, gliding in between Jack and Mina on the way to the sink. Bella felt a pang in her chest.

"He's thirty-three years old. He should be able to take care of himself."

"Relax," Mina said. "We've got it under control."

Jack didn't look pleased, but he took the knife from Mina and began dicing tomatoes for an omelet.

"Wait a minute," Mina said, scrutinizing the ASPCA calendar that served as their schedule. "He's teaching today. Of course his phone's turned off!"

"Teaching?" Bella said.

Mina told her that Nathan taught a few freshman English courses at the same school Ava

had attended. She wasn't terribly surprised that he worked a second job. Still, an adjunct faculty gig felt like something he should have mentioned. And he had a girlfriend. She should have felt relieved, but instead she just felt inadequate.

Jack stopped dicing. "I suppose he escapes my wrath. This time."

Bella carried a tray of lattes out into the café. She had to struggle to keep her hands steady, and she didn't like it.

She worked until close that night, and by the time she walked back to the apartment, she regretted not taking her car. The bite in the wind cut through her denim jacket, and she'd lost any hint of sensation in her toes. The first thing she did when she got back was run a hot bath.

"Chrrr...rrrrr." Icarus gnawed at the bars of his cage. Bella patted his nose as she grabbed a book to read while she tried to soak the chill out of her body. As an afterthought, she also picked up a pen, and the journal Nathan had given her.

The bath salts she'd added to the water made the whole room smell tropical. Bella closed her eyes and imagined tendrils of vines hanging above her head, a nearby tree heavy with ripe red fruit. When the inside of her finally started to feel warm again, she reached for a towel to wipe her hands on. She opened the book Nathan had given to her. There was writing on the inside of the front cover which, upon closer inspection, proved to be an inscription: *For Cinderella, for the way you see the world.* Bella traced the neatly penned letters with a bath-shriveled finger. She flipped the page and picked up her pen.

At first, she wasn't sure what to write. She'd never kept a journal. She'd always felt silly writing letters to someone who didn't exist. She could hear the quiet of the apartment through the walls: Icarus shuffling through the shavings in his cage, the *shtick-shtick* of the

kitchen clock, the rush of water through different pipes in other apartments. She wrote it all down. Slowly, she gathered momentum, writing down her observations of how she felt, what she saw and heard and thought. The feelings she'd harbored alone since Ducky died were etched onto the cream colored pages of the bejeweled journal.

Later, wrapped in the sheets on Ava's futon, Bella wondered if what she'd written was poetry. Probably not. It was a start, though. As she traveled toward the muted peace of sleep, she idly wondered what Nathan's girlfriend was like.

The next morning, Bella tried to quash her concern over Nathan's female companion; instead, she focused her spare thoughts on how she could make what she'd written last night into a poem. She was working the day shift, which so far had been busy without crossing into the realm of chaotic. She was handing a customer six dollars and twelve cents in change when she saw them. Through the storefront windows, Bella recognized Nathan's rugged frame immediately. She was infinitely less familiar with the woman who walked beside him. Bella slammed the cash register shut with a little extra force as she observed the woman's long wispy brown hair that looked professionally blown out. By the time she registered the way the woman's full chest strained the material of her v-necked top, she was furious. How dare he? Except, she thought, how dare he what? Give her a journal? Take her to a poetry night? None of those things were particularly condemning. Still. He'd never once mentioned the woman now beside him, whose legs, Bella observed looked decidedly insectile.

"Morning, Cinderella!" he said, maneuvering behind the counter to get a cup of coffee. "Preparing to accompany me to Providence for a spectacular evening of poetic enlightenment?"

Bella turned to face him. "Why don't you take your girlfriend, Professor?"

The smile retreated from the corners of his mouth. "I'll come pick you up when your shift's done. Then we'll talk."

"No."

"Bella, please."

It was the sound of her own name that undid her. "Fine." She turned on her heel and headed for the kitchen.

"You okay?" Mina said, on her way out to the storefront.

"I need a break. Can you cover me?"

"You got it."

Bella grabbed her bag and pushed through the back door to the stoop where the smokers took their reprieve. She took the journal out of her bag and looked at what she'd written the night before. Slowly, she began to pick out single lines that expressed how angry she felt. From those, she began to cobble a poem, interspersing the lines with new words and phrases. When she was done, she'd filled a page and a half with her new creation. And, she realized, she felt better.

"Bella! We need you." Sy's voice traveled through an open window.

She stood up and brushed the dirt from her pants. When she returned to the cafe, she was greeted by the sight of a ten-person line, but not even that could penetrate her aura of calm. What could—and did—shatter her serenity was the sight of Nathan through the storefront windows, alone this time. Instinctively, her hands went to smooth her newly cut and colored mane, but she stopped herself before the coating of icing and sugar could be transferred to the vibrant red strands. Had she known how her day would play out, Bella would have taken more

care during her morning routine, perhaps choosing her clothing more carefully or adding a spritz of perfume. Instead, she'd pulled on a pair of black jeans and a baseball style t-shirt with purple sleeves. As Nathan approached the counter, she felt very ill-equipped to compete with the woman she'd seen him with earlier, the one who looked like she'd stepped from the pages of a *Newport News* catalog.

He didn't say anything to her, but winked as he made his way back to the kitchen. She felt the specific brand of irritation he evoked begin simmering. She cashed out her customer and went out back to brew more coffee.

"What'll it be today, your highness?" Sy was warily eyeing Nathan, who surveyed the scene while munching on a celery stalk.

"Why don't you stretch the boundaries of your culinary talents and surprise me?" He gestured emphatically with the half-eaten vegetable. Sy snorted, but wiped his hands on his apron and began to do as Nathan had asked.

"Make sure it has avocado!" he said, before vaulting the leafy end of his celery stalk into the industrial sized trash can. He turned to Bella, who was wrestling with a full bag of used coffee grounds, attempting to make it to the dumpster before the entire thing burst at her feet. "Aren't you done yet?"

Bella raised her eyebrows at him. "I'm getting there. Besides, your food isn't even ready yet." She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek as she heaved the bag into the outside dumpster. She really had no reason to be going with him to Providence. Except that she wanted to.

The wind blew her jacket open as she stepped out into the evening, with Nathan a few

steps behind. It had just turned dark, and Bella shivered.

“Cold?”

She glanced at his profile, illuminated by a street lamp. “I’m fine.”

He shrugged. “Could’ve fooled me.” His voice was barely a murmur, and she could have let the comment pass. She didn’t.

“If you have something to say, just say it,” she said, raising her voice a few decibels.

“What’s the matter, Cinderella? Someone smash your glass slippers?”

She felt her fingers curl inward, fingernails digging into her palms. She was furious with him, but he was right. Although she had no glass slippers, she could feel the shattered shards of something unnamed in her chest.

“We’ll talk about this in the car.” He circled her wrist with one hand and began pulling her.

“Let me go!”

“Not so you can make a scene in the street.” He wrenched open the passenger door of the jeep and dropped her arm. After buckling her seatbelt, she rubbed the skin around her wrist, although he hadn’t really been that rough.

“Are you sure your girlfriend doesn’t mind that you’re spending the entire evening with another woman?”

Nathan slowly emptied his lungs, as though trying to maintain composure before he spoke. “Her name is Autumn.”

Bella turned to look out of the window. Of course it was. Her name was Autumn, and she probably worked at an animal shelter and bought all her clothes from L.L. Bean. She

probably drank fair trade tea standing barefoot on Nathan's porch (if indeed he had one) wrapped in his white bathrobe (if indeed he had one).

"She and I don't really have a relationship," he said, interrupting her trail of elaborate Autumn fantasies.

She refused to take the bait. "Your co-workers seem to think otherwise."

"We were pretty heavily involved for awhile, but we ultimately wanted different things."

Bella was silent, offering him no reprieve.

Nathan sighed. "We still see each other. Neither of us has met anyone special, and it's...comfortable"

Bella wouldn't look at him. "Why didn't you bring her to the party?"

For several long minutes, the only sound was Jim Morrison serenading them from the car stereo.

"Bring me home," Bella said.

"That's really what you want?"

She opened her mouth to tell him yes, but then she thought about how she'd felt crouched behind the café, writing in her new journal. "I'll go," she said, "but I'm not sitting with you."

She curled up against the window, creating as much space between them as possible. The vehicle was virtually silent for three towns. She was startled when Nathan cleared his throat, but didn't turn away from the window.

"I love your hair," he said. "It looks great."

Concealed by the night, she allowed herself a small, triumphant smile.

22

When they arrived at the cafe, Bella was still irritable. She paid her own cover charge this time and wordlessly made her way to a small table to the right of the stage. Nathan didn't follow her. She pulled her journal from her bag and began to chronicle her surroundings. Her enthusiasm built as she remembered the reasons why enduring the car ride with Nathan had been worth it.

"Is this seat taken?"

Bella looked up to find the source of the voice. The man standing before her had a thick brown mustache and perfectly round glasses. His face was a spiderweb of wrinkles.

"No," she said, moving her bag off the otherwise vacant chair.

The man smiled. "My usual companion is ill tonight, but I prefer not to sit alone. I'm glad you weren't opposed to company."

Bella was charmed by her seatmate's eloquent speech and dapper appearance. She learned that he'd been attending this particular poetry event with his wife for the past ten years.

Malia, who Bella recognized as the host of the slam Nathan had been in, walked onto the stage. "The sign-up sheet is out, people! See Abe if you're interested."

A man with shoulder length black hair sitting at a table in the back waved his hand.

"I'd better put my name on the list before it fills up," said Bella's companion. "Do you want me to sign you up?"

Bella paused to consider. All around her were people who'd been doing this for who knows how long. She clutched her journal protectively to her chest, unconvinced that her own writing was adequate for an audience. On the other hand, she knew this was something she was meant to be a part of.

"Yes," she said. "Thank you."

Twenty minutes later, Bella's hands were icy, and a pearl of cold sweat rolled down her spine. She couldn't focus on the woman on stage, who was reading a poem about having an affair. Affair-woman was the second reader in the open mic. Bella would be the sixth. She felt branded, a prisoner to be hereby known only as the number she'd been assigned. She'd made a mistake. Surely if she'd been meant to be a part of this, she wouldn't be so paralyzingly terrified. She clung to her journal while she waited for the sound of her name.

Malia took the stage as the applause for the fifth reader died down. "Next up, I've got a little treat for y'all," she said. "This reader is a Jitters virgin, so give it up!"

The applause surprised her. She hadn't expected people to clap so loud for someone they'd never heard before. A small measure of strength returned to her body, and she climbed the steps leading to the stage, her back straight and her eyes up. She clumsily felt out the workings of the microphone, adjusting it to her height. Some of the poets prefaced their poems with some sort of witty banter, but Bella couldn't think of a single thing to say to warm up the crowd. She took a deep breath and looked out across the room. Without opening her journal, she spoke her poem into the microphone, her offertory spell to this coven of artists. She could

scarcely believe that the voice she heard was her own. It coursed through the room like a river, undeniably powerful and wild. All traces of her earlier anxiety were gone.

Bella was oblivious to the applause as she left the stage. Her attention was diverted to the sense of an awakening that seemed to roll through her body. Except, that it wasn't an awakening exactly. It was more like the birth of something that had never been before. She dropped into her seat at the table, drained. She felt hollow and clean, as though she'd undergone some sort of exorcism. The man sitting across from her smiled and patted her hand.

Bella didn't see Nathan again until the end of the night. She was engaged in conversation with Abe, the man who'd been in charge of the sign up sheet. She'd just promised to return the following week when Nathan appeared at her side. He shook hands with Abe before turning to her.

"Ready?"

She said her goodbyes, deliberately smiling at everyone but him. They walked in silence to the jeep.

"I told you," he said, after she'd buckled her seatbelt.

"Told me what? That you're a teacher?" she said. "Oh, wait. No, you didn't, actually."

"You're hell-bent on being mad, aren't you?"

Bella smiled. "Only at you. I'm so euphoric right now that not even your twisted antics can bring me down. This time, you don't have the upper hand."

Nathan shook his head. "After tonight's performance, I would never be so foolish as to think that I ever had the upper hand with you."

Bella was silent. She hated the way he disarmed her.

"I only teach three classes." The sound of his voice broke into her quiet. "Two freshman lit. classes and one poetry workshop."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because," he said, "it's all connected."

Bella stared out the window. "I don't see how."

"Autumn is a former student."

Bella's stomach felt cold as she turned to face him. She said nothing, so he continued.

"She took my poetry workshop two years ago, as a senior. We started seeing each other when she graduated." He took a loud, deep breath. "Ultimately, our paths in life were too divergent for it to work, but I'm kind of like a safety net for her."

Bella swallowed the lump in her throat. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You wanted to know."

She nodded. "You're right. And now I know that you're not at all who I thought you were."

For the rest of the drive, the air hung heavy with the words that neither one of them would speak. When Nathan pulled over in front of Ava's apartment, Bella slipped out of the jeep without a word. She sought the refuge of her alcove, and cried with Icarus nestled beneath her chin, her tears matting his eggshell colored fur.

The first thing Bella noticed when she woke up the next morning was the frost on the window near her head. She shivered, and wrapped the blankets more tightly around her. Glancing at Icarus's cage, she noticed that he was buried beneath a pile of shavings. She tapped at one of the bars, and he poked his pink nose out and snuffled at her.

"Relax," she said. "I'm on it."

She patted barefoot to Ava's bedroom. "Hey, can I turn the heat up?" She pushed the door open a few inches. Ava's bed was neatly made. Since her friend had never been much of an early riser, Bella assumed she'd spent the night at Leo's. "Must be nice," she said, and cranked the thermostat with a flick of her wrist.

After a languorous, hot shower, Bella dressed quickly. She took her keys and left the apartment, shivering as the temperature outside chilled the last remnants of moisture on her skin. She wished she'd taken the time to blow-dry her hair, but instead pulled up her hood and started walking. It was a wise choice, she thought, not to take her car. The physical activity served to release some of her frustrations. Nonetheless, she was still full of what her grandmother had once called "piss and vinegar" when she arrived at the bakery.

"You didn't tell me he had a girlfriend!" Bella had stormed into the kitchen without as much as a greeting to the startled girl behind the counter. Iris raised her sap colored eyes from what looked like a large bowl of snowy frosting.

"Good morning to you, too." She put a hand on her hip. "Now whose girlfriend are we talking about?"

Bella forced the air in her lungs out through her nose, like a bull staring down a toreador. It was infuriating that Iris seemed so calm. "The journal-buying playboy that I work for."

Iris smiled. "Ah, that one. If it's any consolation, you don't really work for him, you work for Jack."

Bella widened her eyes at her older friend. "Are you kidding me right now?"

"Sugar, you have got to *relax*," Iris said. "Nathan doesn't have a girlfriend."

"She looked pretty real to me when I saw her at the Beanstop."

Iris's eyes stormed over. "That little wispy girl? Please!" She spat the words, as though they were poisoned. "What's her name? Summer?"

"Autumn." Bella let the air deflate from her chest.

"Now you listen to me," Iris said, taking her hand. "That girl is not worth one ounce of your anxiety."

Bella remained silent, her expression sullen.

Iris raised her eyebrows. "Even men as intelligent as Nathan take the bait."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Iris said, "that he had just turned thirty and he got his head turned. He was her professor, and she worshipped him, but a relationship can't thrive on that."

Bella didn't raise her eyes. "So?"

"So, he knows that," Iris said, "and so does everybody else. A flighty girl still trying to figure herself out has nothing to offer him."

"Well, I don't know what he wants," Bella said, "but I do know it's not me."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

When she left the bakery, Bella's emotions were still rampant. She pressed her hands to her temples as she walked back, trying to squelch the noise in her head. Since Ducky had died, Bella had often felt like a spectator. She watched other people's relationships, successes, and changes. There had been a barrier holding her back but, she realized now, also protecting her. When she finally started crossing it, started becoming an active participant in her own life again, she'd been too preoccupied to notice. Now, the full feeling in her chest was a painful reminder

of what she'd been hiding from in the first place. She called Jack from her cell phone as she opened the door to the apartment and asked him for the weekend off. She began to fill her backpack with a few changes of clothes. She slung it over her shoulder and lifted Icarus's cage. She didn't bother leaving a note for Ava, planning to call later and hoping her friend would understand.

"Come on, baby," she said to Icarus. "We're going for a ride."

October in New Hampshire held a different sort of chill than Rhode Island. Sharper, somehow more pronounced. Bella pulled up to her mother's house at dusk, which came earlier each day. Icarus had burrowed beneath a pile of shavings in his cage. Bella exhaled all the air from her lungs as she shifted the car into park, and held it for a moment, as though she could stop time in that way. Static or not, she still had to get out of the car. The moment she saw her mother, she dissolved.

"It hurts, Mom."

Her mother immediately pulled her into the house and seated her in a worn in, velveteen rocking chair in the living room. Slowly, Bella felt the hitching of her ribcage subside, the urgency of her tears lessen. Her mother brought her a cup of lavender tea.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" Bella noticed that Leah looked more like a mother than she had since her husband died. Her hair was a soft auburn color and she wore a pair tan corduroy pants with a plain white v-necked t-shirt. Bella plucked a strand of pride from the tangle of emotions stifling her brain. She spilled out the entire story to her mother; the complexity of her infatuation with Nathan, Ava's burgeoning relationship with Leo, the poems she'd been writing, and above all, the heartbreaking reality of living day after day without

Ducky.

"I thought I could do this," she said to her mother, "but I'm failing."

Her mother steepled her fingers and leaned forward. "You aren't failing, you're just living. This is what living feels like."

"Well, I don't remember it being this hard." Bella crossed her arms.

"You're just out of practice."

23

That night, Bella sat on the threadbare rug in her childhood bedroom, sifting through boxes of memorabilia from what felt like another lifetime. She ran her fingers over the signatures in her senior yearbook. Eighteen, she thought, was a resilient age. At nearly twenty-eight, she felt more liable to shatter into pieces at the slightest provocation. As she slipped the yearbook back onto the bookshelf, the chirp of her cell phone intruded on her musing. Icarus lifted his head, assessing the situation before climbing back into the hammock Bella had made for him out of a bandana.

"Where are you?" The voice on the other end of the phone was plaintive, but Bella could detect the underlying worry. She smiled.

"I was going to call."

"Well, you didn't!" Ava said. "I wouldn't have been so worried if you hadn't taken Icarus."

"I'm at my mother's," Bella said. "I took the weekend off."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with our favorite coffee-slinger, would it?"

"He has a girlfriend."

"What?" Ava's voice was edged with razor wire. "He was obviously making a play for you."

"It's complicated," Bella said. "Hence the Exodus to the kingdom of motherly comforts."

"Do what you need to do," said her friend. "I'll try not to kill him before you get back."

As she snapped her phone shut, she imagined Nathan attempting to defend himself from the wrath of her usually poised friend.

"Lights out," she said to Icarus. "We have a visit to make tomorrow." Even though she was hungry for the peace of sleep, Bella lay awake for nearly an hour after she turned off the lamp.

She'd left New Hampshire to escape Ducky's death, and there was no trace of him in Rhode Island. This time, she had no excuse for fleeing. She wondered how she could've thought that she was growing, healing, changing. I'm not brave enough to do any of those things, she thought. Instead, I'm still running.

The cemetery in which they'd buried Ducky was spread over a series of shallow hills and gullies. Woven into the archway of the wrought-iron entrance gate were the words "Joyful Noise." As Bella crossed beneath them, she felt a brief spurt of rage for whatever religious

official had given the cemetery such an unfortunate name. With Icarus's cage in hand, she awkwardly maneuvered the uneven terrain and did her best to avoid the tombstones that rose from the ground like the teeth of a beast too massive to contemplate. She didn't have to look for the granite stone that bore Ducky's name; she knew her way to him by heart.

Because she and Ducky hadn't been married when he died, Bella was unsure of her role in the making of the arrangements. His parents, however, had been deferential to the significance of her relationship with their son. Consequently, it was Bella who'd picked out the burial plot on a gentle down slope not far from the edge of the cemetery where the trees started to grow in. She'd made sure the casket was facing west, so Ducky would have a clear view of the horizon when the sun went down.

She set down the ferret cage to the side of the polished granite slab with the word "Bach" engraved onto the front in beveled-edged letters. As she always did when she visited Ducky, she had the morbid urge to dig up his casket with her bare hands and wrap her arms around the pine box, all that was left of him on earth. She stepped around to the back of the stone where his name was engraved in smaller letters, along with his date of birth and death. She traced the sharp edges of the stone with her fingers and thought of all the names on the stones around her, of how jealous she was of the long spreads of years between the dates she saw there.

In front of the stone, a little to the right, was square granite marker embedded into the ground, indicating the exact spot where they'd buried the casket. There were no words on it, but instead, an engraved picture of a rubber bath duck wearing a bow tie. As always, it was the engraving that undid her. Her tears were hot and painful as they squeezed between her eyelids.

"Hi, baby." Bella sat in the grass next to the marker. "I'm sorry I've been gone." Her

shoulders shook as tears fell into the autumn-crisp grass between her legs. "Actually, you know what?" she said. "I'm not sorry! Because you should be here." Her voice was low and hoarse. "I'm turning twenty-eight without you."

She leaned over and pressed her forehead against the cold, polished stone. It was a pale substitute for the warm human being she'd spent six years sleeping beside. She cried with an utter lack of control, her cheeks stinging and chapping against the wind. In the six months that had passed, she'd somehow forgotten that her emotions could be so wild, as though they fed on tragedy and became something outside of her, something shadowy and monstrous. She'd forgotten that there could be such utter desperation.

The first time Bella ever saw Ducky cry, he was sitting in the narrow closet in his Vermont apartment. It was a Friday, and she'd been surprised to come home from track practice and hear his message. She'd been planning to make the drive to see him later that night, and her first thought was to hope that plans had not changed. His voice on her answering machine was deceptively normal, and Bella was unprepared for the news she received when she returned the call. He informed her that his father's youngest brother had been killed in a rock climbing accident.

As she drove across three states to get to him, she thought about how close Ducky had been to his uncle, who was only twelve years older. (Ducky's grandmother had birthed a brood

of seven, all of them being boys.) His composure was alarming, and part of her was relieved to find him in tears, a cluster of neckties clenched in his right hand.

"I don't have a black suit," he said. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't have time to get one."

Bella slowly knelt beside him and pushed his hair away from his face. "You don't need a black suit."

He grabbed her then, and wound his arms around her like vines, squeezing so tightly she thought her lungs would deflate. She tunneled her fingers through his hair. His skin was moist and hot, like that of a crying child.

In the end, Ducky didn't wear a suit at all. He wore black pinstriped pants with a royal blue button down shirt, and he perched his black fedora hat atop his head. Bella watched him dress in his old bedroom at his parent's house. She was struck by the intricacy of men's clothing: buttons and cufflinks and perfectly knotted ties. Shoes that needed to be polished and worn only with black socks, collars that needed to be flipped a certain way and buttoned down. Sometimes even suspenders, which Bella found impossible to master. It had taken her all of five minutes to slip on a black sleeveless dress. Her strappy sandals, also black, were waiting for her at the front door. What had taken the most effort was braiding her waist-length blonde hair and twisting the braids into a bun at the crown of her head.

"My father's a wreck." Ducky's voice penetrated the heavy silence, and Bella flinched.

"That's probably normal," she said. "When my dad died, my mom didn't get out of bed for weeks."

"They want me to be a pallbearer," he said, not acknowledging her comment. It was as

though he wasn't even speaking to her, just thinking aloud. "There'll be seven pallbearers, just like there were seven brothers. And I'm the oldest boy..." He trailed off, staring at a point in the space between them, as though there was something there that could offer him an answer. Bella tried to find the words that would ease his pain, but she realized that there were none.

Sitting at his grave, Bella took a deep, hitching breath. She hadn't realized that the trail of her own grief would fork into so many different directions.

"I'm scared," she said, and as the words reached her ears, she realized that it was true. She was scared of the ways she was changing into someone that Ducky might not recognize anymore. Icarus thumped his tail against the base of his cage. Bella smiled.

"I brought you someone else, too. He misses you, even though he loves me more." She lowered Icarus to the ground, so he could smell the grass. He pawed at the dirt around the stone.

"We're going to be okay, baby," Bella said, tracing the name on the headstone. "I guess that's really what I wanted to tell you. Even though it's hard, and it hurts, and sometimes I'm really mad at you, it's going to be okay. *I'm* going to be okay." She realized that she believed it. She wasn't necessarily sure how it would happen, but somewhere along the line she had found certainty that she would.

When she left the cemetery, she felt peaceful. She didn't even bother to inwardly curse out the idiot who'd named the cemetery as she passed under the "Joyful Noise" archway.

At her mother's house, she pulled on some leftover cross-country gear and laced up a pair of sneakers.

"I can't believe they made us wear shorts these tiny," she said to Icarus, while trying to get a good look at her backside in the mirror. "This is obscene!" She shrugged into a sweatshirt and turned off her bedroom light.

The outside air raised goose bumps on her overexposed thighs. Bella futilely pulled at the blue nylon material before picking up her stride. Her muscles had become reacquainted with exertion and no longer felt like rebellious rubber bands. As she listened to the sound of her own footfalls and breathed in the cinder smell of October, she felt lighter somehow, as though she could run across the entire state, until she reached the coast of Maine.

After a shower so hot that it made her chilled body itch, Bella began to pack the few things she'd brought with her. She didn't notice when her mother appeared in the doorway.

"A quick trip this time."

Bella looked up. Her mother's comment was neither question nor condemnation.

"I don't have that much time off, so I figured..." Except that wasn't really the truth. "I think," she began again, "that I found what I was looking for."

"I wasn't aware that you were looking for anything," her mother said.

Bella smiled. "Neither was I."

24

It was dusk by the time Bella pulled onto the highway, and the drive to Rhode Island would be long. Icarus was asleep, but Bella knew he'd be waking up soon, probably hungry. She took in what there was of the scenery as she propelled them home—or at least the closest thing they had to home, all things considered. In the distance, Bella could make out something glowing against the impending nightfall. As she approached, she realized it was a cross, painted white and surrounded by flowers and an odd variety of trinkets. Bella immediately pulled over, cursing out the window at the angry honk of a passing trucker. She flicked on her hazards and slowly approached the cross, as though she was in a church.

Printed on the cross in black, capital letters was the name "Andrew Seaver." Whoever had made Andrew Seaver's memorial had anchored it to the guardrail with tangled web of wires. There was a picture in a plastic bag tacked to the cross, which Bella bent to inspect. It showed a man wearing a baseball cap with his arm around a blonde woman with pink lipstick. Slowly, Bella realized that this must be a picture of Andrew Seaver and his wife. For one terrifying moment, she tasted bile, but didn't throw up. What she did do was get back into her car and produce a pen from her bag.

With the hazard lights still blinking, she clawed through her things until she finally latched onto her journal. Then, Bella wrote. She wrote the story of Andrew Seaver's wife on the night that she got the telephone call, the one that told her that her husband wasn't coming home. Ever. She decided that the wife was named Sheryl and that they had a baby. A boy. She wrote

three pages of story about two people whom she'd never met, and afterward, she was so giddy that she didn't even mind the two hours she had left on the road.

As she turned onto one of the Rhode Island streets she'd become so well-acquainted with, Bella noticed that the dashboard clock read nine forty-seven. The Beanstalk would still be open. She changed course and arrived at the cafe within minutes.

The Beanstop was populated with what Mina called the bar rush: people lingering over a cup of coffee after going out for drinks or dinner. The tattoo artist didn't appear to be working that night, though. Bella hung back near a cluster of tables and watched as Nathan emerged from the kitchen to help the next customer. He looked tired as he pushed the hair off his forehead with his forearm. Her stomach dropped as she traced him with her eyes, noticing how faded his jeans were underneath his flour dusted apron. After he retreated back into the kitchen, Bella stood and followed him.

Danny spotted her first. "Thanks for sticking me with the dictator last night," he said, jerking his head toward Nathan. He smiled at her as he wiped his hands on his apron and left the kitchen.

By that time, Nathan had turned to face her, staring for a few moments as though she might be an apparition.

Bella swallowed hard. "I just wanted to let you guys know that I 'm back, in case you needed me to cover tomorrow."

"Won't be necessary," he said, wiping down the counter near the coffee maker.

"Thanks for getting my shift," she said. "I figured you'd just get someone else to do it."

"It's my job."

His indifference awakened her irritation. "Fine. See you Monday."

"Stay." It was a command, not a question.

She slid her hands into her back pockets and tried to look taller. "I don't think so," she said, and turned on her heel.

Not worth it, not worth it, not worth it. The mantra played on repeat, echoing against the boundaries of her brain as she drove back to Ava's apartment. Except, she thought to herself, she didn't really believe that. For once, Icarus was quiet in his cage. Smart boy, she thought.

Back at the apartment, she settled her ferret with some fresh water and food. In the living room, Ava was sound asleep, sprawled over Leo's chest.

"What'd you do to her?" She sunk into a plush easy chair.

"Not my fault this time," Leo said. "She wanted to watch *Big Fish*, and she cried through the entire thing. I'm not surprised she's out."

Bella attempted to muffle her laughter so as not to wake her friend.

"The entire thing!" Leo shook his head. "I've never seen anyone cry so much over a movie."

"She has a very soft heart," Bella said, smiling at Ava, whose hair had fallen delicately over her face.

Leo kissed her on the very tip of her nose. She turned her face toward his chest, then stretched, her body forming a serpentine arch.

"What are you talking about?" Her eyes were still closed as she questioned them.

"Your ability to cry at the drop of a Hallmark card," Bella said.

"Where did you come from?" Ava frowned, confused. "And I didn't cry that much."

Only at the end."

"You are such a liar," Leo said, shifting his position as she sat up.

Ava turned to Bella. "So you're back early."

"Obviously."

"Have you talked to the shithhead yet?"

"Whoa, listen to you, trucker mouth!" Leo raised his eyebrows.

Bella smirked. "Hostility brings out such maturity in you. To answer your question, yes, I stopped by the café on my way into town. And he's still being difficult."

"You should have it out with him." Her friend stood, and made her way to the kitchen.

"Really let him have it."

"He didn't really do anything wrong, though," Bella said.

"Please." Ava reappeared with glass of red wine. "He clearly led you on."

Bella was quiet for a moment as she mulled it over. She had to admit that Ava had a point, which was why, twenty minutes later, she found herself outside the Beanstop. Again.

25

Bella took a deep breath before pushing the door open. It was ten to midnight, and the

place was virtually empty. Nathan was behind the counter, removing all the baked goods from the cases.

"We're closing," he said.

"I'll wait." She slipped into the kitchen and made herself a caramel latte. She grabbed a newspaper and sat down at one of the front tables. As she crossed her legs, she was pleased to notice the wariness in his expression as he tried to size her up. Good boy, she thought, you should be worried.

After the last customer left, Nathan locked the door. Bella thought she saw her opening, but he walked straight past her. She rolled her eyes at his retreat and uncrossed her legs. She didn't see him again until well past midnight, after he'd already sent Danny home.

"You coming, Cinderella?" His voice called out to her from the kitchen. Bella felt as though she was heading into a wolf's lair as she walked out. However, she thought, in that particular fairytale, Little Red Riding did come out on top.

"So why are you here?" Nathan untied his apron and whipped it into the laundry bin. "You didn't seem interested in being here earlier."

Bella felt her insides shrink, but she was tired, hungry, and stiff from hours of driving. Backing down wasn't even on the horizon. "You have no idea what my interests are. You can't even figure out your own."

"Why don't you stop beating around the bush?" His tone of voice made it sound like an order. She remembered why she was mad.

"Why don't you stop telling me what to do," she said. His eyes registered surprise, but he didn't have a comeback. Instead, he crossed his arms and leaned against a table.

"You're making me crazy!" She raked her fingers through her hair, and took a deep breath. "You said you were still involved with Autumn because neither of you had met anyone special, but sometimes you treat me like that's what I am." She felt as though her stomach had turned into a washing machine. When she'd set out to be strong, she hadn't realized that she'd also have to make herself so vulnerable. The silence hung in the air like a noxious gas until Nathan finally spoke.

"I'm done here. I think you should come with me."

She wanted to ask him why, but she knew that it would be a waste of breath to do so. When he slid his arms into the sleeves of his jacket, there was nothing else for Bella to do but follow him out the door.

Outside, there were other people and other sounds. It made it easier for Bella to maintain the lack of conversation. This, she thought, was why people turned the radio up. They cross-stitched through a neighborhood Bella was unfamiliar with. Panic had time to rear its head for a moment before Bella reined it in, reminding herself that this man was teacher, not a serial killer.

Nathan slowed his pace in front of a park with a playground and a baseball diamond. He pushed through the gate. Bella had reached her breaking point.

"What are we doing here?"

He turned around to look at her. In the dark, the irises of his eyes melted into the pupils, making him look like a vampire or some other nighttime demon. "We're swinging."

Bella didn't move.

He cocked his head. "Like on a swing set?"

"I heard you," Bella said, and rubbed her arms through the denim of her jacket. "I just

didn't believe you. And I'm not the one dragging someone to a playground in the middle of the night, so don't you dare look at me like I'm the crazy person here!"

He gave her the ghost of a smile and walked toward her. "Close your eyes."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because," she said, "I don't trust you."

"I don't believe you" he said, unfazed. "Now close your eyes."

Bella did as she was told. She felt his fingers pull on one of her crossed arms as they latched around her wrist. They walked slowly and clumsily, like two people learning how to dance. She felt the texture of the ground change as they walked over some sort of pebbly gravel. He dropped her wrist and she felt his hands come onto her shoulders from the front.

"One little step this way—"

"Stop pushing me," she said. "I'm going to fall."

"I'm not pushing you," Nathan said to her. "Relax. Okay, now sit."

She lowered herself slowly, until she was sitting on the grooved plastic plank of a playground swing. She smiled.

"Can I open my eyes yet?"

"Hell, no!" Nathan's voice came from behind, his breath warm against her ear. "You'll ruin the best part. Now hold on."

No sooner had she raised her hands to grip the chain links than she was boosted upward into what felt like a glorious freefall. She shrieked and held tighter to the chains. As she climbed higher and higher, Bella felt freed.

Abruptly, the sensation ended as Nathan steadied the swing. "You can open those eyes now."

She looked around her, amazed that she could still be somewhere as normal as a playground after experiencing such exhilaration. Nathan dropped into the swing next to her.

"That was fantastic," she said. "I haven't been on a swing since I was a kid."

Nathan smiled, his sneakers dragging lazily in the gravel. "I love to swing. That's my soft spot."

"Some tough guy you are."

"I never claimed to be anything of the sort."

"Right," Bella said. "It must've been your attitude talking. So why are we here, anyway?"

"Because I was lying."

Bella narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm confused."

His sigh registered defeat. "I told you I hadn't met anyone special yet, and I knew that would get to you."

"Then why..."

"Because," he said, "you are, and in case you haven't figured this out yet, I like to be in control."

Her stare was deep. She wasn't used to this kind of unadorned honesty from him. After a few moments of silence, he grabbed the chain of her swing and pulled her closer to him.

"Don't act like you don't care."

She shrugged. "Why should I?"

He didn't drop his gaze, wouldn't let her off the hook. "I know you do. I can feel it every time you're in my sight. Stop fighting it so goddamn hard."

Bella wrapped her arms around her ribs, shrinking away from him. "You have a girlfriend."

He stood up, abruptly letting go of her swing. "Autumn wasn't a girlfriend, she was a mistake."

"It's easy to say that now." She dragged her feet to steady herself.

"She's out of the picture."

"Because of me?"

"Because of you."

"So what now?"

He smiled, betraying a familiar glint of mischief. "I was thinking maybe I could cook you breakfast."

She shook her head, unable to believe in this man in his threadbare jeans, with wild eyes and hair she wanted to feel between her fingers. This man, with his blue collar hands and the soul of a poet. She wanted to revel in the very fact that he existed, but found she couldn't breach the barrier of her past. Who would want someone with as much baggage as she carried?

"I can't."

He crossed his arms, in defiance, not defeat. "Don't tell me you don't want this."

She slowly shook her head. "That's not the issue."

"Someone else?"

Bella offered him a small smile. "Not in the way you mean."

He shook his head. "I can't believe you got up on your high horse when you were just as—"

"He's dead."

Nathan was silent. She watched his throat ripple as he swallowed. She knew she had some explaining to do.

26

Nathan didn't cry the way Iris had when Bella told her the story. He was silent while she spoke, and when she was done, he lifted her off the swing and wrapped her up in his arms. The canvas of his jacket was rough against her face and he smelled like coffee beans, soap, and something spicy she couldn't quite place. The October chill ceased to exist. Bella wondered how she could possibly be afraid of something that felt this safe. But she was. When she pulled away from him, she took a shaky breath.

"You should probably just stay away from me. I'm broken."

"We all get broken, Cinderella. It doesn't mean we stay that way."

"I just think this is a bad idea."

"I think you're falling in love with me."

She dropped her gaze, no longer able to meet his eyes. "I should go." She stood up, but he grabbed her wrist. He jerked her toward him and caught her face in his hand. His mouth came down on hers, and she felt flashes of panic, of guilt. She tried to pull away, but he refused to let her go. Gradually, she stopped struggling. As her fear flaked away, she discovered that something very much like bliss was lurking beneath.

Seated on the counter in Nathan's kitchen, Bella closed her eyes. She could hear the crackle of frozen vegetables thawing in the frying pan, and her nose detected the unmistakable smell of pancakes on the griddle. She felt a fingertip at her nose.

"Did you just put flour on my nose?"

"Not much." Nathan's smile was mischievous as he turned his attention back to the stove.

When he kept insisting on making her breakfast, Bella initially assumed it was a thinly veiled ploy to get her into bed. She was on edge as they drove to his place, but she was distracted from her reservations as soon as they pulled into the driveway. Nathan lived in a beautiful old house with a wraparound porch and a backyard that looked as though it marked the edge of a forest.

"You live here?"

He laughed. "I'll probably be paying it off for the rest of my life, but yes." He turned the

key in the lock, and Bella heard a dog bark from within the house. This must be a well-practiced routine, she thought, picturing the dog lying in wait for the sound of metal on metal.

"This is Limerick," Nathan told her, vigorously patting and scratching a sizeable golden retriever.

Bella smiled, but rolled her eyes.

"I don't want to hear a peep out of you," he said. "You named *your* pet after a doomed mythological creature."

"He was a boy, not a creature. And I didn't even say anything."

"Watch it, Cinderella, or you're gonna be the one making breakfast."

"That might be best," she said, "since I have no reason to believe that your cooking skills are up to par."

Nathan swept her up over his shoulder as she shrieked her protest. "If you don't stop back talking me, girl, I'm gonna give yours to the dog." He set her down on the countertop, where she was currently absorbed in watching him.

He slid a perfectly turned omelet onto wide red plate. The edges were folded in so that it looked like a neat, square package, betraying no trace of the ham, cheese, and vegetables that Bella knew it had been stuffed with.

"Where did you learn how to—"

"Sy isn't necessarily the best chef at the Beanstop," Nathan said, and flipped a pancake next to the omelet. "He just happens to be the only one with a degree in culinary arts."

She laughed. "You could make a fortune in New York."

"Sadly, cuisine is not my calling," Nathan said, handing her a plate before turning off the

range. “I’m doomed to the frustrations of a struggling writer’s life. And so, it would appear, are you.”

Bella cut into the puffed square of omelet. “I’m not a writer. It’s just drivel.”

“But you’re writing.”

“So?”

Nathan swallowed a bite of pancake. “So, what else are you doing with your life? Are you going to tell me that you were born to work the counter at a coffee shop?”

“I’m a librarian. My career just got a little derailed.”

He shook his head. “Cinderella, you have too much light inside you to be hiding it in a library. That’s not what you were meant to do.”

She put her fork down. “It used to be.” He was right, though. It wasn’t, anymore. She had become a different person, a more daring person, and the idea of spending eight hour shifts in a library seemed somehow stifling now. But if that wasn’t her place in the world anymore, then what was?

Bella woke up to a stream of sunlight passing directly over her eyes. She realized slowly that she was on Nathan’s couch, his arms laced firmly around her waist. The table clock in the living room read twelve-forty-one. After several failed attempts at waking the man at her side, she gave up and scrawled a note for him instead.

The afternoon air held a bite, and Bella was grateful that she'd driven her own car. She felt drunk, as though the emotional upheaval that had occurred in the past twelve hours was simply a result of distorted perception. Her mind hadn't processed the turn her relationship with Nathan had taken and she wasn't sure she could find the right emotion. Instead, she focused on the short drive home.

Ava was awake when she got back, fully dressed and Swiffering the kitchen floor.

"Someone got lucky last night."

She let out a short, sharp laugh. "You'd be surprised." She sank into one of the kitchen chairs. "Do you ever think about your place in the world?"

Ava stopped moving. "You just spent the night with the hottest barista I've ever met and you want to talk about this Buddhist-Zen bullshit?"

"Actually, he teaches some courses at your alma mater."

"When he's not making machiattos," Ava said. "So how was he?"

"I seem to remember a certain somebody giving me a stern talking to when I inquired after *her* love life," Bella said, and crossed her arms.

"That was because I'd just met the guy. This is different."

"Sorry to disappoint, but we didn't have sex."

Ava sat down in the chair next to her friend's. "Why not?"

Bella shrugged. "Some things are better than sex."

"Like what?"

"Perfectly turned ham and cheese omelets." She relished in Ava's incredulous expression. "Let's do take out tonight. Dinner and a movie." She didn't give her friend a

chance to respond before she retreated to the alcove to sprawl across her futon with Gone With the Wind and a snuggly ferret.

They'd already started watching *Pirates of the Caribbean* by the time the delivery boy rang the doorbell.

"Pause it," Ava called back as she went to answer the door.

"You've seen this movie fifty times!"

"I don't want to miss any of Orlando Bloom's screen time."

Bella shook her head, but hit the button on the remote. She picked up the tabloid that Ava had left open over one arm of the couch.

"Junior high kids could write better than this," she said, leafing through the pages.

Ava returned to the living room with a stack of cardboard containers, pungent with the aroma of Indian food. "I don't read it for the quality of the writing."

Bella didn't say anything, but rolled her eyes.

"Just because you can read Melville without falling asleep..." Ava let the thought hang.

"This has nothing to do with Melville," Bella said. "Even I could write better articles than these hacks."

"Well, why don't you?" Ava peeled the lid off a container of chicken curry.

Bella cocked her head. "Good question."

That night, Bella found it difficult to sleep. She spread a newspaper across the futon and sat on the floor, picking apart everything from movie reviews to obituaries. Although her passion for poetry was beginning to grow, she knew it wouldn't pay the bills.

By the time she pulled down the covers, her fingertips were grey from newsprint. She

was exhausted, but her excitement lingered, dormant until she woke up and it could electrify her mind once more.

27

She wore sunglasses to work the next day. She'd woken up too late to take a shower, and had barely managed to comb her hair before wriggling into her clothes. When she walked through the door, she was overwhelmed by the sound intermingled voices. Everyday noises had somehow become too much for her. The clock in the kitchen read 9:58 when she put down her bag.

"Cutting it a little close today?" Sy smirked at her from behind the table where he was dicing vegetables.

She pulled down her sunglasses and glared at him. "You're lucky I'm in a good mood."

"Right," Danny said. "Because you're so menacing."

She turned around. "Was I talking to you?"

His reply was a smile so sweet that it hurt Bella's teeth. She tied her apron strings and headed for the register. She managed to make it halfway through her shift before getting the third degree from her friends.

"Come smoke a cigarette with me." Mina pulled on her arm.

"I don't smoke."

"Well come sit with me while *I* smoke."

Bella grabbed her jacket. "It's the slowest form of suicide, you know."

"Spare me the public service announcement."

"Don't you think they're going to be short-handed with both of us out here?"

"Nah." Mina shot a stream of smoke to her left. "Nathan will be in soon, anyway."

Speaking of which..."

Bella shifted on the stone steps. "I should've known." She updated Mina on the current state of events regarding Nathan.

Mina laughed. "He's a little rough around the edges, but he's a really good guy. I promise."

Bella smiled, remembering the way he'd lifted her to sit on the counter and how when he'd kissed her, he'd been gentler than she'd expected.

"I just don't think he's sure of what he wants."

"Are you?"

Bella smiled. "Touche. I just hate this interim when everything is so fragile and tentative."

"Just wait until you've made it through ten years of marriage." Mina laughed as she stubbed out her cigarette. "Trust me, this is the best part."

Bella thought about Ducky, and the apartment at Elmira's. She wasn't so sure that she agreed with her friend. She pushed the memories of her past life away before they could

consume her and stood to brush off her pants. Sharing your life with another person made you vulnerable, and she wasn't sure she was ready for that again, not when the person you loved the most could be taken without reason or explanation.

The cafe was relatively quiet when the two women got back inside. Bella left Mina and Sy in the kitchen and went to bus tables in preparation for the dinner crowd. Although her back was to the door when Nathan arrived, she could feel his presence as though through some sort of feral instinct. She heard him greet Danny, but still didn't turn around. She hadn't spoken to him since she'd left him asleep on the couch. Darts of doubt pricked her insides. If he was really as infatuated as Mina led her to believe, he would have called. By the time she returned to the kitchen with a tray full of dirty dishes, Bella had worked herself into what some might call a snit. She dumped her tray, trying not to splash Danny, whose hands were elbow-deep in suds. Mina was putting on her coat, her shift apparently over. She glanced at Nathan before shooting Bella a perplexed look.

Not long after Mina left, Danny drained the sink and went to work the register, no doubt eliciting looks of lust from every teenage girl who happened to be in the vicinity. Sy was plugged into his headphones, and the silence between Nathan and Bella was almost visible. When she looked at him, she saw nothing of the man who'd flipped pancakes in the middle of the night, who'd wrapped his arms around her so tightly in sleep that she'd had difficulty extricating herself from his grasp. However, he was the one to break the silence.

"When are you on until?" He looked at her clinically.

"Eight."

"You can leave earlier. Danny's here until close."

"I'd rather stay."

"Fine." He pulled a tower of coffee cups out of the closet and sidestepped her to restock. The skin on her arms pebbled into goose bumps as he passed. She turned to leave the kitchen, but stopped.

"Why are you doing this?"

He continued working. "Doing what?"

"Talking to me like I'm a stranger off the street?"

He turned to face her. "Look, I have a job to do."

She crossed her arms. "Well, so do I, but I can't work with this kind of tension."

He shook his head. "I would have thought that you'd at least have the decency to be up front with me, instead of slipping away like a thief in the night."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Saturday night. Or Sunday morning, to be more precise."

She shook her head. "I left a note! It's not my fault you were so comatose that I couldn't wake you up." Her eyes were wide with incredulity, that he was being so unreasonable.

"When you didn't call me, I figured that you didn't want to—"

"I didn't find a note." His expression turned thoughtful.

"Well, I left one."

"I think," he continued, "that I might have a theory as to what happened to it."

"Your jailbait ex-girlfriend showed up and destroyed it in a psychotic rage?"

He cringed. "No. I do, however, have a large dog with a very voracious appetite."

Bella raised an eyebrow. "That's as bad as the dog-ate-my-homework excuse."

"Cinderella, don't stay mad," he said, exaggerating his soft southern drawl. He hooked his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans and pulled them low over his hips.

"Being cute will get you nowhere with me."

"I seriously doubt that," he said. "How can I make it up to you?"

She fixed him with what she hoped was her most seductive smile. "Tell me everything you know about journalism."

"I was thinking more along the lines of dinner, a bubble bath, a full body massage—"

She swatted him with a wooden spoon. "That can come later."

"Oh really, now?" He smiled. "Well, then let's get this pesky writers' nonsense dispensed with."

"Nathan, I'm serious."

"Hell, me too!" He hoisted himself onto a counter. "I was too idealistic for my own good back in college, so I didn't have much use for journalism. I'm familiar with the industry, though."

"What kind of experience do you need?"

"None, if you're willing to start at the bottom." He brushed some flour off the counter.

"Cinderella, I hope this isn't going where I think it's going."

"I'll ask the questions."

"I wasn't asking," he said, "just making my opinion known."

"Save it for the customers. So what qualifies as the bottom?"

"Copy editing. Maybe if you work on a small enough paper, they'll let you cover a school board meeting." His tone was disdainful, but Bella wasn't swayed.

"I could do that."

"Earth to Cinderella!" Nathan snapped his fingers in front of her face. "Journalism is no joke. You have to be tough as nails and twice as sharp to survive that kind of life. You'd be ripped to shreds."

The hint of a smile creased her face as she grabbed a box of napkins for restocking. "I think that you seriously underestimate me."

As she left work that night—at eight o'clock as she'd originally planned—it occurred to her that she finally felt like she was back in the driver's seat. She slipped her cell phone out of her pocket and called Kieran. The automated operator informed her that the number she was trying to reach had been disconnected. She hung up and dialed another number.

"Aren't you on your way home?" Ava said.

"Yes, but—"

"Then why are you calling?"

"Kieran's phone number is disconnected."

"Surprise, surprise."

Bella could picture the expression on her friend's face. "You don't find that dipping at least slightly into the realm of the bizarre?"

"That he got a new phone and didn't tell us? He hasn't been much of a friend lately, so no."

"Well, I'm not letting this ride."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"The only thing I haven't tried."

Ava's laugh was harsh. "Well, wait 'til you get home. This I've got to watch."

28

It was several shades past nightfall when Bella made it back to the apartment. She shucked her jacket and draped it over one of the kitchen chairs. Ava was sitting at the table with a martini, waiting.

"You really feel this is necessary?"

"There's no one else who would know."

"You could call his company." Ava stirred her martini with a cocktail toothpick that had impaled three olives. "At least then we'd know if he's still working there."

"But then what?" Bella poured herself a glass of wine from the slender bottle in the fridge. "They wouldn't give us any more information than that, even if they had it."

Ava cast a nonchalant glance at the glass in Bella's hand. "If you're really going through with this, I'd recommend a stronger drink than that."

"She's low class," Bella said, "but she's not a monster." As she picked up her phone, she wondered if the friction she felt toward Marnie would have bloomed even if Ducky hadn't died. The friendship between the librarian and the slinky blonde secretary had always been tenuous at

best. If it hadn't been this, maybe it would have been something else. She took a deep breath and dialed the number.

"Who is this?" Suspicion leeches through the voice at the other end of the line. Ava moved closer, and Bella angled the phone so that her friend could hear.

"It's Bella." There was a pause, and Bella could hear her expel a lungful of cigarette smoke. The perfect little femme fatale, Bella thought.

"Haven't heard from you in quite some time."

"I've been traveling," Bella said. "Listen, I was calling to see if you have Kieran's new number."

"If he wanted you to have it, I'm sure he'd have given it to you." Another mouthful of smoke. The librarian with the Rapunzel hair might have bitten her tongue, Bella thought, but the spunky redheaded poet was a whole different breed of girl.

"There's no need to be petty," she said. "I'm just worried about him. You're forgetting that I was close with him *before* we put his best friend in the ground." Ava's eyes widened and she stamped her foot against the linoleum in approval.

"Sorry Princess, you don't get everything." Bella could hear Marnie suck in on her cigarette. "You had Ducky. That's enough."

The blood rushed to Bella's head and her vision splashed with black. For a moment, she teetered at the edge of consciousness. She took a slow, deep breath, not willing to be undone by someone who would stoop so low. Ava, on the other hand, kept trying to grab the phone out of her hand. She had to fight to keep the device out of her friend's grasp as she carefully aimed, and then fired her retaliation.

"Maybe if my life was as meaningless as yours, I might have to distract myself from it with below-the-belt remarks, too. Kieran's out of your league, and for that matter, so was my boyfriend. I'm concerned about my friend, but if you can't handle being a grown-up, I'll seek my information elsewhere." Next to her, Ava was practically in hysterics. Marnie was silent, and she knew her rival had been felled. Still, the comment about Ducky rankled and she couldn't resist one final jab. She felt that she'd earned it.

"Oh, and I'd stop smoking if I were you. I hear it makes you look old, and you'll probably want to hang onto your looks, because you sure as hell don't have anything else going for you." This time, Bella didn't wait for a response, just snapped her phone shut. Ava immediately hugged her.

"You. Were. Incredible. I've never seen you like that."

Bella shrugged. "There are some lines you just don't cross."

Ava shook her head. "I knew she had a thing for Ducky."

"How could I have missed the fact that she was such an awful person?" Bella wrapped her arms around her ribcage. "How could I have let her be my friend?"

"I'll tell you how," Ava snorted. "She acted sweet as pie around you because you were always with Ducky. Around the rest of us, she was never any great shakes."

"Still," Bella said, "I can't believe she turned out to be such a viper! Do you think Ducky knew?"

Ava smiled. "He was too perceptive not to. Besides, he only had eyes for one blonde."

Bella smiled. "I'd like to think so."

It wasn't until later, after the adrenaline of the showdown had left her, that Bella realized

she was still no closer to an explanation for Kieran's absence. It was as if he'd wandered into the Bermuda triangle, and somehow slipped off the radar. Under the blankets on the futon, she shivered. Icarus began to gnaw at the bars of his cage, as if he could sense ill tidings.

"It's going to be okay," she said to him, although in shadowy moonlight, she had to wonder which of them she was reassuring.

Her surrender to sleep was slow in coming that night, but when it did, Bella dreamed of Ducky. In the dream, she was in a building, large and cold, that seemed to be made out of stone. It almost seemed like a castle, but she wasn't sure. There were no windows, and the hallways were dark. Bella was unsure of where she was or how she got there. What she was unwaveringly certain of was the fact that she was lost. That prospect was more frightening than the castle itself, and she was crying. She turned corner after corner, rattling the knobs of every door she came across, only to find that they were all locked. Fear became an icicle in her chest. She stopped trying the doors and began to run, blindly turning corner after corner, no doubt losing herself more deeply in her labyrinthine prison until she ran into something solid. She looked up into the familiarity of Ducky's eyes. Her insides loosened in a flood of relief.

"I'm lost, baby." Her eyes welled with the fire of tears. Ducky was silent, but his smile was the most serene thing she'd ever seen. She woke up with anger in her throat, anger at the fact that life had hurt her so deeply and left her with no one to blame. That morning, her shower was brief, the rhythmic tattoo of the water somehow too stifling to bear. She left the house with her hair still wet and headed for the bakery.

"I'm considering a career change." Next to Bella were the pieces to a wedding cake. Iris was all business, and had made her tie a bandanna over her hair before she'd even let her in the

kitchen. Apparently, making a wedding cake out of carrot cake was a task she didn't care to repeat due to a stray hair in the mix.

"Didn't you just make a career change?"

Bella delicately licked cream cheese frosting from an oversized spoon. "That's a gross exaggeration."

"Just saying. It seems like an unnecessary move for someone who's not planning on sticking around."

"Well," said Bella, "maybe I will."

Iris had spread a thick layer of white frosting across the top of the base cake. "So what is this promising new career change?"

"I'm going to be a journalist."

Iris looked up. "I told you he was a nice boy, not that you should aspire to be like him."

"If you're referring to Nathan, this has nothing to do with him. He doesn't even like journalists."

"Whatever. Help me with this." Iris maneuvered the next layer of cake atop the frosting.

On Thursday, Nathan tweaked the schedule so that Bella would be out in time for the Beanstop poetry night.

"You do realize that part of the reason I was hired was to cover for you when you're running the night," Bella said, as she wiped down a countertop.

"That's why we have Danny to pick up the slack," he said.

By seven, Bella had hung up her apron and was helping Nathan carry the sound equipment up from the basement. She had suspicions that his motivations had more to do with

the fact that he needed an extra pair of hands than his interest in her artistic evolution. Still, he could have just as easily enlisted Danny's help. She'd already called Iris, who'd promised to come after taking a nap.

After they'd finished setting up, Nathan led her to a table near the window, not far from the microphone. He disappeared downstairs, leaving Bella to her thoughts. Gradually, the seats found occupants, and the crowd was every bit as diverse as Bella remembered. One man was even wearing a police uniform. When Nathan returned to the table, he was carrying two coffee cups and a brown paper bag. After setting the mugs on the table, he reached into the bag and handed her a wrap.

“What is this?” Bella wrinkled her nose at the smell.

“Smoked salmon on a spinach wrap.” She watched his throat contract as he took a large sip from his coffee cup.

“There’d better not be avocado in it.”

“Only a little.”

Bella rolled her eyes and took a sip of her drink, which turned out to be a caramel latte. Scanning the crowd, she noticed that the young girl who’d read so impressively on Bella’s first night was sitting with a woman who looked to be her mother. Not far from them was a man whose black glossy ponytail was streaked with grey. Bella remembered serving coffee to him earlier in the week. Once again, she was in awe of the community that had developed.

“You’re drooling.” Nathan reseated himself across from her, and Bella realized she hadn’t even noticed him get up.

“Shut up.”

“Don’t blame me,” he said. “It’s not my fault you’re hooked.”

“Do you guys ever have poetry slams here?”

“Nah. It’s a lot of work, and it just doesn’t seem like the right kind of crowd.”

Bella raised her eyebrows. “I think you’re wrong about that.”

“It’s not as simple as it seems, newbie. Most venues have slams because they want to form teams. If there’s nothing at stake, people lose interest.”

Bella stared at him blankly until he explained. Nathan told her that a poetry venue could get registered with a national slam organization. After doing so, the venue could form a team of slam poets that would be eligible to participate in regional and national competitions. She sat back after he finished.

“Still not seeing the problem.”

“The problem is you have to jump through a lot of hoops,” Nathan said. “And I’m not exactly the hoop jumping type.”

Bella stirred her latte, making slow, lazy circles with her spoon. “You should let me do it.”

Nathan raised his eyebrows. “I think you might be biting off a little more than you can chew.”

“There are so many places I could go with that comment...”

“Cinderella, come on. You wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“You could help me.”

“You’re something else.” He shook his head. “I have to get this signup sheet out, so put the conversation on hold.”

“But—”

“Later.” He turned his back, and Bella had to settle for admiring the view as he walked away from her. She wasn’t alone for long before Iris arrived.

“No fair, you got to go home and change.” Bella admired Iris’s sleek purple pants and pulled a chair over for her friend.

“The perks of owning your own business,” said Iris, sliding gracefully into her seat. “How are things going with my favorite Beanstop boy?”

“I’m trying to talk him into letting me start a poetry slam.”

“Not exactly the type of info I was looking for.”

Bella sipped her latte. “In terms of our relationship, your guess is as good as mine. I don’t—” She cut herself short as Nathan walked back to the table.

“Alright, Cinderella. You still want to run a slam?” His eyes were alive with something that made Bella nervous.

“I didn’t say I necessarily wanted to run it, I just want there to—”

“I signed you up for an exhibition slam in Providence.”

“You what?” Bella’s stomach knotted, and it had nothing to do with the salmon and avocado wrap.

“I’ll be in it, too, along with some others. Afterward, we can talk about running a slam out of the Beanstop.” Now, she could identify the jitter in his eyes. It was mischief. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a poetry night to run.” He about-faced, and Bella slouched in her chair. Iris tried to hide a smile behind her mug of tea.

“What?”

"I didn't say anything," Iris said.

"Maybe not, but you're thinking it."

Iris just stirred her tea.

29

"Don't you think it's a little strange to be having a Halloween party in November?" Bella checked her makeup one last time before pulling on her elbow-length white gloves.

"No," Ava said, "but I do think it's strange that your Cinderella costume involves flaming red hair."

"Why?"

"Cinderella was a blonde!"

"Says Disney! Besides, I am a blonde. Just not at the moment." She twirled in front of the mirror, her rhinestone tiara glinting in her reflection. At a second-hand store she'd found the beautiful, ice-blue ball gown with a corset top and a billowing train. Ava had blown out her hair to give it some body, and she'd found a pair of clear, plastic slippers at Wal-mart, of all places, as part of a child's costume. Granted, her red hair *did* look more Little Mermaid than Cinderella, but it was her birthday, and she figured that granted her a little leeway.

"Zip me up." Ava turned her back to Bella. She zipped her friend into her filmy white dress and watched as Ava pulled on a short platinum blonde wig. A few quick makeup tricks and it appeared that Marilyn Monroe had risen from the dead. "Are you still mad that Kieran's not coming?"

"I told you, I'm not mad, I'm just worried."

"Well, it's your birthday." She handed Bella a shot glass. "Worry less, drink more."

Bella held the glass of liquid up to the light. "What is this?"

"A red-headed slut. I figured it was appropriate to the occasion."

"That's so flattering." Bella upended the glass, the Dr. Pepper aftertaste a reminder of the time she'd shared the same drink with Nathan.

"Have you told Nathan about the newspaper job yet?" Sometimes, it felt as though Ava could read her mind.

"I'm not starting for another month."

Ava looked as though she wanted to say something, but the doorbell rang. She turned to Bella. "You should probably get that."

She eyed her friend suspiciously as she swung open the door. Her reservation turned quickly into glee when she discovered Jane waiting in the hallway. Her friend looked as chic as ever, her black hair flat ironed straight and her nails airbrushed Ferrari red. She was the epitome of cool until she dropped her bags to envelop Bella in a hug.

"I can't believe you're here," Bella said into her shoulder.

Jane pulled back. "As if I'd miss the social event of the season. It's not every day my girl turns twenty-eight! You'll have to let me know what it's like."

"You're only three months away, smartass." Bella swatted Jane as she went to hug Ava.

"Where's your brother?"

"Considering your current situation," Jane said, "I thought it was better he stayed home."

Bella turned to Ava. "Someone has a big mouth."

"Apparently, I walked in on the wrong end of *this* conversation." All three women turned to see Leo standing in the doorway holding what looked to be a bag of eyeballs. Ava blushed and Bella collapsed into a fit of laughter, leaning against the refrigerator. Jane introduced herself, the only one of them able to muster a shred of poise.

"I think *some* people have been sampling the punch," she said.

"I wouldn't be surprised." He laughed. "Hon, do you want these in the freezer?"

Ava looked at the bag he held in his hand. "Yup."

Bella crinkled her nose. "What are those?"

"Ice cubes," Leo said, from inside the freezer. "You fill them with water and freeze them."

"Charming," she said.

"She looks pale," Jane said to Ava. "I think it's time for another drink." Bella accepted a cocktail from her friend, complete with a violet-irised eyeball. The liquor lubricated her insides, unwinding any lingering tension. This, she thought, was to be a night of pure pleasure. She felt every inch the princess that she appeared to be. She hadn't told Nathan about her costume choice and wondered how he'd react. The effect was really for him, anyway.

"Help me with my costume," Jane said, as Leo passed an ice chip from his mouth to Ava's.

"You can change in Ava's room," said Bella. "What are you, anyway?"

"Queen of Hearts."

"Like in Alice in Wonderland?"

Jane pulled something out of a shopping bag. "Not exactly." She shook out a white shift with the playing card design sequined over the front. It was so short that Bella initially thought it was a shirt.

Jane shimmied out of her jeans and pulled her shirt over her head. Bella helped her arrange her hair into an ornate bun, over which Jane placed a delicate gold crown adorned with red jewels. Ava called from the kitchen, and Bella discovered that Mina had arrived, this time with her husband. They were dressed as Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen and looked so cool that Bella almost wished she'd dressed like a rock star.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart!" Mina hugged her before handing her a silver bag embossed with the words *St. James Tattoo*.

"Uh oh." Bella looked from Mina to her husband.

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to convert you," Mina said. "It's all stuff you'll love, I promise."

She barely had time to thank them before the doorbell rang out above the conversation. For some time after that, Bella surrendered to the tide of hugs, tissue paper, and outrageous costumes. It reminded her of how flooded her old apartment had been after Ducky died, how everything had become one massive blur. Except, she thought, after Ducky died, she'd been frozen within it, the eye of the hurricane, walled off from everyone around her. Now, she was a part of the chaos, and she wasn't all that surprised to find she liked it.

Bella didn't see Nathan come in, but she could feel his presence.

"Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

She smiled and turned to face him, then swallowed hard. "You too."

He was dressed as a pirate. His white shirt was partially unbuttoned and Bella's eyes were drawn to the contours of his exposed collarbones. His hair was tousled and he was wearing an eye patch. She melted.

"I brought you something," he said, "and there's one part of it that you have to open right now."

She gave him a calculating look, but took the box, which was wrapped in pale blue tissue paper. She wasn't expecting anything in particular, but she was unprepared for the contents of the box. Nestled inside was a pair of glass slippers, but they bore little resemblance to the cheap children's toys that currently adorned her feet. The base and heel of each shoe was made of clear Lucite, while the rest was fashioned from a more flexible material. They looked as though they'd been plucked from the fairy tale, delivered by the fairy godmother herself. As Bella looked up at Nathan, she couldn't help but think that maybe they were.

"But how—"

"You never mind." Nathan lifted her by the waist and set her on the kitchen counter. He knelt before her and made short work of her shoes. Gently, he slid the glass slippers onto her feet. The fit could not have been more precise. He stood, slowly and pressed his forehead against hers.

"The fairest maiden in all the land," he whispered.

Tears slipped down Bella's cheeks. Her chest felt full. It had been almost seven years,

and she'd forgotten what it felt like to fall in love.

When she woke up the next morning, the first thing she registered was surprise that she wasn't hung over. It took her a moment to realize that her phone was ringing. She climbed over Nathan and fumbled for her bag. If she could have known what was hanging on the other end of the line, she might have just let it ring. Instead, she heard Marnie's uneven voice coming through from miles away.

"I'm sorry—I didn't know who else to—oh, God."

"You need to relax, because right now you're making about as much sense as an Alzheimer's patient." Bella pulled a blanket off the bed and slipped out of the apartment so her voice wouldn't wake up last night's revelers, who seemed to be asleep on every available surface. "What happened to you?" Her voice echoed off the cracked paint of the hallway walls.

"It's not me." Marnie's voice sounded choppy, as though she was crying. "Kieran tried to kill himself."

After those words, autopilot kicked in. Bella found herself sitting on the floor next to the futon, packing her duffel bag, except that she didn't remember hanging up the phone or going back into the apartment. The blanket she'd taken off the bed was neatly folded, but she didn't remember doing that, either. Not again, she thought. Not again.

"Come back to bed, little girl." Nathan's eyes were still closed as he reached out a hand

for her.

“I have to go.”

“Later.” His fingertips found her arm and pulled.

“Now,” she said. The news of Kieran’s suicide attempt was enough to get Nathan vertical and alert almost immediately.

“What can I do?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I’m packing and then I’m heading north.”

He examined the contents of her duffel bag. “Shorts might not be the most practical choice for November in New Hampshire.”

Bella stared blankly at the tank top she was folding and realized that she’d packed all her summer clothes. Nathan offered to make her some coffee but she shook him off and went to wake up Ava.

When she pushed open the door to the bedroom, Bella saw her friend asleep on Leo's chest. Her face was slack and she looked so serene that Bella almost left the room without waking her up. After taking a deep breath, she shook Ava's shoulder until she opened her eyes.

"What time is it?"

"Early." Bella swallowed hard. "We have to talk."

Ava wrapped herself in an afghan and followed Bella to the kitchen. Before she'd even finished explaining the situation, Ava was awash in an uncontrollable tide of tears. She remembered her friend's bloodshot eyes in the hospital after the accident, and wondered who had been the one to break the news to her then. It must have been Kieran, she thought. She doubted her mother would have been the one to call, considering the fact that they weren't even on

speaking terms at that point. Now, another crisis, except he wasn't there to handle it. This time, he was the one who'd fallen, and despite all she'd been through, Bella felt like a poor substitute.

"Is he alive?" Ava wiped her face with the corner of the afghan.

"Yes, but Marnie didn't give me much more information than that."

"Why is that fucking bitch there?"

"There was no one else." Bella put her arms around her friend. "I'm going to call his parents in a few minutes. I doubt Marnie has their number."

"Do it now." Ava sat up and wiped the fresh tears away. "I'm fine."

"It's going to take them some time to book a flight, anyway." Kieran's parents had retired to Colorado, where they'd both grown up.

Ava stood. "I'll be there tonight. I don't know when, but—"

"I'll keep you posted." Something unspoken passed between the two women before they retreated to their corners to prepare for the unknown terrain ahead of them. In her alcove, she found that her duffel bag had been packed.

"I found you some weather appropriate clothes." Nathan was poking at Icarus's cage.

"Does this guy bite?"

She laughed. "Only if you stick your fingers through the bars of his cage like a moron." She picked up Icarus and handed him to Nathan. "You packed all my clothes?"

"About a week's worth."

"Did you go through my underwear?"

His eyes brimmed with mischief. "Desperate times..."

She threw a pillow at him and flopped back on the futon. "Can you call the Beanstop

and—"

"Already did. Jack says to take as much time as you need. Is it normal for the little guy to be making motorcycle noises?"

She kissed him, hard. "You're too good to me."

"No better than you deserve." He kissed her one more time before she retreated to the bathroom for a shower.

30

Within an hour, she was on the road, powering north in her boat of a vehicle. Icarus rode shotgun, as he had when she'd first begun her journey, except now they were heading into the storm instead of fleeing it. She willed herself to breathe deeply, resisting the urge to press the gas pedal through the floor. She had no patience for the length of her journey, but part of her warned against haste. Part of her would never forget the sounds and smells of the accident that had taken Ducky from her.

On impact, the screech of metal on metal was so sharp that she thought her ears would be somehow broken. Bella never knew before that day that car crashes had a smell, a burning-chemical stench, out of nature, somehow wrong.

The truck driver was sixty-four with tobacco-stained white hair. Bella could remember being surprised by the lack of damage to his vehicle, but when you're driving something that big, she supposed there wasn't much to be afraid of. When the car stopped moving, she couldn't see clearly through the web of hair that had matted over her eyes. The car was alive, hissing, dripping and leaking fluids like a broken human being. Before that day, she had never seen a dead person.

“Ducky!”

Bella's voice rang out high as a church bell. She was afraid to move, afraid of any more time passing. He was slumped over the steering wheel, his hair partially obscuring his face. His right hand was hanging on the wheel, but without intent, as though held there by a marionette string.

“Ducky, the car. We have to get out!” She pulled at his shoulder. He fell toward her, his head rolling as though on a ball bearing, his neck moving the way necks aren't supposed to move. In the days and weeks that followed, so many times had Bella wished for another chance at this moment. If she could do it again, she would pull his broken body into her lap, and kiss him before his skin got cold. The police would have to pry her from the car, because she wouldn't let him go. As it happened, she fumbled frantically for the door handle. The door stuck in the car's twisted frame, and Bella had to kick it open. She didn't remember starting to

scream, but she remembered the noise, the low, unholy wail.

The truck driver stepped down from his rig as she emerged from the mangled car. His face was ash gray, and she wondered fleetingly if he was going to have a heart attack.

"I didn't see you," he said in a voice barely above a whisper. "I just didn't see you."

As she neared her destination, Bella reflected on her outward composure. When Ducky had died, she'd been hysterical. It had been Kieran who'd held her together, given her the strength she needed to drag herself through the events of the weeks that followed. Now, she felt as though she were watching her life from behind a plate glass shield. Her mind registered the horror of what had happened, but something inside her was keeping it at bay, helping her to stay tough for those who couldn't.

After Nathan left, she'd called Ducky's family. She didn't have the Colorado number, so she'd had to get it from John and Sara Bach, who were only just beginning to put their lives back together. Sara had answered the phone, and Bella had expected the soft-hearted woman to fall apart on her. Instead, Sara had handled the situation surprisingly well. She'd cried, of course, but she seemed to know exactly what to do.

"We'll call his parents, sweetheart," she'd told Bella. "You just concentrate on getting to the hospital."

Her chest felt tight with the threat of tears, but she couldn't allow herself that luxury yet.

"Thank you."

"I'll call John at work, and we'll head over as soon as we can," Sara said. "We love you."

Bella closed her eyes, offering a silent prayer of thanks to whatever deity would hear it. Never had she been more grateful to have such people in her life. "I love you guys, too."

Signs for the tolls jarred her from her thoughts. She hadn't realized she'd traveled so far. As she dropped the quarters in the basket, she gritted her teeth, mentally preparing herself for what was to come. Kieran had taken enough pills to put himself into a coma, but Marnie hadn't specified the quantity or kind. Bella knew that the possibility existed that he wouldn't be walking away from this one, but she tried not to think about that. Instead, she focused on the odometer, as it ticked away the miles between her and the hospital.

When she got off the highway, it occurred to Bella that she'd have to do something about Icarus. No amount of bribery would get a ferret into a hospital. She didn't have the patience to drive to her mother's house in Windham, and no way in hell was she leaving him at Marnie's place. She knew she had only one other option.

Bella pulled the car to a stop in front of Kieran's house. She sat behind the wheel for a moment, unsure if she would be able to do it, to walk into the house where all signs of his life hung balanced on a tightrope. Still the seconds ticked away in her mind, clearer than the sound of any clock. She had to do this now. She took a deep breath and crunched across the gravel. She was prepared for the emotional response that would be triggered. What she wasn't prepared for was the degree to which the apartment would be changed. It was no longer a home she recognized.

Most of the shades had been pulled, and what little light crept around them accentuated

the dust in the air. She put Icarus's cage down in the blue living room, which betrayed no signs of any prior life. In the hallway, the mail was piled haphazardly. Bella counted three unopened cell phone bills, which explained why Kieran had been so out of touch. Walking into the kitchen, the first thing she saw was a pile of dishes in the sink. Above it hovered a cloud of flies, each one no bigger than a comma. The fridge contained a few pieces of rotting fruit and a mold covered plate of something unidentifiable. The smell of decay was overwhelming and she left the room quickly.

At the base of the stairs, she paused. The upstairs hallway was dark, and she wasn't sure what was tucked away behind the black. Still, she found her legs moving, her hand grasping the railing as she climbed. She found herself stepping carefully, as though she might tread upon a ghost. The home that she'd felt so at ease in before had become as frightening as a haunted house.

A lamp was still burning in Kieran's bedroom, and she could see the tangled sheets on his bed. Something red was smeared across the blue pillowcase. Looking closer, Bella realized that it was blood. She stumbled backward, her hand closing around the bathroom doorknob. The light was on in that room, as well. On the beige tiled floor was a puddle of vomit, spattered with the same shade of red that had marred the pillowcase. In the sink were five prescription bottles, white labels glued neatly onto the orange translucent plastic. Slowly, the pieces of what must have happened came together. Kieran hadn't wanted to die in the bathroom, so he'd stumbled across the hall before collapsing onto his bed.

The air seemed to become stiflingly hot. Bella backed away, her foot catching on the edge of the staircase. She fell down the three steps before coming to a stop on the landing. Her

ankle hurt, but she scrambled to her feet and lunged down the remaining stairs. She didn't stop running until she was clear of the house and then she dropped to her knees beside the car. Her breath came in gasps, and tears streamed down her face.

It occurred to her to be grateful that Kieran lived on such a rural street that she didn't have to worry about making a spectacle of herself. Slowly, her breathing returned to normal, and she could stand. Looking back toward the house, she thought of going back for Icarus. She didn't want to leave him there, but there was no other option. She was wasting time, so she forced herself to get behind the wheel and take the quickest route she knew to the same hospital they'd brought her to after Ducky had been killed.

31

After the accident, Bella didn't remember the ambulance ride to the hospital, but she sure as hell remembered waking up there. Her first awareness, while her eyes were still closed, was of the smell. The hospital had smelled like chemicals that stung in open wounds. She'd struggled against the odor, attempting in vain to burrow back into warm, dark, unconsciousness. It was too late, though—her adrenaline had kicked in. Bella couldn't quite place the sterile scent, but her mind associated it with fear. Something dangerous was happening. That realization

triggered the headache, as though someone was driving a wedge into her skull. She opened her eyes.

The light had been blinding, at first. It sent a tremor through her throbbing brain. She reached her hands to her head, and was alarmed to feel the shredded-wheat texture of gauze bandages—many layers of gauze bandages. It wasn't until she'd tried to sit up that Bella noticed how tender the rest of her muscles were. That was also when she noticed the tube down her throat.

She tried to scream, but her throat was full and all that escaped was a pathetic moan. The IV drip in her arm became tangled in the bedside railing as she struggled to stand up. Then, a squeaking sound as someone dressed in printed scrubs approached her with a syringe. The nurse voided the syringe into one of the ports in the IV line. Bella tried to protest, but once again, she found herself mute. The squeaking shoes retreated, and for a moment, she felt fine. Then, her limbs began to feel heavy. She was surprised that her whole body wasn't sinking through the mattress. Eventually, her brain retreated into darkness, her surrender forced, but nonetheless absolute.

Now, she crossed the threshold of the automatic doors and into the emergency room. The hospital was a different place than it had been during those first few days of hell. Its appearance hadn't changed, but Bella had.

"This is not my prison," she whispered, "anymore."

"Pardon me?" The receptionist looked up, sleek, black reading glasses perched low on her nose.

"I'm looking for a friend who was brought here this morning." Bella swallowed hard. "A suicide attempt."

Five minutes later, she was arguing with a doctor outside the intensive care unit. The doctor looked tired, with clouds of grey lurking beneath her eyes.

"I'm sorry, only family is permitted to—"

"His family won't be here!" Bella felt guilty for raising her voice at the bedraggled doctor, but she was determined. "They're flying across the country, probably as we speak, and I don't think that they would want their son to be alone!"

The doctor pinched the skin between her eyebrows. "Let me talk to someone."

Bella was watching her walk away when she heard a familiar voice.

"That was impressive."

She turned to see Marnie in the waiting area. She was wearing black tights and the streaked remnants of her makeup. The way she looked, Bella wouldn't have been surprised to see her chain smoking, right there in the hospital. She took a deep breath.

"How long have you been here?"

"The ambulance got here right before I called you."

Realization trickled into Bella's mind. "Were you the one to find him?"

Marnie nodded. "I tried to go in the ambulance, but I couldn't—"

"How?"

Fresh tears stuck to Marnie's eyelashes. "I started to worry after you called looking for his number. I kept trying to brush it off, but..." She took a deep, hitching breath. "I thought I'd drop by with some coffee on my way to work, but he was...at first I thought he'd gotten a bloody nose in his sleep, but then I saw the bottles in the sink." The sobs started.

Bella felt at a loss as the blonde woman collapsed into herself, her forehead almost touching her knees. The final flame of her resentment still burned, but she couldn't bring herself to feign a total lack of compassion. She rubbed Marnie's back gently.

"H-he was cold." Marnie's pale skin was blotched with pink. Bella shivered in response to the words.

The two women sat for several hours in the area that the hospital optimistically dubbed the waiting room. Because neither of them was a blood relative, the hospital personnel denied them any specific information. They did confirm that Kieran was alive, though. Bella tried to be grateful for even that scrap of information, but her mind conjured up thoughts of irreversible brain damage or, worse, a lifetime of his body lingering in a hospital bed, detached from the rest of him. Her stomach felt as though someone had been playing cat's cradle with it when she heard a frantic but familiar voice.

"They told me to come here. My brother—"

"Shannon?"

The woman's long, straight hair whipped around her like a strawberry-blond scythe as she turned to face Bella. She looked ready to bite through steel, but her expression softened.

"Oh, thank God." She dropped her black leather shoulder bag and threw her arms around Bella's neck. "I've had the most hellish trip. My parents are calling practically every five

minutes." Kieran's sister was four years younger, and lived in New York City. She unwound a charcoal grey scarf from her neck. "Have you seen him yet?"

Bella shook her head. "They won't even give us details on his condition because we're not family."

"The hell they won't!" Shannon grabbed the arm of a random doctor who had the misfortune to be passing by. "We need to get into the ICU."

The doctor had a three-day beard and timid brown eyes. "I'm sorry, this isn't my depart—"

Shannon set her jaw, and spoke in measured tones. "Today, I had to share a cab with a stockbroker who tried to feel me up before boarding a plane to New Hampshire, where I sat next to a man who weighed three hundred and fifty pounds and smelled like the dumpster outside of Taco Bell. Then, I practically had to blow the guy at the Rent-a-Car counter because no one wants to rent you a car unless you're twenty-fucking-five years old. I did all of that so that I could be *here*, because my brother tried to kill himself today."

The doctor looked like a rabbit, weighing the odds of fleeing a predator. "I don't—well—I'll get someone." The bunny turned tail and ran. Shannon sank onto one of the molded plastic chairs and began rummaging through her tote.

"Christ, I need a cigarette."

Bella eyed the bag nervously. "I don't think they're going to let you smoke here, Shan."

"I said I needed one," she said, and pulled a pack of gum from bag. "Not that I was going to light up in the hallway."

Bella smiled, for the first time since she'd left Rhode Island.

Within fifteen minutes, a nurse arrived to take Shannon into the ICU. She'd wanted to

take Bella with her and was prepared to launch a full-blown war until Bella convinced her not to push her luck. It was only after the Shannon had sauntered off that Bella noticed Marnie's exaggerated pallor. Despite the dire circumstances, Bella allowed herself to feel a small measure of satisfaction. The manipulative blonde had finally been upstaged.

"I take it you've never met Kieran's sister before?"

Marnie swallowed. "I didn't realize she was so...intense."

Bella laughed. "Aptly put."

"I don't think she'll like me once she knows who I am."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Bella said. "I think she'll have bigger fish to fry."

At that moment, the sound of high heels on linoleum tile made her look up. Kieran's parents were walking swiftly down the hallway, flanked on either side by John and Sara Bach. Bella closed her eyes for a moment. "Speaking of which..."

The next few minutes were a tornado of voices and tears. Kieran's mother collapsed into hysteria, and Bella wondered how she'd made it through the plane ride. She was dwarfed by her husband, a broad-shouldered man with sleekly trimmed red hair.

After being hugged and kissed effusively, Bella retreated to her chair, where she waited for the dust to settle. A few moments later, Ducky's father extricated himself from the crowd and took the seat next to her. He put his arm around her and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. John Bach was the kind of man who wore flannel shirts and Old Spice cologne. His black hair, now streaked with steel, was as wild as his son's had been. In fact, he looked so much like Ducky that sometimes it hurt her to meet his gaze. His was a comforting presence, though. In many ways, he reminded Bella of her own father, whom she'd lost at so young an age.

"You're looking good, Bell," he said to her.

She smiled. "I wish I felt that way."

"I don't think any of us do today." His gaze traveled to his wife, who was trying to orchestrate a conversation between Kieran's frantic parents and the hospital personnel. "We had a bitch of the time getting them here."

"Did you pick them up at the airport?"

He nodded. "We would've been here sooner, but Sara thought it'd be best if we waited for them."

Bella smirked as she surveyed the pandemonium unfolding before them. "God bless you guys."

He covered his chuckle with a cough. "It was the right thing to do."

Bella's smile faded. "Do you think he'll die?"

"He's not going to die." John Bach crossed his arms.

"How can you know?" Bella's voice was hoarse as she struggled to fit the words over the lump in her throat.

He squeezed her shoulder. "Because our boy's up there now," he said, "and no way will he let that happen."

Bella's tears won out. "Sometimes, I'm really mad at him for dying."

"Yeah," said John. "Me too."

32

The afternoon faded into dusk, the early blue light a hint of the winter that was to come. Kieran's family hadn't emerged from the ICU, so Bella kept vigil with John and Sara. Somewhere in the earlier scuffle, Marnie had slipped away. Bella couldn't sit still, and became adept at inventing trivial reasons to leave her seat: to check if Ava's car was in the parking lot, to make sure it wasn't snowing.

Ducky's mother kept pushing her to eat or drink, but the fever of her anxiety wouldn't tolerate nourishment. She walked to the cafeteria with Sara twice though, just for something to do. When Ava finally did arrive, Bella was grateful for the distraction. She could make out her friend's furrowed brow as she moved toward them.

"What have you heard?" she said over Sara's shoulder as she gave the older woman a hug.

"Not much, thanks to HIPPA," Bella muttered.

John patted her shoulder. "We'll hear more from his family."

Ava looked as though she was prepared to settle in for the long haul. She wore yoga pants and no makeup, her hair pulled into a loose ponytail. Bella noticed a pink canvas bag filled with cards, crossword puzzles, and, of course, tabloids. Ava had just coaxed her into a halfhearted game of rummy when Shannon came through the swinging doors that lead to the intensive care unit. Her face was grim, but she looked, as she always did, like a valkyrie, her

shoulders back and her chin squared.

"He's in a coma," she said, as soon as she was within earshot, "which is good, so I'm told."

Sara reached over to take her hand. "At least that means he's stable."

Shannon shook her head and her eyes welled. "Until he wakes up, they won't know if he has any brain damage, and the longer he's out, the less chance there is that he ever will." She ducked her head, her hair falling in a curtain over her face. Bella felt the fear begin to press her ribs inward, making it difficult for her to breathe. She willed herself to rise above it, not because she felt she had to, but because she could. She could be a pillar for these people, all of whom she loved. She could be for them what Kieran had been for her. After all, in some ways, she had the upper hand. She'd had Ducky. He would make her strong enough.

Shannon said that her parents wouldn't leave her brother's bedside, and they wouldn't be admitting anyone outside the family until he'd been stable for twenty-four hours.

"Why don't you girls go get something to eat?" Sara said.

John snorted. "Why don't you girls go get a beer?" His eyes held the same mischievous glint that Ducky's often had, making Bella feel a twang of longing.

"I feel like I should stay here." Shannon smiled weakly. "I just don't think I could stand it, though. Do you think that makes me a bad sister?"

Bella, who had never had a sister, good or bad, put her arm around Shannon's shoulder. "I think it makes you someone who loves your brother too much to see him this way."

Shannon heaved a sigh that seemed weighted with worry, but nodded.

"I do need to check into a hotel," Ava began.

"That's ridiculous," Sara said. "You'll all stay with us."

Ava managed to convince Sara that she'd have her hands full watching over Kieran's parents. After some discussion, she and Bella also coerced Shannon into sharing the room with them.

"It's not New York City," Ava said, "but I think we could arrange some drinks in the hot tub."

Shannon smiled. "Good enough for me."

Bella was about to agree when a thought occurred to her. "I left Icarus at Kieran's apartment!"

She tried to convince the others to go check into the hotel while she retrieved her ferret, but they were hell-bent on coming along.

"You shouldn't have to go back there alone," Ava said. Even though she'd rather spare them the specter of Kieran's deserted apartment, Bella was grateful for her friends' concern. Shannon was uncharacteristically quiet as they crossed through the automatic doors and into the evening chill.

"Was it bad?" She bit down on her bottom lip. It took Bella a moment to realize that she was asking about the apartment. She stilled a shudder as she recalled the bloody mess upstairs.

"No," she said.

Bella watched the two cars pull in behind her as she parked. She walked over to Ava's car and knocked on the window.

"I'll be right out," she said. "Keep Shannon out here."

If Ava felt surprise, it didn't register on her face. An understanding passed between them,

as it often did during intense situations. Bella turned, and headed up the driveway.

She could hear Icarus as soon as she opened the door. He was chittering frantically and gnawing on his bars, no doubt wondering why he'd been abandoned for so long. Bella shivered. Although the apartment was well heated, the air was heavy with something frigid and dark.

Something on the bookcase caught her eye. Slipping her hands in her coat pockets, she studied the picture of the three of them, taken at the apartment over Elmira's. Kieran was poking Bella with a spear-like barbecue fork, while she sat on the kitchen counter. Only Ducky was looking straight at the camera. He had an arm around Bella and a toothpick between the teeth of his smile. The picture stirred up a gust of pure sadness.

"How far we've fallen," she whispered. She sat on the arm of the plush blue couch and stared at the content gaze Ducky had given the camera. "Don't let him go like this," she said. "No more, baby. No more."

It felt as though she'd spent ages in the gloom of Kieran's abandoned quarters, but Ava and Shannon didn't seem concerned when she emerged with Icarus's cage. Ava rolled down her window.

"I just booked us a room at the Common Man."

"Isn't that a little swank for us?" Bella raised her eyebrows.

Ava shook her head. "Not tonight. You might want to consider how you're going to smuggle a ferret into a hotel room, though."

Bella groaned. "Dammit."

Sneaking Icarus into the hotel room ended up being less of an ordeal that Bella had initially anticipated. While Ava checked in, Shannon went to retrieve a wheeled cart for their

suitcases. Bella stuffed Icarus under her jacket while Shannon placed the cage on the cart and camouflaged it with their bags. Looking as innocent as possible, they broke for the elevator.

"Chrrrr," said Icarus, as he tried to nuzzle through Bella's shirt.

"Quiet," she warned, "or you'll find yourself sleeping on the street."

Once settled, the three women made the best of the bad situation, spending their time alternately in the hot tub and in front of the TV watching *St. Elmo's Fire*. At first, Bella had been skeptical about her friend's choice of accommodations, but it didn't take her long to realize that it was exactly what they needed. She had just returned to the room when her phone rang.

She was both surprised and delighted to hear Nathan's voice. In the chaos of Kieran's hospitalization, she'd all but forgotten the life she had begun to forge for herself in Rhode Island. His tone was light, but Bella could detect the underlying strain of his concern.

"How'd the overgrown rat handle the trip?"

"He's a ferret," Bella said, "and he's used to traveling. How are things at the restaurant?"

"I reckon we're surviving without you. You might want give Iris a call, though."

Bella closed her eyes. "I didn't even think to. Is she worried?"

"You might say that," Nathan said, through a chuckle. "We're keeping her on an even keel, though."

Bella smiled. "I'm sorry I didn't call when I got here, I—"

"Don't you worry about that, Cinderella. I'm not going anywhere."

"Do you miss me enough to let me start a slam at the Beanstop when I get back?"

His laugh gave her goose bumps, even from a hundred miles away. "Sweetheart, I miss you enough to let you do just about anything you want when you get back."

After she hung up the phone, she offered a silent prayer of thanks that such an exceptional human being cared so much about her. She had time to mix herself a drink before she heard the mingled voices of her two missing comrades. It sounded like Ava had kept Shannon sufficiently distracted, for which Bella was supremely grateful. She'd never had a sibling, but she knew what it was like to lose family. She tried to imagine her father shackled to a hospital bed by tubes and machines, tried to imagine waking up every day with a war in her brain between hope and despair. She shivered as Ava and Shannon burst into the room, giggling like they were young and things were simple.

Bella woke up the next morning while her friends were still sprawled across their respective mattresses. She rolled herself delicately off the bed she shared with Ava and fumbled for her phone in the darkened room. The door creaked as she slipped into the hallway. It was seven, but Bella knew of at least one other person who would be awake.

"A phone call would've been nice." Iris's voice was flinty against the mild hum of the bakery.

"I'm calling you now."

"You don't say." Bella could picture Iris standing with one hand on her hip, her eyebrows straining upward. She updated Iris on Kieran's condition, but thanks to Nathan's attentiveness, she had few gaps to fill.

"He's a good boy, that one."

"You sound like you're trying to convince me," Bella said.

"I just know it's hard to get back in the saddle," said Iris.

"Don't worry," Bella said. "I still remember how to hold onto what I want."

When Iris was sufficiently appeased, Bella hung up and returned to the room to find Shannon conversing frantically with her own cell phone. Ava was still unconscious, wheat colored hair draped delicately around her face. Bella waited until Shannon had hung up the phone before moving closer. She was shocked to see that Kieran's poised sister was unabashedly crying. She looked up as Bella tentatively approached.

"He's awake," she said.

Bella briefly closed her eyes. The worry hadn't had time to loosen its grip yet. Elation felt foreign, but she let it take her as one thought ran through her mind on a loop: *Thank you.*

33

At the hospital, Bella was frustrated that they wouldn't let her see Kieran right away. Apparently, the doctors wanted to put him through a barrage of tests to make sure that everyone's initial excitement wasn't premature. Bella felt her stomach tighten as she recalled the possibility of brain damage. The fact that he was alive didn't guarantee that he would be the same. She sat cross-legged on the waiting room floor, rocking gently back and forth. She was wearing a pair of green cargo pants and a thermal shirt, clothes from another life. It was what Nathan had packed for her, oblivious of the significance. They hung on her now, but the feel of them was

still tied to memory, some parts of which she didn't care to revisit. Her mind traveled slowly toward despair as she tried to brace herself for the worst-case scenario. Her catastrophizing was interrupted by Shannon's hand on her shoulder.

"They've cleared him for visitors," she said. "You should go first."

Ava squeezed her hand as she stood up. The head rush almost knocked her down, and she focused on remaining vertical until the black pinpricks faded from her vision. A nurse led her through the double doors.

The intensive care unit wasn't as ominous as Bella had expected. The rooms were large, with glass panels next to the doorways. There were the sounds, the life support sounds that Bella remembered, but she pushed the horror of her own hospital stay from her mind. The nurse stopped in front of Kieran's room.

"I'll be back in ten minutes," he said.

Kieran's eyes were half-closed, but he smiled as she approached his bedside. A tear crawled down the side of his face, over his right temple.

"You look great."

Bella shook her head. "I don't feel great."

"I'm sorry I let you down."

"Don't you know how much I need you?"

He closed his eyes. "That's why I couldn't tell you. You needed me to be strong, and I wasn't."

Bella was silent. It seemed ludicrous that Kieran would think that he was walled off from any source of help. In some ways, she supposed he was right, though. She'd been a disaster for

the first few months after Ducky died. Maybe the warning signs had been there all along.

"I left Icarus at your house for a few hours last night, when I first got into town."

He groaned.

"Don't worry; I'm not going to criticize your slovenly existence." She attempted a smile.

"I saw the picture of the three of us."

Kieran smiled. "That was the night we barbecued on the fire escape."

Bella closed her eyes as the memory surfaced.

It had been a January evening, and Kieran and Ducky had arrived home with a small, portable grill.

"What are you planning on doing with that?" She raised her eyebrows.

Ducky's eyes were gleaming. "It was on sale!"

"Of course it was," she said, "it's the dead of winter."

"It's not snowing, though," Kieran said. "We can still use it." Bella followed his gaze to the window in the living room. Outside that particular window was a widow's walk that led to a wooden ladder, which was built into the side of the house.

Bella shrugged. "Knock yourselves out."

"Come on, Bel," Ducky said, winding his arms around her waist from behind. "I even got that pink sausage, the one that tastes like boneless spareribs."

In the end, her resistance had been futile. She'd busied herself carrying platters of chicken breasts and steak tips out to the fire escape, where the guys had hovered over the grill in their coats and knit hats. Icarus had scampered along after her, happily caught up in the hubbub.

From his hospital bed, Kieran chuckled. "That was a good night."

"It was," Bella said, "but when I saw that picture, I was scared I'd lost you both."

His pale eyes were tired when he turned to look at her. "Maybe it would've been better that way."

"Don't you dare." She set her jaw, angry at him despite his weakened condition. "Don't give me that martyr bullshit."

He sighed. "I'm not that noble. It just got too hard."

Bella was unprepared for his unadorned honesty. "You could have called."

"It wasn't like that," he said. "It was too much work just to get out of bed."

"Been there."

"It was different for you. You carried it on the outside, and I carried it on the inside." He smirked. "Except I didn't realize that until I was past caring. Some days I miss him so much, it knocks the wind right out of me."

Bella didn't say anything, but she pulled her chair closer to his bed and rested her head next to his shoulder. She thought of her mother, of the time she'd spent in bed after Bella's father

had died. No one really came out of these things unscathed, she thought.

"Everything in your refrigerator is growing mold." Bella wrinkled her nose as she quickly slammed it shut.

"No one said you had to open it." Kieran had been out of the hospital for almost a week. The doctors had prescribed him mood stabilizers, which he'd promptly flushed down the toilet. His cantankerous moods were obnoxious, but he was alive.

After a few days, Shannon had returned to New York. She was concerned about her brother, but Bella knew the small town atmosphere had her ready to crawl out of her skin. His parents weren't as willing to depart so quickly. They were staying with John and Sara Bach for another week, despite their son's protests. Bella told him to be grateful that they weren't staying at his place.

"I'll clean the refrigerator, you take a shower." Bella pulled Icarus from Kieran's shoulder and pushed him toward the stairs.

"I need a nap first."

"No one needs a nap at quarter to ten in the morning." Bella deposited Icarus back in his cage and grabbed a sponge. As wiped the worst of the grime from inside the refrigerator, she found it hard to believe that less than a year ago, this town had been her home. Now, she found its old comforts stale. She missed the Beanstop and Iris's scones, and her journal. She couldn't

write in Ashland. The old Bella hadn't been a writer.

The sound of Kieran's footsteps broke into her thoughts.

"You really want to do this?"

"You promised," she said.

"I'm not backing down. Just checking." He put an arm around her shoulders and she grabbed the garbage bag near the door on her way out.

Bella wasn't surprised that the drive out was silent. She suspected that Kieran was as preoccupied as she was. In truth, she wasn't as confident about the endeavor as she'd led him to believe. She had no way of knowing how she'd react once she was there. The need to go was more intense than her fear, though. It was necessary, and that was all there was to it.

Bella didn't realize that they'd arrived at their destination until the car stopped. For a moment, neither of them moved.

"I'll get the bag," Kieran said, finally. Bella reached for the door handle.

"They fixed the guardrail," she said. Kieran grimaced. She wondered if he was thinking of that day when he'd driven out to the same spot to find the wreckage of Ducky's car, if he remembered shielding her from the sounds of sirens and the flashbulbs of photographers. Bella closed her eyes against the tears as her mind called up the image of Ducky slumped over the steering wheel. When his head had rolled back, he had looked so empty. There'd been nothing of him left, and Bella had wondered how something so important could disappear so quickly.

"We don't have to do this today," he said.

"I'm not leaving."

"Okay." His answer was quiet. He lifted something heavy from the garbage bag. "Help

me with this."

Bella grabbed the green, riveted end of the signpost. They carried it behind the guardrail and Bella held it steady while Kieran pounded it a good foot or two into the ground.

"Will it stay?"

Kieran nodded, as he looped a length of cable through the rivets. While he did so, Bella jumped the guardrail to assess the progress. The sign was large, yellow and triangular. Even though it wasn't an official road sign, they'd had to call the state police for permission to put it up. Her throat tightened painfully, but she smiled as Kieran finished securing the cable.

"What do you think?"

"I think it's exactly right."

They'd had the sign custom made. In its center was the black silhouette of a duck with a fedora hat perched atop his head. Beneath the graphic were the words "DUCK X-ING". Bella pulled three laminated photographs from her coat pocket. Kieran handed her a roll of duct tape, and she attached them to the signpost. One was a copy of the photograph from Kieran's bookshelf, and one was a shot of Ducky alone. The third was Bella's favorite. It had been taken at the wedding of one of Ducky's cousins. The two of them had been dancing, except that he'd lifted her so that she was standing, barefoot, on top of his shoes. When she finished, she and Kieran were quiet for awhile. Finally, he broke the silence.

"So what now?"

She shrugged. "We go home and make some hot chocolate?"

He smiled. "Not what I meant, but I like that idea. When do you have to go back to Rhode Island?"

"I don't know. I'm starting a new job in a couple weeks."

"You could stay, you know."

She closed her eyes. Maybe Rhode Island wasn't any more her home that New Hampshire had been. Still, there was nothing left for her here. She'd milked it dry.

"If I go back to Rhode Island, I think I'm going to need to find my own place," she said.

"I love living with Ava, but she's getting pretty serious about her boyfriend."

Kieran shook his head. "I didn't even realize she had a boyfriend."

"I'm not sure how much I'll be around, though," she said, thinking of Nathan. "I could probably use a roommate."

He studied her carefully. "I hope you don't mean me."

"Why?"

"What would I do in Rhode Island?"

Bella laughed, long and full. "Anything," she said. "That's the beauty of being human. We can do anything we want."

The drive back to Rhode Island was serene in comparison to the nightmarish urgency of the corresponding trip north. Of course, she'd had to stop at her mother's house. She'd been livid that Bella hadn't picked her up on the way to the hospital, and made a point of expressing it during her visit with Kieran. The fact that Bella's attention had been focused solely on willing Kieran to hang on was apparently a matter of little consequence. Nonetheless, Bella wasn't a slow learner. She took pleasure in waking her mother up early on the Saturday of her departure.

The two women sat at the kitchen table, sipping tea. Icarus lounged in her mother's lap, content to be scratched under the chin and fed bits of cookie.

"So Kieran's moving in with you?"

Bella swallowed. "He's going to wait until his parents go back west, though. They're still pretty shaken up."

"No small wonder. He took about ten years off all our lives."

Bella ignored her mother's theatrics. "It gives me time to set up a place before he gets down there."

"I'm glad the two of you will be with Ava," her mother said. "Kieran was too lonely, with you and Ducky gone." She spoke of Ducky as though he'd been wandering New England with Bella instead of spending the time in a casket. If only. Thought triggered memory, and she suddenly reached for her bag.

"I brought you something."

Leah looked up, brow furrowed.

"Relax, mom. It's not like it's a live grenade." She handed her mother the gold chain from which her father's wedding band dangled. The older woman's eyes became damp, but she smiled.

"I never gave it back when you asked for it," Bella said.

"You should have it." Her mother shook her head. "You had fewer years with him than I did. My memories are stronger." She unclasped the chain and threaded it around her daughter's neck.

Bella tugged at the ring. "That's really enough?"

Her mother took a sip of her tea. "Memories are a poor consolation prize, but they're the best I can do."

"I worry about forgetting," Bella said.

"You won't," said her mother. "You don't forget things like that."

Later, as Bella continued her trek to Rhode Island, it occurred to her that she was finally traveling home. She was driving toward a new job, good friends, and a man she'd fallen in love with. More importantly, she was driving toward a life that she'd created completely on her own. She felt that nothing could offer a truer reflection of who she was than that.

Although Icarus road shotgun, she could feel Ducky's presence, for the first time since the months following his death. Perhaps this was what he'd wanted for her all along. She shrugged. She was content not with the certainty that this was the right path, but the knowledge that even if it wasn't, she would find it eventually. She focused on the stretch of highway that lay ahead, rarely using the rearview mirror.