

WHO WE THINK WE ARE
a novel

by

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WINTER

1.

Emilia

Emilia knew the tree would die, maybe not this year but in the next few and certainly before Stone, the man she called her father.

The rootstock of her father's prized apple tree, an indigenous crabapple variety he'd grafted the spring of her adoption, first raised Stone's concern around Thanksgiving. A buck in rut had stripped the bark three-quarters of the way around the trunk and deprived the tree of most of its precious cambium layer, without which the upper branches stood little chance of receiving adequate, life-sustaining nutrients.

"It might make it," Stone said. He ran his fingers along the sites of the initial cleft and side grafts that had transformed this lowly crabapple into a desirable, two-variety producer. They'd picked and eaten both mid- and late-season fruit from those branches since Emilia's earliest memories. The scars of the joining were nearly invisible after three decades of growth, but the buck-scraping was a fresh wound, a potentially fatal one, that stood little chance of scarring-over. The idea that Stone held onto hope for the tree's survival seemed as absurd as the likelihood that it would die.

"We can save it," Emilia said against her professional instincts. As an arborist, she knew that trees this badly damaged by bull deer didn't recover well—maybe one in five would show signs of new growth in the late winter months; sometimes only a few branches would offer bud breaks come early spring—but she didn't want to dash Stone's

hope. She rested her free hand on his shoulder. The silver at his temples and in his beard no longer surprised her, though whenever she thought of her father, she always envisioned him in his prime, as the rugged outdoorsman who took her and her older sister Mara hunting and fishing along both the Lehigh and the Delaware Rivers from the time she could tie her own shoes, carry her own supplies, and walk a full-day on her own feet.

He turned and took the basket of apples, intended for baking, from her arms and added two more from a branch just out of her reach. “That should be enough for Mara to keep us in pies till Christmas,” he said. And then, “We’ll watch it. There’s time yet.”

When February arrived and only a third of the top wood remained green and flexible, Emilia collected twelve viable scions in hopes of grafting them in the spring. She knew if she waited any longer, it might be too late.

Waiting was Emilia’s vocation. Her role at the Fish and Game Commission of Pennsylvania was to ensure that the property owned by the state received proper care and maintenance as well as to oversee the enforcement of all ordinances and restrictions placed on the land. This meant lots of waiting around on her part. She waited for reports from the local and state police detailing all illegal activity cited and charged on the property, which recently meant after-sundown gang activity and drug deals conducted in the dark corners of the lot. She waited for reports from environmentalists on the quality of the water. She waited for reports from the trail maintenance crew and grounds inspectors. She waited for people in violation of the posted ordinances to return to their vehicles so she could ticket them or give them written warnings if they apologized without rolling their eyes. She assimilated statistical analyses of the regional species’

populations and compared them from year to year, noting any statistically significant fluctuations and forwarding the information to the appropriate places, and then, as always, she waited for their responses.

With patience as a job requirement and a degree in biology, Emilia should have been overly qualified to wait on all the small things associated with the process of pregnancy--the slight rise in basal temperature, the elapsed time from intercourse to insemination, insemination to implantation, implantation to a missed period, a missed period to two pink lines and then a delicate heartbeat on an ultrasound screen--but, as her husband pointed out so often, her professional habits didn't always follow her home. In the evenings she sat counting down days on the calendar: 14 days till second trimester, 18 days till toes and fingers are fully formed, 72 days until the sex is determinable. She secretly feared that this pregnancy, her fourth, had stolen the last of her patience, that this might be her last chance at motherhood—a title she never thought she wanted until it seemed unattainable.

She carried this fear with her everywhere, yet the three enclosed rows of greenery and blossoms in her backyard greenhouse offered Emilia a respite from her impatience. Here, in the encapsulated warmth, she worked. She parted the dense leaves of the tomato plants and squeezed each fully-red fruit gently, and, if the ovality yielded enough, she twisted it free from its vine. She marveled. Romas. In winter. In Pennsylvania. The scent of freshly-plucked tomato, sweet and green and new, filled her nose. She breathed deeply each time she placed one into the oversized colander, careful not to bruise the fruit now that all the hard work was done.

She passed through the rest of her vegetables and loosened the remainder of the needed ingredients from their vines and pots. With little vigor, she brushed her palms across the tops of the herbs and brought them to her face, like a child might cup water and drink from his own hands, before she moved to the greenhouse door where her lilies had bloomed. The tight green buds of yesterday now reached out with petals every shade of Spring. Emilia cut a few blossoms and bound them together with twine. A bouquet would bring some cheer to the dinner table, she thought. And, with dusk and her husband arriving soon, she needed to get dinner started.

“Goodnight, my lovelies,” she said into her little oasis. “Keep growing.” She held the colander against her side, and with her free hand she rubbed her firm but unrounded belly and whispered, “You, too. Keep growing. I can wait.”

Emilia roasted the tomatoes she’d picked until their skins blistered and the inner membranes squeezed easily into her saucepan. She broke them up further with the flat side of her wooden spatula and set them on medium-low heat to gradually reduce and mingle with the basil, rosemary, and a splash of balsamic vinegar while she prepped the rest of her husband Birk’s favorite dinner. The chicken breasts split without much effort, and she salted and peppered them generously. She arranged them skin side down in a buttered skillet. With heavy-duty aluminum foil she wrapped the brick she kept on her counter—the one friends and family always laughed at when they gathered in her kitchen—and placed it on top of the chicken. That was the magic, the trick. The extra weight pressed the breasts down and guaranteed a crisp skin and moist flesh, the perfect chicken for a hearty, homegrown sauce and a hungry, work-weary man.

The front door opened as Emilia placed the vase of lilies onto the table. She straightened the cloth napkins and silverware and listened to Birk kick off his shoes and hang his overcoat on the hall tree.

“Is that brick chicken or wishful smelling?” he called up the half flight of stairs.

“Depends,” Emilia called back. “Did you get my message?”

Birk walked into the kitchen and flourished a brown-paper wrapped loaf of baguette. “Fresh from *Kristopherson’s*, as requested by the lady,” he said and set the bread on the counter.

“Perfect.” Emilia laughed and kissed him.

“What’s the occasion?” He gestured to the table. “Fancy.”

She scooped a mouthful of sauce onto the spoon and held it out to him.

“I might try for San Marzanos next year. More meat, fewer seeds.”

He tasted the sauce, and when she turned back to the stove he circled her waist and rubbed small circles below her navel with his fingertips. “Delicious. But don’t you think you’ll be a little busy next year?”

“Day fifty today. We passed the critical period for heart development.” She wanted to make it through this first trimester successfully before she started planning actual motherhood.

Emilia turned out of his embrace and gathered the baguette, the cutting board, and the bread knife. She handed them to him and motioned toward the table. “Did you know that San Marzanos were first grown in the volcanic soils near Mt. Vesuvius?”

“Interesting. Thick or thin?”

“Thin. Think about it. They must have really healthy seeds—all those nutrients right at the start. I could invest in a few plants and save seeds from year to year. Really make something of the greenhouse.”

“I think you should come sit and enjoy your efforts.” Birk stood and pulled out Emilia’s chair. “I’ll get the rest.”

Emilia sat. She watched her husband. The day hung on him like an ill-fitted overcoat, heavy and burdensome. His steely gray eyes reflected the tiredness of hearing too much. She knew that the regional schools only called him in as a consult when tragedies too large for the in-house counselor and psychologist to handle rattled the community. Each time he brought a little more of the sadness, a little more seriousness, home.

He arranged each split breast on their plates and spooned a thick pool of sauce next to the chicken. With several thin slices of bread, he dammed the sauce from spreading. When he placed her plate in front of her, he kissed the top of her head, like he might one day do to their child.

“You’re warm,” he said.

“You used to tell me I was hot.” She laughed and picked off a piece of chicken skin, but the crisp, buttery smell made her stomach turn. “Remember that?” Emilia sipped at her water. The burden of the past years’ failures hung heavy in the silence.

“Are you feeling okay?” Birk felt her face with the backs of his hands. “Really, Em. You’re warm.”

“I’m fine.” She rubbed her abdomen. “We’re fine. Just too much time with the plants and in front of the stove.” She quickly added, “How was today?” She didn’t want

to talk about the labored hours she spent inside the greenhouse grafting Stone's scions onto a new root stock. She wanted to hold that secret for herself until she knew with certainty that she'd succeeded.

Birk centered his own plate on the woven placemat. "As expected," he said. "Lots of sad teenagers. A handful of shaken teachers. Administration scrambling to avoid being sued." He picked up his fork and knife and carved into the chicken. He used a slice of his bread to hold the tomato sauce in place and dredged the chicken until it was covered. He closed his eyes and chewed the first bite slowly, if not quietly.

"So. Good. Em. So. So. Good." He paused to take another bite. "This was exactly what I needed tonight."

She watched the muscles along either side of Birk's jaw pulse out then in with each chew.

"The school, well, the boys' basketball coach, let one of his senior players drive himself and an underclassmen home from the game Friday night without direct parental consent."

"I can't believe the school didn't cancel—all that snow."

Birk nodded. "Another concern." He wiped his mouth and continued. "The underclassman passenger, Jack Darlington, was ejected from the car. Rumors say he would have survived the accident had he not been thrown into the river. From what everyone said today, he was a real nice kid. A lot of people are mourning."

She set her fork down and closed her eyes.

"Funeral's Saturday—what's wrong?"

Emilia shook her head and tried to suppress the acid burning the back of her throat. “Probably shouldn’t have eaten the tomatoes.” She sipped again at her water and swallowed down a familiar metallic taste. “His poor family.”

While Birk chewed, she pushed away from the table. Her mouth felt too full of saliva. The wetness needled her tongue.

“Mother,” he said before he swallowed. “It was just Jack and his mother.”

With her arms splayed on the counter, Emilia braced herself and retched into the sink the few bites of dinner she’d managed. She knew the pain of losing pregnancies, children who might have been had she been allowed to know them, but she could not imagine the agony this woman must feel. To have raised a son nearly to manhood and then have him ripped away by an accident on a snow-covered road seemed to confirm the existence of a vindictive God or the absence of one altogether. Emilia was tired of trying to figure out which.

She rinsed her mouth and splashed some cool water on her face. Birk handed her a towel. “Let’s get you to bed. Sound good?”

Emilia nodded and let Birk guide her down the hall. She slipped out of her jeans and sweatshirt and into one of Birk’s old college t-shirts, the one worn so thin the silk screening was no longer legible. When he’d pulled back the covers and then tucked them in around her, he reached to switch off her bedside light.

“Wait,” she said. “Did anyone talk to her?”

“The mother?”

“Yes. The mother.”

“Of course. The school psychologist and principal visited her today.”

“That’s it?”

Birk reached for the light again. “Get some sleep, Em. There’s nothing to do about it now anyway.”

“You should talk to her.” Emilia rolled to the center of the bed and pulled the covers up over her shoulders to ward off the chills.

It was dark, some arbitrary time of not-yet-morning, when Emilia slipped out of bed. She closed and locked the bathroom door before turning on the light. With her panties lowered to mid-thigh, she eased onto the toilet. She pushed the cotton bikinis below her knees but avoided looking at them for the moment and, instead, wrapped her arms around her waist, leaned on her knees, and pretended that this was just another late-night, hormone-induced visit.

She emptied her bladder quickly, looking at the peeling wallpaper and noting the almost-empty mouthwash, but continued to drip long after the stream ended. Without hesitation, she slid her panties to the floor and, one at a time, lifted her feet out of them before she cradled the blood-saturated crotch in her palm and pressed it to her chest. She had lost this baby, too.

She took one towel from the rack and rolled it into a pillow. She lay on the bathroom throw rug and pulled her knees to her chest and the other towel over her head to muffle her sobs.

A few hours later Emilia woke and struggled to straighten herself as Lehigh Valley sunlight bent itself around the louvers of the bathroom’s mini-blinds. In the

bedroom, her alarm clock roused Birk from the opposite side of their bed, and she could hear him fumbling with the comforter in order to reach her buzzing dresser.

“Em?” he called.

She looked at her panties where they lay fallen on the floor.

“Em?” Birk called again. “Where are you?” Another pause, “Em?”

She heard him slide off the bed and twist the unyielding knob.

“Em? You alright in there?” The doorknob rattled again, and this time she heard him picking at the simple lock. He was probably standing there fumbling with a crude, impromptu key—a coin or the button on his jeans—waiting, hanging on to the helpless state of father-to-be-hood. He deserved to be, wanted to be a father. He had never before blamed her, but each loss added another layer to the silent wall between them.

He burst into the bathroom. Emilia watched the recognition register on his face. He dropped to his knees and pulled her to sit on his thighs.

“I’m sorry,” she managed.

“I’ll call Dr. Gilbert.” Birk guided her to her feet. “You should rest.”

She took his hand and let him lead her back to bed. Just as he had the night before, he lifted the covers, and she slid under them. She rolled toward her nightstand and breathed in the pungency of her bathrobe. She stared at the ultrasound picture in the pewter frame on her nightstand and noticed that Birk’s eyes fixated on the same spot.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you,” she replied, unsure if they were speaking to each other.

When Emilia and Birk arrived, the waiting room at St. Luke's OBGYN office was full of round-bellied women and dutiful husbands who ushered sleeping infants in car seat carriers or unisex-colored strollers. Emilia's knees weakened when the wave of baby noise washed over her, but Birk held fast to her waist until she sat in one of the pink, cushioned chairs. He continued to the receptionist's window.

"Dr. Gilbert's just finishing up in delivery," Birk said when he returned. "It might be a little while."

Emilia wondered if the pad she was wearing would last long enough.

"Magazine?" Birk pointed to the left.

Emilia looked at the rack on the wall. *Parents. Cookie. Family Fun. Healthy Pregnancy. Nine Months and Beyond.* All the covers pictured big, naked bellies or cute, smiling faces. She looked back at Birk and shook her head. He took her hand and kissed it, then held it with both of his own. She stared straight ahead at the magazine rack and tried to envision herself as voluptuous and curvy as the women pictured. The heavy oak door leading back to the examination rooms swung open, and a nurse in stork-patterned scrubs held it until a very pregnant young woman, a girl, really, re-entered the waiting room.

"Three pounds in two weeks. Disgusting!" the girl said. A woman, presumably the girl's mother, stood and handed her a jacket. Emilia opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She continued to listen to the girl's complaints...*stretch marks...missing prom...kicking...life over...*and jumped when Birk tapped her on the shoulder.

"Em," he said with his hand outstretched. "They called us."

She took his hand and let him lead her back to the scale and then on to exam room number four. The nurse went through the usual routine of pulse and blood pressure, but when she flipped to the newest page in Emilia's chart she said, "Oh." Then she opened up the cabinet above the sink and pulled out a plastic-backed paper blanket. "You can strip from the waist down, and Dr. Gilbert will be right in."

Emilia took the blanket and waited for the door to close. When it sealed them off from the busy hallway, Emilia lowered her pants, stepped out, and folded them. Birk took them and set them on his lap. He watched as Emilia sat on the table and pulled the blue shower-curtain-like blanket around her.

A heavy knock interrupted whatever Emilia was going to say in order to fill the silence. Dr. Gilbert didn't wait for a response before he entered the room, but he paused long enough to allow a protest if there was one. He was a large man with a kind voice and gentle features, but every time Emilia saw him she marveled at the size of his hands—they were bigger than any OBGYN should be allowed to have.

"I'm so sorry," Dr. Gilbert said as he entered. "I had hoped not to keep you waiting." He extended his hand to Emilia, then Birk. "Let's check you, shall we?"

Emilia leaned back against the paper backing on the table, and grimaced as Dr. Gilbert pulled out the folding metal stirrups. "When did you start bleeding?" he asked.

"Middle of the night sometime."

Dr. Gilbert sat on the stool and wheeled over to the counter where he picked up her chart and began making changes.

"Okay. So the bleeding began last night, not this morning." He scratched down the information. "What is the flow like now? A regular period? Spotting? Nothing?"

“It’s still,” Emilia paused. “I’m still bleeding,” she said.

Dr. Gilbert slid back over to the exam table and guided Emilia’s legs into the stirrups. “Okay,” he said as he pulled on his gloves, “I’m going to do a regular pelvic first.” He lifted the blanket and quickly lowered it again. “Emilia, how heavily are you bleeding?”

“About a pad every hour-and-a-half to two hours.” Emilia knew that this was not good, but she didn’t think it was exactly life-threatening either. “It wasn’t too bad until late this morning.” Dr. Gilbert looked at his watch. He lifted the sheet again, and Emilia felt him pull her panties to one side. She winced as he reached for her cervix and palpated her uterus from both inside and outside at the same time.

“You’ve been bleeding like this for too long.” Dr. Gilbert removed his gloves and pushed a button on the wall. “If there’s any chance of saving your uterus, we need to do it now.” He gently took each of Emilia’s feet out of the stirrups and then reached around and guided her to a sitting position. One of his nurses opened the door, and before she could inquire, Dr. Gilbert ordered a wheelchair. He scribbled again in Emilia’s chart. “I just need to confirm with surgery. Do you have any questions?”

She had hundreds of questions, but she shook her head anyway. She’d been through three other D & C procedures, never under such pressing circumstances, but she knew in a general sense what to expect.

“Will I be able to stay with her?” Birk asked just as the door opened and a different nurse pushed in a wheelchair.

“Dr. Irraldi and his team will give you all the details. You can escort her there, of course. Excuse me, I need to make that call.” Dr. Gilbert walked out and left them with the nurse to get ready.

Birk guided Emilia off the table and into the gown the nurse held out for her. When she sat down in the wheelchair, he covered her with a white cotton blanket for the ride through the breezeway that connected the doctors’ offices with the main hospital. Dr. Gilbert reappeared and handed Birk Emilia’s chart to carry. “Dr. Irraldi is expecting this to arrive with you,” he said and squeezed Emilia’s shoulder. “I’ll see you there in a little while.”

With that confirmation, the nurse whisked them off to surgery.

When Emilia ascended to consciousness in the recovery room, she first heard garbled voices around her. She blinked rapidly to adjust her eyes to the growing light, a searing brightness that settled into a belly full of hot coals. The images of the curtained-off room swayed in front of her. Gradually the figures to her right settled into the shapes of Birk and Dr. Gilbert who stood with their backs to her bed.

“Hi—” Emilia’s voice jutted dry and gravelly into their conversation.

Both men turned, and Dr. Gilbert raised his voice an octave. “Well, look who’s awake! How are you feeling?” He evaluated her blood pressure monitor and oxygen saturation level before feeling her head with the back of his hand. “You had a bit of a fever,” he said as he pointed to the IV line connected to a second bag of fluid. “We had to push antibiotics.”

Emilia lifted her hand, noting the IV line that punched through her skin and bled into her vein.

Dr. Gilbert sat down on the edge of her bed. “Please understand.” He pushed his glasses further up his nose. “Dr. Irraldi and his team had no choice. They were losing you—”

“What does that mean? Birk?” Emilia looked to Birk, who bowed his head. Emilia watched her heart rate climb on the bedside monitor, the numbers quantifying the increased hammering in her chest and head.

The bile rose in her throat. She moved her hands over her lower abdomen and winced. She knew without his answer that her uterus was gone.

2.

Jillian

If Jillian had known on Friday that Jack wouldn't ever arrive home again, she might have stood here at the living room's picture window and watched the neighborhood boys spill from the bus onto the sidewalk, bumping into each other with homework-heavy backpacks. She might have waved to her son while he walked up their driveway kicking a random stone, his right foot always taking a larger step than his left. She might have greeted him with a hug and homemade pizza and asked about his day, listened while he complained about calculus and dreamed aloud of Juilliard. She might have decided to go to his basketball game instead of letting him catch a ride with Toby Danes. She might have driven him home herself.

Today Ginnie Lamberti's boys Anthony and Giorgio, both high school juniors despite the eleven months between them, exited the bus, each with a cardboard file box in their gloved hands. They crossed the street and looked toward Jillian's place like they thought that Jack might have just skipped school for the day, like he might be waiting in the driveway with a basketball in hand, ready to play a little two-on-one. Their breaths rose in large plumes on the cold, late winter air. Jillian meant to turn away from the window, to hide behind the curtains or in the kitchen in hopes the boys wouldn't see her, but her actions no longer seemed married to her intents, just as time now played

circuitous tricks on the order of her day, pulling apart memories at the seams until she lost minutes or hours navigating her way back to the present.

This coming Saturday, so long as the frozen ground yielded, Jillian would bury her only son in the empty plot beside his father in a casket she had yet to build. At the kitchen table this morning—Monday morning according to both her calendar and cellphone—she'd sketched two different rectangular prisms. The first she drew clean and spare with straight, unadorned lines. The other she embellished with an ornamental raised panel on the lid, reminiscent of a cathedral door and its Lancet arch. She had flipped from one design to the next and back again and debated which her son might have preferred had he a say in the matter. Around the kitchen, washed in the bright, snow-reflected light, she saw evidence of him everywhere. Dishes with dehydrated scrambled eggs and thickened ketchup sat stacked next to the sink. His laptop and school papers cluttered the junk counter, as he called it, a handful of change and some gum wrappers scattered on top as if he had just emptied his pockets. His black L.L. Bean backpack, the one he'd used since kindergarten, slouched to the right against the refrigerator, no doubt exactly where he had dropped it when he walked through the door on Friday. Simple, quiet, everyday things. She pulled the first sketch free from the pad, and, in all caps, she wrote JACK.

That afternoon, she had held her breath as she pushed the door to Jack's bedroom open. The covers of his full-sized bed were still as disheveled as if he lay there among them. His dressers and walls still bragged about his accomplishments. Trophies and framed certificates with ribbons tucked behind them seemed unaware of his absence. Jillian unhooked a blue ribbon from the corner of his junior varsity basketball certificate. In glossy gold letters it boasted "Most Improved Player, 2002-2003." She rehung the

ribbon and wished that he hadn't been most improved, that he hadn't been bumped to varsity this year, that he hadn't been at a game on Friday night in the snow. On his nightstand she noted that his alarm was still set, two red lights on the right hand side of the screen, and she knew that tomorrow she would wait the six minutes for the alarm to go off by itself again.

His closet looked the way she imagined all teenage boys' closets looked. A hamper overflowed with socks, jeans, t-shirts, hoodies, and underwear. Shoes were scattered across the rest of the floorspace. Two white, button-down shirts hung on the bar, foreign-looking among all the empty hangers. In the very back hung his garment bag. Jillian unzipped it. The tailor's notes were stapled to the receipt and taped to the clear plastic that covered the suit. She pulled them free and tucked them into her back pocket.

Jack had chosen this suit because it wasn't black. He didn't want to look like part of the piano on stage, he had told her. He wanted a clear separation of man and instrument, so that the Juilliard interviewers could see him for more than who he was at the keys. The light gray suited him, Jillian remembered thinking the moment he stepped out of the dressing room, and the tailor agreed, complimenting Jack while he measured him for alterations. That Jack would soon wear this suit indefinitely seemed only right. She zipped the bag back up and carried it with her to the living room. She hung it from the coat tree by the front door so that she couldn't forget it, and she noted the emptiness of the living room. In contrast to the rest of the house—the kitchen and Jack's bedroom especially—the living room seemed a vacuum where Jack had never existed. The room was small, only big enough for his piano, and now that Mac and his apprentice had

moved it into the workshop, all that remained were the indentations of its former weight in the carpet.

A knock on the door startled Jillian, and the awareness of her own body rocked her back on her heels. How long had she been staring into the blank surface of the far wall? She pushed open the storm door and first Anthony then Giorgio stepped into her home. Their snow boots left wet spots on the carpet.

“Mrs. D,” Anthony started.

“We have these for you. Jack’s things,” Giorgio continued.

“Where would you like them?” Anthony finished.

Jillian smiled at the boys. They always spoke like that. One brother began a sentence, the other completed it. One set in motion an action, the other joined without question. It was why Jack enjoyed their after school basketball matches. The Lamberti boys challenged him with their symbiosis. He loved them like brothers, and she had grown to love them almost like sons.

“Let’s just leave them right here for now.” Jillian took one box and set it beneath the big window, and Giorgio placed his box beside it. She wasn’t ready to sift through the remains of Jack’s high school career.

“We’re really sorry about Jack, Mrs. D,” Giorgio said. He looked to his brother.

“We wanted to let you know we’re here to help with things if you need us,” Anthony added. “The counselor who told us said helping you would help us, too.”

She looked at them, their eyes still murky with shock, and knew that the news should have come from her. When Principal Gregor and the school’s guidance counselor Mrs. Teague had arrived at her home today around noon, they’d assured her that they’d

brought in additional professionals to help the student body cope with Jack's loss. All Jillian could picture were strangers who didn't even know Jack who probably offered stock sympathy and pamphlets on the grieving process.

"I'm sorry you had to find out at school, boys," Jillian said. Their faces, like garden statues, held fixed, stoic expressions. "How about you ride with me and Mac on Saturday?"

Jillian regretted the words as she spoke them. Her grief alone would fill the limo to capacity.

Anthony looked to Giorgio who lifted his chin in one slight upward motion. "We'll be there," he said, and the boys turned together and walked back outside into the cold.

In the front corner of her workshop, Jack's piano stood silent. Mac and his apprentice had waited until she left for the funeral home this morning before they moved the Steinway out of the family room and into the two-bay garage that served as her wood shop. Jillian touched several keys at once. The notes echoed, flat and discordant, against the cinderblock walls. When her grandfather had shipped this piano home to the States from his station in Germany during the war, no one in the family played. Jack was the first and last.

She placed the sketch of the simple casket on top of the work bench, and over it she smoothed out the pink carbon copy of the funeral contract. It bore her signature and today's date at the bottom. Director Johnson's handwritten notations reminded her that Jack's suit needed to be delivered with the coffin by Friday. Through the contract section

titled “Dressing Fee” he wrote “waived” even though Jack would be dressed for her own private viewing before the lid was lowered for his public service. A kind gesture on the director’s part, she thought, to recognize the effort and extra time she’d put into transforming his mother’s beloved dining room table, where all her family had gathered weekly to enjoy her home cooked meals, into a meaningful vessel for her burial last spring. Jillian hadn’t thought much of the idea at the time. Butchering a family heirloom, a piece of artistry and tradition, and consecrating it to the ground offended her until she saw Mrs. Johnson’s sons and daughters, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren holding hands graveside, united around that transformed table one last time. Since then, Jillian’s wood shop and general carpentry business received consistent word-of-mouth referrals for personalized coffin requests.

This was the first piano, though. She hooked the lip of the measuring tape over the edge of the Steinway lid and pulled it across to the other side. She noted the length with a white grease pencil on the black, lacquered wood then measured the width. Again, she wrote the dimensions. She pulled from her back pocket the tailor’s notes and compared the measurements. Even with an inch or two allowance for error, it was easily double the width of Jack’s newly broadened shoulders and would provide more than enough wood for the casket’s lid.

She pulled a stained canvas apron over the junior varsity basketball jersey, a season too small for her son, and then twice tugged the string on the steel fan that hung in the corner of her workspace. The blades oscillated and the dry air turned over and disrupted the order of her sketched-out plans. She smoothed the pages and weighted them down with the legs of the dismantled piano bench before the fan passed again.

Jillian set-up a pair of sawhorses next to the baby grand so that she could remove the lid herself. She unscrewed the hinge from the lid and pocketed the hardware. With her arms on just one side of the top, she slid the solid expanse of veneered birch onto the first support and then repeated the process with the second side. She measured the center point from both the left and the right, just to double-check, and labeled it. She rested her left foot against the leg of the first horse. The piano lid cut into her waist as she leaned over it, a sensation that reminded her of when Jack was a newborn, how she'd reached over the top rails of his crib so often they had bruised her sides.

The memories of his infancy seemed at once immediate and removed, as if she was watching moments from someone else's life. He was a toddler learning to run after the dog during the blizzard of '96 and a near-grown man making the varsity basketball team just eight short weeks ago. She steadied her breath and pulled the blade of her crosscut saw against the far edge of the wood. The teeth bounced on the back pull before they grabbed the smooth veneer, but they caught well enough for Jillian to transition to a push cut. She braced the surface and watched as the saw sliced cleanly through the piano's lid and into the meat of her left hand.

Her blood surfaced a few seconds later, and Jillian pulled her hand to her chest. She untied her apron and gathered the fabric around her closed fist. She meant to move her hand—thought she'd moved her hand—but reality surprised her again.

She climbed the two steps that led into the house, picked up the kitchen phone, and dialed Mac.

"Jillian," Mac said instead of hello.

"Mac—" Jillian stopped to take a deep breath. "I need help. I'm bleeding."

“How bad?”

Jillian breathed heavily and looked at the saturated apron. She slid down the wall till she sat on the linoleum with her head between her raised knees. “The crosscut saw. It’s not good. Really not good.”

She waited for Mac to reply, but his end of the line remained silent. She knew this likely meant that he was already out the door, in his truck, and driving the half-mile to her house down Riegelsville Road.

By the time Mac arrived and shuttled her off to the emergency care center for stitches, she knew that she had severed a tendon. Without the ability to grip, she couldn’t build a thing.

3.

Emilia

Three days post-surgery, Emilia showered and dressed after Birk left for another day of grief counseling at the high school. She was awake when his alarm sounded, but neither of them moved in the direction of the other, so she feigned sleep till she heard the garage door open and then close again. Before she moved aside the covers, she braced her abdomen with her hands and then straightened herself against the tautness of the stapled incision.

Standing hurt less this morning than it had the previous two. In the hospital, the nurses prodded her to move the moment her eyes opened. By the time she'd dried herself and managed to pull her softest sweats up past her navel, remaining upright felt better than sitting. She stepped into her old sherpa-lined boots, and when her heels slipped into place without her having to bend over, she said a silent prayer of thanks that she'd saved them from last season's Goodwill bag.

The hallway smelled like coffee, and, for a moment, Emilia thought that Birk, a tea drinker, had brewed a pot for her before he left. He'd been attentive to her physical

needs these past few days, bringing her comfort in the form of familiar clothes, warm blankets, and pain medication on a rigid schedule, but his role as caregiver at home coupled with his role as grief counselor at work left him looking crumpled—defeated, even. The creases around his eyes had deepened and the gray hairs that began at his temples had started to ascend to his crown.

Emilia admired their wedding photo at the end of the hall as she approached it. The frame, hand-carved poplar stained the color of autumn oak leaves, had been custom-ordered as a belated wedding gift from her father when both Birk and Emilia fell in love with the picture of themselves in front of the fieldstone church. Birk stood in his tux with his back against a bare poplar tree, its leaves spread on the ground around them, and Emilia faced him with her head resting close to his heart and her newly-ringed left hand on his shoulder. Her long veiled trailed behind her like a premature autumn snow. How much Birk had changed in their seven years of marriage. She wondered if the changes he saw in her were as notable. She straightened the heavy picture frame and pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen. Her father stood at her center island paging through the coupon section of the daily newspaper.

“Want a cup?” Stone asked. His voice tumbled like river rocks in his chest, and he pointed to the full pot on the counter.

“I didn’t expect you so early, Dad.” Emilia filled a cup, leaving plenty of head room, and set it on the island in front of where he stood. He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“A spy never reveals his agenda.” Stone took a short sip from his own steaming mug and smiled at his daughter. “Ah—perfection. Double-brewed, you know.” As if she

could forget. Strangely, Emilia admired the way her father drank his coffee black, strong and thick, the cabernet of coffees he called it. But no matter how much she needed the caffeine, she never could acquire a taste for it without the sweet. She figured it was due to the fact that when they'd ventured out early on all those frosty mornings of her youth, he'd packed two thermoses. One for him filled with his extra-strength coffee, and one for her filled with his extra-strength coffee and two hot chocolate packets.

He was a rugged man without the gruff nature of most outdoorsmen. After her mother died, his strong-but-sensitive demeanor, coupled with his six-foot-two landscaper's frame, made him a popular candidate on the township's unwritten most eligible list. So popular, in fact, that throughout Emilia's time at home it wasn't unusual for her to find—first at her annoyance and later to her amusement—a fresh-baked pie or a covered casserole dish on their front porch. None of the women who cooked for Stone ever signed their last names on the little recipe cards they taped to the foil, and it was through returning the dishes and pie plates that Emilia came to know their neighbors and their neighbors' business.

“Birk's filled you in then?” Emilia busied herself with stirring sugar and extra cream into her coffee to cut through its darkness.

“Or his sources,” he said while nodding his head. “Feeling up for a car ride today?”

Stone fished for information as patiently as he lured trout from the Lehigh River's side waters. Emilia remembered him standing in his waders and sending out his line with the current, content to let it float along until he felt the faintest nibble of interest. To see Stone set the hook and to deftly maneuver the fish into deeper, faster-moving waters was

to see living art, and Emilia knew that if she nibbled on the questions Stone floated, she'd eventually tell him the whole story.

Emilia sat down at the table tucked into the corner of the kitchen and gestured for her father to follow. Stone moved as if the action of relocating himself somehow indicated the gravity of what she might say.

"A car ride sounds fine," she said, and she watched the tension release from Stone's shoulders. She knew that she had just told him that she'd be fine, she'd make it through this, too.

Across the river, Stone steered Emilia's Jeep down the pock-filled, dirt road that wound its way through several hundred yards of woods, beneath an old railroad bridge and new highway overpass and into the black-top parking lot overlooking the Lehigh River. He stopped at the crosswalk and Emilia watched as a family of five in snowshoes scuffed across the blacktop and then trudged into the deep remnants of the last storm. The father broke a path and led the way. The children followed with their mother close behind. By the way the mother leaned forward at the hips, Emilia thought she looked ready to catch them if they fell.

The past three days had shuffled Emilia's memories in such a way that they began sorting themselves into hierarchal beings—alive and free-willed—and as she watched the family head off into the woods, Emilia recalled the day she first saw Stone without the all-perfecting cloak of fatherhood.

They had been up in the tree stand one snowy morning in early December. They'd packed thermoses and bundled themselves in heavy camouflage against the cold, and

Stone had brought along an extra blanket for Emilia, her slight figure less tolerant of the cold than his. They'd hiked the mile-and-a-half up river before sunrise, their boots crunching through the icy layer on top of the day-old snow. As they walked, Stone noted where deer tracks interrupted the blank surface, and Emilia walked four paces behind him without making tracks of her own, her new rifle—an early Christmas gift—bouncing against her back. When they reached the stand, Stone boosted her up before him.

For the better part of that fall, they'd been tracking two bucks, watching and noting their habits. Sometimes Emilia would drift off in history class, imagining herself as a Union soldier perched silently in her tree stand, hunting the Confederate deer; however, standing next to Stone that morning felt nothing like the moments she'd imagined at school. Neither of the bucks had passed that direction, but they spotted two does wandering through the woods to a small clearing about thirty yards out. Stone motioned to Emilia to take her shot. Her shot was clean, and the doe dropped straight down, dead by the time Stone and Emilia reached the clearing. Stone knelt close to the doe and placed his hand on her side.

“Later,” he'd said to Emilia when she began digging in their bag for the suspension bar and rope, but she had insisted, angry that he'd suggested otherwise. She'd grown up watching him quarter deer when they were this deep into the woods. After all, the two of them couldn't carry a full-grown deer out alone—the delay seemed suspicious to her at the time. She knew that by the time they dragged the doe back to the truck that it would be well after noon, and then they'd have to hurry before nightfall to get the job done. At her insistence, he began the process.

When he split the deer up the belly, Emilia understood why he hadn't wanted her to help. The doe she took had been pregnant out-of-season. If her mother had still been alive, she would have found a reason for Emilia to come home, to not witness her father cutting the fetus from the doe. Emilia would have listened, horrified, as her mother explained the whole situation. Her father, however, was not a man of words. The silver sac encasing the baby shimmered in the sun like a fish just below the surface of the water, and when it spasmed, her father lacerated the membrane. A wave of nausea overcame Emilia with the odor, and she vomited into a puddle of blood that had pooled and grown thick in the snow. Stone put his hand on her shoulder.

"Now do you understand?" He wiped his knife on a drift of snow, leaving pink stripes at irregular intervals.

Stone parked in the second reserved employee parking space next to Reggie's truck.

"I'll wait here," he said, and Emilia gathered the files she needed to return to her boss from the bag at her feet.

"Morning, Reggie." The door to the commission office, an oversized cubicle, really, clicked shut behind Emilia.

"Look at you," Reggie said as he looked up from his computer screen.

She walked past the small visitors' counter where pamphlets on the local ecology, fishing seasons, and area attractions dusted over in their clear plastic holders and dropped the manilla folders on her boss's desk. "These are interesting," she said.

“I told you.” He folded his glasses and put them in the pocket beneath his embroidered name. “Question is, are you interested?”

“Depends.”

Reggie folded his hands and rested them above his paunch. His waiting stance. When she was in Dr. Reginald Peterson’s undergraduate biology class, first as a student and then as a TA during her graduate studies, he’d pose a question to the students seated stadium style around the room and stand, hands clasped over a then-flat belly, motionless until a correct answer was offered from the crowd.

“When do you need a full write-up?” Emilia took the stack of files back off his desk and hugged them to her chest. Six weeks at home seemed daunting at best, and some vicarious excitement was certainly welcome.

Reggie smiled. “Deadlines aren’t until Spring. Gives you at least three weeks. Field teams won’t be selected until the week after. Just say yes.”

“I sold all my field gear,” she said, but something fluttered deep inside her and rippled into her chest.

“Like planting a tree, Emilia.” He put on his hat and patted her on the shoulder. “You know where to find me if you need any more information.”

“Like riding a bike you mean.”

Reggie paused at the door. “What will I do without you? Now go home and rest.”

Emilia carried the files back out to the Jeep.

When Emilia was a little girl she’d dreamed of knowing her birth parents, not meeting or talking to them, just knowing who they were, like one might know where the

emergency exits at a movie theatre are, just because. Some mornings she woke up unable to remember the faces she'd envisioned, but one dream still stood out to her even now in her mid-thirties. She was five, and the menu at the local ice cream stand had been freshly repainted. The words didn't mean much to her, but beside each listed item was a beautiful hand-painted picture. Emilia kept running her fingers over the painting of a waffle cone with twisted ice cream and rainbow sprinkles. When the small wooden window underneath the Order Here sign slid open, a woman with the same shade of blonde hair as her own waved them closer. They stepped forward and the woman reached through the window and shoved Emilia back.

"I didn't want you!" she yelled.

Before Emilia hit the ground in her dream, she had woken up. She remembered that she had called for her mom, but Claire was already sick. Too sick and too drugged to hear Emilia from the bedroom down the hall. Too weak to come and comfort her even if she had heard. Mara had been the one to fumble into her bed and offer the awkward assurance of a teenager to a kindergartner, the kind of assurance only comforting in the proximity of one body to another.

The teapot whistled as Birk walked into the kitchen, his briefcase and overcoat flecked with melting snowflakes. He passed by Emilia and opened his briefcase on the table.

Emilia shivered and poured the hot water over her tea bag and watched as it released golden brown clouds into the mug as it steeped. Birk stood with his back to her

rummaging through the stack of papers. She dipped the bag up and down without comment. She already knew what was coming.

“Here it is,” Birk said, lifting a pamphlet from the disordered heap of papers. A quick flash of the purple ink and distinctive crayon-drawn font at the top was immediately recognizable. He’d brought this same pamphlet home three times before. He held it out to her.

Emilia ignored it and brought her tea to the table and sat opposite his mess.

“Just look at it this time.” Birk set the pamphlet in front of her and packed away all the rest. “You might change your mind.”

“I won’t,” Emilia said and pushed it aside. The top half of the adoption agency’s brochure slid under the floral placemat, leaving just a picture of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed little girl in pigtails and overalls visible. Emilia pulled the placemat close enough to cover her, too.

“You mean you don’t want to,” Birk said. He unbuttoned his shirt sleeves and rolled them to his elbows.

“So what if I don’t?” Emilia pushed her chair back to stand and winced as the staples pulled against her skin, but Birk leaned across the table and placed his hands over hers.

“We should talk about this, Em. It’s time.” His hands radiated heat. Once she might have kissed him, melted into his strength and self-assurance as easily as the snow. His eyes, as grey and soft as ever, reflected genuine hurt as she pulled herself out from beneath him.

“You know, Redbook claims that the quality of the first four minutes spent with your spouse after work each day can accurately predict the success or failure of your relationship.” She sipped at her tea. “It’s only been three days. Three days. I’m pretty sure we’re failing.”

“I want to talk about where we go from here.”

“No,” she whispered.

“No?” Birk raised his voice. “That’s it? No?” He turned and walked to the windows over the sink. It was the translucent royal blue of winter twilight outside, and gusts of bitter wind blew clouds of dusty snow up against the window panes, where it collected in each of the corners.

She’d avoided this discussion after each miscarriage. She knew this, but even so she still didn’t know what to say, or, more honestly, she didn’t know what she felt. Before she’d been able to say they’d try again. At this mention of adoption something froze-up inside her, like the blood had all rushed to her extremities and left her hollow core to solidify. She’d wanted their child, a child who might look up at her with eyes the same color as her own who might laugh with a similar cadence as Birk and share her own taste for exotic olives and irrational fear of the dark. She’d wanted to give her child a history, not just a future.

“It’s really coming down out there,” Birk said without turning. He spoke with his clinical voice, the one with which he answered his phone.

“I think it’s just blowing now. March winds.” Emilia picked up her tea and joined him at the window.

Next door, Arlene Wilson's kids Jason, Jennifer, and Jackie, or the Js as Emilia called them when Arlene wasn't within earshot, ran around their backyard, all three bundled into bright outfits and bobbing around the snow piles.

"Can you believe they're out in this?" Birk asked.

"They're kids. Of course they're out in this." Emilia leaned against Birk's back and kissed his shoulder. She felt her own chest rise and fall as Birk took a deep breath.

"I should go shovel before it gets much deeper."

"I can't help," Emilia said, her mouth muffled by his shirt.

"I know," Birk said. "Stay here. I'll be back in a little bit. We can try those four minutes again."

Emilia settled on the living room couch with her tea, tepid but strong, and a blanket crocheted by her grandmother—Stone's mother. Only recently had she decided that it was too beautiful to keep in a dry-cleaner's preservation box. She ran her fingers over the chevron pattern. Every fifteenth stitch a peak formed before it decreased to a valley fifteen stitches later, and every ten rows alternated white and gray. Her grandmother had tried to teach her the art numerous times, but Emilia never quite got the hang of it before she died. With every positive pregnancy test, she'd pick up the craft again only to lose her patience before she'd created anything.

Beneath the blanket and with her tea close by, Emilia gradually warmed. She switched on the reading lamp beside the couch and opened up the files from Reggie. Both proposals were fairly straight-forward, and Emilia knew three days, let alone three weeks, would be sufficient time to compose the needed documents. The first one was a contract request for a field arborist in Alberta, Canada, the other for one in New Zealand. Emilia

had long dreamed of taking a trip to New Zealand, but it was the Alberta file that kept her attention.

She'd spent three months in Alberta during her graduate years under Reggie's direction. Along with his nephew, Louis, the three of them had catalogued the jack pine infestation and supervised the control burns imposed to prevent its spread. She'd watched as an entire landscape transformed before her eyes. To many it looked like destruction, but she knew that the only way the forest would recover was through the ravages of fire, of the heat that would force open the seeds of the trees that otherwise would remain dormant. She closed the files.

Her view out the front window overlooked the driveway and the front yard. Their corner property had sidewalks on both the front and side yards, and Emilia knew that Birk would clear it all at least once this evening. From where she sat she could see him at the end of their driveway, shovel in hand. He worked methodically, each shovel full of snow scooped, transported, and dumped in the most economical way possible, the six inches already accumulated piling up to two and three times as high around all the borders of their property. When he paused and looked toward the front window, she waved. Birk raised his hand as if gesturing for her to come to the window, except when Emilia set aside her files and reached the bay window, Jason, Arlene's oldest, ran toward Birk and launched snowball after snowball at him before ducking behind the four-foot evergreen hedgerow.

Her husband laughed, and though she couldn't hear it, Emilia knew from how wide his mouth opened and how his head tipped backward just enough to show his Adam's apple that it was a deep, genuine laugh. Birk bent and gathered some snowballs

of his own then shook all the snow off the evergreens. Jason pelted Birk again as he ran toward his own backyard, and Birk followed, throwing near misses of his own. Neither of them noticed her leaning on the windowsill. Her breath fogged up an entire pane of glass.

4.

Jillian

Jillian stood in her slip and pantyhose at her open closet doors. With her good hand, she pulled from its hanger her only dress, and with it she loosed the memories of the only three times she'd worn it. Each time she had pulled it over her head she'd asked God why He marched the men she loved, one after another, off the earth in such ugly and untimely ways. The first man, a boy really, with whom she'd made love, was shot, a victim of friendly fire, in the jungles of Vietnam. His eighteen-year-old body had filled her with new and mysterious pleasures, only the echoes of which returned home. She couldn't even pin it on the Zips, her father'd said, as if death only mattered if the right person could be blamed for its occurrence. Her father, a man steeped in both ignorance and pride, followed half a year later. A stroke crippled his left side; the dysphagia left him malnourished; the pneumonia filled his lungs, killed him ounce by fluid ounce. Some years later, there was Hank. He gave her a son and sixteen years of marriage before he ran himself through a machine at the steel mill the morning he was issued his pink slip. His co-worker and best friend Mac Warren claimed he hadn't made a sound. She once found a sense of relief, of completion, in the trinity of those losses. Then Jack. She slipped into the black crepe dress and again asked God for an answer. Instead she heard the words that Mac's brother Commissioner Al Warren had used on the way to the hospital: *Ejected. Hypothermic. Drowned.*

She heard Mac come into the kitchen through the garage, heard him hang his keys on the plaque of hooks Jack had made with her in her wood shop one rainy afternoon of his early adolescence. She wrapped herself in a black cardigan and put on her snow boots

before she looked in the mirror. Her shoulder-length, graying hair looked as unkempt as she felt, and so Jillian gathered it at the nape of her neck and attempted to tame it with an elastic. Her bandaged hand caught several strands and pulled them free from the confines of the ponytail. The wisps of hair fell around her face and framed her swollen eyes. She exhaled and watched the strands rise and resettle in the same spots. There was no sense in trying harder to look like she thought she should. This was not Julliard. This was not graduation.

She shielded her eyes from the harsh morning sun as she stepped into the hallway. Mac stood between the kitchen and the living room with his back to her. He was dressed in a dark suit, and even from behind Jillian saw the heaviness of his shoulders, how they rounded forward toward the empty room. She walked behind him, and he reached around her and pulled her close. They stood like that—just as they had at Hank’s funeral five years earlier—each staring at something in solitude, yet rooted together by the physical presence of each other’s body. The mutual loss—a husband, a best friend—is what had pushed them together. Their mutual love for Jack had kept them so. Jillian looked out the window. Dirty piles of snow, white and clean earlier this week, sloped on either side of the salt-crusted road. She wondered what would become of her and Mac, of the relationship they’d never bothered to define for themselves or others, without her son.

She watched as Anthony and Giorgio came walking up the road, all black pants and shoes sticking out from beneath their winter coats. Anthony carried something in his hands.

“We’ll get through this,” Mac said as the boys stepped onto the driveway.

“I forgot they were coming.” Jillian turned out of Mac’s protective hold and opened the inside door. Much like they had on Monday, Anthony and Giorgio stepped into the house, and Anthony handed Jillian a small brown box tied with red and white baker’s twine.

“From our grandma,” he said. “Almond biscotti.”

Giorgio added, “She wanted us to make sure you ate something today.”

Jillian thought about the last thing she ate—cereal. She was sure of what, just not when. Anthony stepped closer and held out the box.

“Let’s all have one,” Mac said.

Jillian took it from Anthony and brought it into the kitchen. She set four plates on the table and untied the string. The scent of freshly-baked biscotti, full of vanilla and amaretto notes, was comforting and familiar. Grandma Ginnie knew how to feed people. So many times over the years, Jillian had come home to packages of food on the front porch, or the boys would bring her a meal wrapped on a plate in tin foil. Each time she’d called Ginnie to thank her, and Ginnie gave out the same advice: *L’appetito vien mangiando. The appetite comes while you’re eating.*

Though she wasn’t hungry, she opened the pantry to see what else she could offer the boys. Instead of an open box of cereal on the second shelf, she found a bloated carton of milk. She turned on the faucet and dumped the soured contents down the drain. She opened the refrigerator and where the milk should have been sat the open box of corn flakes. Jillian turned back toward the living room with the cereal box in hand.

“You’ll never believe—” she stopped short at the sight of Mac straightening Giorgio’s necktie. All three of them wore the same royal blue around their necks. Jack’s

favorite color—his school’s color—the color of the only tie he owned, had owned. She started to speak, but only stammered. Mac came to her side and pulled out a chair. The boys followed.

“We didn’t forget about you,” Mac said. He pulled from his suit pocket a small, velvet box and handed it to her. The palm-sized box hinged on one side, and Jillian opened it. From it she pulled a perfectly matched silk scarf. Tiny, clear seed beads dangled from tassels of varying lengths all around the scarf’s edge like icicles from a roofline.

“Do you like it Mrs. D?” Anthony asked as he sat down across from her at the table.

Giorgio joined him and said, “We voted on that one at the mall.”

“Voted?” Jillian looked up at Mac who nodded.

“It was unanimous,” he said.

Jillian wrapped the cool fabric around her neck and said, “It certainly would have been.”

The limo arrived to the funeral home five minutes ahead of schedule. Two men in black overcoats were tending the marquee—*Darlington Service* was spelled-out in evenly-spaced, block letters, a detail she appreciated. Every time Jillian had thought of this moment over the past week, she imagined that her emotions would be erratic and volatile; however, when Mac opened the limo door and reached out his hand, she felt calm—the eye of the storm, as people like to say. She took his hand and stepped out onto the awning-covered walkway of Johnson’s Funeral Home.

Director Johnson greeted her at the door and then, in turn, shook the hands of her three escorts. “Will you all be attending the private viewing?” he asked.

Jillian nodded and looked to Mac, and the boys looked at each other. Together they walked into the parlor.

The parlor was a community touchstone. Most of the residents in this rural New Jersey town, and even some from the Pennsylvania town immediately across the river knew the pink walls and soft uplighting of Johnson’s. Death took on a healthy glow inside the parlor, and those who came to pay respects often said things like, “Aunt Mary looks great!” and “Uncle James looks so peaceful!” In the receiving line at Hank’s wake, one insensitive iron-worker had called out, “Look, fellas! He’s just on break! Someone wake him up!” Jillian had suspected he was drunk, and she hadn’t meant to laugh a crowd-silencing laugh at his outburst, but she did. In the days and weeks after she buried Hank, she hid at home. It didn’t matter that the sedatives were to blame for her own surge of unconventional behavior. Every time she thought of it, she flushed with embarrassment. Jillian didn’t want anything like that to happen with Jack.

At the front of the room flowers stood on individual columns of varying heights. Giant sprays of blue-tipped spider mums and royal blue carnations leaned on easels at both the head and foot of the casket. And there was Jack—wearing his matching tie in the casket she’d designed and Mac had built in excess of her vision. The corner joints were nearly seamless, and the finish on the bed of the casket matched the black of the lacquered piano-wood lid identically. Jack would have approved.

She walked to her son and knelt.

Director Johnson had prepared her, told her that the post-mortem reconstruction would not be enough to camouflage all of Jack's injuries. The cuts to his face, though mended were still visible beneath the makeup, and the coloring of his skin, especially on his hands and lips revealed the awful truth. He had survived ejection during the crash and then drowned in the frigid river. What wasn't clear to the medical examiner is whether or not he was conscious when his lungs filled.

Jillian reached into the casket and held his hand.

"I'm sorry," she whispered like a mantra. Only when Mac kneeled down next to her did she realize that she was rocking back and forth on her knees.

When mourners started arriving to pay their respects during the reception hour before the burial, Jillian leaned on a pillar without flowers between handshakes and hugs. People told her their memories of Jack, the funny things they recalled. His friends and peers brought pictures and pinned them to the memory board by the guest book. And they just kept coming. Teachers. Coaches. Friends. Parents. Jillian excused herself about halfway through.

"I'm just going to the ladies' room," she said to Mac. All she really needed was some air.

As Jillian washed her hands at the single sink of the two-stall bathroom, she watched a young woman, sixteen or seventeen, maybe, rinse her mouth with tap water and then dab her eyes in the mirror. She was pretty. When they made eye contact, the young woman started crying again. Jillian opened her arms and hugged her. She hadn't counted on this—the grieving mother shouldering the responsibility of consolation.

“Were you friends?” Jillian asked the girl.

“For a little while,” she said. “I moved here over Thanksgiving. Jack—Jack was nice to me.”

Jillian squeezed the girl one last time and asked her name.

“Loreli. But, Jack called me Eli.”

“It was nice to meet you, Eli.”

Eli smiled at her and waved a small goodbye.

The funeral exhausted Jillian. She recalled the greater details—the mile-long processional winding up the narrow hill and through the ornate iron gates of the Cromwell Cemetery, the rolling of the coffin to the gravesite, the consecration of her son into the ground, the laying of hundreds of single blue carnations atop the casket. She remembered these things like a mosaic, something that is beautiful from a distance until you look too hard.

“I can’t cry anymore,” Jillian said. “I can’t even cry for my son. What kind of mother does that make me?” She fumbled with her scarf.

Mac, took her face in both his hands. “No one loved Jack more than you.”

“I could have done better. I could have been there. I could have stopped it. Mac, I could have stopped it. I could have gone and then he wouldn’t have been in the car with Toby and driving in the snow and I could have saved him he’d still be here with us and we—”

“Stop.” Mac pulled her into the hollow space beneath his arm. “The boys gave me something for you today from the school. I want you to promise me that you’ll call on Monday.”

Mac held out a business card: *Dr. Birk O’Rourke, MD, General Psychiatry*. It was a different name than the counselor who had visited with Jack’s principal last week.

“You think I need a shrink?”

“Promise me. I think you need someone who didn’t know Jack.”

Jillian said she’d call without promising and relaxed into the dark warmth of the quiet.

Jillian kept pressure on the brake pedal and clutch. She’d passed the general store and the run-down inn, but when she rolled over the railroad tracks and the patinated cables of the bridge came into full view, she stopped. The guardrail to the right of the bridge that Toby’s car had plowed through was replaced with bright orange netting, and the black cherry tree that had stopped it from plunging into the river bore the scar of the small car’s bumper. Jillian thought she could see the glass from the windshield glinting on top of the snow. The memorial honoring her son Jack still clung to the mid-bridge parapet, its ribbons and balloons limp over the side. Two wooden walkways flanked the grated deck, and the Delaware River, slow and thick with the remnants of winter, passed below.

Al Warren, bridge commissioner, exited the booth and waved her forward with his free hand. She rolled down her window the rest of the way and eased the Jetta over to where he stood.

“Afternoon, Jill. I was going to run these over later.”

She accepted the small stack of envelopes and the plastic grocery bag full of trinkets then nestled them between her tool bag and the console. As an afterthought, she covered them with her dusty work flannel.

“I can’t avoid it today, Al. I have to cross.”

“Want me to take it down?” Al pointed to the ribbons that now jerked and twisted in the wind. “I can box it all up and drop it off if you’d like or send it over with Mac.”

Jillian shook her head. “I didn’t put it up.” She didn’t know who did. Though, when word of Jack’s death lit up the town like a surge during an electrical storm, its erection was inevitable. People build memorials to honor those they’d loved in life. The construction gives them a sense of control.

He patted her arm. “Just say the word when you’re ready.”

She nodded and shifted into first gear. Unlike the other suspension bridges along this stretch of the Delaware, the Riegelsville’s grated surface grabbed at her tire treads and vibrated up through the floorboards and into the soles of her shoes. Until he was twelve, Jack had always picked up his feet while crossing.

Jillian looked in her rear view mirror, made sure no one was behind her, and then stopped the car mid-bridge. This was the spot. Wreaths and flowers, burned with frost, stood above where Al had found Jack’s body in the frigid water. His varsity jacket had snagged on a pier as his body floated under the bridge and prevented him from being carried silently downstream. One mylar balloon still wandered in the light wind. The rest of the popped or deflated bouquet bounced on their matching ribbons, suspended between the bridge and the river.

The rumble of an approaching car forced Jillian to continue across to the Pennsylvania side. Each landmark in town reminded her of him. The Riegelsville Inn, with its wide-planked porch and al fresco dining where they'd often grab a burger after Jack finished at basketball. They'd watch the cars drive by, sometimes guessing the titles of bits of music that spilled from their open windows. The little post office where he'd always wrinkle his nose at the stale glue smell, even as a near-grown man. The pizzeria where he'd waited tables the past two summers.

Outside of town the reminders were less suffocating, spaced at more manageable distances. Jack's old little league fields. The campgrounds where they'd set up the Dobsonian and followed stars across the summer skies. The canal path museum, where a six-year-old Jack disappeared during his kindergarten field trip, only to be found napping in a display of replica mule stables.

Jillian culled these memories as she drove, strung each one onto the delicate thread of the present so that by the time she reached the address, they gathered about her like the hand-painted macaroni necklace Jack had once given her for mother's day, every piece its own story caked in a vibrant layer of haphazardly applied glitter.

She parked at the curb next to a sign that read Dr. Birk O'Rourke, MD, *General Psychiatry*. There was nothing general about her situation. At least to her it all felt far too specific. She contemplated going home, but instead of restarting the car like she wanted, she shouldered her small canvas bag and stepped into the road.

The houses were close here, real suburbia. Fences and shoveled walkways surrounded and divided everything into angular swaths of tidy yards. Un-tragic yards.

Yards that had two parents to tend to them and children playing inside their fences on sunny days. The handrail leading up the front porch steps was covered in a variegated ivy. The doorbell chime reminded her of church bells, and for the first time since she decided to come, Jillian felt that entering this home-based psychiatrist's office might be easier than returning to her own.

The door unlocked and a man with a slight glint of gray in his dark hair opened it. "You must be Mrs. Darlington." He extended his hand. "Dr. O'Rourke. Birk for short, if you like."

"Jillian. Please." Her hand moistened inside his.

She followed him down the wooden stairs. The space of Dr. O'Rourke's office was neutral and cool with green plants and ambiguous art on the walls, a serene, clean-smelling space. Two deep-seated couches sat at a right angle to each other in the far corner of the room, and a table of pamphlets and books was nestled in the L-shape they created. Closest to the entry, a leather chaise was arranged at an angle to an ornate birch desk. Jillian wondered if when Dr. O'Rourke had purchased the desk that the wood choice had been intentional.

"Make yourself comfortable, Jillian. Wherever you'd like." He gestured around the room and she noted where the light salmon of his shirt darkened under his arms.

She slipped out of her shoes and tucked her feet beneath her on the short couch, her bag resting against her right hip. Birk picked up his folio from his desk and sat on the couch adjacent to her.

"I'm glad you came, Jillian. I was worried when you canceled the first two appointments."

“It’s the first time I’ve been out of the house or my workshop since the funeral,” Jillian said. She thought Birk had sympathetic eyes.

“Grief is different for us all. Staying close to home is natural. But, then again,” he cleared his throat, “so is running away. Before we start, did you bring the papers I sent you?”

Jillian reached into her bag and pulled out the envelope filled with signed papers. She unfolded them and handed them to Birk who flipped through and signed each one.

“Just to be clear, Jillian, you understand that anything you tell me and what we discuss will be held in strict confidence, right?”

She nodded.

“We can talk about whatever you’d like.” There was a note of camaraderie in his voice, a gentle assurance that she wasn’t alone in her grief.

“I’ve never done this before.” Jillian met his eyes, and he smiled.

“Never talked? Well--” Birk stood and walked toward the door. “Will coffee help? Or, do you prefer tea?”

“Coffee, thank you.”

“Make yourself more comfortable. I have a pot ready.”

When Birk left, Jillian surveyed the room. She hoped there might be rules for proper psychiatric patient behavior posted, but there weren’t. Soothing oceanic-like landscapes covered the walls without windows, and, because the windows were high, nearly at ceiling level, the late afternoon light angled down and pooled in the center of the room.

Birk returned with a tray full of coffee and all the fixings. He poured her a mug and she stirred in her own cream and sugar.

“Jack loved coffee from the first sip he took,” she said. She held her mug in both hands. She took a sip and then felt the pull of a memory she’d forgotten until then. “For a while last Fall, I didn’t know what was happening to the coffee in the morning. It was just disappearing. I thought the pot had gone bad, evaporating or leaking or something. I’d put six cups in, set the timer, and in the morning only three would come out. Turns out Jack just got to the kitchen first most mornings.”

She continued to talk about her boy. His likes and dislikes. His habits and quirks. Without understanding how, she was laughing and finding comfort in the telling of those stories, and like no time had passed at all, their time was up.

“I hate to stop you, but we’re out of time today.” Birk stood and offered his hand to help her up. “Same time next week?” he asked as she planted her feet back into her shoes.

She nodded. For the first time she thought that Mac might have been right.

5.

Emilia

When Stone dropped Emilia off at home, Birk’s car was already in the driveway, and a car she didn’t recognize was parked along the curb, partially blocking the mailbox and Birk’s private practice sign. She kissed her father and then walked over to check the mail as he drove away, even though her husband usually greeted Fred and accepted the

day's mail by hand. She bent and shielded the evening sun glare from the back window of the late-model, 5-speed Jetta and noted various wooden bowls and blocks of wood stacked in the back seat. In the passenger seat sat a soft-sided tool box full of chisels and rasps amid discarded receipts and paper coffee cups. Wrappers and sawdusty flannel shirts covered the floor. Emilia guessed that this patient was a man in his late fifties or early sixties, quite possibly retired and widowed and almost certainly dealing with grief or depression. She closed the empty mailbox and headed inside.

Birk's practice had grown to its current state one referral at a time over the course of the past year. Many schools in the area recommended him to affluent parents whose children needed counseling beyond what the school could offer, and, sometimes, the parents themselves wound up sitting opposite him, unveiling the genesis of their children's problems through unresolved issues of their own. Word of mouth was effective in connecting Birk with clients, but it was not without its stresses. The reputation of his psychiatric practice was not something he took lightly, and, his constant attentiveness to it sometimes made Emilia feel like she was competing with another woman, especially as the miscarriages drove him deeper and deeper into his work.

She still found it strange to come home to a house filled with someone else's emotions. Depending on which patient Birk was seeing, sometimes waves of grief washed up the stairs and out the door when she opened it; other times shouts of anger and hurt chased her back outside before she'd fully entered, but when she walked in the front door of their bi-level home that night, Birk's cheerful voice rose up from the den downstairs followed by the voice of a woman—not what Emilia had expected based on the Jetta. The extra happiness in the air was cloying.

She sat in the living room in the over-sized chair closest to the stairs and once again pulled up the Alberta file on her laptop. The only thing she had left to edit on the proposal was her personal information, including her field work history. She understood that if she wanted this assignment all she had to do was tell Reggie, but there was something satisfying about going through the official steps.

Birk placed his arms around her from behind and planted a kiss on her earlobe. “Welcome home,” he whispered. “Hungry? I don’t think I stopped for lunch today--six visits in a row.”

“The last was new,” Emilia said as she closed the Alberta file and shut her laptop.

Birk shook his head, a sure sign that he would say no more.

“I thought she’d be a man. Did you see her car?” Emilia really wondered if he’d noticed.

“Ready to go to dinner?” Birk laughed and zipped up his coat.

Stone had reminded Emilia no fewer than fifteen times about dinner at Mara’s house on the way home from her recheck appointment at Dr. Gilbert’s, but the quality of her awareness was not reflected by the quantity of her excitement. She shoved her laptop and file folders into her bag.

“It’s going to be awful, you realize. Will is cooking,” she said and winced at the memory of the last meal Will prepared.

Will and Mara had dated exclusively and devotedly for a while back when they were in high school. Thinking back now, Emilia’s memories were completely devoid of Mara’s presence for stretches of time during those years. She could, however, remember writing angry poetry in middle school English class in which she blamed Will for making

her an only child, a preteen girl without a mother and the big sister she needed. After graduation, Mara went on to culinary school where she met Joe and Will stayed on as a baker at his grandparent's bakery. Bread was the extent of Will's kitchen magic. It didn't stop him from trying, though.

"We'll make up for what we don't eat at dinner with Creme Brûlée from The Riegelsville Inn on the way home?" Birk asked this like they already had a reservation.

"I'll drive." Emilia grabbed her keys and shouldered her bag. Five weeks post-surgery was long enough to wait.

Recovery was something Emilia's sister had mastered. Mara had completely remodeled her house in the six months since she'd divorced Joe, and each time Emilia came to visit, something else had changed—or, in Mara's words, improved. First it had been the bedroom that was gutted, the beige carpet ripped up and replaced with wide pine-planking. Then Mara had refurbished the bathrooms, renegotiated the whole house's neutral color scheme into deep tones of green and burgundy and bisque, and purged the space of anything that was his. Now that the house was again only hers, the changes were more subtle. Sometimes Emilia would find a new knick-knack tucked away on a shelf somewhere, a souvenir of some new exotic place she'd visited: a shiny pebble from the beach in Bora Bora, a tiny bamboo umbrella from a memorable Mexican margarita, a dried thistle from the Scottish Highlands. Other times, a new picture hanging on the wall would startle her with her own reflection as she walked by.

Tonight, on her way in from the front porch, Emilia lingered in the foyer and noted the new throw rugs on the maple laminate flooring while she dropped her work bag

by the stairs. The thick vines that wound their way around the rectangular patch of brown reminded her of the gardens their mother had planted right before she died—the ones she and Mara and Stone struggled to maintain during the first season without her.

They both had helped her tend to the patches of vegetables and flowers, but that first summer without Claire's gentle guidance, they seemed to remember very little of what they had actually done to help. Emilia, who was six at the time, recalled watering, and Mara, then twelve, applied the Miracle Grow and enforced the weekly weeding. But, despite those efforts, by August, most of the gardens had become so bug-infested and overcrowded, that they choked to death before the harvest. The two surviving crops left Mara baking pumpkin pies, pumpkin cookies, and zucchini bread for the better part of the fall, while Emilia watched her, amazed at how effortless she made the peeling, chopping, cooking, mixing, and baking appear. During that first year, the warmth of the oven and the scent of pumpkin cookies with brown-butter frosting filled a corner of the emptiness and deceived them both into believing that things would return to normal.

The scent that greeted them in the hallway was not pumpkin cookies. People of non-Norwegian descent, and possibly a few Norsemen themselves, would never be able to distinguish just which particular fish entree might be for dinner. And, though Will claimed fish recipes as his specialty, they all smelled like polluted ocean.

“We're here!” Emilia called down the hall. Though she didn't find the aroma appetizing, this was the first time in nearly two months that she hadn't felt instantly ill upon entering Mara's house for dinner.

“Come in! Come in!” Mara yelled from the kitchen. She was wiping her hands and untying her apron when Emilia came through the door. Mara wrapped her arms around Emilia’s neck. “Missed you, Em.”

“I have some exciting news for you, Mar,” Emilia said when she let go. “Don’t let me forget to show you.”

Birk pulled out the chair next to him, and Emilia sat shoulder-to-shoulder with him and her father at the small kitchen table. She shifted her weight to lean more towards Birk. Even though they’d been married for eight years, together for almost nine, he still made her nervous—not that she was afraid of him. Rather, his steel-gray eyes unnerved her with their steadiness. She wanted to continuously impress him, as if she was still a freshman undergrad in need of his approval and praise. Oftentimes she wondered if she’d ever live up to the expectations he had for their lives together. They’d married quickly after meeting but had agreed to wait at least a year before they began trying for a family. Now here they were married eight years, still just the two of them.

Will put the last of the fish—a school of them, really, each with their eyes still in place—on the table and then joined them all with a wine glass in hand. He held it out and said, “A toast, to my beautiful bride-to-be.”

Emilia felt Stone grab her knee under the table.

Will. He was nice enough, handsome enough, caring enough. But somehow when Emilia lumped all of his qualities together, they didn’t seem to add up to enough for Mara. Her sister was progressive, motivated, well-traveled. Will was local, complacent, traditional. The common denominators between them seemed to be flour and yeast and water; however, Mara could turn those three into anything from tender pasta to delicate

phyllo dough, but William Kristopherson, would always, unfailingly, knead, shape, and bake the same old loaf of crusty bread that had been the staple of his great-grandparent's bakery for the better part of a century. And then he'd dip it in the juices of fish only he could identify.

Emilia lifted her glass in a universal gesture and tipped back her first four ounces of chardonnay before Will could say anymore about his second attempt to steal her sister.

By the end of the evening she'd lost track of how many glasses, perhaps bottles, she'd consumed, but the influx of alcohol did not improve her mood. She didn't bother to conceal the fact that she hadn't touched her fish and left the whole of it looking up at her from her plate. She stared into its single blank eye, a contest of indifference she knew she'd lose.

Emilia and Birk rode home in relative silence—the shuffling of Emilia's work files the only interruption to the regular road noises. She flipped back and forth between two manila folders constantly, unable to make up her mind which she wanted to focus on for the duration of their twenty-minute ride. She caught Birk glaring at her periodically, but she ignored him and continued to shuffle for no other purpose, she finally decided, than to appear busy shuffling.

“Okay. Enough,” Birk said as he turned onto their road. “What are you doing?”

Emilia looked at him. “Oh, these?” She held up the folders. “Reggie gave them to me last month. I was supposed to have them back to him already. I wanted to talk to Mara about them tonight.”

“What are they?”

“Fieldwork proposals. Field ecologists are needed this spring in Canada and New Zealand.”

“Well, then, don’t you think you should actually look at them?” Birk’s tone attempted playfulness, and Emilia knew that it was for her benefit, but she couldn’t bring herself to banter.

“Birk—” She rested her hand on his leg as she continued, “I’m not just proofing these. I’m actually considering them.”

Birk put the blinker on and turned into the paved driveway. “Considering? What does that mean? You haven’t done field work since before I met you.” He put the car in park but didn’t unbuckle or turn off the ignition.

“I need a break.” Emilia opened the folder with the Canadian proposal. “Plus, this one is a two month contract. I’ll only be away for sixty days. April, May, a few days of June.”

“Let’s talk about this in the morning, after you’re de-wined.” Birk unbuckled his seatbelt, cut the engine, and opened his door.

“Didn’t you listen?” Emilia got out of the passenger side and slammed the door. “I need a hiatus until we figure out what to do next. I need something to look forward to. I can’t spend the foreseeable future in the Jeep patrolling the river walk and evaluating stats while all I’ve thought about around here for the past seven years has been babies. Babies that I can’t even try to have anymore.”

“And what am I supposed to do?” His words erupted. “I’ve been waiting, too.”

“It’s only sixty days.”

“A lot can happen in sixty days, Em.”

“A lot can not happen, too.”

“So you’re going. Just like that. Leaving.”

“In April.”

“And if I asked you not to?”

She didn’t know what she’d do if he asked her to stay.

Emilia looked at her husband. “It’s my fault.”

“What’s your fault?” He opened the door and held it open for her. She walked into the house and stood on the landing between the staircases.

“It’s my fault we can’t have a baby.”

“Stop saying that.” Birk closed the door, turned, and embraced her. “We don’t know why.”

Emilia shrugged out of his arms. “Yes, I do. I had an abortion, Birk.”

Birk stepped back and looked at her. Emilia couldn’t tell if he understood the connection.

“The scar tissue? The reason I kept miscarrying. That’s my fault.” She watched as her words penetrated him.

“When?” he asked, and she couldn’t tell if it was anger that sharpened his tone or if it was the strain of remaining calm.

“A long time ago. I was young.”

He stood staring at her. She knew he expected a more honest answer.

“After my trip to Canada.” She’d been twenty-two.

“Louis.” He didn’t bother to ask.

Emilia nodded.

Birk closed his eyes and bowed his head. He interlaced his fingers and cupped the back of his neck. He pulled his elbows together and hid his face from her. She couldn't even guess what he was thinking.

“And now you want to go back,” he said without looking up. “Did Reggie know?”

She nodded her head again. “He's the only one who knew.”

“I need time to think.” Birk walked down the stairs to his office. The door closed with a soft thump and click.

Emilia didn't know what she had expected from him, but time to think and a quiet shuffle down the steps into isolation wasn't it. She took her files upstairs and called Reggie. When he answered she told him to shortlist her for the Canadian trip.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“No,” Emilia paused, aware of how her voice faltered. “But I'm going anyway.”

SPRING

6.

Jillian

“Alone,” Jillian said to the hum of florescent lights in her workshop. Daylight was just starting to blush over the eastern hills, but she was already three coffee cups deep into her Sunday. This past week at her appointment, Dr. Birk had assured her that grief was both unique to its owner and universal, that she was both exposed and insulated by it. Yet the only word she could find to describe how she felt was alone.

As the lights warmed to their full brightness, Jillian unhooked her apron from the coat tree and pulled it over her head. She dusted off remnants of a former day’s sawdust and tied it around her waist. Blue tarps covered several unfinished projects around the shop, some already overdue to customers, and a large white drop cloth hid what remained of Jack’s piano piled by the bay door. Jillian flipped the wall calendar from February to March. This Sunday, the fifth Sunday of the month, marked six weeks and a day from Jack’s funeral, seven weeks and a day from his death, and sixteen weeks since Father Bernard commissioned a new votive holder for St. Theresa’s vestibule.

She knew it was time to get back to work.

Jillian filled her apron pocket with wood screws, put a fresh battery in her drill, and pulled back the tarp that covered the church's order. The table, a fine oak with crosses carved on both sides of the locking drawer, stood ready for delivery. The risers, five steps designed to hold the weight of fifty prayer candles, just needed to be secured from below. She centered the risers both side to side and front to back, then measured again before she knelt to join the pieces. When she looked up from her spot on the ground, the rising sun backlit the white cloth outline of the piano, and the table's legs framed it like a portrait of what remained. She looked away and drove sixteen screws up into the risers until she was satisfied that they held fast.

At 7:45 AM, Mac arrived at her shop and knocked on the bay door, just as he had every Sunday since Hank's accident five years ago. The past two Sundays Jillian chose to stay inside the house, drapes and blinds drawn, and ignore Mac's knock. She'd told him long ago that she wasn't looking for another man in her life. He'd smiled and said, "I'm fine just being a man around your life." And so they'd stumbled up through the years without ever deciding anything about their future.

This morning, though, Jillian had heard his truck and was almost to the bay door by the time he wrapped out his usual rhythm.

"That was fast," he said before the door had fully opened.

"It's finished." Jillian pointed to Father Bernard's order.

"You're working again."

Jillian nodded. "I have the moving blankets ready."

“You’d better go get yourself ready.” Mac motioned to her slippers and flannel pants and Minwax stained t-shirt. “I’ll need someone to help me unload it and carry it into the church, too.”

“I’m sure someone will be there.”

“Jill--”

“I’m not ready.”

“Come with me. If you don’t want to stay, we’ll come back. But at least come and deliver the order. It’s beautiful.” Mac ran his hand along the carved details. “Really beautiful.”

“Fine.” Jillian wrapped a moving blanket over the top of the votive holder. “Go put this in the bed.” She handed Mac another blanket.

They negotiated the safest position for transport and then ratcheted the table down with heavy duty straps. “Now you.” Mac pointed to the house. “You’ve got fifteen minutes.”

The parking lot was just starting to fill-up for the nine o’clock Mass when Mac backed the truck into the closest space to the door. In the past few years the congregation had grown from a meager twenty-five families to well-over two hundred, partly because of several new housing developments in the county, but most of the new worshippers came to St. Theresa’s after the only other Roman Catholic Church in the area closed its doors. This rejuvenation of parishioners caused minor friction at its onset--older couples left the nine o’clock Mass in favor of the quieter, mostly child-free seven-thirty service. Attendants from the other church often sang their hymns half a beat ahead or behind the

St. Theresa's crowd, the organist's interpretation of the hymnal slightly different than their former player's. Pew seats were sometimes already occupied when regulars came to worship; a few unholy comments were muttered, but overall, the transition was a success.

"Ready?" Mac asked as he opened Jillian's door.

"No."

"Let's go inside and find Father Bernard."

"You know I don't want to see him."

Jillian took Mac's offered hand and let him guide her into the church. She wished it was Father Seamus who would greet her when she entered, with all his heart, wisdom, and sensitivity. Instead, Father Bernard would be in the sacristy. At first, she overlooked his rigid, dogmatic interpretations and liturgies and still came for the church community--to help with the potlucks and picnics and youth group activities. But after he refused to officiate Jack's funeral service at the funeral home instead of the church, Jillian had deliberately delayed his order.

"I'll go get him," Mac said. "Wait here."

In the vestibule, the current votive holder stood without a single one of its twenty-five candles lit. During her years of attendance Jillian had probably lit each and every one of them a few times over, first one, then two, then three at a time. She laughed at the thought of how much money she'd probably stuffed into the donation box in hopes of having those prayers answered.

"What's funny?" Mac asked.

Two altar boys followed him into the anteroom, each with a box in hand that they wordlessly filled with the glass votives. They set the boxes on the floor, took positions on opposite sides of the stand, and carried it toward the sacristy.

Jillian smiled. "Not a single one of the twenty-five was lit."

Mac set the box he was carrying down. "Well, there's twenty-five more."

By the time they placed the new holder and filled its five risers with the fifty votives, more people had started arriving. Many paused to compliment Jillian on the beauty of her work, while others stopped to embrace her and ask how she was doing. It was a question she hadn't figured out how to answer gracefully, so she just whispered, "I'm alright," in return.

When the inflow of worshippers waned, Mac handed her the little box of matches. She turned it over and over in her hands, the striker like a cat's tongue across her fingers. "Light some, Jill. I will, too."

She lit the first three with a single match, a familiar gesture with a rhythm all its own: strike, settle, light, pause, light, pause, light, shake. Then she struck another and lit two more. Mac took the matches from her and lit five of his own.

"Thank you for sharing your prayers here this morning," Father Bernard said as he joined them. "The boys let me know that you arrived."

"Good morning, Father." Mac stepped between Jillian and the priest and extended his hand. He shook Father Bernard's in a single up-and-down pump.

"Good morning," Jillian said as she peeked her head around Mac's shoulder.

"Will you be staying for Mass this morning, Mrs. Darlington?"

The stress he placed on Mrs. reminded her of the way her mother would scold her by emphasizing her middle name as a child.

“Not today, Father Bernard.”

“Very well. When you’re ready, then.” He handed Jillian a check for the agreed upon price of her work. “It is a lovely table. Perhaps it will encourage more people to use it.” He turned and, before his robes had stopped twisting, turned back to face her. “By the way, the candles are still one dollar a piece.”

Mac reached into his back pocket, but Jillian touched his hand. She stared at Father Bernard, his eyes hard and emotionless, and without breaking eye contact, she folded the check in half and slid it through the slot into the locking drawer. “No charge for the table, Father.”

“Bless you.” Father Bernard bowed toward her, still not averting his eyes.

“Excuse me, my people are waiting.”

Mac put his arm around her shoulders and guided her through the door.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he opened the truck door.

Jillian patted the front pocket of her blouse. “I’m wonderful,” she said. “I still have the key.”

Mac laughed. “Mrs. Darlington, you are full of surprises.”

“You know as well as I do that I am not a Mrs., Mac.”

“No, but we’ve got some good years left in us. You could be.”

Jillian leaned forward and kissed his cheek. He smelled like cedar. “You’re a good man, Mac. A real good man.”

The following week Jillian relayed the story to Birk.

“So explain this to me again,” Birk said. He arranged himself at more of a direct angle to where she sat on the couch. “You *think* you’re engaged?”

Jillian nodded. “Actually, I think Mac thinks we’re engaged. He told me last week that I could be a Mrs. again after we left our church.”

Birk relaxed back into his chair. “It seems everyone’s had a busy week.”

She considered him. His eyes were cloudy, and the fine lines at their sides were more pronounced than she recalled. Today he looked just a few years younger than she did. “You included?” she asked.

Birk exhaled. “Me included. But let’s keep focused on you. Tell me, what did you say?”

“Well, I kissed him and told him that he’s a good man, which he is. But I didn’t give him a yes or a no. I mean, he didn’t even really ask.”

“And if he does ask the next time you see him?”

Jillian looked out the window over the oceanic painting. Mac asking her directly couldn’t be far off. “I don’t know. I think I need to resolve a few things of my own before I can commit to someone else.”

“You say ‘resolve things.’ What things?” Of course he’d push her to explore this.

“Oh, lots of things.”

“Such as--”

Jillian had hundreds of thoughts simultaneously, but there was only one she could articulate. “Most importantly, Jack’s death. It is, might always be, senseless to me. I want to know why.”

“You might never know why, though.”

She paused to steady her breathing. “I hope you never know the pain of losing a child.”

Birk dropped his head and pushed his chair back toward his desk. He untucked a photo from his desk blotter and handed it to Jillian. “Two months ago my wife miscarried for the fourth consecutive time. She made it further this time than any of the others. We had hope.”

Jillian held the ultrasound and studied the frozen portrait. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed.”

“And now she claims that it’s all her fault.”

“Don’t you think that’s natural for a woman?”

“She blames herself because of decisions she made that she’s not proud of.”

“I can empathize.”

Birk took the photograph and placed it on the coffee table. “I was taught to help my patients see what they gain from their losses.”

“Have you gained anything from yours?”

“I think I’m still losing.” Birk put his pad and pen down on the table.

She watched him take a deep breath.

“What I’m saying, though, Jillian, is I think you need to figure out what you’ve gained. That’s what’s waiting for you. I want you to think about that for next week.”

Jillian shook his hand and promised to give it some thought.

“I’m going to the cemetery to visit Jack. Care to join me?” Jillian thought the company of someone might make the evening brighter for both of them.

“I have another appointment.” Birk pointed to the clock. “But let’s meet there next week.”

He opened the office door for her and walked her up the stairs. “I don’t say this to patients too often, but thanks for listening.”

Jillian smiled and opened the front door. “I’m not just a patient. We’ve lost children together.”

Jack’s headstone wasn’t yet placed; just a small plastic spike with Sharpie lettering marked his grave. Jillian picked this spot for him because the bench beneath the poplar tree was just a few feet away and from there you could view the whole valley. She sat and watched the river pass under the highway bridge.

“I miss you,” she whispered. “I really, really miss you, Jack.”

Members of the ladies’ auxiliary talked about seeing signs of their departed loved ones. Just the other day Maryellen and Janice stopped by with a plate of cookies and asked if she’d seen any cardinals.

“Cardinals? As in the birds?” Jillian asked.

“That’s the soul of someone coming back to check on you, you know,” Janice said while pouring cups of tea.

Maryellen just patted Jillian’s hand and ate another cookie. Between mouthfuls she asked, “Have you been having dreams, dear? That can sometimes mean the same thing. When my Winston died,” she paused to use a tissue, “I saw him nearly every night in my sleep.”

Jillian recalled when Winston the cocker spaniel had passed on a few years back. It didn't seem a fair comparison, a son to a cocker spaniel, but she appeased Maryellen and told her that, no, she hadn't dreamed in over a month just to shut her up.

Jillian looked up and down the rows of gravestones. Some took on the pink hue of the setting sun, others stood stark and grim against the light sky. She rose from the bench to leave the cemetery and paused on the ground that held her son. "I'd like to see you," she said to the earth in front of her. "Not as a Cardinal or in a dream. However you want." She kissed her hand and touched it to the plastic place marker. "Goodnight, Jack."

When Jillian arrived back home there were three messages on the machine. One from Mac: He was just checking to see how today went. Two from Father Bernard: He would appreciate the key to the votive table's locking drawer. He would appreciate the key to the votive table's locking drawer tomorrow. *Please*. Jillian deleted all the messages and set the blinking number back to zero.

To avoid another night of dreamless sleep, Jillian pulled on her working clothes and went out to her workshop. She knew she needed to finish a few orders, but all day her thoughts had flicked back to the ruined piano in the corner. She needed to see it. To touch the places her boy had touched. The drop cloth slipped easily from the pile and she let it fall to the concrete floor. What remained of the piano was useable: the frame, the strings, the keys, the hammers.

She let her fingers find the keys Jack had taught her, but no matter which she pressed, the sound wasn't what she'd hoped to hear.

7.

Emilia

Jasper National Park sprawled across Alberta like a worn and well-loved afghan that lost its shape long ago. She could see the regrowth lines from the air as she approached the airport. They were a welcome distraction from her unruly meditation of the past six hours. Birk's parting words at the airport had not been, "I love you," or, "We'll get through this," or, even, "Be safe." Instead, he left her with, "Promise me that you'll think about adoption." And that was what she did, all the way to Alberta.

His agreement to even allow her this assignment was contingent upon a dialogue about adoption. He would pursue the legalities and so forth while she was away, and she would scour the crags of her resistance. In theory, it sounded like she was given the easier of the two tasks. Except, after six hours of thinking, she was no more convinced that adoption was for her than when she left.

In the nine years since she'd last been north, the forest had sprung back, bristly and rugged, like a five o'clock shadow left untended for the duration of a weekend, or like Louis's beard after being in the field for five days at a time. Emilia could almost feel the roughness of his jawline in her hands, and if she tried, she could remember how it felt

scratching her neck and shoulders when they'd huddled to keep warm in their sleeping bags. They'd worked hard, and, luckily, the burns had worked back then, and the plan of the mountain pine beetle was thwarted, leaving the jack pine to still stand tall and ponderous in the boreal forests.

How amazed Emilia had been when she witnessed the old conifers opening their cones to the prescribed fire and dropping their seeds onto the freshly cleared floor of the forest. Because the fires had cleaned the landscape down to the mineral layer of the soil, regrowth was an expedited process. The paradox of the region, in Emilia's mind, lay in the wealth of wildlife supported by the steadfast woods, yet to maintain the woods themselves, occasionally they needed to be destroyed. The story of the phoenix came to Emilia frequently during the days of slow-burning acres of woodlands, and she decided on that trip that people and trees had more in common than she once thought.

When she arrived in Jasper this time, amid the great bustling crowd of outdoorsy tourists who wore wool socks and Birkenstocks, she knew that this was not the same Jasper she had once known. This was a modernized Jasper, and now the paradox seemed to Emilia that in order to keep the loggers and oil miners at bay, the town had to exploit the environment to draw tourists. Many, whether the Davy Crockett type in their pack-along tents or the Martha Stewart variety in the five-star wilderness lodges, came to stay in Jasper permanently, never realizing that they were, to a lesser degree of course, reducing the wilderness in which they initially sought refuge one homestead at a time.

Louis had sent notice with the chauffeur that he was waiting for her at the Crippled Bear, a four-room lodge that teetered on the fulcrum of a past time at the edge of town. From Emilia's perspective it seemed to be the passageway between the place's

heritage and the current idealistic hope that the boreal forests weren't beyond salvaging. This lodge was the picture Emilia held in her mind every time she thought back to her time in Alberta—the Crippled Bear and various nights spent in tents beneath the expansive range of stars that topped the trees like Christmas decorations.

She walked up the log steps and through the heavy door with the elk antler handle, the horn smoother than she recalled, and then she saw Louis. He was sitting with his back to the eastern exposure window of the lodge's lobby conversing with the woman Emilia remembered as the lodge's owner—though a bit heavier and grayer. She lingered in the hallway to study him. His shirt was untucked, and she could tell from the way his hair flipped out that the top two buttons were undone and the collar was unevenly folded. Even from across the room she wanted to straighten it, as she had so many mornings during their pine beetle days, but she knew that liberty was no longer hers. She tempered her impulses and stepped into the hazy barroom, the scent of which erased all elapsed time. Nine years had passed, and still Emilia felt like the smitten grad student she had once been. She needed more time to adjust herself to being again in his presence. Louis was an intoxication, of which kind Emilia was still undecided.

Though Louis was the sort of gentleman who'd do something nice for anyone, he'd accrued quite the wrap-sheet in the name of science—evidenced by Reggie's proud display of all the newspaper clippings that detailed Louis's crusades, the most recent of which highlighted Louis as the master-mind behind the march on Washington in protest to the vetoed energy bill. Reggie was even more proud that that one had made the Associated Press. Through Reggie's displays Emilia could keep tabs on Louis, and it was

through sporadic phone calls to his uncle, she supposed, that Louis kept tabs on her. To this day she didn't know if Reggie ever told him about their baby.

Louis and Emilia, though both graduated with the same degree from the same school within three years of each other, didn't formally meet until they both began their graduate studies in the summer of 1997. Reggie had been the lead scientist on their graduate trip, and had urged both of them to come along. Emilia thought about Reggie and how she had at first been reluctant to join him on the trip, but had gone anyway and returned home with the connection that would land her the job with the Pennsylvania Fish and Game Commission. She knew he would laugh at her right now if he could see her sneaking across the room, hoping to be spotted but remain invisible all at the same time. Yolanda caught her moving toward them and interrupted Louis to point her out before patting his shoulder and moving to the bar—for two lagers, Emilia was sure.

She kept moving through the tables of locals, and Louis stood and embraced her with the same warmth as always. If he held any hard feelings about their last parting, he wasn't ready to make them known. Emilia hugged him back, expecting it to feel awkward, but as she recalled, nothing ever felt awkward with Louis.

“Amazing,” he said, pulling away from her, holding her at an arm's length as if for inspection. “You look amazing, Em.”

Emilia willed her cheeks not to flush. “You too, Louis.” Her voice tumbled out of her mouth without her consent, and when Yolanda set two beers on the table a few moments later, Emilia felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

Louis pulled out the chair for her and slid a mug in her direction as he lifted his own. “To working together again,” he said.

She lifted the mug and they clinked glasses, sending a small trail of foam over the edges. The first sip was heady, full-bodied, and exactly what Canadian beer should be she thought—cold, crisp, burgeoning—a testament to the wilderness around them. She listened as Louis explained his connections with fellow researchers in the area and the arrangements of their campsite and specifications of gear, but all she really heard was the rugged edge of his voice, and while he spoke, she walked the fine lines of memories she'd left unexplored.

“So, Uncle Reggie said you really needed this trip.” How gracefully he pried, she thought.

“Baby trouble,” Emilia offered and then realized she should clarify. “We haven't been very lucky.”

“Well, if it's sperm you need, I'd be glad to help. You know that,” Louis joked, tapping his lager to hers.

Reggie had definitely not told him.

Emilia wrapped both her hands around the cool glass and watched the condensation roll down the side until her fingers dammed the way and the water spread in search of a new passage.

“Thanks,” she said. “Birk isn't the problem, though.”

“I'm sorry.” Louis reached over and squeezed her arm. “That was a jackass thing for me to say.”

Emilia nodded in response and took a small comfort in knowing that because he was a man, or maybe because he was a man of science, she wouldn't have to explain. Louis would let her reveal it in her own time, just like he'd let her distance herself

gradually until they parted ways at the end of their graduate research. He was a constant. It was she who waxed and waned.

“So,” Emilia said, changing the subject. “What is our exact goal for the next sixty days?”

Louis laughed. “All business this time, I see. You mean, why are you here again?” He set his lager down and reached beneath the table. Emilia noted the way his dark blond hair fell in waves in the direction he moved, and she struggled to remember how it had smelled like pine and air and campfire when they’d huddled together in the cool nights of the last century. He smiled at her as he sat up and brushed it out of his face. Was he thinking about how she used to run her fingers through it? The past suddenly seemed present, and Emilia knew that keeping the two separate was going to be the most difficult part of this trip.

Louis rolled a map of Albert’s northern corners onto the table. Different colors sectioned off different areas, and Emilia guessed that she would soon come to understand the markings, too. “I need an assistant with an arborist’s background,” Louis said.

Emilia laughed. “My expertise ended as soon as I left the East Coast. You know more than I do about these trees, Louis.”

“I know,” he said. But his smile said *don’t you wish you knew?*

“Well, then, why am I here?” Emilia looked at him, puzzled.

“You’ll understand when we get to the first camp tomorrow.” Louis pointed to a green-traced square on the map, the southern most one. “You wouldn’t believe me even if I told you, so I’ll just let you see for yourself.” He rolled up the map and tucked it back into whatever was under the table.

“You’re up to something.”

“Welcome back to town.” Louis motioned to Yolanda for another round. “On me,” he said to Emilia when she raised her hand in refusal. There was no point in refusing him, she knew.

The next morning dawned with a lightness Emilia had long ago forgotten. The light was pure, thin, and translucent. If there was pollution, it wasn’t apparent from the second-floor view of her room. She rose and showered, knowing that she wouldn’t have this kind of opportunity for a couple days. As she dressed, layered short sleeves under long sleeves, she remembered she hadn’t called home. Her cell phone was of no use up here, so she had to go downstairs and have Yolanda make the connection for her.

She stuffed her clothes into her pack and zipped it shut, and, as Louis had told her last night, she pulled out her field guide and notebook and placed them both into her camera bag. She fumbled down the stairs into the great room area, where Yolanda was sitting behind the main check-in desk.

“Morning, sweetie,” Yolanda said. She had a large mug of steaming coffee and pointed to the carafe sitting on the counter in front of her. “Help yourself.” Emilia wondered if she looked like she had stayed up for half the night catching up with Louis over lagers, or if Yolanda was just being kind by offering.

“Thanks,” Emilia said as she poured a mug for herself. “Do you think you could dial this number for me?” she asked. “I have to check-in at home.”

Yolanda handed her the receiver and punched in the codes and number. After a few seconds, it rang. After five rings the answering machine picked up and Emilia remembered that Birk would be at work—she hadn't recalled the four hour time difference until then. She listened to herself ask for a message and a return number and then wish herself a great day. When the tone beeped, she left Birk the name and number of the Crippled Bear, even though she'd left it on the kitchen counter. She told him that she was headed out and might not be in touch for a few days. She should have called his office line, she realized, but she rationalized it would be rude to ask Yolanda to dial again.

"Thanks," she said as she handed Yolanda the receiver who tucked it back into the cradle beneath the countertop.

"Where you headed, sweetie?" Yolanda asked. "Somewhere with Louis?" She smiled. She had teased them every time they'd come to the Bear during the summer of beetle-burning. She'd told them that you can't fight chemistry, and each time they'd sat at her bar, she'd try out a new drink analogy to prove her point. Emilia recalled her once saying that they were like a good Canadian lager and a shot of whiskey, both excellent independently, but much better in conjunction. Emilia had laughed because of the lack of chemistry in her example, but in good spirits Louis had ordered a boiler-maker, much to Yolanda's delight.

"We're headed to site one, Yo." Louis's voice drifted down the stairs behind them.

Emilia watched him slip off his pack and pull his hair into a ponytail and secure it at the nape of his tanned neck. Of course Yolanda would know the sites. Most of the team

lodged here between trips out into the woods, and, some—like Louis—practically lived on the third floor in the rooms that weren't officially for renting. Yolanda was a natural inquisitor, and she could make anyone talk, no matter how reluctant. The barmaid's gift, Louis had called it all those years ago, and indeed it was a gift that kept her well-informed.

"Be careful out there kids," she said and took the carafe back to the kitchen, presumably for a refill.

"Ready?" Louis asked. He glanced her stuff over, seemingly satisfied. "Let's go."

Emilia shouldered her pack, adjusted her straps, and followed Louis out into the morning.

About five miles into their hike to campsite one, Louis started pointing out the perimeter of the first section they were to document. He was giving coordinates when Emilia interrupted him.

"What are we documenting? Another infestation? You still haven't really told me what I'm here to assist you with. Remember?"

"No, no infestation here. British Columbia's got the mountain pine beetles now. They're breeding two times a year—really causing trouble with the lodgepole pines. I have a couple offers to head over there next, but for now we're here to document the regrowth of what we burned."

"You needed me to document saplings? Come on, Louis. You know I don't believe that."

Louis didn't reply, rather he pressed on faster until they came to the first clearing where the old forest gave way to the new growth. Emilia followed behind, frustrated but amused all the same. Wandering through the forest was a welcome distraction, even if she didn't understand what she was supposed to be doing. She, at least, was enjoying the scenery. Louis moved in front of her: his footsteps upset very little, and his silence in motion was like the silence of the wind. Emilia enjoyed watching him. Each time he checked behind him, they locked eyes, and she felt little pangs of embarrassment. He looked at her like he always had, in her entirety.

When she finally caught up to him, they had arrived at the edge of the old forest. He grabbed her hand and dragged her quickly through the first fifty-feet of the new growth. "I knew you wouldn't believe me if I told you, so look at this." He pointed to a small five-foot tree. "This is why you're here, Em. They're everywhere in the new growth."

Emilia stared at the tree—an oak. For a few moments staring was all she could manage, then she panned the landscape before her. This wasn't the only one. Small oaks dotted the new landscape with their bright green leaves standing conspicuously against the darker backdrop of pine needles. This was why she was here. Louis was asking her to evaluate the extent of the deciduous trees' climb northward. The cause was evident enough, but the impact of the migration was not so clear. How had she missed this from the air? Had she been that preoccupied?

She took out her camera and started shooting pictures. Louis let her lead the way through the first few miles after the initial oak spotting, and after several hours of picture-taking and carefully-documented sample gathering, he suggested that they get to camp.

Emilia put her camera away but held onto her field guide. With all the controversy over global warming and renewable energy, Emilia figured that this trip was going to be more about studying the recovery of the forest, which was going amazingly well. However, what had been boreal forest eight years ago, was now shifting to be more temperate, and with the warming permafrost beneath the trees, there would certainly be competition among the species for space. Emilia now understood what the field work proposal meant when it had said *willing to work within a new field of study and generate initial research*. She was going to help predict the future of the forest and determine whether or not the future could be altered.

After three nights they returned to the lodge, and Yolanda handed Emilia three hand-written messages: one from Birk, one from Mara, and one from Stone. She supposed that it would be best to call Birk, who had called several times according to Yolanda's tick marks in the bottom corner of the note, but when he didn't answer, she had Yolanda dial her father. Predictably, Stone picked up on the third ring and ran through the usual gamut of salutary questions—the weather, the plane ride, the lodging—and, just when Emilia thought he had run out of small talk, he broached the topic she'd hoped to avoid.

“How's Louis?” Stone asked. Emilia couldn't determine if the flatness of his voice was due to the miles between them or if it reflected his attempt at sounding neutral.

She left the question floating between them, strung out on the phone lines, not really located in either place, and contemplated how she might answer. *Fine* would be too flippant and would give Stone the impression that she thought he was being nosy and should mind his own business. *Fantastic* would too readily convey her feelings—the ones

she wanted to conceal from even herself. Her silence, though, she realized, probably let on more than she'd intended, and she quickly muttered something about not hearing him, could he repeat the question.

“Ah, nothing important, Em. Just hope you're getting the break you need.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Emilia replied, more so for dropping the topic than for his well-wishes. “How are Mara and Birk?” she asked to further distance herself from his inquiry.

“Don't worry about us,” Stone said. “We'll be fine.”

Fine, Emilia hung up the phone with that word still ringing in her ears. It was a relative word, she thought. *Fine* could mean any number of things. Even more interesting to her, however, was the fact that Stone had lumped himself and Birk together into an *us* and a *we*—a first-person plurality held together by her absence—a deceptive unity. She knew that if she were at home the tension would be unbearable and she and Birk would be doing their best to cordially avoid each other, while at the same time assuring one another that they were fine.

8.

Jillian

From Jack's grave Jillian looked out over the valley where tangles of blossoming forsythia bordered the Lehigh River. Its turgescient waters, full of northern snowmelt and rain, rushed through the channel of unruly, yellow branches and after a half-mile turned out of sight toward its convergence with the Delaware, the river that took Jack. The rest of the trees were still without flowers or leaves, and, from a distance, the muted green of

their tight buds covered their branches like a layer of frost waiting for the rising, early-April sun to reveal the full splendor of what lay beneath.

Songbirds were returning to the valley, and Jillian watched as a group of orange-breasted robins busied themselves gathering dead grass and other bits of nesting material from the soft ground. Every few minutes the birds hopping around the gravestones paused their song and listened to calls from elsewhere on the wooded hillside, turning their heads from side to side in search of whatever they'd been alerted to. Jillian wondered if she was the threat from where she sat on the wood slat bench with moss-covered concrete pillars and considered how she could show the birds that she posed no danger.

Each spring the robins visited her yard at home, too. They picked through the compost pile just to the right of the garage, and inevitably, one would build a nest in the hollow nook of her front porch awning. She and Jack had always joked that their porch was a secret handed-down from mother to chicks year after year. Some years only two or three eggs would hatch, and the mother and chicks would abandon the intact eggs with the remnants of their own blue shells in search of new homes for the season.

She ran her hands across the smooth, weathered wood of the bench, and pulled it away when a splinter pierced her palm. To her right several straight, deep gouges in the rail's edge interrupted the time-worn finish with fresh, jagged borders. She plucked the wood from her hand and sucked on the small puncture, tasting the tang of blood. She counted the notches: Six. Without meaning to, she listed to the birds all the things she associated with the number.

“Twice the trinity,” she whispered and crossed herself two times. “Half dozens of things: eggs, donuts. Jack’s jersey number,” she said louder. At the sound of her voice the birds rose up and took shelter in the trees on the edges of the graveyard. It wasn’t the sign she’d been searching for. Behind her, Jillian heard soft footsteps on the gravel pathway.

She turned and watched as a young woman bundled in a patchwork quilt made her way toward the bench. The girls’ eyes seemed focused on the ground in front of her and once or twice they flitted up in Jillian’s direction. When they finally made eye contact, Jillian recognized her as the girl from the bathroom at Jack’s services. Though it shouldn’t have, it surprised her that she was here. And then Jillian wondered how many other people had come and sat here on this bench and thought thoughts she’d never know about her son.

“Please, join me. Eli, right?” Jillian said to the girl. She moved to the far side of the bench and gestured to the empty space. “I’ve been here since sunrise with only the birds for company.”

“It’s after noon,” the girl said as she sat. “I saw you here last week, too.” Eli rubbed the corner of her quilt. “You didn’t stay as long.”

“You’ve been here before?” Jillian asked.

“Almost every week. It was a lot colder last Saturday.” Eli adjusted the quilt and held out a pocketknife from underneath it. “I’ve been keeping track,” she said as she opened the knife and notched the edge of the bench. “Eight weeks, counting the one I missed.”

Eli’s eyes were hazel, like the colors of sparrows’ feathers, and Jillian admired the way the angle of the sunlight brightened her gaze. She was the kind of girl Jack would be

drawn to—quiet, warm, unaware of her own pretty face. No amount of sunlight, though, could brighten the bags under her eyes. They were comrades in their sleepless grief for Jack, it seemed to Jillian, both of them pining for different parts of the same boy.

“We can talk about him if you want,” Jillian said. “I’ve run out of things to say to him today.”

“I tell him the same thing every day that I’m here.” Eli closed the knife and pulled the quilt back tight around her shoulders.

Jillian wanted to ask her what she said. What was it that this delicate girl with a pocket knife repeated on her weekly visits? Who was she to her son and why hadn’t he mentioned her? Instead, she offered her own monologue, the narrative that she’d constructed to navigate the one-way conversation she held with her dead son.

“I tell him that I miss him. That’s what I say first every time I come. I say, ‘Jack, I miss you,’ and then I tell him I love him. It’s not enough to say it now, here like this, but I say it anyway. I know I won’t get an answer. The wind and the robins’ endless chatter is the best I get, but it feels better to have those words out there, close to him. At least I hope they’re close to him.”

“You sound like me.” A tear slipped down Eli’s cheek, and she wiped it away with the quilt. “He knew you loved him, though.” The girl looked at her and then rested her head on Jillian’s shoulder. “And, at least you knew he loved you back.”

Jillian wrapped her arm around Eli. She hadn’t known it was like this. There had been girls in Jack’s life, sure, friends and girls that caught his eye, but nothing ever seemed serious. She didn’t try to say comforting things because she knew that nothing about the unknown is ever comfortable.

As she sat holding Eli, this girl who loved her son even after his death, she tried to recall if Jack had ever mentioned or even made reference to her. Had he been happier these last few months? Had he worn more cologne and brushed his teeth more frequently? Stayed out later? Acted any different? At home she had seen no evidence of Eli's presence in Jack's life, but this young woman's grief for her son was real.

By the time Jillian and Eli made their way back to the parking lot, the sun had fallen to its angle of late-afternoon vigil, where it lingered on these late-March afternoons like a three-point shot at the buzzer until it sank below the horizon, inevitable but still surprising in its speed.

"My number." Jillian held out a card to Eli as she opened the door to her beat-up Rabbit, no doubt decades older than she was. "Call whenever you want."

Eli nodded and closed her door.

Jillian took the long way home. When her house, with all its downstairs windows illuminated, came into view, she recalled that she and Mac had made plans to spend the evening together. She'd run out of reasons to put him and his potential proposal off.

"You're here," Mac said as she walked into the kitchen. On the stovetop, Chinese take-out containers puzzled together in a cardboard box, and around the kitchen table Mac, Anthony, and Giorgio sat with a Rummy 500 game spread out between them.

"I forgot." Jillian dropped her purse and coat on the spare chair in the corner. "I'm sorry."

Anthony called, "Rummy," and began tallying points, handing the cards to Giorgio as he counted.

“Should I deal you in this hand, Mrs. D?” Giorgio asked. “Maybe if we play teams you can save Mac. He’s eleven-hundred points behind.”

Mac picked up his empty glass and brought it over to where she stood at the island. “In other words,” he leaned in close to her, “if we were playing for pennies a point, I’d owe the kid eleven bucks.” His breath was hot and dry and smelled of tobacco. He’d started smoking again after Jack died, and Jillian couldn’t bring herself to let him know that, despite his careful concealment, she knew.

“Make that eleven-fifty,” Anthony said as he finished his tabulations. “We should call it a night, though, Giorg. Nonna will be looking for us.”

“Did you eat, boys?” Jillian asked, pointing to the take-out on the stove.

“She’ll just feed us when we get home anyway, Mrs. D. No worries.” Anthony stopped and shook Mac’s hand.

Then Giorgio did the same. They both nodded to Jillian and let themselves out the front door.

“I feel like I interrupted poker night,” Jillian said as she filled her glass from the sink faucet.

“They were just keeping this old guy company till you got home.” Mac slid his arms around Jillian’s shoulders from behind. “Oh, and they helped me tidy up a bit in here. Hungry?”

Mac rustled the paper bags of take-out while Jillian scanned the kitchen’s landscape more closely. All the dishes were cleared from the sink and the dishwasher lights indicated that the cycle was nearly completed. The spider plant hanging in the greenhouse window had been trimmed of all its dead ends and looked like it might now

flourish in the warmer months. The pile of papers and bills and cast-off receipts from the kitchen table had been neatly corralled in a RedWing boot box, no doubt Mac's, and set on the buffet counter. She noted that the tile floor had been scrubbed clean, even in the high-traffic area from the garage past the refrigerator. Even the junk counter was clean. The absence of things overwhelmed her. Physical things. Jack's things. His backpack, shrugged off on his last trip through the garage door and slumped against the fridge. His laptop, slid onto the junk counter at a haphazard angle and covered with the contents of his last day's pockets. She stumbled to the clean counter and leaned against it. She wanted to hold his missing things in her hands.

"Where are Jack's things?" Her tone bit the air more than she wanted it to. Tears of anger burned her eyes.

Mac turned to her with a plate of kung pao chicken and rice, and his face fell. "What's wrong, Jill?"

"His things. Where are they?" She could hear her own heartbeat pounding inside her head. Jillian opened the drawer beneath the counter and rummaged through the pens and pencils. She peeked around the corner into the empty living room. She walked through the kitchen and out into the garage. She lifted the lid on the green garbage bin and when the scent of rotting bananas and synthetic air freshener reached her, she dumped it over on its side. Three white garbage bags rolled out. Nothing of Jack's.

"Jill," Mac called from the doorway to the house. "We just thought it might be easier for you if—"

"If what?" She spun around to face him. "If you just made it all go away? And, we? We? You and two boys and their overbearing Nonna?" Jillian stuffed the garbage

bags back into the can. “All of you trying to feed me, stuff me full of food, for what? So I don’t starve? So I don’t realize that I’m empty? Empty’s all I have.” She brushed past Mac and climbed the steps back into the house. “You had no right, Mac. No right.” She turned to face him. “You aren’t his father.”

Jillian watched the words skewer him like an arrow and wished she could take them back.

“You’re right.” Mac looked at her without blinking, the surface of his eyes shiny in the fluorescent kitchen light. “I wasn’t his father. But I loved him.” He paused and shook his head. “Just like I love you. Just like those boys love you.”

He took his hat and keys from the hooks by the garage door entrance.

“That’s something, you know.”

“Mac. I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean—”

“His things are in his room.”

The garage door opened and closed again.

Mac’s truck door slammed, his engine started, and gravel crunched beneath his tires at the end of the driveway. The silence that followed was only fit for ghosts and regrets, both of which kept her awake with their demands.

9.

Emilia

A load of white laundry tumbled over itself, bubbling and frothing against the clear window of the washer, the bold-faced words *Wendy’s Washery* mirrored in its shiny

surface. Emilia ran her hands over the letters just as her father had traced the name of his brother, Craig G. O'Rourke—an uncle she'd never met—on the black stone surface of The Wall every summer when they'd stop in Washington, D.C. on their way from Bethlehem to Roanoke. Unlike her father, Emilia found no comfort in tactile repetition. She'd tried it once at her mother's grave, but the rising and relief of the granite surface never brought her peace.

Her fingers streaked the front of the washer with cloudy lines, and she took up her place of waiting once more. She sank into the deep, plaid armchair in the corner of the laundromat and waited for Louis to join her. She watched him as he paced the length of the porch; his silhouette swayed back and forth as the sheer white curtains rushed and then receded from the room like wisps of memories. *Her mother's bedroom curtains...snow falling on her third birthday...the scent of white roses and lilies of the valley...an unworn satin nightgown...a bin full of baby clothes and toy animals stuffed underneath her bed...* The breeze carried the scent of fir and pine into the wash room, and Emilia closed her eyes and retraced their steps back from campsite two.

After a month camping at the second site, they'd set out back to the lodge without discussing the ever-warming earth beneath them, the deciduous migration northward, or the report they'd need to write concerning the global impact of their preliminary findings—their names in tandem on the byline. Instead, they walked through the marsh, playing a child's game of hopscotch from clump to springy clump of sphagnum moss while green bog water ran over the tops of their boots. Campsite two had been much the same as the first, dense masses of old growth interrupted by marshlands and regions that they'd burned to stop the beetles—regions that were now dotted with non-indigenous

oaks. And, though scientists were glad to see the regrowth, the northern shift of temperate trees meant that, eventually, the boreal forests would die. Emilia imagined that these investigations would reveal the same thing across the latitude, small graces with catastrophic consequences.

The buzzer on the washer scattered Emilia's thoughts. She sat and stretched before swapping the dark clothes, now warm and light, with the cold, heavy whites from the washer. The clock above the doorway read four-thirty. Another thirty minutes and she could go back to the lodge for a real shower and wash away the traces of sweat, dirt, and bog water. She could try calling home.

She stacked her darks atop the dryer one after the other as she folded them. With each additional garment, the pile lilted more to the left. The laundromat was a quaint place, she thought, nostalgic. Wicker tables strewn with magazines cast long afternoon shadows across the tile floor, and spider plants hung thickly in the corners of the room, small offspring clinging to the ends of first-generation leaves. Laundry here offered the luxury of time, Emilia thought, the space of hours to reflect upon whatever fancy one chose or just to enjoy the company of strangers.

It amused her to see a young man, twenty, she guessed, pile all of his laundry into one machine—colors, whites, darks, everything—and then add his detergent. No doubt someone had taught him the time-saving trick of washing everything on cold. Two young women with a toddler between them, sat on the row of molded, plastic chairs passing a box of crayons back and forth. They took turns helping the little girl name colors and scribble in the book, praising her until she beamed. *Could they be sisters?* Emilia tried to picture her and Mara doing something as mundane as laundry, but like these two women,

doing it spectacularly. She supposed that was what children did for their parents. Turn the ordinary spectacular.

Back home, the laundry was never spectacular, and it never became its own endeavor. It was always a sidecar to something else, the signal to move onto a new domestic chore in the interim between wash and dry: dust, load one—whites; vacuum, load two—darks; change the bed, load three—sheets; clean the bathrooms, load four—towels.

Emilia divided the clothes and placed them into the laundry basket—pants on the left, shirts on the right and dark wool socks in the center. Through the window she could see Louis talking to a pretty woman with a long, blonde ponytail. Louis smoothed the stray strands of her hair and let his hand rest behind her neck. The woman smiled and looked up at him—Emilia remembered that enchanted perspective. The pretty woman then stepped into him, bowing her head against his chest. He embraced her and then kissed both her hands before she walked away.

Louis turned to the window and waved. He held up his wrist and pointed to his watch. Emilia glanced up to the clock—one minute to five. She motioned to the dryer just as it chimed, and, instead of folding the whites, she pulled them from the dryer and smoothed them on top of the already folded garments. She rested the basket on her hip and followed Louis down the steps.

“Let me help you,” Louis said. He reached for the basket, but Emilia twisted it away.

“I got it, Ladies Man, but thanks.”

Louis blushed and looked at the ground. “I thought you saw.”

“And...?” Emilia fished.

“And,” Louis’s voice mimicked hers. “You’ll meet us for dinner at the Bear, right?”

“I don’t want to interrupt.”

“Please, Em. I’ve wanted to tell you, but I figured it would just be better for you two to meet.”

“We’ll see. Let me call home and check-in first. I might just spend the night soaking in some hot, clean water.”

They walked the remainder of the three blocks back to the lodge in awkward silence. Louis held the door open for Emilia, and she turned slightly to squeeze through the narrow space with her laundry. Yolanda held up a slip of paper and waved it in her direction. Louis took the basket from Emilia and nodded for her to go get her message. “I’ll take it up for you,” he said. “You have,” he looked at his watch, “an hour. We’ll knock on our way down.”

Emilia gave Louis a thumbs up before she walked to the desk and took the piece of paper from Yolanda, who didn’t so much as look up from the ledger in front of her, her dark-blue reading glasses teetering on the very tip of her nose. “Four times she’s called, dear. Four times. Sounds a mighty bit stressed, if you ask me.”

Mara, stressed? Sounds pretty normal, she thought, but instead, she said, “Thanks—I mean, could you—”

“I wrote the TAC code down for you already. You can have some privacy, dear. Just dial it before the telephone number. And don’t give that number to Louis—he’ll ring

up a bill to clear the forest.” Yolanda looked up from her ledger. “You know, Emilia, I hope everything’s okay.”

Without knowing what to hope for, she headed up the two flights of stairs to her room.

Her laundry basket was sitting outside her door. She fumbled with her key and kicked the basket through the doorway. After two misdials of the TAC number, Emilia finally got through. Mara picked up on the first ring.

“It’s you,” she almost sang. “When are you coming home?”

“Hi, Mara,” Emilia said. Her sister had always been the more dramatic of the two.

“I miss you. I’m here planning a wedding without my Maid of Honor. It’s miserable.”

Emilia took a deep breath to temper her reply.

“You’ve set a date then?” It wasn’t that she didn’t support Mara marrying again, but a wedding to a man like Will less than a year after her divorce didn’t seem like a recipe for happiness to Emilia. Not that she had that recipe herself.

“August.” Mara’s voice came through the receiver breathy and light, and Emilia could almost picture her sitting on her patio looking off into a picture of the imagined future.

“It’s April, Mara. I’ll be home before the first of June. Plenty of time.” Emilia started putting her clothes away and hung a few not-quite-dry pieces over the sitting chairs by the windows.

“Dad’s bored to pieces without you. I’m pretty sure he’s driving Birk nuts.”

“Not Dad,” Emilia said, attempting to sound casual about the mention of her husband. She’d promised Birk she’d keep her family out of their personal issues, at least while she was away.

“Over-tending the greenhouse. Hours everyday. Birk thinks it’s healthy. I’m not so sure.” Emilia could hear that she was chewing gum.

She listened to her sister list a hundred different options concerning wedding venues, menu choices, music selections, dress colors, and officiants. Feigning interest was easier over the phone from 2,500 miles away. From Alberta, nothing she would say to Mara could prompt her to show up at her doorstep ten minutes later with swatches and samples. The freedom to be honest was liberating.

“I have to go,” Emilia said when she looked at the clock. “Be sure to tell Dad that he’s only to pick stuff if it’s ripe. Nothing benefits from ripening on a windowsill rather than on the vine.”

“Hurry home, then,” Mara said. “He’s going to have it all picked clean by the time you get here.”

“Beginning of June. I promise.”

Emilia started the shower before she hung up the phone. The water was slow to warm, but when it started steaming, Emilia let it wash over her like a better mood.

Louis knocked on her door just as she was pulling her sweater over her head. Even though the days were warm in the Alberta sun, the evenings still held a chill. She pulled the door open.

“The good news,” Louis said, “is that the chef is making German food tonight.”

“I’m afraid to ask the bad news then.” Emilia recalled the overpowering taste of cabbage and vinegar from her last sample of chef’s Sauerbraten.

“Aida’s going to skip dinner. Natalie—her daughter—isn’t feeling well.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize she had a child. She’s so young.”

“Twenty-three is not so young, really.”

“Maybe I just feel really old.” Emilia brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear. Her next birthday would make her a decade older than this young woman that Louis loved.

“So, are you going to make me eat alone?” Louis leaned against the doorjamb.

She grabbed her wallet off the bed and snapped off the lights. “I guess not,” she said and pulled the door closed behind her. “So, Aida. How did you meet her?”

“The same way I met you,” he said as they made their way down the stairs and into the dining hall. “She’s been working at sites three and four. I wanted you to meet her before we all hiked out on Monday. I think you’ll like her.”

“It sure sounds like you do.”

Louis pulled out Emilia’s chair and waited for her to sit.

“I do. She reminds me a lot of you.” He covered her hand with his.

Emilia withdrew. “How old is her daughter?”

“Natalie is three.” Louis reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Here,” he said and handed her a small picture of a little blond-haired, blue-eyed girl in a wagon.

The picture shook in her hands.

“She looks just like her mother.”

“I’m adopting her when we get married this summer.”

Emilia forced herself to look up at him as he sat opposite her even though everything inside her was sinking. “Congratulations,” Emilia forced herself to say.

“Aida was pregnant when I met her. It’s formality, really. The guy was never in the picture.” Louis picked-up the menu with a casualness that suggested total comfort in his new life. “As far as Nat’s concerned, I’m her Daddy.”

The way he said *Daddy*, as if fatherhood now defined him, made Emilia ache. The younger Louis was once certain that he wasn’t interested in marriage, in kids. Naked and in zipped-together sleeping bags spread out beneath the constellations, he’d told her that he was a man married to his job, that he’d father plenty of ideas and research, but that was all. She’d believed him before he knew what kind of man he was. Or at least the kind of man he could have been with her.

“You need to know something, Louis.”

Louis looked up from his menu and focused on her. Emilia searched his face. Hints of crow’s feet that bordered his eyes were offset by his boyish dimples, and she knew it didn’t matter. The truth of their history was for her to make peace with, not for her to dredge-up fresh for him now, all these years later. Louis hadn’t had the option of knowing then, back when he could have had a say. It wasn’t fair of her to burden him now with the unalterable past.

“I really hate German food,” she said instead.

“Guess you won’t be ordering the special.” Louis laughed, and while the girl she used to be might have laughed along with him nearly a decade ago, tonight she only forced a smile.

10.

Jillian

When Jack's alarm sounded, Jillian stepped into her slippers, walked across the hall, and shut it off. Sunlight peeked through the curtains on the eastern window and fell on the two boxes she had yet to sort through. Mac and the boys had stacked them neatly, orderly, in such a way that she might believe them to be innocuous containers instead of the harbingers of fresh pain.

She took the first box from the top of the small pile and set it on the bed. Binders full of calculus notes, history hand-outs, and essays written in Jack's small script covered two sweatshirts and a few pairs of balled-up socks. She held the history binder and paged through the looseleaf paper. Occasionally a small doodle of swirls or crosshatches filled the margins, much as it did in the other two binders. The second box was full of notebooks and gym shorts, deodorant, and sports injury tape that he sometimes used to bind his first and middle fingers together during practices.

There was nothing Jillian felt compelled to keep, yet she couldn't throw anything away. She put it all back into the boxes and placed them back on the floor next to his nightstand where his backpack slumped, nearly out of sight. She picked it up. Good to the company's claim, the backpack had lasted Jack his entire school career. He'd picked it out before kindergarten and carried it home on his very last day.

Jillian unzipped the largest section. A German textbook with a broken spine sat atop crumpled worksheets. The padded laptop compartment was empty. The very front pouch held a large key she didn't recognize on a tethered ring, about a month's worth of gum wrappers, and a blue envelope with Jack's name on it. It looked like a girl's handwriting, loopy and curvy and underlined with a flourish of sorts.

It was unopened.

Jillian hesitated. She'd given Jack a lot of privacy, a lot of space, and in return he'd been an open and honest teenager. He'd confided in her his parking tickets, his crush on a student-teacher, and his self-consciousness over being both a musician and an athlete and therefore active in two disparate social circles.

She couldn't unseal the envelope. It felt too much like she was trespassing on the life he should have had.

Dr. Birk picked up on the first ring.

"Dr. Birk, it's Jillian. I know it's early. I'm sorry." Jillian heard what sounded like bedsheets being cast aside.

"No, no, Jillian. It's fine. I was up." She could tell that he was just saying that.

"I didn't have anyone else to call," she said. All three of her calls to Mac had gone right to voicemail. Voicemails he wasn't returning. "I need a friend."

It sounded like Dr. Birk stifled a yawn.

"Of course," he said. "Does ten o'clock work?"

By 9:30 AM, Jillian was showered, dressed, and on her way across the river. She stopped outside the commissioner's booth and beeped the horn. Al slid open the window.

"Morning, Jillian."

"I need a favor, Al. Tell Mac to call me. I screwed up."

Al looked upriver and pointed. "He's just up at the island. Should be in soon. I'll tell him."

She looked in the direction of Mac's favorite fishing spot and nodded her thanks.

Dr. Birk was sitting on the front steps of his porch with two coffee mugs in hand when she parked at the curb.

"I thought you might need a cup." He held out a red polka-dotted mug as she joined him on the steps.

"Cream?"

"And two sugars," he finished. "I get paid to notice these things."

Jillian laughed and took the coffee. "You look about how I feel, Dr. Birk."

"Not sleeping these days. At least not when I'm supposed to," he said. "And, it's Birk. Just a friend today, remember?"

She nodded and took a long sip. "Strong stuff this morning."

Birk pointed to the pickup truck on the opposite side of the street. "Courtesy of my father-in-law. The man brews it twice. Fresh grounds each time." He widened his eyes in mock disbelief.

"I didn't know you had company. I'll come another time."

Birk put his hand on her shoulder before she could stand.

“Please. Sit. Stay. He’s just here to tend to my wife’s greenhouse. He’ll be gone in an hour, tops.”

Jillian pulled the blue envelope from her back pocket. “Just in case, I won’t take long.” She handed the slightly curved envelope to Birk. “I found it this morning, and I don’t know what to do with it.”

Birk turned it over in his hands and handed it back to Jillian. “You open it.”

“Just like that?”

Birk nodded. “Just like that.”

She slid her finger beneath the sealed flap and ripped along the crease. She parted the sides of the envelope a couple times, but stopped short of pulling the card free.

“I can’t do it. What if he wouldn’t want me to see it?” She put it down on the step.

“From what you’ve told me, you two didn’t have many secrets.” Birk looked into his empty mug. “Why don’t we get a refill before you read it?”

This time when Jillian walked into Birk’s house she walked up the stairs instead of down to his office. While Birk’s area on the lower level was serene and oceanic, the upstairs was neutral and earthy. She surveyed the leather sofas, the tasteful maple furniture, and stopped in her tracks right before the kitchen doors.

“What is it?” Birk turned and asked when she didn’t follow.

Jillian pointed to the wedding picture hanging on the wall. “May I?” she asked and reached for the frame.

“Sure?”

She ran her hands along the lengths of the frame. The gentle carvings on the sides felt familiar under her fingers, as if no time had passed since she'd finished carving them.

“That was almost ten years ago,” Birk went on. “My father-in-law ordered it as a belated wedding gift.”

Tears filled Jillian's eyes. “I know,” she said without looking at Birk. “Stone ordered it from me. Look.” She pointed to the scroll at the bottom right corner. “My initials.”

With coffee forgotten, Birk led her through the kitchen, out onto the deck, and down the stairs into the backyard. The greenhouse stood at an angle to the house, and a professional-looking landscape bordered the walkway to its doors.

“His truck is still here,” Birk said while straining to see over the fence and across the street.

He pulled open the door to the greenhouse and waited for her to step into the misty, humid confines of the glass-paneled building. Several rows of plants spread out in front of her, some of which she could identify: tomatoes, peppers, herbs, but many she could not.

“Stone?” she called. The hiss of the overhead hoses was loud and muffled her voice even to her own ears.

“Dad?” Birk called after her.

Jillian walked through the tomatoes and other vegetable tables back toward where potted trees were in various stages of fruit-bearing. She saw Stone first. He was on his side with one knee pulled up towards his chest for what looked like leverage, and his

arms were extended into the small grove of trees. She called to Birk and waved him over. It wasn't until she knelt down beside her old shop teacher that she realized he wasn't breathing.

11.

Emilia

After spending two weeks at sites three and four with Aida and Louis, Emilia knew her own heart. She slept soundly the first night back at the lodge, and in the morning, she packed her bags and quietly descended the stairs into the lobby. She flagged Yolanda down and hugged her, promised to come back soon, but knew she wouldn't. She picked up her pack. Louis came down the stairs and grabbed her other bag, and, with several false starts, they left the Crippled Bear.

The main road out of Jasper was only flecked with traffic as they headed towards the airport. Emilia looked out her window at the landscape which was dwarfed by the darkening sky and interrupted by cliques of machinery and laid bare every few miles—big, brown earth-wounds that, if Emilia was correct, would begin to heal over as temperate lands, oaks and maples scarring the heart of the remaining Alberta Boreals. If the loggers stayed at bay and the lands were allowed to heal at all.

Signs with arrows and directives crowded the entrance to the airport, and Louis followed the sign indicating departing flights. His motions were stiff, and Emilia could tell that he was doing his best to not look at her. Occasionally, she caught him straining his peripheral vision in her direction.

“We’re here,” he said, pulling the car up to the curb in the drop-off line. He put the car in park and got out to lift her bags out of the trunk.

“Thanks,” Emilia said as she joined him. She could feel that strange magnetism radiating between them, drawing her closer despite their circumstances.

“Let me convince you to stay for one more contract,” he said as he held onto her.

Emilia struggled to breathe, “You convinced me of something better, you know.”

“Will you come back?”

Emilia closed her eyes and breathed him in—pines, soap, and crispness. “I don’t belong here, Louis. I never did.”

“I know,” he said without letting go.

She saw Birk as she descended the escalator into baggage claim A in terminal one. He came into her view gradually, but she knew from the moment she saw his beat-up, black Chuck Taylor peeking out from beneath his khakis with his plaid button-down untucked, one hand in his pocket, the other holding his cell phone to his ear, that it was him. He put his phone into his pocket, and Emilia began walking down the escalator steps to get to him. She rushed across the tiled carpet and wrapped her arms around him, relieved to discover that their curves and hollows still puzzled together.

“I thought you’d never get here,” Birk said.

“I got your texts when we landed. When is his surgery? Is he okay? What happened? Did you call Mara?” She felt like she vomited the questions, but they did little to purge her unease.

“Tomorrow. He’s stable. He wanted to talk to you first. Dr. Brown wanted to operate this morning, but you know Dad.”

The name *Dad* seemed stuck in Birk’s mouth, as if he was rolling it around to determine its palatability before he spit it into the open air of the terminal. But, even so, Emilia valued her husband’s growth—before she had left for Alberta, her father had always been Stone. She wondered what other things had changed during the weeks of her absence.

“You look exhausted, Em. Do you want to shower and change first?” he asked while they walked toward the carousel.

Her clothes were the same ones she’d worn all day yesterday, and her hair was pulled through the back of her hat into a ponytail, but, as good as a shower would feel, seeing Stone would be a hundred times better. Emilia shook her head no. “Let’s just get to the hospital.”

And with that, the carousel fired up and suitcases tumbled from the ceiling, down the chute, and circled like miniature horses, waiting for someone to pick them up and lead them home.

On the turnpike, everything seemed small and enclosed, crowded by comparison to the spaciousness of the past two months. Emilia felt a welcome sensation of claustrophobia riding northward from Philadelphia on the commuter main-vein—its concrete cattle chutes and hills on either side of the four lanes herded travelers through miles and miles of Pennsylvania rock. She noted the drill marks and how they descended through the rock in uniform angles, little half-moons of former cylinders whose other

halves had been blasted away to make room for the ever-thumping circulation of traffic—nature once again manipulated for convenience’s sake.

Birk’s hand felt around on her lap until he found her hand. He intertwined his fingers with hers, and Emilia marveled for a moment at their softness. She rubbed her free hand over their joined ones, feeling the abrasiveness of her skin on his. They drove like this, quiet but connected, until the blue H that spanned the entrance to Lehigh Valley’s Muhlenberg campus came into sight. Birk freed his hand and merged to the right. Emilia sat more upright as he crossed back over the highway and stopped at the traffic light.

“Are you ready?” Birk turned and looked at her.

Emilia inhaled deeply and forced the breath back out slowly but forcefully. Her stomach spasmed when there was no breath left to expel. “Absolutely not.”

At the green light, Birk pulled into the parking lot, and Emilia forced herself to pull the door handle. The heat of summer gave her Goosebumps as she stepped back into the Lehigh Valley humidity. The air felt thick in her lungs. She was home, and, because home was now full of the unknown, she willed herself to take comfort in the small familiarities.

Hand-in-hand Emilia and Birk walked through the lobby to the elevators. In the early years of their relationship, elevators had been an excuse for thirty seconds of intimacy—a hand roaming beneath concealing layers, a lingering kiss on an exposed collar bone—and Emilia found it funny that she should think of such moments. She knew that Birk would describe it as a self-preservation mechanism. He would explain how,

when faced with so much stress and such intense fear, the human mind will compensate by finding radically disjointed focuses to offer distraction—which is exactly why Emilia didn't mention her recollection of the elevator. She just wanted him to tell her that everything was going to be alright.

The elevator opened at the mouth of the white, antiseptically bare ICU corridor that tunneled into a ward of hissing, beeping rooms. The nurses ran around in response to the various complaints, bells, and alarms. Emilia remembered this place. Small vignettes flashed through her mind, like a child's viewfinder shows a closed scene on a circular wheel—each picture in order, always looping. She clung closely behind Birk and tried to focus. They paused outside the door of room 21B.

“Okay,” Birk said. Emilia could feel the pep talk coming. “Remember, he's fragile right now. Even little things can trigger big emotional responses. His sense of—”

“Birk,” Emilia lightened her tone. “I get it.”

Emilia knocked lightly on the door, and when there was no response she opened it. She scanned the form in the bed from the feet upwards, afraid, for the first time, to see her father's face. Even though he was covered and his back was turned to her, she could see how thin, how gaunt he had become in the past months. His hair, however, was uncharacteristically well-kept. As a child she had often had to remind him that it was time for a cut—a reminder he still needed occasionally, so the close-cropped, clean-shaven look surprised her.

“Dad,” Emilia whispered, which struck her as funny. Why was she whispering? She wanted to disturb him—wanted to wake him and hear him say in his comforting, rolling voice that he was fine.

“Dad,” she said again, louder this time. He rolled toward her, and Emilia gasped.

“I’m sorry,” she said, backing up through the doorway. “I must have the wrong room.” And she fought the urge to vomit.

When doctors had first confirmed her mother’s cancer, Emilia was just in kindergarten. Back then, though cancer treatments were improving, her parents took a very realistic approach when they’d explained the disease to Emilia. They’d said that the time left for them to spend together as a family was a gift from God, meant to show them just how lucky they were to have each other. What they didn’t say was that the doctors knew the time left would be six months at the most.

Kindergarten in the eighties was still half-day, so when her mother was admitted to the hospital, Emilia would ride to school with Stone each morning, and kiss him twice before he left her at her classroom door. *One for you, Daddy. One for Mommy.* Then she’d spend the morning with Mrs. O’Dell and her inflatable letter people, all twenty-six of whom she already knew. After lunch, Miss Maggie, a retired school bus driver from next door, would pick her up in her big, blue Cadillac with the couch-like back seat and bring her home. Usually they’d play Go Fish! or some other card game until Mara came home, let loose off the bus. Miss Maggie would stick around and prepare dinner until Stone came home. They’d finish dinner, wash-up, and then drive the fifteen minutes to the hospital, Emilia sandwiched between the two of them in the front seat of Stone’s truck.

One day, however, Miss Maggie came and picked Emilia up early. Mara had waited for them in the back of the car, and when Emilia climbed in, she could see that

Mara's eyes were red and her nose was running. Mara explained that they were going to see their mother because she wasn't feeling very well. Miss Maggie stopped at a five and dime gift store on the way to the hospital and suggested that each girl pick out a card to give to their mother. Emilia insisted that they bring not cards, but a satin nightgown that was hanging in the window. The hospital's terrible gowns had been a joke between Claire and Emilia who, at age five, didn't understand that it was her mother who was growing smaller and smaller, not the gowns getting larger.

Miss Maggie carried their purchases out to the car, where she handed them over the back seat to Mara. Emilia held onto the edge of the gown and rubbed its cool silkiness between her fingers until Mara folded it, tucked the tag neatly inside the collar, and placed it inside the gift bag. Emilia's job was to carry the gift into the hospital. So, one hand held onto Mara and she swung the gift back and forth with the other.

Claire hadn't changed rooms since she'd been admitted to the hospital the week before, but when the trio walked into her room, an elderly man was in the bed. Miss Maggie hushed the girls, and went to talk to a nurse, leaving Mara and Emilia sitting in the waiting room. When she came for them, Stone was with her, and they were both crying. They were too late.

The nurses' station outside Stone's room was vacant, so Emilia walked with Birk to the one around the corner.

"Excuse me," Birk said to a nurse in teal scrubs. "The man in 21B—where did he get moved to?"

She looked up from her paperwork. "Name?"

“Stone Grady,” Emilia said.

“Just a minute.” It looked like she was gnawing on some gum. Whether or not she had any, Emilia couldn’t tell.

After a few moments, the nurse put her finger up to the computer screen and moved her finger across a line of text. “Yes, Stone Grady. He was moved a few hours ago.” She paused as she followed the line to the right hand margin. “Up to the cardiac floor—floor three.”

Emilia exhaled her breath and almost ran back to the elevator.

Stone’s door was open and he was sitting up in bed playing solitaire on his tray table when she walked into his room. The image of the thin, brittle man from room 21A vanished, and was replaced with the image of a healthy, muscular Stone. With the exception of the hospital gown and the monitors, he looked just as Emilia remembered.

“Dad,” Emilia said as she walked over and hugged him. “You look good.”

“Considering, I suppose.” Stone squeezed her. “Sit, please. Tell me all about Alberta. I’m bored to pieces.”

Emilia sat and told him all about her trip—the plane rides, the views from the air, the Crippled Bear, Yolanda, Louis, Aida, Natalie, the maples, the oaks, and the hypothesized catastrophe thawing beneath the forest floor. Occasionally, she tried to sneak in a question about him, but he always deferred, saying, “Oh, there’ll be enough time to discuss me later.”

When conversation waned, he dealt a hand of rummy, seven cards each, twenty-one in all, and he prompted her with questions and told her how Birk had called the paramedics, notified Mara, talked to all the doctors. Emilia listened as Stone talked about

her husband and wondered how she'd forgotten those very same things about Birk. His level-headedness. His management skills. His ability to make things okay.

When dinner arrived, Stone cleared the tray of cards and made faces at Emilia behind the nurse's back. When she finished checking all of his vitals, she updated the care chart hanging on the wall, wished them a goodnight, and closed the door behind her.

Stone waited a few seconds, then he lifted the cover on his tray. Steam billowed up. "Well, at least it's hot tonight." Stone took a bite and nodded his head. "Not too bad. Why don't you guys go home, get something to eat, some sleep?"

Emilia looked at Birk, unsure what to say. She certainly wasn't planning on leaving.

"How about I take Em home, let her shower, get dinner, and then let her come back and get caught up on what's happening tomorrow?"

"Just be back by eight pm. They won't let you in after that." Stone shook hands with Birk and kissed Emilia on the cheek. "Bring back my folio with you, Emilia. It's sitting on the desk in my study."

She nodded and shivered at the use of her full name.

Light spray from the shower rained down onto the blue tile, swirled momentarily, and then descended into the drain. Emilia slid the glass door open and tested the temperature with her toes. She stepped in and pulled the door shut and allowed the familiar scents of home to wash over her body. Question after question rose in her mind, and like the steam that gathered on the mirror, they lingered, but she knew that if she

didn't hurry, they would dissipate before she could write them down. She quickly shampooed, rinsed, and turned off the shower. The air outside the stall was cool and gave her a sense of calm. With a soft, lilac-scented towel wrapped around her, she opened the door back into the bedroom. Birk was sitting on the bed, his legs dangling over the edge.

"Feel better?" He handed her a second towel to wrap around her dripping, light blonde hair that had dampened into a caramel color.

"Not really," she said. He slid his fingers behind her neck and his thumbs caressed her lips. She kissed the pads of his thumbs, and he pulled her into him. His body oozed heat, and Emilia kissed his ear before whispering. "Are you coming back with me?"

Birk slid his hands down her back and tugged at the towel. "How about I keep you here?" he teased. Emilia reached behind her and swatted at his hands.

"Well?"

"I'll drive you if you want." Birk said before giving her towel another yank.

Emilia grabbed the top of her wrap before it broke free. "Drive me?"

Birk hesitated. "Dad wants to see you alone."

She stepped back and looked at him. "Alone?"

He nodded and averted his eyes. When he glanced back, she could see that he had already had the conversation that she would be having with Stone, and a whole new set of questions bloomed.

"You know, but you're not going to tell me, are you?" she asked, but she already knew the answer.

Birk shook his head. “C’mon. As much as I don’t want you to, you should get dressed and get going. It’s getting late already.” He kissed her forehead. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“Wait.” Emilia grabbed his hand. “I want you to know that I thought about it. A lot, actually.”

Birk kissed her knuckles and then covered them with his other hand. “That can wait.”

Emilia pulled on a pair of worn-in jeans, an oversized white oxford button-down, and her favorite leather sandals. Looking in the mirror, she combed her shoulder-length hair, parted it, and left it to air dry. She grabbed an empty canvas bag from her closet and headed down the hall to the kitchen where she picked up her wallet and phone from where she’d dropped them on the center island and rummaged through the junk drawer to find an extra lip gloss. Once packed, she shouldered her bag and opened the refrigerator. Except for some random condiments, a half-gallon of expired milk, and a crate of clementines, it was empty.

With a clementine in hand, Emilia walked down the stairs. Birk met her at the landing by the front door with the keys. Emilia took them, uninviting Birk with a kiss goodbye, and closed the front door behind her.

Stone’s gravel driveway wound up a slow hill, and Emilia navigated around the potholes—the ones that had widened each spring after winter’s thaw—without thought. They had ceased being obstacles long before she ever began driving, so that her first turn

behind the wheel was guided more by her tactile remembrance than by the vision of the driveway in front of her.

She parked in front of the house and tried to see it through young eyes. Once she viewed the modest green-shuttered ranch as a sprawling castle, and though she imagined that it had grown larger through the years for Stone, it seemed smaller to Emilia every time she visited. She unlocked the side door and looked at the bay window to the right. It was once large enough for her to sleep on—like she had done on so many snow days. She'd weigh herself down with quilts on those mornings and watch the white flakes fall down and land on the glass above her. She'd pretend that she was a magician, suspending the snow mid-air before it could pile over her. For a moment Emilia envied the girl of her past memories. As a grown-up the window seat looked like a window seat and nothing more. She'd hoped to take pictures of her own children in that spot, watch them suspend snow have them recreate the magic. She could imagine how the pair of them would look, side by side, snuggled beneath her old patchwork quilts watching the first blizzard of their lives bury them in the window, inch by inch. She wanted to squeeze them and hold onto them and tell them that one day they would be real.

She switched on the overhead lamp, and warm, yellow light chased away the pale evening dusk. She opened the bi-folded doors on the left to the deep, U-shaped closet that Stone had made into an office when he opened his business. His self-proclaimed study was a small time capsule. Framed pictures cluttered the shelves, and files scattered on the countertop indicated the jobs that Stone was either bidding or working on at the time. Emilia piled them up and made a mental note to call the clients after Stone's surgery tomorrow.

Stone's leather portfolio sat exactly in the space it always occupied, the left-hand corner of his desk beneath the potted silk ivy. Emilia had painted the pot in third grade as a mother's day present and, like all the other students, planted ivy seeds. Miss Rourke had allowed Emilia to use bold, primary colors instead of pastels. Stone let Emilia pick a spot for his Mother's Day gift, and she didn't discover until eighth-grade that the closet-bound ivy plant had been replaced by silk. Her hand brushed the dangling silk leaves as she lifted the portfolio from its place, leaving a vacancy in the dust layer on the dark countertop.

The folio was heavier than Emilia had expected, and unevenly torn newspaper edges bulged from its sides. She resisted the urge to open it, and, instead, she tucked it into her canvas bag, the weight of it pulling on her shoulder. Stone had always been an ardent reader of the newspaper, once told Emilia the most unexpected things wind up there, and she enjoyed watching him carefully mine through the layers every Sunday in search for yet another black and white treasure. She hadn't realized that he'd kept many of his clippings in a somewhat organized fashion.

After sifting and sorting through the stacks of clippings for ten silent minutes, Stone handed Emilia the leather folio. Emilia felt a slight resistance as she pulled it from his hands and sat it on her lap.

"Read it," he said.

Emilia untied the cord and pulled out the documents. She struggled to make meaning from the handful of papers that remained. The top document, a half sheet of water-marked parchment, bore her name as Emilia P. York and the name of a Catherine

P. York, her biological mother. So Birk had been right, she thought to herself. She wondered why her father's name wasn't listed. She looked at Stone, who was staring out the window.

She flipped to the next document and skimmed the adoption contract signed by Stone, Claire, Catherine, and a Mr. Peter York, guardian. In an addendum to the adoption contract Emilia read minor...no future contact...all rights waived.... She continued to flip through the stack of papers, and attached to the last page was an envelope. Emilia opened it and pulled out an old photograph. In it was a young woman with waist-length blonde hair whose hands embraced either side of her rounded belly—her teenage biological mother. Her chin was slightly lifted and her full lips were parted, as if she'd been frozen in the moment between smiling and laughing. Emilia reached up to her shoulder and felt her own cornsilk hair.

“I don't under—” Emilia started, but she understood. If Stone didn't share this with her tonight he ran the risk of allowing her to find out on her own.

Stone reached over and took the picture from Emilia. He smiled. “She was beautiful, she was.” He handed the photo back to Emilia. “You can see where you get it from.”

Emilia looked back at the picture. Her appearance in relationship to her father and mother and Mara never bothered her as a kid. Around puberty, though, she'd become self-conscious of her body in comparison to Mara's. Her sister had always been tall and lean but curvy in all the right places. Emilia waited for her own dimensions to develop, but remained, by her own evaluation, average. She'd long ago given up on the game of staring at strangers to find genetic traces of herself. The same color eyes and hair and

skin, similar features and mannerisms had once been a fascination for Emilia, but never before had she experienced such a strange sensation. In the picture, she was physically connected to her mother, inside a girl who'd given up both childhood and motherhood at once.

She no longer hated her.

"I remember the way she cried the day we brought you home," Stone said. "All she could say was 'Thank you,' to your mother. 'Thank you, Mrs. Grady,' she said over and over again. 'Thank you for loving my Emilia.'"

"How old was she?" Emilia fixated on the girl's face. One side of her smile was slightly higher than the other—another shared feature.

"Fifteen when you were born—sixteen a few days after."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Emilia set the picture back on top of Stone's folio. "She was just a kid."

"I didn't think you wanted to know."

She considered what to say. "I'm not sure I knew what I wanted. Know what I want. Even now."

Emilia listened as Stone explained how Catherine York had joined his shop class half-way through the fall semester back in 1973, already six months pregnant. Her family had moved her into the area, across the river from the small town that had hummed like a locust-infested tree at the obvious sign of her pregnancy. She was quiet, shy, but spirited—a lot like you, Stone told her—and a talented designer. In telling Catherine's story, it was like Stone was telling her about herself—a prerequisite to her own life

finally discovered. Except, with Stone narrating, it sounded like a blueprint to her creation.

“I think you should meet her,” Stone said. “You should have someone.”

He turned his face away from her, and Emilia knew he wouldn't say anything more on the matter.

While Emilia thought of something to say, Marley, his evening nurse, eased in through the door backwards. “Mr. Grady, it's time for your night at the spa,” she joked. “You'll have the smoothest skin from neck to ankle on the fourth floor. I promise.” A tray of shaving utensils became prominent when she turned. “Oh, I didn't realize you still had company,” she said looking at the clock.

“Hi, I'm Stone's daughter, Emilia,” Emilia said as she extended her hand. For the first time in a long time, Emilia wondered if the nurse was questioning if Stone was her real father. Was she contemplating the distinct differences in their coloring, their eyes, their physical statures?

Marley put the tray down on the bedside table and nodded in Emilia's direction.

“No worries, Miss Emilia! Your dad is gonna have the best care possible here. I promise we'll take real good care of him.”

Emilia went to her father. “Thank you,” she said as she kissed him. “I'll see you first thing in the morning.”

“Em,” Stone said. “Take this with you.” He held out the folio, full of all the papers he'd removed before. “It's yours.”

She put the folio back in her bag, and kissed her father again.

The waiting room was as bare and sterile as the ICU corridor. White walls surrounded them on three sides, and the gray carpet and plastic-molded chairs seemed special-ordered to match the atmosphere of the place. Emilia sat next to Mara in the row of chairs closest to the surgery doors. They'd chosen them randomly, perhaps because they were a few paces closer to where the surgeon would come through to deliver the news, or maybe just because they had a good view of the room. Both of them flipped through the out-dated waiting room magazines—both silent in an unintentional vigil. Technically, Emilia supposed that this wasn't really a waiting room—it was more like a family-worry room, the place where family members worried until the surgeon reappeared to confirm the surgery's success. Two other pairs of people had assembled there with them, and Emilia made up stories for them to occupy her time: The couple by the vending machine was waiting for a son, who was injured in a car accident, to have the bones in his leg plated and screwed back together. The older women who sat with their disheveled white hair covered by sheer handkerchiefs were waiting for a brother who had fallen last night and broken his hip. Their stories grew more elaborate as the time passed, and then Emilia started over again, creating names and new scenarios more horrifying than her own.

Before sunrise, when Emilia and Mara first arrived at the hospital, the surgeon had alerted them that though he had originally only suspected a triple bypass was necessary, he would be performing a quintuple bypass. Emilia squeezed Mara's hand and wished Birk was with them. He would listen to the details. He would remember all the little things. He would know how to keep her calm. He had asked Emilia if she wanted him to come along, but Emilia told him that it would be better for him to join them later

on, when Stone was due out of surgery. She had suspected that after the surgery would be the difficult time; she underestimated the silent hours of waiting.

Dr. Brown came through the double doors at sixteen minutes after twelve. Emilia tried to read his face, but his hard-edged jaw was emotionless.

“Daughters,” he greeted them. “Mr. Grady is doing fine. We completed all five bypasses, and the procedure went as planned. Depending on his progress, he’ll be in recovery for about six hours before we move him back to the cardiac floor.”

“Can we see him?” Mara asked while Emilia was still pondering what ‘as planned’ really meant.

“Sure. Just realize, he’s still under anesthesia. He won’t be conscious for a few hours yet—and even then, he won’t be himself. He’s got quite a recovery ahead of him.”

“When will he come home?” Emilia made eyes at Mara. She knew Mara couldn’t take anymore time off of work. Caring for Stone was going to fall to her.

“Well, that will depend on your father,” Dr. Brown smiled. “Some patients surprise us and recover quickly. Most are in the hospital for five to eight days. We’ll see. Are you ready to go back?”

Emilia and Mara both nodded. They put on masks and paper gowns over their clothes and followed Dr. Brown back into the cool recovery room. Beds were lined up in rows down both outside walls, and a nurse sat at each occupied bedside. Stone was in the last bed on the left, and his nurse sat watching his numbers on the machines connected to him. Every few seconds she noted something on his clipboard.

“Carrie will be watching your father until he is awake and breathing on his own,” Dr. Brown said above the noise of the machines. Emilia and Mara held hands, and Emilia

wondered if Mara's heart was racing, too. She tried to take her eyes off the tube in Stone's mouth, but the cadence of the breathing machine kept her staring at it, made her watch the rise and fall of his chest beneath the thick cotton blanket.

"He just needs some time," Carrie said, her voice sympathetic, but practiced.

"I want to be here when he wakes up," Emilia said.

Carrie looked at Dr. Brown.

"How about you go and get a bite to eat or a cup of coffee. I'll have you paged as soon as he's awake." Dr. Brown's voice was edgy, but they agreed.

In turn, they each squeezed Stone's hand and walked back into the waiting room to gather their things.

"How about some coffee?" Mara asked her. "There's a great little café off the downstairs lobby."

Emilia picked up her bag and nodded. She followed Mara down the corridor to the elevators. When the doors opened and Emilia saw the green tile of the main lobby, she turned to Mara, puzzled.

"I thought we were going to the downstairs lobby?"

"I only know one way to get there." Mara walked out of the elevator and motioned for Emilia to follow.

After a few wrong turns, Mara finally found the doorway that led them down two flights of stairs to the below-ground-level lobby. This was a lobby more for employees than visitors, as it was right off of the employee parking garage and didn't bear much of a resemblance to the mosaic-tiled North Star flooring of the main lobby, but it was open to anyone, and the coffee smelled inviting.

Emilia pulled out the folio while Mara stood in the short line to order. Stone had given it to her, granted her permission to go through his saved clippings, but she hesitated. It sat on the table-top like a Bible on a hotel night stand. Only when Mara sat her coffee next to her did she dare to open the cover.

“Dad’s collection?” she asked.

“He gave it to me last night,” Emilia explained. “Did he tell you why he wanted to talk to me?” She stirred in a packet of sugar and tested her steaming cup. “Because he told Birk, just thought he might have mentioned it to you.”

“Didn’t mention anything to me. What’d he say?” Mara brought her own cup of coffee to her lips.

Emilia rummaged to the back of the folio for the envelope with the picture. She pulled the photo free and handed it to her sister. “He wants me to meet her.”

“Your real mom?” Mara guessed looking at the picture. She made a face and poured in some more creamer. “Are you going to?”

“I don’t know yet. He seemed so depressed about it.”

“Maybe you should.” She adjusted her coffee again. “She looks so familiar.” Mara stirred and then looked up at Emilia and laughed. “But, I guess she would.”

Emilia took the picture. Her mother was nearly sixteen in the photograph and only days away from giving birth. That would make her fifty-four now, Emilia thought. Six years older than Birk. More than just her mother looked familiar. She tried to place where the photo was taken. Behind Catherine was a small, white-sided Cape with dark red shutters, and red, white, and purple tulips bordered the front porch. A beat-up looking car sat half out of the picture in the driveway. The house number was partially blocked by the

porch's column, but it looked like it said 1779. She would have to remember and ask Stone if he knew where this was taken.

Her thoughts were interrupted, though, when Mara excused herself, stood up and took three big steps towards the bathroom, and then vomited onto the floor by the condiment counter. Emilia went to help her sister, along with a coffee-counter worker whose nametag said Lorin. He waited until Mara was standing upright again to begin mopping up the mess, and he smiled weakly at Emilia as she helped Mara back to her seat.

“Are you okay?” Emilia asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Em,” Mara said, resting her elbows on the table and her head in her hands.

“We have a lot of catching up to do.”

Dr. Brown paged the Grady family at four o'clock according to Emilia's watch and three-fifty-nine according to the maternity ward's waiting room clock. She'd left Mara back in the café, excusing herself to take a walk in order to digest the news Mara had reluctantly shared. In the past hour, the chimes had been rung over the intercom five times—five new babies—and Emilia guessed that Mara had probably heard them too. After all, though this was a reputable cardiac hospital, most of its accolades were due to its vast birthing center, and the staff prided themselves on every new child ushered into life.

She stood at the window and watched the nurse swaddle a new baby, Baby Boy Thompson according to his blue crib card. She rocked him in her arms for a moment and then placed him into his crib cart and wheeled him over to the window for all his

extended family to see before tending to another newborn. Emilia admired him for a moment and then backed away from the nursery window, longing for the opportunity to hold one of the tiny little people on the other side.

“Emilia?”

She knew before she looked that Dr. Gilbert had spotted her. “Hi, Dr. Gilbert,” Emilia said. He was in his street clothes, so Emilia guessed he was going off-shift. He embraced her and began walking with her toward the stairs.

“How’s your sister?” he asked as he held the door open.

Emilia resisted the urge to be bitter and replied politely, but curtly about all the Mara pregnancy questions. He must have picked up on her shortness, because he clumsily changed the subject.

“What brings you here? I heard the page.”

“My Dad,” Emilia said. “Open heart surgery this morning.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Emilia pushed the door to the surgery floor open. She considered what to say for a moment and replied, “Thanks. He’s going to be fine.”

Mara was already sitting at Stone’s bedside when Emilia entered the recovery room. Stone was sitting upright and was free of the breathing tubes, but his eyes were closed. Mara looked down when Emilia made eye contact and moved her chair over to make room for her to stand. Carrie was still with Stone, and she was still checking up on his stats and noting things in his chart, now at least three pages long.

“I thought Birk might be here,” Emilia began.

“I’m sorry,” Mara said. “Really. I am.”

“He should be here soon,” Emilia said.

Carrie just smiled at the two sisters as she went on noting numbers on his chart.

“How is he doing?” Emilia asked.

“He’s breathing on his own now,” Carrie indicated, pointing to the breathing machine that stood by the bedside, unused. “We’re just watching his temperature and pulse right now. We’d like both to be a little more stable before we move him back up to his room. He’s been in and out for the past hour,” Carrie said.

“He asked for you,” Mara offered, a white flag.

“That’s nice.” Emilia picked up her bag. “I’m going to go wait in his room.”

“Good idea,” said Mara. “I’ll go with—”

“You should probably wait here,” Emilia said. “One of us should be here when he wakes up for good.”

Emilia didn’t look behind her as she walked back out into the waiting room. New families had gathered to worry in this space, and she couldn’t begin to make up stories for them. She didn’t even know her own.

Stone’s room was empty when Emilia pushed the door open and flipped on the overhead fluorescent lights. The monitors that had filled the space with their constant chirping stood silent, waiting for Stone to return. She walked past the bed and observed the landscape from the window. Green trees crowded together between the old brick buildings and their leaves, like an oasis, seemed to shimmer in the fading afternoon heat. She pressed her forehead to the glass and peered down beneath the room to the sidewalk.

A sense of vertigo unsteadied her, and as she settled into the vinyl recliner situated by the window, she recalled a conversation she had overheard years ago and understood what the orderly had meant about the windows needing to be fixed. There were no slides, no locks, no moving parts—just large, solid planes of glass. The patients, and their depressions, were locked inside the room, safe from the height of their rooms' positions. She knew that depression was going to be an inevitable side-effect of the surgery for Stone—he had a history of it and had begun to exhibit the warning signs prior to going under the knife. Her concern involved treating the depression before it became debilitating.

She pulled the folio from her bag and opened it in her lap. She could feel the scratches and scrapes that criss-crossed the brown leather cover, like Stone's skin after a long season of fence-building. The documents Emilia was already familiar with were stacked on top, and she put them aside. Beneath them, dog-eared pages from old hunting magazines, clung together, and newspaper clippings interrupted their random arrangement. The magazine articles detailing new hunting techniques didn't interest Emilia as much as the news articles. Emilia looked through the years of saved articles from *The Bethlehem Times*. Her uncle Craig's obituary was paper-clipped to an article with the headline, *Local teen gives all*, and the picture alongside the story showed a young Stone in his dress whites and Craig wearing his fatigues, their arms around each other's shoulders and a cigarette hanging from the corner of Craig's mouth. Their eyes were squinted, as if they were facing the sun, but they were both smiling smiles that were interchangeable—Craig's for Stone's and Stone's for Craig's. Though their noses must have been from opposite sides of their family tree, they were unmistakably brothers, and,

for a moment, Emilia felt a pang of jealousy. There was no such resemblance between her and Mara. She shook it off and turned her father and uncle face down on top of the pile of articles already viewed.

Her parent's wedding announcement was next. A picture of her mother from the waist up looked past her, slightly yellowed from the lapse of time. She was only nineteen in the picture, and she smiled at something slightly off-camera. Emilia imagined that she was smiling at Stone, who was probably making faces at her from behind the photographer's back, like he had on her own wedding day.

The next few clippings were various obituaries—grandparent's Emilia had never met, great-aunts and great-uncles whom she vaguely remembered from stories retold between her parents at holidays—descendants of the Welsh slaters who quarried in the slatebelt region until they were wealthy enough to join the steel industry twenty miles south and the Irish farmers who happily settled in the fertile valley, growing grain and vegetable crops.

Mara's birth announcement followed. No picture was printed, just the documentation of her arrival at the top of the list of twenty-two others that day at this hospital. Emilia wondered if Stone had kept her own birth announcement as she flipped through several magazine articles about the growing white-tail population and arguments for and against increasing the number of deer allowed per hunting permit.

The newest newspaper excerpts from the previous months were small, individual squares and rectangles at the back of the folio, and they scattered as Emilia flipped to them, floating to the floor like confetti. She picked them up one by one, taking the time to read each. *Local bakery southward bound, No more Christmas City cookies,*

Kristopherson's era ends, Not enough dough. She read about the closing of the Kristopherson family business and its relocation to a distant elderly relative's bakery in the deep South. Emilia piled all the articles back in the folio and set it on the windowsill. No wonder Will was gone.

Emilia woke, her feet numb from being propped up on the ottoman, to Mara gently nudging her. She guided her feet down to the floor with her hands and leaned forward to massage her eyes into focus. *Red sky at night*, she thought as she looked at the burning sky. Stone stirred in his bed, and Mara nudged her in the direction of his bedside.

“Dad?”

Stone opened his eyes. He smiled and took Emilia's hand, squeezing it twice in slow succession. “Em,” he rasped. “Missed you.”

“You too,” she said and squeezed him back, repeating the drawn-out double rhythm. “Do you need anything?”

Stone shook his head, his eyes focused out the window. “Not a thing,” he said, and then he closed his eyes again.

“How long have you been back?” Emilia asked Mara.

“Just a few minutes,” she replied. Mara walked around the bed and sat in the chair across from Emilia.

“Does he know yet?” Emilia asked, her words trickling gently across her sleeping father.

Though she'd asked without malice, Mara furrowed her eyebrows and sucked in her lips as if she'd been blasted with the spray of a fire hose. She shifted in her chair to face Emilia directly, Stone laying between them like a buffer zone.

"I don't know how to tell him."

"Tell him what?" Birk asked as he walked through the doorway with a cup holder full of coffee cups.

Mara bowed her head and pulled her feet up beneath her in the chair. Emilia waited for her husband to set the coffees down and look at her before she informed him of the news.

"That he's going to be a grandfather."

"Well that's a surprise," he said to Mara.

"Isn't that the truth," she replied.

"Surprise?" Stone asked, slowly opening his eyes. He blinked and refocused on Mara.

"Congratulations, Dad," Birk said. "You're going to be a grandpa."

Stone smiled. "Sailor's delight," he said before closing his eyes.

Emilia and Birk exchanged glances. When Stone's light breathing gave way to a slow, steady snore, Birk broke the silence.

"When is the big day?" he asked Mara in a tone too upbeat to be genuine.

"The middle of January," she answered without looking at Emilia.

Emilia did the math in her head—Mara was eight weeks along, possibly nine, which meant she had to have gotten knocked-up sometime immediately before Emilia had left for Canada.

“That’s great. I’m happy for you,” Birk said.

“You don’t have to lie.” Mara twisted around in her chair to face him. “It’s not like I planned this.”

Emilia wanted to ask about Will, but thought better of it with Stone sleeping between them. Maybe they had it all figured out. Maybe he didn’t know. Whatever the case, Emilia figured Mara would reveal the situation in her own time.

“Why don’t you go home and get some rest,” Birk said to her. “Em and I will stay with him a while yet.”

Mara shook her head in protest, but Birk added, “You need to take care of yourself.”

“I’m not the one I’m worried about,” she said as she stood up and gathered her bag. She waved tentatively, and Emilia barely nodded in return.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” Birk said. He put his arm on her back and guided her out the door, and in that moment Emilia thought she would burst, but like a dud on the Fourth of July, the emotion rose and fell without display.

She watched Stone sleep. His breathing was even, though he rasped as a result of the chest tube the doctors had removed just hours before. He looked more like himself—tan, rugged—but the white dressings that peeked out from the neckline of his hospital gown suggested a whole new vulnerability.

Stone came home from the hospital eight days later. Emilia had two weeks until she had to be back to work at the Fish and Game Commission, so she was the nominated

daytime care-taker for Stone upon his return, and her duties sounded fairly simple: get him to walk; feed him a healthy breakfast and lunch; make sure he didn't overexert himself; bolster his spirits. She, though, was not foolish enough to undermine the enormity of the task.

She picked him up on the first morning and helped him into the back of her Jeep. The cardiac department had given him a bright red, heart-shaped pillow to hold over his chest in order to ride in the car, sneeze, or cough. Gently squeezing it was the best that they could offer him in the way of comfort while his incision and breastbone, which had been split, spread, and then wired back together, healed. Emilia insisted that he place it between himself and the seatbelt for the fifteen minute ride home.

"Can't I sit up front?" he asked. "This is embarrassing."

"You heard the doctor, Dad." She clicked the seatbelt around him, as radial movement still made him wince, and pointed to the pillow that was sandwiched between his chest and the seatbelt. "Keep it there."

"Yes, mother," he said, drawing out the last syllable as if he was grappling with it in an attempt to take it back. "I'm sorry, Em. I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," Emilia said. "I know what you meant."

They drove to Stone's house in relative quiet. Emilia occasionally looked in the rearview to make sure Stone was okay, and she checked and rechecked him every time she stopped. She stared at him so long at the light on Pembroke that the car behind her blew its horn at the green, and she jerked to a start, which caused Stone to grimace audibly.

"Sorry," she said.

Stone said it was okay, but his eyes were closed.

She focused on her driving, only stealing occasional glances at Stone, for the rest of the way to his house, particularly up the driveway. She didn't trust her instincts on the rough, pot-holed gravel, and the ride was probably rougher because of it. She exaggerated her avoidance of the obstacles, but was too nervous to look at Stone's reaction.

She swung her door open and walked around to the passenger side. Stone was looking out across his property when Emilia opened the door and pushed the front seat forward. Gray hair was beginning to frost his temples, and as he faced away from her, Emilia could see how age was consuming him.

"Ready?" she asked.

Stone bowed his head and watched Emilia unbuckle him, then he shook his head and leaned on her arm as he stepped out of the Jeep with one hand and the pillow clutched to his chest. He stooped briefly to catch his breath before he straightened. Emilia let him set the pace to the door, and she unlocked it and pushed it open for him. He scuffed—his suede moccasins dragging on the hardwood—past his study, past his recliner in the corner of the living room, and stopped where the phone hung on the wall just on the other side of the bi-fold doors that separated the living room from the kitchen and the dining room. Stone squinted at it briefly, and then looked up to Emilia.

"Better get started making the calls," he said, pointing to the blinking number on the answering machine.

"I already called all the clients with open fence orders on your desk," she said.

"How many messages could you have?"

“Ah, must be from before you called, that’s all.” He walked into the kitchen, slower than usual, and reached to open the glassware cabinet. He drew a sharp breath and retracted his arm.

Emilia’s first instinct was to help him, but she tempered her urge. The doctors had told her to let him do as much as he could on his own—regenerating his sense of independence was vital to his recovery. So instead of offering to help, she told him she was going to get his bags.

There was only one bag, really, full of the things she and Mara and Birk had brought to the hospital to make it feel a little more like home. The rest of the Jeep’s small cargo area was full of fruit baskets, dish gardens, and other get-well-soon gifts sent by friends and clients. She carried them, one by one, over to the door and lined them up before propping open the door with her back and placing them on the living room floor. When she picked up two of the plants and stood to bring them into the kitchen, she noticed that one of the bi-fold doors into the kitchen was shut. She walked quietly across the living room and could hear a woman’s voice saying to give her a call. Stone quickly turned the recording off when Emilia walked through the open side of the doorway.

“Am I interrupting?” she asked as she set the plants onto the oak dining table.

“No, not at all,” Stone said. He put his fist to his mouth, cleared his throat and added, “Just some clients, that’s all.”

Emilia nodded, not pressing him further, and she continued to bring in the gifts. Stone settled into one of the kitchen chairs and started flipping through the pile of newspapers that had collected on his table.

“Didn’t you read those in the hospital?”

“There were some things I wanted to save.”

By the time Mara arrived around four, Stone had napped twice, walked the length of the driveway to check the mail and back, and eaten, begrudgingly, a piece of whole wheat toast and egg whites for breakfast and a grilled chicken breast salad with fat-free ranch dressing for lunch. Emilia tersely gave Mara the rundown of the day out at her car, and then helped her carry in her overnight bags.

“Do you want me to stay?” Emilia asked because she knew Mara would be offended if she asked if she needed help.

Mara shook her head and said she’d be alright. “We certainly have enough to talk about,” she added as an afterthought.

Emilia didn’t laugh. Instead, she walked past her and called goodbye to her father through the closed study doors. “I’ll be back in the morning,” she said, and then she headed home.

Mara stood in the doorway waving until Emilia couldn’t see the house in the rearview anymore.

As with all mornings that week, the sisters negotiated the changing of the guard quietly, with as few words as possible, choosing to believe that Stone sleeping in the recliner imposed their silence. Mara was finishing a peanut butter and jelly on toast sandwich and drinking a glass of milk when Emilia reminded her that she wouldn’t be able to stay with Stone on Saturday. Mara put the glass down and wiped her mouth with a napkin.

“Oh. I must have forgotten,” she said, her busyness briefly paused in a failed recognition. “I guess I’ll stay then. Big plans?”

Emilia bit her lip. “Yes.”

“And?” Mara asked as she put her dishes into the sink.

“And, I’ll tell you on Sunday if I feel like it.” Emilia took the dishes out of the sink and placed them into the dishwasher. “How was he last night?”

“The same. Maybe better. I don’t know.” Mara sighed and picked up her keys. “You know, he said something funny after dinner. He told me not to worry, things will all work out.”

Emilia rolled her eyes. Mara, who was usually free-spirited, tended to border melodramatic when she worried. “Maybe he’s become clairvoyant,” she jested.

“Right. Because all is as it should be.” Mara scooped up her keys off the table and headed out the back door without her usual ‘See you later.’

“Bye,” Emilia called after her.

“Don’t mind her,” Stone said from his recliner. “She’ll be happier after work.”

Emilia poured a cup of coffee for him and walked it over to his chair. “Didn’t realize you were awake in here listening.”

“Decaf?” Stone asked as he took the coffee and wafted the steam toward his wrinkled nose.

“Are you going to ask every morning?”

“Just till you stop making it.”

Emilia shook her head. “Anything pressing on your agenda today?”

Stone took a sip of his coffee, grimaced, and said, “Well, doctor’s orders are doctor’s orders. Why don’t we take a walk?”

“Now?”

“Well you don’t want to miss the solstice sunrise, do you?” Stone handed her back his mug and used both arms to gently ease himself up out of the chair. He took his mug back and headed into the kitchen. “Last one to the Jeep drives,” he called back to her.

“Nice try, Dad. Don’t forget your pillow.”

The parking lot of the riverwalk was empty when Emilia pulled into their usual parking spot. She tried but couldn’t remember the first time Stone had brought her here. Each time she recalled an early childhood excursion, she could think of one that preceded it. She walked around to let Stone out of the back seat. June was always a fickle month. Just yesterday she’d worn shorts and a tank and had sweat through both by nine o’clock. Today, at well before six, goosebumps spotted her legs from beneath her denim cut-offs. A perfectly cool start to the solstice. She shook off the chill and looked around while Stone eased out and made certain his feet were firmly on the pavement before letting go.

In the still, dim light, the trees stood silent, and if she listened hard enough, she could hear the river running over the stones close to shore. Fog still clung closely to the river’s surface, and Stone pointed to it. “The curtain is down,” he said. “Let’s go.”

He walked ahead of Emilia, and she followed, content to be walking on a flat, well-worn path through woods that felt like home. Purple rhododendrons were in full bloom, their robust forms filling-in the concave areas of the hillside, and trees that had

still been flowered when Emilia left for Alberta, now hung heavily with fragrant green leaves—a deciduous scent, Emilia thought—a scent she had missed. Stone kept a slow pace, which allowed Emilia to stroll comfortably and survey the condition of things. The broken branches on the blackberry bushes suggested that the Girl Scouts had recently had their Jam Festival and camping trip, and the gum wrappers and other litter pushed into the moist ground meant Bart hadn't insisted on the monthly grounds clean-up.

Stone stopped in front of her and leaned on a tree to his right.

“Dad? What's wrong?” Emilia felt panic electrify her body.

“Nothing. Shh—look.” Stone pointed to a clearing through the woods.

Two deer stood at the river's edge. The larger of the two bent and drank from the fog-covered water. The small one, as if following an example, bent and did the same.

“Think they'll go for a swim?” Emilia whispered to Stone.

“Only if swimming means surviving. A deer understands it's not a fish.”

Emilia stared at him as he continued again, and she let him walk about thirty yards before she followed—this time watching him more carefully. She patted her pocket to make sure she had her cell phone. What would she do, she wondered, if something did happen? As they walked, she began forming a plan, a phone chain, in case of emergency, but when they reached the downed white birch, with its peeling bark and ghostly sheen, she relaxed. They were almost there.

Song birds were beginning to fill the woods with sound, lifting the somber feeling that had thus far pervaded their walk. Stone approached the tree stand and slowly pulled on the ladder, which didn't move.

“Check this for me,” he said without looking at her.

Emilia walked to the ladder, and Stone stepped aside. She vigorously shook the metal rungs, but they held fast. “Seems okay to me. I don’t think you should—”

Stone put two fingers to her lips. “I’m going to.”

“Then after you,” she said.

Stone smiled the way husbands smile at their wives’ burned casseroles, a mask of happiness that, if nothing else, conveys understanding.

Emilia stood back and let him climb. He groaned as he pulled himself up the first wrung. He stood, both feet together, and breathed through his mouth.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Emilia asked, Dr. Brown’s list of directions and warnings running through her mind.

Stone ignored her, or didn’t hear her, and he climbed up another step, pausing in the same way before climbing yet another.

“Are you okay,” she called up to him when he had reached the top of the seven steps.

Stone nodded and sat, dangling his feet over the edge. Emilia climbed as quickly as she could, feeling the burn in her shoulders and her chest when she reached the top.

“I doubt Dr. Brown would approve,” she said as she sat beside her father who was still breathing heavily.

“Well, *I* don’t plan on telling him.” He winked.

The sun was starting to heft its way up above the east hills, and the light filtered unevenly between the branches of the trees. Across the river, light started to crawl up the mountain, like an orange sponge slowly expanding. Emilia let an uneasy silence settle before she rippled its surface.

“So, why are we here, Dad?” Emilia knew why they were there—she just wanted to hear Stone say it.

“Watch,” Stone said without changing his focus. “Just watch.”

Emilia rested her head against the tree and took in the sunrise. The gradual climb of light hesitated briefly as the sun cleared the horizon, like an airplane hesitates before lifting into flight, and then spread across the hillside one headstone at a time. Emilia watched as the dull, gray markers, which looked like little more than marbles from a distance, sparkled like precious stones when the sun painted them with the oranges, yellows, and mauves of early morning light.

“She’d love this,” Emilia said, taking Stone’s hand.

“She does,” he said. He took his hand and wiped his eyes. “I saw her, Miel. When I was under or on my way back—I don’t know which, but she was there.”

Emilia remained quiet.

“You think I’m crazy,” Stone said. “I can’t blame you.”

“Dad, I’m a biologist.”

“You understand why I want to believe though?”

“I want to believe it, too.”

“But you don’t.”

Emilia sighed and shook her head. Stone tipped his head back and rested it against the trunk of the oak. “I remember bringing you and Mara here as little girls,” he said.

“She was always begging me to go home, and you were always begging me to stay.

Couldn’t get more opposite than the two of you.”

“Still can’t,” Emilia said. She sat up and pulled her feet under her, so that she sat cross-legged and leaning on her knees.

“Don’t be too hard on her.” Stone put his hand on her back. “It’s going to work out.”

“How do you know?” Emilia turned to look at him. His head was still tipped backward and his eyes were still closed.

“Because, I know,” he said.

Emilia thought back to all the times she’d used similar circular logic and said, “That’s not an answer.” Though, she wasn’t sure she wanted one.

“No, I suppose it’s not.”

They sat there until the first sunrise of summer stopped being spectacular.