

THOSE WHO HAD

by

COURTNEY ELIZABETH WARD

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Written under the direction of

Alice Elliott Dark

and approved by

Jayne Anne Phillips

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THE LAST ATTWATER

Miriam visited The Madison Bookstore on Thursdays. Each week the bells that hung from the door jingled as Miriam turned the knob and stepped inside, and Jeffrey, the store's owner, looked up from the counter where he sorted the day's receipts. He wore his usual uniform: a plaid shirt, khaki pants that sagged in the rear, and bifocals slid down low on his bulbous nose. A wide smile spread across his face.

"Right on time," he said, glancing down at his watch.

Miriam offered a small smile and nodded. "As always." She unbuttoned her wool coat and shrugged it off her shoulders, hanging it on the old-fashioned coat rack next to the door. She stuffed her knit hat into the coat's pocket and ran her fingers through her gray hair, tugging out the tangles and smoothing the ends so that they hung neatly at her shoulders. Jeffrey watched this routine from his post behind the counter, a bemused smile playing on his face.

When she was settled, Jeffrey told Miriam about the most recent donation and led her through the wooden shelves of neatly organized books toward the staircase at the back of the store. "A man brought it in today," he said over his shoulder. "Said he found a bunch of old books in his late mother's house. I didn't go through it yet." He turned to Miriam as he placed one foot on the first stair. The lines at the corners of his eyes deepened and his graying mustache rose with his grin. "I saved them for you."

The staircase spiraled up toward the loft, where the "reading room" housed hundreds of books. The space was arranged more like a book lover's messy living room than a store. Tall, built-in bookcases lined the perimeter of the room, their shelves stuffed haphazardly with books, some horizontal and some vertical, many two or three layers

deep. The walls were adorned with old photographs in metal frames, most of them faded images of Jeffrey's wife, who had died suddenly of a latent heart defect twelve years earlier. Miriam had never asked about the photos, but Jeffrey had told her the story in heartrending detail during one of their Thursday afternoons. She had listened as politely as she could without encouraging him to go on.

Three small sofas, surrounded at the arms by thigh-high stacks of books, were arranged in a circle at the center of the room. The books were collected in groups based on no particular common quality – not even size or color – and many of the stacks leaned precariously due to the inclusion of one or more small books near the base of the tower. Miriam understood that the reading room was meant to be inviting and comfortable, but it offended her librarian's sense of order. She had offered, once, to catalogue the books for Jeffrey, but he had let out a deep belly laugh, apparently understanding the offer as a joke.

A cardboard box rested on the floor between the couches, next to a worn coffee table. Jeffrey stepped past it to settle into the cushions of a pistachio-colored couch, and Miriam perched on the middle cushion of the couch opposite him. She placed her purse on the floor next to her and pressed the palms of her hands along her lap, straightening the end of her pleated skirt where it hung over her knees.

"Well, let's dig in," Jeffrey said. He pulled the flaps of the box open and lifted out the first three books, lining them across the top of the coffee table.

Miriam glanced at the covers of each, then peered into the box.

"Oh, shoot!" Jeffrey said. "I forgot the tea." He started to stand, but Miriam shook her head and waved him back to his seat.

“Don’t,” she said. “I don’t need tea.” She inched closer to the box, eagerly scanning its contents as Jeffrey pulled the books out and placed them on the table. They were old, their fabric covers and ornate illustrations indicative of the early twentieth century. Miriam would be excited to examine all the books eventually, but she wouldn’t be able to enjoy them until she knew whether an Attwater was among them.

Jeffrey reached deeper and deeper into the box, pulling books out two or three at a time. He’d just uncovered the last layer when Miriam spotted a dusty lavender book lying face down at the bottom. She sucked in her breath. Her knuckles grazed Jeffrey’s as they both reached into the box. Miriam jumped back, retracting her hand. Jeffrey chuckled.

“Sorry,” she said, looking away from his face. She trained her eyes on the book as he pulled it out, fighting the urge to snatch it from his hands. She hadn’t realized she’d been holding her breath until he flipped the book over and the air rushed from her mouth in one long hiss. She slumped back in her seat.

The author’s name stretched across the bottom of the cover in gold leaf, and the title, *A Spinner in the Sun*, was printed on what looked like a white scroll, hovering above a large golden spider web.

“Well, it’s one of Attwater’s,” Jeffrey said, turning it over in his hands. “But you already have this one.”

Miriam nodded.

“The guy said he’d be back tomorrow. He might have more.”

Miriam knew he was right, that it was possible this man’s mother had a number of these books, but she didn’t want to get her hopes up. She pressed her lips together and nodded again.

“Do you want this one? Can’t hurt to have two, right?” He held the book out across the table.

She took it and flipped through the pages, smiling at the familiar musty smell. “Yes, I’ll take it,” she said. “How much do you want for it?” She pulled a large, leather wallet from her purse.

He frowned and shook his head. “It’s yours.”

“You’re running a business here. You can’t give away the product for free.”

Jeffrey laughed and leaned back in his seat. “But these were donated. I didn’t pay for them myself.”

“Jeffrey.” Miriam placed her wallet in her lap and looked at him sternly.

Jeffrey rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he said. “Ten dollars.”

“That’s it?”

“Ten dollars and you have to stay for tea and help me catalogue the rest of these books.” He nodded toward the stack on the table.

Miriam smiled, thumbing through the bills in her wallet. “Deal.” She handed him a ten.

When she arrived home that night, Miriam hung her coat in the closet next to the door and dropped her bag on the floor before settling into the nearest chair. Mahogany bookshelves lined the walls of her apartment, and the books were organized by the Dewey Decimal system, catalogued in a tall, thin chest next to the door. Her mother had asked her once, not long before she passed away, why she arranged her home to look and

feel like her workplace, but Miriam had only stared at her, puzzled by the question. Her furniture was far more attractive than the boxy chairs and scratchy cushions that populated the college library where she worked. The living room housed several high-backed Victorian armchairs, each upholstered in a shade of red or rust. An ornately carved sofa with a shimmering flower pattern sat between two mismatched side tables, and her favorite piece – an ivory single-ended chaise with cabriole legs – rested under the window. Miriam had long ago converted her dining room to book storage as well. Having no purpose for a room meant for dinner parties, she had lined all four walls with floor-to-ceiling bookcases and placed two waist-high free-standing shelves in the middle of the room, back to back so as to maximize the space.

Though she had been collecting books for decades, Miriam had only begun collecting the Attwaters several years earlier, when she had discovered *The Blue Flower* by Henry Van Dyke on one of Jeffrey's shelves. She'd been working with books her entire adult life, and until that day her attention had always been devoted to the contents between the covers, never the covers themselves. But the cover of the Van Dyke book, with its floral pattern and gold leaf, had captivated her, and in admiring it she noticed a tiny "MA" squeezed between the golden flower buds. The letters, slightly overlapped in a wide serif font, were the initials of the illustrator, Mabel Attwater. Once Miriam had noticed the monogram she couldn't stop looking for it. Within a week, she'd found it on half a dozen books from the early 1900s, all with intricate nature-inspired covers. Her research revealed that Attwater was something of an innovator, remarkable not only for her success as an artist in what was still considered a men's field, but also for her unique design sense. Many of her books were covered in bold-colored linens, deep blues and

greens or striking lavenders. Her designs each had certain hallmarks, slightly asymmetrical patterns of flowers and feathers, a combination of matte and glossy gold-stamped vines and lettering that gave the covers dimension. And yet each was a singular piece of art. Miriam's favorite was a reprint of Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. This was one of the few covers made of an ivory cloth, with a floral pattern of sage green vines and fiery petals that faded from red to orange. The vines bordered the cover and also shot up through the middle, splitting the letters in the author's name and sprouting flowers under and around the title, a flaming candelabra of blooms.

Irving's classic aside, the books themselves were mostly fluff, sentimental romance novels and heavy-handed inspirational stories and essays; Miriam found them woefully lesser in quality than their covers and gave up trying to read them, but she remained interested in the cover artist. Little biographical information seemed to exist, but Miriam learned that Attwater had been born in New York in the 1860s, the daughter of a cobbler and a seamstress, and had never married. She had enjoyed great success throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, and later in life transitioned from artist to author, publishing two biographies and three successful mystery novels. In the back of an old reference book, Miriam had found just one photo, a tiny headshot no bigger than two inches square. In it, Attwater squinted at the camera through thin wire-rimmed glasses, her short hair whipped up like little wings behind her ears. Miriam had photocopied the page, cutting out the image and slipping it into the folds of her wallet.

Miriam's admiration for Attwater as an independent and successful woman increased her appreciation for her beautiful designs, and she soon desired to own them all. There were 270 covers attributed to Attwater, and Miriam now had 269 volumes in

her cabinet. Jeffrey had been helping her hunt for the books since that first day, and she'd discovered a number of them in his store. But they had been looking for the book that would complete her collection, *Flower of the Dusk* by Myrtle Reed, for almost a year.

The Mabel Attwaters were neatly stacked in two tall cabinets in Miriam's bedroom, catalogued under Special Collections and organized in chronological order by publication date. The door to her bedroom was open, and from her chair in the living room she could see her oak writing table and the Attwater cabinets standing next to it. The cabinet doors were closed, but she could recreate the image of each book in her mind, knew the exact location of each title and the exact place where *Flower of the Dusk* belonged.

Remembering her new acquisition, Miriam pulled her bag onto her lap and extracted *A Spinner in the Sun*. This copy was in better condition than the one already in the cabinet. The lavender was more vibrant, the pages less yellowed and dog-eared. She carried her bag and the book into the bedroom. The cabinet door squeaked as she opened it, and she slid the book in place next to its twin. She ran her fingers across the spines, pausing for a moment where the last book would fit, and then closed the cabinet door and sat down at her desk.

A hidden drawer housed a small laptop computer, and Miriam placed it on the tabletop. She made the rounds of her usual websites (eBay, a few independent booksellers), searching the internet for a copy of *Flower of the Dusk*. The searches turned up nothing and she finished by clicking over to etsy, where she'd once found one of the Attwaters, grouped with some unrelated titles as "Vintage Books Lot of 6." The seller was apparently targeting brides who wished to use old books as wedding décor, and had

insisted that Miriam purchase the “set” for \$50. She’d since learned that many people sell books in this way, and now scanned the photos of “Vintage Book Lots” every night looking for lavender spines. Satisfied that the book had not become available for online purchase that day, Miriam stood up and undressed. She returned her sensible heels to their place in the line of shoes next to the bed, neatly folded her navy skirt and placed it over the back of a chair, and changed into her flannel pajamas. Then she made herself a turkey sandwich and a cup of tea, and settled into the chaise with a new old novel.

Jeffrey sat at a small table squeezed into the corner behind the counter, the phone receiver cradled between his ear and shoulder, when Miriam arrived the next afternoon. “On hold with the insurance company,” he said, pointing to the phone and rolling his eyes.

Miriam asked if the man had returned with more books from his mother’s house.

Jeffrey grinned and nodded. “They’re in the back.”

Three cardboard boxes were lined up at the bottom of the spiral staircase, and Miriam breathed a happy sigh at not having to climb up to the disorganized loft. She pulled a wooden chair up in front of the boxes, tugging open the flap of the first box as she sat down.

She saw the lavender spine right away. It was wedged between a 1964 World Book Encyclopedia (J-K) and a leather-bound monstrosity that claimed to contain the complete works of William Shakespeare. Miriam traced the gold emblems on the spine with the tip of her finger, then hooked the top of the book and pulled it out of the box.

She felt the texture of the cloth, brushed her fingertip across the surface, tracing the loopy gold design. The title and author were stamped at the top in gold print ringed with black, floating in the outline of a tree. Three thin trunks dropped from the branches down to a symmetrical tangle of roots at the bottom. The illustration was gold, except for the petals of a large white flower, its vines wrapped around the center tree trunk. The beginnings of a smile played across Miriam's lips. She hugged the book to her chest and walked it to the front of the store.

Jeffrey was standing at the desk now, and he hung up the phone just as Miriam approached.

"It's here." Miriam held the book up with both hands and waved it in front of him. "The last Attwater."

Jeffrey's eyes widened and he leaned his hand on the counter to steady himself. "Are – are you sure?" He reached out to take the book from her.

She resisted for a moment before releasing it. "Of course I'm sure. *Flower of the Dusk*. Purple cover, Myrtle Reed, MA." Her outstretched finger hovered over the gilded letters nestled into the bottom corner of the design. "That's it. That's the last one." She reached a hand out to take the book back, but he didn't move to give it to her.

"Where did you find it?" he asked. He turned it over in his hands a few times.

"What do you mean? In the boxes."

"The boxes?" Jeffrey maneuvered around the counter and walked past Miriam toward the back of the store, holding the book in both hands. "These?" He pointed toward the cardboard boxes on the floor.

Miriam let out an exasperated sigh. “Yes.” She stepped around the wooden chair and stood over the opened box. “This box.”

“Oh, no.” Jeffrey scratched the top of his head, and rubbed his thin gray hair forward with the palm of his hand. “I can’t give you anything from this box. This box is.” He paused. “I mean, this box is already spoken for.”

Miriam’s limbs went cold. “What?”

“Yeah, this one’s not – ah – not the one I meant. You can check those two.” He pointed to the two unopened boxes. “But someone’s already bought this one.”

“This whole box? This whole random assortment of books?”

“He collected these books but couldn’t carry them all home. He gave me a deposit and said he’d come back for them.”

Miriam stared at Jeffrey through narrowed eyes. “Just this one? This specific box?”

Jeffrey nodded. “Yeah, I – I don’t know why he put it next to the other boxes. Those two are from that man whose mother passed, but this one.” He pointed again at the box that had contained the last Attwater. “I’m really sorry.” He held the book against his middle and looked down at the floor.

Miriam took a deep breath and held the air in her lungs as long as she could before releasing it through her nose. “Jeffrey. We have been looking for this book” – she grabbed the book from Jeffrey’s hands – “for *a year*. And you mean to tell me that you sold it to someone else? How could you do that?”

Jeffrey crumpled into the chair and covered his face with his hands. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know. I didn’t know it was in there.”

“Where did this person even *find* this book?” The volume of her voice startled Miriam. “This book was just on one of these shelves, and he just happened to find it? That’s not possible, Jeffrey. We’ve checked every single title in this store.”

Jeffrey shook his head, not lifting his face from his hands. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“You have to call him up. You have to tell him you can’t sell him the book.”

“I can’t do that,” he said. He looked up at her, and she almost expected to see tears on his face. Wiry, gray strands of his eyebrows stood out in every direction.

“Just tell him you made a mistake. Tell him you can sell him all the other books.”

Jeffrey stood up and snatched the book back. “It’s a done deal. We’ll just have to keep looking.”

“Keep looking?” The sound scratched the back of her throat. “Keep looking? That’s your solution?” She stepped over the boxes and stomped toward the door. “Oh, I’ll keep looking,” she yelled, aware now that there were other patrons in the store and they were looking at her. “I’ll keep looking at Sage’s Pages and Chatham’s Antique Books. But I will not continue to patronize this sorry excuse for a business!” She yanked her coat off the rack and folded it over her arm, not bothering to put it on before swinging the door open and stepping out into the cold. She heard Jeffrey calling her back, but she slammed the door shut before he’d gotten her full name out.

Miriam spent the next day in the Rare Book Room of the college library. A recently deceased alum had willed her personal library to the college, and the rather large

project of unpacking, sorting, and cataloguing the books gave Miriam a welcome excuse to lock herself away for hours. After hanging her coat in her office, she instructed her staff to leave her undisturbed for the duration of the day. She even broke her own No Food or Drink rule, bringing her salad into the room with her so she wouldn't have to leave to retrieve it at lunch time.

The door to the Rare Book Room was made of heavy wood, and she closed it firmly behind her as she flicked on the lights. The donated books were collected in six large boxes in the corner, and Miriam slid one across the floor toward the table in the center of the room. She laid out a notebook and pen, pulled on a pair of white cotton gloves, and sat down, reaching into the box to pick up the first book. She examined the cover, made a note of the title, author, and publication information, and then began leafing through, page by page, noting any marks in the margins and extracting any slips of paper that had been hidden between the pages. When she had completed this project, she placed the book on the table and pulled out another, beginning the process all over again. Most of the books in the box were old, but she expected that few, if any, would be rare. Still, she delighted in the examination, marveled at the old notes and dried flowers she found.

As the morning wore on, she felt an ache form behind her eyes and decided to take a break. She piled the books she had already catalogued onto a wheeled cart on the other side of the room, and slid the box of books away from the table before removing her gloves and taking out her salad. Floor-to-ceiling built-in bookcases lined the walls of the room, each covered with a door of wire mesh stretched across a dark wood frame. Inside stood the truly rare books, large tomes – many religious – bound with leather or

vellum, decorated with real gold and mother of pearl. Miriam was the only person on the campus allowed to touch these books, but she rarely did.

She was accustomed to this, to being one of the few people allowed to view a collector's most prized books, or the first to peruse a new acquisition. She'd developed relationships with all the bibliophiles in the region, had proved herself as a dedicated and trustworthy comrade in the hunt. She stabbed her salad with her plastic fork as she recalled all the times Jeffrey had given her the right of first refusal over the years she'd been visiting his store. He'd held recent finds behind the counter, thrusting them into her hands the moment she'd walked through the door. That he had let someone else get to the last Attwater, that he hadn't set those boxes aside so she could look first, was unfathomable.

Miriam snapped her plastic salad container shut and shoved it in her bag as she exited the Rare Book Room. "I have a meeting," she said to the reference librarian as she slipped into her coat and headed toward the front door. Her mind spun through possible answers in case he asked with whom she was meeting, but he just nodded and returned his attention to the book laid out on his desk.

Jeffrey started to smile when he saw Miriam walk through the door, but his expression faded as she stormed up to the counter.

"I'm here for the book, Jeffrey." She held out her hand as if requesting payment.

"What?" His voice shook as he glanced down at her outstretched arm. He pushed his glasses up on his nose.

“You know what,” she said. “I don’t know what kind of game you’re onto, but I’m not playing.”

“It’s gone.” He cleared his throat and shifted his weight from his right leg to his left. “The other customer came and picked up his box this morning. I’m sorry.”

Miriam sucked in her breath and turned away from him. Her shoulders shook and angry tears collected in her eyes as she squeezed them shut, silently counting to ten. “I’m really shocked at how you’ve handled this,” she said, turning back to him. “If you won’t do the right thing, I’ll reason with him myself.” She leaned toward him, her palms flat on the countertop, her nose nearly touching his. “Give. Me. His. Address,” she said through clenched teeth.

Jeffrey stared into her eyes, and his face softened. “Have dinner with me,” he said.

She stepped back. “What?”

“Have dinner with me.” He stepped out from behind the counter and grabbed her hand. “Tonight.”

Miriam tugged her hand away. “What on Earth are you-”

The bells on the door jingled, and they both turned to see a young woman step in. She paused and looked at Jeffrey with expectation. His shoulders slumped and he took a step back from Miriam. “How can I help you, miss?”

She described a book she was looking for, and he nodded and scratched his chin. “I think we’ve got that.” He turned to Miriam. “I’ll be right back,” he said, before guiding the woman toward the back of the store.

Miriam nodded but didn't look at him. She dug through her purse for a tissue and dabbed at her eyes. If he thought he could smooth things over with a steak dinner and a nice wine, he was mistaken. She balled up the tissue in her hand, her fist quivering as she squeezed it tight. As she leaned over the counter to toss the tissue in the trash can, a sliver of lavender caught her eye from a low shelf near the floor. It was almost behind the desk, but she didn't need to look closer to know; it was *Flower of the Dusk*. Next to it stood a book with a golden Earth imprinted on the spine, the World Book Encyclopedia, J-K, the one she had seen in the box the day before. The Shakespeare volume stood next to it, along with the other books from the box, all on a shelf marked "To Be Shelved." Heat flashed through her body and her temples pulsed. The man hadn't picked up any of these books, and apparently wasn't going to. He might never have existed at all. She imagined Jeffrey standing behind the counter a moment earlier, shifting his body to stand between her and the books, fidgeting with his glasses as he looked her in the eye and lied.

Miriam craned her neck toward the back of the store. She couldn't see Jeffrey and the new customer, but she could hear them; he would return any moment, and she wasn't sure she had enough time to get around the counter and back again before he did. A small plastic keychain shaped like a book hung on a small hook next to the cash register. Miriam glanced back toward Jeffrey's voice in the back of the store, then snatched the keychain and slid out the door, holding the bells in place as she turned the knob so they wouldn't betray her.

She waited until after midnight to go back. Most nights Jeffrey closed up at eight and was gone by nine, but she knew he sometimes stayed late into the night, doing inventory or researching the origins of a rare book that had turned up in a donation. One night she'd entered the store after eleven, having noticed the light on as she walked home from a fundraising event at the library, and found him lingering over the photos of his wife in the loft. It was her birthday, he'd explained, and he couldn't bring himself to go home to their empty house.

The amber glow from the streetlamps was the only light as Miriam walked, the methodic changing of the traffic light and the flutter of the last remaining leaves on the trees the only movement. Miriam hurried, her arms crossed tight against her chest. The key on its book keychain jingled in her pocket, and she patted it after every couple of steps to make sure it was still there.

She peered through the window when she reached the bookstore. The street's glow highlighted the counter and the cash register, but the rest of the store was dark. Miriam slid the key into the lock and turned it, cringing as the bells jingled. She punched in the alarm code she had seen Jeffrey enter so many times before. She peered around the shelves and listened. There was no sound except her own breathing, and yet she imagined that someone could emerge from the shadows at any moment.

She slipped behind the counter and crouched to the floor, peeking out the window to make sure no one could see her from outside. She ran her hand across the spines of the books on the bottom shelf. There was not enough light to read the titles, but Miriam knew right where the book was, just to the left of the desk's wooden leg. She pulled it from the shelf and clutched it to her chest, letting her body sag until she was kneeling on the floor.

The sound of a car driving past startled Miriam out of her reverie, and she reached up to grab one of the shelves, hoisting herself up off the floor with significant effort. She tucked the book inside her coat and held it against her chest. She pulled the key from her pocket and placed it on the shelf where *The Flower of the Dusk* had been. Then she slipped out from behind the counter and out the door, not bothering to silence the bells as she closed it behind her.

She held the book in front of her and admired it in the soft light of the streetlamp, tracing the words with the tip of her finger, pressing her thumb against the tiny MA in the corner.

REAL

Cassie parked at the back of the funeral home parking lot and leaned forward to peer at the building. It had the feeling of a historical home, all white paint and ornately carved shutters. She wondered what it could have been, if not a funeral home. She could imagine tourists spending several hundred dollars a night to sip tea in a wood-paneled library and sleep in historically themed bedrooms. She'd stayed in such places herself, taking long weekends upstate or in the Berkshires with her husband, Dean. It was the sort of thing Grant had made fun of her for, her love for things of the past, her ability to look at a funeral home and see romance and history.

Grant's sister leaned on a railing in front of the entrance, a cigarette dangling from her lips. A young couple, underdressed in jeans and hooded sweatshirts, approached her, and she plucked the cigarette from her mouth and held it at arm's length to accept their hugs. Cassie hadn't worked through what she would say to Grant's family. Sorry for your loss? It seemed wrong somehow, too distant, as if it wasn't her loss too. And it wasn't, but it could have been. Would they think her insensitive for not mourning? Would they add it to the list of ways she'd left him behind?

Grant's sister sucked her final drag from the cigarette and dropped it, then slipped through the door into the funeral home. Cassie waited a full minute before getting out of her car. She paused in front of the entrance to steady her breathing before climbing the stairs toward the heavy front door.

The foyer looked exactly as she'd imagined: dark wood, high ceilings, old in a charming way. A small group of people stood outside a door at the end of the hall, and Cassie's heels clicked on the marble floor as she walked toward them. She knew she was

supposed to offer her condolences, that the entire point of a wake was to show the family support, but she couldn't help but hope she would be able to slip in and out unnoticed. She'd picked up on an accusatory tone in his sister's text message, a suggestion that Grant's drug use might have been a consequence of their breakup. Dean had said she was reading too much into things. The group parted as Cassie approached. Their faces were unfamiliar, and she let out a small breath of relief and nodded solemnly, then averted her eyes as she walked past them.

The casket was open at the front of the room, and Cassie's stomach dropped at the sight of Grant, lit from above as if on a stage. She had been determined to see his lifeless body – it was the reason she had come – and yet she was entirely unprepared for it. Her neck flushed and her heart quickened with the old fear, but there was something new as well, a curdling in her stomach. She could turn and leave, satisfied that she'd seen enough, but she didn't. A line toward the casket had formed on the left, snaking around to the coat rack that stood a few feet from the door. Cassie stepped into the queue.

She recognized the woman in front of her as a cousin she had met only once or twice, the kind of family you see at weddings and funerals but not birthdays and holidays. It was a strange kind of relief, seeing Grant's family now after all these years, not because she took comfort in the familiar, but the opposite. Their changed faces and bodies, their new spouses and children, all served to remind Cassie how long it had been since she'd left. She had remade her life since then, felt herself to be an entirely different person; that they had all changed without her knowledge seemed to confirm it.

When it was her turn, Cassie stepped forward and knelt down in front of the casket, lacing her fingers in front of her as if in prayer. He looked like himself and also

not himself. His hair was gelled in his usual style, but his skin looked waxy under all the makeup. He was wearing a black dress shirt, and his hands were folded neatly across his middle. On his right ring finger he wore the sterling silver ring Cassie had given him their last Christmas together. He had immediately slipped it on his finger, smiling wide as he turned it around to examine the engraved scroll pattern. It had been a rare moment of light in the final months of their relationship. Now, Cassie felt the burn of brewing tears and dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her fingers. She stood up and backed away, suddenly aware of the people waiting behind her.

The sun had begun to set and a pink glow washed over the parking lot. Cassie rushed to her car, and once safely inside, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. It was all over; Grant was dead. She felt relieved, like the world was now a safer place, and this surprised her. It was as if she was unclenching her jaw, just now discovering that she'd been grinding her teeth for years. She let out a deep breath and then opened her eyes, stuck the key in the ignition.

“Thank you for coming.”

Grant's voice was low and hot in her ear. She turned around and there he was: leaning against the backseat, baring his perfect teeth in a wide grin, wearing the same black t-shirt he'd been wearing the last time she saw him alive. She scrambled to unlock her door, and she could hear him laughing as she jumped out of the car. She slammed the door shut and pressed the button on her keys to lock it, but as she peered through the window she could already see he was no longer there.

Cassie had left Grant on a Wednesday, packing up her things while he was at work. She didn't have much, just a suitcase of clothes and a couple of boxes of books and knickknacks. She slid them all neatly into the trunk of her car and slammed it shut. She pulled her house key off her key ring and walked back inside. So much of what she was leaving behind had been hers. The checkered curtains over the sink, the fraying rug under the dining table, the throw blankets balled up on the couch – all items she'd bought on sale at a local department store, an early effort to transform the dark little apartment into a home. She ran a hand across the top of the scratched table. It had been a hand-me-down from her aunt, along with the mismatched chairs. The lumpy couch, the old tube television, even the dirty dishes in the sink had been given to them by her relatives, all wanting to unload their junk in the name of supporting the younger generation. She felt bad leaving it now, but it was better to have a fresh start. Besides, she didn't have the time or resources to coordinate a big move, and she didn't want to leave Grant with nothing. She hoped to slip out of his life quietly, unnoticed.

Cassie turned the key over in her hand, running her finger along the serrated edge. She placed it on the table, then thought better of it and slipped it back into her pocket. She scanned the room one last time, and then stepped out into the afternoon light, locking the door and closing it firmly behind her.

She hadn't left a note – there didn't seem to be anything more to say – but she figured Grant would call that night or maybe the next morning when he realized she hadn't come home. She wasn't sure what she would say to him, but she had decided what she would not say: that she loved him, that she was sorry, that she'd come back home.

But Grant didn't call. A week passed, then two, then a month. She had failed to consider the possibility that he would actually let her leave silently. In the absence of the uncomfortable phone call she had dreaded, Cassie grew anxious. Letting her have the last word wasn't Grant's style, and her mind reeled with images of him plotting his final say. She hadn't told him which friend she was staying with, or that she was staying with a friend at all, but she pictured him waiting at the doorstep every time she rounded the corner to her friend's apartment. Her skin prickled every time a low, black car drove past her, and she always squinted at the license plates to be sure it wasn't his. She began to fear for her parents, worried that he may go to their house looking for her. Months went by like this with no word from Grant, Cassie constantly alert, her heart beating close under her skin, ready to jump.

When Grant finally did call, six months had passed. Cassie was alone in her new apartment, reading a book in bed. When she saw Grant's name flashing on the screen of her cell phone, her mouth went dry. She ran through her nighttime routine in her mind, trying to remember if she'd locked the deadbolt, before answering.

"Hey babe," he said. Cassie could hear her own blood rushing through her ears, but his voice was slow and smooth.

"Hey," she said. "How are you?" She half-expected him to say that he'd found her, that he was standing outside, but he just made small talk, asked how she'd been, making no reference to the circumstances of her departure. The call unnerved her, leaving her more certain than ever that he was up to something.

But years went by, and if Grant was up to something, he never revealed what it was. He called every six months or so at first, less often as time went on. When she

started dating Dean, he insisted she should stop answering Grant's calls. But Grant called from a new number each time, always with some excuse about losing his phone. She wondered if he thought she wouldn't answer if she knew it was him. She told Dean it caught her off-guard, seeing an unrecognized number, and she answered in case it was important or an emergency. But really, whenever she saw an unfamiliar number pop up on her phone's screen, her heart jumped a little, and she knew it was Grant.

He chatted with her like they were old friends, like their time together was a nice memory they shared and not the dark past it was to Cassie. He was always doing better, always starting a new job, or getting a promotion, or getting a raise. Cassie didn't believe him, but she congratulated him anyway. When he moved out of their apartment – to a much nicer place across town, he said – he kept all of her things, the furniture and housewares she'd left behind.

"It's like you're still here with me," he'd said.

Cassie imagined him eating breakfast out of her cereal bowls or dozing on the couch, wrapped in her blanket. It was strange, of course, but she preferred this to all the images in her mind: Grant waiting on her doorstep as she came home from work, or cornering her on a dark street, or sitting in his car outside her apartment, watching her bedroom window. To imagine him living in her things was more appealing, all the affectionate regret with none of the brooding aggression. She didn't share this detail with Dean, not because he would be angry, but because she wanted to keep it for herself.

Grant's last call had come just hours before the text message from his sister. Cassie had been at work and listened to the voicemail just after learning he had died. The message was unremarkable – he was just "checking in," hoped she was "doing well."

Cassie listened to it over and over, trying to discern some emotion in his voice, some hint of what was to come, but he sounded calm and cool, like always.

Dean was sure that Cassie's hallucination of Grant had been stress-induced and encouraged her to take it easy. He was gentle with her, reminding her that she had seen with her own eyes that Grant was dead, and that ghosts were only real in books and movies. She nodded her assent, but she followed him around the house like a frightened kitten, and he let her. When he told her to delete the voicemail from Grant, she lied and said she already had.

Cassie knew he'd show up again, that there was no way he'd journeyed back from the afterlife just to say thank you, and a week later he did. She was in the shower, her eyes closed, letting the hot water pound the week out of her shoulders and neck, when she felt the creeping sensation that she wasn't alone. She shut the faucet off, and as she pulled back the shower curtain she saw Grant on the other side of the bathroom, his long frame leaning against the door of the linen closet.

Cassie jumped and pulled the shower curtain shut again. She pressed her eyes closed and steadied herself, her palm pressed flat against the wet tile.

"You're not real," she said, but she could hear Grant chuckling on the other side of the curtain. She pulled it open just enough to poke her head out.

"You look good." Grant grinned and cocked an eyebrow, his eyes drifting down to where her body had been exposed a moment earlier.

Cassie felt the corner of her mouth rise into a smile in spite of her fear. “The real Grant would never open with a compliment,” she said.

“You don’t know me anymore, babe. I’m a changed man.” He smiled and raised his eyes to meet her gaze. They were the deep blue she remembered, as alive as ever.

Cassie and Grant rented the grungy apartment in the center of town soon after she graduated from college. Some days she’d arrive home from work to find Grant whistling in front of the stove, grilling cheese sandwiches for supper. Other days she’d find him drinking a beer and flipping through a newspaper at the kitchen table. She’d grab a beer for herself and ask how his day was, but he didn’t look up from the paper. When he’d read to the end, he folded it neatly and stood.

“What do you want for dinner?” Cassie asked.

He walked to the fridge, hovering in front of the opened door for a minute before pulling out the ingredients for a sandwich. She watched from the table as he spread mustard on the bread and folded the turkey slices on top. He carried the sandwich back to the table, pulling out a magazine to flip through while he ate.

Cassie sighed and poured herself a bowl of cereal. She ate it over the sink, staring out the cloudy window as she chewed. Across the street, two small children played on a tire swing, one squealing in delight as the other spun the tire. When she’d finished, Cassie rinsed her bowl and dropped it in the sink before returning to the table. Grant pushed his empty plate away and slapped the magazine closed. Leaning back in his chair, he downed

the last swig of his beer. He looked at Cassie intently until she raised her gaze to meet his.

“Sometimes,” he said, “I’m just sick of having you around.” He pushed his chair back and stood up, disappearing down the hall and into their bedroom before Cassie could formulate a response.

Cassie approached Grant’s behavior academically, believing she could get him to stop treating her this way if she could figure out why he was doing it. She probed him for details about his family and friends and ex-girlfriends, analyzing his past for clues to his psyche. Often she was wrong in her conclusions, but when she hit a nerve, he exploded, screaming until his voice was hoarse, his face turning pink and splotchy from the effort. She shouted back at him, sometimes surprised by her own ferocity. Later, sometimes hours, sometimes days, he would tug her arm, pull her close to him. His lips were always hot, his embrace tight. She tried to resist, to maintain her stubborn resolve, but his kiss cracked her open every time.

He came to her in all the ways she’d always feared he would. The shower had been her deepest, most irrational fear. She knew the chances of a person breaking into her building and sneaking into her bathroom in the middle of the morning were slim. But there was something in the vulnerability of the moment, being naked and trapped in a tiny, tiled room, that had made her jump at every sound on the other side of the shower curtain.

Grant also came to her in the ways she'd expected he would. She found him sitting on her stoop one afternoon, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Another day she walked out of work to find him leaning against her car, his arms crossed against his chest. She nodded and walked past him as if he were merely an acquaintance on the street, but he always followed, joining her in her car or in her home as if she'd invited him in. She tried to get rid of him by informing him of his nonexistence, but neither she nor Grant believed that to be true. She tried asking him to leave her alone, one time sobbing behind the wheel of her car as he prattled away in the passenger seat, filling her in on all the events leading up to his death. When it became clear that no amount of begging would get rid of him, she simply ignored him, allowing him to talk or sit quietly as he wished while she went about her day. It was difficult, though, to stop herself from answering his questions, to refrain from acknowledging him at all. It reminded her of the nights when they were together, the way he treated her like she wasn't there. One afternoon she was sitting on the bedroom floor sorting laundry, and she wondered out loud whether he had ignored her for the same reason she was now ignoring him – because he wanted her to go away.

Grant leaned back against the dresser, stretching his legs out in front of him.

"No," he said.

"Then why did you do it?" She matched up the last pair of Dean's socks and then sat back against the bed, looking Grant in the eye.

He shrugged. "I don't have a good answer."

"Do you have a bad answer?"

"I guess I wanted you to know that I could live without you," he said.

Cassie nodded. "It worked."

"But I couldn't," he said. "Live without you, I mean." He laughed to himself, a small, sad laugh. "And here we are."

The first time Cassie saw Grant he was standing behind a bonfire, his long fingers wrapped around the neck of a beer bottle, his other hand shoved into the front pocket of his jeans. His tanned muscles stretched the fabric of his t-shirt thin around the armholes. Cassie froze when she saw him, inhaling deeply in a way that she would later decide must be what people meant when they talked about "drinking someone in." The fire danced between them, the flames rising so high they appeared to lick Grant's chin. Cassie stared at him, but he only stared into the fire, his eyes darkly intent, his hand mechanically lifting the beer bottle to his lips and then lowering it again.

Cassie's friends swept her away from the fire before she'd managed to catch Grant's glance. They were all 18, all home from college for their first fall break. It was a high school party, just a keg and the fire a hundred paces from some senior's house, but the memories of their own summer field parties were still fresh enough to make their presence here feel natural. Cassie flitted around the fire, saying hello to old classmates, nursing her beer and only half-listening to their stories about roommates and college parties and new hookups. Grant remained in her sights, a spot of stillness in the smoky, buzzing air. He kept to himself, observing from his post by the fire, occasionally bending to pick up a chunk of wood and toss it into the flames. Cassie watched the wood burn, marveling at the way each piece seemed to go up all at once; one moment it was dry and

separate, a foreign object in the blaze, and the next it was engulfed, swallowed whole and indistinguishable from the fire itself.

“You gonna drink that or just hold it all night?” Grant nodded toward Cassie’s plastic cup.

Cassie shrugged and looked into the cup. “I guess I don’t really like it.”

“Shitty beer,” he said. “You want one of these?” He held up his bottle.

The glass was dark brown with a shiny label. Cassie didn’t recognize the name – she wouldn’t recognize anything, really, other than the Coors her dad kept stocked at home. “Where’d you get that?” she asked.

Grant pulled a second bottle out of his back pocket. “My house.” He pointed its neck over her head toward the path that led back to the road.

“You live here?”

He nodded. “My kid sister’s party. I just came out to keep an eye on things.”

“Keep the fire going?” She smiled and pushed her hair behind her ear.

“Yeah.” He took a final swig from the opened bottle and tossed it into the fire.

“You want this one?” He held the unopened bottle toward her.

“No, thanks,” she said. “I don’t really drink much.”

He looked at her for a long moment, a smirk playing across his thin lips. “No,” he said. “You don’t.”

Dean had suggested that Cassie see a doctor after Grant’s wake, and again after the shower incident, but she’d stopped mentioning Grant’s visits after that, and Dean had

seemed to let it slide. When he arrived home early one afternoon and caught her speaking out loud to an empty room, he took matters into his own hands.

“I made you an appointment,” he said the next day. He handed her a slip of paper. “Please. Go.”

Cassie took the slip of paper and studied it. He’d written “Dr. Barnett” across the top, with an address underneath. He looked at her, his eyes glassy and shadowed, his chin rough with several days’ stubble. “Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

Doctor Barnett’s office was decorated in shades of beige and populated with what seemed like too many house plants. Cassie sat in the middle of a tan couch, her back straight, her hands folded neatly in her lap. She tried to answer the doctor’s questions honestly, bracing herself for her reaction. But Doctor Barnett barely reacted at all. Her mouth remained a straight line across her face, her eyes locked on Cassie’s with interest but not alarm. She only looked away occasionally to jot things down in her leather-bound notebook. Cassie found the doctor’s lack of reaction disconcerting. She imagined they taught her this in school, how to appear indifferent to the ravings of a crazy person.

“You’ve been through a traumatic experience,” Doctor Barnett said. “Not only in dealing with your ex-boyfriend’s death, but, it seems, also in the relationship itself.”

Cassie had never thought of her relationship with Grant in these terms, but it sounded accurate enough.

“I’m going to give you a prescription.” She scribbled something on a blue pad, ripped the page off, and handed it to Cassie. “We’ll start with this, but I want you to come back next week.”

Grant was waiting for her in the car, stretched out in the passenger seat with the back folded down, his hands resting behind his head.

“How did it go?” he asked, not sitting up.

“Okay. She gave me a prescription.”

“To get rid of me?”

Cassie nodded.

“So she doesn’t believe I exist.” He sat up, pulling the lever on the side of the seat to bring it back to its upright position.

“Of course not.”

Grant nodded and looked out the window. Cassie faced forward and started the car, clicking her seatbelt into place. She put the car in DRIVE, and then paused, put it back in PARK. She stared at his face, studied his sharp jaw line and his pale stubble, the way the blue of his eyes darkened around the edges. She could see the pores on his nose. There was nothing airy, nothing of the fuzzy edge of memory. Every inch of him was solid and imperfect, every detail exactly the same as when he was alive. She reached across the center console and pressed just one finger against his arm. His flesh was warm and pliable.

“Do you?” he asked. “Believe I exist?”

Cassie stared at him. “I don’t know.”

When she got home, Dean was sitting on the couch with a bag of chips and an open beer. He jumped up as she dropped her bag on the floor and kicked off her shoes.

“Hey you,” he said, his voice gentle, as if she were a child. “How did it go?”

“It went great,” she said. She allowed him to envelop her in a hug, and then she pulled away, resting her hands on his hips as she looked into his eyes and smiled. “The doctor says I’m fine. Just stressed.”

Dean nodded, squeezing her arms.

She broke away from him and walked into the kitchen. “She said it’s normal to experience trauma,” Cassie called. “When something like this happens.” She pulled a glass out of the cabinet and dug the prescription out of her pocket. She turned the faucet on, filling her glass and then holding the crumpled paper under the stream until it was an unrecognizable ball in her palm. She wrapped it in a paper towel and tossed it into the garbage can, then took a long swig of the water.

“Of course,” Dean said, as she walked back into the living room. “It makes sense.”

Cassie plopped down on the couch next to Dean, and he slid next to her and placed his hand tenderly on her knee. Cassie smiled at him and reached for the bag of chips, stuffing a handful in her mouth before settling back into the sofa and grabbing the remote. She pulled her legs up onto the couch and leaned into her husband, her eyes following Grant as he moved across the room and settled into an arm chair. He sat back, his legs wide, a satisfied smile spreading across his face.

JUST THE FAMILY

Moira watched through the passenger window as the snow fell to the ground. The empty road sliced through miles of cow pastures and corn fields, and the dull winter green of the frozen land was beginning to look white.

“It’s sticking,” Moira said.

“We’ll be fine.” Jake reached over to pat her hand, giving her fingers a little squeeze before returning his hand to the wheel. “We can stay over if it gets bad.”

Moira turned to look at the side of his face. His skin was smoother than usual, and there was a tiny red spot on his jaw, a fresh wound from that morning’s shave. She heard his mother’s voice, shrill and exasperated – “You didn’t even shave?” – and bristled. When it came to the small things, it was easier to appease his mother than fight her, but still it bothered her.

A commercial for a local restaurant played on the radio, and a crackle of static cut through the voices, increasing in intensity until the sound was just a whoosh of white noise. Jake fiddled with the buttons for a minute before turning it off.

They sat in silence for several miles. Moira watched the scene roll by: hilly pasture, red barn, dilapidated silo, rows of cut corn. Winding brook, silo, corn, barn. It had all taken on the muted tones of winter, gray and still and barren. There was a time when coming back to this place was as much a homecoming for her as it was for him, but that felt like a lifetime ago, like it was actually a memory of someone else’s life.

Out of the corner of her eye, Moira could see Jake turning his attention from the snow-covered road to glance at her. Once, twice, three times.

“Do you really hate my mother that much?” he said finally.

She blinked, but didn't move. "I don't hate your mother."

"You think she's going to say something."

"I know she's going to say something." She slumped in her seat, resting her head against the cold window. "She always says something."

He looked at her just a second, his face softening before he turned back to the road. "She wouldn't if we just told her, you know. You have to understand. She has no idea we're trying. She thinks – "

"*Were* trying."

Jake's shoulders slumped. "She doesn't know, is my point. She's not as heartless as you think."

"I never said she was heartless." Moira shifted in her seat, crossing and uncrossing her ankles. "I just don't think it's any of her business."

"You'd tell *your* mother, if she was still alive." He tried to look at her again, but the snow was collecting on the windshield now and he had to lean forward to squint through the falling flakes.

It had been almost five years since her mother's death, but still it stung to hear her referred to in this way, still felt too soon to think of her as alive or not alive. "That's different," she said.

"Why?"

Because she's *my* mother, she wanted to say. She closed her eyes and inhaled through her nose, holding the air in her lungs for a moment before letting it out. "Well. She's not. So it doesn't matter."

Moira's mother had told her about the diagnosis a few weeks after the wedding, but later Moira would understand that she had known before and kept it to herself. They sat at a metal bistro table on her mother's back patio, sharing a hunk of chocolate cake Moira had picked up on the drive over. Moira hadn't thought anything of it when her mother asked her to come for the afternoon. They'd made a semi-regular ritual of it since Moira had moved away, a light lunch, a few hours in the garden or in front of the television if it was cold or rainy, and always a sweet treat to finish the day. Moira enjoyed making the hour-long drive to their hometown without Jake, winding through the back roads with the windows down and her favorite old songs on the radio. And she'd grown dependent on the alone time with her mother over the years, needing to hash out ideas or talk through decisions, or sometimes just to have someone reflect herself back to her so she'd know she was on the right path. Even as a child, Moira had felt closer to her mother than her friends seemed to be with theirs, and she attributed this to being the only child of a single mom. Her mother had been nearly 35 when she was born, and they certainly didn't always see eye to eye, but sometimes it was as if they shared something beyond their DNA, a string connecting their two hearts, vibrating softly as they moved.

"There's something I need to tell you," her mother had said, stabbing the cake with her fork. "But I don't want you to worry."

Moira could tell by her tone that she did need to worry. Her mother had a tendency to dramatize small things; that she was so nonchalant now meant she was trying too hard. "Okay," Moira said. "What is it?"

"I have to go in to a clinic next week. For a treatment."

Moira sat up straight and placed her fork on the table. Her hands were already clammy, and she felt herself hollow out as her mother explained what the doctors had told her. Moira listened in silence, the words floating above her head, incomprehensible, as if her mother was saying them in the wrong order.

Jake had cried with Moira when she told him, and this both touched her and annoyed her, as it did months later, at her mother's funeral. He loved her mother, because she was kind and loving and because she had watched with pride as he had grown from Moira's brooding teenage boyfriend to the open-hearted man she had married. His tears were genuine, but Moira knew the loss was her own. I'm an orphan now, she'd thought on the way home from the funeral. Before she'd thought Jake understood her relationship with her mother because his was a single mother too, his father having left when he was just a little boy, but she knew now it was different. He had a sister and aunts and uncles and a host of cousins who would hold him up when his mother passed away, who would be there long after she was gone. But Moira and her mother had always been each other's only anchor, and now she was alone, a ship unmoored.

She spent days in bed, sleeping the afternoons away, reading novels with a flashlight while Jake slept beside her at night. When he tried to rouse her, to convince her to get up and shower, maybe even think about going back to work, she'd grown angry and burrowed deeper under the covers.

"You don't understand," she said. Her voice was scratchy and her face dry, her eyes long since emptied of tears. "My mother was my only person."

"I'm your person," Jake said, his voice low and sad.

Moira only sighed and rolled over, pulling the blankets up over her head.

By the time they got to Jake's mother's house, several inches of snow covered the ground, the trees and shrubs all draped in white. The tires crunched as they rolled over the loose powder, packing it into the pavement. The driveway was long and wound its way up an incline toward the house. Jake inched the car up the hill, losing control twice, but regaining enough traction to make it to the top. Moira got out of the car and turned to admire the familiar view. The yard rolled down to the road below, and beyond that clusters of trees and rows of houses dotted miles of sprawling land. In the winter she could see her own childhood home from here, now just a white spot through the bare tree branches. As teenagers, she and Jake had stood in this spot looking for landmarks, counting the sloped black roofs until they'd located hers. Some nights she had cursed it from here, wishing she could stay in Jake's arms overnight and forever; others it had been like a blinking beacon of her mother's love calling her home. Now she waited for the warmth in her chest, the feeling she got sometimes when she knew her mother was thinking of her or missing her, but all she felt was the ache that had become familiar, the new normal.

Jake stepped beside her and placed his hand on the small of her back. "Ready?"

The steps were freshly shoveled and salted, and they stomped their way up to the top, kicking the snow off their shoes. Jake's mother swung open the door as he was reaching for the knob.

"Thank God you're here!" She waved them in and grabbed Jake by the shoulders. "I was so worried, you driving in this! Why didn't you call?"

“Because I was driving, Ma.” He smiled and shrugged his coat off his shoulders. She raised a disapproving eyebrow and took his coat, draping it over her arm and then holding her hand out for Moira’s.

“Thanks, Nancy.” Moira handed her the coat and leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. “It’s nice to see you.”

“You too, dear.” She brushed past them, carrying the coats toward the den. “Drinks are in the kitchen,” she called over her shoulder. “Something special in the fridge for you, Jake.”

A display of beverages was lined up on the kitchen counter. Four bottles of soda – two diet, two regular – a bottle of seltzer, three bottles of red wine, and a bottle of white chilling in a bucket of ice. A row of stemless wine glasses lined the small shelf above the counter.

“How many people are coming to this dinner?” Moira said.

Jake laughed and shrugged, pulling a beer out of the refrigerator.

Moira surveyed the drink choices, settling on a bottle of red that had already been opened. She poured the wine almost to the top of the glass, but then frowned and swigged three big gulps so that the glass was only half full before following Jake into the living room.

At least seven throw pillows lined the couch, and Moira considered rearranging them to make space, but then decided against it and sat down on top of them. She was acutely aware of the red wine in her glass and the cream color of the couch. She took a slow sip and then carefully placed the glass on the coffee table in front of her.

Nancy picked up a coaster from the side table and reached across to hand it to her. “So you’re drinking then.”

Moira laughed nervously and slid the coaster under her glass. Jake squeezed Moira’s knee.

“Just wait till you see little Ava,” Nancy said. “She’s already getting so big. You really should make more of an effort to visit, Jake. You want your niece to know her uncle, don’t you?”

Jake chuckled and leaned back against the throw pillows, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. “Did Beth say something to you? Or are you just inventing problems?”

Moira tried to follow the conversation, but her eyes drifted to the row of picture frames adorning the mantle over the fire place. There was one photo from their wedding, one from Beth and Henry’s, and one of Jake and Beth as children, standing on the front step in their first-day-of-school clothes. From all the other frames, Ava’s huge blue eyes peered out, each of her ten months of life carefully documented and on display. Moira picked up her wine glass, taking a sip and then cradling it in both hands on top of her knees. There’s no room on the mantle for another baby anyway, she thought.

The morning before, over breakfast, Moira told Jake she wanted to stop trying to get pregnant. He had made pancakes and maple-flavored bacon, and the sweet smell hung in the kitchen as they ate. He was reading something on his phone as he shoveled forkfuls of food into his mouth, but when she said it, he looked up. He swallowed, and placed his fork face down on his plate.

“Are you sure?” he said.

She nodded, forcing herself to look him in the face. The skin around his eyes bore faint lines in the corners, shadows in the creases. He looked tired. She imagined she must look tired too.

They’d been trying for more than a year, an endless cycle of hoping, waiting, and peeing on sticks. Even as she grew to expect the negative result, the blow crushed her each time. The last time had been a week ago, and she had taken some time off from work, had spent days sniffing into her pillow with the covers over her head. He had sat next to her on the bed in the mornings, rubbing her back through the heavy comforter, silently kissing the top of the blankets before heading to work.

“I’m sure,” she said.

He let out a breath and smiled at her, a close-lipped, deflated smile. “I understand.”

He was telling the truth, she knew, but she also knew she should have talked it over with him, that this was a decision they were supposed to make together.

“I just don’t want to think about it anymore. I don’t want to do any more ovulation tests that don’t work. I don’t want to hear about more treatments we can’t afford.”

He reached across the table and rested his hand on top of hers. “I get it. I’m with you.”

She forced a smile. A film of sweat was rubbing off his palm onto her knuckles, and she slipped her hand out from under his, drying it discreetly with the paper napkin on her lap.

Beth and Henry arrived with the baby shortly after Jake and Moira. They drove their four-wheel-drive SUV up the snowy driveway with ease, blocking in Jake and Moira's car. Henry carried the baby inside one of those large plastic carriers that attached to the car seat, a special blanket fitted over the top so that only her face was exposed. Henry placed the carrier on the couch, and Ava instantly started whimpering to be released. He pulled off the blanket and unhooked the carrier's many straps while Beth made her way around the room, kissing everyone hello.

"Sorry we're late," Beth said. "It's really getting bad out there."

"You live right down the road!" Jake laughed as he pulled his sister in for a hug. It was farther than that, but not by much, just the next town over.

Henry lifted Ava out of the baby seat and placed it on the floor, sinking into the couch with the baby on his lap. Her whining settled as she nestled into her father's chest. Beth sat down next to him, and Moira and Jake shifted over to the loveseat to make room.

"Oh let me hold her!" Nancy said, holding her hands out toward Henry. "Just for a few minutes before we eat."

Moira felt a lump rise in her throat as she watched Henry pass the baby across to Nancy. Her thin baby hair laid flat against her head, pinned back by a single pink flower clip, the ends curling up at the nape of her neck. She smiled wide as her grandmother bounced her on her knee, her cheeks round and pink, a high-pitched giggle escaping her lips. Moira both hoped and feared that someone would pass the baby to her, wanting to

feel her soft little body in her arms, the beat of her tiny heart against her chest, and also knowing that it would make her own chest ache.

A timer beeped from the kitchen, and Nancy stood up. “That’s the dinner bell!” she said in a sing-song voice, more to the baby than to anyone else. “Time to eat!” She passed Ava back to Henry and scurried into the kitchen to set up the meal.

Steaming serving dishes lined the long dining room table: lasagna, sausage and peppers, mushrooms stuffed with crabmeat, scalloped potatoes, green beans. It was too much food, but it was always delicious. Moira had made a point to eat light earlier in the day, to save herself for the big meal, and her stomach grumbled now as the savory smells mingled in the air. Nancy emerged from the kitchen carrying one last dish and placed it in front of Moira. “I made shrimp scampi,” she said with a smile. The pink shrimps glistened in the buttery sauce. It was Moira’s favorite. She smiled and thanked Nancy before digging in.

Henry filled a plate for Beth, and as soon as he placed it in front of her, Ava reached out and grabbed a handful of food. They all laughed, and Jake handed Beth a napkin. Ava fussed as Beth wiped cheese and sauce and squished green beans out from between her chubby little fingers. She kicked her miniature sneakers toward the table, letting out a squeal with each thrust, until her face folded in on itself, heavy tears pooling in her eyes and pouring down her purple splotched cheeks.

“Sorry,” Beth said. “Somebody hasn’t napped today.” She spoke the words into the screaming baby’s head. “Lately she won’t even close her eyes unless I’m lying next to her.” She stood up.

Nancy stood too. “Do you need me to get you anything?”

“No, no, I’ve got it.” She swung a baby bag over her shoulder and carried the bawling baby up the stairs. Moira watched Ava’s tiny feet kicking furiously, wishing it was her disappearing up the stairs to lie down with a baby on her chest.

When Ava was born, Moira and Jake had been trying long enough to be frustrated, but not so long to have lost hope. They’d both agreed to keep their efforts private – no point sharing until there’s actually news to share, Moira had said. But she could see right away that holding Ava, just hours after she was born, had intensified Jake’s excitement about their impending parenthood. Moira sat across from him in the tiny hospital room, aiming a camera in his direction.

“Hey Uncle Jake,” she said, trying to get him to look up. He didn’t seem to hear her. He stared at the sleeping bundle in his arms, studying her smooth pink skin, counting every shiny little eyelash.

“Let’s tell them we’re trying,” he said later, in the waiting room.

Moira was sitting next to him on the long bench with her legs crossed under her body, blowing on a styrofoam cup of hot chocolate. “Jake, come on. Today is your sister’s day. Today’s about Ava.”

“Not today. But soon.”

She sighed and lowered the cup from her face.

“I don’t mean tell the whole world,” he said. “Just the family.”

Moira pressed her lips together. She hated the way he referred to his family as *the* family, as if they were the only family in existence. It was “the family” – with their

opinions and suggestions about every decision she and Jake ever made – that she was most worried about; she would have much sooner told complete strangers of their plans to procreate. She knew once she was pregnant there would be no avoiding the endless advice from her in-laws, but the decision itself felt private and she wanted to protect it.

“Not yet,” she said. “Not until I’m pregnant.” Jake’s face fell and he slumped back in his seat. “Hey, come on,” she said, poking a knuckle playfully into his thigh. “Wouldn’t it be an awkward conversation? Telling your mom that we’re going home to have unprotected sex?”

He laughed and wrapped an arm around her shoulder to pull her close, nuzzling into her neck. “Well when you put it that way.”

After dinner, Nancy cleared everyone’s plates and brought out an array of desserts, all of which were met with belly-grabbing and a chorus of groans. Moira poured cream into her coffee, and then slurped the hot beverage down to make room for a bit more. She was eyeing a plate of cookies when Beth descended the stairs. Ava sat in her arms, murmuring bubbly nonsense and fingering a pendant that hung from a chain around her mother’s neck.

“Look who’s still up!” Beth said. She was laughing, but Moira could hear the exhaustion in her voice.

“She didn’t sleep at all?” Nancy reached both hands out to take the baby, who wrapped her pinky finger around her mother’s necklace. Beth pried it loose, and Ava let out a whine before grabbing a hold of Nancy’s silk scarf.

“She did. For about ten minutes, maybe.” Beth slid into her chair and stuffed a cookie into her mouth.

Nancy sat the baby on her knees and bounced her up and down, leaning in to kiss her nose. Ava giggled and clutched the scarf, letting out a delighted squeal and a tug with each bounce. Moira smiled to herself as she watched and sipped her coffee. There was something hypnotizing about the bobbing motion, the way Ava nodded her head along with the movement, the way the ends of her wispy hair floated up and down. Nancy caught her looking, and they made eye contact as Moira peered over the top of her coffee mug.

“You want to go to Aunt Moira?” Nancy cooed, smiling and brushing her nose against Ava’s. She stood up and dangled the baby over Moira until she put the mug down.

Moira reached up and hooked her hands under Ava’s arms, pulling her down to rest on her lap. “Hi, baby.”

Ava grinned and reached for her necklace. Moira thought about pulling it out of her fingers, but decided to let her have it, moving her neck closer to lessen the force of the tug. Ava smelled like a combination of shampoo and baby powder and fresh skin, and for a moment Moira couldn’t resist closing her eyes and resting her nose on the baby’s head.

“Don’t you want those giggles and snuggles every day? You’re not getting any younger, you know.”

“Mom.” Jake said.

He placed a hand on Moira's knee, but she was already starting to stand. Her arms shook as she stood and handed the baby to Jake. "I need to get some fresh air." She turned on her heels and headed toward the front door. As she pulled the door open, she heard Jake scolding his mother in a low tone and knew he was telling her everything.

Outside the snow was still falling, but lighter now, big heavy flakes that drifted slowly to the ground. Moira breathed deeply, watching her breath diffuse through the air in front of her as she exhaled. She shivered and crossed her arms in front of her chest. Five or six inches of snow had collected on the lawn, and Moira admired the smooth untouched expanse that glistened under the glow of the porch light. She stepped off the porch, walked to the middle of the lawn, and sat down in the snow. The cold shot through her jeans, stinging her thighs, but she stayed, lowering her back to the ground until she was lying flat in the powder. She stared up at the black sky, blinking as the snowflakes dropped directly on her face, in her mouth, in her eyes. She pressed her body into the cold earth and waved her arms up and down, slid her legs back and forth, open and closed, like she had as a child. One day, when she was nine or ten years old, it snowed enough to close school and her mother had stayed home with her. They snuggled on the couch, drinking hot chocolate and watching television until the snow finally stopped falling. Then they bundled up to go outside, pulling their jeans on over their pajama pants and wrapping scarves around their faces. Her mother ran to the corner of the yard and flopped backward into the fresh snow, flailing her arms and legs to make an angel-shaped indent in the powder. Moira followed, and when they had finished, they carefully stood up, admired their creations, and then moved onto the next fresh space they could find. They

spent the entire afternoon like this, making their way around the yard until the whole space was filled with angels, floating in pairs.

THOSE WHO HAD

It had been six months since Mr. Zimmer had moved into the old Mercy house, a bi-level the color of avocado. It was the same cookie-cutter construction as every other house on the street, but the elderly Mrs. Mercy had been unable to maintain, let alone modernize, it. Before she'd died, the house's 1970s color scheme and twenty-year-old hardboard siding made it look worn, slumped against the hilly lot it sat on. Patches of dirt and dead grass created a path from the street to the house. Three wooden steps, tinged green where moss had started to grow in the dampness, led up to the porch. A screen door with a metal frame hung slightly ajar. Behind it, a plain wood slab door had been stained the color of rust. The house wasn't exactly dilapidated, but before Mr. Zimmer moved in, it had looked unkempt next to the others on Glenbrook Drive.

When the development was built, there were two floor plan options: a ranch with three bedrooms or a bi-level with four. Every house had a picture window to the left of the door and two smaller windows to the right, each flanked by slatted shutters in a contrasting color. Some of the homeowners had maintained the original landscaping, flat-topped bushes under the windows and evergreen trees lining the yards, creating visible boundary lines between properties. Mr. Zimmer had ripped these out and replaced them with a chain-link fence that extended from the sides of the house and around the back, serving as a pen for his enormous German Shepherd. He'd also dug up the sparse lawn, rolling out rows of lush sod, and installed cement slab and a stainless steel railing to replace the rickety front porch. He'd hired professionals to do the siding and the windows, but he did the yard work himself, his sweaty t-shirt dangling from the branches of an oak tree, his tan muscles glistening in the summer heat. The neighbors had talked.

A line of round stones the size of soccer balls ran up and down the street in front of every house, dividing the road from the grass. In the absence of sidewalks, the row of rocks served as a logical walking path and makeshift playground equipment for neighborhood children. The stones had functioned as safe landing places during games of Hot Lava, as a balance beam for ill-advised cartwheels, and as a pacing path for those waiting for their friends to be allowed to come out and play. When they were younger, Morgan and Jodi had gone house to house offering to paint their neighbors' rocks in creative designs and bright colors, for a small fee. Many of the rocks still displayed the girls' artistry, faded pink polka dots on navy blue backgrounds in front of some houses, solid primary colors in ROY G. BIV order in front of others. But they had been afraid of Mrs. Mercy, so Mr. Zimmer's rocks were still the color of rocks, chipped and darkened by time, but otherwise untouched.

Now, as ninth graders, Morgan and Jodi were again eyeing up the neighbors' houses as a moneymaking opportunity, this time so they could buy costumes for Bobby Mora's Halloween party. In years past their parents had paid for their costumes, but the girls knew they'd need parental approval in order to obtain parental funds for the purchase, and the costumes they had their eyes on – the “Sexy Butterfly” for Morgan and the “Devilish Delight” for Jodi – weren't likely to earn this approval. The dog-walking business had been Morgan's idea, but it was Jodi who'd suggested they approach Mr. Zimmer. His dog was huge, she'd pointed out, so they could charge him extra.

He'd replaced the hollow wooden door with a modern glass one, a large pane framed by stainless steel. From the front porch, the girls could see right into the living room. Mr. Zimmer sat on a black leather chair in faded blue jeans and a white t-shirt, his

bare feet crossed at the ankles on a foot stool in front of him. He looked over at them as Morgan reached for the doorbell, but she pressed it anyway and heard a perfunctory ding-dong through the door, followed by the aggravated barks of the dog. She looked at Jodi, who nodded confidently.

Mr. Zimmer climbed out of the chair and swung the front door open. His eyes were bright blue, and the lines around them were faint. He ran a hand through his hair, letting the tousled pieces fall across his forehead. Morgan swallowed. She'd seen him out in the yard over the summer and had heard her mother gossiping on the phone about the "hunky new neighbor," but she'd assumed he was older.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Jodi took a step forward. "Actually, sir, we'd like to help you."

"Help me?"

"With your dog," Morgan said. "We're professional dog walkers, and we were wondering if you'd be interested in our services?"

Mr. Zimmer laughed. "Professional dog walkers?"

"That's right," Jodi said.

"I don't know," Mr. Zimmer said. He leaned against the doorframe, and a patch of golden stubble appeared on his chin, reflected by the afternoon light. "I work from home most days." He glanced down at his casual attire. "And Damien's got the yard all to himself."

Morgan tilted her head to point her ear toward the sky. "That's him barking right now isn't it? Sounds like he'd like to get on the other side of that fence every once in awhile."

Mr. Zimmer laughed, revealing a row of perfect front teeth. “Okay, okay,” he said. “What’s the going rate?”

Damien spent his days rolling in dirt and digging holes in Mr. Zimmer’s backyard, and that’s where Morgan and Jodi found him when they arrived for work each afternoon. Mr. Zimmer had shown them how to unlatch the gate in the chain-link fence, but Damien tried to escape the second the gate swung open, so the girls took to climbing over the fence instead. The leash hung on a hook at the back of the house, next to a sliding glass door. On Fridays Mr. Zimmer taped an envelope of cash to the glass, twenty-five dollars for five days’ work.

Jodi had joined the future business leaders club at school, which met most Friday afternoons, so collecting the money had become Morgan’s responsibility. One Friday, after walking Damien and hanging his leash back on its hook, Morgan turned to retrieve the envelope, but it wasn’t there. She scanned the grass and peered under the plastic lawn furniture. When she’d determined that it was definitely nowhere in the vicinity, she stepped up to the glass door and knocked. A minute passed, and then she knocked again, louder.

Mr. Zimmer slid the glass door open. “Everything ok?”

“Sorry to bother you,” Morgan said. “But you forgot the envelope?”

“Did I?” He patted the back of his jeans. “Sorry about that. My wallet’s upstairs in my office.” He slid the door open wider and gestured for her to come in.

She followed him up the stairs to the main level. The living room was laid out just like every other house on the street, but the décor was colder, more modern. Large, colorful books were stacked on a glass coffee table, one of them resting open, revealing a black and white photo spread. Two couches and two chairs surrounded the table, all black leather, low and sleek. A tall tv stand stood against one wall, a row of framed photographs lined up across the top. Morgan studied them from her post at the door, but she couldn't quite make out the faces in the photos.

The office was the middle bedroom, a small room with just one large window. In her own identical house, this room acted as Morgan's bedroom. In the place her bed would be, this room housed a black desk stacked with equipment, most of which Morgan didn't recognize. Mr. Zimmer picked up a large camera.

"Photography equipment," he said. He pointed the camera at Morgan and she heard a click. Startled, she took a step back. He placed the camera back on the desk and began rummaging through the drawers.

A pile of photographs was stacked on the corner of the desk. In the top photo, a naked woman lounged on a red couch, her head tilted back and her mouth slightly open. The corners of the photos beneath poked out from under the top one, a bare foot in one, the curve of a knee in another. Morgan had seen photos like these before, in the dirty magazines the boys stole from the convenience store and passed around school. But these photos were different, more revealing somehow.

A collage of framed photographs hung on the wall over the desk. They were all girls, all in various stages of undress. Morgan felt like she should look away, but she was mesmerized by the pictures, by the very fact that someone would display them. The one

closest to where she stood showed a girl completely naked, reclining on a black leather couch, her legs spread wide so that one draped over the arm of the couch and her other foot rested on the floor. Her long, dark hair dripped down her chest, just covering her nipples. Her mouth was pressed into a shiny, pink heart, and her eyes were rimmed with black eyeliner. Her pale skin was smooth.

“Do you like them?” Mr. Zimmer said.

Morgan startled and heat spread from her neck to her forehead.

“It’s okay if you do,” he said. He reached out and pressed a hand against Morgan’s shoulder. “It’s normal.”

Morgan looked down at his hand. His rolled-up sleeve exposed a long black tattoo along the inside of his wrist. Warmth spread down her arm, tingling into her fingertips. For a long moment neither of them said anything.

“Sorry.” Mr. Zimmer pulled his hand away and flipped through the bills in his wallet. “What do I owe you again?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Right. Okay.” He held out two bills.

She took them and thanked him and went home.

The next day Morgan described the photos to Jodi. “It was sort of like in magazines, but also sort of not,” she said.

“What does that even mean?” Jodi asked.

Morgan tried to identify the differences, but on the surface Mr. Zimmer's photos and the boys' dirty pictures were the same: beautiful women, mostly naked, suggestive poses. The difference had been a feeling, like these girls could be someone they knew. "I don't think their boobs were fake," she said.

"So is he a creep or just a photographer?"

"Definitely not a creep," Morgan said.

Jodi eyed her. "Sounds kind of like a creep."

By Halloween, Morgan and Jodi had earned the money for their costumes, with enough leftover to buy new glitter eye shadow and dark lipstick. In Jodi's bedroom they slipped into their costumes from last year and stuffed their new store-bought costumes and the makeup into Jodi's backpack. At Bobby's they locked themselves in the main floor bathroom to undergo their transformation.

"So," Jodi said, as she pulled the costumes from the bag. "Are you going to at least talk to Bobby tonight?"

"I hope so." Morgan wriggled into her costume, a tight, orange and black butterfly patterned dress with spaghetti-straps and a plunging neckline. It reminded her of the lingerie worn by the women in Mr. Zimmer's photographs, lacy corsets cut low to reveal round, swollen breasts. Morgan stood in front of the mirror and leaned in, pushing her shoulders forward so that her arms squeezed her chest. The additional cleavage was minimal, but it was something.

Jodi nodded in approval. “He’d have to be blind not to notice you in that,” she said.

Jodi’s costume consisted of a similar spandex dress, only hers was red with a sequined devil tail pinned to the back.

Morgan slipped on her wings and pulled the makeup out of Jodi’s backpack, puckering her lips to apply the lipstick and then passing the tube. Jodi’s battery-powered devil horns glowed in the mirror next to her.

“Ready?” Jodi asked, slipping the makeup back into her bag.

In the basement, a pack of girls in cat costumes shook their tails on a makeshift dance floor while a boombox in the corner played thumping pop music. Morgan peered into the dark corners of the room. Boys in doctors’ scrubs and baseball uniforms stood in clusters around the room’s perimeter, talking and laughing and throwing elbows into each others’ ribs as they watched the girls dance. Jodi nodded toward the corner where Bobby stood in a red fireman’s hat and matching jumpsuit, near the table that held the boombox and a stack of cassette tapes. He was fiddling with a small black box. He slapped the side of it a few times and it jumped to life, casting a bright strobe light across the room. Morgan tried to sway her hips as she wobbled toward him in her high heels.

“Cool strobe light,” she said.

Bobby looked up at her. “Yeah,” he said. “Thanks.”

Morgan shifted her weight from one leg to the other. “Seems like a really good party.”

“Yeah.” Bobby took a swig from his red plastic cup and then held it at waist level, staring down into it.

Morgan took a step closer, leaning forward so her breasts brushed against his arm. “Do you want to dance?” she asked. She kept her head down and looked up at him through her eyelashes.

Bobby took a step back. “Yeah, actually, I was just about to go do that,” he said. “See you later.” He placed his cup on the table and pushed past her, his movements stilted in the strobe light as he disappeared into the throng of wriggling girl bodies.

Tears stung the corners of Morgan’s eyes. She wiped beads of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. Her hair was damp, and she pressed her palms against her hairline, picturing the unmanageable dark brown curls that had surely begun to swirl around her temples. In the flashing strobe light, Jodi’s tail flickered, a spark of red from under the basement stairs.

Morgan moved across the room, turning sideways to squeeze her wings through the crowd. As she reached the stairs she called Jodi’s name, but the sound died in her mouth. Jodi was with a pirate, tall and lanky in a billowing white shirt and a red bandanna. His face was attached to her face, and his hands were on her butt, his forefingers and thumbs creating a circle around the sparkly tail.

The brisk air stung Morgan’s cheeks as she pushed through the basement door into the backyard. She kicked off her shoes, carrying them as she ran barefoot around the side of the house and down the street, not slowing until half a block later, when Bobby’s house was safely out of sight. A few lingering trick-or-treaters were making their way down the other side of the street, hooting and hollering as they ran between houses.

Morgan slowed as she approached Mr. Zimmer’s house. His living room window was illuminated by the dancing blue glow of a television, and she imagined him sitting on

his fancy black furniture in his jeans and t-shirt, a bowl full of candy bars on his lap. She slipped her heels back on her feet and walked up to his front door.

“Trick or Treat!” she yelled when he opened the door.

“Happy Halloween!” He pushed the door open, holding out a plastic bowl full of candy. “Take as many as you want,” he said.

She stepped into the glow of the porch light.

“Hey, it’s you,” he said. He pushed the door open wider. “Aren’t you a little old for trick-or-treating?”

Morgan nodded, smiling. “Does that mean I can’t have a piece of candy?”

“Nah,” he said. “As long as you’re in costume, then you’ve earned it fair and square.”

“I am.” She turned slightly to the side, showing off her wings. “Where’s your costume?” she asked, eyeing his plain black shirt and jeans.

“I actually was wearing one, but I took it off.”

“Can I see it?”

He hesitated, looked at her in the porch light. His eyes travelled down the length of her body, pausing at her platform pumps before looking back up. “Okay,” he said. He held the door open for her and she stepped inside.

A pile of clothing sat on the end of the couch, and he gathered it into his arms and shuffled into the kitchen. “No peeking,” he said.

She leaned against the arm of the couch, stretching her legs out in front of her. They looked long and lean in the heels. Mr. Zimmer stepped back into the living room and stopped, his legs shoulder-width apart, his hands on his waist. He wore a cowboy hat,

a brown vest, and a blue bandanna tied around his neck. “Howdy, little miss,” he said, drawing out his vowels in a sultry southern accent.

Morgan giggled. “You’re a cowboy.”

He smirked and cocked an eyebrow, and she felt a stir of excitement in her chest. She recognized the same piercing blue eyes she’d noticed the first time they’d met, the same shadow of stubble along his sharp jaw line. She thought of the boys at Bobby Mora’s party, all dressed in similar costumes, pirates and soldiers and policemen. None of them looked like Mr. Zimmer. “I like it,” she said.

“It’s not as good as yours.” He looked down at her outstretched legs.

She stood up straight and did a slow twirl so he could get a better look.

“Mind if I take a picture?” He picked up a camera from the end table.

She agreed, and he lifted the camera to his eye. She stared at the wall, listening to the clicks behind her, and when he paused she turned to look at him over her shoulder.

“That’s perfect,” he said.

He moved a few steps to the right and clicked the shutter a few more times.

Morgan, unsure where to look, tried to imitate the models she’d seen in magazines. She looked down at the floor, then up and straight ahead at the television, then back toward Mr. Zimmer. Remembering the photos of the girls in his office, she turned and looked straight at the camera, widening her eyes and letting her mouth fall slightly open. The camera clicked three more times and then he lowered it. “You’re a natural,” he said.

“Well I guess I should go.”

He placed the camera back on the table and picked up the bowl of candy, holding it out to her. “Don’t forget your treat.”

She reached in and pulled out a sleeve of peanut butter cups. “My favorite,” she said, holding them up.

Mr. Zimmer nodded and smiled. “Well, there’s plenty more where that came from.”

The girls abandoned the dog-walking business after Halloween, but Morgan kept walking Damien, on her own. Each afternoon, Mr. Zimmer met her at the door as she hung up Damien’s leash, and presented her with a sleeve of peanut butter cups. They ate them together, sitting side by side on his couch, a photography book spread across their laps. He showed her all his favorites – Cecil Beaton, Herb Ritts, Francesco Scavullo – and told her about the people he’d photographed, the places he’d travelled to. He let her hold his camera, showed her how it worked, how to adjust the focus and exposure. Some days he photographed her, and other days he let her photograph him. After he developed the film, they’d go through the prints together, and he’d explain why some were good and why others were not so good.

In school, Morgan considered the boys in her class, comparing their immature antics and childish faces to Mr. Zimmer’s kindness and handsome features. When the teacher asked the class to read silently, she stared at the pages but didn’t turn them, letting the words in front of her blur while she thought up clever things to say and smart questions she could ask him later that day.

Jodi ribbed her about her developing crush on Mr. Zimmer, but encouraged her to keep going to his house. Morgan recounted all of their conversations in minute detail, asking Jodi to help her interpret the things he said, help figure out if he liked her.

“I don’t know,” Jodi said. “It sounds like he’s just, like, teaching you stuff? Did you tell him you want to be a photographer or something?”

“Not really. I just.” Morgan thought for a moment. “I guess I just let him talk about whatever he wants.”

“But. Why would that make you think he likes you?”

Morgan shrugged. “Isn’t that what you do with Eric?”

Jodi had been “going out” with the pirate since Halloween, which seemed to consist mostly of kissing against his locker between classes. Jodi smiled and closed her eyes. “I guess,” she said. “But it’s different.”

One afternoon Mr. Zimmer poured peppermint schnapps into his hot cocoa, then, after a moment of hesitation, into Morgan’s too. They sat close on the couch, their hands wrapped around steaming mugs. Morgan enjoyed the warm fuzziness in her limbs, the way her mind seemed to be floating somewhere above her body.

She leaned in closer, letting her arm brush against his. “What should I even call you?” she asked. Mr. was a title for teachers and other people’s dads, but she wasn’t sure their relationship warranted something more familiar. She hoped it did, but before the schnapps she’d been afraid to ask, afraid to find out otherwise.

He looked at her, his eyes smiling. “Why do you have to call me anything?”

She shrugged.

“I have my own name for you,” he said. He let out a breath and looked down into his mug.

“You do?”

“In my head, I call you ‘Butterfly.’ Because of that one time you came here.”

“My Halloween costume?”

He nodded. “What do you call me? In your head?”

Morgan sat back. She’d only ever thought of him as Mr. Zimmer, but that seemed stupid now. “Nothing,” she said. “I don’t call you anything.”

“Ian,” he said. “Call me Ian.”

She looked back at him, suddenly aware of his dark eyelashes and the movement of his Adam’s apple in his throat and the warmth of his leg against the side of her thigh. He leaned in closer, and her eyelids drooped, almost on their own. As their lips touched, heat spread from her mouth, across her face, and down the length of her body, until even her toes felt warm and tingly. They kissed for what felt like a long time, and when he finally pulled away, she found herself gasping for breath.

“Sorry.” He sat back and ran a hand through his hair.

“Ian,” she said.

The first kiss lasted the whole weekend. Over and over, Morgan replayed the moment in her mind like a favorite movie. When she’d almost grown tired of it, she replayed it for Jodi, speeding through the awkward conversation part, slowing down the

lips and warmth part. By Monday afternoon she had worn through the reel, and ran the whole way home from school, anxious for a replay of the real thing.

The kissing became part of the routine. At first: candy, photography, schnapps, kissing. Then: candy, kissing, photography, kissing, schnapps, kissing. Ian still liked to talk to Morgan about his work, and she often found herself impatiently listening to him describe his latest shoot or a gallery he'd visited. He showed her the dark room he'd built in the basement, explained in intricate detail the process of developing film. Morgan listened carefully at first, but the names of the chemicals floated meaninglessly in her mind. She turned to examine a string of photos hanging from a thin rope that stretched the length of the room, each one clipped to the rope with a wooden clothespin. The hanging photos were all his professional work, a city street scene, some strategically lit vodka bottles, and a few barely dressed women. Morgan thought of the photos of the girls on the wall in his office, many of whom weren't dressed at all.

"Who are all those girls?" she asked once they were back upstairs, settled into the couch.

"Hmm?"

"Downstairs. And in your office."

"Just models."

"Are they..." Morgan paused, bit her lip. "Were they your girlfriends?"

Ian laughed and turned toward her. His eyes looked warm and watery. "Not all of them." He placed a hand on top of hers. "Most were just models. A few were special."

Special. He'd called her special before, but the word hadn't sounded then like it did now, low and hoarse and secret. The girls in his photos were older than her, but not

that much older, and she cringed now as she eyed the crumpled candy wrappers and empty cocoa mugs on the table.

“What if I posed for you?” she asked, her voice steady.

“You pose for me all the time.”

“No,” she said. “I mean special, like them.”

“Like them?”

Morgan stood up. She gripped the bottom of her sweater in her fingers and pulled it up over her head, exposing first her pale belly, then her small pink bra. Then she unbuttoned her jeans and pushed them to the floor. She glanced down at her body, aware of the stark difference between her cotton underwear and the lacy items worn by the girls in the photos. But Ian was sitting up, his camera in hand. She sat on the loveseat, leaning back on her elbows and draping her right leg over the leather arm like the girl in the photo. Ian clicked a few photos from his seat on the couch, then stood up and moved around the room, shooting her from every angle.

He stopped to reload the film, and in the moment of pause, Morgan felt a creeping embarrassment. She sat up, pulling her knees up to her chin and wrapping her arms around them.

“You okay?” Ian asked. He placed the camera on the table and sat on the loveseat next to her.

Morgan nodded.

“You were really great.” He squeezed her fingers in his palm and smiled warmly.

Morgan leaned toward him, wrapping her arms around his neck, and kissed him. He cradled her face in his hands, his palms rough against the curve of her jaw. He pushed

his fingers through her hair and down her back, circling her with his arms and lowering her back onto the couch. As she settled her head into a throw pillow, he stopped, pulling away just an inch.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.” His breath was warm and sweet on her nose.

She nodded and said nothing, because she didn’t know how to say what she wanted, how to explain that she wanted everything, all the things she knew and all the things she didn’t.

After, Morgan saw everyone in two categories: those who had, and those who hadn’t. Bobby Mora had, everyone knew. And so, his previous two girlfriends had. A few of the girls on the soccer team had, Morgan thought, but this was just a hunch, an inference from the way they swung their hips as they walked down the hall and the way they sat quietly while everyone else giggled in sex ed.

Jodi hadn’t. She glanced at Morgan every few seconds as the teacher explained how to pinch the top of the condom. Morgan faced the front of the room, her eyes trained on the banana the teacher was holding, but she could feel Jodi squirming in her seat next to her.

“And don’t let him tell you he’s too big, girls,” the teacher said as she rolled the condom down over the banana.

The room erupted in nervous laughter, and Jodi reached across to tap Morgan’s arm. “Hey,” she said.

Morgan turned to her, and Jodi tossed a folded piece of paper onto her desk.

Morgan looked at Jodi and then unfolded the paper. *Why don't you volunteer to show Ms. McLoughlin how it's done???* Jodi snickered beside her. Morgan ripped the paper in half, then in half again and again, crumpling the pieces into a ball in her hand.

After class, Jodi had more questions, about the condoms and also about pain and blood and orgasms. She and the pirate were waiting for the right moment, she said, but they had been spending afternoons on the musty couch in his basement.

"Do you feel different?" she wanted to know.

"Yes and no," Morgan said. Jodi waited for an elaboration, but Morgan didn't have the words to explain it.

One afternoon, lying in Ian's bed, her face pressed against the warm skin of his chest, Morgan worried out loud about what would happen if she got pregnant. She didn't look at him.

"You don't need to worry about that stuff."

"I don't?"

"You know I always use a condom."

"Yeah, but in school they say that condoms are only ninety-eight percent effective. What if I'm the other two percent?"

Ian squeezed her closer and kissed her forehead. "In school," he said with a laugh.

The darkroom was long and narrow, a large closet that Ian had converted with some shelving and safelights. Morgan stood in front of the counter, dipping sheets of paper in plastic trays. Each tray contained a different liquid, and Morgan knew when to move the paper from one to the next, but she hadn't yet learned the names of each chemical or why they worked. Ian had set the trays up for her before moving to the other side of the room, developing more negatives while she processed the prints. Most days, they completed this routine in silence. Ian liked quiet while he worked.

The first few prints had been photos of Morgan – he only let her process the personal photos they'd taken together, never his professional ones or even his own personal shots. Morgan clipped the prints to the rope strung above the counter, studying them while she waited for the chemicals to do their work. This batch had been taken outside, on the deck off the kitchen. Ian had been reluctant, but she had insisted; he had taught her that sunlight was the best light. In the photos, she sat on the deck's railing, her feet crossed at the ankles, her hands gripping the wood. She was wearing jeans and just her sweater, a rainbow striped v-neck, no coat. It had been cold that day, and even in the orange red glow of the safelights, Morgan could see the tightness in her features, her face braced against the wind. Her eyes had stung and watered at the corners, and she had thrown her head back in a laugh to hide it. She hadn't wanted to let Ian think he'd been right to refuse to go outside. In the first photo, Morgan looked to the sky, her mouth open, her hair whipping against her cheeks. In the second, she looked straight at the camera, her smile smaller, her laugh contained. In the third, she looked at the ground, the thin strip of the part in her hair the only visible skin. At the time, she'd thought she

looked carefree and sexy, and she was disappointed now to see these photos of a little girl playing on a fence strung up next to Ian's latest batch of underwear models

The photo in the tray was of Ian. The shadows around his hairline appeared first, then the rest of his hair, the front pieces flipped up in the wind. Slowly the rest of his face appeared: his sharp jaw line, the shadows under his nose, the thin strip of darkness between his lips. It was the familiar face she'd admired for months, until it wasn't. His face looked stern, his jaw line not just sharp, but clenched, his light eyes not bright, but cold. Morgan agitated the tray, shaking it gently as Ian had taught her, while the face in the photo darkened. The shadows grew, spreading from around his hairline and under his chin and the cracks in his skin until his features were all black, his eyes two dark holes.

"Oh!" Morgan grabbed the tongs and lifted the photo out of the tray. "Oh no, oh no, oh no."

"What?" Ian was by her side in a moment.

Morgan waved the photo in the air, not sure whether to put it in the next tray or let it fall to the ground.

"Oh," Ian said, taking the tongs and the photo from her hand.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I –"

"It's overexposed. I messed it up." He placed the photo on the counter and pulled off his rubber gloves. "It wasn't you, it was me."

"You did?"

"Yeah," he said. He placed his hands on her shoulders and bent to look in her eyes. "You okay?"

CRESCENT LAKE

I noticed the Gatorland poster just a few minutes after we stepped off the plane in Tampa. We were standing in a long hallway, somewhere between the gate and baggage claim, and my mother was examining a giant map of the airport hung on the wall. Next to the map, an enormous alligator grinned, baring a collection of crooked, yellow teeth. Its skin was dark green, almost black, and the rocky bumps on its back glistened as it climbed out of a swampy pool. A pile of shiny brochures were stuffed into a plastic bin next to the poster, and I grabbed one and waved it between my mother's face and the map she was studying.

"Look Ma," I said. "It's, like, a theme park or something."

"Forget it, Tracie," my mother said, swatting my hand away. "This is not a vacation. We're here to see Uncle Ted and help out Aunt Jean."

I stuffed the brochure into the back pocket of my jeans. My mother gripped my wrist and pulled me through the crowd toward baggage claim. Aunt Jean stood in front of the carousel, flanked by uniformed men in chauffeur hats, her wrinkled khaki shorts and doughy calves glowing next to their crisp navy slacks. She held a ripped cardboard box top with our names looped across it in black marker, and shook it excitedly as she saw us, giggling at her own joke.

I tugged my arm free of my mother's grasp. "Why is she even here?"

"She's picking us up. That's what you do for family."

I groaned. "Shouldn't she be home with Uncle Ted?"

Worry flashed across my mother's face as she glanced down at me, but a moment later she was caught in Aunt Jean's arms. "Oh, Annie! So good to see you!" The force of

her hug knocked my mother's sunglasses from their perch on top of her head, and they clattered onto the tile floor. Mom bent to retrieve them and Aunt Jean stepped past her to place a hand firmly on each of my shoulders.

"And who is this young lady?" She shook me gently. "You're too tall to be the little girl I remember."

"That was three years ago, Aunt Jean. I'm eleven now? I'm actually short for my grade."

"Nonsense!" She pulled me in for a hug. She smelled like sunscreen and peppermint. She tugged my duffel bag off my shoulder and flung it over her own, then grabbed my mother's hand and smiled at her warmly.

"Come on, Annie," she said. "Your brother is excited to see you."

Aunt Jean didn't drive, so "picking us up" meant taking a cab to the airport, waving that goofy sign around, and then taking another cab back home with us. I sat in the middle seat, staring out the windshield at the flat stretch of palm-tree lined pavement. Mom and Aunt Jean chattered on either side of me, leaning forward and talking over my lap as if I wasn't there. It was exactly what Ashley L. and Ashley W. would have been doing if I had been sitting in my Social Studies seat instead of in this cab, except they would have to stop talking and use me as a note-passer once the bell rang. I wondered what they were doing at that moment, in my absence. I imagined Ashley L. bouncing a folded square of paper across my desk like a skipping stone.

I leaned forward in my seat and looked at Aunt Jean until she took her eyes off my mother to smile at me. "Have you ever been to Gatorland?" I asked. "There was this really cool poster in the airport and -"

“Tracie,” my mother warned.

“What? I’m just asking.”

Aunt Jean looked over my head at my mother, and then leaned in close, her breath warm on my ear. “You don’t need to go to an amusement park to see a gator.” I sat back and eyed her suspiciously. “We have gators right in our backyard.”

I froze. I tried to picture Aunt Jean and Uncle Ted’s backyard, an expanse of dry grass covered with hulking, leathery creatures, their jaws snapping as they walked slowly on their stumpy legs.

My mother sighed. “Don’t encourage her.”

Aunt Jean winked and patted my knee.

My mother had warned me that Uncle Ted was sick, but the only sign of his illness was the ratty afghan he kept draped over his lap. The mustard-colored stitches had stretched so that large swaths of his sweatpants showed through. From across the room, it almost looked like the brown sweatpant material was part of the blanket, like he was curled up under the skin of a giraffe. I didn’t think such a tattered piece of fabric could provide any kind of warmth, but sick people needed blankets and that was his.

He sat in an oversized, coffee-stained recliner, flipping through a magazine, the giraffe blanket spread out over his legs. Mom had spent a considerable amount of time fussing over him and that blanket, tucking him in like a boy and asking, over and over, if he was comfortable before she finally headed to the kitchen to help Aunt Jean make dinner.

When she was safely out of sight I put down my book and looked at Uncle Ted.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“What’s up, kiddo?” His skin hung loose around his eyes and mouth now, but his eyes still looked the same as I remembered, young and animated and just a little mischievous. My mother had always said he was the same little boy she’d grown up with, a child trapped in a man’s body.

I leaned over the arm of the couch until I was close enough to whisper. “Aunt Jean says there are alligators in your backyard.”

“The backyard?” He shrugged. “Definitely in the lake.” He squinted like he was trying not to laugh, but his smile was even, calm.

“Do they ever come on land?”

“Sometimes. You need to look out for them, just in case.”

“So you’ve seen one!” I cringed at the volume of my own voice, and tried to peek around the corner to the kitchen. Mom was chopping vegetables at the counter and Aunt Jean was stirring something on the stove. Neither of them looked my way.

Uncle Ted let out a belly laugh that turned into a cough, and that did it. Mom burst in from the kitchen, knife still in hand. “You alright?”

“I’m fine. Fine.” He covered his mouth with one hand to stifle one last cough, and waved her away with the other. “Just laughing with Trace here, got a little carried away. She’s a funny one, this kid of yours.”

My mother looked at me, her eyes narrowed. “Oh yeah, she’s a real laugh riot,” she said. “You can keep her for your own personal comedian if you want her.”

“Alright then.” Uncle Ted put his hand on top of my head, mussing my hair. “I’ll take her.”

In the morning, Aunt Jean showed us around the neighborhood. When we had arrived in the cab, it just looked like a giant parking lot and an endless row of identical doors, but when we stepped out the backdoor of the condo we were standing in a lush, carefully landscaped garden. Uncle Ted settled himself in a wicker chaise with a double layer of cushions. Mom offered to get him his magazine or a book, but he declined. He would rather watch us, he said. We were his favorite entertainment.

The condos were arranged in a semi-circle facing the lake, so that everyone’s patio had a view and access to the yard. The pool was kidney-shaped, a still sheet of cerulean surrounded by hot cement. While Mom and Aunt Jean inspected the flowers growing in pots next to Uncle Ted’s chair, I ran to the pool, kneeling down to run my fingers through the water. It was as warm as bath water, a disappointing side-effect of the Florida heat.

“Don’t fall in!” Uncle Ted called from the patio, and I pretended to wobble on my knees, my arms outstretched to catch my balance. I twisted to smile at him, and he laughed and coughed and laughed. My mother turned away from the flowers to give me a stern look, but I just laughed with him as if I hadn’t noticed.

Next to the pool stood a wooden gazebo surrounded by neatly trimmed bushes. Their flat tops were exactly the height of the gazebo’s railing, and a line of hanging plants dripped from the roof, creating a sense that the structure was made of foliage. The

wood floor of the gazebo groaned as I stepped onto it. I felt movement around me, but saw nothing except fallen leaves and the occasional slow-moving bug. Glimpsing the lake between the hanging plants, I parted the greenery with the back of my hand. The lake stretched across the horizon, its edges disappearing behind the growth on either side, so that I couldn't get a sense of its width. The far shore was a green blur of trees in the distance. The water was calm except for the soft waves lapping at the shore. Large gray birds circled the pier, taking turns landing on the posts that supported it.

I felt a rustle of movement again, and this time I turned quickly enough to see the mover: a lizard no longer than the palm of my hand, frozen on the bench a few feet away. His thin body was smooth and dry, the color of leaves and mud, and his black eyes bulged. They were everywhere, scattered across the railing, dangling from the latticework, their tiny heads poking up through the leaves of the plants. I was surrounded by a miniature lizard army, all of them perfectly motionless, waiting for me to stop looking so they could get back to their day. I wanted to scream and run, and also to try to catch one in my hands. Instead, I stepped off the bench slowly and tip-toed back toward the pool, breaking into a run the second my foot touched the pavement.

Aunt Jean sat on the edge of the patio, her pale legs outstretched and her bare toes wiggling in the grass. A little boy was standing in front of her, talking excitedly, and she furrowed her brow in concentration, nodding along. A few feet away my mother stood barefoot in the grass, talking with a man dressed in khaki cargo shorts and flip flops. I sucked in my breath and tried not to look at them.

"Tracie!" Aunt Jean called as I jogged over. "Come meet Jason!"

Jason was small, maybe seven years old, with sandy hair and a deep tan. “Nice to meet you,” he said. He reached out his hand to shake.

I nodded. “Hey.”

“Jason lives over there, other side of the gazebo,” Aunt Jean waved a hand toward the row of identical patios across the yard.

“Did you know there are lizards in that thing?”

“Yup!” Jason said. “I caught one and kept it in my room once. Last summer. My dad found it and made me set it free.”

“Do they bite?”

Uncle Ted chuckled from his seat in the corner. “Only if you piss them off,” he said, “but those aren’t the bites you should be worried about.” He stretched his arms out in front of him, opening them and clamping down rhythmically like an alligator’s jaws.

“My dad’s got a boat,” Jason said, nodding toward the man with the cargo shorts. “We’re going gator hunting tomorrow. You can come if you want.” He turned toward his dad, who was leaning in close to my mother’s ear, saying something I couldn’t quite hear. “Dad? They can come on the gator hunt with us?”

Jason’s dad looked up at him, and then turned back to my mother with a smile. He rubbed his hand across the thick brown stubble on his cheek. I wondered if he had a job.

“Sure,” he said. “Of course they can come.”

I waited for my mother to repeat her lecture about this not being a vacation, to explain that we were there to see my uncle and not to do anything fun. But instead she pressed her lips into a small smile and looked at Jason’s dad. “Sounds like fun,” she said. “An adventure!”

The adults set a time and a meeting place, and then Jason and his dad walked back across the grass to their own patio.

“That Chuck is such a nice man,” Mom said with a happy sigh. She plopped down next to Aunt Jean and rolled her linen pants up over her knees, exposing her pale legs to the sun.

“Chuck?” My lips curled around the word. “So much for Gregory, huh?”

“Who’s Gregory?” Aunt Jean raised an eyebrow.

Mom grinned sheepishly and lowered her voice. “My boyfriend,” she said.

Heat flushed from my neck to my forehead and back down again. I hated Gregory. I hadn’t actually met him, but I’d watched him from the front window in our apartment as he guided my mother down our driveway with his hand on the small of her back, and as he swaggered back up the path at the end of the night, and as he cupped her chin in his hands and kissed her under the porch light. I hated him, and not because he wasn’t my father. When you’re a divorced kid, people always think you’re sad because you want your parents to get back together, but that wasn’t it. I hated Gregory because she snuck off to call him every day, and because she said “my boyfriend” in that low, sexy voice, like he was a cute boy at school and not a grown man she met on the internet.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that Tracie,” my mother said.

I stepped past her toward the screen door. “Whatever,” I said. “I won’t look at you at all.”

The next morning I stuffed the Gatorland brochure in my pocket before heading downstairs for breakfast. Mom, Aunt Jean, and Uncle Ted were gathered around the table with a shoebox full of old photographs between them. Their dirty breakfast dishes were stacked near the end of the table, and they were passing photos between them, giggling and pointing at each one. They didn't seem to notice me.

I pulled a cereal bowl down from the cabinet and filled it with cheerios and milk, then carried it to the table and slid into a seat next to Uncle Ted. "What ya looking at?"

"Just some old photographs." He held a tattered black and white photo out in front of me. "Do you know who that is?"

I leaned in close to study it. Two children stood in the middle of a sidewalk. The smaller one was a little girl, probably not more than two or three years old, wearing a pleated dress, Mary Jane shoes, and a floppy bonnet with a bow on the front. An older boy stood behind her, his face at least a foot above hers, his hand resting on the top of her head. He was smiling, showing off a missing front tooth.

I shrugged. "You and mom?"

He laughed and tossed the photo into the box. "That one was too easy, I guess."

My mother reached into the box and pulled the photo back out, turning it over in her hand to read the words scrawled on the back. "Do you remember where we going? Why do I look so miserable?"

Uncle Ted smirked. "The zoo. You were terrified of the lions."

"Mom! Didn't you know there were cages?"

"I might have left that part out when I told her about it," Uncle Ted said with a sly smile.

I slurped the remaining milk from my cereal bowl and stood up to bring it to the sink. As I moved back toward the table, I pulled the Gatorland brochure from my pocket and unfolded it, pressing out the creases before casually pushing it across the table toward Uncle Ted. “Have you ever been to this place?”

“Gatorland?” Uncle Ted picked up the brochure and opened it. A large photo exactly like the one I’d seen in the airport stretched across several pages, the gator’s mouth open wide as if in warning.

My mother sighed. “Where did you get that?”

I looked at her, eyes wide, and shrugged. “At the airport.”

“Looks cool.” Uncle Ted folded the brochure back up and passed it to Aunt Jean. “It’s not far from here.”

Aunt Jean flipped through the pages, reading each section carefully. “They have a feeding tank. You can watch them eat.” She held up the brochure and pointed at a photo. “And a man who swims with the gators.”

“I bet he swims with them *after* they’ve been fed,” Uncle Ted said. “You don’t want to swim with a bunch of hungry gators.” He looked at me and wiggled his eyebrows.

My mother tossed a pile of photos back into the shoebox and stood up. “How many times do I have to tell you, Tracie? We’re not here to go to amusement parks. We’re here to visit Uncle Ted.” She gathered the dirty dishes and then stomped across the kitchen to the sink.

“Everyone wants to go but you!”

Mom let the dishes clatter into the sink, and then she stood completely still, her back to us, gripping the edge of the counter. Uncle Ted and Aunt Jean exchanged a look across the table.

“It might be a bit much for me anyway,” Uncle Ted said, patting my arm.

Aunt Jean nodded. “Besides, we’re going on a gator hunt later. We’ll see them in the wild. Even better.”

I slumped back into my seat. “I guess.”

“We could go down to the lake now and take a look,” Aunt Jean said. “If you want.”

I looked up at her. She was smiling, trying to look excited. Uncle Ted smiled too, nodding reassuringly.

“Ok.” I grabbed the Gatorland brochure and then headed for the front door to grab my sneakers. My mother was still standing at the kitchen sink when Aunt Jean and I slipped through the backdoor into the yard.

Tall, leafy trees lined the path leading to the lake. On one side, the trees dotted a flat stretch of manicured lawn, but on the other the trees went deeper, surrounded by moss and ground cover. It looked more like the woods in New Jersey than the tropical vegetation I expected to see in Florida. Aunt Jean stepped gingerly along the cement path in her bare feet, and I skipped ahead of her. The path led onto the wooden planks of the pier, and the ground sloped down on either side of it, a gradual progression from grass to muck to shallow water. There was no fence or barrier to separate the path from the water, and I imagined the alligators marching right up onto the land, lumbering up the path to

someone's patio, and hanging out in the bushes until an unsuspecting resident stretched out on a lounge chair and closed her eyes.

I walked half way out onto the pier, and then turned back to face Aunt Jean.

"They can just walk right up onto the grass."

"Yup." She wrapped one arm around my shoulders. "And don't go dangling your limbs over the edge here, either." She cackled and shook me a little, but I was only half convinced she was kidding.

I inched toward the edge of the dock, lining the toes of my sneakers up with the end of the wooden planks, and peered down into the lake. The water was clear and shallow here, and I could see straight to the bottom. Beams of sunlight, distorted by the rippling water, played on the rocks and sand on the lake's floor. A long skinny fish swam out from under the dock and paused, its paper-thin fins waving gently in the water, before turning around and darting back under cover.

The dock stretched out several hundred feet in each direction, and I walked to one end and then back toward the other, scanning the banks for signs of wildlife. In one shady corner I saw what looked like gator eyes poking up through the water. I stopped at the sight of them, then swallowed and inched closer, but the gator became just a pile of sticks and an air bubble bobbing on the surface. A few gulls stood ankle deep at the water's edge. They hopped each time a small wave rippled to shore, but otherwise they seemed pretty calm and not at all fearful for their lives.

"Don't alligators live in swamps?" I asked. "This doesn't look like a swamp."

"There are a lot of swampy areas in the lake," Aunt Jean said.

I could just make out the line of trees on the other side, the green land dotted by white houses. The lake rippled out softly for what looked like miles. Dozens of motorboats zipped across the water and a handful of sailboats bobbed along. I closed my eyes and wished I was on one of them.

Uncle Ted couldn't go swimming, but he insisted that I take advantage of the pool. "You don't have one at home," he said. "We pay dues for this thing. Someone oughta use it."

We waited the requisite hour after lunch, and then I changed into my bathing suit and ran outside. Uncle Ted had pulled his chaise onto the grassy area in front of the patio, and he shouted out scores as I practiced my cannonball. The water was almost as warm as the air, and sweaty, chlorinated drops rolled down my face as I climbed the pool ladder and ran to the other side, over and over. After about a dozen jumps, I swam to the edge of the pool and hoisted myself up, resting my forearms on the hot pavement.

"I'm tired of jumping."

"That last one was your best ever," Uncle Ted said. "Might as well quit while you're ahead."

A breeze rustled through the trees, and I looked out at the lake, imagining a pair of beady eyes poking through the water's surface.

"Are you going to come with us tonight?" I asked. "On the gator hunt."

Uncle Ted shook his head. I sighed and rested my chin on my forearms.

"You've got a great ship captain," he said. "Chuck knows all the gator spots."

I rolled my eyes. “Right. Chuck.”

After dinner, Mom, Aunt Jean, and I walked back down to the pier. The sun was beginning to set, and the sky glowed pink behind the shadowy land on the horizon. I tried to recalibrate my expectations to account for the fading light. In my imaginings, I had faced the gators in broad daylight, but the lake looked murkier now, more ominous as the sky darkened. A motor boat bobbed in the water. Chuck was standing in front of the boat in the same cargo shorts from the day before, talking with three older men who smoked cigars in lawn chairs on the dock.

Jason handed us each a life jacket, and I paused before slipping it on. The need for safety equipment hadn’t occurred to me before, but now I shivered as I imagined myself falling into the gator-infested waters and tightened the straps of the life vest around my middle. Chuck held our hands as we stepped onto the boat. There was a bench in the middle, and Aunt Jean sat in the center of it, wrapping her arms around Jason and me as we sat down on either side of her.

“You can take the good seat,” Chuck said to my mother, holding her hand a beat longer than necessary as she stepped onto the boat. With his other hand he pointed to a cushioned chair at the front. “You’ll be our lookout.”

Mom giggled, and I cringed. The chair was bolted to what seemed like the top of the boat. Mom had to take a big step up to reach it, and there were no side walls around it. She plopped into the seat, then turned to look down at us. “It’s quite a view from up here,” she said with a grin.

“Happy huntin’!” one of the old men called from his lawn chair, and we cheered and waved.

The wind pricked my skin and tossed my mother’s shoulder-length hair up and out in every direction. I looked over the edge of the boat, watching the black water ripple. We were only a foot or two higher than the surface of the water, and I wondered if that was low enough for an alligator to climb on. As Chuck turned the boat toward the right, I had to plant my sneaker against the side wall and lean toward Aunt Jean to keep from toppling over the edge. On her other side, Jason was laughing. He pulled a giant red flashlight out from under his seat and flicked it on. As he waved it around, the light fell on my mother, perched at the helm. She gripped her seat with both hands.

She could fall in; we all could fall in; the boat could capsize and leave us all stranded in the water. I imagined beady gator eyes drifting up slowly, circling us as we kicked our feet in the water and gripped our overturned boat. Shivering, I huddled closer to Aunt Jean and tried not to close my eyes.

“There’s a cove out that way where the gators like to hang out,” Chuck hollered from behind us. “I’ll get us close and then cut the engine. So we don’t startle ‘em.”

Jason leaned across Aunt Jean’s lap and tapped my knee. “I’ve seen lots of gators out in that cove.”

We raced toward what looked like a line of trees on an embankment, but a narrow opening in the land appeared as we got closer. The engine stopped and we floated toward the opening. I squinted into the dusk, scanning the water for scaled tails and bumpy snouts. The rhythmic chirping of the crickets and katydids grew louder as we drifted into the cove, their volume rivaled only by the pumping of my own blood in my ears. The sun

seemed to have sunk almost completely, and I began to wonder why any of us had thought it was a good idea to go out on a boat at night, with a strange man, in a lake infested with man-eating monsters. Jason waved his flashlight across the water, which looked green and soupy under the light. A mosquito landed on my arm, but I was afraid to move so I let it bite me. I tightened my grip on Aunt Jean's arm and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to ignore the itch and hoping that the immediate lack of alligator sightings would allow the party to give up and head back.

Something splashed to my right, not too close, but loud, and I jumped, letting out a tiny squeal. Jason waved his flashlight in the direction of the sound, but I couldn't look. I curled up against Aunt Jean and moaned.

"You alright, Trace?" Mom turned, her gaze moving quickly from me to a spot over my head. She exchanged a look with Chuck.

"Getting too dark out here," Chuck said. "We should head back."

"But, Da-ad!" Jason said.

Chuck shushed him and started the engine, and within seconds we were racing back through the narrow opening into the open air of the lake. The wind whipped through my hair and slow tears dripped down my chin, my fear now rivaled by my embarrassment at being found out. I kept my eye on my mother, her fingers clinging to the bottom of her seat. She looked thin, her body a wispy silhouette against the night sky. She was shaking, her shoulders rocking, and for a moment I thought she was about to be flung off the boat and into the dark water. A sound bubbled up from her, louder than the crickets and the engine. She was crying too. I felt a rush of relief. Maybe she'd convinced Chuck to turn back for herself, not for me. But as she turned her head to look back toward the cove, I

realized her eyes were squinting, half-closed, and her mouth was wide open. She wasn't crying; she was laughing. Not the flirtatious giggle that was always lighting that fire of disgust in my gut, but a bigger, heartier laugh. The sound was familiar yet not, like a song lyric you can't quite place.

When Chuck cut the engine and we drifted up to the pier, I put my head down and wiped my face with my hands. The lawn chair men welcomed us back as we shed our life jackets and climbed out of the boat.

"You just missed it!" one of them called. "A gator just swam right by, right past the pier." He waved his arm to the right, his finger pointed toward the darkening edge of the lake.

"You might be able see it," another man said, "if you walk down that end."

"Oh man!" Jason said. He scampered across the wooden planks into the darkness, waving his flashlight across the surface of the water.

I shuddered and walked down the pier toward the path.

"Tracie!" my mother called.

I burst into a run. My sneakers thumped against the wood, and I pretended I couldn't hear her when she called me back to say thank you to Chuck. I didn't slow to a walk until I was safely under the cover of the trees.

I walked up the path toward the house, my arms hugged to my chest, keeping pace with the chirping crickets as the voices from the pier faded. The woods lining the path looked denser in the dark, and I quickened my step, trying to focus on the cool glow of the pool up ahead. Uncle Ted was lying in his lounge chair on the patio, his eyes

closed and his arms crossed in front of his chest. He looked like he was sleeping, but his eyes popped open as I tip-toed up next to him.

“See any gators?” he asked.

“Nah.” I sat down on the pavement and pulled my knees to my chest.

“Maybe next time.”

“Maybe.” I leaned back and pressed my palms against the smooth cement. It was still warm, even without the sun beating down on it. A hot tub gurgled on the other side of the pool, and I watched the steam rise off the water. I was about to ask Uncle Ted why people in Florida need hot tubs when I felt a tickle across the top of my foot. A lizard scurried down my foot back onto the patio and I squealed, kicking off my sandal as I jumped to my feet and hovered in a crouching position. The lizard froze, its only movement the tiny rhythm of its breathing. It held its head up, as if listening for something.

Uncle Ted laughed, placing a hand on my shoulder to steady me. “You sure are jumpy tonight, aren’t you?”

I studied the lizard’s profile, the thick dark stripe down its side, its black, unmoving eye. “I guess I’m just not used to all this nature,” I said.

I woke up early the next morning. My t-shirt was damp, clinging to my chest, and a lump sat heavy in my stomach. My air mattress had partially deflated in the night so that my body had sunk toward the floor. I rolled toward the queen size bed next to me and pointed my ear toward the ceiling, listening for my mother’s breathing. The room

was quiet. She was already up. The bedroom door creaked as I tip-toed into the hall, and I paused to listen. No one seemed to stir, so I headed to the backdoor. My toes squished in the wet grass as I walked across the lawn toward the path. With the early light glistening across the water's surface, and the morning music of birds and rustling leaves, the lake seemed much less frightening than it had the night before, and the lump in my stomach flip-flopped with embarrassment.

I stepped slowly across the cement walkway, feeling each stray leaf and branch as they pressed into the soles of my feet. I watched carefully for the tiny lizards, not wanting to step on anything that might move under me.

As the pier came into view, I saw two shadowed figures sitting between the posts, their legs dangling over the water. It was my mother and Uncle Ted. His arm was draped across her back and he squeezed her close against his side. Her head was bent, resting on his chest, and her shoulders were shaking, slowly, rhythmically. There was no wind whipping through her hair, no sound but the slow lapping of the water at the shore. In the distance, a bright white spot shone against the trees on the horizon, a sailboat bobbing in place on the calm water, unconcerned with the alligators lurking beneath the surface. And from my spot under the trees, watching my mother cry with her brother, I forgot the alligators too. They weren't why we were here.

Crawling back into my mother's bed, the sheets cold against my skin, I remembered the way my mother's body had convulsed the night before, the way her laugh had burst out, carried by the wind. That strange, familiar laugh. I remembered it now; it was her carnival laugh. Years earlier, before Uncle Ted was sick, even before my parents were divorced, she had taken the day off from work, and we spent the entire

afternoon on the Scrambler. With each turn, I gritted my teeth and gripped the lap bar, trying to fight the force pushing me around on the bench, and when I gave up and let go she held onto me tight. We laughed and laughed, our hair flying in our eyes and mouths, and when the ride stopped, we hopped off and got right back on line to ride it again.

When I heard my mother's footsteps on the stairs, I closed my eyes and held my breath, listening for the whine of the door. She came in quietly, shutting the door with just the slightest thump, and then the bed swelled as she climbed in next to me. I felt her hot breath above me as her fingers brushed across my forehead. She smoothed down my hair and let out a sigh before lying down next to me, pressing her own head into the pillow next to mine. Then she draped her arm across me and squeezed, and I allowed myself to go limp, to be pulled closer, to feel the warmth of her body against my back.