

Hollowing

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Abstract

Hollowing is a short creative fiction novel about fatherhood, illness, loss, and devotion. The book tells the story of Cole, a man who is facing several problems in his life. His wife is terminally ill and his son is repeating his father's mistakes. While trying to hold his family together, Cole faces conflicts with jealousy, infidelity, respect, and denial. He must overcome his stunted understanding of emotion and contend with an unhealthy perception of masculinity linked to his troubled childhood in order to try and guide his family towards the happiest future for all of them. This thesis explores the concepts of obligation, grieving, and love from an unconventional angle, using strong narrative focus and a small cast of characters in and around Cole's family. *Hollowing* explores the mind of a man whose life is at a difficult crossroads, where every day presents him with new challenges. This creative thesis utilizes a third person close point of view and is the culmination of over two years of planning and writing. It is a character-driven work of literary fiction, set in modern times.

Hollowing

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Book One: Meeting

Thursday

A takeout chicken bucket sat empty before Cole, an irreverent centerpiece for their unadorned dining table. The table had not been covered since Maria spilled wine on the cloth a month ago. He could remember exactly where that cloth was now, balled into a corner of the laundry room's shelves, abandoned.

The hollow skins of the chicken breasts on his plate looked lonely and smelled of oil. Cole looked at his family, feeling neither hungry nor full. To his right sat his daughter Jane, idly stacking a pile of bones. To his left sat his son Joseph, his posture hunched and his hands occupied by his phone. Across from him sat his wife Maria.

“How was school, Jane?” he asked into the silence. Jane looked up from her improvised sculpture and shrugged, her entire body loose.

“What did you learn today?”

She poked at her biscuit, shifting in her seat. “We’re learning translations in geometry.”

“Are you enjoying it?”

“I guess.”

“Not as fun as art?”

“Nope.”

No one in the family was big on talking at the table anymore. Cole rubbed his forearms and turned to his son.

“How about you Joseph?”

“Nothing ever happens.”

“I’m sure something happened. Did you make it to school on time?”

Joseph snorted derisively. “Nope.”

“You know that isn’t good for your grades.”

Joseph straightened up in his chair and met Cole’s gaze evenly. A perpetual contest of authority boiled right behind his eyes. “I’m passing. I’ll keep my grades there.”

“You know, we had hoped that this would be your last year at Maplegrove. You can still get enough credits to graduate.”

“Yeah, maybe.” he said, turning back to his phone. Cole had two degrees in psychology and worked as a counselor, but couldn’t stay objective with his children. They knew his face too well.

“And I know that you’ve been having some trouble too,” he said, turning to Jane. She blushed, and Cole could tell that she had been hoping to avoid his questioning.

“I have a couple As,” she said, smiling at him.

“And we’re very proud of those, but we also know to expect that from you. You’re always going to do well in art classes. But you have other subjects to focus on.”

Jane looked around the table, casting about for someone to save her. Joseph was texting. Maria was looking at the napkin in her lap. Cole glanced at her, but looked away just as quickly. Her thin arms tapered out of sight below the table, and he could make out every

blue vein. She was wearing the nightgown she had owned since they met, and it no longer fit her well. She was becoming a woman he hardly recognized.

“I’m not failing anything,” Jane said, her face bashful. Cole smiled back at her and returned to his plate. The clicking of Joseph’s nails against his phone was beginning to grate in his skull anyway.

“So you both know I’m taking you to school tomorrow, right? I want to see you in here by seven.”

“Okay,” Jane said.

“I’ve got a ride,” Joseph said without looking up.

“You sure they’ll be here? You need to start showing up on time.”

“Yeah, got it,” he said, but Cole could tell from the fluid way he stood that his mind had already left the table. Joseph cleaned his place with habitual haste and headed upstairs without a word more. Jane and Cole both watched him go. After the noise of him climbing the stairs faded, Maria stood and left as well, floating silently into the kitchen. Cole heard the distinctive sound of the medicine cabinet opening, then the clicking of bottles knocking together. After a pause, she too headed upstairs. She had not eaten.

Jane turned to him and opened her mouth slightly before pausing. Her brown hair was hanging unevenly over her eyes, but Cole could still see the excitement in them. She leaned forward in her chair, towards him.

“Well, spit it out,” he said, laughing. “I can tell something’s gotten you ruffled.”

“Do you want to see my still life studies?”

“Sure,” he said, trying to match her level of enthusiasm. They walked to her backpack, and she showed him several pages from her art book. She was learning to work

with charcoal, and it suited her well. He never insulted any of her art, especially while she was still finding her style, but in this case all of his compliments were heartfelt. She had drawn almost exclusively beetles, in a variety of scenes from the woods adjoining their house. They looked sinister as they prowled between the leaves and rotting wood, Cole had to admit that they disquieted him slightly. Charcoal was a stark medium.

“They’re lovely,” he said as she closed the book.

“Yeah,” She said, smiling, “I’m expecting an A.”

“Confidence is important,” he said, guiding her towards the stairs. After dinner, the family inevitably ended up sequestered within their own spaces. Joseph’s door was already shut and likely locked. The door at the end of the hall was always closed. After he bid Jane goodnight, she shut herself in as well.

Cole entered his office and set about finishing the work he had been putting off. With his earbuds in and salsa music blaring, he could ignore the motionless house for hours. He was doing thoughtless clerical work, so he occupied his mind imagining himself boxing again, a sport he had given up for his family. He missed it more with age.

The duty of preparing the house for nighttime fell to him. After shutting down his laptop he walked back down the segmented stairway, from the open second-floor landing into the foyer. He turned off the outdoor lights and looked through the peephole of their weighted mahogany door. Everything was still. He made his rounds down the hallway, past the dining room on one side and the storage closets on the other, then across the living room to the garage door. Once the lights were off and the locks set, he repeated the path backwards, hands reaching for the corners of furniture in the half-light. All of their furnishings were of excellent craftsmanship, but his fingers had left conspicuous marks in the

dust. As he ascended back to the second floor and turned off the chandelier in the foyer, he quieted his footsteps. He could hear faint sounds from within his children's rooms. It was only midnight, but part of him wanted to reprimand them for staying up. He resisted the urge and continued down the hall to the master bedroom.

The bedroom was sparse and utilitarian, with a wide bay window overlooking nothing of interest. Maria's desk sat in front of the window, an immobile mass of carved black wood. He had hauled it into place fifteen years ago and to this day it had not budged an inch. She enjoyed the midmorning light when it shone across her charts and graphs, rows of numbers that were meaningless to Cole. His wife had a well-ordered mind, a mind destined for accounting, but Cole's own thoughts were too scattered to follow her.

The other side of the room held their bathroom and closet. They had framed some of Jane's art, two self-portrait sketches and a painted scene showing an overgrown fence separating a meadow and a forest. In the middle of the room sat two twin beds, separated by a spindle-legged end table at their headboards. The table held two of his books, his silent clock, and his framed picture of the couple in a swan-shaped paddleboat. He had taken her to along a boardwalk for their fifth anniversary. Maria slept in the left bed, and seemed to already be unconscious.

Cole stepped into the bathroom and shut the door silently. As he prepared for bed, he kept locking eyes with his reflection then glancing away. It was a habit he'd been developing recently. Once he was undressed, he finally confronted himself directly. He would be forty soon. He flexed and puffed out his chest, then chided himself for his childishness. It didn't matter an ounce what he looked like. Besides, his hair was black. His jaw was strong. His hands were large and thick-skinned. Man's hands.

A single sigh escaped him slowly as he deflated his chest. He was wasting time that should be spent sleeping; he'd have to be up with the kids tomorrow, if not earlier.

He settled himself under the sheets as quietly as possible and looked over at Maria, trying to calm his thoughts. To his surprise, in the light of the streetlamps shining through the window, he could see her eyes open and alertly watching him back.

"I'm sorry, I didn't meant to wake you," he said. His voice sounded forced even in his head.

"You didn't." Her voice flooded him with memories instantly. A dance, a steeple, a broken bike and a broken knee, a rosary, three trips to the maternity ward, dozens of roses and millions of smiles. She had the familiar voice of a smoker.

"How are you feeling?"

She didn't respond. He knew that cancer was blossoming outwards from her lungs, clawing into her bones and wrenching at the nerves of her shoulders. He had watched his wife lamed by suffering and, two months ago, frozen by her diagnosis. Since then, her eyes had worn the pallor of the dead, both very deep and very empty. Only the inevitable certainly of her condition kept her out of the hospital.

"Pain?"

She nodded.

"Jane's made some wonderful drawings with charcoal. I'm sure she'd love for you to look at them."

"I will."

It was no use pestering her. She was tired, although she might be sleepless tonight anyway. He gave her several minutes, but when she neither moved nor opened her eyes Cole

rolled onto his back. As soon as he turned away he felt like she was watching him again, but when he checked she was still immobile. The feeling of being watched persisted every time he closed his eyes.

Friday

The walls of his office were an uninteresting shade of butter yellow. Motivational posters quoting long-dead presidents adorned the walls, a poor substitute for windows. His desk was wide and fit into the space poorly, so he had to squeeze between it and his shelves just to get out from behind it. His office was not very inviting, although he had bought two potted plants to try and liven up the space.

“So Cindy, how has your day been?” he asked his visitor. Cindy Wallace was a regular in his office. She had been assigned to Cole after her family had moved into the area two years ago. They came here to escape their old house, after Cindy’s mother committed suicide in it. Cindy had mostly moved past the death in the time since, but still visited Cole routinely. It was a pattern that comforted them both.

“Fine, Mr. Cole. Classes are fine.”

“You’ve had two so far, right?”

“Yes sir, algebra and biology.”

“Are you still getting along with your friends?”

She looked off to one side, reading one of his posters. It was how she always looked when she was deciding how to continue. “Not really. Some of them have been talking about Tina. Calling her names.”

Tina was Cindy’s older sister and one of the more popular students. She was a queen bee of sorts, one of the faces that was known all around the school. She would undoubtedly have enemies, in the petty way that the enviable always seem to, but Cole didn’t know her well.

“And what do they say about her?”

“They call her a slut. I think they’re just jealous.”

“Your friends say that?”

“Not my good friends,” she said, looking into her lap bashfully. “Just some people in my classes. They say that she dates bad boys.”

“Has she been dating bad boys?”

Cindy eyes widened before she bit her lip and met his gaze. “I don’t really know him, sir.”

“So there’s someone specific you’re thinking of?” Cole asked, trying to lead Cindy to answering. She seemed reluctant to continue.

She looked at the wall clock and jumped to her feet. “I think I have to go to lunch now, Mr. Cole.”

He checked his watch and saw that their meeting had indeed run over. He had excused her from part of class to visit him, but lunch was a requirement. Even though he wanted to press her further, he knew that for today he had learned as much as he could.

“All right Cindy. It’s been a pleasure talking to you, as usual.”

“Thanks Mr. Cole, I’ll see you next week!”

She was out the door before she’d even put her backpack on. Cole puzzled for a moment over her behavior. Perhaps she was developing an interest in bad boys too. He would find out more next week.

Cole grabbed his own lunch from the staff room fridge and joined some of his coworkers at a folding table set up in the break room. He had worked at Maple Grove since moving to the area, and had built some of his deepest friendships from among his peers. He sat next to his friend Omar, nodding to the other English teachers nearby.

“And here’s Cole, late as usual,” Omar said, clapping Cole on the back.

“Appointment ran over.” Cole said back, smiling to the other teachers.

“How rude. And I was going to do you a favor.”

“What favor?” His lunch was a hastily prepared ham sandwich and a cheese stick, packaged in bright orange plastic. The bread had been thoroughly soaked by the moist meat.

“You mentioned that you hadn’t yet gotten food for this little party, right? I was shopping yesterday and decided to pick up some stuff for kebabs. I’ll come over a little early tomorrow and bring it.”

“Oh, thanks. I haven’t even done the shopping yet,” Cole said, keeping his fatigue out of his voice. Maria had held an annual barbeque every year since they moved, but this year the burden of preparing the event had fallen to Cole. He had never understood the scale of work involved before, since she had managed everything and left him to just invite his friends and flip some patties. Cole refused to let the tradition fade away, no matter how ill prepared he felt to host. He hoped that she would like a party.

“I’m bringing Laura, of course, and possibly her parents. They’re coming into town tonight, but they’ll be staying in a hotel. Supposedly there are some things they want to clear up with me. I like talking to them – but I will admit it’s gotten me a little worried.”

Omar’s voice faded into the background as more people arrived for lunch and the room’s conversations formed a quiet murmur. Cole focused on nodding at the correct times but didn’t care to hear about wedding plans for the hundredth time. Omar and his lovely young fiancée could talk of nothing else.

“How are the kids?” Omar asked, pulling Cole from his thoughts.

“They’re just about the same as always I guess. Joseph is still struggling with the thought of growing up.”

“I felt the same way,” Omar said through a mouthful of salad. His lunch was a variety of carefully portioned dishes held in a matching Tupperware set. “I’m sure you were a troublemaker as a teen too.”

“Sort of. I guess I had a rebellious phase, but nothing like I’m seeing now. I mostly just snuck out to see girls. I try not to think about Joseph’s forays into that slice of adulthood.”

Omar slapped him on the back again and let out a deep belly laugh. Omar spoke with almost no hint of his childhood in Pakistan, except for when he laughed. He grinned at Cole with a wide mouth of pearly teeth.

“You were the one slipping out not too long ago. Surely you can’t really condemn him too harshly for following his urges.”

“Ah, maybe. I know it’s hypocritical.” Cole wanted to say much more about the mistakes he had made, and not wanting to see them repeated, but didn’t want to take the

conversation there. He could imagine Omar's smile falling as Cole explained what it felt like to have a son at nineteen, to have two children before finishing school, to be forgotten or judged by everyone you knew because passion occasionally clouded your judgment. Their lunch break was short enough that it was better for their friendships if he kept conversation light.

Omar stood and looked at his watch. "I do have to start heading back to class, Cole. But speaking of dreams. Remember that friend I told you about who's a big-deal author in New York? Well he's visiting me, and I thought I could bring him to the party."

"Sure, if you bought enough meat."

"Ah, I can just ditch Laura's parents at the house. Mark me down for three people. I'm sure you'll love to meet this guy. He's great. Real poetic."

"I look forward to it. Call me before you come over."

The room around him was slowly draining, but Cole didn't have any appointments after lunch so he was free to eat at a more leisurely pace. He'd go back to the counseling center and be ready for walk-ins or special situations in a minute, but first he took out his phone and began to make a shopping list, for tomorrow morning. Although he had prepared some parts of the event ahead of time, much work still had to be done in the next two days.

The last bell had rung twenty minutes ago, and still Cole saw no signs of Joseph. He and Jane stood awkwardly at the school's front entrance, the slight wind sending shivers down his arms. Joseph must have found another ride home.

“Let’s hope. I’m not going to wait any longer.”

The staff lot was only a short walk away from the school’s front doors. Cole and Jane stepped around the mulch-covered median and walked to his car, both holding their hands in their pockets. The sky overhead was nearly cloudless, and the tall woods that encircled the school’s property swayed in a gentle breeze. The school was nearly deserted, with everyone already headed home.

It was a ten-minute ride back to their home, just long enough for Jane to give him a brief overview of her day. She was on a block class schedule with four classes every day in an alternating pattern. This particular Friday, her sculpture elective had met and covered clay techniques. Cole listened intently as Jane described what she had done.

As soon as they had pulled into the garage Jane vanished inside, running up the stairs two at a time until she was back in her room. Cole lingered in the kitchen, reading through the mail then looking out the windows and into their backyard. The kitchen was a small space, dominated by the spruce cabinets and black marble countertops. He had done some of the installation work himself, when he and Maria had renovated the property fifteen years ago. It had been a bit of a mess when they’d purchased it, but after a month of hard work it had grown on him enormously. Although they had chosen the house to have enough space for two children, Cole didn’t imagine that they’d leave once Joseph did. Cole felt as though this was his house, more than any other place he’d lived.

The backyard was not in the best of shape, he knew. Even just looking out the window he could see that it needed some serious work with pruners and a rake, at the least. They had a healthy stretch of lushly green grass, but the edges of their property were ill defined and overgrown. He decided to clean up the yard today and do his shopping tomorrow

morning. The fact that Joseph was still missing and wasn't answering his phone played a large role in his decision, although he tried to deny it even in his own mind. If he were in the yard, he'd be able to hear a car pull in.

After ascending the stairs, Cole walked to the end of the hall and paused at the master bedroom door. As quietly as he could, he opened it and stepped inside, already turning his head towards the bay window.

Maria was sitting at her desk, back straight and hands placed on the desk's surface. He could see papers laying around and in front of her, details of one of her clients undoubtedly. The fan overhead was running, from when he had turned it on in the morning.

"Hey," he said quietly.

"Hello," she said, coughing slightly after finishing the word. She turned her head partially to one side until he was in her peripheral vision. The sharp lines of her face were regal in the sunlight shining through her window.

"Working I see?"

"Yes. Staying busy."

"That's good," he said, hesitating. "Anything I could do to help you?"

"No thank you, Cole."

Cole stood in the middle of the room for a moment, fiddling with the bottom edge of his blazer, then walked purposefully up to Maria. He laid his hands on her shoulders. She had gotten dressed today, and her shirt's wide neckline sloped across her shoulders and collarbone unevenly. Her brown hair was held back in a messy bun, with several long strands falling out of the tie and straight down her back or over her cheeks. It didn't seem to bother her.

Cole leaned forward and kissed the side of her neck. Her skin was warm.

“You remember that our barbeque is tomorrow?”

“Yes, you told me.”

“I hope that you’ll be there for it. I know that everyone wants to see you.”

“Do they? I’ll try to make an appearance. I have an appointment.” Maria attended her appointments alone. Cole knew that her treatment was called stereotactic body radiotherapy, but no matter how much he read about the process he couldn’t understand how it might help his wife. He had thought that the doctors would be able to cut out the problem, but Maria was allergic to anesthesia. They couldn’t fix her. There was no miracle solution. They had caught it too late.

“Afterwards then?” he said.

“We’ll see,” she said with finality. Her eyes never seemed to move, even when she was reading the pages in front of her. To Cole they looked like tables of meaningless figures, but of course Maria understood them. She used to tease him by saying that he could only bear to study unreliable people. Numbers, she said, were too reliable.

“Okay. Sorry to bother you.” He kissed her neck again and turned away, going into the bathroom to change. After he was in more suitable work clothing, he passed back through the bedroom. Maria had tilted her head upwards slightly and was looking out the window, watching the branches sway. Her rigid posture unnerved him.

Cleaning the yard took him all afternoon. The improvement was drastic and the immediate reward for his work was gratifying, although part of him was hoping that someone at the barbeque tomorrow would compliment it. After returning his gardening supplies to their proper places and making sure that they had enough charcoal, Cole retired inside and set

about preparing some microwavable meals for everyone's dinner. He was no chef, but he was responsible for feeding the family now, and the kids didn't seem to mind pre-packaged food.

He delivered Maria's meal first, setting the plate beside her on the table wordlessly and trying not to intrude. She seemed to be doing calculations in her head. She absently spun a pencil in her hand. The gesture was automatic for her and he had seen it thousands of times, but still he stood hypnotized in the doorway for a second before going to visit Jane.

"Dinner," he said, knocking on her door. He could hear faint music from inside, but after his knock it stopped almost immediately.

"Come in," Jane called, and he opened the door and stepped into her room. Her bed took up nearly a third of the room, and the remaining space was devoted to a dresser, a table, and piles of laundry and school supplies on the floor. Stacks of sketchpads and bags of paintbrushes were stacked in organic disorder on every flat surface, including the queen mattress on which Jane lay. She had her laptop open, facing away from him.

"Thanks, dad," she said, sitting up so she could grab the plate. For a moment she looked around her for a clear spot before shrugging and placing the plate in her lap, shuffling back towards her computer.

"Being very productive I see," Cole said jokingly, looking around the room. She claimed that it was organized, although her system was inscrutable to him.

"I actually am. I figured out where Joseph went. Sort of. I knew you were worried though, so I asked around."

"Oh? And what did your detective work uncover?"

"He was last seen getting into the passage seat of a really nice car with some girl, although she was unidentifiable at a distance."

“Well tell your source that I appreciate knowing that. I just wish he’d text me himself.”

“That would make things easier,” Jane said, starting to eat her mac-and-cheese.

“What do you think I should do about him?” Cole said on a whim. He didn’t want to turn his children against each other of course, but everything he had tried to foster healthy relations between himself and Joseph seemed ineffective. It probably wouldn’t hurt just to ask Jane.

“Do you need to do something?”

It was an odd question. Perhaps Jane had a rebellious streak as well, and was looking up to Joseph as an example. That could certainly cause problems.

“I think so. He doesn’t seem to have any respect for this house and its rules. I don’t want to control his life, but I feel like I need to intervene at some point. He needs to learn how to listen.”

Jane nodded sagely as she swallowed a forkful. “Word around school is that he never works in class but still passes because he aces the tests. All the girls love him.”

“Yeah, don’t remind me. I’m sure he’s riding around with some strange woman now. You’d better not be this much trouble when you get to his age. My poor heart couldn’t take it.”

“I can’t promise anything, but I’ll watch out for your heart.”

“Well that’s reassuring.”

As Jane continued to eat, Cole pushed a little further into the room, stepping around all of the clutter. He picked up a sketchbook and idly flipped through it. The images inside

were all very faint and few seemed to have made it past the conceptual stage. They were interesting nonetheless. Mostly, he saw faces and city skylines.

“You know he does love you guys. Even if he forgets it,” Jane said evenly without taking her eyes off her meal. “He’s having trouble coping, so he’s lashing out. I think.”

“He is going through a rough time,” Cole said, trying to lead her into talking more. Jane and he had never discussed Joseph in such candid terms before, but they had always been closer to each other than they were to him. Cole knew that his children talked to each other about things they’d never mention to him.

“Yeah. He is.”

Cole wanted to press her further, but he could see in the lines of her forehead that she was stressed already. Jane had always been the mediator of the family. It must have been taxing for her to watch him and Joseph fight.

She perked up and turned to him. “Hey dad, can I invite Tessa over to spend the night?”

“I don’t see why not, Tessa’s never any trouble. Can her parents bring her over here?” Tessa was Jane’s best friend at Maplegrove, a quiet girl that Cole knew little about. She visited the house often.

“Yeah,” Jane said, smiling up at him, “I’ll text her now. Can she stay for the barbeque? Otherwise I won’t know anyone.”

“You know almost everyone who’s coming, it isn’t a big event. But yes, you can invite a couple friends your age if you want.”

“No, Tessa’s enough. Thanks, dad,” she said, already looking down at her phone. Cole left her room and walked down the hall to his office, starting in on his work for the

weekend. He couldn't hear Tessa arrive over his music, but presumed that she and Jane could handle it. When he made his rounds locking up the house that night, he heard faint murmuring coming from Jane's closed door. Joseph's door was still wide open and his room was pitch black. Cole went to bed uneasy and slept dreamlessly.

Saturday

When Cole made his way downstairs in the early hours of the morning to prepare his breakfast, he found Joseph sitting at the dining table, eating a bowl of dry cereal and reading from a book with a white plastic cover. He glanced up as Cole made his way downstairs, but said nothing.

Cole stepped first into the kitchen, opening cabinets and the refrigerator in the routine preparation of his protein bar and OJ breakfast. He sat at the table opposite Joseph, but kept his eyes on his food as they both ate. The hand holding his glass shook, so he drank in small sips.

After he finished his meal, Cole stared at the parts of Joseph's face visible over the book. The spine was split from flexing, but he could just make out the cursive *My Sister's Keeper* across the spine. His son continued reading and mechanically eating, although at this point his spoon was scraping against the bottom of the bowl and reaching his mouth nearly empty.

Cole reached across the table and slammed the book out of Joseph's hands, flattening it against the table. Only then did Joseph look up and meet his gaze.

“Where were you?”

“With a friend.”

“Really? With some girl I hear.”

“Yeah, what of it?” Joseph said, raising his voice to match Cole’s escalating volume. Both were still sitting, but leaning forward towards each other. Cole was getting used to fighting in this exact way. Joseph was a disobedient boy, without any respect, and Cole struggled to stay calm in the face of such disregard. Having and raising Joseph had warped Cole’s life. Joseph’s disdain for that sacrifice was offensive.

“What of it? Are you kidding? You can’t just decide not to come home, Joseph. You didn’t even call.”

“I’m nineteen, dad, back off. I’m fine, aren’t I? No harm done.”

Cole leaned forward further and gripped the far edge of the table in his hands, bringing his face closer to Joseph. “No more of this ridiculous playing hooky. If you want independence so bad, work on graduating. But as long as you want a place to live in this house, I want to know where you’re spending the night.”

“Why? I’m perfectly fine, see? Nobody got hurt.” He put down his spoon and leaned his chair back onto its back legs, crossing his arms over his chest. He looked roguish and tired.

“And how were we supposed to know that? Do you want to worry us that badly? I just want to know if you’re going somewhere.”

“I can look after myself.”

Cole sat back in the chair and forced himself to examine the grain of the wood panel flooring. Neither seemed tempted to break the silence, and eventually Joseph stood and

carried his dishes back into the kitchen. As he passed back through the kitchen, Cole grabbed his arm and held him in place.

“You didn’t just bother me. You worried Jane, and you worried your mother. I’m not trying to stop you from going out with your friends. I just want you to check in with us.”

Joseph tried to wrench his arm from Cole’s grip, but his young muscles were no match for Cole’s time-earned strength. After a brief moment of struggle, Cole let him go. Joseph stopped at the door to the kitchen.

“I’ll tell you if I won’t be home next time.”

It was as close to an apology as he was probably going to get, but for some reason the ambiguity of it bothered Cole.

“Do you understand why?”

Joseph turned back to Cole and smiled at him, but his expression was more lifeless than mirthful. “Yeah, sure.”

He turned to leave, but immediately stepped out of the doorway as Maria glided into the dining room. She had been fast asleep when Cole left the room, but possibly their shouting had woken her. She didn’t look at either of them, instead passing through into the kitchen. In the silent house, the clicking of prescription bottles was piercing.

As though waking from a trance, Joseph called “Morning, mom,” into the kitchen, turning to look expectantly at Cole. Cole held his silence.

“Good morning, Joseph,” Maria answered after a pause.

Joseph never took his eyes off Cole, and cracked a small smile. “I’m going to change and shower, but then I’ll be going out and meeting some people. I’ll be back before two.”

“You’d better,” Cole said, looking away from Joseph at last and into the kitchen. He could just see the edge of Maria’s gown around the cabinets between them. It clung to her legs.

Joseph turned and left unhurriedly, taking the stairs at a measured pace. Cole heard the sound of his door close only faintly, then several sounds of doors opening and closing. It seemed like Tessa and Jane were awake.

Maria came into the dining room and sat next to him, although she had only a handful of colored capsules and a glass of water for breakfast. Cole offered her food, but she declined with a shake of her head.

“He spent the night with some girl from school I think,” Cole told her, although he felt almost as though he were talking to himself.

Maria looked over at him, raising the glass to her lips and taking a long drink without blinking. “When did he get back?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t been here long. I was up half the night waiting for him.”

Maria shrugged and returned to her task, separating each pill and systematically downing them. Cole crossed his hands in his lap.

“Does it worry you when he’s out like this?” he asked her finally. Maria continued as though she hadn’t heard him, then shrugged slightly.

“He’ll be okay,” she said softly.

“I know. I know that. I just don’t want anything to happen to him.” Cole was sure that she saw through his unfinished thought. More than his worry for Joseph’s well being, Cole wanted to keep Joseph away from the struggles of adulthood. Cole had faced them too young for his taste and wanted to spare Joseph from the same fate.

Maria finished her medication and stood, draining the last of the glass of water and setting it back on the table. She folded her arms into her gown and walked around behind his seat. After a pause he felt the soft pressure of her hand on his shoulder.

“You turned out fine.”

Soon Joseph returned downstairs, leaving without responding to Cole’s yelled goodbye. Apparently he had a ride, because he didn’t ask to borrow the keys. Maria had returned upstairs to get dressed, but soon afterwards had to leave for her appointment. She let Cole kiss her cheek and clutch her slender hands tightly, and her earlier words stuck with Cole as he went about the motions of preparing for the barbeque. He went around town shopping, picking up corny decorations and pre-packaged platters of deserts and vegetables. As he wandered down grocery store aisles and past rows of streamers and congratulatory balloons, his mind wandered back to his own adolescence, and the fights he had gotten into with his parents. He remembered nineteen vividly; it was the year that he met Maria and also the year that Joseph was born.

He remembered seeing her at a club, and he remembered being hypnotized by her hips. That night he had chased her into the dark, throwing himself at her. Usually he grinned and wooed and let his casual masculine beauty win him whatever woman he wanted, but Maria shook her finger at him and cursed him in lilting Spanish while her bronzed friends laughed and let the shadow of her glory dress them in splendor. He ended up with one of them instead, a petite girl with many experiences and few reservations, but her lustrous black hair and pleasant yelps only entertained him for an hour before his thoughts were back on the mystery woman. It was an underwhelming night for both of them.

He found out that she was called Maria and that she only spoke English at work, so he found out where she worked. He called every day for a week, always asking for her and refusing to offer more information. When he was finally let through – primarily to shut him up – he introduced himself as Tony and asked the most sensible questions he could about audits and eligibility until she commanded him to stop and asked him who he really was. Apparently it was enough to earn him a cup of coffee three days later, and a companion for a dance two nights later, and a bedmate a week later. He continued to lie about his age until they had known each other for three months, and when he told her she laughed and then yelled.

At first he had wanted her because lusting after something so impossibly beautiful felt simple and right. In time, he learned to want her in a thousand additional ways. He learned to show her tenderness in the way he spoke. He learned to guide her as an extension to his own body. Although he had held a reputation for womanizing, he became a decent man. She taught him to salsa, and they won a competition together. He claimed that it was her ability entirely which won them the multicolored ribbons, and she smiled without disagreeing.

He always removed his ring when he boxed, and it was during one such event that it went missing, vanishing off the stands where it lay between two of his teammates. He quit and finished school without ever speaking to his team again, although Maria never minded him going around without a ring on. She said that no woman could possibly steal him away after he had been hers. He smiled without disagreeing.

Cole was pulled from his reverie by the jarring of his cart veering into the rack beside him, scattering sparklers and stickers. He knelt and quickly set them back in their place, feeling self-conscious even though he was practically alone in the store.

By noon he had finished his errands and came home to find the house calm. He ascertained that Jane and Tessa were still in her room, and confirmed that they had already eaten. For the next hour he finished his preparations, just in time for Omar's call.

Omar showed up wearing khaki shorts, a pastel blue polo, and a wide grin. He had a grocery bag in both hands. Cole showed him into the backyard and they busied themselves with getting the grill lit and the decorations up. It almost felt comical, to be putting up streamers for several grown adults and his own sullen children, but for some reason it also felt very important to Cole.

"Thanks again for all your help," he told Omar as they stood together, arms crossed over their chests, watching the fire begin to lick the metal grate.

"No worries Cole," he said, looking down at his feet, "I know that Maria usually helped you set all this up, but I don't mind helping instead."

Cole looked away as well, blinking hard. "Well I appreciate it."

"Yeah, no problem. Is she going to be here?"

"I think so, a little later. She'll at least stop by."

"Is she... Well, I'll look forward to seeing her," he said, trailing off into silence before slapping Cole's back bracingly and busying himself with worrying over coals that had been better left alone. Omar was one of the few people who hadn't pulled away from the family when told about Maria's diagnosis. In fact, he seemed to draw closer to Cole, pushing more into his life and filling spots Cole hadn't known were empty.

Maria had never made friends easily, but she wasn't used to losing friends either. Her diagnosis had spread through their friends like a cleansing wildfire, and each week another old companion found an excuse to stop showing up. She had cried at first, but now Maria didn't ever cry. Cole knew why they had left. It was not easy to care for a dying woman. They would have had to sacrifice. They would have had to confront death. They would have had to realize that life was deeply unfair and deeply beyond their control. It was easier to cut away the cancer and forget that you had ever been friends with a woman named Maria. They learned who their true friends were in the first month, and Cole was grateful to count Omar among that small number.

"I thought you were bringing guests," Cole said, diverting the conversation.

"Yeah, Laura's entertaining Daniel right now and they'll come over once things are starting."

"Daniel's your author friend?"

"Yeah, he's a great guy. I can't wait to see you two hit it off. You remind me of him sometimes, with the way you talk about things."

"Well, I'm sure we'll get along famously, if you think so highly of him."

"He's published like five books. He had a bit in the New Yorker too. Dark guy, but very talented. I'm not the only one who thinks highly of him."

"Then I can't wait to meet him."

Cole went inside to fetch Jane and Tessa, and found them sitting together in her room, both on their laptops and silent. At his request, they headed down into the backyard.

“Where’s Joseph?” Jane asked when she came into the backyard and looked around. Cole watched her carefully to see if she’d react to all the work he’d put into decorating but she seemed otherwise preoccupied.

“He said he was going out, but he promised to be back by the party. I planned to start at two, and it’s only just turned. He could get here any moment.”

Fifteen past the hour, Cole heard the roaring of an engine from in front of the house. He excused himself from the conversation and walked through the side yard, rounding the house just in time to see a black sports car vanish back up the street and around a bend, driving much too fast for residential roads. Joseph was walking unhurriedly down the driveway and didn’t see Cole at first.

Cole followed him into the open garage and grabbed him by the shoulder just as Joseph was grabbing the door handle that led into the house. He turned his son roughly towards him and pushed his back against the door.

“You said you’d be back before two,” he said, raising an eyebrow and holding eye contact. Joseph’s face was impassive and his hair was tousled. It was the same black as Cole’s, albeit with a little less grey.

“I’m just a little late. I lost track of time. Not a big deal.”

Cole released him and stepped back a little. He couldn’t fully explain his anger, but felt the need to continue. “Not this time, but this isn’t just about you being late. It’s the principle. You have commitments to this family, and you don’t take them very seriously.”

“Whatever,” Joseph said, trying to turn and open the door. Cole pushed it shut again, and Joseph turned to look at him indignantly.

“This isn’t whatever, Joseph. You’re an adult. You have obligations.”

As Joseph glared at him, Cole heard the sound of a car pulling up. Maria's sedan pulled into the open second slot of the garage, immediately behind Cole. Maria got out of the car and walked around it towards the door. Joseph stepped away from the door and opened it. Without speaking to either of them, she brushed past Cole and went inside.

Joseph pulled the door closed and turned back to Cole, but the look in his eyes had changed. "Obligations to what? What do you want from me?"

"I want you to follow the rules I set for my house."

"What is that going to do? You want me out of here as soon as possible. I can't fix this by following your rules."

Cole took a step back and pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He was loath to admit that he needed Joseph's help, but in his core he understood that was exactly what he wanted to say. Joseph opened the door, hands steady. His eyes were calculating and condescending when he looked at Cole.

"I'm not responsible for this, you know. It isn't my job to fix her."

"It is your job to help."

"Like hell it is. If you need help get a therapist. But it's like you said. I'm an adult now."

"Then act like it, Joseph. You're acting like a child."

"I'm being independent. She isn't my responsibility. You handle it. I have my own life to live."

Cole felt like his skin was steaming. He raised his hands and grabbed Joseph tightly by the shoulders, keeping him from retreating into the house. He was about to start yelling when he heard a quiet cough behind him and turned to see Tessa standing by the garage door.

She was hiding the bottom half of her face in her scarf, but her eyes were watching them intently.

“Sorry,” she murmured as Cole released his grip. Joseph smacked his hands aside and stood up to his full height, looking back at Tessa.

“Hey Tessa,” he said awkwardly, glaring daggers at Cole. Cole’s mind was slowing down as the tension dissipated, and he scratched the back of his head before turning to Tessa.

“What’s up?”

“Jane told me to find you. Omar’s friend is here.”

“Oh. Okay, thanks,” Cole said, his chest deflating. Joseph vanished into the house almost before Tessa had finished speaking, and his footsteps up the stairs were audible even from the garage.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Tessa. Just a little disagreement,” Cole said, walking towards her.

“I know,” she said, an appraising look in her eyes. Working with students had taught him to be wary of the quiet ones. She turned and headed towards the backyard, staying several paces ahead of him and heading towards Jane. Cole had more pressing things to think about, but felt new interest in paying attention to Tessa.

He saw Laura and Omar standing by the grill, laughing together. They were barely able to take their eyes off each other, and Omar was doing a poor job minding the fire. Further towards the back of the yard, he saw Maria standing with a man he didn’t recognize, a man much older than Omar. The man hunched a bit and his glasses covered much of his face, but his arms were lively and animated. He held a beer in one hand, and rested the other in the small of Maria’s back. Maria was watching his every motion, and she was smiling.

Cole approached the two of them, plastering a smile on his face. Maria and the man both looked up at him.

“Hello, you must be Daniel,” Cole said, extending his hand to the man. Daniel gripped it with both his hands and shook it very slightly.

“I am. You must be Cole. Wonderful party you’ve organized here.”

“Glad you think so. And glad you could make it; Omar says you’re visiting from New York.”

“Yes, that’s mostly correct. I’ve actually moved into a little apartment downtown, but I won’t be staying long. Perhaps a month.”

He was moving around less than when Cole first saw him at a distance. Now that Cole was talking to him, Daniel’s gaze was unfalteringly locked with his. The glasses he wore were actually quite small and obviously prescribed, but the rest of Daniel’s face was so mundane that the glasses seemed large upon it. His face was forgettable.

“Well I would introduce you, but it looks like you’ve already met everyone. I apologize for missing your arrival.”

Daniel smiled at him, “It’s no trouble, Omar and Laura were kind enough to handle introductions.”

Cole noticed that Daniel had moved his hand off of Maria, and was now holding it still behind his back. It seemed like his back had straightened as well. Cole slid one arm around Maria’s waist and drew her against him. He could feel her look over at him silently, but kept his gaze locked with Daniel as the man spoke.

“So Maria tells me you’re a counselor at your children’s school?”

“Yeah, I’ve worked in counseling for fifteen years now. Once they both graduate, I may move into something else. I’ve really grown to love the school though.”

“Of course, it is a very noble position. I’ve never written about a school.”

“Omar’s told me about all that you’ve written. You sound very successful.”

Daniel laughed lightly and shrugged. Now that Cole was closer to him, he realized that Daniel couldn’t have been a day over fifty, although he looked sixty-five at a distance. He wore a pallor of loss.

“I never hoped to be successful, but somehow it happened regardless. I’ve had a few things published. I’m sure they’re nothing you’ve heard of.”

“I used to read more, what’s your last name? Maybe I’ll recognize you.”

“Daniel Ares. I wrote *The Mocking Jar* and *The Dependent Shine*, most famously.”

Cole startled. He recognized the name *The Mocking Jar*. In fact, he knew exactly where on the living room’s bookcase the thin black book sat, from the many times he had looked down the shelf to try and find something to read at night. Those books had been building up neglectful dust for quite a while.

“We have a copy of *The Mocking Jar*, I think. I don’t know where it came from though.”

“Really? I’m flattered,” he said, and although he did seem flattered, he did not seem surprised.

Omar called out that the food was ready, and the different groups around the party started to congregate at the grill and picnic table. As if on cue, Joseph sauntered out of the house. Cole had already decided not to push the issue with him any further, especially in front of Maria. He would have to handle Joseph another day. Everyone was served and sat

along the long table, with a folding chair taking each head of the table. Although only eight people were in attendance, crowding around the table brought everyone close together, and Cole found himself pressed between Maria and Jane.

The table was in constant conversation, between Omar's loud storytelling and Jane and Tessa talking about school. Cole occasionally cracked a joke or settled a dispute, but mostly he sat silent and watched. Maria spoke not a word unless directly addressed. Daniel also favored silence. Cole noticed that throughout the meal, Daniel's eyes were continuously on either himself or Maria.

As plates were being emptied, Cole felt his pocket begin to vibrate, and quickly extricated himself from the table, apologizing as he stepped inside. It was an unknown number, but the area code was local. He answered hesitantly.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Is this Mr. Roth?"

"Yes. May I ask who's speaking?"

"This is Tina Wallace. I go to Maplegrove. You know my sister, Cindy."

"Oh, of course. Hello Tina, what seems to be the problem?"

"There's no major problem, Mr. Roth. I just wanted to schedule an appointment with you to discuss my mother. The anniversary is coming up."

Cole looked out through the sliding glass doors into the yard and watched the bustle of activity for a moment. Everyone was in motion, cleaning and eating and talking. His mind was having trouble focusing on the conversation.

"All right, I'll have to check my calendar but I should be free."

After he finished speaking, Cole realized something. This was his cell phone, not his work line to the home phone.

“Tina, how did you get this number?”

“Oh, I asked Joseph for it.”

Joseph was standing still, surrounded by conversation and bustle. Cole realized where he had been sneaking out to lately. “Yes. Of course.”

“I’ll see you on Monday, then?”

Cole assented and slid his phone back into his pocket. His thoughts turned back to his son. Tina Wallace, queen bee. That must have been her car he saw driving off earlier. Last night, it had been her that kept Joseph away from home.

When he turned his gaze back to the sliding glass door, he saw that Joseph had moved further into the yard and was talking to Tessa. Omar and Laura were now deep in conversation with Daniel, who was hunching over again. Maria stood just outside their circle, her hands clenched in front of her. Although Cole couldn’t see her face, he could tell that her gaze was downcast.

“No, I’m sure he’d love that,” Omar was saying as Cole approached the group.

“Perhaps later, there’s no need tonight,” Daniel responded, looking at Cole. His smile seemed warmer than before. As Cole stepped into the circle, Maria visibly started and quickly turned towards the house. Her measured strides in the opposite direction drew the entire group’s attention. She reached the house and shut the door behind her.

“I suppose this has all been very tiring for her,” Daniel said in a comforting tone. Cole resented the familiarity in his speech.

“Yeah, strangers tire her out quickly,” Cole said, keeping his voice level. Omar and Laura exchanged a glance in his peripheral vision.

“Oh, Maria and I are acquainted,” Daniel said, “We went to school together many years ago.”

“Really? That’s odd, I never heard her mention you.”

Some of the warmth fell out of Daniel’s face and he tilted his head forward, peering over the edge of his glasses. Cole noticed his eyes for the first time, where previously the glass had dominated his view. Daniel had eyes the color of dirt.

“Perhaps not. It was very long ago.”

“You knew each other in college?”

“Tenth grade exclusively. She moved into the area, then back out.”

Omar turned to Daniel and laughed loudly, “That is just the strangest coincidence! I mean, none of us even lived here before, but we all met each other at one time or another. I bet it must have been a shock seeing her here, if you recognized her.”

“Yes, it certainly was,” Daniel said, smiling back at him. He shifted his arms so that they were behind his back and straightened up.

“You knew she was going to be here,” Cole said instantly. Something about Daniel’s lie made it transparent to him. Although he had been uncomfortable with how Maria was acting around Daniel, this revelation complicated things. He was certain that Maria had never mentioned this author before, but clearly the two had some kind of past together. Maria had been more animated tonight than she had in weeks.

Daniel stopped smiling and looked at Cole appraisingly. Omar seemed dumbstruck, turning back and forth between them.

“I did.”

“How well did you two know each other exactly?” Cole said, speaking with methodical intonation. Laura shifted her weight between her feet and tugged on Omar’s sleeve, trying to draw him away from the conversation. Omar, for his part, seemed to still be captivated by the coincidence.

“Quite well. We were close.” There was a steel edge in his voice that had previously been masked by his smile. Cole wondered how much of his behavior earlier had been a character.

“It is getting late,” Laura said urgently, grabbing Omar’s hand, “We can pick up these decorations for you. We’ll have to be leaving soon of course, plenty to do tomorrow.”

“That would be great,” Cole said without looking at her. Omar complained briefly, but would never disobey Laura’s instruction and was led away to a different corner of the yard.

Daniel sighed slightly and pulled his glasses off, folding them into his breast pocket. When he looked back at Cole, he had pulled himself up to his full height.

“Will this be when you intimidate me?” he said, looking anything but intimidated.

Cole was disarmed by the comment, but his anger did not fade so quickly. “I’d just like to know what intentions you have with my wife, preferably without intimidation. I think you came here to see her, and Omar was just a convenient method.”

“He is correct that it was a coincidence that my friend happened to know the husband of a woman I once knew. That I did not plan.”

“But you did plan to come here for her.”

Daniel made a reproachful face, but it felt unauthentic. “I am checking in on an old acquaintance. You needn’t worry.”

“I saw how you were touching her earlier. You look at her like I should worry.” Their gazes were evenly matched, but while Cole couldn’t stop his brow from furrowing, Daniel remained nearly expressionless.

“I have no intention of seducing your wife, Cole,” he said simply, lowering his voice slightly. Joseph and Tessa were much too far away to hear the quiet exchange, but there was something almost conspiratorial in the way that Daniel looked at Cole.

“Why did you come here?”

“A long time ago she asked this of me. I was only recently strong enough to answer.”

“What does that mean?”

“She wanted to see how I was doing. We had not seen each other in thirty years, Cole. She wanted to see me. Apparently she had fond memories of me.”

“Seems like any normal person would have just flown down and knocked on the door if he wanted to call up an old acquaintance.” Cole’s anger was beginning to wane as Daniel continued to speak evenly. Cole realized that he might have been overreacting, and began taking deeper breaths.

Daniel sagged slightly, and once again looked fifteen years too old. “It is not so simple. But do not worry about me, Cole. You do not need to fear for your wife’s fidelity. I have seen and heard that you treat her earnestly. I’m not here to steal anything.”

“Then why are you here?”

“When I left New York, the only thing I had to follow was her email. I saw no reason to go anywhere else.”

Cole took a small step backwards and pushed his hands into his pockets. The sincerity and directness of Daniel’s speech made it very easy to believe him.

“You two were lovers?”

“We were fifteen. Lovers is too strong a word.”

“And she just emailed you out of the blue?”

“Yes. Two months ago.”

Cole realized that all of his anger was gone, and that now he didn’t know what to feel. Daniel was watching him calmly, wearing the same blank face that he had for most of their exchange.

“Well, now you’ve seen her. Are you satisfied?”

“I would like to see her again. I won’t be here long.”

“What, just stop by for visits?”

“Yes. Not unannounced, of course. I do not wish in intrude.”

The idea sounded insane to Cole. He pointed one finger at Daniel’s chest. “Look, you leave my wife alone. I won’t have you hanging around here. You’ve seen her, now leave.” Cole couldn’t get the image of Daniel’s hand on Maria’s back out of his head. That was how he had touched her, when they were still learning each other. It was a kind of contact he held in his treasured memories.

Daniel stare turned sympathetic, “Twenty years you’ve had to learn her character, and yet you don’t trust her still? Doubt me if you must, but doubting your wife is cowardice. Are you not enough of a man to compel her to faithfulness?”

“I’m enough of a man to not let some big-shot move in on my wife,” Cole retorted, but he could feel his anger receding again. The possessiveness of Daniel’s touch left him feeling inadequate, and the man’s calm demeanor only exacerbated the feeling.

“I won’t argue with you any more,” Daniel said, relaxing slightly and moving his hands back in front of him. “But think about what I’ve said. Ask Maria. If you change your mind, Omar can tell me.”

“Oh, I’ll be asking her.”

Daniel fell silent as Cole led him back over to Omar and a very nervous Laura. Cole smiled at her calmingly and thanked them for all of their help, and together the four of them walked around the house to the waiting cars.

As he was climbing into Omar’s passenger seat, Daniel paused and looked at Cole. He had slid his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose and was frowning.

“She won’t tell you, but she did enjoy the party. It was good of you to do this.”

Cole couldn’t decide how to answer, and before he could speak Daniel had shut the door and was hidden behind the glass. As the pair of cars sped back onto the main road, Cole looked down at his shoes.

“Thanks,” he muttered to himself, feeling very childish. He headed inside.

As he shut and locked the front door, Cole heard a soft cough behind him. He turned to find Tessa standing in the hallway, looking back at him expressionlessly. He straightened up and smiled at her.

“Can I stay over for another night, Mr. Roth?” she asked him quietly. Cole could faintly hear a disturbance coming from the kitchen and the sound of glasses clinking together.

“Do your parents know?”

She nodded in response, but before Cole could respond Joseph stepped out of the kitchen and walked down the hallway, holding a glass of water at his side. He stepped around Tessa and paused in front of Cole, looking him straight in the eyes.

Cole was tired of arguing with him. Although Joseph’s brows were furrowed heavily, Cole merely smiled back and after a moment Joseph wordlessly began up the staircase.

“Yes, Tessa, you can stay,” he said, keeping his fatigue out of his voice as best he could. She thanked him and made her own way up the stairs after Joseph, footfalls nearly silent. Jane was likely already upstairs in her room. Cole watched Tessa go before walking into the kitchen himself and sitting down at the table.

The grain of the table was just interesting enough to occupy his exhausted brain. He spent several minutes tracing the wood with his fingertips, finding small rivets or knots that had been flattened and lacquered by the carpenters. He had bought almost all the furniture in the house with Maria after they had moved into the area, but a part of him missed the plainness of the empty house. They had lived with little more than their bed and suitcases for a week, and during that time the house had felt full of possibility. Filling it with furniture had made it feel quite empty.

He knew that, at some point, he would have to talk to Joseph. Although his son’s venom earlier had stung, Cole knew that he had to address the issue. He did want his son’s help. Joseph and Jane were dealing with Maria’s diagnosis in their own ways, but increasingly Cole felt overwhelmed handling things alone.

Even as he debated what to do about his son, Cole knew that he was avoiding his bedroom. He checked the wall clock and saw that it was only seven. He walked up to the bookshelf in the living room and ran one finger along the spines until it landed upon *The Mocking Jar*. It was a slim book bound in black, with Daniel's name in stark red lettering after the flowing script of the title.

Cole sat on the loveseat facing the windows and flipped through the book repeatedly, hands moving habitually. With his gaze unfocused out the window, his mind wandered back to Daniel. He again saw the author's eyes, his folded body, and his confident hand reached out to Maria.

It was not the possessiveness of how he had touched Maria that bothered Cole. It was the fact that he had touched her at all. Even their close friends, even the children, did not touch Maria. Her silence and demeanor typically separated her far away from anyone, and in fact Cole could not remember anyone but himself coming into casual contact with her in months. The way that Daniel spread his palm across her back was so familiar and assured that it stuck out even more painfully in Cole's mind.

Even as he struggled with the thought, Cole chided himself for doubting Maria. Some of Daniel's words had sunk in with him, and he asked himself why he didn't trust his wife. Maria had never shown any sign of being unfaithful, and he reprimanded himself for being so protective. He decided to talk to her about Daniel before deciding anything else. He stretched his legs out and slouched down against the upholstery, opening *The Mocking Jar* with one hand and holding it against his chest. It began on a rooftop, with three men drinking.

He lay in bed five hours later, across from his undoubtedly sleepless wife, and held his arms crossed tight against his chest. They had stopped sleeping together over a month ago. Maria spent most of her time in bed sleepless and preferred solitude. Having her further away did nothing to keep her out of his thoughts, and the soft sound of the fan shaking in its cradle overhead clicked repetitiously in his head, prompting him to speak with every click.

“Do you love me, Maria?”

“Of course I do, Cole. I married you.”

He slept, but was not reassured.

Sunday

Cole slept in, and when he pulled himself out of bed at ten he found the room empty. Perhaps Maria had gone out, or was eating downstairs. He walked to the window and leaned his weight on her table, placing his palms against the surface. All of her papers were in perfect order still, and even the piles of loose sheets on her desk were in line with each other and neatly arranged. Outside the window, tree branches waved lazily in the midmorning light. He stared for only a moment before turning and heading to the dresser, grabbing a new set of clothes. The bathroom door was closed, and he opened it automatically before walking in.

He found Maria in the bath, naked and still. She was facing the door and leaning back against the porcelain, and as he entered her eyes moved upwards and met his gaze. Her

head was resting on one of her hands, with her elbow on the side of the bathtub. Seeing her paralyzed him.

“Oh, sorry,” he said after a heavy pause. He looked away from her eyes, but saw her in the mirror as well, so he looked at the ceiling instead. “I thought you were downstairs. I’ll leave,”

As he was in the doorway, hand reaching for the knob, he heard her call after him softly.

“No, stay.”

In time he was undressed and slipped into the tub behind her. She sat between his thick legs and hugged her knees, turning her face to one side. He saw that her eyes were closed, but her face was calm. Her passions had been dulled with time and marriage. Now, the cancer clawing in her lungs had deadened her emotionally. She wore a blank face to avoid wearing a mask of suffering.

“Can you wash my back?” she whispered, and he began to move his hands slowly over her skin. Cole could feel his heart pounding as he rubbed her body with the warm water. It splashed against the sides of the bathtub and overflowed onto the tiling, but he ignored that. All he could see was the unaccustomed gauntness of her body beneath his grip. He had forgotten what she looked like nude, but knew that it had been nothing like this. She was faded.

She muttered something into the silence. Part of him was convinced that it was an apology, but another part realized that it had been in Spanish.

Before he could ask, she leaned forward again and stood up. She was shaking slightly when she stepped out onto the rug and grabbed a towel. She wrapped herself in the

cloth and started drying off. Cole stood and stepped out after her, then gently took the towel out of her hands. She leaned against him while he dried her off, hiding her face with the curtain of her hair. She took the towel from his grip and finished drying herself without moving away from him.

Cole cradled her body in his arms and although she did not resist, she laid against him like a corpse. His hands found the arches of her shoulder blades and rubbed across them with a feather's touch. He remembered holding his children in the same way, with all the strength of his arms and all the care of his fingers. For some reason, he desperately wanted to show Maria that he was still that same man.

Joseph had been born underweight, although not premature. He had been a tiny babe swathed in Cole's arms, and at first Cole had been very wary of hurting him accidentally. In time, as he aged, this fear had been replaced with an assured confidence in his own abilities. Their first child had drawn him and Maria more tightly together than ever before, and the memories of holding Joseph's slumbering infantile body between them still filled him with contentment.

After Joseph, their lives had warped to make room for the baby. Cole was still going to school, Maria found a part-time job, and they worked to teach each other how to be a family. Cole's family had disowned him, ashamed. Now, two decades later, he barely thought of them. They tried for a second child for years, and once got very close. Their miscarriage had strained their marriage, and until Jane's birth he and Maria had spent little time together.

Jane's birth was much less difficult for Maria, although she was a larger baby. Around her, the family rallied and renewed their love. He and Maria started dancing together

again. A child became the center of his existence again, and with Maria he worked to raise them better than himself. He had explained to five-year-old Joseph the importance and severity of being a good older brother. At the time, he had thought that most of it sunk in.

Maria's hair was still wet and the dangling tips brushed against his chest with every slight sway of her frame. She was still looking down, eyes hidden, as he took the towel back from her and began to dry himself. He was hesitant to push her by talking, but his mind was buzzing with questions.

"Why?" he asked her as he finished with the towel, taking a step back from her. The towel was already wet from drying her and had not worked very well. He didn't mind the beads of water left behind along his neck or shins. He could feel them dripping slowly over his skin. Maria shook her head a little before muttering something.

"What are you doing today?" he asked instead, hoping to get her talking more animatedly and then convince her to open up. Cole's heart was still pounding and his hands felt emptied without her in them.

"I need to work," she said, hugging her arms across her body. She seemed conscious of her nakedness for the first time, and turned her body slightly to shy away from him. He noted that her nails had been cut for the first time in weeks. They were clipped down to the nub. The exposed skin was pink and youthful.

"All day?" he said, stepping back towards her. She startled at his movement and tightened her hold on her arms, looking away from him.

Without another word she was gone, hips vanishing around the doorframe as she went to the dresser. Cole waited until the door shut behind her to sigh, then sat down on the edge of the tub and put his head in his hands. The porcelain was cold against his bare skin.

He tangled his fingers in his hair and pulled, which did nothing to clear his mind. Every time he attempted to name his emotion internally, he found a different answer. They were all correct. He took a short cold shower to try and clear his mind and quiet his libido, but it just left him shivering with no more insight than he had entered the stall with.

It was almost lunchtime before he was dressed and left the bathroom. True to her word, Maria was sitting at her desk, wearing her robe and intently staring at the page in front of her. He looked around the room as though she wasn't there, gathering his belt and wallet off the dresser before turning to the door. He left before the silence overwhelmed him.

He found Jane and Tessa downstairs, sitting in the living room and whispering conspiratorially. As he entered they fell silent and Jane pulled away, sitting ramrod-straight in her chair. Cole laughed and grinned at her.

“Plotting my assassination I see? E tu, Tessa?”

“Maybe. Depends if we have to keep you quiet.”

“Right now I'd rather be kept fed. Will we have your company all day Tessa?” he asked her, turning away from his daughter. Tessa was wearing different clothes than he had seen her in the last couple days, so she had probably planned on staying two nights the whole time. It didn't particularly bother him.

“No sir, I'll be going home soon. My mom is coming to pick me up now.”

“Okay, Jane can unlock the door for you. Always a pleasure to have you.”

Tessa thanked him, and after touching Jane's shoulder affectionately he headed towards the kitchen to prepare some of the leftovers. The only corded phone in the house sat on the counter, next to the stove that Maria used to cook on. She had insisted that the family

only have one phone, and that it be placed within an arms reach of where she was most frequently. It had helped to keep them centered, binding them to a single point.

After eating, Cole walked back into the living room and sat down next to Jane. She and Tessa seemed to have finished their secret conversation, since now they were talking about their homeroom teacher. Cole listened to the gossip disinterestedly while Maria danced in his mind. He gazed around the room without really seeing, and for the first time realized that he hadn't seen Joseph all morning.

“Do either of you know where Joseph is?” he interrupted.

“He left this morning,” Tessa said, looking out one of the windows. She was still wearing her scarf, a dark brown that matched her brunette hair and was decorated with an ornate Persian design. The ends of her hair brushed across the top of the scarf as she turned back to face him.

“Did he say where he was going?”

“No.”

“What time was this?”

“About ten,” she said, then turned to face out the window again. Cole looked over her shoulder and saw that a van had just pulled into the cul-de-sac and stopped in front of their house.

“That's my mom. Thank you for letting me stay Mr. Roth. I'll see you tomorrow Jane.” When she stood, she grabbed a wide green satchel from beside her chair and slung it over her head habitually.

“Bye Tess,” Jane said, standing to hug her friend. Cole said goodbye as well and they watched out the window as Tessa climbed into the passenger seat

Something about the way that Tessa watched him made him a little uncomfortable. She seemed shrewd. Jane was a very good judge of character, though, so he decided to trust her instincts. Tessa had been her friend for years now and she had always been very polite and not the least trouble. Her shyness was just a little off-putting, he decided. It was certainly not the biggest thing he had to worry about, he reminded himself, and his thoughts turned back to Maria.

Jane left after a moment and headed back to her room, claiming that she was going to do homework; Cole suspected that it was her laptop drawing her away. Her departure made the room feel very large around him, and after an uncomfortable shiver he stood and walked over to the bookshelf. *The Mocking Jar* was slid forward from the other books, spine protruding over the edge of the dark wood shelf. He slid it back into place, then pulled it out completely and set it on one of the end tables.

He pulled out his cellphone and texted Omar, telling him to invite Daniel to visit whenever he wanted. Once he had finished typing the message he reread it several times without changing a word. It felt like the right thing to do, although he wasn't sure why. He remembered the smell of his wife's hair and pressed send. Maybe Daniel's little speech had impacted him.

Later, he returned to the cream-colored master bedroom. It was like walking into a time capsule, every time. The fan spun overhead gently, creating enough movement to keep the air fresh. The natural light through the window filled the space with vitality. The room was tied to Maria inseparably in his memories, and he could not look at it and see anything else.

She sat at her desk, in her robe, and shifted through her papers without reacting to his entrance. They were both silent as he walked across the room and knelt behind her, draping his arms around her and pulling her body against the chair's high back. The stiff plank separated their embrace and the corners dug into his flesh as he clutched against it.

“Cole?”

The clouds outside shifted and the room darkened slightly. Maria let go of her documents and reached a single hand down to his arms, resting the palm of her hand against his forearm. Her fingers made no effort to grip onto him, instead sliding up his arm. It made his hairs stand on end.

When she reached his elbow and pulled her hand away, Cole stood and left.

Many hours later, after Cole had regained his composure and set to working in his office, the doorbell rang unexpectedly. Cole's music was loud enough that he missed the sound; after the second ring, Jane answered, and showed Daniel to Cole's office.

“I'm sorry to drop in unannounced,” Daniel said, stepping past the doorway as Cole pulled his headphones off.

“No, it's fine. I did say anytime,” Cole said. He had decided to be as gracious as possible to Daniel. In truth, he felt ashamed of how angrily he had treated the man yesterday and regretted his childishness. He seemed to only have good intentions, and Cole certainly didn't mind having someone around that made Maria happy. If he was honest with himself, he knew that the events of the morning had reassured him. They had been the main factor in changing his mind.

“In the future I’d love to let you know ahead of time, but I had no way of contacting you,” Daniel said, reaching his hand out. Cole shook it hesitantly and it seemed to satisfy Daniel, as he moved his arms back to their default position behind his back.

“Of course, we can exchange numbers.”

“That would be nice.”

After they had exchanged contacts, Daniel smiled at Cole and spoke. “Omar tells me that you’ve been reading my book.”

“Yeah, I decided to see what I thought of it.”

“I’d be curious to know.”

Cole wasn’t very far into the book and could provide no great insights. He found himself complimenting Daniel lavishly, although in fact he had found *The Mocking Jar* thoroughly average so far. The entire time they spoke, he sensed a tension in Daniel that the older man was hiding well, but not suppressing completely. There was liveliness in his eyes that suggested he was not satisfied.

“But of course you’re not here to discuss your writing. If you want, I can take you to Maria. I’m sure she’d like to talk with you.”

“I would like that very much.”

They left the office and walked down the short hall until reaching the closed door of the master bedroom. Cole motioned for Daniel to wait and cracked the door slightly, sliding around the edge and shutting it behind him. Maria did not look up at his entry and seemed to have not moved since last he visited her.

“Maria? Can we talk for a minute?”

Her body remained motionless, but she looked over her shoulder until he was in her peripheral vision. A small nod was his signal to continue.

“I invited Daniel over, the writer from the last night. I’m sure you remember him.

He could have sworn that her back stiffened, although he would not have thought it possible. “Daniel?”

“Yeah, I thought that you two might want to catch up a little. He’s outside the door – if you want to get dressed I can invite him in.”

Maria stood slowly and walked to the dresser, gown swishing around her short legs. She dug through the drawers and after a moment grabbed something and went into the bathroom.

“I’m going to go ahead and get him,” Cole called after her, but she gave no response. He shrugged and walked back to the door, opening it and letting Daniel in. He entered into the space with exaggerated slowness and seemed to be noting every detail of the room. He didn’t comment on anything, including the separated beds.

“You keep a nice home, Cole,” he said at length, grasping his hands in front of him and looking at Cole expectantly. He seemed to feel out of place in the bedroom, and after a moment Cole noticed for the first time that the only chair in the entire room was at Maria’s desk. They used to have others, but for different reasons they had all been removed over the years. Now that he focused on it, he saw that the room was actually very empty.

“You can just sit on the bed here,” Cole said, gesturing him towards his own bed. Daniel nodded thankfully and they sat next to each other, legs planted off the bed.

Maria entered a moment later, dressed in a flowing floral blouse and dark-wash jeans. Daniel didn't turn to face her, and as Cole watched her walk across the room she met his gaze and smiled a little. The gesture reassured him.

She sat across from them, evenly between them, but her eyes were locked onto Daniel. "Hello," she said softly, and he reached a hand out towards her, which she softly shook.

"Good to see you again Maria," he said, holding his hands in his lap.

Both of them seemed unable to start the conversation, so Cole asked about their high school. Daniel began describing the building at some length, reminiscing with notable clarity about every hallway and teacher. He seemed to have a crisp memory, which Cole assumed was a boon to his writing.

Maria for her part was nearly silent, occasionally interjecting a disagreement about one of his assessments. They disagreed about which teachers had been the most personable, what food the least edible. Her answers were brief but Daniel always paused the second she began speaking, deferring to her. Now that he was speaking, Daniel was moving his hands animatedly, and Maria's eyes followed his grand motions.

Cole continued to listen, but now that he had gotten Daniel talking he seemed to be inexhaustible. He could see Maria's happiness in the lithe energy of her eyes and the joy of her nodding head, but Cole soon grew bored with the discussion. He had no interest in listening to almost thirty-year-old gossip.

He decided to place his trust in Maria, and at a slight lull in the conversation he stood and put a hand gently on Maria's shoulder.

“I need to get some more work done before tomorrow, so I think I’ll leave you two to your reminiscing. If you want something to eat or drink, Daniel, just stop by and I can get you something from the kitchen.”

“That’s very kind of you Cole, thank you,” Daniel said, smiling at him. Cole said goodbye to Maria, and she turned to him.

“Goodbye Cole. Thank you.”

It was comforting to see her more lively. Cole went back to his office but in truth had very little to do. Instead, he entered Daniel’s name into a search engine and started to browse through the list of news articles that it returned. None of them went into much detail beyond the canned publicity quotes and plot summaries, but Cole found a longer interview that he saved onto his computer to read later. Time passed quickly.

Hours later, the sun was starting to cut through the cloud layer, stretching a brilliant red across the sky outside his office. Cole stood and opened the window, letting the light rush into the room and paint lines across the floor. His thoughts were back on Maria, but that was nothing unusual. The gathering clouds outside seemed to signal a storm, and their bleakness matched his mood.

As he looked out the window, a black Aston Martin rushed into the subdivision and stopped in front of their driveway, behind the jeep that Cole assumed was Daniel’s. After a long pause the passenger door opened and he saw Joseph’s lanky frame unfold itself and step out onto the sidewalk.

Cole moved away from the window and headed downstairs. He could hear a muffled male voice coming from his bedroom and soft music playing from Jane’s room as he

passed down the hall and descended the stairs. He reached the front foyer just as Joseph was unlocking the door.

“Oh. Hey,” Joseph said, caught off guard.

“Hey Joseph. Let’s talk.”

“I was just out with a friend, it’s- ”

“Slow down, I’m not upset. I know you were with Tina.”

Joseph nodded slowly, wary. “Am I supposed to tell you who I’m seeing?”

“I’m curious but don’t really care. You were right. You’re an adult and you can make your own decisions.”

Joseph nodded again, but his brow was still furrowed. “But?”

It was hard for Cole to admit his own weakness. It always had been. “But I need your help, Joseph.”

He seemed willing to listen; Cole had hoped that right after he’d been with Tina he would be in a better mood, and it seemed to be working.

“I won’t ask you to do much. I want you to graduate this year. I know that your attendance is less than perfect, but I’m sure you can work out some deal with your teachers. You want to get out of here I know, so I bet you can work with me here.”

Joseph had no response, and Cole decided to just go on.

“I need you to be conscious of your mother.”

Joseph looked away and opened his mouth to retort, his face warping into a frown, but Cole cut him off.

“That car you love taking to school? She bought that. She bought your clothes and your fancy phone and the room you run off to. Respect that if nothing else. I’m not asking

you to change your schedule. You can keep going out with friends. You can spend nights out. But when your family needs you, I need you to be here.”

Joseph met Cole’s eyes and held his gaze, but some of the fire had gone out of him. His eyes were no longer battling with Cole, but instead regarding him. It seemed like Cole had done the right thing by approaching him with a compromise.

“Sure.”

It was as close to backing down as Joseph would ever be. Cole didn’t press his advantage. He offered Joseph leftovers for dinner but Joseph was already intent on leaving and turned him down. After a minute Cole heard the slam of a bedroom door.

He passed into the living room and thought about grabbing Daniel’s book, but realized that he didn’t really want to talk about it anymore. Cole had run out of things to say and was self-conscious of his literary weakness.

Cole started back up the stairs and had rounded the middle landing when he saw a figure standing silhouetted at the top. He could make out Daniel’s hunched frame against the brightness of the overhead light. There was something off about his stance, a tension held in his shoulders.

“Oh, hello Cole.”

“Getting hungry?” Cole asked, continuing up the stairs. Daniel stepped out of the way and let him up onto the landing where they could face each other evenly. Daniel’s face looked drawn. His eyes were alive with turmoil.

“No, actually I had quite lost track of time. I won’t impose on you for a meal. If it’s no bother, I thought that I’d be leaving now. I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” Cole said, trying to match his level of graciousness. “It everything all right?”

Daniel lips twisted out a laugh that didn’t reach the rest of his face. “I fear I’ve talked her ear off. I have a tendency to monologue.”

“I’m sure she preferred that. Maria doesn’t much like talking anymore.” Cole didn’t feel like he was getting the full truth, which made him uncomfortable. Perhaps Maria would be less reluctant to talk to him.

“Yes. I picked up on that. I believe that she enjoyed it anyway.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to visit again, sometime later this week.” Daniel continued.

“Of course, that’s no trouble. I’m sure she’d love to see you again.”

Daniel reached one hand forward and set it heavily on Cole’s shoulder. His gestures had a practiced grace, but it was clear in his eyes that his thoughts were elsewhere. “You’re being very understanding, friend. I appreciate your trust, and I’m sure that your wife deserves it.”

“Thank you,” Cole said, gesturing down the stairs with a sweeping hand. He and Daniel descended into the front lobby before stopping in front of the door. Cole decided to question him further, to try and understand his change in behavior.

“Did she talk at all?”

“Yes, a little. She interjected on occasion.”

“Good. That’s good. Some days she is more energetic than today, but I think that the excitement of yesterday was somewhat tiring.”

“That’s very reasonable. She told me about what you’ve done for your family. I think she is grateful.”

Cole felt pride swell in his chest and smiled a little wider, and he could see that Daniel seemed pleased as well. The more cynical part of Cole’s mind was wary that Daniel was perhaps exaggerating the truth to endear himself to Cole, but he suppressed that thought. He didn’t know if he should trust Daniel’s words.

“But enough talk for today, I won’t linger any longer,” Daniel said. Cole pulled himself back out of his thoughts and looked back to Daniel, who nodded at him.

Cole nodded back and reached towards the door’s shining handle, when from upstairs there came a muffled crashing sound. His body tensed to alert, and as if in response he heard a second thunderous crash, this one a hundred times louder than the first. Cole stood riveted as the clashing ring cut through the still air and surrounded them.

Without speaking, Cole leapt up the stairs. As he mounted the landing, Jane and Joseph’s doors sprung open and they looked curiously after him. The flashes of their faces that he saw in passing were frightened and confused. He had the bedroom door open in a single wrenching motion and threw himself through it.

Maria stood behind her desk, legs spread wide and arms outstretched before her. Her shirt was rippling around her and she was shaking from the tension in her limbs. The bay window before her was shattered entirely, struggling shards clinging to the corners of the frame. There was a single long blade of glass embedded in the woodwork of her desk, and fragments on the carpet. He took the entire scene in within the span of an instant.

Before he had taken two steps into the room Maria turned and ran to him, collapsing into his arms. He caught her against him and held her upright while her fingers

dug into his shirt. Her body was racked with terrible sobs. There was a storm building outside, and the gales passing in through the window blew her hair onto his face and wrapped it around his neck. Cole was rendered speechless by the energy and the noise.

Cole whispered in her ear, begging her to speak, to be safe, to be sane, to still remember who he was and that he loved her. She flexed her fingers across his chest with painful strength and wet his collar with her deep tears. She was not visibly hurt, but as Cole continued to mutter to her she still did not respond. He could see nothing wrong with her, but of course that meant little. He was shamelessly afraid. She was so small inside his embrace. His arms nearly smothered her.

“Please, please, are you hurt,” he whispered, and after an anguished sob she choked, coughed, and shook her head against him. Cole thanked God and tried to control his own emotions. He needed to calm himself enough to be strong for her. Although he knew very little of what had happened, he knew that he must help if he could.

Cole looked up for the first time since entering and noticed that his family was standing awkwardly behind them, Jane and Joseph both watching him with wide eyes. Cole looked over at the broken glass and realized that Maria’s chair was nowhere to be seen. He supposed that it would be in the front lawn, surrounded by shining glass.

Everyone was firstly focused on Maria, but she gave no indication that she could even hear their worry for her. Jane and Joseph hovered around them until Cole sent them to bed. They could do nothing to help here. They left without arguing, but Jane stood just outside the doorway watching them for several minutes. She retreated of her own accord some time later, doubtlessly not to bed. It was only nine, but Cole felt as though his day had

already lasted several hours too long. Daniel was nowhere to be seen, but Cole didn't want to leave his wife to search for him.

This was the first time he had seen such a burst of emotion from her in two months, since she had broken their china cabinet the night of her diagnosis. More than anything it scared him.

After an hour, she began to slip against him more heavily and her fingers relaxed their grip. Cole realized that she was falling asleep where she stood so he helped her into bed, bundling the blankets tightly around her. He was unable to reassure himself that she was safe, even as he tucked her in and watched her grip the corner of her pillowcase in one errant hand.

“Why?” he asked.

Maria looked over at the window, then back at Cole. She seemed to weigh him with her gaze, measuring him against imaginary scales. Her eyes were clouded.

“I don't want to die,” she said. Cole held her until she slept in his arms.

He was loath to leave, but he knew that it was his job to be pragmatic, even now. It was beginning to rain lightly outside. Several things needed to be done before a storm came in. The window had to be patched, and the chair and glass collected from outside. It wouldn't take him long to handle the other distractions and return to her.

The door's handle was cold against his palm as he passed back into the hallway. He could see the light passing beneath both Jane and Joseph's doors in the otherwise dark house. He thought of Maria's outburst, certain that Daniel had triggered it somehow. He was amazed that she had even been strong enough to lift the heavy-set chair in the first place. Whatever he had said to her must have been terrible, and Cole felt a hard ball of anger in his gut. The author was nowhere to be found, his car gone from outside the house.

Cole descended the stairs, hands formed into fists, and found a pile of upholstery and wood in the middle of the foyer that was quite obviously the remains of a chair thrown out a second story window. As he reached the ground floor and walked closer, he saw a plastic wastebasket full of glass sitting next to the chair. Even the smaller chips had been collected meticulously. There was no indication of who had done this, but he had a guess. Cole grabbed several trash bags and a roll of heavy-duty tape from the kitchen before climbing back upstairs.

He rapped on Joseph's door, and after a moment heard an assenting grunt from inside. Cole opened the door a crack and stuck his head around the frame, meeting Joseph's expectant gaze.

"You got the chair inside?"

Joseph looked away. "I didn't think that you had time. It needed to be done."

Cole watched him, expecting more of a response, but Joseph continued to look away and remained silent. Cole nodded after the pause became awkward.

"I appreciate it. Thank you, Joseph."

"Sure." Joseph pretended to be preoccupied with his phone, but Cole recognized that it was an act.

Cole shut the door quietly as he left, stopping next at Jane's room. Before he had knocked twice the door opened. Jane stood in the frame, staring at him intently.

"What happened?" she blurted before looking ashamed at her outburst and stepping back a little.

"I don't really know," he answered honestly, "But I wanted to tell you that your mother's doing fine and seems to be calmed down completely."

“Is this because of that strange man that was here earlier?”

Cole chuckled but decided not to tell her his suspicions. “He is a little strange, isn’t he? I don’t know if he’s involved.”

“Okay.”

“Are you going to be okay sleeping tonight? School tomorrow?”

“Yeah dad, I’m okay,” she said before smiling broadly at him. It looked much more forced than he was used to seeing, but that bothered him little. He had wanted to check that she wasn’t too shaken up by the proceedings of the night, and she seemed fine.

Maria seemed to have barely moved from where he left her, only rolling over slightly in bed. Cole checked to make sure that she was still breathing, but as he walked over to the bed she stiffened and opened her eyes, watching him intently. He gave her his bravest smile, hoping that some of it might wear off on her.

Using the bags and the tape Cole managed to mostly seal the window, trying to at least prevent any water from getting inside and damaging things. Although he stepped carefully, very little glass had ended up inside. It seemed like the force of the chair passing through the window had caused most of the glass to fall into the yard. Cole fitted his makeshift shutter into place just as the rain started to pick up. The drumbeat of the drops breaking across the roof was very calming.

He returned to Maria again and sat by her bed, running a hand along her hair and smoothing it behind her ear. She watched him silently, but shifted forward slightly against his palm. He was grateful for even the slight gesture.

“Was it something he said?” he asked. Although he was worried about upsetting her again, he felt like he needed to know what had provoked such a strong reaction. Maria closed

her eyes, nodding her head in confirmation. Cole continued to brush her hair, but asked no further questions.

Not until far into the night did Maria give in to sleep, long after Cole's hand had stopped moving along her scalp and came to rest along the side of her neck. Her hair was tangled in his fingers, tethering him to her. He sat next to her, watching, until he was certain that she had fallen asleep, then climbed into his own bed. He knew that he had to remain practical, and that tomorrow he would be expected at the school bright and early. He needed to get as much sleep as he could.

Cole had hoped that Daniel could be a point of hope in Maria's life, but perhaps that would be impossible. He would have to ask Maria if she wanted to see Daniel again at all. Cole expected to be angry with Daniel, but couldn't muster the fury. His anger was atypically dormant, replaced with a consuming sadness. He looked at his wife, listening to the snapping plastic bags flex in the wind, heard the rain pound the roof over his head, and eventually found his way to sleep.

Monday

Tina and Cindy did not look related. Cindy was bookish and small-bodied, and her complexion was marred with acne across both of her cheekbones that she obviously picked at. In his office, she always sat on the very front edge of her chair. Tina sat at an angle, slender legs crossed and bobbing rhythmically as she watched Cole with one brilliant blue eye, the other concealed by the curtain of her platinum-blond hair.

“Is there something you want to talk about, Tina?” he asked. He wasn’t entirely certain why she had scheduled this appointment.

“Do you remember why my family moved here?”

“I do, yes. Your mother.”

“The anniversary is coming up – the second anniversary.” Her voice was very clear and had a self-assured tone to it that Cole found rare in high school students.

“Yes, of course. Do you think about your mother much?”

“Sometimes. Not as much any more.”

“That’s part of the healing process. Although I’m sure you miss her, your life is still going on.” Tina watched him impassively.

He changed tactics. “Do you think that the anniversary will be difficult for you?”

“I do,” she said slowly, straightened up and uncrossing her legs. She planted her feet in front of her and rested her hands against her bare thighs. “I’m planning on taking that day off from school, but I don’t know what I’ll do. I don’t know how it will affect me.”

“It might be better to stay in school and proceed as usual,” Cole said, watching her reaction, “So that you have something to distract you, and so that the day has more of a schedule. It would do you no good to be miserable all day with nothing else on your mind.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Do you know what happened to my mother?”

“I do,” Cole said levelly. She had shot herself.

“I was the one who found her laying there on her bed,” Tina said, her voice unwavering. “Do you think that I’ll forget about that just because I’m going to class?”

“Of course not.”

“Last year I went to school, on the anniversary. It was terrible.”

“Was that day difficult for you?”

She frowned at him. “Everyone treated me like a leper. Like I had to be taken care of. It was infuriating.”

“Your friends were probably looking after your well being. Everyone handles the grieving process differently.”

“The grieving process didn’t turn me into a child, Mr. Roth,” she said dismissively. “I’m fine. My mother wasn’t. She hated her marriage and hated her life so she killed herself. I’ve been dragging that around with me ever since.”

Cole sat up in his seat, taken aback. He barely knew what to say in response to Tina’s outburst. She still looked calm, but he wasn’t sure what emotional state she was in. “I’m sure that your mother had complicated reasons. Nothing was your fault.”

“I told you, Mr. Roth. I’m not a child. Everyone treats me like I’m special because my mom’s dead. But I wish everyone would just forget that. I’m tired of it.”

“I suppose it is good that you’ve moved on,” he said slowly.

“I have. In fact, I think that getting this out in the open has helped me out,” she said, standing. Cole raised an eyebrow in mute surprise and Tina strode to the door, pausing in the frame. She turned to face him and leaned against the wall.

“Can I ask a favor of you Mr. Roth?”

“That depends what it is,” he answered honestly. One of the other counselors walked past the doorway behind Tina and looked in over her arm, meeting Cole’s eyes.

“You’ve probably heard that Joseph and I are talking.”

“Yes, I’ve been informed.”

“Under those circumstances I’d like to talk more, and I need a ride home today. I was wondering if you could give me one.”

Cole was surprised and wary. Tina seemed sane enough, but impulsive. Being alone with her was a potentially dangerous situation, but his curiosity about his son outweighed his reluctance. It might be nice to hear about Joseph from a different perspective. He needed permission to take her home, but her father could volunteer that over the phone. It was the same process Cole had gone through with Tessa’s mother.

“If your father okays it with the school, I could. Where do you live?”

“Over in Eliya’s Gardens, I can direct you. It is a bit of drive.”

Cole had never heard of Eliya’s Gardens, but now that he had extended the offer he didn’t want to retract it. “If you don’t mind swinging by the house first so I can drop my daughter off then that should be fine.” He didn’t want Jane in the car with them. Tina might be less comfortable talking openly in front of one of her peers.

“I don’t mind. Shall I meet you out in the lot? I know what car you drive.”

“That sounds fine,” Cole said, surprised. He was realizing that this conversation had been more important to her than the preceding meeting.

She smiled at him. “Thank you, Cole. I’ll see you after school.”

It was unusual for his car to be so silent traveling home. Cole kept his eyes locked on the road for the short drive, but in his mirrors he caught glimpses of Jane and Tessa sitting in the back seat. He had found out after the final bell that Tessa’s parents were attending an event tonight and that they wanted her to spend the night with Jane, which he didn’t mind.

They were widely separated and uncharacteristically tight-lipped, hands at their sides and eyes locked forward. Tina sat in his passenger seat, lounging with her eyes turned out the window and one hand touching her lips. She had greeted the other two by name but no other conversation passed between them.

Cole pulled into the driveway and Jane and Tessa both jumped out, dragging their bags after them and heading to the garage keypad. Cole backed up slowly enough that he could see them open the garage and then the door into the house. As the garage door rumbled shut behind them he turned back out into the cul-de-sac and started driving away.

Tina turned away from the window and watched him instead, and when he glanced sideways to meet her eyes she smiled at him.

“I appreciate the ride Mr. Roth,” she said, and told him the general direction to drive. Cole normally drove with his hands clasping the bottom of the wheel loosely, but for some reason he felt tense today and gripped the wheel’s upper edge.

“So when did you and Joseph start seeing each other?” he asked, glancing over at her as he accelerated to forty-five. She was now turned to face him almost entirely, with her long legs drawn up under her on the seat. When she first climbed into his car she had slid the seat backwards several inches.

“Not very long ago. I guess about two weeks.”

“Oh, okay. And how did you two meet each other?” She shifted slightly in her seat and he forced out a small laugh. “You’ll have to forgive a father his little curiosities.”

“I don’t mind. We have history class together. I’ve sort of known him since we were sophomores though.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you see saw him around. I hear that he’s got a bit of a reputation.”

Tina laughed with a clear, musical sound. “There are the rumors.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Cole said, trying to act as though he knew what these supposed rumors were. In reality, he had not known that Joseph was some sort of celebrity.

“All the girls know him,” she continued, looking away from him and out the front window. “He could be very popular if he wasn’t so confrontational.”

“He’s not really the type to crave popularity,” Cole said, eyes flicking between his mirrors as he shifted across lanes.

“No, he’s not. Everyone knows about him though.”

Cole wanted to feel upset at Joseph’s infamy, but knew that a larger part of him was pleased. He lived in much the same manner throughout high school, riding his reputation into many young hearts. Joseph had inherited much of his looks, but Maria’s genes had softened his features, giving his face the haughty composition of an aristocrat. Cole had always thought that his own face looked like a fighter. Joseph looked like a lover.

“I’m sure all the girls are jealous of you,” Cole said, glancing back at Tina. She was watching him again, drumming her fingers against her leg rhythmically.

“Maybe. They all hate me anyways, since I have money and grades and looks. I’ve gotten used to it.”

She was casual in a disarming sort of way. Cole kept his eyes on the road but the psychologist in him was intrigued by the frankness of her answer.

“You don’t seem to delude yourself about much.”

“I figure, if I’m going to be honest with anyone, it may as well be myself, right?”

“That’s a good place to start. Are you being honest with me too?”

She laughed and turned to sit in her seat properly, stretching her legs out. “I guess.”

Cole felt emboldened to inquire further about Joseph. He hoped that Tina could be a resource for him in understanding his son, and possibly in convincing him to settle down a little. “Well if you don’t delude yourself, I’m sure you know that Joseph and I don’t really see eye to eye.”

“He doesn’t like to talk about you. I’d gathered that there was some issue between you.”

“Does he talk about his home life at all?”

Tina chuckled to herself. “Guess we don’t talk much. I haven’t bothered to ask.”

“You’re not curious? I guess you had heard around school that I’m his father, but you never wanted to know more?”

She glanced over at him. “Mr. Roth, I’m not interested in what Joseph does when he’s away from me. I’m a very “in-the-moment” kind of girl.”

Cole was curious where her cultivated disinterest stemmed from. She sounded like she was telling the truth, but it surprised him. “So the second he leaves you, you stop caring?”

She shrugged and slouched down further in the seat, turning onto her side to face him. He realized that she could not possibly be wearing her seat belt.

“Maybe I should worry more. You know he has a reputation for picking up two girls at once? Maybe I should watch him more closely.” She turned forward again and when he glanced over Cole saw that she had shut her eyes. “But I’m not trying to marry the guy. He’s just fun. I don’t really mind if he’s cheating.”

Cole had heard nothing about his son's supposed unreliability, but it surprised him less than he would have liked. Tina pointed forward and instructed him about where to turn with clear directions before slouching again.

"You think he is cheating?" Cole asked. Tina seemed very willing to talk about both her relationship and Joseph himself. Cole knew that this might be one of very few chances he got to hear such candid descriptions of Joseph's habits.

"I know that he is. He'd probably even tell me if I asked. I don't know who she is though. I bet she's older." She seemed unaffected by this fact, her voice monotone.

Cole made the turn and set his speed lower as he drove along the back roads. It looked like she was leading him down some shortcut. She had doubtlessly driven this path a thousand times to and from school.

"You don't seem to care too much," Cole said. It seemed like he felt more bothered by Joseph's lack of fidelity than she did.

"Like you said. I don't delude myself. Did you think I was seeing Joseph for his moral character?"

"I suppose not."

"I don't really need anything serious in my life. I hope you didn't have the wrong idea about me and Joseph."

Cole chuckled darkly. "I didn't really have any idea. I only found out recently."

"I guess he wouldn't have told you."

"No, that would be very unusual."

She pulled her legs back under herself and sat cross-legged, guiding him through several turns. The neighborhood they were driving through soon fed back out into a larger

road, and again Cole was able to let his instincts handle the driving while his thoughts turned over these new revelations.

“He’s not so bad,” Tina said, speaking much softer. Over the noise of the road and his sputtering engine, Cole could only just hear her.

“No?”

“No. He does care. I think he tries not to, but he does. I’ll miss him.”

Cole laughed unexpectedly before quickly catching himself. “Sorry. I wasn’t expecting you to be planning your breakup already.”

“Well first we have to become an official couple. Then I’ll grow bored of him and we’ll fight a little, and then he’ll get all sulky and I’ll walk out.”

“You seem pretty confident in your plan.”

“It’s worked six times this year. Patterns.”

Cole looked over at her and saw that she was watching him with partially hooded eyes.

“I would be careful. I don’t think Joseph really obeys any pattern.”

She thought about his statement for a minute. At last she hugged her legs and put her chin against her knee, indicating with a pointing finger where Cole needed to turn. He followed her instructions wordlessly, waiting for her to respond.

“It’s kind of funny.”

“What is?”

“I was just thinking about how I’d react if he just left me tomorrow. I wouldn’t care too much. He’s replaceable. And I’m sure that I’m replaceable to him.”

Cole felt almost sickened by how callous she was, but realized that at least she was being honest with herself. He could certainly remember a parade of women through his teenage years that had been utterly interchangeable, although he would have denied it at the time. Each one-night love affair was little different than the previous three. This realization made him feel less certain about his own morals, and more understanding of Tina. She knew that her life was easy and reveled in it.

They pulled up to a wide wrought iron gate after a half hour of driving. Tina hopped out of the car and ran over to the small building next to the gate, giving Cole time to admire the landscaping. The gentle hills surrounding the gate and accompanying fence were dotted with earthen flowerbeds that contained a variety of low-lying plants. They seemed to be well maintained, although not very colorful. Tina touched the keypad attached to the stucco building beside the gate and after a chime the barrier slid smoothly open. She ran back to the car.

“If he’s replaceable so easily, why did you pick him?” Cole asked, only half wanting to hear the answer. Tina looked at him questioningly, and he reworded his question. “Why go through the trouble? He’s a handful.”

“He is special. I can find someone else once he’s gone, but he is special,” she said, thinking aloud. She spoke deliberately as she puzzled through her reasoning within her head. “Actually, I really do like him. I think that it’s because he’s difficult. He’s emotional. Passionate.”

“And you like that?”

“Very much. I only approached him after I saw him tear this guy apart.”

Cole had never heard about Joseph being part of any confrontation. “Joseph was fighting?”

“No, no, just words. Some guy from the swim team was trying to start something and Joseph just ran circles around him. The guy couldn’t get a word in. Joseph just kept talking down to him. Like he didn’t even consider him worth his time.

Cole hadn’t ever heard about this exchange. It surprised him. He had assumed that Joseph would be hotheaded enough to start throwing punches at the first opportunity.

“Why were they arguing?” he asked as he pulled into the long white driveway that Tina indicated. The house at the end of the path looked much too large for a family of three.

“Oh, Joseph was trying to steal his girl,” Tina said, and she seemed to enjoy the frown the spread across Cole’s face. “He’s stopped doing that now though.”

Cole put the car in park once he had driven up to the house’s front entrance and turned to look at Tina. “I appreciated talking to you Tina, thank you. You’ve helped me understand him a little better.”

“Glad to help Cole,” she said, lips parting into a smile. He startled when she called him by his first name, and with a smile she smoothed her hair back along the line of her ear and nodded at him. “If I ever need a ride I guess I know who to ask.”

Cole watched her walk away uneasily, with his thoughts turning over each new discovery from their trip. Her long strides carried her to the front door and after a small wave in his direction she pulled it open and stepped inside. Cole shifted into reverse and started the drive home. He was thankful that the trip was so long; it gave him plenty of time to think about Joseph.

It did not surprise him that Joseph chafed with his peers. He was a smart but arrogant boy, and not a particularly agreeable one, so even with no other factors he would find enemies easily. Cole had long been surprised that he didn't hear about any fights or at least disagreements, especially working at the school, but it seemed that Joseph was capable of handling his own fights and winning them without causing an incident.

Hearing Tina mention Joseph's passion was nostalgic for Cole; passionate had been Maria's favorite word to call a young Joseph who refused to tolerate playmates' slowness. Passionate little Joseph had cried when he learned that hamburgers were cows and been listless for two weeks after his fish died. Passionate little Joseph had pulled a girl's hair clean out when she was talking over the teacher's instructions.

His inner musings made the return trip pass much more quickly than his initial drive, and Cole arrived home shortly after four. He noticed that Joseph's car was gone and pulled into the garage to park. He turned the car off but stayed seated in silence with his hands on the keys. He tapped one foot against the floorboard and tried to figure out what was bothering him. Nothing seemed to line up in his mind. Why would Tina ask him for a ride if Joseph had his car with him? Maybe he was visiting this supposed other woman, but even that didn't explain why Tina needed a ride home. She had provided no explanation for the request, and now that Cole thought about it he realized that Cindy had not needed a ride home.

As he walked over to the door leading into the house, Cole spun his key ring around his pointer finger. Why had Tina called the conference in the first place, when she seemed to be feeling fine? Had it been just to ask him for a ride? The possibility occurred to him that she was questioning him just as much as he was questioning her, only much more subtly.

Was she trying to get more information about Joseph indirectly by seeing what he asked about? She honestly didn't seem calculating enough. And that still didn't explain how Cindy got home, although of course it was possible that someone else had taken her or that she was spending the afternoon with a friend. So then where was Joseph?

Cole resigned himself to uncertainty. He was missing a few too many variables to solve his questions, and it wasn't as though he really needed to know, as curious as he was. Instead he let himself into his home and focused on his grumbling stomach.

He was expecting to find the house quiet, but as he walked into the downstairs hallway he heard a voice from the kitchen. Walking closer let him identify it as Jane's excited tones, and he could pick out individual words. He realized that she was describing her charcoal drawings just as he rounded the corner.

Jane and Maria were sitting at the kitchen table, both leaning over the open sketchbook spread across the wooden surface. They had their backs to him so his presence in the doorway went entirely undetected. Cole leaned against the door's frame and smiled as Jane described the finer details of her work, pointing them out to Maria with one waving hand. Maria wore a black dress today and sat perched forward on the edge of the chair, arms crossed over her chest. One of her hands clutched the top of a mug. She was leaning forward to get a better look at the sketches and nodding along with Jane's descriptions.

Jane flipped through the different sketchbooks excitedly, showing Maria pieces of her art from the last three weeks. Cole had already seen most of the pieces he heard her describing, but he knew that Maria had not. It made him glad to see Jane so obviously pleased as she glowed with pride and repeated what praise her art teachers had given her. More than that, it was bittersweet to see Maria taking an interest again.

During a lull in Jane's monologue Maria stiffened and glanced over her shoulder, catching sight of Cole. She caught his eyes and blinked several times before turning back to Jane. Her empty hand reached over her shoulder and waved him forward with two bone-thin fingers.

"I see you two are up to no good," Cole said, putting a hand on Jane's shoulder and causing her to jump. She turned and beamed up at him from her chair.

"I'm showing her all the things I've made in the last month."

"I can see that. I hope you don't mean all of them, or else we'll be here for weeks," he said, grinning at her. Jane was practically bouncing on her seat and smiling. Cole grabbed one of the other chairs from around the table and pulled it to Jane's other side before easing himself into it, gesturing for her to continue with the presentation.

Jane moved through her books at a lightning pace and still spent nearly a half hour longer describing her work proudly. Maria nodded at all the right places and sometimes asked a simple question in a muted voice, which Jane always answered in a matching suppressed tone. Occasionally Cole and Maria would catch each other's gaze, and she always smiled at him thinly before looking down again.

After Jane finished, she stacked the sketchbooks on the table and sat back in her chair, looking expectantly between Maria and Cole as if she didn't know what to do next.

Maria set her mug on the table and looked over at Jane. "Isn't your friend waiting for you upstairs?"

"Oh. Tessa. Yeah, she's upstairs," Jane said, looking worried. "I forgot. I should go check on her."

“I’m sure she’s fine, but go ahead and check,” Cole said, patting Jane’s back.

“Thank you for showing us your art.”

“You’re very talented,” Maria said, nodding in agreement with Cole. Jane beamed at her before running out of the room. After she was gone, Cole turned back to Maria and found her sipping her coffee and watching him over the far rim of her mug.

“Are you feeling better?”

“I took medicine this morning. I’ve been forgetting.”

“Well I’m glad you remembered, those are very important,” he said, shifting out of his chair. He claimed Jane’s seat instead, so that his knees were pressed against Maria’s.

“They don’t help much.”

He reached out to reassure her with his touch, but knew even before trying that it was a laughably unfit solution. She accepted his gentle hand, but did not relax.

“Does it hurt today?”

Her shoulders shook slightly as if struck by a breeze and she nodded twice in rapid succession before setting her mug down and wrapping her arms against her chest again. Her thumbs were moving nervously over the fabric of her dress. Cole regretted asking her.

“Where were you?” she asked him, watching his eyes again.

“Driving Joseph’s girlfriend home. She told me a little bit about him I didn’t know before.”

“Oh. That’s good.”

“How was your day?”

“I worked.”

“Getting much done?”

“No.”

“Do you want to talk about the window?” he asked carefully. Maria looked at him with an even, calm expression on her face.

“I’m sorry about that. Some things Daniel said made me emotional. But it wasn’t his fault. I overreacted.”

“What did he say?” Cole said, both worried and protective.

“He wanted to know about my diagnosis. He talks about death.”

Cole nodded somberly and leaned against the back of his chair, closing his eyes. It was one of the options he had considered. Death was not a topic Cole enjoyed discussing, but it was often on his mind these days. Of course that would upset Maria. He wondered if she would want to see Daniel again, but as he thought Maria stirred in her chair and stood.

“I should be getting back to work.”

“You have to go now?” he said, trying to keep any hint of desperation from creeping into his voice.

“I should,” she said. “I have an appointment tomorrow.”

“Of course,” he said, although he had forgotten. “Any way I can help you?”

Her face was very tired. “No Cole. But thank you. Just worry about Joseph.”

“Should I tell Daniel not to come by any more?”

“No, let him. I want to see him.”

She floated out of the room, leaving her mug behind half-drunk. Cole heard her footsteps fade as she followed her daughter upstairs. He let out a deep sigh and slumped down in his chair.

He had very few plans for the afternoon, so after eating his fill he found himself in the living room, hand resting on the spine of Daniel's book. It took him several moments to pull it off of the shelf and to begin reading.

The day passed without incident. Cole moved around the house several times but soon found himself engrossed in *The Mocking Jar*. It quieted his restlessness. As the night began to fall Jane and Tessa came downstairs asking for dinner, and he fixed them some frozen chicken nuggets. He made some for himself and Maria as well, although when he went upstairs to offer them to her she denied being hungry. He retreated to his office and ate alone, browsing through his student records disinterestedly. Work around the school had been slow recently. Soon the school year would be coming to an end and he would have to work with students doomed to fail or students planning their next year of classes, but for now he had a brief period of rest. He opened up Cindy's file and reread it, although it made almost no mention of Tina.

After finishing his meal Cole returned downstairs to take care of the dishes. Some of the leftovers from the barbeque were starting to age poorly, so he threw them away and took out the trash. Sometime soon he would have to go grocery shopping to fill all the empty spaces in the fridge, but it seemed like only himself and Jane ate at home any more, and of course Tessa when she was around. Food tended to last past expiration if he bought in bulk, especially with how often they ordered food in.

Once the chores were finished Cole returned to the office and sat at his computer, but had no enthusiasm to do the little bits of work he should be. Instead he opened up the interview with Daniel and started reading through it. The article was lengthy, a special from a magazine about writers in the northeast. It included a picture of Daniel that looked recent. He

hands were holding a small line of his work like bookends and his knowing smile seemed tinged with the leftover liveliness of a laugh.

Cole read about Daniel's literary aspirations with some interest, but focused more on the personal details. Daniel mentioned a wife, which caught Cole of guard. He looked back at the picture and noted that Daniel was wearing a ring. Cole was certain that Daniel had not been wearing a ring either time he had visited the house.

Daniel had mentioned that he had nowhere else to go after leaving New York, but he had not mentioned why he left. Cole looked at the man in the picture and saw a smile warmer than any Cole had seen from Daniel in person. The ring's disappearance told a disquieting story.

He closed the page without finishing the article, then sat back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair. He couldn't decide if asking Daniel about it would be overstepping the bounds of their relationship. He knew very little about the man. Perhaps Cole could ask Maria and see if she had any insight to provide. Tonight would not be the time, he decided. She was feeling good today. He didn't want to upset her.

Instead he leaned back further and took Daniel's book back in his hands, reading the small paragraph inside the back cover. It said very little in many words. Cole signed and opened the book again, resuming reading. He was over halfway through now.

He dozed in his chair, listless, as the night grew darker. His half-dreams were populated by Tina, Joseph and Daniel. He imagined that he was in the car with the three of them. Tina was pressing one smooth hand against Daniel's chest, her voice silky, while Joseph dug his fingers into Cole's shirt, grasping him and shaking him awake. Their lips moved, but Cole couldn't understand a word they said. It was as though they were muttering

in a foreign language. Every time that he woke with a start he had to find the last page he was reading again and resume, so he made progress very slowly.

As midnight drew near, he was awoken by a loud ringing that he assumed came from his dream. He had been driving with Joseph in his passenger seat, and they had been fighting over the wheel. Cole struggled to grab at the threads of logic from his dream as it receded from his memory, but the harder he tried to remember why they had been fighting or where they were going the faster he seemed to forget. His thoughts were interrupted as the ringing sounded again, and he realized that it was not a noise in his mind; it was the front doorbell.

He stood quickly and wiped the sleep from his eyes, descending the stairs in an uneven quickstep. It was much too late for any neighbor to be dropping in, not to mention that their neighbors had been avoiding them for months. Salesmen would doubtless not ring this late either. He looked out through the peephole and his heart jumped into his throat. A police officer was standing on his doorstep.

Cole pulled the door open, his mind jumping between possibilities. Jane and Maria were both probably still upstairs. He had not seen Joseph all day. He held his breath as the officer looked up and him, then down at a pad of paper in his hand.

“Are you Mr. Roth?” he said, his eyes alert and piercing. Cole felt frantic and nodded.

“Yes officer, what’s going on?” What had happened?

“Well, sir, I was driving along when I saw a car on the side of the road that seemed to be unattended. I checked it out and found a couple of kids naked in the back. I think you might know them.”

Cole felt relief following by a fresh surge of anger. “I wouldn’t be surprised.” He looked over the officer’s shoulder and across the yard. Joseph’s car was sitting in the driveway, and Cole could see his son sitting in the driver’s seat, with Tina lounging casually in the passenger seat. They were both watching him. “That’s my son all right.”

“I’ve had a pretty thorough talk with the two of the them,” said the officer, resting his hands on his hips. His arms were bare and mostly hairless. “I’ll tell you what I told them. It’s illegal to expose yourself like that in public, even in your car. If someone else had walked up to them and seen anything, there could have been problems.”

The officer looked at Cole’s ashen face. “Now I’m not going to press any sort of charges. By my estimation, this isn’t too serious. I’ll let them off with a warning. I wanted to let you know what had happened so you can handle this issue in the family. I know they’re not minors, but I figured you’d want to know.”

“Oh don’t worry officer, I’ll handle it,” Cole said, staring at the car. Joseph met his eyes then leaned back in his seat, vanishing behind Tina. She continued watching Cole. He found that sight of them infuriating. He remembered a roadside moment of careless passion, nearly twenty years ago, that had controlled his life ever since. Joseph wasn’t ready to be a father. Cole knew exactly how little it took to gain that title.

“I had hoped as much. If anyone from our department ever catches them like this again it could be pretty serious.” He put his pad back into his breast pocket and looked at Cole, noticing how intently he was staring at the car. “I trust that you can handle things from here?”

“Yes sir. Thank you, officer.”

The two men walked out towards the driveway, leaving the front door open. The officer paused between the vehicles and turned to Cole.

“I didn’t tell them if I was charging them. Wanted to let them stew a little.”

“Thank you officer,” Cole said, looking through the back window of Joseph’s car. Both the occupants were hidden behind their seats.

“Well, I’ll let you handle things from here,” the Officer said, nodding to Cole and passing between the vehicles, towards the driver’s door. “Hope I didn’t wake you.”

“No, I was up late. Thank you again.”

The officer climbed into his car and after fussing with his dashboard for a moment backed out of the driveway. Cole watched him drive away before walking around Joseph’s car and rapping a knuckle loudly on the passenger window. It rolled down reluctantly and Tina’s hand lolled out the gap.

“Both of you. Come inside.”

He turned without waiting for a response and strode back up to the house, stepping into the living room. He tugged at his hair angrily and tried to plan a response. He wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted to do with them, and his thoughts felt clouded.

He heard the door shut softly and Joseph walked into the living room. Joseph planted his feet wide apart and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at Cole. After a moment Tina walked in behind him, much more at ease. It seemed like she understood that Cole felt no desire to punish her. That wasn’t his job.

Cole matched Joseph’s gaze but struggled with what words to say. His son watched him back like a hawk, waiting to pounce the second he opened his mouth. Cole only frowned, and Joseph sneered.

“What?” Joseph spat, taking a step forward. “What’s the problem now?”

“The problem? You’re getting brought home by a cop and you’re asking that?”

Cole said, his anger rising.

“Look, I listened to you, here I am, inside. Just tell me what my punishment is.

None of the holier-than-thou speeches, okay?”

For a moment, Cole saw everything clearly. He was no father, not really. Only a boy who had never had time to grow up. The moment of clarity passed and Cole saw Joseph’s sneering face, narrow eyes and thick hair much like Cole’s own. He dug in his mind to try and find the words he should say, but all of his education sunk behind a wave of rage. Cole resorted to the method of problem solving he had always been best at.

He took a half step forward and punched Joseph in the jaw, sending him tumbling to the floor. He released his grip, loosening his fingers again, and stood to his full height. Unlike his own father, Cole had never struck his son. There was something raw inside him that felt more satisfied afterwards. Tina stared at his hand, eyebrows climbing up her forehead. Cole fought down his emotions, realizing that among them was pride. Pride in his son, even now.

His mind was a tangle of feelings as he stared at his son. He felt shame at his own impulsivity and tried to think of a way to salvage the moment, but the past and the present intermingled in his thoughts and all he could see was his own father standing over him. He saw the callousness of his father’s face when he had shoved Cole to the ground and disowned his son. Cole shook his head, trying to fight down the memories and stay in the moment. He knew that if he stayed in the room, stayed with the son who was entirely too much like himself, he would say something that he’d regret for the rest of his life.

Joseph's right cheek had three telltale red knuckle imprints right above his jawline. He touched them gently and looked up at Cole, mouth partially open, as Cole knelt down and picked up Joseph's keys from where he had dropped them.

"Stay here. I'm taking Tina home."

Joseph didn't respond, and Cole left the room without waiting for his comeback. He couldn't handle the scorn in his son's voice. Cole knew that he deserved that scorn, but now that he had spoken he couldn't back down. He grabbed Tina's arm as he passed and dragged her after him, although after a minute she stopped resisting and walked along with him.

He led her to Joseph's car and climbed into the driver's seat himself, letting her slide into the passenger's. Again she showed no knowledge of a seatbelt's purpose, instead sitting sideways to face him. He sped out of the driveway and headed back towards Tina's house.

He drove angry, hands white-knuckled on the wheel and eyes locked forward. He was speeding. Tina didn't seem to mind.

"Why'd you hit him?" she asked after several minutes. Cole was starting to cool off, but still wasn't sure he wanted to talk. His fuming breaths were still matching his pounding heart rate. He couldn't clear the image of his knuckle marks out of his mind. He realized that he had made a huge mistake, and when he answered Cindy it was with reluctance and doubt thick in his voice.

"He needs to be punished."

"Does he?"

“Yes. For this, and other things. He has to follow rules.” Cole clung to the thought. He had never followed the rules, and seeing what it had done to his life made him wish for something better for Joseph.

Tina sat on her legs and leaned one arm against her headrest, cocking her head as she watched him. He refused to look over at her.

“It’s not like we were doing anything wrong.”

“Not doing anything wrong? Indecent exposure is a crime. If he can’t even obey the law then we have a more serious problem.

“Relax,” she said lightly, and he saw her face form into a smile. “I thought the exposure was pretty decent.”

Cole refused to think about his child’s exploits and kept his eyes locked forward, but Tina seemed intent on going on. She leaned forward over the gearstick and continued. “It’s just fucking. No one got hurt.”

“It’s fucking stupid is what it is. You’re lucky the officer didn’t want to pursue this. You could both get marks on your permanent records.”

“I wasn’t too worried. He seemed pretty happy to have found us.” She fiddled with the buttons on her blouse as she spoke.

“Just be glad he was understanding.”

“Of course he understood. It’s the universal language. Everybody does it. It would take a real hard-ass to prosecute us.”

Cole held his eyes on the road and said nothing.

“From what I hear you used to like having some fun yourself,” she said, her voice dropping into a silkier tone.

“Yeah, until I grew up.” He didn’t like that she was bringing him into the conversation. He had no idea how much she knew about his past, or even know how much Joseph knew.

“What, and then you just quit? I can’t imagine that.”

Cole felt nervous, an unaccustomed sensation. His mouth was dry and his grip on the wheel remained tight. He wished strongly that he had thought to call Tina’s father instead of driving her home. Another mistake atop the pile.

She leaned a little closer. “Do you miss it?”

“Tina, just focus on your own situation. I’m going to want to talk to your father when we get to your house. I doubt he’ll be too happy with you.”

“Daddy’s away,” she said, a satisfied note in her voice. “And Cindy’s spending the night with a friend.”

“Then I’ll leave him a note.”

“He won’t care,” she said dismissively, sitting back in her seat. She tangled one hand in her hair and left the other in her lap. Her voice was husky. “You know I’m pretty smart. I’ve noticed some things around your house. And Joey told me a little. I know all about your situation, Cole.”

He made the turn onto her shortcut, leaving the main road. This path was dark and unoccupied, with only his headlights showing the way onward. Without the streetlights overhead, he could no longer see her in his peripheral vision.

“Tina...” he started, but she loomed forward out of the dark and stopped him. Her hand came to rest on his shoulder.

“I know you miss it. You’re a physical kind of guy.”

“Tina, stop.”

“You sure? I think you’re excited.”

“I love my wife, Tina.”

She giggled and removed her hand, sliding back into her seat. Her long legs gleamed as a car passed them in the opposite direction, catching the cabin in a brief flash of light.

“Who said anything about love?”

“This is wrong Tina, please, stop,” he said, trying to keep from looking at her. The road was twisted ahead of him and overhanging branches blocked most of the light from the sky. It took some focus to stay on the road. He tried to block her comments out of his thoughts.

“Do you really think that?”

“I’m thirty-eight! You’re dating my son, Tina.”

“I’m eighteen. You can’t tell me you’re not curious. I know you’re not getting any.”

Cole couldn’t answer, so he continued driving in silence. They pulled back out onto a main road and the car was thankfully lit again. He noticed that she had shifted to sit leaning against the car’s door, watching him from beneath her parted bangs. Her eyes were starkly highlighted against the darkness by her eyeliner. He looked away from her.

“You’re a good looking man, Cole. You deserve a woman who can please you.”

“And I have one, Tina. Please, just stop. I’m not interested.”

She stared at him intently for the remainder of the drive, keeping her back straight. Her hands ran over her legs rhythmically, but Cole refused to look at her. His driving was much too fast, and soon rolled up to the gate. He unlocked the car door for her and gestured

at the gate wordlessly. Tina slowly shifted back into a proper sitting position and pushed the door open, but she didn't get out of the car.

“Come on. You need to blow off some steam. I don't mind if you're rough.”

“Tina, I am not interested. Don't make me tell Joseph about this.”

She laughed bitterly. “Go ahead. Not like he's being faithful.”

“Just get out,” he said, voice resigned. He was getting tired of telling her no, and ashamed of how difficult it was. Although he denied it even in his head, he was interested. He resisted the urge, but it was tiring.

Tina stepped out of the car and headed towards the gate's keypad. She walked a circuitous route, staying in his headlights as long as possible. As she stepped in front of the car, she threw her hair back and ran her hands through it, swinging her hips in exaggerated steps. Cole looked away, shamed by his curiosity to continue watching.

As the gate swung open and Tina strolled back to the car, Cole released his seatbelt and leaned across the car, dragging her door shut. He locked the car completely then rolled down the passenger side window.

“You're going to leave me here?” she said, stepping up to the outside of the car. Her voice was a mix of indignant and taunting. “It's half a mile to my house.”

“You can walk. Not like anyone at home is waiting up for you.” He didn't want her back in his car. He was worried, for many reasons.

“It's past midnight. You're really going to make me walk home alone? It isn't safe.”

“I thought that was the point of the gate. I think you'll be fine.”

She stuck one hand in through the window, grabbing onto the door's locking mechanism and yanking it open. Before Cole was able to react and re-lock the door, Tina had opened it and climbed back inside, sitting in her seat correctly and crossing her legs and arms. Her face was transformed by her anger, her eyes cold slits above her glowering lips.

"You can just turn me down without being such an ass about it you know. It was just an offer. I don't know why you think you have to be such a saint."

Cole wanted to order her out of his car, but he was sure she wouldn't listen and didn't want to touch her. He decided to just drive her the final leg and then hopefully she would remove herself. Now that she had ditched her seductive smile for this anger, he was less nervous being with her.

He drove the last portion of the trip with both of them remaining totally silent, Tina looking steadfastly out her window and bobbing her leg. Cole focused on his driving as much as he could, but they were the only car on the road and it was well lit. His thoughts wandered back and forth between Maria and Tina.

He pulled into her driveway just as before, going as far forward as he could. At last she turned back to him and unknotted her body, favoring him a slight smile. She met his eyes and spoke, voice sure and confident.

"Consider it an open invitation, for anything. If you're even curious."

He had no response for her but a tight-lipped frown. Tina climbed out of the car and slammed the door, then leaned her arms into the open window and hunched her head down to look at him again.

"Are you going to cause trouble with Joseph about this?"

"Not if I don't have to. He's in enough trouble as is."

“You know I don’t mean any harm.”

Cole breathed deeply and looked away from her, clasping the top of the wheel in one hand. “Just go inside.”

She paused as if about to go on, but after a moment of indecision turned to walk inside. Cole rolled up her window and watched her walk away until she unlocked the door and stepped inside. He drove home in the quiet night, letting his instincts handle the car. His mind was elsewhere entirely.

When he stopped in the dining room’s doorway, he found Joseph sitting silently in his chair, his hands holding each other loosely on the wooden tabletop. He had no reaction to Cole’s appearance in the room.

Cole stepped into the room and sat across from Joseph, matching his stance.

“I still don’t think I did anything wrong,” Joseph said after a moment, sulking in his frustration.

“I don’t want to hear it Joseph,” Cole said. The outlines of his knuckles were still red against Joseph’s tanned skin, and looking at them made Cole feel tired. Cole scratched his neck and saw that Joseph had looked up, watching him.

“I’m tired of this shit. I don’t care if you think you’re a saint, you have to follow the rules. If you don’t, there won’t be a home for you here any longer.”

Joseph raised one eyebrow in indignant surprise. “You’re kicking me out?”

“Not tonight. But this is your last chance. I’ve tried to work with you, but this is too far. I won’t have you getting brought home by the police. Fix yourself up.”

He looked at first frightened, then angry. Joseph leaned back in his chair and eyed Cole with his calculating gaze.

“So no more police, be here for the family, and graduate? Is that all?”

Cole shrugged noncommittally.

“Just making sure,” Joseph said, his voice dripping sarcasm, “That I know all the rules to follow.”

Cole wanted to make him understand. He wanted to communicate all the complexities of his fatherly love, and the obligations that were attached to being loved. He wanted Joseph to respect his sacrifices and share in his successes. He did not want to see his own past repeated.

“I fought with my parents a lot when I was your age.”

“I know.”

“Do you know what they did to end it?”

“Did they, perhaps, kick you out?”

“No. My father, he came up to me after I had won a boxing match. It was the biggest win I’d had yet. He walked up to me afterwards and looked at me from my head down to my shoes. I was a sweaty mess. My head guard was too tight; I guess I grew into it. He looked at me and said, “You made me proud out there. But if you don’t abort it, I’ll never call you my son again.””

Joseph’s sneer fell off his face until he was expressionless, eyes looking at Cole only because they had been previously. It was obvious he wasn’t really seeing anything.

“We kept you. He kept his word.” Cole stood and pushed his chair back up against the rim, watching Joseph. “I don’t want to lose you. Stop fighting me.”

Cole knew that he was close to giving Joseph an ultimatum, the same way that his father had spoken to him. He only hoped that he could guide his son to the right answer, even

if Cole didn't know that answer himself. Now more than ever, Cole felt as though he needed Joseph's support.

The events of the day had worn Cole thin, and it was clear to him that there was nothing more to say. He left the dining room and crossed the length of the hall, locking the garage's interior door and turning off the living room lights. Joseph was still sitting at the table as he walked back by, taking care of the front door. Cole climbed the stairs, ignoring the quiet murmurs from Jane's room and making his way to the master bedroom. When he entered, he found Maria asleep in bed, her blankets wrapped around her. He undressed slowly and went about his nightly routine with great care.

Standing in front of the mirror, he leaned on his hands and watched his own eyes. They were murky and partially closed. He looked for things in them that he was unsure if he possessed, trying to catch a glimpse into his own deeper character. Cole looked for infidelity and for forgiveness, but could find neither. It seemed like he was the man he had always thought himself to be. Too much emotion struggling against too little control. Too much of a fighter. That affirmation provoked no response from him besides resignation. He was tired of it all.

His bed was cold and very empty, even with him in it. Although he usually slept with only a light sheet, tonight Cole gathered a heavy blanket against his chest and wrapped his hands into it. It provided no comfort, and as the night grew later he kicked it off the bed in frustration. The last time he could remember looking at his clock, it read quarter past four.

His sleep was dreamless and lonely. It did little to satisfy him.

Tuesday

Tina had chosen a somber black today. It contrasted her skin, but that did little to sooth Cole's mind. Even her calm smile and reserved outfit left him uncomfortable.

"I just wanted to apologize," she said. She had stopped by, supposedly for counseling. Cole felt obligated to at least talk to her, as much as he wanted to kick her out and slam the door.

"That's very considerate of you, but to be honest I'd rather just forget that anything happened."

"I think I was just a little emotional from all that had happened that night," she said, intent upon going on.

Cole sighed, somewhat glad to have his massive desk between them. "Just make sure it doesn't happen again."

"I don't know Cole. I feel like, if Joseph's going to mess around, that I'm entitled to do the same."

"If you two have any relationship problems you'd like to settle I'd recommend handling it between yourselves. I'm not that kind of counselor."

She laughed, but it sounded defeated. "I guess I should talk to him. You're the only person I've talked to about him cheating."

Cole wanted to avoid Tina but couldn't resist developing a growing interest in her situation, in part because it actually was his job, and in part because it involved Joseph. Cole had realized that he was unable to care for his son like he should. He needed her help. She

worried him, but his need exceeded his fear. Once Maria was gone and Cole was alone with a son who hated him, he needed the strength to help his son.

“Are you certain that he is?”

“I know he would.”

“But not that he is?”

She looked off to one side and crossed her arms. “I guess not. He just acts funny sometimes.”

“I think he spends most of the time acting strangely. Maybe you should just talk to him a little. Point out that you’re worried.”

“I am not worried,” she said fervently, and Cole decided not to contradict her. She looked back over at him and started drumming her fingers on her chair’s armrests, smiling.

“I didn’t come for an actual conference, and now look at me. I’ll talk to him later. I just wanted to apologize.”

“Apology accepted, Tina. Lets just not go there again.”

She was already standing to leave, but her smile shifted into a more sly expression. “If he isn’t being faithful, I’m sure it’ll break my heart. Maybe I’ll come back to visit you then. For counseling.”

Cole was left at a loss for words as she waved over her shoulder and walked back out of his office, returning to lunch. He slumped back in his chair and sighed, looking at the ceiling. Today would be another lunchtime spent in his office. He had been too tired to fix himself lunch this morning.

He realized that someone was standing in the doorway and looked back down, sitting up in his chair hurriedly. He saw Jane standing in the doorway. She smiled at him, and he returned the face as genuinely as he could.

“Hi,” she said, stepping into the office and sitting down in the chair Tina had just vacated.

“Hello, Jane. And what, may I ask, brings you to my office today?”

“I just wanted somewhere to eat. Tessa’s doing something for band so I didn’t really have anyone to sit with in the lunchroom.”

“You’re always welcome here,” Cole said.

She ate quietly while he updated some of his software. As his computer downloaded the updates, Cole opened up an Internet window and started searching for chairs listlessly. Maria’s chair would need replacing and he had no experience shopping for furniture. The window was another matter, but one that felt almost too daunting to address. The garbage bag filler was a poor alternative, and if nothing else Cole would have to find a better temporary solution until he could get a new pane of glass installed.

“What are you doing?” Jane asked through a mouthful of food.

“Just looking for a chair. To replace your mother’s.”

She hesitated for a moment. “Do you know why she broke it?”

“No, not really.”

“Was it that writer?”

“His name is Daniel, and he’ll probably be visiting the house more often so you should probably remember that.”

“Fine, Daniel. What are he and mom doing?”

“They went to high school together for a year. I think they’re mostly just catching up. Your mother seems to think he’s a good guy.” He left off his suspicions about Daniel.

There was no reason to cause Jane to worry as well.

Jane nodded and ate another bite, then looked at Cole expectantly. “And what about you?”

“I think he’s a funny man. He means well.”

Jane seemed to accept his assessment and went back to eating. Cole watched her for a moment before taking out his phone. Cole was going to be at home all afternoon, and decided that it might make Maria happy if he invited Daniel over. He called the number he had been given but the line was answered by a machine immediately. Cole left a message stating the date and inviting Daniel over anytime after school.

“He’s coming over today?” Jane asked after he hung up.

“Maybe. I got his answering machine. And speaking of tonight, will Tessa be joining us again? Seems like she may as well move in to your room soon.”

Jane shook her head, face difficult to read. “She doesn’t really like staying at home. But I don’t think she’s coming over today.”

“She doesn’t like being at home?” Cole asked, his curiosity piqued.

“No. I think her dad is tough on her. We don’t talk about it.”

“Oh, okay. Well we can meet in the lobby after class gets out like usual. I think it’ll just be the two of us going home.”

Jane looked unsatisfied but hesitated. Cole looked at her and smiled gently. “What is it?”

“What happened last night?”

He supposed it was normal for her to be curious. She and Tessa had still been awake, after all, and hearing voices from downstairs so late would be unusual. Although he could not remember the moment, he was certain that Joseph hitting the ground would have made a crashing noise. Cole didn't feel like explaining the whole situation to her. He trusted her, but didn't want to trouble her. Jane sometimes seemed to have gotten Joseph's share of sensitivity. She was too young to be burdened with all of his troubles.

"Just Joseph and I having a disagreement, nothing unusual." She looked dubious. "Nothing for you to worry about."

She seemed to accept his explanation, looking back down to her Tupperware. Cole noticed that she had finished eating. Lunch period would be over soon. He decided to send her back to class in a minute, if she wasn't already headed out.

"I wish you two fought less," she said, interrupting his thoughts. Her statement caught him off guard and he responded slowly.

"Me too Jane. Me too."

Daniel spent the majority of his second visit talking with Maria alone, but stopped by Cole's office before leaving. He had arrived shortly before five and stayed to the point that Cole offered him dinner, but as before he insisted that he didn't want to intrude. Today he was wearing a deep blue blazer that was slightly frayed with age. Cole asked if he was dressing for anything in particular and Daniel shrugged sheepishly.

"I didn't bring much with me. Sometimes I have to compromise my fashion ideals."

Cole thought about the article he'd read and saw an opening to clear things up about Daniel's recent past. He watched Daniel's hands for a moment. He wore no ring.

"Did you leave in a hurry then? I know you came here from New York, but basically nothing else."

Daniel straightened his posture and his glasses seemed almost to darken, obscuring his eyes. "Yes, I was in a hurry."

Cole knew that he might be treading close to dangerous topics, but couldn't resist pushing further. "Any particular reason for leaving?"

"Yes. My wife died. I had no interest in staying in the city afterwards."

"Oh, I'm sorry for your loss," Cole said, regretting asking. He realized that Daniel had only just come to visit Omar. His wife's death could not have been even a month ago. Daniel, strangely, seemed unaffected. He hardly even sounded sad.

"Yes, everyone's been saying that. If anything, you should be sorry for her."

Cole wasn't exactly sure how to respond, so he nodded. Daniel seemed poised, as if expecting Cole to go on and bristling at the possibility of responding. After an awkward moment of silence, Cole decided to keep questioning him.

"How did she pass?"

"Ah, it was an overdose. My wife was a drug addict, you see."

"I – I see. That's very tragic."

"It is. She was an alcoholic long before I met her, but during our marriage she developed other dependencies."

Cole was uncomfortable with the conversation, and it alarmed him that Daniel was not. In fact, the man seemed to almost be goading Cole, watching him intently through his glasses.

“Forgive me, but you don’t seem bothered by all of this.”

For the first time Daniel seemed genuinely sad. His shoulders slumped, making Cole even taller in comparison. “I wasn’t surprised. She had been on that path for many months.”

“I’m sure that was difficult for you.”

“Very much. But sometimes a bird is more beautiful with a broken wing. Of course I am saddened by losing her, but I am a greater part disappointed.”

“Disappointed?”

“Yes, disappointed. Life is very transient, but history can immortalize those who achieve notable greatness. I had hoped for such a fate for myself and for my wife, but her death was as ignoble as imaginable. After I am gone, she will be forgotten forever. That saddens me more than her death.”

“I don’t think I follow,” Cole said, repeating Daniel’s words in his head. “I’m sure that she has other people who will remember her.”

“No. They will forget quickly. For our own self-preservation, we forget the dead and ignore their passing. All except for the noble.”

Cole felt like the conversation was diverging from Daniel’s wife, but clearly the man wanted to steer their discussion here. The author clasped his hands together.

“You have been reading my book. How far have you gotten?”

Cole cast into his memory. The chapters were numbered, but he could not remember which he had last read. "I just passed the scene where Natalia goes to the liquor store."

"Then you've read past Andre's suicide?"

"I have."

"Suicide is a poetic death," Daniel said, starting to gesture with his hands. "In Andre's case, he is never forgotten. A memorial is built for him, later on. You will read that part later."

"Well of course, you wrote it that way," Cole said, taking a step back. This was clearly a topic that Daniel had thought about at some length. He waved away Cole's objection and continued.

"It would happen that way in reality as well." He sobered suddenly. "But my wife's death was crude. I was the one who found her, you know. Her skin was blue. Her heart had stopped. It was a tragedy, but it was her fault. All the mourners refused to admit that."

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Cole said. He spoke softly to try and calm Daniel, who was speaking more rapidly now.

"I'm sorry," Daniel said, chuckling morbidly and pushing his glasses further up. He moved his head from side to side. "It is an emotional topic for me of course. I loved her very much. Soon she will just be another forgotten face in history."

Cole decided against disagreeing with him, after seeing what effect it had last time. He reached forward and put his hand on Daniel's shoulder, bracing him. The older man looked at him with great compassion in his eyes but said nothing.

"Stay for dinner. We'd love to have you."

“No, I shouldn’t. I’m sure I’ve troubled you enough already. If you don’t mind, I’ll be going.”

Cole was worried about Daniel’s state of mind, but it wasn’t his place to watch over him. Despite the fervor he had previously spoken with, Daniel did seem to have calmed himself. He was watching Cole expectantly.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite. Although I would like to visit tomorrow. Maria mentioned our old yearbooks today, and I’d like to share mine with her. Apparently she lost hers.”

Memories flashed through Cole’s mind, memories of a bonfire. His arms wrapped around Maria as she cried. They had felt abandoned by friends who no longer returned calls or kept promises, so they burned those connections. She had thrown her yearbook and address book and fistfuls of letters onto the little blaze they had lit illegally in the backyard. He hoped that it would have given her closure. It had seemed to help, but that had been weeks ago.

“I don’t know where she could have misplaced it,” he said.

“No matter, I have mine with me. If it doesn’t trouble you, I’d like to visit during the morning tomorrow. I have important plans in the afternoon.”

“Of course it’s no trouble, what time should she expect you?”

“I’ll come around eleven, if that suits you.”

Cole shrugged. Maria would be the only person in the house at eleven on a school day, but the thought of her and Daniel being alone was less threatening than he had expected.

“I won’t be here, but if you want to stop by that’s fine.”

Daniel thanked him graciously and they walked down the stairs to the front door. Cole thought about Daniel's earlier claims. A poetic death. Cole didn't want to disagree with him openly, but the more he considered it, the more he found the concept ridiculous. People were either dead or alive, and that was all. You couldn't choose to be immortalized by history.

He opened the door for Daniel and they exchanged goodbyes. He watched Daniel walk to his car. Cole had never met a forty-five year old man who looked so aged. He idly wondered if Daniel's wife was the only drug user in their relationship, but chided himself afterwards. Daniel's habits were none of his concern so long as the man wasn't hurting Maria.

Cole felt unbalanced. He couldn't stop turning Daniel's words over in his head. It was obvious, he thought, that Daniel had wanted to talk about his ideas. He had intentionally steered the topic from his wife's passing to the idea of a poetic death. Perhaps Daniel was grieving in his own way. There was even a possibility that Daniel was suppressing his feelings for the sake of his sanity, although Cole was not certain he would describe Daniel as sane.

He told Maria about Daniel's planned visit when he took her dinner, and she seemed pleased. Cole stayed with her briefly, but she sounded distracted. He could not catch her eyes no matter how long he watched her face. The temporary replacement chair he had carried up from the living room was mismatched to the desk, the wrong height and style. She sat in it anyway and stared at the smashed window as though the pane was still intact, offering a view to the night sky. She had spent so much time in that position, Cole suspected

that she could imagine the scene behind his improvised tarp as though it had been transparent.

Joseph spent the entire day at home, which Cole found gratifying. Perhaps his comments yesterday had some effect on the boy. It seemed likely that Tina and Joseph would give things a couple of days to settle down before they started spending the nights together again, especially with how conflicted Tina was feeling.

It was not until he lay in bed, arms behind his head and eyes roaming the ceiling, that Cole decided to voice his concerns to Maria. He turned to look at her, and in response to the sound of him turning she looked over at him. Daniel's words from earlier stuck in his mind, and he realized that he didn't know how Maria felt about death. When they had been new to each other and talked for long hours every night, death had seemed like a distant impossibility. Now that they confronted it daily, it was even harder to discuss.

"Do you believe that someone can die poetically?" he said quietly. Her face remained statuesque.

"I don't know."

"Daniel was talking to me today. He thinks that certain kinds of death are nobler than others. He talked about being remembered by history."

"Yes. He's told me about this too."

"Do you agree with him?"

Maria turned onto her side fully so she could face him and slid her hand underneath the pillow. Her other hand came to rest on her neck.

"I don't know."

"He told you about his wife?"

“Yes.”

“I asked him why he left New York. He wanted to talk about her death.”

“Yes. He’s told me too.”

“Did he seem sad?”

She moved her hand off of her neck and onto her face, covering it from his view.

“No. Although he is.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. He loved her very much. He is different now than he was before.”

Cole watched her intently, but all that he could tell from her demeanor was that her thoughts were complicated. “I would be surprised if he hadn’t changed in thirty years.”

She shook her head a little. “No, not like that. Not his life He changed deeper than that.”

“How so?”

Maria was silent for so long that Cole decided she must have fallen asleep until she rolled onto her back and spoke. “I don’t know.”

“Do you mean that his personality changed?”

“When I knew him, he was complete. He doesn’t feel complete anymore. He’s missing something.”

Cole continued to watch her, but it seemed like she was done speaking. He wanted to hear her continue. It was obvious that she understood Daniel better than he did, and also that he had confided more in her. Cole was enjoying hearing her voice, despite the frailty in her speech.

“Missing his wife?”

“I don’t know,” she said with some finality. Cole’s mind was spinning too fast to stop yet.

“Do you think that he’s right?” Cole said.

“Right about what?”

“About death. About poetry.”

She let out a soft sigh, a sound of pain. He wished that he could see her face, but with the window covered their bedroom was plunged in darkness.

“I don’t know Cole. I don’t want to think about it.”

Her voice was exhausted and scared. Cole realized that he had been pushing her too hard, and after a muttered apology he turned over in bed to face the opposite direction.

Daniel’s words were a puzzle in Cole’s mind, and he continued to obsess over them as he lay in bed.

He was half asleep before Maria spoke again. “Cole?”

“Hrm?” he muttered, stirring and blinking to wipe the sleep from his mind.

“My appointment today.”

“What about it?”

“You should be ready.”

Cole felt a combination of lethargy and desperation. He struggled to awaken his sleeping mind, but something in him resisted that. A part of him wanted to fall into the void and forget this conversation.

“It won’t be long now,” Maria whispered. Minutes later, her even breathing told him that she had fallen asleep. He realized that they were breathing in unison.

Cole lay on his side and stared at Maria, willing his eyes open. Whenever he closed them, his imagination tortured him. He imagined Daniel's wife, her skin mottled with blue veins. Her eyes bulged out of her skull, but when he turned away he saw Tina's mother clutching a pistol, kissing the barrel with waxy red lips. His children's faces superimposed themselves over hers. He saw Maria's hands clutching the pistol. He saw himself finding the bodies, all laying in a neat triangle in the foyer, with a neat pile of notes in between them. He heard Daniel's voice inside his head, whispering into his ear.

“It was poetic.”

Book Two: Mocking

Wednesday, fifteen days later.

Cole found Maria's appointment notes and learned that the outlook was grim. Maria had been given a month. The first two weeks of that span passed quietly.

Cole debated with himself for long hours before deciding not to tell his children. They could do nothing to help. He assumed that Daniel knew, but they never discussed it. Daniel became a near-daily fixture in the house. He always declined food and spent his time with Maria. Most of the time Cole left them alone. Whenever he did sit in, neither objected but their conversation stayed on mundane topics. Cole assumed that they talked about more meaningful things when he wasn't around.

The anniversary of Tina and Cindy's mother's death came and went. Cindy showed up to school and came by to visit him. She was in good spirits, and confirmed that Tina had stayed home. Cole had seen flashes of Tina for the past two weeks, coming and going at their driveway or striding down the halls of Maplegrove. Apparently Joseph had assuaged her doubts, since the two were still acting much like a couple. Tina's gaze lingered on Cole every time that she saw him but she maintained an icy distance.

Cole had replaced the window and bought Maria a new chair. He met with Omar every lunch and discussed anything besides his ailing wife. He lay in bed nightly, watching her curl around her sheets. He did all of this but felt nothing, his mind locked like a stuttering gear. Daily life provided just enough distraction to keep him from confronting his own

inability to help. Maria at least seemed to be livelier than before. She spoke to the children every time she saw them.

It was one day past the last day when Cole returned home from work and found Daniel, uncharacteristically, sitting at the kitchen table. Jane and Tessa both greeted him in passing before heading upstairs, but Cole sat down across from him and regarded the older man.

“Is everything okay?” he asked. It was strange for him to find Daniel anywhere but with Maria.

“Not really. I was going to stay until you got back, but now that you’re here I think I’ll be leaving.” Daniel’s eyes watched Cole, full of sorrow but alert.

“May I ask why?”

Daniel straightened up. “Actually, it would be better if you didn’t. I think it would be best if I left now.”

“Did something happen?”

“She asked me to leave.”

“Why?”

“We had a bit of a disagreement. Nothing serious, but I don’t want to stress her unnecessarily.”

Cole watched his face but found it impossible to read. “What did you disagree about?”

“I’m afraid that I can’t tell you that. And I’d appreciate you not asking her. I stayed just to tell you. Don’t ask too much of her today.”

Cole felt indignant that Daniel would say such a thing. He crossed his arms over his chest, raising one eyebrow. “Some sort of secret between you two?”

Daniel shrugged. “Something like that. I assure you, you have nothing to worry about. As I’ve told you before, I have no intent to seduce your wife.”

Cole realized that he had been asking the wrong questions of Daniel since the beginning. “Then what are your intentions? You said that you had nowhere else you needed to go, so you came in response to her email. So now are you just going to live the rest of your life here so you can visit her every day?”

Daniel’s eyes were clear and a lighter brown than usual. “Well, I don’t have much time left to visit her, do I?”

Cole grabbed the words out of his mind and threw them down into his subconscious without thinking about them.

“I won’t be troubling you much longer, Cole. You’ve been an incredibly gracious and understanding host. Maria appreciates it, as do I. ”

He glanced around absently before turning to face Cole again. “Please do not ask her. It would only trouble her, and she will not tell you anything.” After he finished speaking he stood silhouetted and started towards the door. Cole followed him.

“What did you two argue about?” Cole asked him again, trying to push him for information before he left. It bothered him that Maria had actually asked Daniel to leave.

“Cole, it is best that you do not know. I tell you again, you do not have to worry. Please just believe that.”

Daniel pulled the door open without another word, leaving Cole standing in the foyer with unanswered questions. He stepped forward to press his forehead against the front

window and watched Daniel walk away, climb into his car, and pull back out of their cul-de-sac.

It was over three hours later that Cole prepared dinner for himself and the three women in the house. After serving the spaghetti to Jane and Tessa at the table, Cole filled a plate and headed upstairs, still debating if he should ask Maria about his disagreement with Daniel. Not knowing was a constant annoyance hovering in the back of his thoughts, but if he took Daniel at his word asking her could be almost as difficult.

The scene inside swam into view as if through a portal into the past. Maria was painting, standing by the window with her easel set near the wall. Her paints sat in a neat row across the edge of her desk.

Maria had not painted in years. It was only ever a hobby, and had in time been replaced by the raising of children. She had never been very good, but neither was she bad. What had been most important was that she enjoyed painting, and he had made a tradition of giving her new brushes for their anniversary. She had never wanted to talk about why she stopped, so he had stopped asking.

“Maria?” he asked. She turned her head back over her shoulder and locked eyes with him for an instant before turning back to her canvas.

“You’re painting again?” he asked, walking towards her. As he walked forward, Cole noticed that she had only painted a few blotches of color, and was now staring at the page without expression. She seemed to have forgotten that she was holding a brush. The image on the canvas was indistinct.

“I... I made you dinner,” he said after a moment more of her silence. She glanced over at the food before turning back to her work. Cole watched her for a long minute, but she seemed to be content examining her work without commenting.

The surprise of seeing her had pushed his earlier thoughts out of his mind, but now Daniel’s command echoed in his head - I’d appreciate you not asking her. Cole knew that it might be a mistake, but he also felt like he had a right to know.

“I know you asked Daniel to leave,” he started, testing her mood. Maria glanced away from the canvas and looked in his direction, although not at his face. Her eyes focused on his hands, which were hanging by his sides.

“Yes,” she said, then turned back to her art. She raised the brush and made a single long stroke along the page. It did nothing to clarify what she was painting.

“He told me that you two had some sort of disagreement. What was it about?”

This time she did turn to face him fully, and when their eyes met he saw that her expression was pleading. She looked pained.

“Oh Cole,” she said, then looked down at her feet. “I can’t tell you that.”

He took a step forward. “Why not? You two had always gotten along so well, I can’t think what would have made you so upset with him. If something happened, I want to be here to help you.”

“No. Don’t ask me. I won’t tell you.”

Cole watched her body tensing up as she folded her arms around her chest,

“You’re frightening me,” he said.

She gave no visible clue that she had even heard him. Daniel had been right to caution him against asking her. After a pause, Cole headed back downstairs and joined the

girls. He sat at the head of the table and faced them, eating and remaining silent. Jane and Tessa continued talking as they ate, but Cole paid very little attention.

Soon Tessa finished her plate and took it into the kitchen. Jane had been playing with her food for the last five minutes. When Tessa came back into the dining room, Jane told her to head upstairs and that she'd be up in a minute. Tessa nodded and left.

Jane was watching him now, food forgotten. He continued eating, but now part of his attention was focused on Jane. She watched him back, looking indecisive.

“Is mom okay?” she asked.

Cole finished his bite and thought for a moment before responding. “No. She isn't feeling well. The pain is worse.”

Jane looked down at her plate. “I thought so.”

She had always been a tender child. He knew that she was struggling. It had been a difficult time in her life, and he knew that it would only get worse.

“You've been very kind to her,” Cole said.

“I don't know what to do.”

“What you've been doing is great. I know that she appreciates it.”

Jane shook her head and looked at Cole resolutely. “She'll get better.”

“Of course,” said Cole, trying sound like he believed her. He wasn't sure if she believed herself. They stared at each other for a moment, unflinching.

“I'm going to go hang out with Tessa,” Jane said, standing. Cole rose to his feet and pulled her into a hug before she left. Cole was used to her running up the stairs two at a time, but today she lingered on each step.

Cole went to bed earlier than normal because he had slept poorly the previous night. When he opened the door into the master bedroom he found Maria still by her easel. When he spoke to her in greeting, she ignored him. Whatever confrontation she had with Daniel earlier was still affecting her mood, and it was obvious to Cole that she was wary of him questioning her again. Her demeanor seemed to discourage any approach so he went about his routine in silence to avoid disturbing her.

In front of the mirror, Cole took stock of himself. He tried to see himself as others would. He could put on the face that Jane and Joseph called dad. He could put on the face that students confided in during counseling. With a little more effort, he could kindle the gleam in his eyes that Tina called good looking. He tried to make the smile that Maria had always loved but despite his best efforts, his cheeks sank into his skeleton and his eyes looked hollow. She used to put her soft hands against the line of his jaw when he smiled and point his face towards her so she could watch him laugh.

Daniel looked old for a man only seven years Cole's senior. It scared him to see what he might become. It was a fate that Cole too would suffer. He pulled his hair and watched his face contort in the mirror. His hands curled, knuckles bulging. His fists were unable to fight his most important battles.

He came back into the bedroom and found the scene unchanged. He moved a standing lamp over to Maria and pointed it at her page, switching the light on. When he turned off the overhead light the majority of the room fell into darkness, with a cone of illumination surrounding Maria. He asked her if the change bothered her, and she shook her head emphatically. Cole had hoped at least for a verbal answer. He sat on the edge of his bed and observed her, trying to read her. Back when she had been unburdened, she had flowed

like honeyed coffee, and he could read her with his hands alone. They had, in a way, always been dancing. Now she was frozen against him, and all he could identify from her stance was that she was afraid. He did not know of what, but he had a nagging suspicion that it was him she feared.

Cole was asleep when Maria went to bed. She packed up her paints and easel, leaving all the supplies piled in a corner. Then, she undressed and stood between their beds, watching his chest fall and rise. After several minutes, Maria lifted the edge of Cole's sheets and slid in, waking him.

Neither of them spoke, and only the warmth against his chest told Cole that he was not merely dreaming. They fit snugly on the twin mattress. He looked down along his chest and saw her brown hair piled against him, her hands balled into loose fists and held tight against her face. Her expression was hidden.

Cole tightened his grip around her and breathed in deeply. She fit neatly across his chest. The pressure of her weight let him feel his own heart beating. He ran his hand through her hair and over her shoulder, letting her feel the strength in his fingers. She tucked her head against his chest and relaxed the tension in her frame.

The stars cast only sparse light into the room. Maria smelled like tomatoes and weighed very little. Cole did not question why she had come to him, tonight of all nights. His surprise had woken him, but he did not feel excited. Cole felt tranquil. Soon his comfort and relief lulled him back to sleep.

That night, Maria did not sleep. She listened to his heart, felt the warmth of his breath, and forgot her sadness.

Thursday

Joseph looked up to see his mother standing in the doorway. She had stepped into the garage and was now watching him, expressionless.

He felt awkward with her watching him. She had her arms crossed over her chest. It was possible that she was upset with him. It had been a while since he had been able to judge her moods. Perhaps she didn't like him skipping school. The cigarette he held had almost burned down, so he dropped it and fished in his pocket for his pack.

She walked up to him and reached her hand forward, fingers extended. Joseph was surprised by the gesture. She had always been vehemently opposed to this habit.

He gave her one and lit it. She matched his long drag and looked away from the gentle wind to blow out. Her nightgown looked out of place in the backyard. Now that she had joined him, she seemed unconcerned with looking at him, instead watching the clouds or the leaves overhead.

“I thought you hated when I smoked.”

She moved her hand towards her mouth, stopped just short of her lips, and shrugged. “You can choose for yourself.”

“I thought you quit?”

“I did. Twelve years of this until your father made me stop.”

Joseph didn't like to look confused, but he was having a hard time avoiding it. He wasn't sure he wanted to know why his mother had taken a sudden interest in him.

“Why're you out here now then?”

Mom tilted her head backwards completely and held her arms at her side. Her eyes closed then opened again. “What, is it going to kill me?”

Joseph looked away and blinked hard. “Guess not.”

“Your father’s been telling me about the trouble you’re getting into.”

Of course this was going to be some attack on his character. She had probably just come out here acting friendly to try and soften him up.

“I can handle my life,” he said venomously.

“I know.”

It wasn’t the answer he had expected. She leveled her gaze again, then lazily looked at him. It seemed almost accidental that their eyes met, but when they did he saw that hers were filled with great sadness.

“Then why bring it up?” he said.

“Just talking.”

“All right, well let’s talk about something else. I don’t want to talk about all the problems Dad has with me.”

“Okay.”

Joseph looked at her, at a loss for how to continue. She seemed to sense his hesitation and smiled thinly.

“Tell me about this girlfriend.”

“Tina? She’s not my girlfriend, but what about her?”

“What do you like about her?”

Joseph thought for a moment. It was actually a more difficult question than he had anticipated.

“She’s very pretty. Her family has a lot of money so their house is really nice. She always treats me well.”

“Is she nice?”

“Yeah,” he responded instinctively, before thinking about the question. “Well. Not really. But she isn’t mean. She’s just sort of detached.”

“Even to you?”

“No, she’s pretty attached to me. She likes me a lot.”

“Well that’s good,” she said, taking another drag. Maria folded her arms around herself. She was watching him with a gentle smile.

“Why are you out here?” Joseph asked. It was unusual to see her talking, nonetheless seeking conversation with him. He didn’t mind, but for some reason it did scare him.

“You looked lonely.”

“I’m not.”

“Okay. Am I intruding?”

He looked down at his shoes as she blew smoke over her shoulder. “No.”

The silence between them grew longer, but it didn’t bother Joseph. He finished his smoke and crushed the butt under his heel. Maria threw hers down and he stepped on it as well. He noticed that she was barefoot.

“You look cold, do you want to go in?” he asked her. The weather was quite pleasant, but the wind brought some chill with it.

“No thank you. You should go though.”

“Go? Where? I’m not going to school just to attend my last class.”

“Not school. Just somewhere. It isn’t good for you to spend time here.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She looked at him and cocked her head to the side. “You’ll never be this young again. Go explore something.”

“I’m not just going to go running off into the woods. I’m not ten anymore.”

“Go to a gym. Watch some boxing.”

“Dad was the boxer. Not a family tradition I want to continue.”

“Go anyway. You’ll learn something.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that an order?”

“Yes.”

Joseph was poised to snap a comeback at her, but before she had even finished speaking Maria had turned and was walking back inside. She swayed slightly in the wind.

“What do you want me to learn?” he called after her. She didn’t turn around, but paused in the doorway into the garage.

“Go watch a fight. You’ll know.”

Cole hadn’t been to the gym in a decade, but he still remembered most of the scenery. The raised ceiling and fluorescent lights made the room feel cheap, like a warehouse. A darker shade of blue covered the walls, nearly matching the grey carpeting on the floor. Even the people using the machines and weights were identical to his memory. He had spent significant time in gyms like this during the earlier years of his life, but it felt

strange to be back. Maria had been very insistent when she called him, so he had left the school early and driven to the gym.

He found Joseph standing just off the mats used by boxers. Cole stood a distance away from him for a minute, watching him. Joseph in turn watched the sparring. His head was darting from side to side as his vision switched between pairs of combatants. Maria had warned him but it still surprised Cole to see his son here. Joseph had never before set foot in a gym outside of P.E. class.

“Hey,” Cole said as he walked up behind Joseph. His son startled and whipped around to face him. Judging by his reaction, watching the sparring had put him on edge.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Joseph said.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Joseph glared and looked back at the boxers. “Mom told me to come out here. She said I’d learn something.” He sighed. “She sent you too?”

“Yeah. She told me you’d be here. I couldn’t believe it.”

Joseph grunted dully. He was holding his body tight, his stance guarded. He seemed ill at ease. For a couple minutes, they both watched the fights. It made Cole nostalgic in a way, but he found himself watching Joseph as much as he was watching the boxers. None of them impressed Cole, although he was out of practice enough that any of them could likely take him. He chuckled darkly.

“What?” Joseph asked sideways.

“Just thinking about fighting. I’m a bit too old, I think.”

“Probably.”

The silence returned between them, forming a barrier almost physical in its substantiality. Cole wanted to push against the gap, but knew that if he stepped towards Joseph his son would just step away. Closeness between them had faded long ago.

“I wonder if she meant us to fight,” Cole asked aloud, partly out of curiosity and partly to fill the silence.

“I’m not fighting you,” Joseph said.

“I know. I wouldn’t want to.”

“Didn’t seem to have a problem knocking me around before.”

Cole scratched the back of his head. “I am sorry about that.”

Joseph looked away from the fighters at last, instead inspecting his shoes. “Don’t be.”

“It was out of line, I know that. You had just worried me. When I saw that cop, at my door, at midnight? I thought you were dead or in prison.”

“I know.”

“I don’t really care where you and Tina do it. Just as long as you’re being safe.”

“Oh dad, no, not this talk.”

“No, I know. Too late anyway, if you did need it.” Cole chuckled to himself. “I guess I never really gave you the talk. I sort of guessed you’d figure it out on your own.”

Joseph shrugged and laughed too, although very softly. “Yeah. It isn’t too hard.”

Cole looked over at his son, and saw that Joseph was smiling.

“I think we fight more than enough anyways,” Cole said.

Joseph wouldn’t look at him, but he didn’t turn away either. “Probably.”

“So then why did she send us here?”

“I don’t know, dad. She told me that I’d learn something.”

“Have you?”

Joseph shrugged. The match that he had been watching ended in a flurry of blows followed by a single uppercut. The slapping of glove striking face sang through the air, and Cole felt almost like clapping. It was nice to see someone win.

“I’m sorry about your dad.”

Cole looked over and saw that Joseph had spoken without altering his pose or expression. He looked almost frozen.

“Don’t be. I don’t regret my decision.”

Neither was willing to break the silence that followed Cole’s statement, and soon it was time for school to end. Cole had to pick up the girls. Joseph flinched when Cole reached towards him, but made no complaint when Cole put a heavy hand on his back.

He made it back to Maplegrove ten minutes after the students had been released, just as the busses were pulling out. Jane and Tessa were both waiting out in front of the building. He pulled through the school’s driveway and stopped in front of them. Jane’s face lit up when she saw his car.

“I thought you’d just left us,” she called to him when he rolled down the passenger window.

As they approached his car, he noticed someone else standing in the shadow under the school’s front awning. He recognized Tina’s silhouette.

“Need a ride? I can take you to our house.” he called to her. Although he was wary of being alone with her, surely there couldn’t be any problems with Jane and Tessa in the back seat. If she was hanging around for Joseph, she might be waiting for quite a while.

“Sure,” she called back, stepping out into the sun and walking unhurriedly to his car. She was wearing jeans that must have been sewn onto her legs, and he purposefully looked back at the road.

“Thanks Mr. Roth,” she said, climbing into the passenger seat. Jane and Tessa were both responded monosyllabically when Tina greeted them by name. She seemed unfazed, instead curling up on her seat facing Cole. She fished her phone out of her back pocket and began texting, probably telling Joseph about her new ride.

The trip was quiet, which Cole found pleasant. It gave him time to replay his conversation with Joseph in his head. It bothered Cole that Joseph was obviously still skipping school. Hopefully he would still graduate, but it seemed like Cole had lost any influence in that decision. It was up to Joseph at this point.

After he pulled into the garage and the car emptied, Cole wandered the house listlessly. He felt no motivation to do any of his work or to take care of chores. Even his thoughts felt directionless, flashing between Joseph and Maria. When Joseph came home half an hour later, he greeted Cole only in passing before heading upstairs. Cole heard the door shut behind him as he doubtlessly found Tina waiting in his room.

Although there were six people in it, the house was very quiet around Cole. He considered going to talk to Maria, but was also afraid. Last night she had seemed improved, but this morning she had pulled away from him.

He had woken up with her still on his chest. She had opened her eyes almost the instant he shifted. Before he could think of what to say she rolled off of him and stood hurriedly, walking to the bathroom. He had caught a glimpse of her distraught face as the door closed behind her.

Evaluations greeted him on his desk after he made his way upstairs. He was in no mood to work, but he couldn't just ignore the other obligations in his life. Lately Cole had felt drawn thin between all of his commitments. When dinnertime came, he told Jane to order pizza for everyone. He was too tired to even appreciate the night in.

Cole finished his work as the night was growing old and sat in his computer chair limply. It would be eleven soon, and to be awake for school tomorrow he should head to bed. Moving, however, seemed difficult. He leaned his head back and looked at the ceiling. After a deep sigh and a moment of thought, he woke his computer again and opened up his photos. The earliest entries saved on his computer were from his honeymoon with Maria, in New Orleans. The age of the French Quarter fascinated her. As he browsed through the album, he noticed one consistency between them. Maria was in every photograph.

Cole was lost in his memories to the point that a knock at the door made him jump. He coughed awkwardly, like a man waking from a stupor. A quiet voice said his name from behind him, a voice he could identify as Tina's. He turned to face her wearily, but she looked more worried than anything.

“What is it, Tina?” he asked.

“I need to talk to you Cole. Can you drive me home? Joseph doesn't want to.”

He raised an eyebrow. He had managed to almost totally avoid being alone with her, but perhaps it would not be possible any longer. She did look bothered.

“Do you remember what I told you last time?” he said under his breath, glaring at her. She nodded twice in quick succession.

“Yes. This isn't like last time.” Her earnest tone was convincing.

“Okay. I'll take you home. Get your stuff.”

Cole was still reluctant as Tina followed him down the stairs and out the door into the garage. She lounged in his passenger seat, facing him. It made him uncomfortable, but she stayed quiet for the first leg of their drive. Once he pulled out of the neighborhood, she looked out through the front windshield and spoke.

“I took your advice. I’ve been watching him and trying to figure out if he is cheating.”

“And?”

“I know he is.”

“Do you have proof? Or just a feeling?”

He could see her well enough in his peripheral vision that he could tell her face fell. “Just a feeling I guess. But I’m sure. He doesn’t care about me like he used to.”

Cole drove under the emerging stars without questioning her. It didn’t sound like she was done speaking. Tina waved her legs up and down under the glove compartment and sat on her hands. She spoke before they had driven another mile.

“I do care about him. I don’t want to lose him.”

“Does he care about you?”

“I think so. I can’t tell anymore. He’s distant.”

“He can be like that to anyone.”

“I know. But I don’t feel attached to him any more. We’re drifting.”

“I’m not a couples counselor. But maybe you are just –” he paused, looking for the perfect word. When it didn’t come to him, he repeated after her. “Drifting.”

“Maybe,” he said to herself more than him. She bit at her nail.

“I don’t think he would cheat,” Cole said. “That doesn’t seem like him.”

“You don’t? He could. He’s taken out different girls two nights in a row.”

“I’m not saying he’s the most monogamous man around. But if you two are in something real, I don’t think he’d ruin that.”

“Maybe. We’re not dating though. I guess it wouldn’t even be cheating.”

Cole snorted. “You two are totally dating.”

“We never said that.”

“Well I’m saying it now. It’s been, what, a month?”

She pulled her knees up to her chin and buried her mouth between them. “Longer. I wouldn’t care about someone this much in just a month.”

Cole looked over at her as he pulled down the shortcut. Even in the darkness her body was speaking of defeat.

“You act like it’s already over.”

She was slow to respond. “Maybe it is.”

“Did you ever actually talk to him? Have you told him how you feel?”

Tina sighed slowly, then leaned over closer to Cole. “No. I’ve never told him I care.”

“Maybe if you started there…”

“No,” she said vehemently. She sat up straighter. “I will never tell him.”

“I’m sure he’d like to know. Maybe it would make him treat you better.”

Tina sounded tired. “He treats me well.”

“Then why not tell him you care? It is a very simple thing.”

“Maybe for you.” She looked out the side window and turned her body partly away from him. Her response was spoken with great deliberation. “If I ever let him know I care,

he'll tell me that he doesn't. I know that." She shuffled down further in her seat. "But if I never bring it up, I can keep imagining."

Cole felt within himself the same sadness that seemed to be torturing her. He was no stranger to feeling unloved. It was a particularly cruel heartbreak. He took his right hand off the wheel and set it on Tina's shoulder protectively. She pressed back against him.

"So what will you do?" he said. It sounded lame even echoing in his head.

"What can I do, Cole. I'll confront him eventually, and we'll break up, and I'll find someone else and try to move on."

"Ever had a hard breakup before?" he asked her. It occurred to him for the first time that perhaps Tina had always ended relationships on her terms.

She shook her head and turned towards him. Once she sat up she regained a bit of her composure and strength. It made her less pitiful, and much more attractive.

"I bet we're in the same boat," she said.

"I don't think Joseph knows what to do with either of us," Cole said, trying to deflect her obvious intentions. Tina laughed.

"That's not what I meant. Don't you ever miss being wanted?"

"I am wanted."

"Hmm. Sure." She leaned in closer as they pulled back out onto the main road. "If you ever feel alone, you know where to find me."

"Tina, don't start this again," he said, leaning away from her. He had been worried about bringing her into his car again for precisely this reason.

"I know, I know. Just making sure you remember me. If you won't help me out like this, will you at least do me a favor?"

She shifted away and Cole's head cleared considerably. "Depends on the favor."

"Just watch him for me. See if you notice any signs he's messing around. I'd like to know precisely why I'm not good enough for him." There was an almost predatory note in her voice. Cole glanced over at her, and saw that her eyes were slanted and fiery.

"Sure. I'll watch him. But I still don't think he's the type. Maybe you two just aren't compatible."

She crossed her arms over her chest and made a noise of derision. "Whatever. I'll ask him directly soon. He'll tell me."

Cole wanted to say more, but had lost track of whose side he was on. Cole weighed his son against Tina and tried to decide who was the good guy. He had tried so far to support them both, but did not know what direction he'd turn if he had to pick a side. Tina kept her gaze locked forward and her arms crossed.

After passing the gate and dropping Tina at the end of her driveway, Cole found himself alone in the car. He turned on the radio but couldn't find anything he liked. He turned it off and sped instead.

Despite his speed, it was quite late when he arrived home. For the sake of any sleepers, he parked outside the garage instead of opening the loud door. He let himself in silently through the front door and locked up, then headed upstairs.

He stopped on the fourth stair from the top, far enough up to see down the length of the hall. The short figure of Tessa slunk out of Joseph's room into the hall and closed the door. She moved like a cat, her scarf draped over one shoulder. Her hair was a disarrayed mess. When she turned back towards Jane's room, she saw Cole's head and shoulders on the stairs and froze in place. She looked young and scared.

“No,” Cole said, stepped up another stair. “No, no, no.”

Tessa looked down to the side. Her eyes closed and she winced visibly.

“Tessa?” Cole said in disbelief, stepping towards her. She took a step back to look up at him, then looked back down. She moved like a cornered animal.

“Hey,” she said quietly, avoiding eye contact.

“Not you,” he shook his head. “I never – really?”

Tessa shifted her scarf, hands moving in a flurry as she wrapped it around her neck and face, obscuring everything up to her nose. She seemed at a loss for what to say.

“Is he in there?” Cole asked, still doubting what he saw. The top of her blouse was untied and open across her sternum, lengths of string hanging down her flat chest.

She nodded in response to his question, and Cole took a step back, trying to clear his mind. His confusion was ebbing away and being replaced with a far more familiar emotion; anger.

“Go to Jane’s room. Stay in there all night. Do you understand me?”

Tessa nodded, then dodged around him and fled down the hall. She took great care opening Jane’s door. Jane would be asleep on the king bed, the other half growing cold. She had inherited the bed from the master bedroom months ago, and Cole knew that the two girls shared it. He hoped his daughter slept deeply.

Cole waited until Tessa was gone, then counted to a hundred. He opened Joseph’s door and stepped inside. It was difficult for him to not slam it behind him.

Joseph was sitting on the edge of his bed in only his briefs, laptop resting on his thighs. He jumped off the bed when Cole barged in. His face warped through confusion, anger, and then settled on fear when his eyes met Cole’s.

“Dad,” Joseph started, but Cole had no intention to let him go on. Cole grabbed Joseph by the shoulders and lifted him bodily to his feet, his laptop skittering across the carpet. Cole pushed him away and Joseph stumbled, collapsing against his bookshelf. He looked at Cole in muted surprise.

Cole grabbed him and pulled him back to his feet. He held Joseph in place right in front of him. “What the hell, Joseph,” he growled, wary of waking the whole house.

“Get off me,” Joseph said weakly, grabbing hold of Cole’s forearms.

“What are you doing?” Cole said, shaking him hard. Joseph’s back cracked against the shelf again and Joseph gasped audibly. Cole snarled. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Let go,” Joseph said, louder now. He tried to shake himself free. “Let me explain.”

Cole knocked him against the shelf again. Three books fell off, one of them hitting his arm on the way down. The sound of Joseph’s head hitting the wood was stark in the otherwise silent house.

“I was just reassuring your girlfriend that you wouldn’t cheat on her, and then I come home to this?”

“She isn’t my girlfriend,” Joseph said, sounding more desperate. He released Cole’s arms and reached behind his back, trying to hold himself away from the shelf. “And this isn’t what it looks like, just let me explain.”

Cole dropped him and took a step back, his arms hanging at his sides. His hands were still balled into fists and his breathing was erratic. “She’s fourteen, Joseph. Fourteen. You’d better have some damn good explanations.”

“She’s fifteen,” Joseph said quickly, and Cole had to resist grabbing him again. “But I didn’t want this. She came to me. This was her idea.”

“You expect me to believe that Tessa just decided to come in here and forced herself on you?”

“I’m not saying I wasn’t willing,” Joseph said, stepping away from Cole until his back was pressed against the shelf again. Cole stepped forward to match his backpedaling. “But she started this.”

“I find that awfully hard to believe.”

“It’s the truth. I’d flirted with her before, when she was around. But never more. I wasn’t even really serious.”

“Bullshit.”

“She was in here, wasn’t she?”

“Sure. Doing it in Jane’s room might have made her feel betrayed.”

Joseph looked away, face pensive. “I wasn’t trying to betray anyone. She just walked in here and started touching me.”

Cole closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. “I’m finding it awfully hard to believe you Joseph. She’s fifteen, for Christ’s sakes.”

“I know. I’m not too sure either.”

“You were sure enough to have sex with her.”

“No, I didn’t. We stopped. She wanted to though.”

“Well then what the hell did you do?”

Joseph held the back of his neck in both his hands. “We got awfully close.”

Cole scratched his face and tried to calm down. He regretted his outburst, but still felt let down. “You keep making it hard to stay on your side Joseph,” he said. Joseph met his eyes then looked away again.

“I promise, dad, I didn’t plan this to happen. She came in here.”

“You should have stopped her. What about Tina? Shit, Joseph. What the hell were you thinking?”

“I don’t know, dad, all right? I don’t know.”

“Dad?” The voice was quiet and came from behind Cole, from outside Joseph’s doorway. Cole closed his eyes and turned to face the door. He walked to it, then opened it a crack, blocking the view inside with his body. Jane was standing in the hall, looking up at him expectantly. She looked tired and confused both, and Tessa was standing just behind her looking mortified. He glanced over his shoulder at Joseph and saw that he had his gaze locked on the ground.

“Hey Jane, sorry for waking you,” Cole said, putting on a smile for her. She tried to look past him into the room, but he blocked the view.

“I heard a crashing, what’s going on?”

“I knocked some books over. Nothing to worry about.” The lie flowed so easily from his lips. Twelve thirty on a Friday morning was hardly the time to tell her. Cole had no idea how Jane would react to finding out that her best friend was trying to sleep with her brother, but he knew that it would bother her.

She nodded at him. “Nothing’s wrong?”

“No Jane, nothing at all. Go ahead to bed, school tomorrow.”

She nodded to him again, slower this time. “Okay. Come on Tessa.”

Tessa met Cole’s eyes and gave him a pleading look, but his returning stare was blank. He didn’t know how to feel towards Tessa now, so he chose to show her nothing.

Once they had left, he turned back to Joseph. In the intervening time, he had pulled his pants back on and sat on the edge of his bed.

Cole walked around to stand in front of his son, crossing his arms over his chest. Joseph looked up at him, his face a mask of worries. Cole sighed.

“You’ve gotten yourself into some shit.”

“I know.”

“There’s going to be consequences for this. But we won’t handle it tonight. You didn’t have sex with her?”

Joseph shook his head once to each side.

“Good. We’re going to talk tomorrow, after school. Be on your best behavior. I need time to think.”

Joseph nodded mutely, and Cole could tell from the particular hanging of his shoulders that he was feeling shame. Cole wanted to both reprimand and comfort him.

“Go to bed. You’d better stay in here. No need to make this worse.”

“I know.”

Cole knew nothing else to say. He opened the door enough step through, then turned back to face his son. Joseph had lifted his head but was not watching Cole; instead, his eyes were glazed over and facing directly forward. From this angle, Cole could see that there were red marks down his back from where he had been knocked against the shelves.

“Sorry, dad,” Joseph said softly into the air. Cole looked away from his wounds.

“I’m sorry too, son.”

Friday

The next morning, Cole made breakfast for Jane and Tessa. He found making conversation with Tessa impossible. She had the same frozen expression on her face the entire meal, hiding behind her scarf. Jane didn't seem to notice. Silence was not unusual for Tessa.

“So, Jane, how is your sculpture class going?”

She looked up from her pancakes. “It's nice.”

“You have it today, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you guys doing in class?”

She finished chewing and set down her fork. “I'm making a rabbit's head.”

“That sounds morbid.”

“It looks pretty cute right now. We're just learning about textures.”

“Oh, okay. Whenever you have a finished product, I'd love to see it.”

Jane smiled at him. It made a jarring contrast with Tessa's thousand-yard stare.

Cole glanced between them. Jane hadn't noticed Tessa's fearful demeanor.

After dropping the girls off and parking his car, Cole made his way into the office and set about his day's work. He had several meetings through the morning, both impromptu and prearranged. His last appointment ran into his lunch break. Once the student had left, Cole stood and stretched, then walked around the desk. As he stepped out into the hall, his office phone rang. With a sigh, Cole stepped back into the office and answered.

“Hello, this is Cole Roth.”

“Hey Cole, this is Officer Aphon. We had a bit of a situation just now in the lunchroom, I’d like you to come down to the principal’s office.”

“What happened?” Cole said, brow wrinkling. Joseph had a later lunch period.

“Your daughter started a fight, apparently. No one’s talking to me down here, can you just come over?”

“Of course,” Cole said, grabbing his face with his free hand and sighing. “I’ll be right over.” Of course something had happened with Jane. Trying to conceal the recent happenings from her may have been a mistake.

When Cole walked into the foyer of the principal’s office, he found Jane and Tessa both sitting in the straight-back chairs. The foyer was dominated by a counter separating the waiting area and the back offices. Officer Aphon was leaning against the counter, looking back and forth between the girls. The artificial plants and covered bulletin boards did little to brighten the gloomy atmosphere. Jane had her arms and legs crossed and her eyes were locked on Tessa, who was sitting with her hands in her lap. Tessa’s gaze was downcast and her face was hidden by her hair.

“Hello Mr. Roth,” Officer Aphon said, gesturing at Jane. “I believe that this is your daughter?”

“Yes sir, she is.”

“Well Jane, do you want to tell your dad what happened?” said the Officer, leaning into Jane’s line of sight. She ignored him but did turn to glare at Cole.

“I don’t know, dad, do you want to tell me what Tessa did?” Jane said. Her voice was frigid.

“Seems to me like you already know.”

“Now I don’t know what they were fighting about,” Officer Aphon said. “That’s not my place, I know. But I can tell you what I saw. I saw Jane here knock her friend over and jump on top of her. Looked like she was trying to bash her head in.”

Cole looked between them and saw no reaction from either.

“All right. We’ll settle this after school. You two stay apart until then.”

Before he had even finished, Jane stood stepped past him towards the hall. Officer Aphon made a noise of complaint, stepping forward to block her.

“Now Cole, they were fighting. There is a punishment.”

“Please, Officer. I’m sure you recognize these girls. They’re not trouble. It won’t happen again, I can assure you of that. Let me handle the punishing.”

Officer Aphon sighed and wrung his hands together. “I can let your daughter off with a warning, but I need to inform her parents,” he gestured at Tessa, “Unless she’s your daughter too.”

“No, she isn’t. Could you give her parents a call?”

“I’ll see if we have a number on file. What’s your full name?” Officer Aphon said, stepping to the computer behind the counter while looking at Tessa.

“Theresa Basco,” she muttered, eyes still downturned.

Cole walked in front of Tessa and nudged her leg with his foot. She looked up at him then, tired and scared.

“You tell her what happened?”

Tessa nodded once slowly.

“I’ve got it here,” Officer Aphon said, gesturing at the computer. “Want me to give them a call or would you prefer to do it?” he said to Tessa.

Tessa looked fearful but reached for the phone. Cole thought for a moment and realized that keeping this hidden from Tessa's parents would be potentially damning. It was not the sort of news that would age well, if they found out later, and since word would inevitably get around the school after Jane's outburst, he reasoned that it would be better to tell Tessa's parents now. She didn't seem to have been hurt by her and Joseph's actions.

"Ask them to come by the house later," Cole said, putting a hand on Tessa's shoulder as she dialed. "I need to talk to them. Bad news doesn't age well."

"Is something going on that I need to know about?" asked officer Aphon, raising an eyebrow.

"No," Cole said, smiling disarmingly. "A problem entirely outside the school."

Tessa's face had fallen and was turning white, but she didn't argue as the phone rang.

"Hello, mom? H-hey. I need to tell you, I'm," she swallowed slightly, "I'm getting a warning from school. I was in a fight. I'm okay." she paused for a moment while listening to the response. "No, nothing. And you need to come over to Jane's house. Mr. Roth wants to talk to you. No, no, just you." She finished and spent a moment more listening to a response, then handed the phone to the Officer.

"This is Officer Aphon from Maplegrove High, are you Tessa's mother? Well ma'am, your daughter was in a little fight today. She didn't start it but since I'm letting her off with a warning it is policy to inform the contact parent." He paused. "Yes ma'am. Of course." Another pause. "I don't know anything about that. I expect your daughter could tell you more. Of course." A longer pause. "Thank you. Goodbye."

After hanging up, Officer Aphon nodded at Cole. “You’re good to go. I trust that this sort of thing won’t happen again.”

“I’m sure it won’t,” Cole said, showing the officer a hollow smile before turning and herding Tessa out the door. She and Jane kept their eyes on the ground as Cole walked them back to the lunchroom.

That afternoon, Cole met the two girls standing separated outside the school. He ordered Jane to sit in the front with him, leaving Tessa alone in the back seat. Both girls watched the waving limbs of passing trees rather than watching each other’s glares.

Once they got home, Cole led them to the kitchen. Jane was still glaring daggers at Tessa, and Tessa still looked down in shame.

“When will your parents be here?” Cole asked her. She shuffled her feet.

“When dad gets off work.”

“Which means?”

“Around six.”

Cole glanced between them. “Okay. Well no way am I letting you two be alone together. If you want to talk about what’s happening you can do it here in front of me, but otherwise, Jane, I want you to go to your room and stay there.”

Jane snorted. “I don’t want to talk.”

“Fine, then go. I’m not going to punish you, but don’t push me.” He tried to convey his seriousness but Jane was still primarily concerned with Tessa. There was anger in Jane’s eyes, but it was increasingly veiled behind a denser cocktail of emotion. She looked hurt and ran upstairs without another word.

“And you can stay here,” Cole said, crossing his arms and looking at Tessa. She glanced up at him.

“For five hours?”

“Yep. I’m sure you have schoolwork or something. Occupy yourself.”

Tessa’s cheeks were flushed and her hands hung dead at her sides. They sat at the kitchen table, Cole fiddling with some student records while Tessa sat at her computer. Her hands occasionally lifted out of her lap and brushed over the track pad, but she was doing very little. She must have been reading.

Cole found he was too distracted to work and folded the manila folders closed again, returning them to his suitcase. Instead, he followed Tessa’s lead and took out his laptop, killing time.

Joseph arrived home minutes later. When he walked in the door, he glanced between Tessa and Cole, his face falling.

“Something happen?”

“Yes. Jane now knows about what you’ve been doing behind her back.”

Joseph nodded slowly.

“And Tessa’s parents are coming over here tonight to talk.”

Tessa’s body tightened reflexively while Joseph straightened his stance and looked first at Tessa, then at Cole.

“All right. When?”

“Apparently around six. Tessa’s staying with us until then, although she’s not leaving this room. I’m keeping her away from Jane. They had a bit of a disagreement.”

Joseph nodded, taking in what was being said. “So Jane’s upstairs now?”

“Yeah. Although I don’t recommend trying to talk to her. I’m willing to bet that she’s not too happy with you right now.”

“Probably not.”

“When they get here,” Cole said, “You’re going to have to talk to them. You both are. They have a right to know.”

“I know,” Joseph said, a look of resignation on his face. Tessa looked afraid, her gaze still downcast.

Cole nodded back at him. “You can wait upstairs if you want, just don’t leave.”

Joseph was looking off to the side and biting his lip. Cole could tell from his demeanor that he understood the trouble he was in. The cockiness he normally exuded had vanished. After a sigh, Joseph turned away, heading upstairs.

Cole returned to his laptop, matching Tessa, but soon grew weary and shut the machine, standing up to pace the kitchen. Slow minutes grew into slow hours as he walked around the bottom floor of the house, too listless to do anything meaningful. He busied himself with trying to read, with eating a bowl of cereal, then with tidying up the house. Tessa seemed frozen in time, totally immobile in her chair.

When at last Tessa’s parents did arrive, they came with sound and fury. Her father was a pot-bellied boar of a man who drummed on the door with his meaty hands. Her mother had a build identical to Tessa’s, slight and short. Her hair was steely and drawn back in a bun.

Cole answered the door and invited them both inside. It was his first time meeting Tessa’s parents, but they wasted no time with pleasantries.

“Where’s our daughter?” the man said, looking around the foyer as if expecting to find her hiding in it.

“She’s just waiting in the kitchen. I don’t think we’ve met, by the way. I’m Cole, Jane’s father.”

“Charmed,” said Tessa’s mother, extending a hand. “I’m Alice. This is my husband, Roger.”

“Nice to meet you,” Cole said to her, and to Roger’s retreating back. The man was already making his way further into the house.

“What seems to be the problem exactly?” Alice asked him, drawing his attention back away from her husband. She had a thin but good-natured smile. “I heard from the school that she was involved in a fight?”

“Well, yes. My daughter Jane knocked her around a little, but she’s completely fine. Nothing serious.” He breathed in heavily. “But there is a more serious issue I wanted to discuss with both of you.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

Cole shook his head. “If you’ll just walk down this hall and go into the kitchen, I’ll explain in a moment. Let me just call my son down.”

Alice nodded at him and started walking after her husband. Cole could hear Roger’s voice from the kitchen, slowly rising in volume. It sounded like he was not pleased with Tessa.

A moment after he knocked on Joseph’s door it opened inwards. Joseph looked solemn.

“They’re here. Let’s go.”

They walked into the kitchen, Cole leading, and saw that Tessa's family had spread themselves around the room. Tessa had not moved from her chair, although now her arms were locked rigidly at her sides, her hands white-knuckled. Roger was sitting across from her, in the chair that Cole had been using, talking at her angrily. He gestured with his hands in sweeping motions. Alice was standing just inside the door, her own arms crossed as she watched the table.

"Sorry for the delay," Cole said loudly, interrupting Roger's tirade. The red-faced man looked away from Tessa and glared at Cole.

"Your daughter assaulted mine, right?" he said. It was an auspicious beginning.

"Jane knocked her over. I don't think much else happened. It ended very quickly."

"Now, Tessa's been spending a lot of time over here at your house, Mr., Mr...."

"Cole," said Alice.

"At your house, Mr. Cole. And I won't stand for my daughter being mistreated."

"Jane and Tessa normally get along very well. I'm sure she can attest to that."

Tessa was still looking down at her lap and seemed very reluctant to speak. Rather than lose the momentum of the conversation, Cole opted to continue instead of waiting for her.

"But today they did have a disagreement, and the source of that disagreement is why I wanted to speak to both of you." Cole looked back over his shoulder and saw that Joseph was standing in the doorway, leaning one shoulder against the frame, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes were on Cole.

"What did they disagree about?" Alice asked.

“Well, your daughter, and my son Joseph here,” he gestured over his shoulder, “They spent some time together last night.”

“What do you mean, some time?” said Roger.

“I mean that I caught Tessa sneaking out of his room past midnight, after they had been physical with each other.”

Alice looked between Joseph and Tessa urgently, but Roger’s reaction was more volatile. His flushed face turned a darker hue of red and he stood out of his chair in a flash, slamming his palms down on the table. He was glaring at his daughter.

“What happened?” his voice was surely loud enough that Jane and Maria could hear it from upstairs. Cole hoped that both of them would know to stay away.

“Daddy, please –”

“And you,” Roger continued, rounding on Joseph. “What have you been doing to her?”

Joseph raised one eyebrow but did not move from the doorway. “Not much. Last night was the first time we did anything.”

Roger stepped out from behind the table, rotating his gaze between Tessa, Joseph, and Cole. “I said,” he said, locking his gaze on Joseph. “What have you been doing to her?”

Joseph pushed off of the frame with his shoulder, standing upright and moving more behind Cole. “I haven’t slept with her.”

Roger glared down at Tessa. “What do you have to say for yourself, huh? I want an explanation.”

“Dear, please,” said Alice, but her husband threw her a withering glare and she slunk back into the corner.

“I said, I want an explanation!”

“Daddy, please!”

Roger turned to face Joseph. Cole stepped forward, making his presence obvious. So far, he was content to let the larger man vent his emotion, but Cole would not let this come to blows. He was confident in his ability to stop Roger if he needed to.

“What lies have you been telling my daughter, punk?” Roger hissed, trying to step around Cole to face Joseph.

“I didn’t lie to her. It was just a little bit of messing around,” Joseph said, his voice level. Cole was impressed with his restraint and his fearlessness.

“Just a little messing around? Just a little - I will not stand for my daughter being a part of anything like that, you little shit.”

“Now, there’s no need for name calling,” said Cole, “Nothing too extreme has happened between them, and it isn’t anyone’s fault. They’re just kids. Exploring.”

“No,” Roger said as he shifted his glare to his daughter. “Not my daughter. I didn’t raise a whore.”

Tessa refused to meet his gaze.

“I thought that you should know about this,” Cole said, refusing to be sidetracked by Roger, “but I also don’t think that either of them were harmed by this.”

Roger turned away from his daughter and pointed one meaty finger directly at Cole’s nose. His bare arms were covered in thick dark hair. “You shut up. I want to talk to my daughter.” He turned back to Tessa without giving Cole a second thought. “And you. Tell me what he did to you.”

“Daddy, he didn’t - ”

Roger slammed his hand down next to Tessa on the table, shaking the room. Cole was getting annoyed and his first impulse was to respond with violence of his own. He restrained himself because he felt like any sort of escalation would end badly for Tessa and Joseph both.

“Bullshit. Tell me what he did to you.”

Tessa pulled away from him, grasping her hands together in her lap, but before Cole could say anything Joseph spoke.

“It was just a blowjob. And she isn’t a whore.”

Roger pivoted away from Tessa, which Cole suspected had been Joseph’s goal.

“You shouldn’t yell at your daughter like that. Look how scared she is.”

“Don’t you dare tell me how to raise my daughter. I will run my household how I damn well want to.”

“Right. Got it. She hasn’t done anything that bad though. You’re overreacting.”

Cole admired Joseph’s valor but made sure to keep his shoulder in front of Joseph, presenting a physical barrier to Roger.

Roger’s eyes narrowed, and he spun to glare at Alice, who had been silently watching from the corner. She looked away from him.

“And what do you have to say about this?”

“I’m sure that Tessa’s just experimenting. She can’t be blamed for curiosity.”

Roger grunted and spun back to Joseph. All of his motions were exaggerated, like a bull posturing against the matador. Cole knew that bulls killed a lot of matadors.

“So this is your fault, is that what you’re all saying?” Roger said, asking Joseph but indicating everyone with a sweep of his arms.

“Now, this isn’t an issue of fault,” Cole said, but Roger wasn’t having any of it. He continued to stare at Joseph, waiting for a response.

“How old are you?” Roger’s eyes lit up. Joseph raised his chin slightly.

“Nineteen.”

A grin spread across Roger’s face. “You know what you are? You’re an adult. This is statutory rape.”

Cole felt cold in an instant, and the atmosphere in the room changed completely. The word rape had never crossed Cole’s mind.

“Now hold on,” Joseph said, taking a step forward, but Roger pulled away from him. He seemed less interested in being physically aggressive now, instead smirking.

“I’m going to press charges against you, kid. I have witnesses right here. You admitted it yourself, in front of all of us.”

“Daddy, please, he didn’t rape me, it isn’t like that,” Tessa said in a rush of air, but Roger slammed his hand on the table and she fell silent.

“Surely that won’t be necessary,” Cole said, trying to keep his voice level. “I’m sure that we can settle this without the law. This should stay between our families.”

“Oh no,” Roger said, looking vindictive and pleased. “The only interaction I want between our families will happen in a courtroom.”

“Roger,” said Alice, but he ignored her completely and she didn’t go on.

“I didn’t rape her,” Joseph said, his voice weaker now.

“Yes you did. And I’ll make sure you end up behind bars for it.”

Roger seemed to be done talking, and he looked around the kitchen slowly, taking in all of the scared faces watching him. “In fact, I think that we’ll be leaving now. I’m not saying anything else until I’ve talked to a lawyer.”

“Roger, please,” Cole said, trying to stay level headed. He didn’t know enough law to be sure, but he felt that Roger would probably have a strong legal case against Joseph; their age gap, four years, was significant enough that it must be illegal. This was not how he had seen this conversation going.

“We’re leaving,” Roger reiterated, grabbing Tessa roughly by the arm and dragging her to her feet. When Cole looked to Alice for support, her face was wearing a well-practiced blank expression. She looked away from his begging gaze.

“This isn’t necessary, I assure you. We can handle this between ourselves.”

Cole’s words fell on deaf ears as Tessa’s family moved towards the front door. Joseph seemed frozen where he stood, watching Tessa’s retreating back with a look equal parts confusion and pain. Tessa glanced up from the ground only once, as she passed through the middle of the foyer, and Cole saw that she made eye contact with Joseph. Her eyes looked apologetic.

Cole stood in the front doorway as Roger dragged Tessa down their front walk. He wanted to call after them but knew that it was useless. Alice was walking behind Roger with her gaze downcast and her arms limp at her sides.

A ghost breezed by Cole, too light and quick for him to react. He felt her hand touch his in passing as Maria flew down the path after them. It looked to Cole like her feet, visible below the hem of her robe, weren’t even moving. In a second, she had caught up with Alice and grasped her hand.

Alice gasped and spun to face Maria. Cole could not see his wife's face, but Alice's confusion was quite visible from his position.

"You won't let this happen, will you?" Maria said, her voice louder and clearer than Cole had heard in many months. "Will you listen to your daughter?"

"What?" Alice said, caught off guard by Maria's sudden appearance. Cole realized that Tessa's parents probably knew nothing about Maria.

"Listen to your daughter, Alice. She will tell you the truth. I know that this news must be very distressing to you and your husband, but you cannot act impulsively when so much is at stake. Do not be hasty to ruin a young man's life. Listen to your daughter."

Alice was at a loss for words, but Roger felt no such effects. He grabbed her by the arm in the same way that he held Tessa and dragged her down the path with an unintelligible grunt. The mothers didn't stop staring at each other until Roger slammed the passenger door closed, tinted windows hiding Alice from view. Maria watched their car pull out of sight.

Cole watched his wife, his thoughts muddled. He could hear Joseph behind him, shifting around uneasily. Both of them were watching Maria.

When she did turn and head back inside, she said not a word to either of them. Instead she touched Cole's chest gently, over his heart, then brushed past him and did the same to Joseph. She headed towards the living room.

Cole stepped inside after her, shutting the door. For a moment he and Joseph stood in the front hall in silence, contemplating each other with blank eyes.

"Go to bed," Cole said at last, sighing.

"It's seven o'clock."

"I know. Go apologize to Jane, then go to bed."

“I bet she’ll hit me.”

Cole scratched his cheek, feeling his stubble against his fingertips. “You’ve taken enough knocks from me. I’m sure you can handle hers.”

Joseph looked away. “Sure.”

The room was very quiet. Cole could hear the soft whir of their air conditioning. “I didn’t want things to go this way.”

“Yeah. Me neither.” Joseph said. He sounded less petulant than normal.

“I’ll do what I can to keep this out of a court. He has a good case though.”

“I know.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told them,” Cole said, wistful. He had been sure that telling Tessa’s parents was the right thing to do. His code of honor, which he had hoped would be shared between parents, had compelled him.

“Maybe. But it’s done now.”

Cole nodded at him, regarding his son. Joseph didn’t seem angry. He was more resigned than anything.

“What if Jane asks me for an explanation?” Joseph said.

“Do you have one?”

“Not really.”

“Tell her the facts. She deserves that. Especially because I suspect Tessa will be spending significantly less time over here. This will ruin their friendship.”

Joseph shook his head. “He’s crazy. I didn’t rape her.”

“I believe you. I think she started it. But the law has a different stance.”

“Shit, I know. I know.”

Cole stepped towards Joseph and touched his shoulder. “Jane is a good person. She’ll see your regret. Maybe she’ll take it easy on you.”

Joseph shook his head. “It isn’t her that I’m worried about.”

“Yeah. Me neither.”

After Joseph headed upstairs, Cole went into the living room in search of Maria. She was sitting in front of the fireplace, her legs folded beneath her and her hands in her lap. Cole sat down next to her, draping one arm over her slim shoulders.

“You know what happened?”

“I knew before Joseph did.” Her eyes never left the fireplace.

“You saw this coming?”

“At the barbeque. Something about how she looked at him.”

Cole stared at the iron grate. They had never gotten much use out of their fireplace and the ashes in the bottom were years old.

“Thank you for defending Joseph. I know that he appreciates it. Maybe you got through to Alice more than anything I said.”

“She won’t be able to stop him.”

Cole nodded slowly, imagining a flame. “No. He has too much steam. Too much bluster.” He looked sideways at her. “Do you think that Joseph deserves this?”

“He made a very bad decision. But he is not bad.”

“No, he isn’t.”

She leaned her head over onto his shoulder. He imagined that she too was picturing a cracking fire.

Maria lifted one hand out of her lap and revealed that she was holding a neon green lighter. She had smoked much of her life, but that had been decades ago. It was strange to him that she still had a lighter.

She flicked the wheel and brought a tiny flame to life. They watched it mutely.

“I wanted to burn myself yesterday.”

“Why?”

“To see if it would still hurt.”

“Did you?”

“No. I was too scared.”

Cole reached out to take the lighter from her, but she released the flame and pulled her hand away from him.

“It isn’t mine,” she muttered.

“Why would you burn yourself?”

“I told you.” Her eyes were unfocused, as if they could still see the fire. “I burn every day on the inside. I wondered if I could still burn on the outside.”

Cole wrapped his arms tighter around her. He felt pathetically unfit.

“But you didn’t do it?”

“No. It was stupid, I know. I would still burn. I can still be hurt.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. Are you sure I can’t take that thing? It seems like it’s giving you bad ideas.”

Her voice sounded like a smile. “I’ll keep it.”

Cole watched her until his leg fell asleep. Holding her in this position was uncomfortable. When he let go and stood, she turned her head to watch him.

“I’m going to go to bed,” he said. “Do you want to come with me?”

“I’ll be up soon,” she said, looking back at the fireplace. Cole touched her shoulder, then forced himself to turn away and head out of the room. As he stepped into the hall, he heard the distinctive click of the lighter coming to life.

He prepared the house for the night, locking the doors and turning off the lights, seeing her every time he walked past the living room. The night was still very young, but he had nothing to do and his mind was fatigued. He couldn’t stop imagining Maria pressing a match against her bare breastbone. In his imagination, her skin burned like paper, and beneath that seared parchment her body was hollow.

He lingered for a moment after finishing and watched Maria. She was staring intently into the dancing flame. It unnerved Cole, and although he was ashamed to admit it, made him distrust her. This fascination with fire was new and worrying.

He lay in bed for many hours, turning his mind between Joseph and Maria. He could think of no way to satisfy Roger and keep Joseph out of prison. The situation only became more ludicrous the longer he thought about it. He was still awake when Maria came to bed, although he did not speak to her.

As true night fell, Cole rolled over to face his wife. She was lying on her back, eyes closed, but he didn’t think she was asleep. The lighter was sitting on the nightstand, and for an instant he was tempted to steal and destroy it. He resisted the urge and rolled over to face the opposite direction.

Thoughts of Joseph kept Cole up, but eventually he succumbed to his weariness. Maria did not sleep until long after her husband, haunted by thoughts of fire and ruin. Neither slept restfully.

Saturday

Cole found himself tossing and turning early the next morning. Every time he closed his eyes his fists clenched into the twisted sheets and Roger's snarling face haunted him. The man's bluster and huge frame stuck in his mind and left him queasy. He sighed and slipped out of bed, placing his feet evenly on the cold hardwood floor.

Maria was watching him, her eyes alert. For an instant the urge to touch her face filled him, but Cole resisted and smiled at her instead. Her face remained impassive.

After dressing and splashing water across his face, Cole descended to the kitchen. He found Jane already sitting at the table, a bowl in front of her with only a quarter inch of milk in the bottom. He set the coffeemaker and sat down next to her. His coffee was ready before he had decided what to say.

"How did you sleep?" he asked, purposefully looking down into his mug. They had so far avoided making eye contact.

"I've slept better." Her voice was icy but tired.

"Did Joseph come by to talk to you last night?"

Jane looked over at him now, and he glanced at her sideways over the top of his coffee. Her eyes were red.

"Yeah, he did. We talked for a while."

Cole put his free hand in his lap to avoid drumming on the table. He wanted to continue pushing her but something made him wary. Before he came up with something else to say, Jane put her hands up to her face.

“I can’t believe them. I can’t. Why? Why does he always ruin everything?” she said, her voice clear in spite of her wet cheeks.

“I don’t think that either of them were trying to ruin anything,” Cole said, reaching to put his arms around his daughter. Jane leaned sideways into his grip, but he was unable to comfort her. Her back remained rigid.

“He’s an asshole,” she said, and Cole nodded slowly.

“Sometimes.”

“All the time. An asshole.”

“What did he say to you?”

“He told me what happened,” Jane said, shifting on her chair and pulling away. “I’ll never talk to Tessa again.” She sounded resigned and resolved.

“I don’t think she wanted to hurt you,” Cole said.

“Well she did. I don’t care what she wants.”

“Okay.”

“They’re both assholes.”

Cole frowned and looked down at his hands. His knuckles had never quite lost the calloused bulges that left thin gaps between his fingers. “Not a word I want you saying.”

Her glare was withering. “Oh, you care what I do. I can’t even say a bad word.”

“Jane, I know that you’re upset, but - ”

“No, you don’t know,” she said back, cutting him off with her hiss. “You don’t know what this feels like. I hate them. I can’t believe them. I can’t.”

“Will you ever forgive Joseph?” he asked, scooting closer to her. He heard a creaking of footfalls on the steps but ignored them.

“He’s my brother. I’ll have to. But I don’t want to,” Jane said.

As she spoke, Joseph entered the kitchen. His eyes, too, looked tired and he kept his gaze downturned as he stepped to the fridge and swung the door open. He shivered.

“Tessa probably won’t be coming by as much anymore,” Cole said.

“Good. I don’t want to see her,” Jane said back, staring at Joseph. Tears still ran down her face. They made her look somber and old, and the quiet desperation in them was easily seen in the flickering of her eyes. Jane had never been prone to crying, but she had always cried loudly. The calm she wore now reminded Cole of how she had cried after hearing her mother’s diagnosis. There was no ceremony to such sadness.

Joseph sat down with his juice and his frown, watching his sister across the round wooden tabletop. Cole looked between them.

“How did you sleep?” he asked Joseph.

“Badly.”

“Good,” Jane spat.

“Now Jane - ” Cole tried to interject, but before he could say anything else Jane swiveled her neck to look at him.

“What? What is it? I’m not allowed to get angry over this? Joseph can do whatever he wants with anyone he wants, but I have to be a perfect angel?”

Cole closed his mouth and looked at her, unsure what to say. She seized on his hesitation and turned to Joseph, lowering her voice again.

“You hurt me. I can’t believe you actually did this. I hope you do go to prison.”

Only his eyes betrayed his grief. “I didn’t want this to happen. I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“You went along with it. She was my friend, Joseph. Doesn’t that mean anything to any of you?”

Cole and Joseph both sat at the table, cowed into silence, while Jane tapped her bare toes on the ground rhythmically. She was shaking from her emotion.

“You’re awful!” she said at last, her voice rising. Joseph met her accusatory gaze.

“You took her from me, and now I can’t ever have her back.”

“I’m sorry Jane.”

“No. Not like me. I’m sorry that you still live here. I’m sorry you’re alive. I wish you had never met Tessa. I can’t ever see her again. I don’t want to see her.”

Cole wanted to say something, anything, to reassure his children, but knew that she was right. A pale form floated into the doorway before he could respond. The whole family was together.

Maria systematically collected her pill bottles as usual. She had never used anything but memory to keep track of the dosages. Cole watched her, his mind moiling, as she assumed her place in the fourth chair across the table from him. It was the first time that the four of them had eaten a meal together in weeks.

Maria’s presence commanded a greater degree of control over the table than he had previously. Jane and Joseph both looked down at their laps. Cole looked at his wife’s arms.

They were so thin now, atrophied and ghostly. She looked delicate and she frightened him. Jane stopped crying a minute after Maria had taken her place at the table.

“Daniel will be coming to visit later,” Maria said. The hum of kitchen electronics had been soothing, but hearing her speak brought him back to his senses.

“Oh?”

“I don’t want you here when he is.”

“Oh?” he said again, sitting up straighter. His mind was torn between thoughts of Jane and this new conversation.

“No.”

“Is this because you two fought last time?”

“Something like that,” she said, then looked over at Jane. One skeletal arm reached forward and touched Jane’s shoulder, startling her. For a moment, daughter and mother locked eyes, both of them expressionless.

“He’s an asshole. But you will have to forgive him,” Maria said.

“She’s gone. Because of what they did.”

“I know. It isn’t fair and it isn’t good.”

Jane shook her head, her eyes red but dry. She looked over at Joseph, swallowing and breathing heavily. “I want everything to go back how it was.”

Joseph laid his hands on the table. “Me too, Jane.”

“They can’t,” Maria said, softly still. They were all leaning forwards slightly to hear her. “All we can do is go on.”

Jane controlled her breathing and glared at Joseph. “I do hate you.”

He nodded at his lap. “You should.”

“We can get through this, though,” Cole said. “As a family.”

Joseph snorted and after a beat’s pause, Jane giggled hollowly.

“You two do love each other,” Maria said, looking squarely at Cole as she spoke.

He watched her eyes. “You’ll still love each other after this is all behind you.”

“Maybe,” said Jane. Joseph said nothing.

“You will,” Maria said. “You must.”

No one at the table could contradict her. After a silent minute, Jane rose from the table, hesitantly touched Maria’s shoulder, and headed upstairs. The table listened in silence to the sounds of her door opening and closing again.

“When is Daniel coming over?” Cole asked after a pause. Maria looked between him and Joseph.

“Later. In the afternoon.”

“And you don’t want me here?”

She regarded him with a level, unreadable gaze. “It would be better if you weren’t.”

In the animal core of Cole’s mind, he felt afraid. He felt possessive of Maria, and her insistence to be left alone with Daniel did nothing to quell his jealousy. Although he had told himself over and over that he trusted her, his emotions were not so levelheaded. He wanted to be the sort of man who would trust her absolutely. To his embarrassment, he was not.

There was something deeper in him that felt a colder fear, although he could not give it voice or name yet. He was not afraid of Daniel, and he was not afraid of the two of them being alone. He was afraid of his wife’s unreadable eyes. As he watched her across the

table he was acutely aware of how little he understood his wife in that moment. His love for her felt flimsy and ashen.

“Are you sure?”

She blinked lazily. “Yes.”

He nodded in resignation, trying to let his face convey the complexity of his feelings better than his words could. Maria, much to his dismay, looked away, her chin high and her gaze casting around the room with calculating sweeps.

“Will you drive me to Tina’s later? If you’re going out anyways,” Joseph said, purposefully not meeting Cole’s eyes.

Cole regarded his son in surprise. As he shook his head and refocused, he watched Maria rise from her seat as well and follow Tina upstairs. Only once she was gone did he find himself able to process Joseph’s request and understand it.

“You want to tell her?”

Joseph nodded, his lips a thin frown. “Yeah. I think I need to.”

“I agree. You’ll explain everything?”

“She deserves to know.”

“I agree.”

“I’m going to break up with her. Or let her break up with me.”

Cole sighed. “She knew something was happening.”

“Nothing was happening. Nothing until she came into my room.”

“Do you care about her?” Cole asked, remembering the last conversation he’d had with Tina. He didn’t want to think about how she’d react to Joseph’s news.

Joseph stood from the table. “I do. But I have to tell her.”

Cole couldn't decide if he was sorry for Joseph or glad to see him taking responsibility for his mistake. Things could have been much worse if Joseph hadn't turned Tessa away, but it would be much better if he had never given in at all.

"When do you want to leave?" Cole asked as Joseph turned to exit the kitchen.

"Daniel usually gets here around two. I guess we'll leave before that."

Cole nodded slowly. "Sure." He thought for a moment and called after his son before he could start upstairs. "Are you sure you want me to go with you?"

Joseph paused on the first stair. "I want you there."

"Okay. I'll come get you later."

"Sure. Thanks, dad."

Cole watched him ascend without replying. It was still early in the morning and the filtered light through the kitchen blinds drew lines across the tile floor. Cole shuffled his bare feet over the ground. He held a hot core of rage in his heart, hating Joseph for what he had done to Cole's family. But larger than that feeling, wrapping around it, was a love for his son. He hoped that he was seeing a new Joseph, a Joseph who would remain even once this trouble was gone. He had so much potential. Cole felt hypocritical for trying to control his life, but he wanted give his son the best life he could. Cole was, he realized, not a happy man. He hoped Joseph would not retread too many of his footsteps.

Cole went to his office and spent the morning researching statutory rape law. He hoped still to keep the entire situation out of court, but Roger had seemed insistent on it yesterday. Cole came to an understanding of how bad things were. Roger was right, at least as far as the law was concerned. There was no debating that the act had occurred or that it was illegal. Joseph could spend over a decade of his life in prison.

Cole shut down his computer angrily, gripping the armrests of his desk chair. He fought the urge to break the chair apart. As he breathed out through his nose, breaking Roger seemed like the more productive course of action.

He had nothing more to do but enjoyed the privacy of his office. In here, he felt as though his thoughts were relatively clear. If he went to his bedroom he's have to face Maria, and he still hadn't shaken the fear that had struck him earlier. He didn't want to deal with either of his children.

Cole leaned his head back and let his chair recline. The ceiling overhead was pleasantly featureless. It was calming to stay so still, and soon he found himself dozing.

He awoke with time to prepare some microwave meals for everyone before he and Joseph had planned to leave. Neither Jane nor Maria spoke to him when he dropped their food off, but Joseph offered to eat with him downstairs. Their meal was somber and at first Cole feared that Joseph was losing his nerve. Once they washed their plates off, however, Joseph looked at Cole and nodded.

“Let's go.”

Cole drove. They were surrounded only by the sounds of the road. Cole spent the time mulling over in his head what he expected Joseph to say. After the way that Tina had talked about him two days ago, Cole feared that the two would not separate cleanly. It was clear to him that, despite their claims, there was a real connection between them.

Joseph seemed intent to gaze out the window. He had his arms folded over his chest, somewhere between a projection of strength and holding himself. Cole didn't think that he could accomplish anything by intruding so he let his son keep his silence.

At the gate into Tina's subdivision, Joseph walked over to the keypad and entered a combination before returning. The gates slid back out of the road and Cole accelerated between them, driving along the center of the wide street. Tina's father's house loomed towards the end of the street. Joseph sunk lower in his seat as they pulled into the driveway.

"Does she know we're coming?"

"Yeah, I texted her. The door's open."

"Okay. Do you want me to go with you or wait out here?"

Joseph opened his mouth as if to speak. After a moment of hesitation, he shook his head. "You should come inside. I don't know how long this will be."

Tina's house looked more inviting on the inside than Cole had expected. The foyer was old-fashioned and paneled in wood, with wide arches leading out of the room into several interior spaces. The high ceiling drew his eyes upwards to the intricate molding along the edges of the room. The effect was sophisticated and the light coming through the front windows gave the room a picturesque glow.

When Tina herself stepped out from one of the interior doorways, the sound of her heels announcing her before they could see her, Joseph lifted his chin to face her directly and nodded in greeting. She was wearing black but had obviously dressed up for this meeting. Her hair was pinned back in a severe bun. Her gaze was fierce behind her makeup. She glanced at Cole and smiled formally at him before looking back at Joseph.

"Can we talk in your room?" Joseph said, his voice even but soft. Tina nodded at him, then turned to Cole.

“Feel free to make yourself at home, Mr. Roth. No one else is home so you won’t disturb anyone.” She gestured through one of the side doors. “The bathroom and kitchen are both that way, help yourself.”

“Thanks Tina,” Cole found himself saying automatically, but before he had even finished speaking she had spun around and was striding deeper into the house. Joseph watched her go for several steps before following her without another word.

Cole wandered the bottom floor of the house for several minutes, noting the décor and finding the bathroom. He got a glass and filled it with water from the mostly-empty fridge. There were slices of cheese on the top shelf and half-empty bottles of wine in the door, but everything else had the look of condiments untouched in months.

He found it disconcerting to walk around by himself. The house was fastidiously clean in the manner of a crime scene. It did not, in fact, seem like most of the rooms were ever used. Every throw pillow looked undisturbed and none of the trashcans had anything in them. There were very few pictures around the house, and they were almost all of the two girls when they were much younger. He saw nothing to confirm that Tina’s mother had ever existed. Her face had been wiped from the house.

After exhausting his good-natured curiosity, Cole sat in a living room next to the kitchen and sunk back into the armchair he had chosen. The house was quiet, and if he focused he could almost make out the sound of voices. Instead he listened to the slight rumbling of the home’s heating system.

An hour passed. Cole let his mind wander back to the beginnings of his marriage. He remembered vividly each trip to the hospital, Maria hissing at him in Spanish while

pressing her palms against her bulging stomach. He and Maria had spent far too much time in the hospital.

The first time they had been told that her treatment wasn't working, he had been dragged from the hospital by orderlies. He had wanted to tear apart that building brick by brick. Before they restrained him, he had already torn seven of his knuckles open against the cinderblock walls. In addition to Maria's bill, they had been charged for his property damage. He hadn't set foot in the hospital since, and Maria went to her appointments alone. She told him she did not mind, but he was still ashamed.

In his grief, time passed quickly. When he heard the sound of Tina's heels mincing back towards the foyer he rose and stepped back into the front room. The two teens entered only seconds later. Joseph walked past Cole without a glance and reached for the handle of the front door.

"Mr. Roth, could I talk to you for a minute?" Tina said, her voice clear. He couldn't tell if she'd been crying.

He nodded mutely and Joseph opened the door, letting in a slight chill. "I'll wait in the car," he said before stepping outside and shutting the door in one motion.

Cole watched Tina while Joseph walked away. "What is this about?"

Her face looked tired. Cole could see that there were thoughts turning over in her mind, but she was either unable to express them or deliberately hiding them.

"Nothing inappropriate. I just. I," she trailed off, her voice faltering and slipping into a higher tone than her usual huskiness. "I just. I wanted to talk."

Cole was weary but took a step towards her, away from the door. In an instant she had stepped twice towards him, her feet twisting under her. Her eyes were closed and her

face was expressionless but he saw tears beading in the corners of her eyes before she buried her face against his chest and clung onto him, letting out a single racking sob. Instinctively, he put his arms around her. She clutched his shirt and shook, silent again.

After a moment Tina pushed off of him and stood back up straight, noticeably better balanced. She took several deep breaths and then opened her eyes, shaking her head side to side.

“Sorry Cole.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry about all this.”

“No. Don’t be. You were right all along.” She shook her head harder and crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes were dry again, her voice controlled. “Of course I cared about him. We were together. We meant something to each other.”

Cole bit back his response before he could point out that Joseph had cheated on her, despite what Cole had said.

“I never would have guessed Tessa would do something like this,” Tina said. Her voice was appraising and cruel, entirely too impressed for Cole’s comfort.

“None of us expected it,” Cole said.

“He told me everything. Seems serious.”

“It is.”

“Any idea what you’re going to do?”

Cole raised an eyebrow at her questioning tone and she smiled. It looked very genuine.

“You’re a fighter, Cole. You won’t let this happen.”

“The law is against him.”

“Then you’ll have to do a damn good job.”

Cole sighed, unwilling to play her game. Tina had shed her earlier emotional outburst as easily as a shawl, and now she seemed just as composed and sharp as he had ever seen her. It was a skill he didn’t want to deal with at the moment.

“Joseph’s waiting, Tina. Unless there’s something you actually want to talk about, I should go.”

She thought for a moment before responding. “Take care of him. This wasn’t easy for him.”

“And who’s taking care of you?”

Her sneer looked almost regal. “My mom shot herself, Cole. Remember? I can handle dumping a boy.”

When he had no response, she gestured towards the door.

“Go ahead and take him home. I’m fine.”

Cole stepped back to the door and paused with his hand on the knob. “Sorry about this again, Tina.”

“Don’t be. And don’t forget my offer either,” she gave him a smile that stopped at her upper lip. “I’m single now.”

Cole drove back towards his home, but it was still too early in the day for Daniel to be gone and Cole wanted to honor Maria’s wishes to be left alone. He drove roads he was accustomed to traveling on at random before turning off into the park nearest to their house. It was a spot that he and Joseph both knew well. Years ago, they had passed many afternoons here together. Today, they sat on a park bench watching the trees bow to each gust of wind and the clouds overhead glide across the sky. Cole had rarely felt so close to his son.

They left shortly before sunset, when the silence between them had grown too loud to stand. Cole drove home, his mind swirling with thoughts and simultaneously painfully still. He felt as though everything in his life was closing in around him. Somewhere between his frustration and disappointment with Joseph and the dull black stone of his fears for Maria, he knew he could be happy. He had only to discover how.

When they reached home, Cole noted that the only lights on in the house were on the upper floor. The master bedroom and Jane's bedroom. Once they were inside, the furniture made dark looming shapes in the quiet house, shapes they both navigated past without turning on a light. When Joseph shut his door behind him, Cole was left alone in the hallway, lit only by the lines of brightness visible under everyone's doors. He went to his bedroom, seeking Maria. She had haunted his thoughts throughout the day. He needed to see her to confirm that she was still solid and real.

His hand felt frozen to the knob when he swung open the door to the master bedroom. The fan overhead was spinning, sending a gentle breeze around the room and causing the ceiling lights to flicker. The window was directly in line with the sun, and Cole squinted involuntarily against the harsh light.

Maria was silhouetted at her desk, a dark shape in the halo of light. Locks of straight brown hair were spread across the floor behind her, forming a radial barricade trapping her against the desk. At the sound of the door opening she straightened, laying down the pen she had been writing with. She looked over her shoulder. The sweep of her brow leading back over her pale skull was displayed prominently. She was bald and starkly beautiful.

She stood from the chair and walked, barefoot and confident, towards him. She stepped in the gaps between hairs, leaving the array untouched, and when she reached him she laid her arms around his neck and kissed him. Cole wrapped his arms around his wife and kissed her back, watching her as she stared back at him. She pushed the door closed behind his back. They did not break out of each other's gaze even when she released him and they separated, an inch of space between his sternum and her breasts.

“Your hair,” he said.

Maria tilted her head back and smiled, running her fingertips over her scalp. Her features were sharply exposed now, and Cole found himself memorizing every raised edge of bone. Her head looked too large for her atrophied body. She looked nothing like she had when they met. Her face was toneless, especially the pale patch that had been covered with hair. She was rigid. Her joints bulged out against the shell of her skin.

“Why?”

She took hold of him, interlacing her fingers with his across the backs of his hands. He did not resist as she guided his hands up to her face, laying them against her cheeks. Cole gripped the back of her jawbone and brushed his fingertips around her ears, feeling the uneven nubs of hair left behind. It did not look like the work of a professional. Cole suspected that either she or Daniel had done it.

“Did Daniel do this?”

Maria had not looked away from his eyes. She was smiling still, genuine warmth spreading across her face. Her skull felt unbearably fragile in his grip but nothing had changed about her smile. She was no different than she had ever been, really.

“Are you okay?” he asked at last. He was, in spite of himself, terrified. Cole couldn’t understand why she had shaved her head, why she was smiling at him now with so much love in her eyes. She had not looked at him like this in months. His heart was pounding.

“Yes, Cole. I am in control.”

“Are you in pain?”

“Not tonight. No pain tonight.” Her bone fingers slipped between the buttons of his shirt, just below the bulge of his Adam’s apple, and popped the first one out through the fabric. The tips of her thumbs drew gently down through the dark hair on his chest. Cole shivered.

“Maria?” he asked in surprise, unwilling to pull away. She ran the fingertips of one hand along his skin and dug them into the hair at the nape of his neck. Her second hand slid onto his belt.

“Am I still the woman you first loved?”

Cole looked at her. Her curves were gone. Without her hair, she looked alien and powerful. Her blouse was loose over a sunken chest, every rib jutting against her skin, the organs within barely constituting a human being. Inside her was a mortal heart.

“Always.”

“Then love me tonight.”

They moved to the bed and moved inside each other. He could feel none of her frailty. Their love was silent and slow. Her skin tasted of sweat and ash. They shut off the lights and in the dark he tried to picture her as she used to be. He couldn’t remember. In his

mind, she was frozen as she was now – smiling, eyes clear and bright, body failing. He longed to be much more than a man.

Sunday

Roger didn't call until well into the afternoon.

Cole hadn't expected a call, but neither had he been able to leave the house. His night had been unusually late, and waking with his wife lying next to him in bed had frozen him. This time, Maria made no effort to run from him. She unfolded her thin arms and encircled Cole's chest, pulling her scalp against the cavity below his chin. Nothing seemed real.

When at last they did draw apart and Maria went to shower, Cole sat on the bed facing the bathroom, his feet planted flat on the ground. The grain of the carpet against his toes was identical to the texture of the tan carpets that covered his parent's house. He hadn't set foot in that house in decades because his wife and the children he was raising with her made him unwelcome there. Those bitter memories bounced ineffectively around his mind, unable to steal the smile from his face.

They had not discussed that night and they had not discussed her shaved head. Once she was showered she bid him to do the same. When Cole reached for her he was rebuked with gentle firmness. Maria's demeanor was aloof and thoughtful. When he reemerged from the shower she had cleaned up the evidence of her haircut and was dressed. When they descended the stairs in unison Cole stared at her bobbing chin. Her face's angles were

harsher than ever before, both because of her weight and because of her baldness. There was nothing hidden about her now. After Maria took her pills she glanced at him over one pointed shoulder before turning her back on him, returning to the bedroom. Cole knew that she did not want to be followed. He could see that in every swaying step she took.

He ate breakfast and lunch, both alone. The house was occupied around him but he saw his family only in passing. Isolation cast a fog, both gloomy and calming, over Cole's mind. The house was full of quiet desperation, and into that silence the buzz of the kitchen's chorded phone was deafening.

Cole lifted the ringing phone from the receiver and spoke into it. It took him a moment to understand that the Roger on the other end of the line was the same Roger that he had talked to two nights past. It seemed inconceivable that such a large man, a man who now controlled Cole's life, could fit into the tiny antiquated bit of plastic.

"I didn't expect you to call," he said, standing. Cole wished that he wasn't quite so alone in the kitchen.

"I wanted to let you know that we've been talking to a lawyer. We're going to be seeing each other in court soon."

Cole's first response was a burning in the back of his throat that made him want to spit back at Roger, but he held himself back. He could not afford to make things worse.

"Could we consider other options, Roger? This will ruin his life forever."

"It's the law. Rape in the fourth degree." He sounded smug. It bothered Cole that Roger seemed so intent on his misplaced revenge that he didn't seem concerned with his daughter's well being or her side of the story.

“I looked up the laws, I know they’re against Joseph. But he’s only nineteen. Didn’t you ever do anything you regretted when you were younger?”

“You don’t need to know my life story. Once everything’s planned out, I’ll let you know the court date.”

“Roger, please. Can’t we talk about this?”

“No, my lawyer said I should talk to you as little as possible.”

Cole could feel the moment slipping away and feared that if Roger hung up, his chance would be lost. Tessa’s mother had seemed receptive to Cole and Maria’s pleading, but Roger was a wall of twisted and righteous wrath. If Roger was committed, Cole feared that Alice would agree with him blindly. Their marriage didn’t feel like it was built on equality. Cole cast about for some way to catch his attention.

“Please, Roger. My wife is sick.”

“And what does that have to do with my daughter?”

“Nothing, but it – it’s my family. If you take Joseph away you’ll be tearing us all apart. She needs us here.”

“I’m not doing this. Your dumbass son did this,” Roger said defensively.

“I know, I know. But couldn’t you just give us some time at least? Joseph already confessed. You have all the witnesses you’d need. Just give my wife some - ”

“No,” Roger said, cutting through Cole’s words. “I don’t see any need to give you time. And you should be ashamed of yourself for using your sick wife like this.”

“What? I’m not - ” Cole shot back into the receiver, moving the phone away from his ear in an animalistic motion of lashing out, but again Roger spoke over him.

“I’ve talked enough. I’m sure that the trial won’t take long at all. You’ll be hearing from my lawyer soon, Cole. Goodbye.”

“Wait!” Cole yelled into the phone, much louder than he had wanted, but the only response was a metallic click and a dial tone. Cole bit down against his teeth, yanking the phone’s receiver off of the counter and dropping both it and the handset to the tile floor. They bounced and clattered with satisfying energy before falling together against the cabinets, still tethered to the wall by the power cable. He stared at them, leaning back on the kitchen table, and tried to quiet his bloody thoughts.

Joseph stepped into the kitchen after a minute and picked up the phone, fixing it back on the counter in its normal place. He leaned against the counter opposite Cole and the two regarded each other. Cole was aware of how furious his brow looked, contorted into knots that bent his eyes into slivers of hot glass. Joseph watched his face closely, and once he had regained control his son spoke.

“Roger?”

“Yeah. Seems like his plans are unchanged.”

“Thanks for trying to change his mind.”

Cole sighed. “We don’t always get along Joseph, but you don’t deserve to go to jail. Not from bullshit like this.”

Joseph shook his head and looked down at his bare feet. “You never should have told them.”

“I thought it was the right thing to do. I didn’t expect this.”

“Obviously.”

“There’s no changing it now,” Cole said, wary of engaging Joseph in another fight. He was tired of fighting. Lately, it had seemed like everyone in his life was fighting.

“No,” Joseph agreed. For a minute they watched each other in silence, the Joseph sighed and spoke. “I wanted to apologize.”

“Oh?” Cole said, regarding his son. Joseph had matched his position almost exactly across the gap, mirroring him. It staged them as equals.

“I wanted to apologize.”

“I know you didn’t want any of this to happen,” Cole said.

“No, not for this,” Joseph said, straightening off of the counter and then shaking his head, “Well, for this. But not because of this. Because of everything.”

Cole pulled out a chair and sat at the table, gesturing at another for Joseph. He could tell that his son was speaking from a genuine place. The side of Joseph that was emerging in response to Roger’s disturbance in their life was someone Cole wanted very much to encourage, so he gave Joseph time to collect his thoughts once they were sitting.

“I wanted to apologize,” Joseph began again, staring intently at the wood grain next to Cole’s hands, “for how I’ve always acted. For the last year, especially the last months.”

“Thank you,” Cole said, surprised by his frankness and by the apology itself, “Apology accepted.”

“Wait, I’m not done. Let me finish. I know that I haven’t been making the best decisions for the family. I didn’t want to. I wanted to make decisions that were the best for me. I wanted to live my life in spite of what you wanted, and I wanted to get away from mom. I was scared.” His eyes had glazed over, and Cole knew that he was seeing scenes in

his mind far from the kitchen. “I’m scared now. I’m really scared, dad. But I can’t run any more, and I’m tired. I want to come home.”

“You are home, Joseph,” Cole said softly, shifting his chair forwards. Joseph glanced at him, a rueful smile flashing across his face before he settled back against the chair’s frame and glared down at his fingernails.

“Sure. But I wanted you to know. I’m on your side, and mom’s side. I want to come back to my family.”

“Thank you, Joseph.”

“I haven’t been seeing anything clearly for a while.”

“We can get through all of this.”

Joseph looked at him evenly, responding with the despair in his eyes.

“Together, we can get through all of this,” Cole repeated, watching his son.

“I was terrible to Jane. To you. To mom.”

“None of us are without fault,” Cole said, scratching the back of his head and remembering the times he had struck Joseph in the last month.

“Then how can you say we’ll get through this? Maybe we messed it up.”

Cole saw Maria’s shaved head every time he closed his eyes, stately and unafraid in his imagination. He remembered how she had felt in his arms last night, her breath heating his ear in short, uneven gasps.

“I think we can do it. We need to keep you out of prison.”

“And what about mom?”

“She has to fight alone. But she can do it.”

Joseph shook his head and leaned forward in his chair, his torso moving closer to Cole. He held his son against his chest and dug his hand into the hair on the back of Joseph's head.

"It is good to have you," Cole said, at a loss for what to say to comfort his son.

"It is good to be back."

"You are always my son."

"Are you always glad you kept me?"

"Always."

Daniel was the last person Cole expected to find on his doorstep at almost ten o'clock at night. As they stood on the stoop there was something conspiratorial about their exchange that Cole could not deny. Daniel had called his cell and told him to step outside, and when Cole had opened the door he had found Daniel already waiting, his arms limp at his side and his brown eyes wide. Only once Cole was on the front step, with the door closed behind him, did he cough slightly and speak.

"I'm sorry for dropping in unannounced and for greeting you so strangely. But I want my passage by your house today to be unknown to Maria. Is she upstairs?"

Daniel did not look like his normal self. There was a manic fidgeting in his small hands that gave him the uneasy appearance of a fish bouncing on the dock. He was wearing a suit unlike his typical wardrobe. Daniel wasn't wearing his glasses, and his clay eyes were serene, the only part of him that was calm. They were fixated on Cole's face, watching him with both animalistic cunning and a measure of cold fear.

“She is. Why don’t you want her to know you’re here? And did you shave her head yesterday? She won’t talk about it.”

“I wish that I could tell you and her both a great many things, Cole. But I have to handle this in a different way. I’ll be leaving soon.”

“Leaving?” Cole said, taken aback. He remembered faintly that Daniel had told him that his stay in the area was short-term, since he had been staying in a hotel, but Cole had come to see Daniel as a permanent anchor in Maria’s life in spite of this knowledge.

“Yes, leaving. I’m afraid that I have to head home.”

“Of course, I understand. Did you tell Maria?”

“She knows my plans. I did not want to face her today.”

“Did you have something to do with her hair?” Cole repeated.

“It was not my decision. I helped with some of the logistics, yes.”

“Why did she do it?”

“Why not do it? It gave her a measure of control.”

Cole nodded slowly. There was a glimmer in Daniel’s eyes that made Cole think he wasn’t getting the full story, but he knew he didn’t have any power to force Daniel to talk more. Cole was resigned to secrets.

“It surprised me.”

“I believe that was one of her reasons as well.”

“Maybe,” Cole said, unsatisfied. “Why are you going home now?”

“It was always a matter of time. This place doesn’t fit with me. Tonight just happened to be the breaking point.”

“Oh, you’re leaving tonight?” Cole glanced into the blackness. The porch light made the night around them seem all the darker. “Isn’t it a little late?”

“Yes, I suppose. But the nights don’t bother me, Cole.”

“Well, thank you for stopping by to tell me,” Cole said, somewhat at a loss. It was strange for Daniel to leave this moment, and for him to tell Cole in this manner.

“I just wanted you to understand. I know we haven’t always gotten along without chafing. But I never meant you ill will,” Daniel said.

“I know that now. I’m sorry for mistrusting you at first.”

“You had every right to. My entrance into your life looked predatory. You are forgiven completely.”

“Thanks. I think Maria is glad you came back into her life.”

“I hope so. It was good to reconnect with a long lost love. I have tremendous respect for her.”

“As do I,” Cole said, nodding. The only sounds in the night were a scarce few cars passing on the streets around their cul-de-sac, audible only as a slight whirl over the treetops. The lights of the other houses swam like ghostly lanterns in Cole’s peripheral vision and Daniel’s eyes flashed and he nodded slightly.

“Time works in mysterious ways. But I am glad it brought us together.”

“Me too,” said Cole.

“I do not mean to take up your entire night. I only meant to say goodbye.”

“There’s no rush. What do you intend to do, back in New York?”

“I will find ways to occupy my time. I always do.”

“Will you be writing?”

“I still have stories to tell.”

“I’ll be on the lookout. I wouldn’t mind reading some more of your work.”

“I appreciate that, Cole. Thank you. And you will look after things here?”

“Of course, I’ll look after Maria. I think she’ll accept this. She’s been better lately, I’m sure you’ve noticed. I don’t think she’ll be too hurt by you leaving.”

“No. I don’t think so either,” Daniel said, his voice very quiet.

“I’ll look after her.”

“You will,” Daniel said, as a declaration of fact. Cole nodded at him and for a moment they were both silent.

“I shall leave,” Daniel said. “Pass my tidings along to your family tomorrow. You have gifted children. Tell them to do something with their lives that will be remembered.”

“I’ll let everyone know that you said goodbye,” said Cole.

“Excellent. Then goodbye I shall say.”

He bowed at the waist awkwardly, then turned and descended the stairs, making his way back to his little black car. Cole watched him drive up their street at a measured pace. The sky overhead was clear and a slight breeze rustled the branches against each other dissonantly, so Cole wrapped his arms around his chest and stepped back inside.

Once it was time to shut the house for the night, Cole made special efforts to leave the front door locked before turning off all the lights downstairs and ascending the stairs. Joseph’s light was off, although Cole guessed that his son was still awake.

Cole stepped into his room and saw that Maria was already lying in bed. Her painting supplies had been assembled again, in the same corner, and she had clearly been working on something, but in the dimly lit room he could see no sign of her creation. For a

minute Cole simply watched Maria breathe, but he couldn't determine if she was asleep or not. He had been silently hoping that last night's embraces hadn't been a solitary occasion, but tonight she was lying back in her bed and he lacked the presumption to climb into it with her. Instead, Cole moved into the bathroom.

As always, after completing his cleanliness routine and brushing his teeth, Cole stared into his reflection's eyes. His wrinkles seemed to have deepened in the last two weeks. Part of him wanted to believe that it was a trick of the mind and that he didn't look any different at all, but he also felt aged. His thoughts were strained between disparate points and he couldn't find a solution to any of his problems.

When Cole lay down in his bed alone, he let out a soft sigh and turned to Maria. He could imagine the slopes of her body underneath the covers, and watching the gentle breaths moving through her neck and collarbone left his body excited but his mind calmed. His eyes were heavy, but for as long as he could stay awake he stared at her thin eyelashes. They fluttered in what he could only assume were dreams.

The previous night, Cole had gotten precious little sleep. Tonight, his bedroom felt like the center of a great storm. All around his mind raged images of loss and pain, but before his eyes he could focus only on Maria. He knew in those moments that he still loved her just as much as ever. All the events of the day faded into the background, a whipping whirlwind surrounding the two of them, and in time he felt his worries drifting out of his conscious mind as well. His thoughts cleared and condensed into a warmth and love so visceral and deep in his mind that he almost thought it had earthly substance. He longed to feel the embrace of his nearby wife. They lay, separated but together, in the eye of the storm. Although they were apart, Cole felt that she was very close.

Once Cole was sound asleep, Maria rose from her bed. She stood in front of her desk, reaching below a ream of paperwork and finding the thicker sheet of crinkled paper with her painting on it. In the dark, she could barely see the outline of her husband's face, depicted with care but inexpertly. It was the best effort she had managed in days of attempts.

Maria floated across the room, nude, and laid the painting on the nightstand between their beds. Her thin fingers offered no resistance as she slipped her rings off their tips. She laid the two bands down on top of the painting. They were modest things, for Cole had never been wealthy. She hadn't married him for his money or his career prospects. As she watched the dark shape in the night gently rise and fall with his breathing, she could still see exactly why she had married him.

Next she dressed in careful motions, taking her time. In minutes she was able to draw a dress from the closet and slide it over her newly shrunken frame. This one still clung to her, and as she stretched tights along her legs she watched each inch of skin slide underneath the fabric. In her mind's eye, she watched that skin crinkle like her painting, bending and crackling and flexing. Jets of fire bled out of the holes and soon the edges of her parchment body turned from white to burned black, roasting her apart from the inside out. She slipped into some flats and, after habitually grabbing a hair tie, drifted back across the room and plucked a small parcel out of her dresser drawer. She left the master bedroom without making a sound. She was certain that Cole still slept.

Joseph's door creaked each time it was opened past the halfway point, so she slipped around the frame without opening it more than a few inches. She was smaller now, smaller than ever before. He lay upon the bed like a great awkward beast, uncovered, limbs

splayed. On his nightstand she set an unopened pack of cigarettes and the pale green lighter she had stolen from him a week ago.

Jane's room was a minefield that Maria flitted through as a shadow. She slunk between the towers of discarded sketchbooks with a gentle sway on her uneasy feet and came to stand at the head of her daughter's bed. Jane's brow was furrowed, and Maria suspected she was having a nightmare. It would not do to wake her, but Maria tugged softly on her sheets and uncovered the top half of her flannel pajamas so that, in her sleep, Jane struggled to re-cover herself and ended up rolling onto her side. Perhaps it would be enough to shift the dream, at least. Maria set a tent of four envelopes, three long and weighted and one quite thin, on top of the pile closest to Jane's head, in lieu of a flat table space.

Navigating the house in the dark was trivially easy, and Maria allowed her thoughts to wander. In the time it took her to disconnect the garage door and raise it noiselessly by hand, she had walked back through all of her birthdays from age eight to eighteen. She sat next to herself in the theater and watched her first disappointingly wet kiss. She stood beside the podium as she accepted a second-place medal at a dance competition. She saw her body shake as she muttered to her second boyfriend and let him slip his fingertips between the cups of her bra and the globes of her breasts.

She started her car, the only noise she had no solution for, and pulled out into the driveway before getting out to close the garage door behind her. In her mind she walked through her small public college and reacquainted herself with every professor and club meeting that she could still picture. It was mostly a blur of raised voices and rainy midnight streets. She tried to remember exactly how it felt to walk at graduation, but memories of that night eclipsed her achievements from that day. These were friends who had not stayed in

touch after her diagnosis, and she remembered them fondly only because, in her memories, they were frozen in time prior to their betrayal.

Driving was easy. She remembered the drive to and from work every day, when she got her first job in accounting. It was one of the greatest feelings of pride she had ever experienced, to be living alone and driving herself to a job she had earned to do work she was trained for. Her co-workers had never been good friends, just faces with nametags and competing resumes that she learned to treat as equals, even when she saw their inefficient mistakes. During this time, she met Cole, and after him her memories became a blur.

She luxuriated inside her memories of Cole for the rest of the twenty-minute drive. The births of their children glowed as points of light amidst the glimmer. The trips they had taken around the country and, when they were younger, down to South America. The way he looked at her every time she told him about her love. The way he stood behind her at all of her successes and next to her when she felt weak. She clung onto passing memories like rafts in the torrent and for a dozen seconds would watch them, happy and whole. Cole surprising her at work with a meal and a flower. Them, together, lifting Joseph into the seat of a rollercoaster. Finger-painting with Jane, where Cole insisted on giving himself war paint every time because she knew he was allergic to the paint and would bring him into the shower to wash it off at the soonest convenience.

By the time she drove into the field and parked next to Daniel's small car, she had caught up to the week before her diagnosis. She shut her mind closed again, putting on a face blank of emotion. The stars overhead were the only source of light as her headlights shut off and she left the car. A path out through the field had already been trampled tonight. She retrieved her own lighter from the glove box and followed the trail.

Daniel switched on a flashlight as she got closer. He was standing very still, a pair of gas cans in one hand and a bundle of long white cloth in the other. The cloth was dripping.

“Hello,” he called, flicking the light back off.

“Are you ready?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Together?”

Maria closed her eyes with a grace that was wasted on the night. “You first. I’ll watch.”

“And then?”

“I’ll finish it.”

Book Three: Mourning

A day

The limbs were skeletal and beat each other senselessly whenever the wind whipped them. It was a macabre dance, too large for the gentle breeze, too angry for the silent graveyard, and too human for a stand of trees. The clouds were admonishing grey. They spoke of rain at their edges but the ground was dry enough to crack. If you looked straight down, you could see the black heart of the earth inside every crack.

His daughter's fingers scratched along the face of the grave. The stone was proud and bright and new, surrounded by soil that appeared undisturbed unless you looked closely. If you really watched for the edges, looked for the subtle divot and the outline of a wretched coffin, you could see the spot of the ground that had been exhumed in violation and then piled back atop a pile of boards and lacquer and cooked bone.

He hadn't ever seen inside the coffin, but he had seen the remains. He had seen them on a metal slab of a table, laid out in a picturesque approximation of a tortured body. He hadn't cried then and he wasn't crying now, even as his daughter's small body shook with sobs. The clouds and the clay were as dry as his eyes, as dry as his parched lips that were rent with cracks and permanently closed in a neutral frown of surrender. If he was to slip below the earth and fall into a wooden box and melt to ash, he would neither notice nor mind.

When he held his daughter it was because she came to him and his arms moved automatically, an android taught to love but disconnected from any reason. He had been

taught love. He had been taught love over years with a woman who loved with smiles and spontaneity. Lessons he had internalized to his core now slipped out of him like sand out of a broken hourglass. He ran in uneven streams, keeping no time, signifying nothing, acting because of gravity and habit. He held his daughter and loved her still.

It was hard to not do anything. His problem had no solution. When his daughter sensed the lifelessness in his arms she hit his chest with tiny fists and he felt his ribs shake, his bones laughing. They mocked him for living as they stretched his skin into a shape still human, hiding the crippling hunchback he carried. His daughter ran paces away before returning to the grave and kneeling by it, hidden from his view. Without her in his sight, he stared at the granite monolith and wished to drown in it.

“We need to go home.”

“I’m not going.”

“You can’t stay here.” His words meant nothing, even to him. Nothing was forbidden because nothing seemed to be possible. There was no difference, really, between leaving this place and staying here. They are the same place.

“Go without me.”

“Jane, come on. I can’t leave you.”

“Ten more minutes.” Through her tears it was hard to hear her words, despite his years of training. It was impossible for his mind to remember those years. They lined up into sequence and were compacted together, folding into each other and screeching as the memories twisted into a thin disk that told him he once knew how his daughter cried. Now her tears were different. They were consuming tears. They dropped to the earth or leaped to the stone and sizzled their ways downwards, dissolving the coffin beneath. If she cried for

long enough, eventually she would erode the only earthly remains of the reason she was crying. If she cried for a hundred years and wore the dirt below her to a basin and broke open the lid of the coffin, the remains within would still be hungry for the wetness.

Ten minutes passed. "Are you ready?"

"Just go, leave me."

"We've been here hours. This is the fourth visit this week. You have to leave." His words were automatic, a man who was not him speaking them from a place of concern he could not find. He was two faces in one body, and although the tongue and lips belonged to a caring man, the mind twisted in the grasp of the fetal self snared within his gut. The two selves ignored each other out of desperate self-preservation, because he knew that tying the two halves back together would be tying fire to the dark.

"Just a little longer."

"Come on, please."

She either couldn't or didn't respond. He gave her ten more minutes.

"Are you ready now?"

"She submitted my art to some magazines."

"What?"

"She pretended to be me and took some of my art and submitted it to magazines.

My beetles."

"She did?"

"Yeah. And three of them got accepted. They're going to mail me copies since they're not local publications."

"That's great."

“I never knew.” The tears returned and her tiny shadow, the only part of her he could see around the gravestone, shook violently.

“Neither did I.”

“Dad, I never knew.”

“I know, it’s okay.”

Her sobs again made her pleading vocalizations indecipherable. He murmured that he couldn’t understand and she kept repeating it until he could. It became a mantra that she forced out of her locked jaw and upturned lips. Her pacing was irregular but it drilled into his head ritualistically. I never knew. I never knew. I never knew.

Neither of them could open their eyes and when she came to him again he held her with the same callous inability to focus. His caring face knew that the living being clinging to him was more important than the charred bones beneath him. But the curled face in his gut wrapped a sinew hand around his heart and gripped onto something more powerful than life in its malevolent mind. It wanted fairness in the world. It knew he deserved joy equivalent to his suffering. That face didn’t care about anything but grabbing that reward from the jaws of death. The deeper he was lost into the miasmatic sludge of his agony, the more that face believed that things would work out in his favor. At some point, they had to.

Once she was cogent again he asked her to leave with him.

“No. Not yet.”

“I’ll drag you away if I have to. You can’t stay here.”

“I’ll walk home then, you just go.”

“It’s miles, and you don’t know the way.”

“I know the way.”

“I’m not leaving you here.” Not here, in the den of death.

“Just go, dad.”

She held onto his still-warm body as if she didn’t want him to go, so his caring face stayed. But the twisted face was already crashing among his locked memories, flashing across his closed eyelids the images of her hospital room, of her pills, of her back flexing in an animal attempt to outrun the pain clinging to her. He cared for his daughter and wrapped his arms around her tightly, feeling her life against his chest. She held him back, shaking too much to talk, mouth spasmodically opening and closing. Her body was alive against him, which should have filled him with happiness. It reminded him only of the lifelessness of the incomplete husk beneath their feet.

He was alone.

A day

The road before them was winding and gravely quiet, repaved time and again into a patchwork of black lines overlapping each other. The car leapt around the turns without slowing, tires spinning. This road was an artery of the world, a single belt strapping the concealing crust down against the stone underbelly of their planet. He knew that beneath the surface was a world more vast and empty than any human achievement, a world uncaring for the life and loss of the ants that crawled upon it. Every step he took pressed the dirt down against this huge emptiness, compressing the soil against the stone against the fiery heart.

Roads lined the surface, but beneath the crust he knew there was a coffin steadily returning to the stone beneath it.

His hands gripped the leather wheel loosely, guiding him and his son along the path. Their start was far behind them and their destination loomed further yet. Maybe he had been on this journey all of his life.

Instead of looking out the window, he closed his eyes often and shut down his mind. His senses were dulled and deadened against a world he didn't want to experience. Inside his eyelids were crouched shadow animals stretching across the concave curve of his skull, pressing down against his brain. They haunted him every moment now.

His son in the passenger seat was too similar to himself. At moments they looked like the two faces of a coin, doomed to never touch and yet unable to let go of each other, but in reality they were minted incorrectly. Both sides of their coin bore the same tortured face. He looked at his son and felt a fog of hatred smothering his love, enfolding him in a comforting void. Looking into this genetic mirror made his skin crawl with his unworthiness.

The other cars of the road felt like ghosts as he passed among them. His car had never touched another vehicle. There was a repelling force surrounding him, radiating from his moiling mind and scattering everyone in front of him. His eyes never turned to look at the speedometer's thin needle. It was far from his mind. As he passed between the other vehicles, he could glimpse flashes of their skin, faces and hands without humans attached to them hurtling towards their deaths. No one around him had long. All of them were on the clock of death, and their seconds were ticking away in precious wasted breaths. He didn't pity them and he didn't care.

He was on sick leave. They had no savings, only a pile of medical bills. Debt was a foe that sat on his back with hollow fingers sunk into his flesh. It was a shackling band of metal around his ankles and cuffs binding his hands. Wrapped up in the iron of his obligations and weighted down by the mass of his bills, he felt powerless as a babe. There was no way to protect himself from these blows. Bound, he could only watch as his children and his home began to sag underneath his burden as well, sliding closer to collapse.

His son shifted away from him in the seat, twisting in the seat. His whole life was becoming twisted. Everything he committed to memory seemed to be withering away the next time he turned to look at it. His children were folding in on themselves and drawing themselves inwards. His fingers were thinner and covered in bulges and cuts he couldn't remember or explain. His eyes didn't open as wide any more, and around their edges the vascular red webs were winding towards his pupils. He felt like a mask, turning steadily more transparent. His strength was flowing outwards through his impotent rage and his bottomless sorrow.

“Damn it all.” he said without truly meaning to speak.

The wheel was a viper within his hands. He turned off onto a twisting two-lane highway and soon they were the only visible car on the road, traveling much too fast. He wasn't truly in control around the turns, and with the oncoming lane so nearby they drifted between the two as he accelerated.

“You're driving like shit,” His son said. His son was going to stay out of prison in spite of his crimes. The charges against him had been dropped out of pity. It was a final perfect present from the burned hands of his mother.

“I know that. Shut up. There's no one here.”

The earth was held together as loosely as his own mind, a mass of graves and soil and stone that was utterly without compassion and without any solutions except for the final one. He knew that all the bare-limbed plants around him were nurtured by the deaths of others, that every hungry tree drank the blood of the dead, and that every toothed maw tore apart flesh at every opportunity. But time was the ultimate predator. He could feel its jaws wrapping around his torso more with every passing day, preparing to snatch him back off the surface and bury him in a ditch to be forgotten after a century. His body would nurture a thousand generations of meaningless strife and struggle and at the end of it nothing would really be any different. Nothing changed.

Around a thin turn with his foot compressing the pedal, he had to adjust the wheel to avoid ramming into an oncoming sedan. He saw a flash of panic in the mannequin-faced man driving the other car before they were past each other. His son swore violently and pressed himself back against the seat.

Of the three men, he was the only one who knew how little it would have mattered if their cars had destroyed themselves against each other and left a multicolored pile of crumpled metal in the middle of that corner.

“Careful, shit,” his son said, reaching over and putting a hand atop the wheel. They both watched as a truck rounded the next turn and sped towards them in the lane besides them. The two vehicles cruised towards each other, preparing to pass within mere feet of the certain death that they both represented.

He and his son both tightened their grips on the wheel, both twisting it against each other. Neither was pulling away or towards the truck, as it neared the point of dangerous

abandon after which they would both be unable to avoid a collision. They were fighting each other for control, and the car began to lurch side to side with a combative swerve.

“I could pull us in front of it,” his son said, his eyes sunken back under a tired brow and his face strained even though it was completely relaxed. His eyes told the entire truth of his deadened feeling. The prospect of hitting the truck did not scare him because he did not feel anything. The two vehicles drove closer.

“Are you going to?”

They were yards away, only feet from the wrong lane, so close to death that he could feel the shadows on his skull shivering with anticipation. The air was electric and the wheel within his hands was pulling from side to side. His son’s hand was shaking. In slow sequence, they both let go of the wheel. The car drifted to the side. His son grabbed the wheel back in a flash and gave it a jerk. They passed within inches of the truck, their tires well over the dividing line. He knew that he ought to feel relieved, but could not bear to. The car was a cage and his son was an enemy and he closed his eyes.

He was alone.

A day

Cole sits on his bed, his hands twisting and untwisting with each other. His thoughts are wandering inside his head. A head full of ghosts, their ethereal bodies passing through each other. He sees his parents, who did not come to the funeral. He sees his children, whose

bodies are only two closed doors away from his body. He sees himself, young and vibrant, full of optimism. He does not see his wife.

Their community mourns for the drug addict and the terminally ill patient in a customary, respectful way. They are trained to mourn casually, so that their lives can go on. They donate electronically and spend a minute commiserating with their friends or with reporters, but in their eyes Cole can see that they do not care. They do not believe. When their mind presses against the death and the void before it, they turn around and forget the blackness. He is not afraid of this void, but he cannot find it. Everywhere he walks inside his mind he finds only pain and empty rooms. He has rummaged through his memories of her so many times that they are rearranged and strewn about, a thousand sheets of scattered paper. The ones closest the edges are slipping away already, to be lost forever. He clings only tighter to the memories he has left, but for every page of love he clutches greedily to his chest he shoves others further away.

Her story is national news, but Cole speaks to no one. The children stay home from school. He knows that it is unhealthy to wallow, but his health seems so unimportant. Prolonging his life doesn't interest him.

His phone lies on the bed next to him, open to the contacts. Tina's number is highlighted and, although the screen has dimmed, he can see the letters clear enough. He has grown proficient in the motions required to navigate to her number, although he has never called it. It is an easy temptation. An emotional well to cast his coins into while wishing for something more. He wants something he does not have, but isn't sure what. Maybe she could show him. Cole turns off his phone instead and takes out the battery, scattering the pieces on tabletops around the room.

The fetal fear inside his gut has grown into his stomach. He no longer feels his appetite. The sinews running between his organs and up to his spine are thickening into fingers that pull his innards into a pile surrounding his heart. He feels suffocated even when breathing deeply. His brain is drowning in blood. His back is bending forwards into a simian declaration of defeat. His chest is marked with long parallel scratches, from where he rips at his skin in the night. He doesn't sleep.

Once, Cole was sure he was a good person. He went through life carelessly and made many mistakes, but he tried to right what he had done wrong. He loved his family. He treated his friends with respect. But today he had bloodied his palms from gripping the corners of her desk. He had stared at Tina's name in his phone for an hour, his body tense and filled with a shameful desire to destroy her beautiful face, a desire he had been unable to define between arousal and disgust. He didn't know if he was good any more.

Cole dragged the end table away from between the beds and pushed them together. He laid Maria's rings on her pillow and climbed into his side of the bed, facing hers. The trees outside her window swayed against each other. He did not cry.

He is alone.