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This collection of stories explores the ways in which women navigate emotional suppression in relation to mental illness and trauma. The characters are thrust into a variety of situations that force them to reopen old wounds, confront past trauma, or shed light on their current mental states in order to find emotional reprieve.

CATHARSIS:

STORIES

by

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Approved by

Committee Chair

For the women who have been told they are too much or not enough.

You are exactly right.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by ASHLEE M. SHEFER has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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PREFACE

After all, women have a lot to be angry about.

—Gloria Steinem

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DEAD HOUSE

My phone rang while I was trying to figure out dinner. I blindly reached for it on the kitchen counter and tapped the green icon, thinking it might be the client I had spoken with earlier in the day. We were in the process of wrapping up a project, which was a blessing and a curse. It meant I would get my check soon, but also, I'd have to start searching for a new gig.

"Hi, Cora," Jillian said, sounding like a bank representative or a salesperson. One of those people who act overly nice to get on your good side before saying you owe them money, and my sister was very good at wiggling her way onto people's good sides.

I clutch the phone to my ear, mentally kicking myself for having not checked caller ID before answering. "Hi," I said as I inspected my scarcely supplied pantry without fully seeing anything. I couldn't even remember the last time we'd called each other.

"How are things going?" she asked

"Fine," I said, reaching for a box of pasta, even though my mind was already leaning towards ordering out for the third night in a row.

"Glad to hear that," Jillian said. She proceeded to tell me how Oscar had lost his first tooth. Emma had her third-grade recorder concert last week. Henry received a promotion right before Christmas. She gave me a rundown of everyone's lives except her own.

“That’s great,” I said, forcing an upward slant in my voice to sound interested. I set down the takeout menu I’d pulled from a drawer and took a seat at the kitchen island.

“But why are you calling me?”

Jillian sighed but didn’t try to defend herself. “Mom’s not doing too well,” she said, her voice shifting to a more serious tone. “She’s confined to bed most of the time and has trouble getting around without a wheelchair now. She needs help with everything, and I just can’t do it. I have two kids now, my own life. I can’t drop everything, you know?”

I listened to the rain pattering against the roof. There had been plenty of times in the past where my mother claimed to be sick, usually when she felt she wasn’t getting enough attention. Ever since I’d settled down permanently in North Carolina, I wasn’t normally contacted about it. I let Jillian’s words sink into my mind and form meaning. Jillian had a husband and kids. A family, a stable life. I lived with a cat in an apartment and worked as a freelance ad designer where my only real structured responsibility was to occasionally meet up with local clients to discuss concept art. My life was versatile, easy to disrupt, never mind that I lived ten and a half hours away from our mother’s house.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked anyway.

Jillian was quiet for a moment. Maisy entered the kitchen, black tail swishing through the air. She crouched by the stove and stared at me with wide yellow eyes as if also anticipating my sister’s answer.

“You wouldn’t need to stay for long,” Jillian said. Her voice picked up speed as if she was afraid I’d interrupt before she was finished selling the idea to me. “Maybe a

couple weeks? A month? Just until I can figure out what to do next. Find her home assistance or—there are facilities in the area. I just have to call around and see if there’s space, what the pricing is, whether she’ll like it—”

“She’s going to hate that,” I said.

“I know. I know she is.” Jillian’s voice was shaky, and I tensed, desperately hoping she wouldn’t start crying because I wouldn’t know what to do with that. “I’ll take care of all that. I just need someone to stay with her until then because I really can’t do it.”

Had Jillian blocked out our entire childhood or was she simply in denial? I let it all sink in—the audacity of the phone call, the boldness of the question. For a second I wondered if my mother was in the room with Jillian right now, whispering words into her ear to relay to me. Cora’s life is too good right now, how can we fuck it all up? I stared down at my fingers splayed against the cheap plastic of the island. I was in a different state, but she was still always in my head waiting, waiting.

“This is kind of a lot to ask for,” I said, digging my nails into my palm to keep my voice tame.

“Believe me, I know it is. But you could also stop by and see the kids while you’re here. They haven’t seen their aunt in a while, and Emma’s been drawing on her tablet. She’d love to show you.”

I sighed. “I guess it has been a while since I’ve last been up there. The drive is just kinda far.”

“It is a bit far,” Jillian said. And then her voice perked up. “But don’t you also

still have some friends up here that you keep in contact with? You won't just be stuck in the house with Mom. You'll have plenty of things to do.”

I did still have friends in Connecticut and had just video chatted with one of them the other day. I was torn between being annoyed by Jillian's comments but also admiring her art of persuasion. I had no good defense, so I surrendered.

I ordered Chinese takeout after getting off the phone and sat on my couch fuming. An unexpected rage festered inside of me, a feeling I hadn't experienced in a while. My leg bounced rapidly against the hardwood floor. I wanted to run, scream, punch something. Be punched. I craved some kind of physical release. Once my food arrived, I set it in the kitchen and went for a long walk, letting the cool evening wash over me, clearing my head.

Three days later, I packed up everything I thought I would need for the next month, including Maisy, who hated car rides. And I made the ten-and-a-half-hour drive back to the woods of Salem, Connecticut, a place I hadn't been in years, having no idea what to expect once I got there.

#

It was snowing when I arrived in Salem. My car crunched up the long winding driveway. I stared up at the house through the windshield, flurries of snow drifting through the air. The exterior was weathered and dirty, uneven mounds of snow settling on the roof, giving the house the impression of collapsing at any moment. There were no lights glowing from within, no decorations left over from the holidays. The house looked dead, like the life had been sucked out of it. I wondered if Jillian was wrong. Maybe our

mother was already dead.

I got out of the car and pulled out Maisy's carrier. A house key was attached to my keyring, but I wasn't sure if I should use it. It had been at least two years since I was last there. Did that officially make me a guest now?

I knocked on the door.

There were no sounds from within. No footsteps, no creaks of the floorboards. No life in that dead house. I knocked again, waited a moment. When I still didn't hear anything, I stuck my key in the lock, pushed open the door, and entered the house.

"Hello?" I said, more out of instinct than because I actually expected someone to answer me. The house was cold and gray, despite it being afternoon. The heavy snowfall had covered the windows, making the day feel like night.

I set the cat carrier down and let Maisy out, my hand shaking as I opened the metal door. She crept out, her head bowed as she took in her new surroundings. The living room was to my left, the kitchen up ahead. They were both vacant. The dread coated my body, seeping into my veins, ice cold. I held back a shiver as I started my slow ascent upstairs.

The stairs creaked beneath my booted feet. As I got closer to the landing, I heard indiscernible muted voices. My mother's bedroom door was cracked open, emitting flashes of blue light. I pushed the door wider and the voices got louder. She was lying on her bed on top of the covers dressed in sweatpants, an article of clothing I'd rarely seen my mother wear. The TV was turned on to some talk show, and the remote sat on the bed next to her. I inched towards the bed, taking the time to look my mother over. Her

thinning hair, the wrinkles that lined her face. Sickly purple veins snaked up her hands. I didn't remember her looking this old the last time I saw her. I glanced at her chest, holding my breath as if afraid to take the oxygen from the room away from her. I couldn't tell if she was breathing.

I reached out and touched her hand, but she didn't move. Her skin was cold to the touch. I waited a moment, hoping she would somehow sense my presence and wake up on her own. When she still didn't stir, I shook her several times before she finally blinked up at me, saying something about how I didn't have to be so rough.

"It's nice to see you, too, Mom," I told her.

"Yes, yes, it's about time you came to visit me. Aren't you a bit late? I was expecting you in the afternoon."

I almost left right then. Scooped Maisy up from downstairs, got in my car, and drove the six hundred miles back to North Carolina. I wanted to remind her it wasn't a choice for me to be here. That, in fact, it was the last thing I wanted.

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"Just got in," I said. "Haven't even unloaded the car yet."

She made a noise in her throat as if she didn't believe me. As if maybe I had taken advantage of her sleeping to snoop through the house, see what secrets she was hiding here. A missed opportunity on my part. She moved to push herself up from the bed. I held out a hand for assistance, but she ignored it as she heaved herself off the bed, grimacing. I noticed there was no wheelchair in sight.

"How do you get up and down the stairs?" I asked, because I hadn't noticed any

kind of home assistance on the staircase either.

“I walk,” she said, and then made her way out of the room.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek before following.

#

My dad used to tell Jillian and me to never wake our mother up while she was sleeping. I was so young at the time that I thought it was a game. My mother was sleeping beauty, confined to her tower. A princess tricked into slumber by an evil witch, and we had to let her sleep or else bad things would happen to her. It never occurred to me that my mother was the evil witch, and we had to let her sleep for our own safety.

She always seemed put together when we were growing up. Even around the house, she'd have on dresses, matching pantsuits, her brown hair styled, every curl perfectly in place. Floral perfume was used to cover the stench of cigarettes she smoked excessively. Her makeup was always done. Light eyeshadow, mascara. Lipstick was applied before leaving the house, and she left the house almost every day to make a public appearance. She was known and liked by everyone in town and had a reputation to maintain.

She picked up a job when I was about six. It was the first job she'd had since I'd been born because my dad had told her she had to find something, that it was getting difficult to survive on just his salary. The job she found was at a nursing home in our town, but they could only offer her third shift. She took it out of desperation but wasn't happy about it. She had no problem letting us know that anytime we annoyed her.

“I don't want to eat this again,” I said one night, poking at the breaded chicken

patty on my plate with a fork like it was a repulsive bug.

“I’m not happy about it either,” our mother snapped, throwing a dish towel on the kitchen counter. “If I didn’t have kids, I could be eating steak right now. Hell, I probably wouldn’t even need this job.” She shook her head. “Jillian never complains about stuff like that. Why can’t you be more like her?”

I’d heard those words before. Whenever I got too dirty from playing outside in the woods. When I protested anytime my mother tried putting me in a dress. The time I got upset when my parents got me Barbie dolls instead of the Star Wars action figures I had asked for. Why couldn’t I be more like Jillian? She always did what she was told.

I saw the flicker of a smile cross Jillian’s face, but it quickly faded when she noticed I was looking at her.

Over time, I did become quieter because I didn’t want to endure the wrath of my mother whenever she was home, which was less often. She worked five days a week, had weekends off. Because of her new sleep schedule, she was groggy and irritable every time she was awake, but it was never visible just by looking at her. The dark shadows under her eyes were always smoothed away by concealer, the pallor of her cheeks coated with blush.

If I stayed out of sight, she didn’t search for me. I began spending more time in my bedroom, the door always shut, keeping her out.

#

My phone vibrated on the couch next to me as a new text from Jillian came in.

How was the drive? the message asked.

It was a harmless question, but it still irritated me. Jillian could be here asking the question in person since she lived just a couple miles away. Jillian could be here, period. She'd always had a better relationship with our mother. They would go shopping for dresses and makeup together, share inside jokes that I was never a part of. It hurt at first, but then I adjusted. Realized I didn't really care about those things, anyway. The indifference turned to irritation when I heard Jillian complaining to her friend on the phone once, calling our mother needy and pathetic. Saying she only went shopping with her so much because she got something out of it. Our mother never saw through Jillian's act, only rejected mine because I wouldn't change myself for her.

And now I was the one here at the house. Not Jillian.

"How long do you plan on staying?" my mother asked me. She entered the living room with a hot mug of tea, eased herself into a chair. The wheelchair sat folded up and shoved into a corner of the room.

Maisy jumped on the couch next to me and hunched down on the cushion, wide gaze set on my mother. A person she'd never met. "Until you kick me out, I guess," I said with a forced smile. *Or you die.* The guilt pressed into my chest at the thought.

My mother made a noise in her throat but didn't return the smile. She blew on her tea and took a sip. "I suppose you have things to unpack," she said. "Need time to settle in. The bed upstairs is made, but I haven't washed the sheets recently."

"It's fine," I said, stroking Maisy's fur. The house felt smaller than I remembered. The living room walls were closer, darker, even though they were made of the same brown paneling I grew up with. My eyes darted to the shadowed corners, wondering what

creatures lurked there that only came out at night. I held back a shiver.

“And I don’t know what you’re expecting for dinner. I don’t cook much these days. Mostly just frozen meals I can put in the microwave.”

“I’ll figure something out.” My chest folded in on itself like an irritated animal poked with a stick.

“Jillian set me up, so my groceries get delivered here,” my mother said, the pride leaking into her voice like a child showing off a perfect spelling test. “She’s been a lot of help this past year, even with those kids of hers.”

My fingers curled in Maisy’s fur as my arms tingled. The feeling of fingernails running lightly over skin. I hated this blind faith my mother had in Jillian. How she expected her eldest daughter to do no wrong. The knowledge of the nursing home sat inside of me like a satisfying meal.

“You can always count on Jillian,” I said.

“Yes,” my mother said. “I certainly can.”

Maisy jumped from the couch and my fingers curled through the air, no longer having any leverage to hold onto. I stood up, and my mother blinked at me, as surprised as I was that I moved so quickly.

“I’m going to bring my stuff in before the snow piles up too much,” I said. “And then I’ll make us dinner. I’m assuming you at least have pasta?”

She looked confused for a moment, like she didn’t understand the language I was speaking. And then she cleared her throat. “There’s a frozen lasagna in the freezer.”

“Perfect,” I said before slipping my coat on and disappearing out the door.

I flipped my hood up against the snow, the flakes catching in the tips of my long dark hair. My car was already covered in a thin sheet of snow. I walked slowly, taking in the yard. The trees were bare this time of year, and the white expanse of packed snow caused the illusion of the yard stretching on for miles.

I used to lay outside in the yard when my parents would fight. They would hurl words like weapons at each other, and it usually resulted in my mother hiding in her bedroom with the door closed and my dad leaving the house, sometimes for days. It wasn't surprising when he returned home one night just to pack his bags before leaving permanently. My mother called him selfish in front of us, said that he walked away from his problems instead of dealing with them, and we didn't need that kind of toxicity in our lives. Jillian nodded in agreement. It didn't make a difference to me whether he was there or not, so I stayed silent.

"If you aren't happy about it, Cora, then you can join him," my mother told me, reading my silence as an act of defiance.

I mumbled "maybe I will" under my breath just to spite her, but I couldn't tell if she heard me because she didn't respond, didn't react. So I escaped outside.

The house is pushed far enough back in the woods it isn't even visible from the road. I loved the solitude of the yard, the silence that stretched around me. Winter nights were always my favorite. The night after a fresh snowfall, when the world is blanketed in white, the snow settled and still untainted by dirt or rain, still pure. The trees bare and frosted so they look fake. I bundled myself up in a heavy coat and layers of pants before spreading out in the snow, letting my body form an imprint on its surface. I stared up at

the pink sky overhead, the world glowing, my breath misting in a cloud above me. I wondered how long I could lay there before getting frostbite. I wondered if my mother would come looking for me, but she never did. Neither did Jillian.

#

After unpacking my car and hauling everything up to my old bedroom I called Jillian.

“I thought you said Mom couldn’t move around without a wheelchair,” I said.

“She told me mobility was getting hard,” Jillian replied. I could hear clattering in the background, like she was moving pots and pans around. “You’re already at the house?”

I sat back on my bed, staring around the room. It had been converted into a guestroom years ago when I first went away to college. A passive way of telling me that I wasn’t welcome there anymore. I knew that Jillian’s room was still intact because it had taken her longer to move out, and our mother wasn’t sure if she would need it again, even though she had her own place only a few miles away.

“I told you I was driving up today,” I said. “She doesn’t seem to want me here.”

“You’ve been gone for a while,” Jillian told me. “She just has to adjust.”

“Right.” It was funny to me that I was the one who had to uproot their life and my mother was the person who needed to adjust. “What else did you say was wrong with her?”

“Um.” Jillian sounded distracted. “Trouble walking, breathing. She said she gets tired easily and sometimes gets dizzy if she moves too much. That’s why I didn’t want

her driving or going to stores by herself.”

I watched Maisy lick her paw at the foot of my bed. I could see my mother being tired. It had taken me several seconds of shaking to wake her up. Breathlessness, maybe. She had a cough, but she’d had that problem for years because of smoking. She walked down the stairs without breathing heavy. She moved around the kitchen, circling me like a hawk as I’d prepared the lasagna. I thought of the wheelchair sitting in the corner of the living room, tucked away like an old forgotten toy from childhood.

“Does she know you’re looking at nursing homes?” I asked.

Jillian cleared her throat. “We haven’t discussed that yet.”

“Don’t you think that’s an important thing to discuss with her? And, I mean, what’s going to happen after she goes? We’ll have the whole house to worry about.”

“Yes, Cora, I know. You think I haven’t thought about these things?” Jillian snapped, and I was both surprised and satisfied to hear the crack in her usual confident demeanor. “I’m going to have the conversation with her. She just isn’t the easiest person to talk to sometimes. You know this.”

I did know this. It was a defining reason why I left the house at eighteen and never moved back.

Jillian and I hung up, and I stayed in the bedroom for the rest of the evening. Considered unpacking my suitcase but didn’t. I realized I wanted this trip to feel as temporary as possible. I got into bed early and scrolled on my tablet through a list of potential design gigs that were recommended to me. Instead of inquiring about any of them, I put the tablet away and fell asleep.

I woke up sometime later when I felt something lightly brush against my hand. I was laying on my left side, arm spread across the blanket. Maisy's yellow eyes glowed in the darkness next to me. I sat up in bed, pressing my back against the headboard. A sliver of light shined through the window, only because it snowed and made the backyard a little brighter.

Maisy jumped off the bed and scratched at the door. I decided I was feeling restless as well and got up from bed, fumbling for the light switch on the wall next to the dresser. I checked my phone to see it was two in the morning. As soon as I opened the door, Maisy dashed into the hallway and bounded down the stairs, so I followed her into the kitchen. My mother was awake, sitting at the table with a steaming mug in front of her.

“What are you doing up?” I asked.

“I can't do what I want in my own house?” my mother said.

Without responding, I took a glass down from a cabinet and poured water from the sink. I contemplated turning around and going right back upstairs. I knew that would result in another snarky comment from her. I knew tomorrow morning she would give me the cold shoulder until I apologized for upsetting her, bending over backwards so she would get what she wanted. That's what Jillian would do.

I took a seat at the kitchen table across from her. My mother blinked at me, her hands wrapped firmly around her mug. Maisy strolled out of the kitchen like she knew there was about to be a standoff, and she wanted no part of it. I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

“Are you having trouble sleeping through the night?” I asked, glancing towards the stairs. I half expected to see someone descending, even though I knew my mother and I were the only two people in the house.

My mother shrugged. “Sometimes I can’t sleep, sometimes all I want to do is sleep. Depends, I guess.”

I took a sip of water. “You seemed to make it down the stairs okay.”

My mother scoffed. “Is that so surprising?”

“How often do you use the wheelchair?”

She watched me closely. I stared back, not smiling, not blinking. I wanted her to know that I knew. She could fool Jillian, but not me. I was angry that I had been swept up in this. Pulled out of my life to encourage our mother’s scheme. Even in a different state, I couldn’t get away. But I did see the dark bags under her eyes. Her thinning gray hair. Dark veins snaking through papery translucent skin. I thought about how easy it would’ve been, several hours ago when I found her asleep in bed, her chest not moving, to have just taken one of her pillows and pressed down over her face, holding it in place while she flailed and scratched at my hands until she took that final shuddering breath and stilled.

It would’ve been so easy. And since she had led people to believe how sick she was, I could’ve simply claimed that I found her like that.

Bile rose up my throat, but I couldn’t shake the image. I couldn’t shake the sense of relief I would’ve felt at her last breath.

“A doctor never told me I had to use the wheelchair,” my mom said.

I nodded. “Have you even been to see a doctor?”

“Of course I have. You can ask Jillian. She came with me.”

I glanced at the clock hanging from the wall behind my mother, watching the seconds tick away. It was two-seventeen in the morning. I could’ve grabbed Maisy and gone to bed, avoided a fight, let my mother keep her secret. But then I remembered that my dad had walked away instead of trying to solve the problem. Jillian always tried appealing to our mother to avoid a fight. She never once stood up for me.

“Did Jillian ever speak to the doctor or just you?” I asked.

The clock continued to tick. My mother tapped her fingers against the mug, studying me like I was a misplaced object that shouldn’t be in the kitchen. And then she said, “How dare you.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“You come storming into my house when I didn’t even invite you, and then accuse me of not understanding my own health. What, do you think I’m lying to everyone? That because I don’t use a wheelchair every day, I must not even be sick?”

“I just think you might not be as sick as everyone thinks you are,” I said, keeping my voice surprisingly calm. I could feel myself shaking inside.

“How would you even know?” my mother snapped. She pushed back from the table and crossed the kitchen with no issue, no breathlessness. No sign of an illness while she paced, yanking her fingers through her hair. “You don’t even live around here.” She stopped moving and pointed an accusing finger at me. “You left the second you could, not caring what you were leaving behind, who you were hurting. No loyalty to our

family, just like your father.”

“It was never our family that was the problem,” I said, standing up. I took one step forward, staring at her, letting her know I wasn’t afraid. “You manipulate people for attention and then get aggressive when you don’t get your way.”

“What do you—how—” Her tongue tripped over the words until she clamped her mouth shut, standing there like a child who had been caught in a lie. I could see the rage boiling inside of her, and I smiled. I had never experienced joy at someone else’s pain.

“And your act was so good this time,” I said, taking another step forward. “So good that Jillian has been looking at nursing homes, Mom. Did you know about *that*?”

I saw something snap in my mother’s eyes. Her fingers twitched at her sides, and I couldn’t help but notice the knife set on the counter just a couple feet away from her. I contemplated whether I could get there before her. Which knife I could reach for. I wondered if it was as easy to slice through someone’s throat as they showed in the movies. If the blood immediately gushed out or if it was more of a slow trickle.

“You’re lying,” she said, but the words were shaky. There was no conviction in her tone. I caught a hint of emotion in her eye I’d never seen there before. She was hurt at Jillian’s betrayal. “Jillian would—she wouldn’t—”

I shrugged one shoulder. “If you don’t believe me, then why don’t you call her and ask?”

My mother chewed on her lip. I took it all in: her frail body, shoulders slumped in defeat, the hurt and shock still displayed on her face. She looked smaller than I remembered, living in this big, old house all by herself. I tried to imagine what that felt

like. Being the one everyone else moved away from and didn't want to return to. It wasn't anger that I felt anymore. It was pity.

"Get the fuck out of my house," she finally said. The words came out low like a growl as she lifted her gaze to meet mine. "Now. I don't want you here when I wake up in the morning."

She went upstairs. I continued to stare at the spot where she'd been standing, remembering the hatred in her eyes when she turned away. Remembering the hatred burning in my gut that now felt like an ache. The faded memory of pain when your mind tries to tell you it wasn't actually that bad.

I wouldn't actually kill my mother, I told myself. I don't have it in me.

I walked into the living room, where Maisy was curled up in a corner of the couch, oblivious to the tension in the house. I wasn't sure what to do yet or where I would go, so I grabbed my coat from the coatrack by the front door and slipped into my shoes before heading out to the yard.

I wasn't in good snow attire. My feet sank into the hard-packed snow as I trekked across the surface that looked as smooth as glass, untouched by dirt or animal footprints. I laid on my back, arms and legs spread out like I was about to make a snow angel. My chest loosened as I breathed in the winter air, feeling it scorch my nostrils. I wondered what her reaction would be if she woke up tomorrow and I was still here. Or if she would call Jillian. What would that conversation sound like?

I stared up at the pink sky and exhaled deeply, watching my breath cloud above me, hovering in the air briefly before it disappeared

WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

My brother decided to move in with me the day I planned my one hundred and twenty-seventh suicide. I use the word “plan” very loosely because it’s not like anything was set in stone. I was starting to get good at ignoring people’s texts and phone calls with the hope that everyone would eventually leave me alone, but the plan backfired. He showed up at my apartment instead.

“What the fuck, Sierra,” Theodore said when I opened the door to my apartment to let him in. He pushed past me. “You haven’t answered your phone in two days. I thought something was wrong. And you’re just sitting in here—” His gaze swept the living room and landed on the gray scarf I’d been in the middle of making. “*Knitting?* You couldn’t put it down just to send a quick text?”

“Sorry,” I said, staring at the scarf. I wondered if I should weave black in with the gray.

Theodore stood in front of me, placing a hand on each of my shoulders. “I need you to text me back,” he said, his tone gentle. “Even if it’s just a thumbs up emoji or something. I don’t care. Can you please do that?”

I didn’t look him in the eye as I nodded.

He ordered us a pizza for dinner and asked if he could stay on the couch that night. I pulled the air mattress out of my closet and gave him that to sleep on instead.

When he came back from the store with groceries the next night, I knew we weren't just having sleepovers. He intended to keep an eye on me, and that included trying to get me out of the apartment. I kindly reminded him that I did, in fact, have a job, that I went for walks around the neighborhood, and sometimes even ventured out to restaurants.

“It doesn't count if you do all those things alone,” Theodore said.

I didn't understand that philosophy. And I *did* talk to people at my job. I had to greet them before taking their pet out to my van to groom. I worked for a mobile pet grooming service, although I was the only other employee besides the owner. Her business had gotten more popular, and she hadn't been able to keep up with all her new clients. But I rarely saw her. There wasn't an office I had to go to. I simply went to her house to pick up the van she had given me a key to. And then I emailed her a report at the end of the day.

“How about we go check out that yard sale down the street?” Theodore asked me that first Saturday morning he was living in my apartment. He was lounging on my couch in sweatpants, the air mattress neatly made in the corner of the room. He'd made dark roast coffee for both of us, even though I hated dark roast coffee. I always made breakfast blend, but I drank it anyway because I only had one coffee maker.

“What yard sale?” I asked. I was sitting at the kitchen table absently looking over a flyer for some neighborhood watch meeting that had been left in my mailbox. Saturday mornings were usually spent with me moseying around the apartment, doing menial domestic tasks. I didn't know what to do with this other person in my space.

“The one down the street,” he repeated. “I've seen signs for it all week. Might be

cool to check it out.”

I didn't think it sounded cool at all. It seemed like a weak attempt to make me socialize. My neighborhood loved to hold meetings and street barbecues. They were all about community here, but I stayed because the rent was cheap. After a feeble attempt at trying to convince him to bring his girlfriend instead, I found myself changing into real clothes and following Theodore out of the apartment. It was more to avoid a fight or a lecture, not because I was actually interested. Why would I want to spend my Saturday morning looking through someone else's junk? We stepped outside and headed down the street, passing mostly old Victorian houses that had been converted into apartments.

The house in question was owned by an elderly couple. They greeted us warmly as we entered their yard. Theodore greeted them back, asked how they were doing. I simply smiled and immediately went straight for the tables lined up under a tent covered with, well, *stuff*. I gazed down at all the old jewelry and plate sets that had been laid carefully out on display. There were dolls with tangled hair and dirty toy trucks. Racks of used clothing and piles of scarves. Boxes holding miscellaneous items labelled “home décor.”

I ran my fingers through a purple silk scarf. It was gorgeous and soft, and I wondered how it would feel around my neck, cinched so tightly I couldn't breathe. I quickly pulled my hand away from the scarf, feeling self-conscious as if others around me could read my thoughts.

I meandered over to a miscellaneous items table, passing by a few people who might've been my other neighbors. The items there resembled mostly antiques. Gilded

hand mirrors and hairbrushes, ornate wooden jewelry boxes, some old fountain pens and embroidered stationary. Hidden beneath some of the clutter was a brown, leather-bound book. I picked it up and opened the cover to find a name written inside: Isobel Harkin.

I flipped through the pages, noticing the dated passages, most of them from the 1940s. This was somebody's old journal. Clutching it to my chest, I went in search of Theodore and found him browsing through a box of old CDs. I asked to borrow some money, since I didn't have my wallet with me.

"What's that?" he asked, pushing the CDs back into place.

"A journal," I told him.

He nodded, and without any further questions, reached into his wallet for a ten-dollar bill, passing it off to me like I was a child asking for ice cream money. I took the journal and money over to the old couple standing behind a folding table with a lockbox.

"What do you have there?" the old man asked.

I held up the journal.

"Ah, that old thing," the man said. He waved his hand through the air. "Found that in the attic. No idea where it came from. I'm not going to charge you for it. Enjoy!"

I said thank you and slid the ten bucks into my pocket. I figured Theodore owed me for my unwilling hospitality.

We left the yard sale. I held the journal to my chest, my excitement spiking at the thought of curling up in bed and devouring Isobel Harkin's words, whoever she was. But the excitement was short-lived when Theodore asked if I wanted to hit a few shops downtown and grab dinner at a restaurant. If it was any other person in the world, I would

have declined, but I indulged him. And then finally, finally, that evening, I sat at my desk and placed Isobel Harkin's journal next to mine. Gingerly, I opened the leather cover and then flipped to the first written page. I read the first line: *This world has never felt like home.*

I ran my finger over the words as if I could imprint them onto my skin like a tattoo. I then pulled my phone out of my pocket and Googled the words. A poem came up called *Home* by Isobel Harkin. I tapped on her Wikipedia page, saw a black and white photo of a young woman, stone-faced, her eyes set in that eerie glaze that all old photographs had. She was a poet from North Carolina, active in the 1940s, and she'd died at twenty-seven, not much older than I was. It was an overdose. Of course, she killed herself. She was a writer, just like Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath.

I scrolled through her relatively short Wikipedia page, noting that she had only published one book of poetry. She'd struggled with mental illness and recurring thoughts of suicide during her adult life and most of her writing reflected that.

I considered the journal in front of me, Isobel's loopy cursive. The Wikipedia page said nothing about a long-lost journal. What secrets was I about to find?

#

I started thinking about death as more than just a vague idea when I was nine. My grandmother died of bladder cancer, and her wake was an open casket. I remember gazing down at her stiff, carefully positioned body. At the white makeup and pink lipstick they'd caked onto her face. The purple velvet dress and matching jacket she'd wanted to be buried in. The word that came to mind was *fake* because my grandmother had never

looked like that. I reached out a hand to touch her because I didn't believe it was her. I wanted to wake the stranger and tell them to go away.

“What are you doing?” Theodore asked, grabbing my arm by the elbow. He was twelve at the time.

“She doesn't look right,” I said, shaking him off.

“She's dead. What do you think she's gonna look like?”

I didn't know how to respond, but my parents had come over when they heard the commotion and told me to leave the room if I was going to be disruptive. I wandered into the foyer of the funeral home where giant poster boards filled with pictures had been set up for people to look at before viewing the dead body. I looked at my grandma's smiling, lively face in all the photos. She wasn't wearing pink lipstick in a single picture, and that got me thinking. What would I look like at my funeral? Would people recognize me? What would I be wearing in the casket? What would I be wearing when I die?

How would I die?

Thinking about death didn't scare me, even as a child. I might have been too young and naïve at nine in the way children are to really be afraid of dying. My grandmother had been old and sick. I was neither of those things. But my interest in death was revealed to me as not being normal the older I got. The way I talked about death, the way I planned it. Obsessed over it. I wouldn't know it was an issue until I told Theodore and he told our parents, and I was sent to see a therapist. And when the therapist asked me if I ever thought about “attempting death” once I was thirteen, and I said yes, well—that created a whole new set of problems.

#

I went to work the next day. My boss and I had a trade-off for the weekends. She took the Saturday appointments, and I took Sunday. I told Theodore I'd see him that night and went to pick up the van. The first appointment was a Shih Tzu, his hair overgrown and tangled like a mop. I brought him out to the van after making insignificant small talk with his owner, taking a few minutes to scratch his ears, rub his belly. I loved that dogs couldn't talk. That they couldn't ask you questions like how are you doing or what are you thinking.

I didn't have to lie to them.

I gave the Shih Tzu another pat on the head as I reached for the trimmers, his little pink tongue hanging out as he panted. I had to tell a lot of lies when I was younger. More for other people's sake than my own. Theodore and I were left alone a lot once he entered high school. My parents had a lot of meetings to attend, a lot of business trips for the company they owned. If they weren't spending the night somewhere, they were too tired to engage much with us when they got home. Or had too much work to review.

Theodore would get frustrated.

"It doesn't bother you that they're never around?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "Not really."

It might have been a lie, but what was I supposed to say?

I shaved along the Shih Tzu's back first, down to his paws. He whined when I touched his feet, so I scratched his ears to distract him, to calm him down.

Part of me was relieved they weren't around much. They wouldn't ask as many

questions. And if they did, they were too distracted to give much thought to my answers. They noticed I spent a lot of time in my room. That I rarely went outside or to see friends. They asked why I was wearing long sleeves in the middle of July because it's a weird thing to do. I knew it would be noticed, and I had my answers prepared. I liked being alone. I had plenty of things to do in my room. I got cold easily, and we had the AC on during the summer. Rational explanations that slipped so easily from my tongue even as a young adolescent.

But I couldn't fool Theodore. Maybe we were around each other too much.

He cornered me in the kitchen one summer day while our parents were at work and forced up the sleeve of my hoodie to reveal thin red cuts lining my wrists.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

It bothered me a bit that he sounded scared. "It's nothing," I told him, and yanked my arm away.

"Have you told your therapist?"

I didn't see why it was any of my therapist's business what I did with my body. Or anyone's business for that matter. I wasn't hurting other people. I didn't even really see it as hurting myself. I thought about death so much, about what happens to bodies after they die, that I started to feel numb. Too numb that I questioned whether I was actually alive. It was only a test. A way to remind myself that I took up a physical presence in this world.

This world has never felt like home.

The words slammed against my mind as I shaved around the dog's neck. I turned

the trimmers off, set them down on the metal table. The Shih Tzu shook its whole body and wagged its tail, happy to be momentarily free. I wondered what it must feel like to give words to feelings, a skill I have never possessed.

Theodore was waiting for me when I got home.

“Hey,” he said, putting down the book he’d been reading. “How was work?”

“Fine,” I said, dumping my bag on the table in the kitchen. I realized I hated the open concept of the living room and kitchen.

Theodore leaned forward on the couch, resting his elbows on his knees. I knew he was expecting to spend some time together that night. Order takeout for dinner.

“I’m not feeling super well,” I said. “I think I want to lay down for a bit.

“Oh, okay,” Theodore replied. “Do you need me to get you anything?”

I forced a smile and told him not to worry about it before closing myself in my bedroom. I sat at my desk and gazed down at the two journals. Isobel Harkin’s tattered leather book and my rigid black hardback. I picked up a pen and opened my journal to a new page, sat there, waited. I had never been a creative writer, never attempted fiction or poetry. I’d never been able to make something up when there was so much in the real world to write about already. I looked up at the window in front of my desk, the one whose curtains I always kept closed, not sure what I had been expecting to happen. Maybe I needed more inspiration.

Isobel Harkin wasn’t a very successful poet while she was alive. Most of her work was never published. She’d written hundreds of poems that lay hidden in one of her desk drawers. Each poem was, as she wrote, *a flicker of light in this vast, depthless*

tunnel. But she didn't believe they would ever see the light of day. Suicide came up more and more in her later journal entries, each method more creative than her last. She'd write about the death, and then she'd write a poem about it. Handing out fliers for a poetry reading in the town square but instead shooting herself in the head, making a public spectacle of it. Jumping into a boiling vat of beer. *Who doesn't like alcohol?* she wrote. Shoving a red-hot poker down her throat. Constructing a wooden machine of knives with a rope pulley that would hack her head to pieces. They were gruesome, messy ways of death.

I thought about the way she did die. Drug overdose. One of the most unoriginal, cliched methods that left people thinking what a waste. It was one of the first methods I'd written down in my journal, but none of mine were as creative as hers.

I found a note from her about halfway through her entries. It read, *My death must be more substantial than my life*.

I considered these words. The idea of being remembered for the way you died but not for the way you lived. I didn't quite understand what the point of that was or what was being accomplished, but I did understand the feeling she described under the surface. This idea of life holding no depth, no light. Hopelessness.

#

The one and only time I actually tried to kill myself was when I was twenty. I'd dropped out of college, well—I'd stopped going to my classes at the local community college where I'd been studying to be a veterinarian. It wasn't that I didn't find my classes interesting. This sense of doubt constantly lingered at the back of my mind. This

voice asking me if I truly believed I would make it to the end of my degree, and that voice became so persistent I could barely concentrate on my work. I received all failing grades, and was put on academic probation, so I could no longer receive financial aid. I was at a dead-end job in retail, one that I hated. It hit me one day while my parents were on a business trip, Theodore had gotten a job, moved out, and the house felt big and lonely. This overwhelming sense of dread washed over me that this was all I would ever have. The future held nothing for me. The dread turned to clarity, this sense of relief at the thought that nothing was holding me here. I had no reason to stay in this world.

I had stopped cutting myself a couple years before that thanks to a therapist who gave me alternative methods of physical release. The old rubber band trick at first, and then exercising to promote a healthier lifestyle. I jogged around the neighborhood until my lungs screamed and my legs shook. I started a gym membership where I lifted weights until I couldn't raise my arms anymore. My body had never felt so strong, but my mind was deteriorating. My body meant nothing if I felt no real satisfaction from it.

How I would do it came pretty easily to me. I went back to my roots. My parents didn't own any guns, the only real drug they had in the house was Tylenol and that wouldn't do. There was no strong enough place to hang myself. The garage was used more for storage than for cars, and I didn't have a car at that point anyway, so carbon monoxide poisoning was out. I got in the bathtub with a box cutter and became a cliché. I slit my wrists, felt the sting that came from slicing open skin. I hissed through my teeth and closed my eyes, waiting for the wounds to numb, for my head to lighten. I waited for the life to drain out of me.

And then I woke up at some point in a bright white sterile room, monitor beeping in the background. Theodore was sleeping in a chair in the corner. I was in the hospital with thick bandages wrapped around my wrists stained a brownish red. I'd been dressed in a cotton gown, and it horrified me to think that Theodore had seen me naked and who knows how many other strangers. He woke up a few minutes later, blinking, and then sat up straight when he realized I was awake.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked me.

I wanted to say no, but instead I said, “I guess.”

A nurse came in to check all my vitals, change the bandages on my wrists. My dinner came in a few minutes later, but something about hospital-made chicken parmesan and a side of string beans seemed revolting to me.

“Mom and Dad will be here in a couple days,” Theodore told me.

“What?” I asked, sipping a can of Ginger Ale through a straw.

“They said they were sorry and wish they could be here tonight,” he said. “But apparently they couldn't get an earlier flight.”

My eyes wandered outside. I was on a higher floor of the hospital and could only make out the top spindly branches of a tree and the corner of another brick building.

“Maybe I don't want them here at all,” I said.

Theodore was quiet for a moment. “Why wouldn't you want them here?” he asked in a measured tone.

“Because they didn't care about me before,” I said. “Nobody did.”

“You know that's bullshit, Sierra,” he said. I looked at him. “I came to the house

to check in on you, see if you wanted to do something tonight, and ended up yanking you out of bloody water and cinching towels around your wrists. Don't tell me nobody fucking cares about you. I *always* have."

Theodore released a wavering breath and covered his face with his hands. I didn't know how to respond to him, so I sat back against my pillow and stayed silent.

#

I ended up calling my boss and telling her I wouldn't be making my appointments that day, that I was sick. I never called out, so she sounded deeply concerned on the phone. The journal entries went on a bit longer, and I had to finish them. I was committed. I needed to know how Isobel Harkin's story ended.

She started to leave her house less and less. Her poems began taking up less space in the journal, and the entries became shorter, vaguer, like she'd become disconnected from her writing. *I feel hollow like the life has been dug out of me. Someone fill me with the dirt that we bury each other in, let death lead to life.* Isobel continued to describe another person doing this to her, the intimacy of someone assisting in something so personal. I paused when I reached the end of the entry, feeling unsettled by what I'd just read, almost repulsed by it. But I kept reading, hoping that something or someone would intervene. I so badly wanted Isobel to get better, even though I knew this wasn't a work of fiction. I already knew how the story ended.

Theodore came back from work around five-thirty. I was still at my desk with the journals. I'd gotten up at some point to make a sandwich but had immediately gone back to the safety of my room. The empty plate remained on my desk. I heard Theodore move

around a bit, shuffling through the kitchen, opening the fridge. There were footsteps, a pause, and then a soft knock on my door.

“Sierra?” he said. “I see your light’s on. I thought you had work today?”

I stopped reading. Something about melting iron, how a man in England had killed himself by jumping into a furnace of liquified iron and all that remained of him was a piece of his charred spine. *My body would be obliterated, Isobel wrote. But my legacy would remain.*

“I’m still not feeling well,” I said.

“Can I get you anything?” Theodore asked. “I can make you soup.”

“No thanks.”

He told me to let him know if I changed my mind. I tore through the other wild deaths she had heard of, the Greek Cynic philosopher Peregrinus who had stripped naked and calmly walked into the Olympic fire. A golden end to a golden life. *Imagine the glory in that. Being able to choose your grand exit, the way people will always remember you.* She’d stopped writing poetry almost completely. She never left her house except when she needed food, and she’d taken up gardening as a way to pass the time. The flowers that bloomed intrigued her, sickened her. The way they equated beauty to weakness. I flipped to the next page where there was only a single line. The last line she ever wrote.

If I were to disappear I know some people would miss me. They would ache for me, and maybe then they would realize they should have tried harder.

I read the line a second time, a third time, and then slowly closed the journal. My heart did ache for her, but it also ached for the people who had lost her. I wondered if any

of those people had read her journal, and how they would've felt after reading that last line.

Theodore knocked on my door the next morning before he left for work. I was awake but pretended I was sleeping, so I wouldn't have to talk to him. I called my boss to cancel my appointments for the day again. It might be the flu, I told her. Still had a running fever, congestion. In her motherly way, she told me to get some rest.

I laid in bed for most of the day, thinking about how when I told my parents I wasn't returning to school to be a vet, they didn't ask me why. They assumed it was because I was too lazy to put in the work and were openly disappointed in me for a while. I didn't know how to make them understand, so I never corrected them. When I told Theodore that I wasn't going to school anymore, he'd given me a reassuring smile.

"School isn't going anywhere," he told me. "After you spend some time working on yourself, you can go back."

I'd had no plans to go back, but I didn't want to tell him out of fear he'd have a similar reaction to our parents. So, I'd slowly stopped reaching out to him as well. I wanted to minimize myself, to disappear, but after reading Isobel's words, the thought of being noticed was appealing. The thought of going back to school, of becoming a vet, of proving to others and myself that I wasn't lazy, I wasn't worthless, that there was life inside of me, was something I wanted to hold onto and will into existence.

When Theodore knocked on my door that night, he wouldn't leave me alone until I came out. I unlocked the door and cracked it open. He was standing back a few feet dressed in his work clothes, khakis and a gray button up. I knew he worked in the IT

department for his company, but I wasn't completely sure what he did. Theodore had always been smart and driven, getting his degree in computer science. I wondered if his job made him happy, if it gave him a purpose.

His eyes roamed over me, like he couldn't understand why I had been wired this way. Running a hand through his hair, he let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, you just don't look sick," he said.

I gripped the edge of the door with my hand and said, "I feel better today."

"Then why did you call out of work?"

"I might still be contagious."

"C'mon, Sierra." He sat on the arm of the couch and folded his arms across his chest. "You've been acting weird ever since we went to that yard sale. You're never very talkative but at least you would sit in the room with me. What happened?"

"Why do you—" My grip on the door tightened. "Nothing happened. Why do you always assume that?"

"Because I don't understand why you do this," he snapped. He bit his lip and when he spoke next, his voice was quieter. "I don't understand why you pull away from people and don't let anyone in. I want to help you, but I don't know how."

My nails dug into the wood of the door. Theodore stared at me, his crossed arms pressed into his chest like he was trying to cut himself in half. "Are you happy with how your life is?" I asked.

Theodore blinked and sat back, so he was leaning against the wall. "Um, it's fine, I guess," he said. "My job pays well. I like my apartment."

“But are you happy?” I asked. I couldn’t tell if he was avoiding an answer or didn’t understand my question.

He released a sigh, his shoulders relaxing with the motion. “Not always, no. But I like solving problems. It makes me feel good about myself, so sometimes that’s enough to get me through the day.”

I nodded and took in his dejected form, the word vulnerable coming to mind. I’d never seen my brother as vulnerable before. I asked him if he wanted to order pizza and pick up a six pack. He let out a laugh and said sure.

LIFESTYLE

When my brother asked me to babysit my nephew for a weekend, I didn't respond for three hours. It was through text, of course. Josh never called me without warning because he knew I wouldn't answer. It wasn't unusual for us to text each other, but he rarely asked me for favors, and he definitely had never asked me to take Ben in for an entire weekend before. If I declined, I knew my parents would gladly take him, but Josh's text clearly stated that Ben would prefer to come here, and I didn't blame the kid. I'd grown up with my parents and couldn't wait to get out of that house.

I thought about this long and hard as my eyes roamed around my apartment, taking in the furniture, all sharp corners and glass surfaces in that modern art deco fashion I was a snob for. A couch and cushioned chairs that were more decorative than homey, but I liked them. I tried to picture an eight-year-old in here and couldn't, but I also reminded myself that at eight, the kid was probably old enough not to walk into a table or stick his fingers into an electrical socket. I remembered how Josh's house had looked when Ben was still a toddler, rubber pieces covering the sharp edges of tables, weird child-proof contraptions holding the fridge and cabinets closed. It was a process of untying things and pushing buttons just to get a glass of water. I'd felt like I was breaking into a bank vault.

Josh informed me he and Melinda, his wife, would be dropping Ben off Friday in the late afternoon.

I took the day off from the office, told the magazine I worked for that I could make edits and update my blog posts from home. I didn't need to sit in a cubicle to write about "lifestyle" issues. In fact, I had told my job several months ago (and this is why I was able to work from home occasionally in the first place) that it would be more beneficial for me to get out there on the streets, in the stores, speak to "real people" and see what products they were buying, what new fads they were participating in, how they were managing to stay sane in a society that preached how the more hours you worked, the less you saw your loved ones, the happier you would be. I suggested starting a blog on the magazine's website, updating subscribers in real time. But most of the time I could simply sit in my apartment in my pajamas, and after some good investigative work on all my social media sites, I could find the information I needed.

Lifestyle was the easiest section to bullshit. But my job praised me, telling me I was the kind of innovative journalist that magazines needed to pump new life into a dying industry. Who was I to argue?

That Friday morning, I actually was at the store. I ventured out after snapping a mirror selfie to post on Instagram, Twitter, even Facebook, tagging all the brands I was wearing that day, adding #nomakeup, #lookgoodfeelgood. I typed up a caption about starting off the day right with a jog around the neighborhood before making an egg white omelet. I do not jog, and I was in my air-conditioned apartment, which meant there wasn't a single drop of sweat on me. I was also wearing foundation. But the post earned hundreds of likes and a ton of comments from people telling me how inspirational my blog was. I responded to just enough with thank you's and heart emojis to show how

much I appreciated my followers.

I went to the grocery store and filled a cart with dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, boxed macaroni and cheese, and juice boxes. I snapped a picture and sent it to Bailey.

Kids like this shit, right?

She responded immediately. *Mac n cheese is a staple for any household.* A second text quickly followed. *We still on for tonight? I'd love to meet Ben!*

I stared at the message, unsure how to respond. We'd been seeing each other for a few months now and usually met up for dinner on Friday's and then spent the night together, but we hadn't actually met each other's families yet. Bailey had asked about it, even went so far to say her mom wanted to meet me, but I kept fabricating excuses. I didn't know how to approach this relationship, had never consistently seen another woman for this long before. I dodged questions about my own family, about my own experience with coming out because I hadn't really done it yet. And, after I had released an article in a print copy of the magazine about "How to Treat Your Man This Valentine's Day," Bailey started questioning me about my work.

"You know," she said, sitting on my couch with the magazine splayed open on her lap. "You have a unique perspective to offer. And a large following now. Why don't you use it to step outside the heterosexual gaze?"

I finished pouring a glass of water from my purifier and added some sliced cucumber to it. "I don't really want to get, like, political with my work," I said.

That was the wrong thing to say. I regretted it when I saw the hurt in Bailey's eyes.

The magazine I contributed to wrote almost exclusively about heterosexual relationships. I received comments now and then, especially when I wrote about relationships and sex, that whoever my boyfriend was must be one lucky guy. Or questions about why I never posted pictures of him. I'm not sure why it was assumed that he existed, that I must be in a relationship with a man based on the things I wrote about. But I never confirmed nor denied the rumors. I let them keep spinning because my whole online life was already a lie anyway.

I knew Bailey was aware of these rumors, and I also knew that she hated my reaction to them. She'd reminded me a few weeks back that June was right around the corner. Pride month. We could find a parade to go to, take a picture for my Instagram account as a way to promote inclusivity and love. I knew she was right in saying that it was actually impossible that none of my readers or followers were part of the community and this would be such a simple way to acknowledge them.

As I waited in the checkout lane at the grocery store, it was the middle of June. I had yet to post anything about pride and the magazine showed no interest in covering it. I used that as my excuse.

Josh and Melinda showed up with Ben around three in the afternoon. When they entered the apartment, Ben glanced around as if he'd never been there before, his hands clutching the straps of his backpack. He was wearing a purple shirt with glittery gold stars and his brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

"Thanks for doing this sort of last minute," Josh said. "Hope we didn't ruin your weekend plans."

I laughed, remembering the text I had sent Bailey and the guilt I'd felt. *Maybe we should move our plans to another night just so Ben has time to settle in for tonight.* She'd been understanding and had hinted at seeing us tomorrow, but I decided to deal with that when the time came.

"I don't mind doing it at all," I said. "I'm sure my place is more fun than Mom and Dad's."

Josh snorted, and Melinda gave me a tight-lipped smile. "We'd feel better knowing he's somewhere he feels comfortable," Josh said.

That was something I understood. They informed me that Ben had brought some toys and books to keep himself occupied, that he wasn't much of an outdoorsy person unless it was to go for a walk. They'd be back Sunday afternoon—Melinda had a conference that weekend for work and Josh was going for moral support, I guess. After they left, I stood in the kitchen, watching Ben look around at all the furniture and artwork in my living room. He had yet to sit down or say a word to me. I decided, as the adult, it was my obligation to make the first move.

"What's in the backpack?" I asked.

Ben glanced up at me, eyes wide, like a startled animal. He slid the backpack off his shoulders and flipped it around on the floor. A picture of Wonder Woman was on the front. "My superheroes," he said, kneeling next to the backpack. He began pulling them out, some I recognized, some I didn't. I wasn't up to date on my superhero movies.

"Cool, cool," I said, placing my hands on the kitchen island. "I'm guessing you're a big fan?"

Ben nodded and sat down with his legs crossed, spreading the dolls out on the floor. “Yeah, they’re cool,” he said. “They don’t let anyone boss them around.”

I nodded, sort of hoping he wouldn’t ask me if I wanted to play with them. Tapping my fingers against the counter, I said, “So, are you hungry? I have dinosaur nuggets and mac and cheese.”

Ben grimaced. “I don’t really like mac and cheese.”

“You don’t—” I was going to have to fire Bailey as my confidant. “Okay, that’s fine. Let’s see.” I opened my fridge. “I have eggs, bacon, um. . . some goat cheese.”

“Oh, Dad makes these really good omelets sometimes with goat cheese,” Ben said, his voice pitching in excitement. “And spinach.”

“Spinach and goat cheese,” I said, grabbing the carton of eggs, goat cheese, and a bag of spinach leaves. “Sure, why not. You want some multigrain toast with avocado too?”

Ben’s eyebrows dipped in confusion, but then he sprang up from the floor when he saw the ingredients I laid out on the counter. “Omelets for *dinner*?”

“Hel—heck yeah, omelets for dinner,” I said. “No one bosses us around in this apartment.”

Ben smiled and walked slowly towards the kitchen. I dragged a stool around the island, so he could prop himself up next to me. He perked up even more when I told him he could put the ingredients in the omelet himself.

For the rest of the evening, Ben seemed more relaxed, more comfortable as he kicked his shoes off, pulled more superhero figures out of his backpack, took a couple

books out. He seemed at home in my apartment, like he visited all the time. I'd witnessed the way he acted whenever Josh and Melinda went over to my parent's house, which wasn't too often. Usually just for holidays, the occasional Saturday night dinner. We all still lived in the same state, but had branched out, wanting to get away from the rural area. I had always wanted to live in a city, and Josh and Melinda had settled in a suburb after Ben was born.

Ben still wore his shoulder-length hair in a ponytail whenever he went to his grandparent's, and he wore the same colorful and glittery shirts because it was probably all he had. It was what he liked wearing most. I'd bought him a couple for his birthday last year when Josh told me that was all Ben wanted. He looked the same around my parents, but he was quieter, more reserved, drawn into himself like he was doing everything possible not to be noticed. And I understood why.

"Josh, this kid needs a haircut," my mother would say, tugging on Ben's ponytail.

Ben would wince but not say anything, just keep staring at his food on the table as if by not making eye contact with anyone we would forget he was there.

"He doesn't want a haircut, Mom," Josh would respond automatically, giving Ben a small supportive smile across the table.

When Ben wasn't around, the comments weren't quite so harmless and couldn't be passed off as simply teasing. They complained about how Josh let Ben do whatever he wanted, that there were no boundaries. People would start to talk about him or ask questions.

"I mean, the kid had a *unicorn* on his shirt," my dad would grumble, shaking his

head. “People are gonna start making assumptions.”

Yes, assumptions. I’d heard this before. Not about Ben but myself. My parents still did not know about Bailey. Didn’t know that I liked women in general. I hadn’t dated a boy since I was a freshman in college, and every once in a while, I did hear remarks about how it had been a long time since I’d dated anyone, that they couldn’t believe I wasn’t able to find a boyfriend as if I was doing something wrong. I wasn’t putting myself out enough. I worked too much, it made me too intimidating. I’ve heard every variation of what “the problem” could be, but I had been dating. I’d talked to, gone out with, and had casual flings with many women I’d met on dating apps or at bars. Nothing that ever stuck, no one I’d ever been particularly drawn to until I’d met Bailey at the restaurant that she owned. I’d stopped in one night after a long day of work for a drink, and she’d been tending bar because they were short-staffed. I hadn’t expected to stay until closing or to write my number at the bottom of the receipt, but I did, and she texted me the next day.

I wanted to tell my parents about Bailey. To let them know I’d found someone who made me happy, as if I had to prove to them that there wasn’t something wrong with me, and I was, indeed, dateable. But I couldn’t quite squeeze the words out. It was like there was a blockage in my throat, preventing me from coughing the words up. Part of it was because I was afraid they would treat me differently once they knew. I would become the subject of their whispered comments when I wasn’t around. But also, I’d almost been outed when I was in middle school, and their reaction, even though it happened so long ago now, had been enough to keep me silent.

I had a friend when I was twelve named Alice, and we liked the way our names sounded when they were said together. Amber and Alice. It made sense that we were best friends, and we liked each other so much that we started calling each other girlfriends because we were girls, and we were friends. Sometimes we would hold hands in the hallways at school and no one stopped us. Sometimes we would kiss but only in the safety of our bedrooms. We would hang out almost every day after school and on most weekends. Until my dad came home from work one day and was angry.

“What is this about you and Alice calling each other *girlfriend*?” he asked.

I froze, stayed silent for too long that I couldn’t deny it. Another student at the middle school had told her dad about Alice and me, and her dad and told my dad and I was so flustered and in disbelief that I couldn’t speak.

“You can’t say things like that,” my dad said. “People are going to make the wrong assumptions.”

And there was that word: assumptions. But I didn’t understand.

I wasn’t allowed to see Alice outside of school anymore. And eventually, our friendship fizzled out until she moved away and started going to a different school. I started dating boys after that.

#

Bailey texted me that night asking if she could come over. I’d just finished taking a picture of my omelet after I finished making it with a side of orange juice and two pieces of multigrain toast covered with blackberry jam. My plan was to post the picture in the morning with a caption that said something about starting the day off right and how

one good choice could lead to more or some shit like that. I looked at the message. Part of me wanted to see Bailey because we hadn't been together since last Sunday, but I also wasn't sure if I should have her around Ben. It seemed like a big step.

“Why are you taking pictures of your food?” Ben asked me. Half his omelet was already gone.

“For the internet,” I said.

“The internet wants to know what you're eating?”

I snorted. “You'd be surprised.” Ben blinked at me like he was waiting for an explanation. I swiped my inbox away. “Do you want to see my Instagram?”

He nodded.

I pulled up the app and slid the phone over to him, explaining that he could scroll through the posts and tap on images to see them up close and read the captions. He smiled as he looked through the pictures, his eyes widening as he looked at the likes on one image, in disbelief that I had over four thousand friends. Followers, not friends. I cringed at how much that made me sound like a cult leader.

“How were you able to take this picture?” Ben asked, referring to one of me sitting on the couch holding a book so the cover was visible on camera. My hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and I was wearing black-rimmed glasses. Cheap plastic ones I had bought online that didn't actually have a prescription. Bailey had taken the picture for me. We'd done a whole photoshoot, and then I'd started taking pictures of her even though she hated being on camera.

“My tripod,” I told him. He asked about others of me posing in front of buildings,

at parks, inside restaurants. “I can usually find someone who will take my picture.”

“Wow,” he said. “You know people everywhere.”

I smiled but didn’t correct him. I didn’t know any of the people usually. Other people’s fascination with my job always amazed me.

The next day I brought Ben for a walk around the city. He seemed astonished that I was able to walk to get coffee, food, to get to the office. Josh and Melinda lived in a neighborhood in an urbanized area, but not an area that was walkable. I knew that Melinda drove Ben to school every morning on her way to the university campus where she taught. He talked about the campus, how it was kind of like a city, that you could walk to different buildings and cafes. I asked him questions about it, even though I’d gone to college, but he seemed excited to finally be the one sharing knowledge.

We walked around a local park that had a garden. Every time we passed a person, Ben asked if I knew them from Instagram. It wasn’t until I brought him to a bakery and told him he could get anything he wanted that we bumped into Carla, a woman from my office.

“Amber! How was your day off?” she asked, clutching an iced coffee. Before I could answer, she turned to Ben. “Who’s your friend?”

Ben stood just slightly behind me as I introduced him to Carla.

“It’s great to meet you, Ben,” Carla said. “I love your shirt.”

Ben blushed and muttered a thank you. His shirt was orange with the print of a giraffe who had eyelashes and was wearing a pink bow on one ear. We said bye to Carla and picked out half a dozen donuts to bring back to the apartment. As we walked, I

noticed that Ben stood a little straighter and kept running his hands over the design on his shirt, a smile constantly tugging at his lips.

Later that evening, I was trying to brainstorm some ideas for my posts the next week. I tried to put something out on social media at least five days a week, blog posts usually went up at least three times. For every monthly print magazine, I usually contributed two to three articles. The problem with producing content like this was that occasionally I ran out of ideas. I'd been overdoing it with food recently. Clothes were already a weekly occurrence. Makeup? I hadn't tried any new products recently.

My phone buzzed. A new message from Bailey. *Can we talk?*

The message didn't surprise me. I had finally responded to Bailey late last night claiming I'd missed her text earlier, and then I'd dodged her request to meet up at the park with Ben, saying I had lunch plans with him and not asking her to come. My excuses were weak, but I didn't know how to bring myself to be honest with her. So, I did what I do best. I avoided the message and turned to my closet to find some inspiration. I rummaged around until I found a clear plastic bin that held a collection of nail polish. *That* had potential.

"You have so many different colors," Ben said, glancing up from the book he'd been reading. He was curled up in a chair by the window.

"I know, it's a bit overwhelming," I said, taking a spot on the couch. I set the bin on the coffee table and popped off the lid. What would count as something hip and summery? I tried to think of beach colors. "What do you think of when you think of summer?"

Ben set his book down and knelt at the other side of the coffee table, his gaze scanning over the nail polish. The tip of his tongue poked out of the corner of his mouth. “Ice cream,” he said. “Well—” He pulled out a jar of bright red nail polish. “My mom and dad get these popsicles that are fruit flavored. Cherry, orange—” He grabbed a jar of orange, yellow, and a darker red. “—lemon and raspberry. I like to eat them at the beach or when we go out by the pool.”

“Popsicles,” I said, my mind spinning. Bright colors, fruit. *A fun, hip way to add a splash of color to your summer!* “Ben, you’re a genius.”

Ben beamed as he lined the colors up next to each other: bright red, orange, dark red, and yellow. “I’ve always wanted to paint my nails,” he said. “My friend, Rachel, has this sparkly purple nail polish, but Mom and Dad didn’t think it was a good idea.”

I looked at Ben, watching his shoulders sag a bit as he looked through the other colors. “Why not?” I asked.

Ben shrugged, but then he said, “Sometimes I already get made fun of for my clothes. And my hair.”

I kept watching Ben, but he wouldn’t make eye contact with me. I was irritated by what he told me. Not because he *did* tell me, but because I’d seen how happy it made him to receive compliments on his outfits or to be able to speak openly about his interests. It irritated me that someone would tear him down like that.

“I think you rock the hair,” I told him. “And the clothes. Those other people just don’t understand good style.” I picked up the bottle of bright red nail polish. “Why don’t we paint your nails? See how the colors look together.”

Ben's eyes widened. "Really?" he said, looking down at his currently plain nails, his colorful giraffe shirt. "The colors would match with my clothes. Yeah, let's do it."

I got to work, smoothing the polish over his nails. He held his hands firmly against the table, fingers splayed, trying his hardest to stay as still as possible so I wouldn't mess up. His commitment made me smile. I imagined that people assumed Ben was going through a phase. He would eventually start wearing more masculine clothing, cut his hair, develop an interest in cars or something equally stereotypical. Whether it was a phase or not, I didn't see the point in suppressing his interests. All that would do is make him grow up to be a self-conscious adult, never knowing whether to share an interest with other people or not. He would always second guess himself, always hide himself away because that would seem like the safer, less painful option.

I recognized it's what I had been doing for years.

I thought I was fine living in secret. No one had to know about my sexuality. It wasn't a part of my career or my family. I didn't see why the world had to get involved. It was easier for me to make up more excuses to Bailey than to have the conversation with my parents. And really, I didn't understand why there had to be a conversation. Why couldn't it be socially acceptable to just bring a woman over for a holiday dinner one year without needing to have a talk or get wild reactions from people? I wanted to post a picture of Bailey and me on social media, but I didn't want to get comments from people saying *I didn't know you were a lesbian* or something equally stupid and invasive like knowing this changed something about me.

I didn't want to care about what people thought of me, but it was so hard not to

when it was part of my job. But maybe I could start small.

Once I finished Ben's last nail and we let them dry for a few minutes, I asked, "Wanna take some pictures? I have a friend who I think would love to see your nails."

Ben nodded excitedly and asked how he should pose. I snapped a few pictures of his painted nails and sent them to Bailey with a text that said, *Sorry, been busy giving Ben a makeover*. And then I responded to her previous question saying that yes, we could talk. I invited her over to have dinner with Ben and me that evening, and we could stay up after he went to bed.

Sending that last message made me a bit nervous but in a curious way. I felt a spark of intrigue, of liberation, at the thought of finally being honest.

NO DISTRACTIONS

We moved to a new apartment after deciding that it would be good for me. There was too much to do at the last place, too much to look at. That's why I had an episode. I don't remember having an episode but that's probably because I blacked out and when I woke up, I was in bed in the guest room, wrists and ankles strapped to the bedposts.

You were flailing, you told me. Out of control. I was afraid you'd hurt yourself.

I felt so lucky to have you. I knew you would always take care of me.

The apartment is on the second floor of an old, converted house with wide rectangular windows. We're surrounded by trees, the house set back from the road. Quiet. The quiet will be good for me. No distractions. There is a small garden in front of the house I can see from the window with bright colorful flowers. Maybe tulips. I'm glad they're tulips and not roses. Soft, safe.

You have to work during the day. I wake up in the morning with you, eat breakfast.

Stay out of trouble, you say before kissing me on the forehead. Your lips are soft against my skin. You're wearing your black pantsuit with a patterned blouse, hair pulled back in a low bun. I'm not sure what trouble you think I can get into, but I don't want to disappoint you.

I sit on the couch. I look at the tulips.

My phone is on the coffee table in front of the couch and it vibrates. It's a text from my mother asking how the new apartment is. Asking if the new location has helped with my head.

I'm not sure how to respond, so I turn back to the window. There's a woman standing by the tulips wearing a white dress, red hair draped over her shoulders. She reaches out a pale hand and plucks a pink tulip from the garden, bringing it close to her face. I sit up straighter on the couch, press one hand to the window. Her gaze drifts up, latches on to mine.

I freeze. Can she see me?

She brings the tulip to her mouth, her teeth tearing a petal from the flower. I blink. She swallows it and then smiles.

A door slams. I jump, my head whipping in the direction of the sound. Footsteps fading down the hallway. My chest is tight, staticky. I take a deep breath and turn back to the window, but the garden is empty. The tulips undisturbed.

When you come home from work, I ask how your day was. Fine. Always fine. A bit stressful. I say I'm sorry because I know you do this for me. How can I help? You smile at me and say, you know how. We fuck. You make dinner after, and I do the dishes while you stand behind me, waiting. We fuck again. Your body quivers, and I finally feel useful.

I tell you about the text from my mother.

You snort in annoyance, your arm draped loosely across my stomach, bare breasts pressed against my arm.

Tell her everything is great, you say, fingers stroking my stomach. I shiver. You are doing great without her.

You ask me what I did today. I did some unpacking, watched TV. I don't tell you about the woman in the garden, and it doesn't feel like lying.

The next day I'm suspicious. You go to work. I look out the window. Nothing but tulips, blue skies. A brown bunny sniffs at the flowers before hopping across the yard, disappearing beyond the trees. Nothing to see here, no distractions. I decide to continue unpacking and reach for a box labeled photographs. But not photographs of family. We don't want bad memories filling up our safe space.

You told me once that you don't have a family. You never knew your dad and your mom mostly left you alone to fend for yourself. You lived with your grandparents for a while until they kicked you out when they caught you kissing a girl in your bedroom you swore was just a friend.

I've never known stability until I met you, you once told me.

I'd never felt so close to another person.

I think about that now as I place photographs of mountains and seascapes around the apartment, humming to myself. You're the only person I have seen since I quit my job at the store to get better. I haven't seen my family in several months. No interaction, no engagement except for texting.

I see movement out of the corner of my eye. A flutter like wings.

The photograph of a forest slips from my hands, the glass shattering on the floor. I turn in the direction of the living room where I saw movement but see nothing now. No

one. The room is quiet, still, except for the soft patter of rain drizzling outside. I step over the photograph and broken frame, my sock clad feet crunching over tiny shards of glass.

Outside is gray and hazy. I don't know when it started raining or how much time has passed. The woman with red hair is standing by the trees, her white dress billowing around pale legs. White in the rain? She seems dry but I'm not sure how that can be. Her hand grazes over one of the tree trunks as she stares into the woods. She is unmoving. I wonder if she's lost something, and then her fist pounds the tree again and again. She pounds it with both fists, scratches at the bark. I clench my own fists as I imagine bloody and broken nails hanging from scratched fingertips. She turns, looks up at my window, opens her mouth as if to scream.

I duck, realizing I don't want her to see me. Don't want her to know I'm here alone. Thunder cracks against the sky, the house shaking. I slide to the floor, hands over my ears, tears stinging my eyes. Rain pounds against the windows, the roof. I want it to go away. Make it go away.

You gently shake me awake when you get home, ask me what happened. I fell asleep on the floor next to the couch. There's a broken frame and glass all over the bedroom floor.

The storm, I say, and immediately push up from the floor to look out the window. The rain has stopped. There is no one outside.

What storm? you ask. It rained earlier but there was no thunder, no lightning. It's barely wet except for some watermarks on the gravel in the parking lot.

The storm in my head. Did I have another episode?

You tell me to sit on the couch and get me a glass of water. Tell me I'll feel better after I eat something. You disappear into the kitchen, and I can hear the clatter of pans, the squeak of cabinet doors. I sip the water, my back to the window. I'm afraid to look. Sometimes she's there, sometimes she's not. I want to look at the soft colors of the tulips, but I don't want to see her again. If I don't want to see her, maybe she won't appear. Maybe it's all in my head. I want to ask you if you've seen her, too, but I'm too afraid.

I can hear you humming to yourself.

I set the cup of water on the coffee table and go to the kitchen because I want to be useful. You're standing at the stove, steam curling through the air. It smells like butter and garlic. You're cooking asparagus like my mom used to make it.

Can I help with dinner? I ask, like I used to ask my mom, but she'd always say no.

You turn quickly, seem surprised to see me standing there. There is a box of rice on the counter, a few chicken breasts, a pill bottle with no label. You follow my gaze.

Migraine medicine, you say. You know I get those sometimes.

I nod but it feels mechanical. You've probably told me, but I don't remember right now. The storm in my head. I always lose a bit of memory when I have an episode.

I leave you alone in the kitchen and watch TV. After dinner, we fuck. Again, and again. My body feels numb. After you finish, you lay your head on my sweaty abdomen, your body warm against me. Warm and safe. Your hair is soft against my bare skin. Soft like the petals on a tulip.

I don't wake up until afternoon the next day. When I open my eyes, I look at the

clock on the nightstand next to the bed. And then I pick it up and bring it closer to my eyes because I can't believe what time I'm seeing. I scramble out of bed, get dressed, make toast. My head feels heavy but also empty. Foggy. I wonder if this is how you feel when you're starting to get a migraine. I look in our hallway closet that we use for miscellaneous storage, dig through the kitchen cupboards. There is no unlabeled pill bottle. I open the medicine cabinet in the bathroom but see nothing except toothpaste, lotion, and some Excedrin. Migraine medicine. I stare at the bottle. Why is there Excedrin if you have the prescription?

The couch feels so far away as I walk towards the living room. My legs are shaky, dizzy. I feel dizzy, and I collapse onto the couch, massaging my temples. The room starts shrinking, the walls pressing closer and closer. I drag my knees to my chest, push my body as far into the couch cushions as I can.

The room can't be shrinking. That's impossible.

I squeeze my eyes shut, open them, and the walls are back in place. Everything is quiet except for the pounding in my head, the motion shaking my brain like thunder against a house.

A car door slams. I uncurl myself.

There's a man outside. The trunk of his car is open and full of brown grocery bags. I prop myself on my knees on the couch. I look at the tulips. They seem vibrant today in the bright sun. I feel myself start to calm down despite the hammering in my skull. A flash of red against white catches my attention, and I look towards the trees. The woman is standing by the tree she pounded and scratched yesterday, except this time she

is holding a brown bunny. The bunny hangs limp in her hands, it's dark glassy eyes so still, so empty. The woman looks at my window, smirking. Fear. I am terrified before she sinks her teeth into the soft white underbelly of the bunny. Before red blossoms across her white dress, and she throws her head back and lets out a horrible laugh. One that vibrates through my head, setting my skull on fire.

I pound my fist against the window as the man steps back into view to collect more groceries from his car. He doesn't startle, doesn't look in my direction. My gaze is blurry and thick with tears as I try to open the window but realize it's painted shut. What do I do? Tell me what to do.

Stay out of trouble, you said to me.

The woman is no longer standing by the woods. I'm not sure where she went. I'm not sure if she was ever there, but the man is still out there, and I think he would want to know. My head still pounding, I open the door. I run down the hallway, down the stairs. I throw open the door that leads outside and collide with the man, his grocery bags falling to the ground, cans of soup and apples rolling across the porch. He says something to me, and he sounds disgruntled, but I don't hear the words.

Go inside, I tell him. You need to go inside.

Are you okay, lady? he asks.

Go inside, I repeat as I stumble off the porch. I don't know why I do it, but I need to know if she's still out there. Go inside. Go inside. Go inside. I hear your voice, but you're not here.

Go inside.

I'm in the parking lot. My gaze is blurry, heavy. I see shades of brown and gray and green. No red. Where is she?

I saw her, I mutter as I drop to my knees. I lay on the rough gravel. I close my eyes.

When I wake up the light is harsh, blinding. I hear beeping, rolling wheels. I'm in a hospital bed. I blink, and I notice you sitting in a chair to the right of my bed. You're in work clothes, and you're not pleased.

I told you to stay out of trouble, you say. Your voice is quiet, soft. You lean forward, and there is a red tint to your hair under the bright light. I grab fistfuls of my sheet, wishing I would sink further and further into the bed, out of sight. Out of your sight.

You shake your head and say, All you had to do was stay inside.

You stand up, and for a brief, horrifying moment, I think you are going to strangle me or sink your teeth into me. You don't even look at me as you leave the room, closing the door behind you until it is only open a crack.

I shift under the covers, so I'm lying flat on my back. There is nothing in the room to look at. No artwork, no distractions. My head feels fuzzy, but it doesn't hurt. There's a needle in my arm connected to a bag of fluid. I itch around it, feeling a slight sting. I push harder, the sting intensifies. I like the way it feels. The pain is real.

My eyes drift to the window, taking in the darkening sky. Charcoal gray. I can't see the ground at all, or the trees. No cars, no people. Just sky. Just gray. Safe.

PARASITE

Jason was first on Riley's list. Well, not on *her* client list; Mistress Millie's client list. He was a regular or had been a regular before Riley took a break from being Mistress Millie. He was waiting for her in the social lounge, a carpeted room furnished with plump couches and chairs. Riley gestured with her finger for him to follow her. She led him to the dungeon. Jason's hands gripped the hem of his shirt, eyes directed at the floor.

She'd hoped for a moment alone to reacquaint herself with the room, the props, but the dungeon had been occupied when she arrived before her shift. It had been weeks since she'd last put on the black leather bodysuit and chain choker. It was like meeting up with a friend after spending time apart, stumbling through a conversation as you reacquainted yourselves. The dungeons were on the ground level of the house, below the dommes dressing rooms. The windows were blacked out, the rooms soundproof. Her thigh-high red stiletto boots echoed through the sparsely furnished room. This one had a padded medical table in the center, a cabinet in the back that held props. There was a bookshelf stacked with books and a houseplant to feel homey. Two hard-backed chairs that served as the "waiting" room. A mirror leaned against the wall. She watched herself walk past it, taking in Mistress Millie's confident strut, her long auburn wig with a fringe that accentuated her angular cheekbones. The tension she held in her shoulders eased.

"Take your clothes off, baby," she said, running a finger along Jason's jawline.

He was still clad in his jeans and hoodie sitting in one of the chairs. “You know the drill.” The sultry tone dripped out of her throat, sounding nearly unrecognizable to her. Millie hadn’t spoken in nearly a month, but she turned away from Jason so he wouldn’t notice any slip in her performance, tossing her hair over her shoulder for dramatic effect.

She went to the cabinet for handcuffs and a pinwheel. Clients were always required to take their clothes off. She needed them to know that the minute they crossed the threshold, they were in Mistress Millie’s domain. When she turned back around Jason was naked, quivering from excitement, anticipation, fear. There was always a little bit of fear with the clients, and it always made her smile. He waited for her to tell him to get on the table, and she promptly handcuffed both of his hands to the safety rails. He wasn’t allowed to touch himself until the end of the session. She climbed on top of him and straddled his waist, feeling his abdomen clench beneath her weight, unused to the hardness of a male body.

“Did you have a good day, sweetheart?” she asked, caressing the side of his neck with the edges of her fingernails.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, emitting a slight gasp.

“Good, good.” Riley pressed the pinwheel against his skin, rolling the spokes down the length of his torso, watching the rise and fall of his chest. She loved the slow buildup in her sessions with Jason. Loved watching him squirm and buck beneath her both in pleasure and discomfort. He liked to dabble in consensual non-consent, which meant she could do whatever she wanted with him, short of killing him. She was glad Jason was her first client on her first night back. She’d missed this part of the job. Being

the one in control. Being the one to push someone to their limits, right before they break.

#

Blake wasn't home yet when Riley got back to the apartment. Her band was playing at a local bar that night, which meant she would probably stick around to drink with the audience after.

Riley dropped her keys in a basket on the kitchen counter and shrugged out of her coat. She was dressed in just leggings and a crewneck, her natural brown hair pulled back in a low messy bun. The most unassuming outfit. She could have been coming from anywhere, and to her relief, no one on the streets had given her more than a passing glance on her walk home. With her face scrubbed clear of makeup, the wig discarded, not a single scrap of leather on her body, she felt vulnerable. Powerless.

Pushing the unease from her mind, she decided to shower. Showering was always one of the first things she did when she got home after a night full of sessions. The clients never really touched her. She didn't work as a switch, was strictly domme, but she was enclosed in a room for four to five hours a night with naked men who were hot and sweaty, sometimes pumping themselves and ejaculating on her floor or equipment. She always made them clean up their own mess, but that was her least favorite part. The wet sound it made, the smell of come. It would linger in her nostrils for the rest of the evening, making her skin feel clammy. She needed to rinse it off, scrub herself clean.

The spray was hot as it hit her skin, the steam rising like a ghost around her. She hung her head, letting the water drench her hair against her shoulders, and closed her eyes.

Sometimes she looked at her body. At the places where it dipped and curved and folded, everything connected in one continuous sweep. She would flex her toes, bend her knees, suck in her stomach. Sometimes she'd rub her fingers between her legs, waiting for the rippling sensation that would rattle a gasp from her lungs. She could feel everything, acknowledge the movements, but she didn't recognize them. She didn't recognize this naked body as her own. And then the rage would punch her in the chest, sweep the breath from her body, and she craved a physical release. A way of channeling it so it wasn't festering inside of her.

She turned off the spray, stepped out of the shower. After drying herself off, she realized with a sinking dread that she'd forgotten to bring clothes with her into the bathroom.

Water dripped from the faucet, plopping onto the floor of the porcelain tub. With the towel wrapped firmly around her, Riley tried to picture where in the bedroom pajamas would be. Her fuzzy plaid pajama pants—she'd worn them last night. Had she thrown them on the bed this morning? Maybe. She couldn't remember tossing them in the hamper.

She crept down the hallway, her footsteps silent as if afraid she'd disturb the peace even though the apartment was empty. The bedroom door was cracked open, the light on inside. They lived on the third floor of the building now, and she knew no one could see into the windows from this high up. But even as she tried to reassure herself, images of the photos she'd seen of herself flashed through her mind. Pictures of her getting dressed, clad in only her underwear, even one of her and Blake kissing, hands tangled in each

other's hair. She shivered at the thought, remembering that feeling of recognizing herself in the photos but feeling no emotional connection to them. It had been like looking at a stranger, even though seeing them had terrified her. Not just the content, but the number of pictures that had been taken. It had meant this man had been watching her for quite some time.

When Riley pushed the door open further, she felt relief at the sight of her pajama pants and a t-shirt laying in a crumpled heap on the bed. She quickly slipped them off the bed and retreated from the room.

By the time Blake got home, it was almost one a.m. and Riley was curled up on the couch watching a woman stuff chicken on Food Network. Blake stepped into sight, wearing ripped fishnets under distressed black jean shorts. Her tank-top revealed the colored tattoos on her arms.

"The fuck are you doing?" Blake asked, lighting up a joint. She swayed on her feet.

"Watching this cooking show," Riley said, because she didn't quite understand the question. "I've never understood how they stuffed chicken like this."

"Why are you watching this?" Blake asked.

"I couldn't sleep."

Blake nodded and fell onto the couch next to Riley. She passed her the joint as the woman slathered oil over the raw chicken. Riley grimaced at how slimy everything looked as she sucked on the joint and coughed the smoke out before handing it back to Blake.

“How was your show?” she asked.

Blake nodded like she had a beat stuck in her head, blond hair bouncing. “It was good. Wild crowd. They really liked screaming the words at me, which made my job easier. How was your *clientele* this evening?”

“Average,” Riley said, remembering when one of her clients had asked if he could suck on her foot. She’d let him, feeling his slimy tongue run against the callused skin on her big toe. She imagined someone rubbing raw, oil-slicked chicken over her skin and held back a shudder. “They were all mostly sensation and massage-based sessions. I hate those.”

Blake leaned her head back against the couch and blew smoke into the air. Riley noticed the way Blake’s red lips parted, how her lower back arched during the movement. And then she rested her head on Riley’s shoulder.

“Sounds like you just want to beat the shit out of people,” Blake said.

Riley put an arm around Blake, pulled her closer. “It’s easier.”

Blake pushed herself onto Riley’s lap, straddling her on the couch. “We could take this conversation to the bedroom,” she said, blond hair falling like a sheet around Riley.

Riley placed her hands on the soft curves of Blake’s hips. Her weight was a comfort, something familiar and safe. Something that Riley could hold onto and remember that physical contact could be intimate, sensual. And even though she and Blake did get aggressive in bed, it was never hostile. The acts were exclusively for pleasure, built on established boundaries and trust.

For a moment, Riley considered standing and carrying Blake to the bedroom, but Millie didn't come home with her. And even though she hated it, she wasn't sure how to make that first move without Millie right now.

"Maybe we can just kiss for a bit," Riley said, running her hands up Blake's shirt.

Blake shifted and smiled, failing to hide the slight disappointment present in her eyes. "Of course," she said, and then lowered her face, soft lips brushing against Riley's, a tease, before parting into a kiss.

#

Riley woke up early the next morning. Blake was still sleeping, would continue to sleep well into the afternoon. Her band had another show that night, and they were popular enough that Blake no longer needed her old job at the record store. Their combined income was enough to pay their bills and allow them to live comfortably, but they had almost no savings. It was the reason why they hadn't been able to afford to actually move out of their building, because that would have required a security deposit at a new place and hiring a truck to move their furniture.

Riley made coffee and sat on the couch still dressed in her pajamas. She'd thought about looking for another job. A so-called "real job." One that might allow her to actually use the accounting degree she got in college. The safety that came with a regular day job was appealing, the consistency and predictability of numbers, but the thought of being Riley all the time, of giving up Millie, not so much. The whole point of creating Millie was to help her let loose sometimes, to learn how to take control in versatile situations.

She pulled up a job search site on her phone, scrolled through to see what was out

there. To see what she was even qualified for, but nothing was piquing her interest. The problem was she *liked* being a domme. Had liked it until work mixed with her personal life, when a client of hers had identified her out of costume on the street one night when she was walking home.

“I’ve been waiting so long for this,” he said as he moved closer. “Can I take you out for a drink so we can talk?”

He smiled when he said it, but Riley couldn’t help but feel unnerved. She explained that she didn’t do that, she didn’t meet with clients outside of the dungeon. When the smile started sliding from his face, she apologized, even though she didn’t think she should have to, and began turning to walk away.

“But I’m not just a client,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. She immediately tensed. His breath was hot against her ear. “C’mon, I’ve noticed the connection we have when we’re in that room together. Don’t you feel it too?”

Slipping a can of mace from her purse, she spun back around and told him to back off. The mace she always carried but hoped she’d never have to use. He put his hands up and stepped back, said he didn’t mean to alarm her, that he wasn’t like the other guys that came to see her. When he mentioned that he could give her a better life, a better place to live than the one she currently had, cold fear replaced her anger. She stood her ground and he eventually wandered away, saying he would give her time to think. To think about what? She decided the man was clearly delusional and went straight to the police. When the police went to his house to talk to him, they discovered the photographs. She filed for a restraining order.

Feeling frustrated, she exited out of the job search and tossed her phone onto the couch next to her. Any kind of job she saw that had to do with accounting and finance with a decent enough salary required more experience in the field than what she currently had. And she knew she couldn't afford to take a drastic pay cut.

A few minutes later, Blake emerged from the bedroom dressed in an oversize black band tee. Her unbrushed hair laid in messy curls down her back as she padded barefoot to the kitchen.

“What are you up to today?” Blake asked, opening the fridge.

Riley swiped the internet away and set her phone down. “Nothing really. Looking for jobs but there isn't much around here.”

“The bar I'm playing at tonight is hiring,” Blake said, coming up next to the couch with a glass of orange juice. “You should come to the show tonight. You haven't been to one in a while and maybe you can talk to a manager.”

Riley bit her lip. “I have to work.”

“Well, after that. We're usually still playing after you get out.”

Riley missed going to shows. She missed showing up with the band and then claiming a spot at the bar, watching Blake get the crowd riled up while they shouted the lyrics at her. She missed singing along to the music and cheering when Blake made eye contact with her from the stage. But she wasn't sure who else would be there tonight, who might recognize her. “I can't tonight, I'm sorry,” she said. “Another night.”

“Okay,” Blake said.

Riley could feel Blake lingering behind her like she was weighing her words,

deciding if she should speak, before she went back down the hallway to the bedroom.

#

After Riley transformed into Millie that evening, she stood in front of the full-length mirror in her dressing room. Her gaze flicked over her dark smokey eyes and false eyelashes. Her prized red leather boots. She straightened her shoulders, ran her hands along her leather-clad body. That primal urge to unleash her aggression stirred inside of her, the beast awakening. She checked her client list for the evening and felt a growing resentment as her eyes ran down the lineup. The first one was a bondage session, which were always hit or miss for her. Sometimes they wanted to be constrained and punished, sometimes they wanted to be tied down and tickled with a feather. And she didn't recognize the name. The second one she did recognize. He had a food fetish and last time he came in, he'd brought his own eggs and asked her to crack them over his lower abdomen. He shivered and moaned when the yolks slid down his stomach, his pelvis, settling in the grooves of his thighs. She'd watched with fascination, having never encountered someone who'd gotten turned on like that before, but that wouldn't help her release any aggression.

And then, she saw Jason's name and felt herself smile, a spark of intrigue flickering inside her.

The first time Jason had visited her, he asked her to sit on his face and read off a list of all the insecurities he had that he'd written down on a lined piece of notebook paper. He didn't speak. Didn't say a single word to her outside of his request during their first several sessions. One day, he wanted her to paddle him and tell him how much of a

bad boy he was. She happily obliged until they reached the aftercare, and he started crying. She almost turned him down the next time he scheduled a session with her, but when he showed up, he told her he was interested in consensual non-consent, and he only felt comfortable doing it with her.

Tonight, he wanted her to whip his balls and body shame him. She would happily oblige.

“Take it off, baby,” she said once they reached the dungeon. “Let’s take a good look at you.”

He took his clothes off and dropped them in a heap on the floor. Riley circled him, heels clicking, twirling a lock of Millie’s auburn wig around her finger. Jason stood rigidly, hands plastered to his sides. She instructed he lay on the table on his back, spread-eagled, and used rope to tie both his hands and feet to the bed. She then grabbed a riding crop from the wall and swished it through the air. It didn’t make that satisfying whistle, but she knew it packed a good enough sting. It was the implement Blake requested her to use the most, and she felt a stab of guilt that she was doing it to Jason but not her.

Jason flexed his toes, pulling the rope taut. Riley knelt on the bed, towering over him, sliding the crop along his inner thigh. She considered his penis lying limp against his leg. Harmless. She told him it was pathetic. That it was too small for him to be a real man. She shamed him for not shaving his pubes, guiding the crop down between his thighs. As soon as he began to harden, she slapped the crop against his testicles. He cried out, his hands clenching the ropes that held his wrists. She brought it down twice more,

watching the way his body squirmed, attempting to avoid the pain he asked her to inflict on him.

Riley continued to degrade him, to torment him with her crop. She caught a glimpse of herself—of Millie—in the mirror behind the table, towering over Jason’s naked form. She imagined a cheetah towering over its prey, fangs bared, and smirked. She concentrated on the snap of the crop, the sharp intakes of breath from Jason. He was starting to sweat. She could feel the moisture on her skin, the heat enveloping her. The beast was clawing at her ribcage, begging to be released. Jason moaned like he was in pain.

“Hit me harder,” he told her.

Millie slapped him. Not with the crop, but with her hand across his face. He blinked up at her, his eyes watering.

“Don’t fucking tell me what to do,” she said, the words coming out like a growl. A flicker of surprise crossed Jason’s face. She’d never used face-slapping with him before.

“Sorry, mistress,” he said, his voice hoarse.

She felt her heartbeat slow, saw that his dick was still up, and for some reason, this made her angrier. She told Jason she was going to have to punish him and went to the wall for a sturdier implement.

After her last session, once she’d shed Millie off of her and changed into jeans and a sweater, just Riley again, she sat on the floor of her dressing room, back against the wall, knees held tightly to her chest. She tried to shake the image of surprise from Jason’s

face, a breach of the trust they'd gradually built up over a few months' worth of sessions. She couldn't understand it. The rage that infiltrated her. The pull she felt inside of her, like there was a string being tugged by someone else, someone stronger than her. She couldn't fight it. Why couldn't she fight it?

She didn't go to Blake's show that night. As soon as she walked through the door, she went around the apartment and shut all the blinds. It didn't feel like enough. People would surely be able to see the glow from the lights from outside. She pulled a bunch of spare sheets out from a closet and used tacks she found in her desk drawer to cover all the windows. When she finished, she turned off all the lights and turned the TV on to Animal Planet. A segment about snakes. She drew her knees up to her chest and fixated on the screen, her stomach churning like there was a parasite inside of her.

Don't think about it, she told herself.

She liked watching the snake slither through the leaves as camouflage and then spring upon an unlucky rodent, fangs exposed. It wasn't out of cruelty. Only survival.

When Blake stumbled into the apartment a couple hours later, she gave Riley a simple greeting and headed down the hallway. A few seconds later, she came back to the living room and stood at the side of the couch, her eyes grazing over the sheets hanging from the walls.

"So, um, I see you did some decorating tonight," Blake said.

Riley didn't look away from the TV as she said, "We don't have any curtains."

"You've never mentioned wanting curtains." Blake appeared in front of Riley, blocking the TV. She was wearing her leather skirt tonight with black high-tops. Her

blond waves had been flat-ironed. “Do you mind telling me what’s going on?”

Riley picked at a loose thread on her shirt and shrugged.

Blake nodded as she peered over her shoulder at the TV. At the innocent violence of the animal world. “Does this have anything to do with, um—” She ran her fingers through her hair. “You know. What happened a few weeks ago.”

Riley’s grip tightened on the sleeve of her shirt, nails digging into the fabric. She remembered the sound of Jason’s gasps as he’d jerked himself off after she’d untied him from the table, his body convulsing with the effort. It had sickened her, enraged her. She’d wanted to vomit, cut his dick off, tell him he didn’t deserve this kind of pleasure. She suppressed the rekindled emotions now, pushed the images from her mind. She thought about dense forests and how there were so many places to hide.

“Sometimes I just don’t want anyone to see me,” she said.

“Sure, okay,” Blake said. She continued to play with her hair. Riley rarely ever saw her uncomfortable in any situation. “Do you think, maybe, you should try talking to someone?”

Riley blinked. “I talk to you.”

“Yeah, but I can’t give you professional help.” Blake sat on the couch, placing a comforting hand on Riley’s thigh. Riley felt her muscles loosen. She could smell Blake’s flowery perfume and felt something stir inside of her. Something softer, more delicate, but still primal. She wanted to run her hands through Blake’s hair, yank on it until she gasped. It had been a while since they were that intimate with each other, but anytime Riley thought about the photographs, seeing her and Blake entangled with each other,

captured by a stranger, she drew away, not wanting to put Blake in a situation like that again.

“I’ll think about it,” Riley said, even though she knew she wouldn’t.

Blake looked at her for a moment, the corners of her eyes crinkling in concern. “I think you should put some serious thought into it,” she said. “You’ve barely even mentioned what happened, like you think you can, I don’t know, ignore it out of existence.”

Riley felt her body tense, that familiar unfiltered rage flooding through her, but she tried to contain it. She didn’t want to lash out at Blake. “I said I would think about it. I just need some time.”

Releasing a small sigh, Blake nodded and stood, said she was going to change and would be back. Riley remained stiff and motionless on the couch, footage of snakes in the wild continuing to flash across the TV, but she found herself barely paying attention to it.

#

When Riley saw Jason’s name on her list of sessions the next evening, she felt a sense of relief. Once again, he was waiting for her in the social lounge. She led him to the dungeon and prompted him to strip naked as usual. He looked at himself in the mirror.

“Can we try something new tonight?” he asked.

He wanted her to whip him in front of the mirror. She hadn’t been expecting it, didn’t even realize he was into it. She felt the beast stirring inside of her, wagging its tail in anticipation.

“Have you already been touching yourself, Jason?” she asked in Millie’s sultry

tone.

Jason peeled his gaze from his reflection and looked at her, his face reddening. “I’m sorry, Mistress,” he said. “I know I’m not supposed to until you tell me to.”

“Then why’d you do it?” The beast rattled its cage. The mirror buzzed to life, pulling her in. She looked at her reflection over Jason’s shoulder, locking eyes with Millie’s wicked gaze. Jason glanced down at his erection in shame, doing his best to avoid looking at her. This satisfied her, but she still wanted him to pay for it. To feel him tremble beneath her. Hear him scream.

“Bring a chair over in front of the mirror,” she told him, her voice firm. “And grab your belt.”

Jason dragged a chair over to the mirror, unlooped the belt from his pants that he’d draped over the couch. Riley took it from him, running her fingers over the old, creased leather. She thought about how he would walk out of here after, the belt wrapped around his waist, a constant reminder wherever he went. A reminder of the power that Millie wielded over him. She instructed him to bend over the back of the chair, place his hands on the seat.

“Look at yourself,” Millie told him, stroking a finger down his spine. “Why are you here?”

Jason met his own eyes in the mirror, Millie towering over him. “I need to be punished,” he said with a sigh.

She realized his erection was pressed up against the back of the chair. The beast rumbled at the thought of him panting, gasping with pleasure, with sweet relief. Millie

would take care of him. The crack of leather against skin resounded through the room. She swung two more times, but Jason didn't move, didn't make a sound. That made her angrier. She hit harder, remembering the shame she'd felt sitting in the police station that day with the photographs laid out in front of her. The pictures that showed her at her most vulnerable. She couldn't help but wonder if they had circulated around the station. If the cops had laughed at them, made comments about them. How many people had seen them?

Jason's body tensed, his hands lifting from the chair.

"Don't you dare take your hands off that fucking chair," she snapped.

Jason mumbled an apology, his grip tightening around the edges of the seat. Her anger grew, boiling over. She hit him three more times in rapid succession, catching the movements of her reflection in her periphery.

"This is Millie's domain," she heard herself say. Jason whimpered beneath her, his body curling around the back of the chair like a scared animal. Like wounded prey.

She felt laughter bubbling in her chest. "How does it feel?" she heard herself say. "How does it feel to be so helpless?" She continued to lash his own belt against him, felt a tug somewhere in her gut to look up, to see what was happening. When her eyes trailed up the mirror, her reflection was already looking at her, grinning wickedly, a predatory glint in her eyes. Her chest deflated, the anger dissipating, replaced by a fear that was so pervasive she wanted to smash the mirror, destroy the threat.

She tore her gaze from the mirror as the belt met Jason's skin one last time. He cried out, his arms shaking. His whole body was shaking. Riley's gaze fixated on his

bruised skin with a grim fascination, her stomach churning in disgust and disbelief like she was staring at a corpse. She placed a hand on Jason's lower back, feeling his hot and sweaty skin, but he stumbled back from the chair, his gaze swiveling around until he found his clothes.

“What the fuck was that?” he said, wincing as he slid his jeans on. “I said my safe words *three* times.” He stormed out of the room while he was still adjusting his shirt.

Riley's first instinct was to reach for Millie to guide her through this, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She couldn't stand the thought of letting the beast out again, so she stood there, Jason's belt hanging limp in her hand, as she watched him walk away.

CAROUSEL

The moment I see that I'm scheduled to work the carousel my mood worsens. I can't think of a worse way to spend my shift than having to operate the most boring ride in all of Lake Amos Theme Park. I scan down the rest of the roster and see someone else's name typed in next to Down Time, which is where I'm usually stationed. My favorite ride simply because I like to watch as everyone's swinging legs stiffen once they reach the top in that second of hesitation before plummeting straight down, screaming like they're falling to their deaths.

I move away from the roster and head into a back room of the employee's building to stash my stuff in a locker. I'd been hoping for more of a distraction this shift. Something to take my mind off of the wedding invitation I'd received in the mail this morning from Rachel, an old friend from college. My heart clenches like a fist at the thought of college, and I slam my locker closed with more force than necessary. I grab the keys that I'll need for the carousel and am about to head out when Kevin appears from the manager's office.

"Molly," he says with half of his body hanging out the door. "Can I see you for a sec?"

I refrain from rolling my eyes as I follow him into the office. He's dressed in his managerial khakis and navy-blue polo with Lake Amos stitched into the right breast.

Quite the step-up from the navy-blue t-shirt that the regular old employees have to wear. He takes a seat behind his desk, drawing a file over and flipping it open.

I tap my fingers against my knee.

“So, we have a new trainee coming in today,” Kevin says after several excruciating seconds. “Stacy Hamden. College senior. Picked this up as her summer job.”

I just stare at him, trying to figure out how this has anything to do with me.

“Resume says she’s a chem major. Imagine that.” He spins the file around and slaps it down in front of me. “Be nice to her, got it? We’re understaffed and we need her to stay.”

“Oh-kay,” I say, wondering who hands in an official resume when applying for a temporary position at an amusement park.

“I assigned you to train her. She’ll be in at five and will stay with you until close.”

“I—but Rob usually trains new people.”

Kevin gives me a wide, soul-crushing smile that causes my stomach to flip. The kind of smile he probably gives to his kids before telling them they won’t be getting ice cream after dinner, or that their hamster died. “I thought it might be beneficial for *you* to take it easy with the carousel for a few weeks and show Stacy how we do things around here. There’s just been some talk of certain employees clocking in late, taking extra-long breaks, abandoning their shifts—we don’t want Stacy to fall into these bad habits, do we?”

My hand grips my thigh, pinching the skin beneath my khakis. I immediately try to think of any employees I might’ve pissed off in the past couple weeks.

“You don’t have a problem training her, right?” Kevin asks, scrunching his eyebrows.

I force myself to smile. “Not at all,” I say. “Send her over at five.”

I relieve the current attendant from their duty and take my place behind the control panel, watching as people flood through the gate. This is another thing that irritates me about this damn ride—there’s always a line. Always. And it’s usually families that had set out to have a happy day at the park, piling their kids in the car, not expecting their day to descend into a chaotic mess. I sit behind the Plexiglas of my booth as frustrated parents and whining kids approach the carousel, circling the horses to choose the worthiest one. I watch it all unfold, leaning back in my chair, hoping that no one looks up and makes eye contact with me. I’d rather them think there’s no human behind the control panel, that the ride simply operates on its own, so I don’t have to smile. And, even further, I hope that no one recognizes me. That has yet to happen since I started working here, but the wedding invitation had been unexpected. Invasive, almost. I don’t know how Rachel knows my current address.

The attendant working the gate cuts the line off and walks around the carousel to make sure everyone’s strapped to their horses. He gives me the thumbs up and I start the ride, the horses with their wide, sightless eyes and open mouths bobbing up and down. I catch sight of the flashing lights at the top of the carousel advertising *Mr. Amos’s Grand Carousel*. What a narcissist—naming a ride after yourself when you already claim the entire fucking park.

I snort at the same time a kid comes into view on the cycle, clutching his horse for

dear life and wailing into his arm. It makes me wish there was a way to make the ride go faster. Or send them up higher. Or flip the horses upside down.

A couple months ago, I'd been put on the Scrambler for a fill-in shift, and I'd spent the day researching the park on my phone. It was cloudy, intermittent rain that was consistent enough that people stayed away but not dramatic enough for us to close. Good old Mr. Amos, who built the park in 1942, had hired the renowned German carver and carousel builder, Jurgen Schwarz, to construct Mr. Amos's Grand Carousel. Schwarz had immigrated to the United States in the mid-1930s to partake in the booming carnival and theme park business that was rising across the country. Mr. Amos's Grand Carousel was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, being one of only twenty-seven Schwarz originals still left in the country. But in 1942, when Mr. Amos advertised a Schwarz Original Carousel to bring in guests well—frankly, no one gave a shit. Americans didn't know who Schwarz was yet.

But the part of the park's history that intrigued me the most is that Mr. Amos had a wife who came up with the idea of building the fastest wooden rollercoaster to attract the business they desperately needed. Mrs. Gertrude Amos took it upon herself to search for a roller coaster engineer in the area who would be willing to take on the task. She helped design the outline of the coaster and the shape and color of the cars. And what do you know—people came from all over the country to ride the coaster. And the park flourished, having to install time markers on how long of a wait the line for the rollercoaster would be. The ride was a total success. But did anyone know she was the mastermind behind the ride? Rocket Rollercoaster was what it was named. The most

generic, unoriginal name any ride has ever been given. It became just another attraction under the guise of Lake Amos Theme Park. And Mrs. Gertrude Amos became just an extension of her husband, forced to stand beside him and remain silent.

The boy comes into focus again, still crying, a woman next to him, presumably his mother, trying to calm him down. I want to tell him to get over it. That a couple minutes of being uncomfortable on a ride might be the worst thing that ever happens to him. People will always believe him, like how people believed Mr. Amos when he claimed the rollercoaster as his idea. Like how people believed Gavin over me after the party.

But of course, I don't say anything. I stop the ride and watch as people climb down from their horses and herd like obedient cattle towards the exit gate just as miserable as they were when they came in.

#

Stacy shows up at exactly 4:58, which means she's an overachiever and I don't know what to do with that. She smiles and greets the attendant working the gate, blond ponytail swinging over the shoulder of her navy-blue Lake Amos shirt. I've already decided I'm not going to smile at her when she enters the booth and holds out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Stacy," she says. I can see the toxic-looking blue gum that smells like cotton candy in her mouth.

"I know," I say, giving her hand a single shake. "Molly."

"Kevin said you'd be training me." She grabs a folding chair leaning against the back of the booth and sits so close to me our knees almost touch. I tense my thigh. "Do I

get to actually do anything or should I just observe? I brought something to take notes.”

She pulls out a pocket composition notebook and a purple gel pen from her khakis.

“You can just sit there,” I say as the gate attendant tugs on the last seat belt and gives me the thumbs up. I hit the power switch and watch the carousel ease into motion, turning around and around. I can hear Stacy breathing next to me. The claustrophobia makes my skin tingle.

“How long have you been working here?” Stacy asks.

“Too long,” I say, watching a little girl tip her head back and screech. A woman puts a hand behind her to force her back up.

Stacy laughs even though I didn’t make a joke. “I mean, this job doesn’t seem too bad. You must get some entertaining people, right?”

“Sure.”

“And it’s not total customer service. I mean, I used to work at Target and let me tell ya something—”

“Look, it’s a little distracting talking this much when I’m trying to operate the ride. Time’s almost up. I gotta end it soon.”

“Oh.” Stacy nods and snaps her gum. She opens her little book and jots down a couple notes.

The little girl spins into view again, her sandaled feet kicking against her horse, body bouncing off the seat as if that’ll make her horse go faster. I almost pity her. Thirty seconds later, I slow the ride down, and I can feel Stacy watching me intently. She writes down more notes. The next group of people floods through the gate and begins choosing

their horses. Stacy snaps her gum again.

“So, do you live close by?” she asks.

#

From 1948 to 1952, Lake Amos Theme Park expanded, adding two new rides to their Kiddie Park and three waterslides that lead into the lake the park is built next to. It will be almost fifteen years until the full water park is completed. Eight more years until they install the Scrambler. Four years until they build the train ride that takes guests on a tour around the lake, passing at the bottom of the hill that holds the mansion where the Amos family lived. It's since been labelled a historical site by the state and is now open for tours. “Haunted Mansion” tours are held every weekend in October. During December they decorate it for the holidays.

In 1951 police responded to a domestic disturbance call at the Amos household. It was phoned in by Edward Amos, the youngest sibling who was six at the time. He reported to the dispatcher that his daddy was scaring him. When police showed up, Leslie Amos, the oldest sibling, opened the door dressed in slippers and her cotton nightgown. She had been reading in the lounge and hadn't been expecting the police to show up. No one knew that Edward had called. A domestic disturbance? Leslie asked, not really even sure what that meant at thirteen-years-old. She rushed upstairs to find her dad, who was in his study by then looking over official park business. Police are here to see you, daddy, she would tell Mr. Amos. She was worried something was wrong. Nothing to worry about, sweetheart, would be Mr. Amos's answer as he pushed back from his desk, smoothing out the wrinkles in his white collared shirt.

The police would ask Mr. Amos if everything is okay. Mr. Amos would smile and say, Of course. He would have to remind Edward that the phone isn't a toy. The police would laugh, and Gertrude would appear behind Mr. Amos at the sound of voices, her eyes widening in panic when she notices the police. Gertrude would tell them that everything was just fine. Oh, the bruise on her eye? Accidents happen all the time when you work at an amusement park. And she would laugh to brush the question off, disguise the fear she felt in her chest. Mr. Amos had a bit of a temper. He wouldn't like the police barging into his house like this asking his family questions. She could see the tension in his hand gripping the door.

I took it upon myself to fill in some of these details based on what I read on Wikipedia, since I wasn't in the Amos mansion that night in 1951. Three years ago, when I was being questioned by the police, I remember playing with my fingers in my lap. Bouncing my leg. I'd felt like I was the one being interrogated, even though I had reported the crime.

It says here you knew the assailant, the officer said to me. That you'd dated him in the past. You went upstairs willingly. You were drinking that night.

I felt my stomach sink further with each nod of my head. I could tell what the officer thought just by the tone of his voice. I waited for him to ask me what I was wearing that night, and I dreaded having to respond but he never did. Maybe he didn't need to. This was just another case of a college girl drinking a little too much at a frat party and letting some guy take advantage of her.

When I spent that rainy afternoon at the park reading about the Amos family on

my phone, all I could imagine was my officer sitting across from Gertrude that night if they had bothered to ask her if everything was okay, watching her fidget, seeing the unease in her eyes, and wondering what she had done to piss her husband off so badly.

#

Stacy becomes more work than I anticipate. Not because she doesn't get the job. There isn't much *to* get when dealing with the carousel. I realized on that first day that she likes to talk. But it isn't just me she wants to talk to. No, she wants to engage with every fucking rider that walks through the gate. She hangs out the door of the booth, waving and telling people to have a great ride. I sit slouched in my seat, my chest caving in a little further with each person who turns their eyes in our direction. By the time the gate is shut and she's back in the booth, my skin feels so itchy I want to tear it off.

"I really don't think you should be doing that," I say, tightening my voice so I don't sound too aggressive.

"Why not?" she asks. "People seem to like it."

"We're not really here for rider engagement. We just. . . do rides."

"Well, there isn't anything in the employee handbook that says we *can't* engage with them."

I snort.

She snaps her gum and says, "What?"

"No one reads the employee handbook."

"I just want to make sure people have a good time. That's what they come here for."

“It’s not our responsibility to—”

“Wait, isn’t this a microphone?” Stacy stands up and drops her notebook and pen on the chair. She taps at the slim silver instrument protruding from the control panel as I stop the ride. The carousel slows down just as Stacy taps a button and feedback echoes through the microphone. “Welcome back, riders!” she says.

I cringe as her voice projects over what feels like the entire park. A few people have startled reactions at being spoken to as this is the *carousel*. She tells them to enjoy their evening. To come back and enjoy the ride again. She thanks them for coming to Lake Amos’s Grand Theme Park. I want to tell her that the riders didn’t come “back” from anywhere. That “Grand” isn’t even a part of the park’s title. But her voice is so loud, her commentary so obnoxiously wrong, that I feel paralyzed, unable to even sink to the floor like I so desperately want to.

Stacy turns off the microphone when she finishes speaking and laughs. Her face droops a bit when she notices I don’t join her. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

“I don’t understand why you’re trying to draw attention to us,” I snap. My forehead is almost even with the control panel, my body curled into itself.

Stacy considers me before jumping up from her seat. “I’ll go outside then,” she says. “Then they’ll only see me.”

The next round of people pours through the gate and Stacy steps outside the booth to greet them, strategically blocking the window on the door. I sit in my chair, still fuming, feeling trapped like an animal at a zoo.

#

The thing about my town is that it's not small but it also isn't a big city. People know each other or they know *of* each other. Faces are recognized, stories are spread. You know things about people you've never met. But that didn't stop me from attending the local university. Why pay for room and board somewhere else when I live walking distance from a four-year university that continuously makes the "Best Colleges" ranking lists? I got accepted into the Honors program. They gave me a scholarship. I made friends on campus and crashed in their dorms until junior year when a couple of us got an apartment off campus together. My college experience was great until I met Gavin my junior year.

Gavin was from out of town and ended up at this school because of an Academic Merit Scholarship he'd received. He was in a fraternity, Vice President of the SGA, President of the Bio Club. He was smart on top of being attractive. Rachel was in a sorority and introduced us to each other at a party. We dated on and off, nothing serious. I wasn't even wholly interested in him as a person. We came from two different worlds, had nothing in common. The set up didn't bother me, and then, we lost contact for about a month. Saw each other in passing on campus a few times, gave casual waves, but neither of us made a move to actually get together. I figured that was that, and it didn't matter because what were we to each other?

We started talking again one night at a party at the frat house. I went with Rachel, but we split up at some point when she went to talk with her sorority friends, and I went into the kitchen for another drink. My third one. Gavin cornered me. Not threateningly. He offered to mix my drink for me, asked how I was doing as he turned his back to me.

Asked me why we hadn't seen each other recently and handed the drink over. It was vodka and cranberry juice. I said something about being busy with it being the middle of the semester and all that. We stayed in the corner of the kitchen next to the fridge for a little while. The party whirled around us. People stumbling into the kitchen and sloppily pouring new drinks. A pong table was being set up in the hallway, loud music thumping from the living room. Some guys shouted at Gavin to come join them, but Gavin waved them away.

"Do you want to keep talking upstairs?" Gavin asked. "Where it's quieter."

I said yes and followed him, curious about the direction this conversation was taking. He was clearly interested in me, and I thought maybe I could give a more formal effort of getting to know him. We found an empty bedroom and stepped inside, Gavin closing the door behind us. Almost immediately, his hands were on me and he started kissing my neck. I pushed away from him.

"I thought you wanted to talk," I said. The room was spinning. I sat down on the bed.

"I do, I do," he said, taking a seat next to me. "We hardly see each other anymore. We don't even talk. I think we should change that."

I nodded, and the movement made me feel nauseous.

"Hey, you okay?" Gavin asked. He pushed a strand of hair out of my face and tucked it behind my ear. "Why don't you just lie down for a minute?"

I was afraid to nod again. Instead, I let him gently lower me down to my back. I closed my eyes, felt his hands on me, but was too lethargic, too disoriented to do

anything about it. I was shaken awake sometime later by Rachel, her concerned face looming into view as I blinked my eyes open. But after a moment, she laughed, said something about me being wasted and that we should go back to the apartment.

I went back with her. I threw up in the bathroom several times, and then locked myself in my bedroom, curled into a ball in the corner of my bed, and sobbed.

When I first reported Gavin the sympathy was on my side. I was a local everyone had watched grow up who'd never done anything wrong, never gotten into any trouble. My dad was a teacher at the high school in town. My mom worked at the post office. Everyone knew us. Gavin was the outsider, a reckless frat boy contaminating our low-crime town. I described what happened to the police two days after the incident, and my parents came to the station with me for support. Gavin was brought in for questioning. So were a few other people from the party. When the police spoke to me again, the vibe in the room was different. The air was heavy, holding me down like a weight. I couldn't move, I could barely even speak as the police began to question *me*. Except they weren't really questions. They were statements posed as inquiries, a sign that they had already made up their mind.

The tweets came a few days after everyone had been questioned. *The things people will do for attention* or *Don't drink at a party if you can't handle yourself*. And people would reply to them with laughing emojis or comments like, *it's funny because I know who you're talking about*. I'd been turned into a joke.

"Maybe you should think about coming home," my dad said to me one night on the phone. "Take a break. This is attracting a lot of attention. I'm just concerned with

how this might affect you after.”

I didn't understand how this was backfiring on me or why my future would be the one affected. I hadn't done anything wrong. But the case never made it to trial anyway. The charges were dropped. It was my word against his. My word against all his friends. Against everyone at the party who had seen us talking, who knew our history, and had seen me follow him upstairs.

Not knowing what else to do, I began packing up my things in the apartment. I didn't want to drop out of school, but I barely left my dorm anymore. I'd gotten some accommodations from professors, but the work I was turning in was not best and not receiving very good grades. There was a chance I wouldn't pass the semester or be able to remain in the honors program. I was starting to think there was no reason to be here anyway.

“I understand what happened to you is awful,” Rachel said my last night in the apartment. She'd just gotten back from her night class. “But you'll move past this. You can't just put your life on hold.”

The comments felt insensitive at the time. How could she understand? Something like this had never happened to her.

“I need a break,” I said. I had piled up most of my stuff in the living room, and I was itching to disappear back into my bedroom to be alone.

“But the semester is almost over.” She moved towards me as if to hug me or comfort me in some way but stopped when I visibly tensed. “Winter break is coming, and when we all come back after, no one will even remember. It'll be like it never happened.”

There was a chance that might happen. That my story would become old news, never mind I would still be living with the repercussions of what happened to me. I would have to constantly be around the people who were at that party when it happened. I couldn't decide what would be worse. To be constantly reminded of that night or to pretend it never existed. I couldn't think of any other options.

I dropped out of school without finishing my junior year. I never got my degree in psychology. I never went on to grad school to become licensed as a clinical psychologist. I snagged the first job I got as a ride operator at a theme park. A job where I could hide and stay silent, living under the shadow of Mr. Amos.

#

In the summer of 1954, Lake Amos Theme Park began offering live performances. Nothing spectacular. Usually local musicians who couldn't get a gig anywhere else, so they were given an hour slot time on either a Friday or Saturday night. The shows were free for any guest who bought admission to the park. The ploy worked. Ticket sales skyrocketed during the weekends. That fall, Mrs. Gertrude Amos was checked into the county hospital. She had some cuts and bruises and a broken arm. She told the doctor that she'd fallen down the stairs. Mr. Amos went to the hospital with her as the concerned husband, staying by her bedside, asking the doctor a thousand questions about her well-being.

She'll be fine, the doctor would tell him. She's lucky to have a husband who cares.

And the doctor will only say that because he's Mr. Amos, and he's the richest

man in the town. He built a family-friendly theme park, and everyone wants to believe that the Amos's are a wholesome family. Mrs. Gertrude will stay silent because who will believe her? And if they do believe her, who will be the cop that'll convict Mr. Amos on domestic abuse charges? Think about what that would do to the family, to the town. All that theme park revenue would be gone.

Mr. Amos will remain free until 1962, when he's arrested for tax fraud. Ownership of the park is passed on to the eldest Amos son, not Gertrude, even though she'd been with the park since it opened. Even though she'd put so much work in to help it thrive.

The unfairness of it angered me, even though I can't say it surprised me.

#

The next day at work, I try telling Kevin that I don't think me training Stacy is a good idea anymore. He disagrees.

He shakes his head, shuffling papers around on his desk like he's in the middle of very important business. "Look, there's only one week left. Then you can go back to the Pirate Ship."

"Down Time."

"Whatever."

I drag myself out of his office and trek across the park with my arms crossed tightly against my chest. Screams split the air as Rocket Rollercoaster does its slow roll over the apex of its biggest drop and plummets down the tracks. People laugh and yell, cheering over the wail of a siren as someone wins a game. Groups of people brush past

me, snatches of their conversations vibrating through me like the plucked strings on a guitar. I squeeze my arms tighter, keeping my gaze down as I walk towards the carousel, a route I've walked so many times. It's such a childish concept but it relieves me anyway. If I don't see them, they don't see me.

Stacy is operating the carousel by herself once I get there. It's her fourth week of training, which means she can operate the ride alone. I'm only there in case she has questions.

"Hi, Molly," she says when I enter the booth, her face lifting with a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"Hi," I say, slumping into a chair pushed back from the control panel. She doesn't say anything else, and I'm surprised that the silence is not comforting. I clear my throat and ask, "How's it going?"

"Hm? Oh, I'm fine," Stacy says, her eyes concentrated on the spinning carousel. "Just some family stuff going on. You know how it is."

"Sure." I'm tempted to pry further, to explore this new side of Stacy, but I don't. I let the silence consume us because I know that I would be irritated if she pushed me to talk about something I didn't want to.

"Do you want to take the next one?" she asks as the carousel eases to a stop.

I try to hide the surprise from my face as I mutter a "sure."

We switch spots. The gate opens and new riders flood in. They circle the carousel, looking for the worthiest horse to claim. I hear my name from outside the booth.

"Molly? Is that you?"

My limbs turn to ice. Laughter surrounds me. *Mr. Amos's Grand Carousel* burns green and yellow and red from the lights. I look out the window on the door, and I see Rachel standing outside the booth. She's wearing a striped dress with a jean jacket, and her hair has gotten longer.

Her lips twitch into a smile. "Your mom told me that you're working here now."

I look at her worried gaze, her dangly silver earrings. I've only seen her a handful of times in passing around town since I dropped out of college. We've had a few text exchanges, but they never felt genuine. It always seemed like an obligation on her part to check up on me because we were once roommates.

"It's really, really good to see you," Rachel says, the smile struggling to stay on her face. She loops one hand around the strap of her purse like she needs something to hold her in place.

I feel oddly self-conscious at her finding me here like she caught me in a vulnerable act even though I'm simply at work doing my job. "What are you—why are you here?" I ask.

"You haven't responded to my invitation," she says tentatively, and then she spills into a monologue like she'd been rehearsing it for weeks. "And I wanted to come by in person because I really would love to have you there. It's been so long since we've been together, since we had the whole college group together, and I think this could be kind of like a reunion, ya know? And I think—"

"What is wrong with you?" I say. The words push out of my mouth before I can comprehend what I'm saying. "Why the fuck would that be a good idea? I don't want to

be around those people. Not after what happened. Not after how everyone *reacted* to what happened. These are the same people who are friends with—with Gavin. I don't want to be around *any* of them.”

Rachel opens and closes her mouth before sighing. I can't tell if she thinks I'm overreacting or if it simply just hadn't occurred to her that I might still be upset about what happened. I don't even give her time to respond as I step into the booth, almost colliding with Stacy who'd been standing by the door. I grab my zip up hoodie off my chair. “I'm taking a break,” I tell her.

“I—okay,” she says, looking uneasy. I could tell she'd heard the exchange. “Is everything alright?”

I shake my head as I shrug into my hoodie and slip out the exit gate, not even checking if Rachel is anywhere in sight. The entire park is illuminated with neon flashing lights. I watch the train for Rocket Rollercoaster move slowly up the hill, the hydraulics clicking, just a silhouette against the backdrop of night. I pause under the safe cover of a tree for a moment, watching the cars creep over the apex before plummeting down. I feel the drop in my stomach and release a breath. I wonder if Gertrude Amos ever got the chance to plunge down that drop, to feel the wind rush over her face.

“Molly.”

My chest lurches, prompting me to move. To flee from danger. But then I realize it's Stacy walking towards me, her light hair a halo in the night.

“Where are you doing?” she asks but her voice is loud, and I immediately hush her. She snaps her gum. “I'm sorry, really, but you sounded really upset during that

conversation, and I want to—”

“Stop fucking talking,” I say and then grab her by the arm. I drag her down a path that leads between the Scrambler and the Pirate Ship and ends in a row of hedges that marks the end of the park. “Why do you have to be so loud all the time?” I ask her through clenched teeth. “Everyone *always* looks at you.” My voice is low, but I feel a strain in my throat, an unfamiliar itch. I want to scream but I don’t know how. “Is that what you want? For everyone to look at us all the time. They laugh at you, Stacy. Not *with* you. *At* you. They think you’re a joke.”

Stacy stands like a shadow before me. Part of me wishes I could reel the words back in, but I don’t regret saying them. I don’t regret feeling them. I figure someone needs to tell her how obnoxious she is. I hear her inhale.

“I don’t care,” she says.

I blink and watch as Rocket Rollercoaster takes another plunge down the tracks, the screams ringing through the air. I cringe and shove my hands into my hoodie pockets.

“I mean, why should I?” Stacy continues. She snaps her gum. “It’s their problem if they think I’m crazy, not mine. Ever since my sister got sick, I realized a lot of things didn’t matter. I spend my entire day at the hospital and then come here to forget about it. It doesn’t even feel like real life here. The whole place is a joke.”

I think about Mr. Amos constructing the plans for the park, manufacturing rides, naming a carousel after himself. When Gertrude Amos took over, she didn’t change the name of the ride. She didn’t name Rocket Rollercoaster after herself. She kept it the same.

“You don’t understand,” I hear myself say. My nails bite into my palms.

“I know you don’t like to be loud,” Stacy says. Her ponytail swings in the dark as she turns her head. “I also know you’re not actually upset with me; you’re just taking it out on me. And why are you staring at the rollercoaster?”

I look at the wooden tracks piercing the sky, the drop almost as big as Down Time. The second biggest ride in the park but the fastest wooden rollercoaster in all of New England. I think of Mr. Amos’s Grand Carousel, a Schwarz original. A ride that spins in circles, trying to go somewhere but always ending up where it started. No rush, no wind. A steady, even pace. I tell Stacy I want to ride the rollercoaster.

“Now?” she says. “In the middle of our shift?”

I nod, even though I’m not sure if she can see me in the dark. She seems to take my silence as a yes. We step back out in the park, the crowd parting around us. I resist the urge to flee, to look down. I stare straight ahead as the rollercoaster comes closer, not paying attention to any people, not catching anyone’s eye. It’s a Wednesday night nearing eight pm and there’s only one full train load of people waiting in line. Estimated time is approximately five minutes. Stacy asks me if I want her to sit next to me.

“Yes,” I say because I realize if I don’t have someone to hold me accountable, I probably won’t do it on my own.

We get to our gate, the train screeches to a stop in front of us. People flood out of their cars, down the exit ramp. I slide into the empty seat in front of me, Stacy sits next to me. I can feel her warmth and my initial thought is to pull away, but I don’t. I sit there, gripping the lap bar, and the ride jerks forward before settling into its slow crawl down

the tracks. Stacy bounces next to me.

“Man, I haven’t been on a rollercoaster in a while,” she says.

We crawl higher and higher, the park rolling out around us. I feel vulnerable at the sudden exposure, but then I look down, seeing Mr. Amos’s Grand Carousel beneath me. Seeing how small it looks from this high up, from the top of the rollercoaster that Gertrude Amos designed. Rocket Rollercoaster. The name doesn’t matter, I realize. There’s power in the design.

The train rolls over the apex. My hands squeeze the lap bar, anticipating the drop in my stomach, the rush of the wind. The train plunges down the tracks with a roar, and I let out the loudest scream.