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## **Sprout**

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Sprout


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In partial fulfillment  
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Sprout  
by  
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## Chapter 1

Covering my scars comes at a price. Sweat drips down my back, from my temples, settles in the crooks of my elbows, even though it's barely seven o'clock in the morning. The emptiness of the city around me makes me feel safe. One block feels conquerable in isolation. Small wooden stands form a double-layered semi-circle in the middle of the city block. Vendors are still setting out their products when I arrive. Each stall is an explosion of color against the dark stained wood. Yellow and orange peppers, red tomatoes and strawberries, green cucumbers and zucchinis, blueberries and blackberries. A woman sells homemade soy candles and soaps. Another has hand-stamped bracelets and rings. It's better than I remember. I walk to a small stall in the corner of the market with a sign that reads "SEEDS" in bright green.

Yesterday, I saw a girl walking down E Marshall Street holding a succulent. I want to hate succulents because of how trendy they are—and because they were everywhere at Tucker's—but every time I see one, the dusty rose and pale green win me over. They're unassuming and low maintenance. I need more of a challenge. I decided, while eating Mrs. Shumaker's flavorless salmon, that I wanted to plant herbs. Something from Before. Dr. Garcia would tell me this is progress, but I'm not going to tell him about it. I want it to be mine.

"Looking for anything in particular?" A woman in her sixties stands behind a table covered in rows of bagged seeds, each labeled in handwritten cursive.

"I used to have an herb garden," I say. I think about the mismatched boxes I pieced together with leftover wood from my father's workshop back in middle school. Dad helped me pull a few crooked nails out, but I made them by myself. From slabs of wood to raised gardens with just a hammer, nails, and my own strength. Each evening, I watered the plants and cleared out the occasional slug from the soil. I remember the excitement of the first green sprouts

pushing through the soil and how spaghetti tasted better topped with fresh parsley, how all of it made me feel full inside, the act of creating and helping things grow.

“I’ve got herbs over here.” The woman behind the booth smiles, revealing overlapping front teeth. Her hair is thin, her scalp showing in patches. She points at a shoebox filled with tiny paper bags.

I thumb through them. Basil. Chives. Cilantro. Mint. Oregano. Parsley. Rosemary. Thyme.

“Are you starting over?”

“What?” I pull my arms back. Did the cuff of my shirt slide too far up my arm? Maybe the woman saw my scars. I want to walk away.

“Are you replanting in an old garden or starting over?” The woman has kind eyes, a translucent pale blue. All the seed packets blend together. The open air feels thick in my throat. I feel myself pulling away.

It’s not like one of those weird visualization exercises they made us do in group therapy. The place I go is black—just black. Everything is still. It’s only me. It’s the closest I can get to the moment I thought I was going to die. Before Sarah came in. That one blissful second of darkness. I don’t tell Dr. Garcia this part, either. Just that there is a place I go. A place that is not here.

Dr. Garcia calls these “triggers,” the moments where I want to retreat into myself. He tells me to look out for them, to recognize them when they happen, and to ground myself in the present moment. I start repeating the list we created together, a list of fundamental truths about who I am. Positive truths that will not change, no matter the circumstances.

*My name is Sloan Casey.*

*I'm 21 years old.*

*I'm...*

What else do we talk about? Who am I? I have plenty of negative things for the list: I am broken. I am a failure. I am too fucked up to be fixed.

At my first official meeting with Dr. Garcia, after I checked in to Tucker's 90-day Suicide Survivors Treatment Program, I perched on the edge of the purple suede chair in his office, chosen, I imagined, because the muted purple was supposed to be soothing and the suede felt soft to the touch, comforting. Less obvious than the yellow one at the hospital. Dr. Garcia is not what I pictured for a psychiatrist. My mind immediately conjured an old bald guy with a graying beard and glasses. Dr. Garcia is young—early 30s, maybe—with heavy brow bones and unkempt eyebrows. He's always clean shaven and has thick, dark hair like Elvis.

The first thing he asked me, after making me agree to a policy of complete and total honesty was, "Why did you try to kill yourself?"

How do you even answer that question?

"Everything," I said.

"Can you be more specific?"

"No."

"Why not?" he asked.

"It's all jumbled in my head," I said.

"Sounds like you need a way to organize it."

"Sure," I said, mostly because I wasn't ready to talk about After.

I'm still not, really.

I call them the Big Four, the reasons I slit my wrists. Before, The Big Four was what we called the basic principles of design in studio. If something was off, I could go through them and figure out why the design wasn't working. Before, it was contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity. After, it's anxiety, depression, situational stressors, and depersonalization. Dr. Garcia's terms. Not mine.

"Honey, are you alright?" The woman's voice pulls me back to my shaking hands, to the stripes of sun beaming through the pergola. I need to make a polite exit and never see this woman again. I can be a story for her to tell her family at Sunday supper. The crazy girl at the 17th Street Market. By Dr. Garcia's standards, today is already a success. I did something other than sit at Mrs. Shumaker's house rearranging the clothes in my drawers and watching TV and reading, like I have for the past week, since I was discharged. I got out of bed, showered, walked to the farmer's market. Three victories. But I want the seeds, the little garden on Mrs. Shumaker's back porch. I don't want to fail at something else.

"I didn't eat breakfast this morning," I tell the woman with a small laugh. "Just got a little lightheaded."

"I have an apple in my purse."

"No, thanks. I'll just take some basil, cilantro, mint, and parsley."

"Two dollars." The woman collects the seed bags and records the purchase in her ledger. I hand her cash.

When I turn the corner from the market, I stop and take deep breaths. If this was Before, I would call Evan to pick me up, would be crying right here in front of a Mexican restaurant when he arrived. We would fight about it at some point, after it festered long enough to exaggerate the fall out. Maximum damage. He would call me dramatic. I would call him an asshole. I would cry



to Sarah, would hold one of her healing crystals in my palm and listen to her tell me things would get better. Now, After, there is no Evan to call. There is no Sarah to comfort me. Just me. Alone. Beneath me, I am sure the ground is going to open, and part of me hopes it does. I grip the cool metal of an empty bicycle rack with one hand and clasp the seed bags in the other until the sidewalk feels solid again.

## Chapter 2

The script isn't perfect, but it's close enough. I lie on my bed tracing Dr. Garcia's handwriting a few times before trying it freehand. Replicating his signature is the easy part, just a few looping scribbles. It's writing out "Alprazolam, 2 mg, every 8 hours, as needed" that's hard. Eventually, I manage to spell the medicine right and mimic Dr. Garcia's disjointed print with accuracy. My heart thrums in my chest. It's as close to the high I used to feel when I cut into my arms. The instinct to physically harm myself is fading, but I still sometimes feel the urge.

It's not that I need the Xanax. My bottle still has fifty-two pills. I always know how many are in it because I track it in my daily journal for Dr. Garcia. When did I take one? Why? Did I try breathing exercises first? What about meditation? What was the trigger? Can I categorize it into the Big Four? In order to prescribe the medication, Dr. Garcia requires this information be tracked, at least for members of the program. It's part of the data they collect to prove the program's effectiveness. The specificity surprises me. One of Evan's fraternity brothers sold Xanax out of his room in the frat house. No one was checking on him.

The thing is, it isn't supposed to be like this. I'm not supposed to be here, on the other side, After, sorting through The Big Four, healing, listening to people in group therapy, talking about how relieved they are that the pills and booze didn't work, that the cuts weren't deep enough. I woke up in the hospital as the same girl who watched blood leak out of her arms onto the bathmat.

At the pharmacy, the clerk smiles, takes the paper and asks for my name and birthdate. He types the information, and I tell him, no, I've never filled a prescription with them before, and yes, I'll wait on it. As I walk around the store waiting to hear my name called, I half expect someone to approach me, to call me out on my forgery. Will they call the police or just refuse to

fill the prescription? They'll probably at least call Dr. Garcia, especially since I wrote for a high dosage of a habit-forming drug. Maybe I'll be able to talk my way out of it. Or I'll just stand there and accept the consequences. I doubt my ability to cry my way out of the scenario; I haven't cried since Before.

I walk to the wall opposite the pharmacy, which is filled with makeup from one end to the other. Foundation, eyeshadow, primers, mascara, concealer, eyelash curlers, lipstick. It's been a while since I've put on makeup. It doesn't matter how you look in the mental hospital.

Sale signs spread across the displays. They read: NEW SEASON, NEW YOU! I know that makeup will not change me, but the prospect feels compelling. Maybe if I put more effort into my physical appearance, my mentality will change, too. Makeup is, some might say, a form of art. I hold multiple shades of foundation and try a few on the back of my hand before choosing the lightest shade they have. A small plastic sticker on a palette of purple eyeshadow reads: "accentuates brown eyes!" I wonder if it's true. I've never worn purple before. Lipstick shades from Posh Pink to Orange Blaze to Purple Pansy to Red Riot line the shelf. Then I see it. Lady Danger. That same stark red from Before, the one I never gave back to the girl from the final Lambda party of the year. The one that smeared when I wiped my face after vomiting onto the volleyball net. Evan threw a towel at me and said, "you're embarrassing."

"Ma'am?"

I hear the voice and jump, dropping the makeup in my hand.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry." A store clerk bends over to pick up the dropped makeup. She looks like she's still in high school.

“You scared me,” I say, trying to recover. This girl is about to ask me about the prescription. Maybe the pharmacy sent her over because she isn’t threatening and I won’t think to run. They’re right. I’m bolted to the floor.

“I’m so sorry. I was just going to ask if you needed any help.” The girl hands me the foundation and lipstick. “I love makeup,” she adds.

That much is obvious. Her eyelashes are dark black and curled almost up to the thin, high arches of her eyebrows. They call my name over the P.A. system.

“That’s me,” I say.

“You know, I think you should go with this one.” The girl hands me a mauve tube. “It’s a bit understated, like you.”

“Thanks.” You don’t know me.

“You’re so welcome. You’ll have to come back sometime so I can see how it looks!”

Definitely not going to happen.

I shove Mauve Mystery into a display of Sharpies, but I keep Lady Danger in my hand. I sign my name on the electronic pad saying I don’t need to speak to the pharmacist and that I understand the habit-forming nature of the medication.

As I walk out of the store, I resist the urge to look over my shoulder. In my car, I rest my head on the steering wheel and let out a sigh. This exhale feels fuller than the ones in the store. I open the bag and wrap my fingers around the bottle. A back up plan. Just in case.

### Chapter 3

On the days I want to kill myself, I crave a cup of coffee. It's a reminder of Before, something I can no longer have. I promised Dr. Garcia that I wouldn't have any caffeine for the next three months, and decaf is a sorry substitute. Everything about treatment is a test. Go to sleep at ten and wake up at eight every day; see how you feel. Meditate for fifteen minutes before you start your day; see how you feel. Journal at least three times a week, especially when you find yourself disengaging. No caffeine is supposed to mean less anxiety.

I get dressed and walk down the block, looking for a coffee shop. Even though the houses have the same basic structure, I love how there's always one or two on a street painted a bright yellow or robin's egg blue. I know the major city landmarks: Monument Avenue, a miles long ode to the Confederacy and the brick clock tower of Main Street Station hovering over the interstate overpass. I can hear the trains from my room at Mrs. Shumaker's house. Even when the whistles wake me, I like picturing someone taking a weary step onto the station platform with a duffel bag in hand, finally home. The nuances of this neighborhood are still new to me. The blocks transition from crowded houses and to commercial establishments with no warning. A sign hangs off the corner of a building at an odd angle, toeing the line between charming misplacement and too many door slams. The logo is boring. "The Lounge" written in black next to a mug.

Inside, I inhale. The next best thing to drinking coffee is smelling it. It's perfect. Gritty. Fresh coffee beans instead of grounds. A reason to make it through at least the next hour. The Lounge isn't dirty, but the scratches on the metal chairs and tables give it an underground grunge bar aesthetic. The counter to the left of the door extends from the front of the shop to the back, save a little opening at the front. Booths line the back wall. A collection of small, round tables

fills the rest of the room. The place is empty, but late Tuesday morning probably isn't the most popular time to get coffee. Plastered posters form a mismatched wallpaper leaving no empty space. The book cover of *The Great Gatsby*, the *Godfather* movie, the Broadway show *Rent*. They all seem a bit cliché, but classics are classics, I guess.

“What can I get for you?” A guy stands behind the counter in a faded green flannel, sleeves rolled, a plain gray T-shirt underneath. His unruly beard is not quite thick enough to mask the dimple on his left cheek when he smiles at me.

“Let me guess,” he says. He lifts his pointer and middle fingers to his temples and rubs, mumbling under his breath. I notice a red scar across the palm of his right hand and a silver band on the middle finger of his left. “Skinny vanilla iced coffee?”

“No.”

“It's too early for a pumpkin spice latte.”

I can't tell if he's talking to me or to himself.

“Can I have –”

“Wait. Give me another try.”

“A lemonade.”

“A chai tea.”

We say these at the same time. Of course he assumes I want the most typical drinks in the world. To him, I am one of many, indecipherable from any other girl who walks into his shop. The worst part is that I actually do want a vanilla latte. But I don't want him to be able to see me that way, with that sort of clarity.

“It's about to get loud,” he tells me, pulling a juicer out from under the counter.

An electronic hum fills the shop, echoing in the emptiness. While the barista goes through one lemon and then another, a small bell sounds, and a girl walks in, wringing out her hair in the doorway. In the few minutes I've been inside, it's started raining. This is the worst part of late summer in the South, the sporadic thunderstorms appearing without warning.

"Annie," the guy shouts over the juicer. "Regular?"

She gives him a thumbs up and disappears in the back corner.

The guy adds sugar and water to the juice and says, "Before I give you this, I have to recommend that you try a flavor. We have raspberry, strawberry, pomegranate, watermelon."

"I'm fine."

"I'm glad to hear that," he says. "But I think you should try a flavor."

"No." Give me my damn drink and let me go.

He finishes mixing my drink, snaps a lid onto the cup and points to the straws. I pull some bills from my wallet, but the guy waves me off.

"First drink's on the house."

I put four ones on the counter. He slides them back toward me.

"It's true," the girl who walked in says. "He does it for everyone."

He winks at the girl, and I wonder if maybe they're friends or dating or something in between. If Sarah were here, she'd take the bills and thank him. On the way to the booth, she'd whisper in my ear, "he was totally flirting with you!" I leave the bills on the counter and walk to the booth in the opposite corner of the shop. Cracked vinyl scrapes my legs as I scoot in.

I open *Little Women*, because I need an excuse to sit here and inhale the scent of coffee without looking crazy. I haven't even read an entire paragraph when the guy from the counter slides into the other side of my booth.

“I’m Patrick, by the way,” he says.

His ability to maintain eye contact rivals Dr. Garcia’s. I look back at my book, but I can’t focus on any of the words. Something about his eyes is intimidating. They’re more round than almond, a warm brown. I tuck my foot under my leg.

“Since you paid for your drink, which first time customers never do, I thought I’d offer you a free pastry.”

“No, thank you,” I say.

“Oh come on. This chocolate chip scone is amazing.”

I flip my book over on the table. “I believe you. I just don’t want one.”

He doesn’t answer, but he continues to stare at me. I give him the look I used to give Evan across the main room of the frat house when he pissed me off.

“Sheesh,” Patrick says, throwing his hands up. “I get the message, Jo.”

“My name’s not Jo,” I say. I don’t even remember if I gave him my name.

“Maybe not, but you’re sure acting like her.” He gestures to *Little Women*. Jo March, the second oldest sister. I’m not sure if he means this as an insult or compliment. Jo is intense, stubborn, strong. It could go either way. Patrick raises his eyebrows at me, and I get one more glimpse of his dimple before he walks back to the counter. He leaves the scone behind.



## Chapter 4

Saturday morning, I wake up thinking about the army of pill bottles beneath my bathroom sink. I head to The Lounge, hoping the smell of the coffee will keep me from obsessing over the knife block on the kitchen counter, from the thought that if I time it right, I can step into the street and get hit by a car.

As I walk, I think of excuses to tell Patrick why I'm there, just in case he thinks it's to see him. Girls do that. Go out of their way to see guys they like. I used to take the long route around the drillfield to run into Evan on his way to Calculus first semester. It added ten minutes to my walk, but seeing him was always worth it. Can I say I'm getting something for Mrs. Shumaker? Maybe I'll pretend I forgot something. What would I leave that I wouldn't miss for a two weeks? A pen? That's stupid.

"You're back," Patrick says when I walk in. "I thought I scared you away."

"You couldn't," I say. You don't have that power.

Patrick laughs. "Can I get you a drink?"

"I'm okay." Just trying not to die today. I see my excuse: the bulletin board with local flyers on it. I walk to it, which means walking closer to the counter and Patrick. The first flyer I see is for the Watermelon Festival. I yank it down and crumple it. The pushpin falls to the floor.

"What are you doing?" Patrick asks. He moves to the front of the counter and wipes it down with a wet rag. I feel the air move when he passes, not quite touching me, but near enough.

"This already happened."

"Were you there?"

My ears get hot. I've been to every Watermelon Festival since I've been in existence. My mother went while she was pregnant with me. The next year, my parents took me in a stroller. I

went the week after I got my wisdom teeth removed, my cheeks still swollen, scooping frozen lemonade out of a plastic cup with a spoon. Last year, Sarah came with me, and we ate slices of watermelon that had been soaked in vodka. I was still at Tucker's this year.

"No."

"You missed a hell of a day," he says, coming to stand by me, the length of the board between us.

My lungs cave in like they do right before I'm going to cry. I focus on the board. One flyer is for someone who needs a roommate for an "honestly pretty shitty but relatively cheap apartment" in the Fan District. Another advertises goat yoga at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts next Tuesday. There's a band showcase in a few weeks. All the names sound like they've been made up by high schoolers: Misfits 4 Hire, Fresh Apples, Anywhere Else. Finally, I find something I like. A lecture series on physical vs. graphic arts. I get out my phone to take a picture of the dates.

"What'd you find?"

Surely some customer needs his attention for a coffee emergency or something needs cleaning or tending to behind the counter. "You ask too many questions."

"People are interesting. They don't like to talk, but they like to answer questions."

"I don't."

"That's a shame. I had one more for you."

"Oh well," I say, dropping my phone into my purse. I move toward the front door, but Patrick blocks me. He's so close I see where his beard is inching out of its carefully trimmed lines, the crater of a dimple in his cheek. I smell the espresso and sweet syrup absorbed into his clothes. One more step and we will collide. I remind myself to breathe.

“I want to take you on a date,” he says. I look around, desperate for an interruption, but everyone in the shop is either focused on a laptop screen with earbuds in or engrossed in conversation.

“No, you don’t.” I want to go away. To disappear.

“I do. I would’ve asked, but you didn’t want to hear my last question.”

“You don’t know me,” I tell him. And you don’t want to. I form a tight fist around my purse straps and fiddle with the zipper. Physical touch forces me to be here. In front of Patrick. To acknowledge that he is asking me out. To react, in some way.

“That’s the point of the date. To get to know you.”

“I can’t,” I say. I avoid his eyes and step around him. Patrick responds, but my ears don’t register anything beyond muffled sounds and the door’s bell on my way out.

When I get home, Mrs. Shumaker says, “I just got off the phone with your mother.

She says it without looking up from her quilting, just keeps pushing the needle in and out of the fabric that lies across her lap.

“What did you tell her?” I ask, leaning against the doorway between the living room and kitchen.

“I told her you’re alive.” Her hands stop and she looks up. “She loves you, you know.”

Mrs. Shumaker’s face sags under the weight of her wrinkles, like a sad English Mastiff. I wonder if it takes her extra energy to lift the corners of her mouth into a smile. Her eyes, though, are the kind of eyes strangers stop on the street to compliment. They’re mostly gray now, but you can tell they used to be a sharp, pale blue. The kind of eyes that have the power to pull the truth out of you. But only if they choose to wield it.

“Do you have any planter pots?” I ask her.

“Finally going to plant that little garden, huh? You can check the junk room upstairs. Take anything you want.” Halfway up the stairs I hear her yell, “If you find any cash, give me half.” I can never quite tell when she’s serious and when she’s kidding. She just might have pockets of money hidden around her house. It wouldn’t surprise me.

The junk room smells stale. I don’t know the last time Mrs. Shumaker came in here. It feels like the air has sat stagnant for years. I squeeze between the dusty wooden bed frame and a three-foot Santa statue with paint chipping off its face to stacks of boxes. I take a box and put it on the bed. A cloud of dust explodes in the sunlight and settles back onto the quilt. Inside the box are candlesticks and synthetic flowers – lilacs, mini sunflowers, geraniums. After four more boxes I uncover a bookshelf in the far corner of the room next to a closet door I didn’t notice before, either.

The bookshelf is mostly empty, save a few *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. I rearrange boxes so that I can climb over them and open the closet door. In a purple crate on the floor is a collection of mason jars, one filled with pennies, another with marbles. Perfect. I grab four of them, including the marbles, and make my way back through my box maze to the bed. I halfway put the boxes back before deciding it doesn’t matter.

Outside, there’s a small shaded section of the porch against the house. I set up there, the mason jars, the seeds, the bag of topsoil I bought a few days ago. In each jar, I drop some marbles. They clink in the bottom, settling onto each other in an uneven heap. I roll up my sleeves before I pull open the soil bag. There they are. The stark lines on my arms, the division between Before and After. This is the me I know Patrick does not want to know, the girl who was stitched back together but not fixed. I think about throwing a jar against the side of the house

and using a shard to cut it open again and watch the blood pour out. Instead, I throw a marble as hard as I can and watch it disappear over the fence.

I turn back to the soil and dig my hands deep into the bag. I want to feel the dirt caked under my nails, want to smell like a bed of mulch, want my hands to be stained brown for the next few days. I think about the little starter garden I made at home, about the bigger garden bed Dad and I eventually made together and filled with vegetables. I wonder if there's a little girl living in that house now that helps her parents water the plants or if they've destroyed it and put up a swing set instead.

I bury the seeds beneath the soil, make sure they're covered but not too deep. As I work, I think about the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, whether they ever existed or if it was just a dream that never came to fruition or the product of an active and convincing imagination. Maybe King Nebuchadnezzar's underling designed something so ornate and so beautiful that the king didn't believe it could be built. I wonder where the idea even came from, terrace after terrace overflowing with lush greenery built into the side of a mountain. Did it come to him in a dream? Did he think it was impossible? How long did it take him to design something fit for a queen? Sometimes I think all the brilliant ideas were already thought up long ago, and our collective memory must remember and recreate them.

I sprinkle a bit of water into the jars and put each one on its own porch step. My own little Babylonian garden. I kneel in front of them, my hands resting on my thighs, and I whisper, "Please grow. Please, please grow."

## Chapter 5

At the international bookstore, two displays dominate the front entry: Morocco and Brazil. Christ the Redeemer stares at me from the covers of travel guides, and copies of Paulo Coelho's novels line three shelves. Morocco's display boasts golden desert landscapes and decadent painted walls. One of the books is titled *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*. The most honest title I've ever seen. I want to find something less stirring, a shelf with books I've heard of. I move toward Europe.

"Warrior Sloan," I hear from behind me. Patrick. Of course. Nowhere is safe.

"What?"

"I did some research about your name. My name is obvious and boring. The patricians in Ancient Rome, Saint Patrick. Patricks are naturally inquisitive. Blah Blah. Sloan, though, you don't hear it every day. It means warrior. Sloans want to find deeper meaning in life, which makes them prone to existential sadness."

I nod but continue moving to the back of the store. Sarah would love this, the idea of researching names for their metaphorical meanings. The description is accurate, but my name doesn't have any bearing on who I've become. My parents chose it, not the universe.

"I need some help," Patrick says. His smile changes his whole face, his cheek disappearing into his dimple. I guess there's no hard feelings about me turning him down. He's taller than I remember, but that doesn't mean much. I barely break five feet.

"With what?" I ask.

"There's this game I play when I come in here, but I'm stuck today."

"Tell me the game and then I'll decide."

“I pick a country, then I go to that chair over there,” he points to a gray armchair by the window, “and I flip through the guidebooks, plot an imaginary trip.”

“Sounds like a lot of work for a fake trip,” I say.

“I’ve never really traveled, so I like learning about the world.”

“What’s today’s country?” I ask. I’ve never traveled out of the country, outside of the eastern seaboard, really. My favorite place is Cape Cod in the summer, cracking lobsters to the music of seagulls and the ocean. The tender, butter-coated meat melting in my mouth, my mother’s nose pink with sunburn, my father’s Parrothead tattoo visible on his left hip above his bathing suit waistband. Evening walks on the beach, barefoot and bundled in a sweater to guard against the chilled breeze off the water. I tuck these images away. They belong in Before.

“That’s what I need help with.”

I take a minute to look over the shelves. Ireland, France, Germany, Spain. I stop, seeing the names of authors I didn’t know were from England. Roald Dahl. Ian McEwan, Virginia Woolf.

“England?” Patrick says, his voice elevated. “You have the entire world in front of you and you pick England?”

“I’m done with this,” I say.

“Wait,” Patrick says, “It’s just, England is boring. It’s all high tea and guards in furry hats that never smile. I mean, they speak *English*. Don’t you want to pick something more fun? More exotic?”

I fold my arms across my chest and rub my thumb over the ridged skin of my wrists. “It’s not like I’m going anywhere anytime soon.”

I don't tell him that if I were planning a trip, it would be to Greece and Turkey. The Greeks had an implicit and instinctive understanding of architecture unmatched by other cultures. I'd start in Athens at the Acropolis, visiting the Parthenon with its perfect design ratios. Look down from the Acropolis to the red-roofed buildings of Athens. The Erechtheion at sunset to see its oxidized iron turn golden, to see the Caryatids hold up what's left of the temple with ease. Visit the sixteen remaining columns at the Temple of Olympian Zeus. The Temple of Hephaestus, the best-preserved temple in Greece. Then, I'd travel to Delphi and walk the ruins with my sketchbook, imagining the twists and turns of the interior, where the oracles sat waiting for messages from the gods for the citizens who came asking questions. Maybe ask them a few myself. Something painfully existential, like "what is my purpose?" or "will it always feel this hard?" Maybe some more specific things, like "will I ever design again?," "will my parents ever be able to coexist?"

After that, I'd fly to Crete to see the Minoan Palace at Knossos. Walk the long hallways below the earth until it's so dark I can't see my own hand in front of my face, and I have to turn on the flashlight given to me by the tour guide, until I am lost in the labyrinth with nothing to lead me out but my own instinct and memory. In Turkey, I'd go to Istanbul to see the Walls of Constantinople, the great protectors of the city. The last place I'd go would be my favorite, the Hagia Sophia Mosque. I want to stand directly under the center of the floating dome and feel the light hit me from a million different angles. See how the dome floats above the light. Feel the dampness of the Wishing Column on my palm. To wish for inspiration, for the smallest piece of an idea that I can work with, to be able to design something again.

"Who cares? What about Russia?" Patrick hands me a book with a castle covered in shimmering gold accents on the cover.



I flip through it. “It’s old and dirty.”

“But it’s got such a rich history. And the palaces are beautiful.”

“Maybe once. Not anymore. All the shit with the Romanovs—”

“You can’t be serious.” Patrick cuts me off.

“Not everything is beautiful.” I unfold my arms as I talk. I need him to understand this so that maybe he’ll stop bothering me with his dimpled smile and happiness.

“You said it was beautiful once.” He. Won’t. Stop.

“That doesn’t mean it’s beautiful now. Once something is ruined—”

“Once it’s ruined, it becomes beautiful because it’s flawed.” He finishes for me.

“I was going to say once it’s ruined, there’s no hope.”

Patrick pauses, spins the ring on his middle finger a few times, looks at the floor. I see the red line that cuts through his palm and wonder what it’s from? I’m about to apologize when he says, “Look at this palace. You can’t tell me it’s a piece of shit because of what happened a hundred years ago.”

“It’s tainted. There might be remnants of what used to be, but you can’t look past it.”

“It’s real, Sloan. Nothing’s perfect. If we can’t look past the flaws, what’s the point?”

His eyes have changed, gotten darker. He sounds less playful. Maybe I haven’t hurt his feelings, but I definitely hit a nerve. He sounds like Dr. Garcia, though, and I get enough psycho-babble once a week for fifty-five minutes. I know better. People are broken, simple as that. There is no fixing them, no making them whole again. Everyone walks around with different scars, different pieces missing, some taped on, some glued together, but no one is actually whole. My scars still show, but not everyone’s do.

“Most of us are just broken,” I say.

“And you don’t think that trying to work through the brokenness deserves a little credit?”

he asks, a harsh edge to his voice

I look down at my arms, covered by the gray sleeves of my shirt, and picture my demented Jacob’s Ladder of scars before crossing my arms back across my chest. He might understand if I showed them to him. I imagine pushing the sleeves of my T-shirt up, revealing the ugliest truth about myself to him, the shock on his face melting into pity. Once he knows, he’ll treat me differently, tiptoe around me, will be glad I said no to his date. I stare at the blue carpet speckled with green and red.

“The palace is both a reminder of the past and a reason to move forward,” he says.

“You think that a vase that’s glued back together by the seven-year-old that broke it is still beautiful? Even with the cracks, the dried glue, and the tiny holes?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“Because of what it represents.”

“The seven-year-old’s punishment?”

“The vase is still here after all of that.”

The lightness returns to his eyes. He’s come back to himself again. I’m relieved that I didn’t permanently drag him into this dark place with me. I want to believe that Patrick is right, that things that are broken Before can somehow be valuable After. That this isn’t all there is. I run my fingers over the jagged edges of my scars. It frightens me how much they comfort me. When the scars fade, what then? Who am I without tangible evidence of being this broken, damaged thing?

“I’ve got to head to work,” Patrick says. “You should stop by later.”

“Yeah,” I say. He probably thinks I’m lying. I’m not sure if I am or not.

Once he leaves, I linger in the store. I look out the window to be sure Patrick is gone before sitting in the gray chair with *A Travel Guide to Russia* open in my lap. I wonder if Romanov ghosts haunt the halls of their beloved home, if they chastise museum curators for their inaccuracy or if they are simply happy to be remembered despite their upheaval. I picture myself there, in a room filled with floor-to-ceiling velvet curtains, their brilliant crimson a foreshadowing of the family’s end. I imagine myself climbing the same stairs Anastasia climbed each night on her way to bed, running my hand along a white marble banister, feeling the pulse of the palace in my fingertips.

## Chapter 6

In my wallet, a folded sticky note reads MAKE A CONNECTION in block print. Dr. Garcia made me write it two weeks ago, made me promise to stick it on my dashboard or bathroom mirror, somewhere I will see it every day. I'm back in his office, back in the purple chair, and he asks, "How's the sticky note coming?"

He asked last week, too, and I told him I was thinking about texting Sarah. It wasn't a lie. I think about texting her all the time. When I smell the lavender soap Mrs. Shumaker keeps at the kitchen sink. When I hear a Fleetwood Mac song. The peacock earrings on a girl at The Lounge. All of those thoughts end in one single image: the mosaic blue of her eyes when she found me. I wrote her a letter in my journal.

This week, I tell him about Patrick, about him asking me out, about me running out, about the bookstore, how Patrick got so defensive about nothing.

"Why'd you say no?" he asks.

"Because," I say.

Dr. Garcia waits. I don't know how to explain it. Patrick's a different kind of risk. With him, there are endless possibilities. Maybe we go on a date and I find out he chews with his mouth open. Or maybe he's one of those guys who plays video games until his eyes are dried open at five in the morning. There's also the chance that he's as genuine as he presents. Worst of all, things could be really great for a while and then becomes an acid that burns us both.

"I don't know," I finally say.

"You don't know or you don't want to say?"

This time I'm silent.

"I think you should go on the date," Dr. Garcia says.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t do it again,” I say.

“Do what again?”

“All of it.”

“Go on the date,” Dr. Garcia says. “It’s an hour of your life. It doesn’t have to mean anything. You just have to try. You need to have a proper support system if you don’t—”

“If I don’t want to come back, I know.”

“So next week, you’ll tell me all about the date?” He smiles as he says this, like he’s enjoying how uncomfortable this makes me.

I grab my purse and walk out the door.

At The Lounge, I can’t find Patrick right away. A new guy is up front taking orders, and someone else is collecting plates and cups from the tables. This seems like a sign. I can’t ask Patrick out. Not after I ran out when he asked me. Not after I didn’t go see him at work after the bookstore. His presence pushes me out of my peaceful nonexistence. I can only take so much of that.

“Hey Warrior,” the guy with the plates says. I know it’s Patrick, but I don’t fully recognize him until he smiles and I see the dimple. He shaved his beard.

I point at him and say, “Your beard.”

He sets the plates down on the nearest table and rubs his hand on his cheeks and chin in one motion. “I get rid of it every now and then. Every time I shave it I remember why I let it grow back.”

It looks different, that's for sure. But his smile is the same. The kind of teeth that are straight enough not to need braces but not straight enough to be perfect.

"You want a lemonade?" he asks. The line at the counter has cleared, and the new guy is finishing making the drinks. He moves so slow I can feel him thinking through each step of the process.

"No," I say. "Should you help him?" I scratch my fingernail against the back of a chair. I just need a another minute to figure out how I'm going to do this. I don't know what to say, how to bring it up without feeling like an idiot. Without making Patrick feel like he's won. Because he hasn't. This is a project. Something to check off of a list. Dr. Garcia will see I'm making progress, then I'll be done.

Patrick looks over. "He's fine."

"You sure?" I ask, stalling.

"Yeah. What's up?"

I try to think of a lie. I've got a whole week before I have to report back to Dr. Garcia. Plus, I can always just text Sarah, "hey." That counts as trying to make a connection. But that "hey" would unleash a swarm of memories and mistakes. Dr. Garcia would probably make me do the date the week after anyway. Patrick's eyes are a soft, warm brown, a contrast to the dark, cold, distant look he had in the bookstore. Something's under the surface there, something I recognize, even if I don't know what it is. So I say, "Is a date still on the table?"

He smiles wide and without the beard, I can see he flushes a bit. "Absolutely."

I have to tell myself to smile, remind myself that I'm supposed to look happy about his answer.

"Are you around tomorrow?" I ask. Get it over with as soon as possible.

“I’ll be free around eight. Dinner sound ok?”

“Sure. Where should I meet you?”

“I’ll pick you up.”

The last thing I need is for him to know where I live. It’s not like I think he’s a murderer or anything. But I don’t need to give him the ability to show up unexpectedly, especially since it’s just one date.

“I’ll meet you.”

Patrick raps his fingers on the counter and says, “Come here at eight. I’ll think of something fun for us to do.”

“See you then.” I don’t want to keep the conversation going. Tomorrow will be enough. I walk to the door.

Before I make it out, Patrick says, “Sloan.”

I turn to him, one hand on the door. I can tell he’s about to say something, and I silently beg him not to. This is not a special moment. Nothing has changed. He puts his hand to his face and rubs his bare chin.

“See you tomorrow,” he says.

The bell rings on my way out.

I take a different route to The Lounge than usual, past the small, narrow houses crammed onto the city blocks. It’s the one thing I miss about the suburbs: the spacing. The closeness of things here makes me feel claustrophobic sometimes. Two blocks from The Lounge, I stop in front of the Edgar Allan Poe Museum. If not for the large stone slabs on the front of the building, it would blend into the others around it.

Poe understood darkness. He didn't shy away from the subjects people like to avoid: death, murder, even mental illness, depending on how you interpret *The Tell-Tale Heart*. He talked about the real shit, the hard shit. It didn't scare him. For a minute, I consider hopping the fence, sitting on a bench, and disappearing for a while. I wonder if Poe had an interior escape or if he just embraced darkness as part of his identity. There are no lights in the garden, and the trees still hold enough leaves to block out most of the streetlights. If I do that, I can save Patrick from what I couldn't save Sarah and Evan from. Me.

Channeling Dr. Garcia, I tell myself, *You can do this. It's just an hour. It isn't life or death.* I walk instead of climb and begin making a list:

*My name is Sloan Casey.*

*I'm 21 years old.*

*I failed at killing myself.*

I continue past the museum and see Patrick standing outside the coffee shop. He rolls his shirt sleeve up to his elbow, bends his arm a few times, then rolls it back down to his wrist and buttons the cuff.

"I like them better rolled," I say.

He looks up and reaches a hand to scratch the back of his neck. Seeing him is just as shocking as it was earlier. The absence of the beard completely changes his face. Without it, he looks younger, vulnerable. He's dressed up a little, a regular shirt instead of flannel, loafers instead of converse.

"I thought you weren't coming," he says, rolling the sleeves again.

I look at my phone. I'm fifteen minutes late. "I almost didn't."



He lets out a laugh but stifles it halfway through, like he's unsure if I'm flirting or telling the truth.

"I have one or two things to finish up in here," he tells me. "Do you mind?"

Of course I mind. Dinner. One hour. That's all this is supposed to be. Quick. Painless. Easy. "How long is it gonna take?"

"Fifteen minutes? I just need to count the cash and dump the leftover coffee."

"You didn't do that while you were waiting for me?"

"Cleaning up before we officially close is a jinx. It sends a secret message to customers to come in for a last minute cup of coffee and pay in pocket change."

I open the door to The Lounge. The bell sounds shriller than usual.

"Doesn't that thing annoy you?" I ask.

"I'm used to it. Sometimes I don't even hear it."

He walks behind the counter, and I take a seat on a bar stool. I rest my arms on the counter. Without natural light streaming through the front windows, The Lounge exists in grayscale. Even the posters don't have the same pop they do in the daytime. I like it, though. It makes me feel less on display. The smell is the same. Fresh coffee beans. Never gets old.

Patrick fills a mug with coffee and slides it to me. "While you wait," he says.

I push it back across the counter. "I don't drink coffee."

"Seriously? I thought you were just being difficult that day." He empties the carafe into the sink basin.

"Nope."

He dumps the mug, too.

"I'll hurry," he says.

Good. Patrick counts the cash in silence, making hundred-dollar piles of the bills and one-dollar piles of the coins. He double checks himself and writes the number—\$372.83 by my count—on a slip of paper before putting it all in a blue zipper pouch.

“I just need to put this in the safe in the back, and then we’re good to go.” He goes immediately, so I don’t have to respond.

“Let’s go.” We exit The Lounge, and Patrick starts down the sidewalk in the direction I just came from. I fall into stride with him.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

Patrick presses the button at the crosswalk and the light turns green. The streets are quiet for a Thursday night, but it’s early. They’ll fill up soon.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

“I don’t do surprises.” We pass the Poe Museum again, and I think about how this date would go in one of his stories. Would I kill Patrick or would he kill me? Or would we die tragically together? I decide it would be me who dies, and Patrick would write me an ode, like “Annabel Lee.” He seems the type.

“Come on,” Patrick says, looking at me.

“Where are we going?”

“A pizza place by the interstate junction.”

“What if I don’t like pizza?”

“Everyone likes pizza.”

How is he still being nice to me? Or maybe the question is why?

“You’re quiet because I’m right, right?”

I’m starting to remember why I don’t like him, why I knew this date was a bad idea.

“Yes,” I say.

At the restaurant, he opens the door for me. It’s a small place, crammed with tables and people in line to order. When it’s our turn, we order individual slices. I don’t offer to pay. Patrick gets Hawaiian.

“Pineapple doesn’t belong on pizza,” I tell him.

“We like what we like,” he says.

I get pepperoni. Two seats open up at the bar table in front of the window. I’m thankful that we don’t have to look into each other’s eyes while we eat.

“So, do you go to school here?” He takes a big, unselfconscious bite. Grease drips from the corner of his mouth. He licks it away.

“No,” I say. I use a fork and knife to cut a piece of mine.

“So you’re from here?”

“Sort of.” I take a bite. The sauce to cheese ratio is perfect.

“Suburbs?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

The rest of dinner goes like this: him asking questions, me giving minimal answers. It’s not that the answers are important or secret, but they’re little dominoes lined up in a row. Tell one and you tell another and then before you know it, he knows everything about Evan and my parents and Tucker’s and my current state of apathy. It’s best if I don’t start. But Patrick won’t stop. He finished his pizza in about four bites, so he has nothing to do but talk. Question after question pours out of him. Where’d you go to high school? What’s your favorite movie? Would you rather give up cheese or chocolate?

I drop my knife and fork on my plate and turn to face him. “Why are you like this?”

“Like what?”

“Relentless.”

“You asked me out, you know.” He says this with a smile on his face, half his cheek disappearing into his dimple, his eyes bright with victory. This is exactly why I didn’t want to do this. I should’ve texted Sarah. At least if she’d been mad or not answered, I wouldn’t have had to deal with this. I’d rather be yelled at.

“You’re always happy,” I say.

“That’s not true.”

“Bullshit.” I eat my last bite of pizza and wipe my mouth with a napkin.

“I have my moments,” he says.

“Maybe in private.”

We take our trash to the garbage can by the door. A chill breeze hits me as soon as we step outside. It’s nice, that jolt of life that stiffens my muscles. I walk with my arms crossed, my scars safely tucked away under my maroon sweater. Sarah always said the color was made for me, my pale skin and dark hair. Patrick leads us down by the canal, under the rusted steel canopy of train tracks. The intermittent lights along the route keep us mostly in the shadows.

“You want the real answer?” Patrick asks.

“To what?” I say.

“Why I’m always happy.” He puts the last two words in air quotes.

“Obviously.”

He puts his hands in his pockets and looks straight ahead. “I’m a recovering addict,”

“What kind?” I look over to the dark, still water of the canal.

“Alcohol. Cocaine. Narcotics”

He says this like he's telling me the lemonade flavor options, with certainty and without emotion. I think about my roommate in the hospital before Tucker's, shaking and vomiting into the pink basin the nurses gave her. Whatever I say next should be meaningful, acknowledging his confession.

"How do you get from addict to running a coffee shop?"

"I broke the window a while back. Got in a fight while I was high. The guy threw me at the window. I went straight through. It's how I got this scar." He turns out his palm to show me the red line I noticed the first day we met. "The owner, Roy, is an old friend of my dad's from college, so he promised not to press charges if I went to rehab. Once I got out, I still owed about six hundred for the window, so I offered to work free until I paid it back. I didn't have anything better to do, so I stayed on, then he asked me to be a manager. So here I am. Sober."

I'm trying to reconcile these two Patricks. The guy with the scones and the coffee, and the one I never knew, a rougher one, fighting against himself. Now would be a perfect time to roll up my sleeves and tell him about me. I want to offer him something, to tell him that I get it. But I can't. That would be like skipping the process of lining the dominoes up and just dumping them out on the table. Noisy. Counterproductive.

Patrick keeps talking, "You know those giant Styrofoam cups from the gas station? I used to get one and fill it half with Coke and half with whiskey. That way I could drink anywhere. When I got home, I'd just refill it with whatever I had left. Southern Comfort. Bourbon. Only dark liquors, though."

"What about the other stuff?"

"Drinking got boring. And messy. I woke up one morning on my couch with my own puke crusted in my hair. It was awful. Puked all over the carpet as soon as I smelled it. Didn't

even have enough energy to walk to the bathroom. Saw a guy snort a line at a party, asked if I could try it. It was so different from being drunk. Worked fast as hell. The whole world came into sharp focus but I felt like I could move through it and around it. Like everyone else was frozen and there was just me. After that, I'd snort anything to get that feeling back."

He sounds almost wistful talking about getting high, nostalgic maybe. I don't know how to respond. He's so open it's intimidating. What am I supposed to say? Cool? Wow? I think of what I'd want him to say if I told him this much about me.

"I'm kind of tired," I say.

"Yeah, of course," he says. "Can I walk you home?"

"I'll be fine."

We turn by the prison, back in the direction of The Lounge. In the direction of Mrs. Shumaker's house, though he doesn't know it.

"I don't mind," he says.

"I'd rather go alone," I say.

"At least let me give you my phone number," he says. "You can text me when you get home safe."

I hesitate, weighing the pros and cons. A phone number means a permanent connection. But it'll also get Dr. Garcia off my back. It's proof. I hand my phone to him. He types the number and gives it back. I worry he's going to reach out for a hug. It's safe to say there will be no kiss.

"Walk safe," he says.

"You too."

I walk a few blocks out of my way in case he's watching. On the way, I try to picture him as a junkie. Dark bags under his eyes. Shaky hands. Or as a drunk. Slurred speech. Starting bar fights. I think of myself at the Lambda party, cutting my hand on the cracked plastic of a solo cup I crushed after chugging a beer. Vomiting bright blue onto the volleyball net, wiping my mouth and smearing red lipstick across my cheek, Evan's words circulating in my head. *You're embarrassing. Embarrassing. Embarrassing.*

Maybe we really aren't so different, Patrick and me. When I get home and I've turned out the lights and pulled the covers up to my chin, I find his number and text him, "Home."

## Chapter 7

Tiny green sprouts of basil and cilantro have pushed through the soil. The others look no different than they did when I planted them. Beneath the surface, though, cells divide and energy is exchanged and invisible progress is being made. I hope so, anyway. I can't stop thinking about Patrick. When I take my medicine in the morning, I think of him crushing pills and snorting. When I water the herbs, I think of him consuming a steady stream of drinks. And in the moments I think it would be easier to die, like when the grocery store is out of potato soup and there's a fender bender on Broad Street and I drop my keys into a puddle, I think of him in a room of strangers fighting for sobriety. I hate it, that with one story, one date, he has become a different person to me. I think I want to know him for real. Not just as a check in a box on Dr. Garcia's to-do list. Worse than that, I want to text Sarah about it, to ask her opinion. But I don't have that right anymore.

Part of me still thinks another date with Patrick is a bad idea. As far as I've reasoned, it's the part of me from Before. I'm supposed to be making connections and engaging in life. It sounds tempting, but I don't know if I believe it's possible. What's the point in exploring a relationship with Patrick if I might not even be here to maintain it? Or if it will just end up in the same disheveled heap as me and Evan? This debate occupies me for days, until Mrs. Shumaker tells me it's her week to host book club. It's nice of her to give me this warning that my mother will be at the house. My throat feel dry and tight, and all I can think about is last Christmas and our scam of a family meeting before I went to Tucker's. I don't want to see her.

I slip into The Lounge behind a group of students and sit in the same booth from the first day with the cracked vinyl seat in the back and open *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration*. It's from the first design class I ever took. I'm hoping if I go back to basics that I



won't just stare at an empty page in my sketchbook. It's hard to concentrate, hearing Patrick interact with customers. But it's harder, I realize, because he's not paying attention to me. He hasn't noticed I'm here. I'm invisible.

After a while, he says, "It's time to close up, Warrior."

Warrior. Maybe he doesn't hate me. I close my book and start to walk out. Then I have a thought. "Do you mind if I stay while you clean up?"

"Sure."

I sit on a barstool. I keep my book closed. I want Patrick to talk to me. I can't stand the silence. He usually fills the empty space. I never know what to say. I want something to distract me from thinking about my mother. I watch his hands make stacks of bills and tap out calculations on the countertop, just like the other night. Something about the routine feels familiar and safe.

He disappears into the back and returns empty-handed.

"You ready to go?" he asks.

The correct answer, I know, is yes. He's not asking me to be honest. He's telling me it's time to leave. I'm not sure what I'll do until I'm sure my mother is gone. I don't trust myself.

"Are you busy?" I ask him.

His eyes widen. "No, what's up?"

"Do you want to hang out?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Something low key?" I don't mean to phrase it as a question. Don't be afraid to say what you want, Dr. Garcia always says.

“Not much downtown will be low key tonight,” Patrick says. “Halloween weekend is wild down here.”

I remember last Halloween when Evan and I dressed as Sandy and Danny Zuko from the final scene of *Grease*. I wore leather pants with a leotard that was so tight it hurt to breathe. I borrowed a pair of red heels that Evan hated. They made me an inch taller than him. The night was fun until Evan got kicked out of the bar for pissing into a potted plant on the patio. When I tried to help him through the crowd, he shrugged me off with enough force that I teetered on my heels before falling to the floor. Evan didn’t even look back. A girl dressed as a gumball machine helped me up and wiped the mascara trails off my cheeks. I pulled my fake eyelashes off on the walk home.

“Can we stay here?” I ask. I don’t want to spend the night seeing former versions of myself stumbling down sidewalks.

“Sure.” Patrick pulls out the juicer.

“Can we have coffee?” I ask.

“I thought you didn’t drink coffee.”

“I don’t drink caffeine,” I say. “So I try to stay away from coffee, too.”

“Decaf?” he asks.

I nod.

Patrick scoops coffee beans from a container under the counter and puts them into the coffee grinder. It crunches as Patrick puts the remainder of the day’s pastries on a plate. I collect stray crumbs from the plate with my pointer finger. A few stick and then fall onto the counter. When the coffee is ready, Patrick pours two mugs, leaving room for cream and sugar. I wipe the crumbs onto the floor.

“French vanilla?” I ask.

Patrick reaches under the counter and slides me the creamer. I take two sugar packets from the basket by the register. Patrick grabs the plate of scones and cake pops and tilts his head toward the back of the shop. “Let’s go to the roof.”

“There’s a roof?”

“The owner closed it after Hurricane Irene in 2011. This place was barely breaking even back then. Redoing the roof would’ve cost more than he was making.”

We walk to the back of the café to a door in the corner that reads EMPLOYEES ONLY and climb a narrow staircase that groans with each step. The cool air hits me as soon as we step onto the roof. It’s bigger than I imagined. The roof is dirty and weathered, some sort of tar and gravel mixture. Around the outside perimeter is a three foot brick wall. I walk across and lean over the edge. The beginning of Halloween Weekend shows in the groups of costumed people below.

An office building blocks the view of the canal and the river, but the view is still perfect. Being above the city, even only one story, feels like being on a separate plane of existence. I’m not sure I trust it. Patrick joins me at the roof’s edge. We stand there, sip our coffee, and watch the street light change colors. I picture all the ways this rooftop could be designed. Encased in glass. Wrought iron tables. A bar in the corner. Earthy colors. It comes together in my head seamlessly.

“What do you do when you’re not here?” Patrick asks me. He’s offering me a redo. I’m not an idiot.

I don’t want to say “nothing,” which would be the honest answer, so I say, “Depends on the day.”

“What did you do today?”

“Went to the fabric store for the woman I live with. Read. Watered my plants.”

“You like to garden?”

“It’s lame, I know, but I like fresh vegetables and herbs. I like the work it takes to make something grow well.”

“Things can grow badly?”

I bite into a red velvet cake pop. A little stale but still delicious. If I scoot an inch to the left or bend my elbow, my arm will brush against Patrick’s. Part of me wants to do it, to get the first touch over with, to see if the chemistry is there or if it’s just in my head, if it’s just because I feel connected to him since I learned his secret. But that one touch would create a series of touches, insignificant at first – holding hands, tucking my hair behind my ear, his hand resting on my knee – that would ultimately end in disaster. Evan had seemed perfect at first.

I sit and lean against the brick. Patrick follows. “Can I ask you something?” I say.

“Sure.”

“How long have you been sober?”

He traces a fingertip around the rim of his mug. “A little over a year.”

“Is it hard?”

“Not all the time. But a lot of it.”

“Honestly, it’s hard to believe,” I tell him.

“What is?”

“That all of that could happen and you still spit sunshine everywhere.”

“I was mad as hell for a while, but recovery’s about getting to the heart of why you drink and use. Once I started dealing with that stuff, happiness didn’t feel so foreign. Like you said, it takes work to make something grow.”

I want to ask what that stuff was for him. When he talks, I don’t have to think about myself, about my mother, about any of it. But I can only ask so much without giving in return. I finish my cake pop and wipe the crumbs that fall into my lap.

“What are you avoiding?” he asks me.

“What do you mean?”

“Staying after close. I know it’s not because of me.”

He says this as a fact, not like he’s hurt or offended.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say.

“Sometimes those are the things you need to talk about.”

I drain the rest of my coffee. I thought decaf would be worse than no coffee at all. Even though it tastes weak, I realize how much I’ve missed it. It feels natural to be here, drinking coffee on the roof with Patrick. It feels almost easy, except he asks questions that cut to the deepest parts of what I’m not willing to dig into.

Before we leave, I pause in the doorway of the stairwell. Lights shine from random windows in city buildings and a whistle sounds the arrival or departure of a train at Main Street Station. I close my eyes and envision all the things I could do with this space, all the ways I could fix it. I think of all the things this empty space can become.

I want to show Patrick what I worked on all night. I throw my unbrushed hair into a messy bun, put an oversized sweatshirt over my tank top, and leave the house with a composition notebook

and pencil in hand. My notebook is full of ideas for the rooftop. For the first time since Before, I didn't feel haunted when I sat down to draw. It was like my hands had direct access to my subconscious. Ideas I didn't even know I had ended up on paper. The bell on the door of The Lounge crashes against the glass as I throw the door open.

“Hey,” Patrick says, “You look...”

“I didn't sleep last night.”

“Had that much fun with me, huh?” He smirks, just enough to make his one dimple visible. His beard has already grown back, and it's trimmed close to the skin, the perfect amount of stubble. There's a playfulness in his eyes. The tips of my ears get hot. This is serious. But I do like that he's flirting with me. Dammit.

“We have to fix the roof,” I say.

“Roy will never go for it.”

“Look,” I say, opening my notebook. On the first page is a pergola draped with cantina lights. Small tables and chairs painted in bright colors on the next. Potted plants lining one of the walls. Window boxes of lirioppe, like at my old house. Giant community tables. Wooden chairs with cushions. A couch that wraps around three sides. Floating lanterns. My hand aches from filling half the notebook.

“Holy shit,” Patrick says as he flips through. “These are amazing.”

“We could make this happen,” I say.

“We?” Patrick says, half statement, half question.

I ignore him. “Roy's letting valuable real estate rot above the city. You've got a view of all of Shockoe Slip.”

“I've brought it up to Roy, but he always shoots it down.”

“The business is solid now, right?”

“Yeah, but there’s still a lot of work that needs to be done. We’d have to figure out logistics. There’s the weather. If we open an entire new section, what business codes do we need to follow? It’s more complicated than it seems.”

“Fine,” I say, slapping the notebook shut.

He rests his chin in his hand and stares at me, his brown eyes fixed on me like he’s trying to crack a code. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Like what?”

“Passionate. Happy. Excited.”

“I just threw these together in one night. It’s not a big deal.” I know he doesn’t believe me, but I don’t want him to know how important this is, how much it matters. I’m scared if I admit it, especially to Patrick, it’ll jinx it. I’ll have design block again. Nothing else will come. Sketching in that notebook called a piece of Before to the surface, a piece of Before that I don’t hate. A piece I thought had been lost. Patrick reaches out a hand and tugs the notebook from me. He flips through, turning it at different angles to make sense of the sketches.

“I think we should at least try,” I say.

“Can you get me something more concrete that I can give to Roy?”

Before I can think too hard about it, I stand on my tiptoes and pull Patrick into a hug. He bends his knees a little and puts his arms around me, too. I expect some sort of jolt, electricity, something to send my body into overdrive the way it did with Evan the first few times we touched. No goosebumps. No shock. It just feels natural.

## Chapter 8

When Patrick invites me to his apartment to cook dinner together, I accept because I want to see him outside of The Lounge. Maybe his apartment will be dirty, which will make him less charming. Maybe in a different environment he won't seem so intimidating and charismatic. I'm disappointed when I arrive to find clean countertops and a folded blanket draped over the couch. I tell myself he cleaned to impress me, that it's not normally like this, but that makes me feel more uncomfortable than realizing he might be just as perfect as he seems.

I hesitate on the small square of linoleum at the front door. Every step into the apartment is one I can't take back. Patrick takes my coat and hangs it on the doorknob of a closet in the hallway. Though my mother taught me otherwise, I leave my shoes on as I step onto the carpet and then into the kitchen. All the ingredients sit in a neat row on the countertop.

"I brought cilantro from my garden and a few things from the farmer's market," I say as I put a plastic bag on the counter.

"Awesome," Patrick says. He dumps ground beef into a pan. I chop the onion, and my eyes burn. Once the meat starts sizzling, Patrick goes to the living room and turns on music. A Billy Joel melody fills the room. Patrick sings along to himself, bobbing his head. He shuffles across the floor in perfect time with the music. He bumps his hip against mine. I laugh, and a small flush of red appears on the apples of his cheeks.

"You have to dance to Billy Joel," he says.

We prepare the rest of the meal this way. Patrick dances around the kitchen while I stay put. As I put dishes on the table, Patrick catches me mouthing the words to "Only The Good Die Young" and winks at me. My heart pounds. I hate it. Sort of. The whole night feels intimate in a way I wasn't prepared for. Even in the beginning, it never felt this easy with Evan. There are



happy memories, I'm sure, but they're in the recesses of my mind, somewhere I can't reach anymore. All I can remember are the strings of tension and the mystery of when they would snap.

Patrick waits until we're eating to tell me Roy has given us a small budget to redesign the rooftop. "He's skeptical," Patrick says, "but your sketches swayed him. You've set some high expectations."

It's not impossible to do on a budget, but it won't be easy. Now, I have to work on a realistic plan instead of my lofty visions. This is what I've missed: the challenge.

"I want it done before summer," I say. I think of a late spring opening before it's too humid to function. Patrick agrees.

After dinner, I take the plates to the sink.

"You don't have to clean those," Patrick says. "I'll get them later."

"I don't mind," I say.

While I rinse and scrub, Patrick brings dishes to the sink, emptying them into small Tupperware containers. I stick a bowl under the running water, and it splashes, soaking the cuff and lower sleeve of my sweater.

It happens in slow motion. Patrick reaches across the sink. His nails are chewed down to stubs. He folds back the wet part of my sleeve. My body freezes. I tell myself not to panic. I can't stop what's about to happen. He rolls the sleeve again. The raised pink flesh on my wrist shows. I see it every day, but I look at it now through Patrick's eyes. With disgust. I wait for him to ask me about the scar, to say something, anything. I jerk my hand away. The bowl drops. Cracks in half in the sink. The water continues running. I get my coat and bag and head toward the door.

“Sloan,” Patrick says. His voice is gentle, pleading. I can’t look at him. I don’t want to see the way his eyes look filled with sadness. With pity. With disappointment. With the realization that I’m not the girl he thinks I am. I step around him and open the door. “Sloan,” he says again, even softer, like he’s afraid his voice will break me. Before I leave, I make myself look him in the face. His honey brown eyes show nothing but concern. There’s a warmth to them. I could stay here and tell him everything, push my sleeves back, let him trace the path of the last year across my arms. Instead, I brace myself against the wind and don’t stop until I’m safe inside my car.

My herbs are dying. Even the parsley and mint have withered, and they’re supposed to last through the winter. I move them inside, hoping the warmth will keep them alive. I’ve spent the last three days at the house. I lie to Mrs. Shumaker when she asks if I’ve been out. “Of course,” I say, “I went to the Canal Walk today,” or “I spent the afternoon at Jefferson Park.” Whatever I tell her gets reported to my mother. Lying comes with keeping up appearances.

What I’ve actually done since I left Patrick’s is finish *Little Women* and two seasons of *Friends*. As long as I’m distracted, I can convince myself that I don’t have to talk to Patrick. I have three voicemails from him on my phone. One for each day since our date. In the first, he apologizes, says I don’t have to tell him about it, says he just wants to see me again. The next one says he misses me. The last one he says he won’t call anymore.

I think of a fight Evan and I had last year, after I’d been taking antidepressants for a few weeks. We were on his couch, watching TV and doing homework, tolerating each other because we didn’t know how else to exist.

“I need for you to acknowledge that I’m doing the best I can.” I told him, my voice tight.

“Do you ever think about the fact that I need things, too?”

“What are you saying?”

“I have other options.” Evan leaned his elbow on the back of the couch, twirling a chunk of blond hair in his fingers. In that moment, I knew we would never find our way back to the simplicity of cheese steaks at the dining hall, would never survive the drought.

“You want an out?” I said. “I’ll give you one.”

I expected him to fight, to ask me to stay, but he just sat there, twirling the same lock of hair as I walked away.

It should be easy. I should be able to get up off the bed and walk into The Lounge and pretend like the other night didn’t happen. Patrick did the one thing Evan never did. He called. *Do you miss him?* I imagine Sarah asking me. As much as I can’t stand it, the answer is yes. I miss Patrick. I’ve brewed coffee three days in a row and dumped it once it got cold and the aroma went stale. I go to the kitchen and see the herbs on the windowsill, and I remember what I said to him on the rooftop. *It takes work to make things grow.* Fuck.

I walk the four blocks to The Lounge. Before I go inside, I see Patrick behind the counter, laughing with a customer. That smile. I push the door open. Patrick looks up when it rings and stops what he’s doing. The guy holding his coffee turns to look at me, too. He nods at Patrick and walks out.

Patrick says something to JT, the other barista, and waves me to the back of the shop. We climb the stairs to the roof. The setting sun casts gold and navy hues across the sky. In a different situation, it would be romantic. Here, it’s haunting. The last remnants of light being chased from the sky.

“I shouldn’t have left like that the other night,” I say to him.

“I get what it’s like to have secrets,” he says.

When he says this, I realize that I don’t want it to be my secret. He shared his with me. I undo the buttons at the bottom of my sleeves and roll them up. I turn my arms outward, close to his face so he can see each individual line that crisscrosses its way up to my elbows, along with the long, dark ones that slice vertically through them all. Patrick pushes my arms down to my sides.

“You’re not there anymore,” Patrick says after a moment.

“I stole a prescription pad from my psychiatrist.” As soon as the words come out, I want them back. Honesty, though, is about saying the hard things out loud.

“Okay, so you’re still a little fucked up. Big deal. We all are.”

“I just like knowing that I could, you know, if I wanted.”

“What’d you write it for?”

“Xanax.”

“You won’t do it.” He says this with a confidence that surprises me. “You made it this far. You’re not gonna start all over.”

“Wouldn’t have to if I succeeded next time.”

“Will you at least wait until the rooftop’s done then? I’m not much of a designer.”

Patrick’s face cracks first, his mouth spilling into a smile. I laugh, a deep one that makes my sides ache. It sounds unfamiliar. For a moment, I feel normal.

## Chapter 9

The pressure building in the clouds bursts as I walk. I spread my fingers and swing my hands by my sides, feeling them separate the air like it's more solid than gas. The last bit of daylight disappears, and there's a still quiet in the darkness.

I make no attempt at cover. The rain is a refreshing chill on my skin. It's unseasonably warm for November. I miss the mountains, where it would already be cool by now, but that's just another way of missing Before. Every storm reminds me of watching them from the window bench in the kitchen. For my eighth birthday, Dad and I built the bench into the bay window. While Dad went to the fridge, I put a bit on the drill and tried to keep working. Without Dad's hands guiding me, though, the weight of the drill was too much, and it slipped. I drilled a hole in the wall. I wasn't allowed to use Dad's workshop without supervision for almost the next two years. And I had to patch the hole. Once the bench was finally finished, though, I'd curl up against the window that angled in watch the sky light up and then count how many seconds until the thunder split the air. I loved the small second when it looked as bright as day before returning to dark.

Lightning illuminates the row of stores ahead for a second before a loud crack of thunder echoes between the buildings. A few cars drive to the end of the street, their wipers beating a vigorous rhythm to keep up with the raindrops.

At the corner, I have a choice. I can turn left and head back to Mrs. Shumaker's house. I can put on flannel pajama pants and turn on my space heater and watch TV until I fall asleep. If I turn right, I pass The Lounge. There, Patrick and I can sit behind the locked door and wipe down the tables and drink decaf coffee and eat stale cake pops. Is there a word for this? For wanting to do two things at once? For wanting to be alone but not lonely? It's only been a few days since

Patrick and I talked on the roof. I want to see him, want to find excuses to go to The Lounge. But every time I think about Patrick and whatever is happening between us, if anything is happening between us, all I see is the disastrous end. It's too hard to think of a happy one. To hope.

I want to pluck a star from the sky and have it burn the answer into my palm. Not just to this. To everything. The clouds block most of the stars, but a few are bright enough to shine through. I turn right, toward Patrick. The rain has slowed to a sporadic drizzle. When I get to The Lounge, the door is locked, the shop empty. Should've just gone home.

Behind me, I hear a voice say, "Want a ride?" Patrick sits behind the wheel of his hatchback, the window half cracked.

I get in.

"You're soaked," he says.

"I went for a walk and got caught."

Patrick puts the car into gear.

"Where am I going?" he asks.

"Can we just drive around?"

Patrick doesn't ask any questions, just flips his turn signal and pulls onto the empty street. I play with the hem on my shirt, tracing the tiny, perfect line of stitches with my thumbnail.

"You okay?" he asks. I hate this question. I never feel okay. Some days I feel better. Some days I do alright. But "okay" is a word I never know what to do with, a word I can't feel. The rain picks up again. A layer of fog settles onto the windshield.

"Do you ever feel worse at night than during the day?" I ask, spreading my hands out in front of me, staring at the white half-moons on my unpainted nails.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” I take time choosing my words. If I don’t pick the right ones, Patrick won’t understand, and I’ll sound stupid. Patrick keeps his eyes on the road, takes a left onto Monument Avenue at the Robert E. Lee memorial. “It’s like everything is fine during the day, but as soon as the sun sets, it gets worse. The night caves in or something.”

“Which is why you were out walking.”

“The air helps.”

“Does it?”

Walking gives me something to do when my eyes are too tired to read but my brain is too awake to avoid suicide. The rain beats against the windows. I already told Patrick about May, about Tucker’s. I should be able to tell him about this, too. About how even after all of this, the lingering darkness won’t totally go away. It did for him. It should for me, too.

Sarah never asked me to explain. In the middle of the night, I’d crawl into her bed, and she’d scoot closer to the wall. Sometimes she’d go back to sleep. Sometimes, she’d put lavender and orange essential oils in her diffuser on the nightstand, and we’d lay there without speaking, her stuffed elephant between us. Those moments are what I miss. The unspoken understandings of our friendship.

I could never explain it to Evan, either. I tried once, when we hiked through a desolate forest to the frozen waterfall at the top of the trail. The frozen falls had a haunting beauty about them, caging the water in, freezing it in time and space.

I asked Evan, “Do you think the water knows it’s stuck?”

He looked at me with one hand hovering over his eyes to block the glaring sun. “What are you talking about?”

We stood, our gloved hands intertwined, our heads tilted towards the top of the falls.

I wait for Patrick to fill the silence, to tell me about how Kim Jong-Il wrote operas and Abraham Lincoln was a star wrestler and the Aztecs introduced Europeans to chocolate. To ask me invasive questions about my personal life. Something. He doesn't even turn up the radio. Lightning flashes again, the car bright as dawn for just a moment, and when the thunder follows, I feel smaller, like at any moment the storm might swallow me up.

"Take me home," I say.

"Which direction?"

"No," I say. "Take me *home*."

"With me?"

"Yeah."

At the next stoplight, he turns and looks at me.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

The shadows of the buildings cross his face. My heart beats so fast I'm worried Patrick can hear it. I lean across the center console and kiss him. Patrick's lips are soft and slow against mine. A horn honks. We break apart. The light is green. Patrick leaves one hand on the steering wheel and holds mine with the other.

When we get to his apartment, I stand by the door. Patrick tells me to wait and disappears into his room. My clothes are still damp, sticking to my skin. My boldness from the car has deflated a bit, but I know I want this. I want to feel close to someone, to him. I walk to the doorway of his room. It's as neat as the rest of the apartment. A bed, dresser, and desk.



“We should put your clothes in the dryer,” he says. He holds a t-shirt and shorts out to me and points across the hall. “Bathroom’s right there.”

I want him to make the first move. I want to feel his hands wandering across my body, the weight of him on top of me. Warmth. Pleasure. Closeness. I pull my shirt over my head and drop it on the floor. My jeans have to be peeled off, and I feel awkward standing there—halfway in the lit hallway, halfway in the dark of his room—in my non matching bra and panties. I wait for nervousness to hit, for the instinct to cover my body, to hide my scars. It doesn’t come. It feels like minutes pass before Patrick drops the clothes in his hand and closes the distance between us. By the time he reaches me, his shirt is already off. Dark brown hair covers his chest in thick curls.

We crash together, my body touching his at every possible point of contact. His hands shake as he reaches to undo the clasp of my bra. I fumble loosening his belt. When we’re in bed, he slides my panties over my hips. He runs his hands over my forearms, and I know he feels it, the seam where my skin was sewn together. I hold myself still. Patrick’s eyes are non-judgmental, a mixture of his tenderness with a glint of the more primal side of him. His kisses are soft and hot on my neck, my collarbones. Then, he pushes inside me, slow at first, then faster. There’s an urgency in the way his body moves with mine. I pull him against me.

When we finish, I get up and cross the hall to the bathroom, picking up Patrick’s clothes on my way. The light is harsh and highlights the redness around my mouth from Patrick’s stubble. I pull my wet hair into a bun, use the bathroom, and get dressed. I crawl back into bed with Patrick, letting him wrap himself around me in a cocoon. Despite the cliché, I feel safe here. The thunder and lightning have stopped. Patrick’s breath is steady, his belly rising and falling against my back.

“I put your clothes in the dryer,” he tells me.

“Thanks.”

I listen to the rain still splattering against the window panes. I don't want to talk, to ruin this feeling. Not quite happiness. Not love. Contentment.

“Stay the night,” Patrick whispers, his lips against my ear.

I turn to face him, scooting close, intertwining our legs. He slips an arm in the space between my neck and the bed and traces my shoulder blades. His hands are warm against my cold skin. I want to stay. I run my finger across his cheek, letting it dip into his dimple. He kisses me. On the mouth. Then the nose. It's perfect. Better than I imagined it would be.

“I don't have a toothbrush,” I say.

“I probably have an extra.”

I shake my head and lean my forehead against his so our noses brush against each other. Most of me wants to stay here. But I don't want to be here when he wakes up. The chance that tomorrow will be as good as tonight seems impossible.

“I'll stay 'til my clothes are dry,” I tell him.

He pulls me against him. My head rests against his chest, his chin on my head.

“I like you, Warrior.” He says it so quietly that I'm not sure if I imagined it. I close my eyes and smile against him, hoping the dryer doesn't stop too soon.

## Chapter 10

The next Monday, I tell Dr. Garcia I had sex with Patrick. That we've hung out every day since.

At The Lounge. At his house. All around the city.

"How do you feel about that?" he asks.

"Seriously?" I ask. He never uses the cliché psychiatrist questions.

"It's not a trick question," he says. "I want to know what you're feeling about it."

Around Patrick, I can't stop smiling. Something about him is magnetic, contagious. I don't know quite how to explain it.

"I'm fascinated by him," I say.

"In what way?"

"He got better."

For more than two hours, I sketch different blueprints, trying to accommodate Roy's wishes for a closed-in rooftop and incorporating my own vision for open air seating. It's not a rooftop if it's closed. Patrick tries to help us meet in the middle. When Roy isn't looking, Patrick winks at me. I focus on my drawing, keeping the lines straight, the measurements precise.

Roy has a stern demeanor. His mouth rests in a straight line, and his eyes are distracted, like he's always thinking, even in the silences. He's patient and stubborn, a strange and frustrating combination. But I see why Patrick likes him. When he laughs, it comes from somewhere deep inside of him, loud and uninhibited. Patrick keeps him laughing, which helps with all the redraws.

The roof is a twenty by twenty rectangle with the staircase corner jutting out an extra two feet. We finally agree to have the customers come up the staircase to a nine foot room enclosed

on three sides by segmented floor-to-ceiling windows that will be open on the top halves on good weather days. On the far side from the staircase, the place will flow into an outdoor patio. Roy likes my idea of bench seating around the ledge of the roof. I try to convince him to let me line lirioppe behind them. He says we'll see.

I think about all the ways we can cut corners to lessen costs. We could probably find enough scrap metal to piece together for the roof from the junkyard. Some of the decorations are unnecessary. Roy would be happy if we cut the plants. I even consider getting a part time job at Home Depot to get a discount on whatever we need. Patrick laughs when I tell him this. "You'd be terrible at that," he says. "You'd have to pretend to be nice to people." He's right. I'd hate it.

After this meeting, I realize there's only one way I can complete this project under budget. I'm going to have to call my father.

I haven't spoken to my parents since May, when we sat in Meeting Room 2 with Dr. Garcia to discuss my progress and the idea of discharge after my suicide attempt. I spent a week in the hospital total—a day in the ICU, which I don't remember at all, two days of one-on-one monitoring from a carousel of people in light blue scrubs, and four days in the psych ward with a roommate detoxing from drug use. The first time I met Dr. Garcia, a day earlier, I wanted to ask if he was old enough to practice medicine, but I didn't have the energy to be an asshole. When Dr. Garcia asked me if I'd be okay meeting with my parents to discuss a treatment plan, I shrugged. College is a weird age. Even though I feel too young, I'm technically an adult in charge of my own care and capable of making my own medical decisions. The nurses on the floor had no choice but to oblige when I said I wouldn't accept visitors.

"It's your choice," Dr. Garcia told me. "I won't make it for you."

I told him yes. I figured it would be better to see them for the first time with someone else there to alleviate the tension. They sat on opposite sides of the room. My mother looked like she was going to brunch with friends after the meeting, wearing a dress and heels. Dad looked the same as always, like he was ready for any sort of manual labor that might present itself, though he seemed to have tears in his eyes, while Mom picked a spot on the floor to stare at as she tapped her toe against the tile.

“Let’s get right to business,” Dr. Garcia said as soon as he sat down on the yellow chair in the room. He opened a notebook in his lap and lay a pen on it. “They sent me here from Tucker’s. Do you know what that is?”

“The insane asylum,” I said. My voice scratched against my throat. I didn’t realize until then how little I’d spoken over the last week.

“We’re a psychiatric care clinic.”

Okay.

“We house a variety of different inpatient programs for people who are in recovery from suicide attempts. I’m here to see if you’re a good fit for our 90-day Suicide Survivors Treatment Program.”

He sat with his hands folded on his crossed legs, his dark eyes soft and patient. I hated them.

“She’ll be fine at home,” my mother said.

“That’s definitely an option,” Dr. Garcia said, “but I’ll need to feel confident that there are certain systems in place that will provide an optimum healing environment.”

“Why are you assuming she’d go to your house?” my father asked. He sat up straight. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall.

“You can’t tell me you think she’ll be joining you in that little bachelor pad you have.”

“It has two bedrooms, Jessica. I think the house would be too much for her. The memories. The pressure.”

“What pressure?” Mom uncrossed her legs, her heel making a sharp click on the floor.

“Are you kidding?” My father asked with a scoff. I imagined I was holding a paintbrush and painting black across this room. It covered my parents, the yellow chair, Dr. Garcia. Painting my mind drowned out the sound, too. Only me.

“I’m interested in what you think, Sloan,” Dr. Garcia said. I snapped my eyes back open to find Dr. Garcia and my parents looking at me. As long as I got out of there, I’d do just about anything. The fake cheerfulness of ward activities and people who actually bought into the whole “art can fix you” crap pissed me off. I was better off rotting away in my apartment at school. I didn’t want to go to either of their houses and be a pawn in their divorce.

“What’s it like?” I asked.

Dr. Garcia said, “Our programs aren’t designed to be quick fixes. If you come, you’re going to have to put in work. But we have an incredibly high success rate for our patients. There’s more freedom—an entire campus that sits on the James River around which you can earn the privilege to roam—as long as you attend your group and individual therapy sessions and take any prescribed medication.”

“Sloan doesn’t need to go any program,” my mother said. “We’re her parents. We’re perfectly capable of taking care of her.”

“I’m right here,” I said, waving at my mother.

“Obviously, things in your life were overwhelming to the point that you tried to end it.” Dr. Garcia spoke directly to me, his eye contact unwavering. “My job is to help you remember

who you were before life got that way and help you see what your life could be like when proper coping mechanisms and possibly medications are in place. The best way to do that is in an environment where you feel safe and comfortable.”

I wanted to smile. Dr. Garcia had managed to insult my mother without speaking to her at all. She lifted a hand to her head to fluff her hair at the roots and then twisted the bracelets on her wrist. I hated that Dr. Garcia’s words resonated in a part of me that I hadn’t realized could still feel. He didn’t ask me why I was depressed or what made me want to kill myself. Those were questions I couldn’t answer, mostly because the answers themselves felt abstract and separate from me. I didn’t want to go to the program. Not really. But choosing a house was choosing a parent. I had a gun with one bullet, and I had to pull the trigger. Dr. Garcia offered an option to put the gun down. An option where I would be able to sweat at noon, lying in the grass, letting the sun burn my face. A place outside the realm of my mother’s reign and outside of my father’s subtle indifference.

“I’ll go to the program,” I said.

Two days later, I did.

I drive around the apartment complex until I find Dad’s truck. He moved out soon after I went back to school for spring semester. I only visited once before going to Tucker’s. I check under the truck to see the apartment number painted on the asphalt. The building still has the same desperate feel to it. The sad gray buildings. A dumpster crooked across parking spots, garbage piled over the top. I can’t imagine living in a place like this after living in our house with its cavernous ceilings and French moldings. When I knock on his door, there’s a delay before Dad smiles. As soon as he does, something in me softens, and I want to hug him, to bridge the gap to

Before. He looks good, like himself. Scruff on his face. A pair of paint splattered jeans and a white t-shirt. My own brown eyes looking back at me.

Inside is plain. A navy couch across from a TV mounted on the wall. A small table in the corner of the same room. Nothing on the walls. Maybe it's a rebellion from Mom's gallery walls and perfect decorations. Or it's indifference. Neither thought surprises me.

"Do you want water or a Coke or something?" he asks.

"No," I say.

He leans an elbow on the countertop, the only thing separating the kitchenette and the rest of the space. "How are you?"

Another question I never know how to answer. Do people want honesty or platitudes? I shrug. To my mother, this would be unacceptable. My father takes it for what it is. Or at least he doesn't push it.

"I'm working on this project," I say. "I've been going to this coffee shop down near the Canal Walk, and the owner gave me a small budget to turn the roof into a secondary space for customers."

Admitting that I need his help feels juvenile, like a step backwards in recovery. Dr. Garcia says that sometimes asking for help is a sign of moving forward, even though it doesn't feel like it. I want my father to interject, to ask a question, to take the burden of the conversation away from me. But this has never been his way. While my mother chided and disciplined with words, my father stared me down in silence. That look always cracked me. Not the increasingly shrill voice of my mother.



“The design is simple,” I continue, “but he wants us to do it with \$1500. That’s barely going to cover the cost of materials. I can do some of the labor, but there’s some wiring that needs to be done.”

These are the most consecutive words I’ve spoken to my father in months, maybe even a year. I trace the outline of the light switch cover next to me. My father is still silent, still leaning, a statue in his own home.

“I don’t think we can stay in budget. Not without help anyway.”

I swallow, trying to push my heart back into my chest. Dad lifts his elbow off the counter. When I look at him, I can’t tell what he’s thinking. I feel like I’m thirteen again, standing in the doorway of my parents’ room, asking to have a sleepover on a weeknight. It’s that same feeling of hope tinged with the fear of a no.

“We’re breaking ground on a new subdivision on the north side of town next week,” he says.

“That’s great,” I say. “You’re going to be pretty busy for a while.” I feel the disappointment underneath my rib cage, that sudden heaviness in my chest, the way my mouth goes dry. My instinct to flee kicks in.

“Yeah,” he says. “I won’t have any hands to spare. But there will probably be raw materials to scrounge up as the project moves along.”

“Okay,” I say. I put my hand in the pocket of my vest and jingle my keys. There’s nothing else to say. I don’t know why I expected anything different. Of course he can’t help me. He never could. He couldn’t cancel out the over critical nature of my mother. He couldn’t reach the places inside of me that I hid from him. He can fix everything in the world: a sink, a window frame, the busted pipe in my bathroom. Everything but his family. But me.

“Sloan,” he says. In the silence before he finishes, I see how the brown has faded from his eyes, how they sink into the bags beneath them. It’s only been a few months, but if I look closely, he’s aged years. “It’s good to see you, kid.”

I force a quick smile, my lips squeezed together in a tight curved line, but I turn so he can’t see the tears in my eyes. On the drive home, I realize these are the first tears that have actually fallen since Before. This is why I don’t get my hopes up, why I stopped trying. It leads to this moment, driving down the bypass, the lights of oncoming cars blurred by my tears.

Saturday morning, I sit on the roof with a sketchpad. I’m supposed to simplify the design, but I don’t want to make cuts. Patrick tells me that there’s a chance we can do it in stages. With extra revenue generated from the rooftop, maybe Roy will feel comfortable reinvesting. I hear the door open and close, but I don’t look up to see Patrick walk over. He’s probably got a red velvet cake pop or a lemonade or something that he thinks will cheer me up. But the voice that says my name is not Patrick’s. It’s my father’s.

He sits down next to me and gestures to the book in my hand. “May I?” he asks.

I hand it over and watch my father’s face as he flips through. He tilts his head, nods a few times, and looks up to integrate the designs with the space we’re in. I know these looks; they are mine.

“These are incredible,” he says.

“They’re not even the best ones,” I say.

“No?”

“I went a little overboard in my first few versions. We had to cut back on some things for cost and, well, for Roy.”

“You always did have a certain peculiarity to your designs. That hexagonal hospital. Or that one lake house with those skinny windows lining the wall. The circular entryway you wanted me to build for your bedroom.”

His words are simple. Ordinary. But they carry the weight of years, of being known. I don't have to explain anything to him. He's been there for it all. And he's here now. I push the sleeves of my sweatshirt up to my elbows. From the corner of my eye, I see him look down at my arms and then back to the book. I pull my sweatshirt sleeves back down.

“Do you mind if I take a few pictures?”

“Sure.”

He takes his time with his phone, taking pictures of the pages as a whole, then zooming in to take pictures of specific sketches and the notes I penned beside them. In my sketchbooks, I even consider my handwriting to be art.

“I'm in,” he says when he puts his phone away.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Casey Contracting will take on the project.”

“What about the subdivision?”

“I took on extra projects all the time when you were a kid.”

I think about all the Saturdays without him. And the rare ones when he'd wake me up to make chocolate chip pancakes and watch cartoons. I'd sit on the couch, still in my pajamas, balancing my plate on my crossed legs. My father would bring the whipped cream with us—he said there's no such thing as too much whipped cream—and we'd eat until our stomachs hurt and the cartoons turned into afternoon TV. Sometimes Mom would join us, her pancakes topped with berries.

“You’ll be losing money,” I say.

Dad closes the sketchbook and puts it on the ground beside him. “You remember the street art festival when you were twelve?” I nod. He continues, “You cried when it rained that night because you couldn’t stand the thought of your first prize chalk drawing bleeding together with the mediocre art of the kids around you.”

I laugh, “I sound like a brat.”

“My hope for you that day was that you would eventually feel what it’s like to make something that will last. And I promised myself I would be there to see it.”

It’s a bright day for autumn, the kind where families descend upon pumpkin patches and apple orchards in plaid shirts and boots, where you can almost forget that in a few weeks the sky will turn gray and the days will get short and life will feel hard. We are not that family anymore. Those people belong in Before. In a few weeks, leaves will float to the ground and curl into crunchy brown littering the streets and sidewalks and park benches. Today, though, it’s clear and crisp and the air sings in harmony with the orange and yellow trees. Here, After, I reach out a hand and rest it on Dad’s knee. He sets his on top, awkward at first, before curling his fingers around mine. We look at the empty space in front of us, and I know he’s thinking the same thing as me. We are going to turn this place into something that will last.

## Chapter 11

I can tell Mom tried to make everything look normal. The nativity scene is on the pie safe in the dining room, the wise men spaced at varying distances from baby Jesus. The tree, in the same spot as always by the window, though this year, without Dad to cut one down, it's artificial. My handmade ornaments from childhood are scattered between gold and red spheres. One ornament is obviously missing, the one I destroyed, but it wouldn't have been up anyway. That's what I tell myself. There's garland wrapped around the handrail of the staircase. Mrs. Claus on the window sill in the kitchen. Poinsettias as a centerpiece on the dining room table. It looks like Christmas here, the Christmases I remember.

I declined Mom's Thanksgiving offer and made cinnamon rolls with Patrick instead. We watched the parade in our pajamas. Dr. Garcia convinced me that Christmas would be a good idea, a step toward restoration and healing. In theory he might be right, but I'm revisiting the the first battle site of the past year's war. I'm not sure he understands that. At what point does recovery transition from active, difficult steps that scream against your instincts to a regular part of life? Does it ever?

It's just the two of us, but soon the guests will arrive. Aunt Debbie and Uncle Mac and their two kids, Lacy and Levi. Grandma. I help set the table, including sprigs of holly and the handwritten name cards. If there's something Mom can control, she will.

When we sit down to dinner, Grandma says a long prayer about miracles and blessings, and I know it's about me. Everyone knows. I open one eye and see Lacy staring at me. She looks down at her folded hands. We pass the dishes around—beef tenderloin, mashed potatoes, asparagus, rolls, the usual—and Uncle Mac says, “Sloan, your mom says you've been looking for jobs. Any luck?”

“I’m not looking for jobs,” I say.

My mother slices her knife through the bleeding meat on her plate. Aunt Debbie gives Uncle Mac a look that says, “I told you not to say anything stupid,” and he shrugs, because he thought it was an innocent question.

“Why not?” Lacy asks. Levi’s twelve, old enough to follow the intricacies of dysfunction. Lacy’s eight and still mostly oblivious.

“I don’t want one.”

“You’ll have to get one eventually,” Grandma says. “You can’t expect your mother to pay for everything forever.” From a miracle to a mooch in less than ten minutes.

“I’ll get one at some point.” I stab a rod of asparagus, dip it in mashed potatoes, and eat.

“I just think that the sooner you get back into a routine...” My mother lets her sentence trail off, but I can fill it in with any number of phrases.

The sooner you get back into a routine:

You’ll be back to normal

I’ll stop worrying

We can pretend this never happened

I can tell the women in book club how great you’re doing

I won’t have to speak to your father anymore.

“What did you tell everyone about me?” I ask.

“I told them that you weren’t well.” Mom continues to cut her meat into tiny, bite-sized pieces. Aunt Debbie motions to the kids to keep eating.

“And when they asked for details?” I want to know what she said to alleviate the shame of me being her daughter. How had she avoided the stares? The comments? The whispers?

“You’re fine now,” Mom says, as if this is an answer.

“Did she even tell you the truth?” I look to Aunt Debbie and Uncle Mac, to Levi and Lacy. “Do you know what really happened?”

Lacy and Levi shake their heads.

“They’re just kids. They don’t need to know.” Grandma cuts in.

“Of course I told the truth,” Mom says.

“The actual truth?”

Mom sets her silverware down on her plate and wipes her hands on the napkin in her lap.

“Sloan, this is inappropriate,” Grandma says.

“I didn’t lie, but I never told the whole truth. Is that what you want to hear?” Mom says. She swallows hard, like she hopes to pull the words back in.

“Of course. Can’t let anyone know that Jessica Casey doesn’t have a perfect life. Though, I bet people figured that out from the divorce.”

I don’t wait to see if the comment lands. I grab my coat and walk out the door, a repeat of last year, when my parents finally told me about the divorce.

I leave the house and walk the cracked asphalt path through the leafless oaks. A red bow adorns the neighborhood sign, and the gazebo at the front is strung with lights that glitter in the dark. We used to have picnics here when the weather got warm in late April, packing sandwiches and chips and Cokes in a blue cooler. I stand in the center, staring at the lattice work of the roof, covered in ivy. Headlights shine on me. A minivan stops in front of the gazebo, stop number six of the Brandermill Lights Tour: Best Neighborhood. In the car, a father drives, and a mother turns around, talking to the kids. Little hands and foreheads press against the back windows. The father’s leather-gloved hand lifts toward me in a half-hearted wave.

I stay there as another three cars pass, until the cold aches in my bones. The kind of cold my father used to build a fire for while my mother made hot chocolate on the stove, when we'd wear matching Christmas pajama pants and watch *White Christmas* and *The Santa Clause*. When we watched the midnight mass live from the Vatican, Dad singing along with the Latin in gibberish that always ended in the word "domino." When we played Monopoly until 2 a.m. Under the spattering of lights in the gazebo, I hold my wrist close to my face. One of those lines is the first one.

Last Christmas, I lay on the floor in front of the tree, always a White Spruce, its lowest branches inches above my face. As a kid, I did this often, comforted by the soft warmth of the lights and the intricate system of branches and leaves and needles working together, a living, breathing thing that became part of our family for its few remaining weeks of life. I never thought about the fact that when we cut it down, we killed it. The tree lost its splendor. Tinsel drooped unevenly. Too many reflective orbs made the light look artificial and cheap. The star on top looked rusty. From there, underneath, it looked the same.

Standing, I traced the outline of a ballerina's pink tutu, of a glitter-dipped glass sphere, of a penguin's Santa hat. My finger lingered on the ornament that said, in careful script, "The Caseys, established 1994." When my parents received it as a gift, I imagined how they must have smiled, leaned into each other for a kiss, my father's mustache scratching my mother's pale face, how they must have dreamt of forever together, hardly noticing the creasing of crow's feet and laugh lines or the stray grays that began to spread because they were aging together. There could never have been a thought, at that point, that they would end here, twenty-four years together shattered like a snow globe.



I yanked the circular ceramic ornament and carried it into the garage where I walked past my mother's car to the tool shelf. A half-finished end table lay in pieces, the four legs, the crossbars, and the top, stained a weathered gray. Tools scattered the bench, screwdrivers and hammers strewn in no particular order. The jet black Lexus looked out of place. Sunglasses hung from a monogrammed strap on the rearview mirror, and I was sure the center console was filled with lipstick and flossers and hand sanitizer.

I put the ornament on the workbench and stared at it. Twenty-four years. Three more than I'd been alive. One away from silver. And just a stupid ornament to show for it. I grabbed a hammer and slammed it into the ornament, fissures fracturing its surface. After another hit, shards flew upward and outward like a cannonball splash in a backyard pool. I picked up the biggest shard, the 99 still intact. I hit the pad of my index finger against its sharp point, harder each time.

Leaving the mess on the bench, I took the 99 piece upstairs with me. My parents would find the mess in the morning, I knew, but I didn't care. I did to the ornament what they'd done to their marriage. Even. The next day, the remnants were gone. Neither of my parents ever mentioned it. In the darkness of my bedroom, I moved my wrist back and forth, watching the 99 appear and disappear in the moonlight. It cast a shadow, and I flipped it between my fingers, the shapeless form dancing along the wall, the edges grazing my skin.

Evan's parents had gotten divorced when he was a kid; I knew he would understand if I called. But if he saw my name show up at 3 am, I knew what he would think. Sarah would probably answer, but I didn't want to bother her, either. I wanted to prove to them that I was doing better. My bedroom felt small and isolated, like my parents' news had separated me from the rest of the world, like they'd not only severed their own relationship but every one I had, too.

I traced the blue veins traveling up my wrist and into my palm. In the moonlight, they looked like two purple creeks trapped under a fragile sheen of ice. A soft pulse beat beneath my skin and echoed in my ears. I dragged the shard across my wrist.

When I get home, everyone is at the kitchen table playing dominoes. They all look up when they hear the door, twelve eyes staring down the front hallway. My mother rises from the table, and Lacy says, "But Aunt Jess, it's your turn."

"We'll skip her this time," Aunt Debbie says.

In the foyer, I take my keys from the hook and pick up my purse.

"I wanted to protect you." Mom whispers. "It's all I've ever wanted to do."

"I destroyed myself anyway."

Mom looks upward and uses the pad of her finger to blot tears away and save her mascara.

She says, "I might not say it enough or show it well, but don't you dare think that anything I ever did for you wasn't out of love."

I notice the bags under her eyes, the wrinkles at their corners, and I recognize the look. I've seen it in the mirror countless times. The helplessness of a situation. The inability to figure out how to proceed. Eyes round and wild in their sockets, looking for an answer or a place to land. Those eyes reveal the weight of the burden I've forced her to carry, and she always carries burdens alone.

"I'm not going to lie to people," I say.

This is the part where I leave, but I'm not sure what to say. My mother goes into the living room. I take a few steps to the doorway and see her crouching at the base of the tree. When she stands, she's holding two boxes: one a large rectangle, the other a small square.

"Merry Christmas," she says, handing them to me.

The big one is heavier than I expect, and I imagine she filled it with a bunch of smaller gifts. She always loved the surprise of a box inside of a box on Christmas morning. My selfishness embarrasses me. I didn't get her anything.

"Merry Christmas," I say back.

I stand on the front porch for a few minutes before I get into my car. I run my hand over the velvet ribbon on the wreath, count the fake candles in the windows. I walk to my car, skipping over the uneven stone three from the driveway. This place, as much as I want to leave it in Before, is still part of me. I am still part of it. It is still home.

## Chapter 12

I told Patrick I didn't want to make a big deal out of New Year's Eve. The expectations and the parties, the over-the-top sparkles and noise. I just want something quiet. I'm still uncomfortable with the idea of 2018. I've accepted the fact that I'm going to be here for it, and I'm—excited is too strong a word—hopeful? Expectant? I'm not dreading it. But I'm holding my expectations close. I don't want to dream too big. Patrick tells me to meet him at The Lounge at nine, dressed in something I don't mind getting dirty. I have no idea what we're doing. Something outside, maybe. I'm itching to get to whatever it is. I think I'm starting to like surprises.

When I leave Mrs. Shumaker's, she says, "You going to be out all night?"

"I'm not sure," I say.

"Be back by next year, at least," she says and laughs. Old people love a good New Year's joke.

There's a woman inside The Lounge putting plastic cloths over the tables. Her platinum blond hair is piled on top of her head in one of those perfect messy buns I can't master. When I walk in, she looks up and smiles but keeps working, putting an easel on each table.

"Warrior!" Patrick says. "You're not supposed to be here yet."

"I figured I'd just hang here until you were ready. What are we doing?"

"This is Lilly," he says.

She comes over and shakes my hand.

"It's great to meet you," she says. "When Patrick asked if I'd be willing to do a class on New Year's I thought it was a great idea!"

"She's a high school art teacher," Patrick says.

"Is this one of those sips and strokes painting and drinking things?" I ask.

“Basically,” Lilly says, “except it’ll be a bunch of people from our AA group, so it’s more like sober strokes.”

Sober strokes. I love it.

“You thought of this?” I ask Patrick when Lilly goes back to a cardboard box and keeps setting up.

“You said you wanted lowkey,” he says. “Plus, you can’t mess up if she’s telling you what to do.”

“It’s perfect,” I say. “I have to admit, the clothes threw me off. I thought we’d be out in the wilderness somewhere.”

“Wanted to be safe. I don’t know what kind of painter you are.”

“A messy one,” I say.

“The best ones are.”

By the time the others arrive, Lilly has finished setting out brushes and water cups and paper plates with dollops of paint and paper towels. Patrick has put coffee pots and mugs on the counter with cream and sugar. Everyone knows each other, asks personal questions about each other’s lives, offers encouragement and advice. There’s an openness in the room I didn’t expect and haven’t experienced since Tucker’s. I never thought I’d miss the environment of group therapy, but watching from the outside, I see how it’s nice to be known in your flaws, especially by people who understand.

When we finally sit, Lilly opens the class with the serenity prayer. Everyone joins in. I listen to the range of voices muttering the words, from the deep rasp of the old man across the room to the softer voice of a girl at the next table. Patrick squeezes my hand.

An already painted canvas is next to Lilly at the front of the group. It's a simple picture based off the Canal Walk, water on one side, bright, vibrant blue, next to brown and grey cobblestones and a line of pink trees and street lamps. The paper plate next to my easel has twice as many colors as the others. I listen to Lilly's voice as she starts the class, telling them first to coat the entire canvas in white, a basic backdrop so that the paint sticks better. After that, I tune her and the rest of the chatter out, using only her painting as a guide.

I've always been moved by the Impressionists: Monet, Renoir, Degas, Sisley. Even Van Gogh and Cezanne in the Post-Impressionism movement. Art isn't about exactitudes or photorealistic depictions of the world. It's about interpretation. About communicating a feeling through deliberate choices. Van Gogh's *Starry Night* doesn't show the sky over the Rhone with accuracy. If it did, it wouldn't be hanging in the Museum of Modern Art. Instead, it's a picture of Van Gogh's desperation, his attempts at happiness coiled into the yellow stars, his demons skating across the surface of the canvas in the blue of the sky. Or Monet's *Water Lillies*, lavender and muted greens blended together creating the illusion of looking at the water through some sort of distorted lens, but only barely. The essence is still there. That's what it's about. The essence.

Sometimes, I wonder how much thought went into those paintings. Did Van Gogh get out of bed, plagued by insomnia for the third night in a row, and wipe brushes across a canvas trying to soothe himself? Was Monet simply painting what he was capable of seeing—a world obscured by cataracts? How much meaning have we assigned to them without knowing the story, the real one, not the ones purported by art teachers. Maybe Monet painted that bridge in a moment like this one, a thrum of noise around him, focused only on the landscape and how it made him feel.

I make the water darker than Lilly's painting, adding purple and black to the turquoise. Instead of a daytime portrait, I paint the sky navy and streak it with pink and orange. The whole

thing is held together by jewel tones instead of an aggressive palate of brightness. I light the street lamps and paint their reflections in the water. For the trees, I take a more abstract route, dotting each one with a mixture of all the colors from the piece, varying the pressure of the brush to create texture for the leaves. When I painted as a kid, I always wanted to use neons and metallics, any color that might stand out. I let the color do the work that my art should have been doing. But these colors, though they're darker, seem to carry more weight. Individually, they don't pop, but all together, against the dark sky and shadowed sidewalk, they bring the whole piece to life. I was always scared that using darker colors would make my art boring, but it makes it rich, real. Nothing in life is actually neon.

When we finish, everyone helps with clean up. A few people come up to me and compliment my talent. I thank them with smiles that I hope look humble, but I'm damn proud of that painting. Mostly of how I was able to block out the noise, not just of the shop, but of my own critic. I just *painted*.

Everyone is out of the place by eleven-thirty. Patrick pulls out his cell phone and live streams the New Year's Eve coverage of Times Square. We sit at the counter and watch the performances and interviews of the people crazy enough to spend the entire day in that kind of crowd to enjoy sixty seconds at midnight.

"Thank you," I tell him.

"For what?" he asks.

"All of this. Tonight."

"It's not a big deal," he says.

"It is to me." What I want to say is this: You see me. The real me. The me I remember. The me I want to be.

At midnight, Patrick kisses me. When I pull away, he kisses the bridge of my nose and pulls me into him. I slide off my barstool and press my ear flat against his chest, listening to the steady rhythms of his breath and pulsing heartbeats. It's like coming home at the end of vacation, like hearing the train whistle from my bedroom every night, like mixing paint into the perfect shade of pink after adding too much red and too much white. His arms around me are tight, like I am steady and not fragile. I don't know how long we stay like this. All I know is that I don't want to be the first to let go.



## Chapter 13

In a dark corner of the bar, I stand far enough away from the stage to avoid a ringing in my ears but close enough that the haze from hookahs still swirls around me. Only a few tables occupy the expanse of space between the stage and the bar at the back. In addition to those are two dark leather couches where a group of friends sits piled on top of each other, clinking glasses and passing the hookah. All the bodies and smoke make it hot enough that I roll up my sleeves. I can still see my scars but that's because I know they're there. In this lighting, they could just as easily be shadows. Patrick walks over with two glasses, both filled with lemonade. When I take mine, we cheers.

People trickle in, filling the place as the band's guitarist strums a few chords for a sound check. I watch the faces that walk in. One looks like Evan, the same blond hair and approximate height. It can't actually be him, though. I don't recognize the girl he's with. He's at school. Four hours away. He would never come to an underground indie band show. I've got to be hallucinating.

"Let's leave," I whisper to Patrick.

"I know this isn't your scene," he says, "but I really think you'll like the band."

It's him. I press my forehead against Patrick's shoulder. Maybe he won't see me. He's walking over. Don't panic. I want to sink into the wall behind me and disappear.

"Sloan Casey," Evan says, holding out his hand. A formal handshake. Great.

"What are you doing here?" I hold my arms across my stomach.

"My girlfriend's brother is the drummer for the opening band."

Girlfriend. The word catches in my mind. He doesn't introduce me to the short blond girl he's with.

“I didn’t know you were out,” Evan says.

“Probably because you didn’t come see me or try to find out how I was.” I shouldn’t do this here, but his presence has unhinged any desire for me to be polite.

“Sarah kept me in the loop,” he says.

“You should’ve said something.”

“What was I supposed to say?”

“If you actually loved me, you would have thought of something,” I say.

“Here we go,” he says. He hands his girlfriend a ten dollar bill and asks her to get them drinks. I’m not sure she’s old enough, but that’s not my problem. I look to Patrick, waiting for him to orchestrate an escape for us, but he just stands there, watching the conversation unfold.

“What?” I say.

“You want to blame me for everything.”

“Only the part that’s your fault.”

“Which is what exactly?”

“You didn’t do anything,” I say. “You knew what was happening, and you just watched me drown.”

“I knew you were going through something,” he says. “I didn’t know you’d end up slitting your wrists.”

Of course Evan makes himself the victim. I nearly died, and all he can think about is how hard it is for him.

“At least you didn’t find me.”

“That’s dark.”

His presence here, After, in the new life I'm trying to create, makes me feel like the few pieces of myself that are melding back together will disintegrate. I want a drink. Just another difference between Before and After. Before: tequila shots and vodka cranberries. After: Lithium and lemonade.

"Fuck you, Evan," I say.

"It's easier for you to hate me. I get it. I'm glad you're doing okay. Really." Evan nods at Patrick as he walks away.

My whole body shakes. I take a long sip of my lemonade before throwing it to the ground. Faces turn at the sound. They're trying to piece together what happened. I side step the shattered glass and walk out of the bar.

Outside, I pace. I clench my fists, but there's nothing to punch. My chest tightens. My breath quickens. The moisture leaves my throat.

"I'm glad you didn't throw your drink in his face," Patrick says.

I concentrate on breathing in a normal rhythm.

"It would've been so cliché. It happens in every single movie. Throwing your drink on the floor was so much better."

I stop pacing. "Are you mocking me?"

"No."

"I cannot believe him," I say. Each word comes out clipped, its own breath.

I wait for Patrick to say something, to come to my defense. Above us, cars make a steady thump as they drive over the small gaps of the interstate overpass. Inside the bar, music begins, an exaggerated drumbeat and a squealing electric guitar. I pull my sleeves down over my hands and tuck them into my armpits to keep my fingers warm.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” I ask him.

“What do you want me to say?”

“Something supportive.”

“Do you want me to lie?”

“What the hell does that mean?” I just finished fighting with Evan. Why is Patrick fighting me, too?

“I don’t think you’ll like what I have to say.”

A group of men walks out of the bar. The smoke from their cigarettes mixes with the fog escaping my lungs with each exhale.

“What do you have to say?” I feel it coming before it starts. The argument. My curiosity is a magnet. It will destroy anything in its path to bind to something.

“It doesn’t matter,” Patrick says, “Let’s go somewhere else. Don’t let it ruin the night.”

“No,” I say. “If you have something to say, you should say it. I don’t need you to protect me.”

“That’s a trap if I ever saw one,” Patrick says. He starts walking.

“Fucking say it.”

I believed that without Evan, I’d be better. I would no longer be the girl screaming at her boyfriend on the street. She was the girl from Before. But here I am, After, reprising my role, forcing Patrick to play along.

“You ambushed him,” he says.

“He came up to me.”

“He was being polite.”

“He was being an asshole.”

“Sloan, he was just saying hi.”

“He brought up Tucker’s.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t have done that, but you went into full on attack mode.”

“I was attacked first!”

Patrick doesn’t know Evan. He doesn’t know that the Tucker’s comment was calculated, measured. It was supposed to be a dig. Otherwise, why mention it? Why come up to me at all?

“You can believe what you want to believe,” Patrick says. “But you aren’t a victim here. He’s right. You want to blame him because it’s easier than admitting that maybe some of your problems are a product of your blind spots.”

I take in a breath, the cold spreading through my lungs in sharp pricks. My “blind spots.” Fucking AA lingo. I flatten my lips into a straight line.

“My problems are a product of a chemical imbalance.”

“Partially,” Patrick says.

“You really think this is my fault?”

“I think you need to stop digging through the past for excuses and move forward.”

If I had another glass full of lemonade, I would throw it right in Patrick’s face. Instead, I walk off toward the yellow lights of Main Street Station. I cross under the overpass, the concrete lit up from the lights imbedded in the sidewalk beneath it. The wind picks up, and though it hasn’t started snowing yet, the stench of winter—road salt and stale air—surrounds me. The night is a collage of unfocused images. Salt on the sidewalk. A crescent moon so thin it’s like an accidental scratch in the sky. A cardboard sign asking for food. A plaque describing the historical significance of the Reconciliation Statue. Bricks and bricks and bricks. No trees in this

neighborhood. I don't watch the traffic lights or look before crossing the streets. The cars will stop or they won't. It doesn't matter much to me.

I climb what feels like a hundred stairs up to Jefferson Park. I wrap my hands around the rusted chains of the tire swing, my hands stiff from the cold. The chains groan when I settle my weight on the tire. My feet barely touch the ground, so my toes scratch circles in the mulch as I spin. I turn until the chains twist all the way to the top, lift my feet, and hold on as the swing untwists. The playground blurs. I never should have trusted Patrick.

People have probably settled in for the night, hoping that snow and ice will result in closures in their favor. Years ago, I'd have been on the couch between my mother and father, a slice of frozen pizza in hand, watching some old classic movie starring Shirley Temple or Jimmy Stewart. Not anymore.

The swing slows and the slide and monkey bars tilt back and forth like a seesaw. When that stops, the entire park sways. But I know that the trees and playground equipment are rooted. I'm the unsteady one.

I think about all the times I left in the middle of fights with Evan, hoping he'd follow me, sitting outside his apartment in my car for twenty minutes before realizing he wasn't coming. Waiting for him to think of looking for me at the tennis courts, where we would lean against the fence and talk in the middle of the night because neither of us wanted to go home. I can't do that again.

The lights at The Lounge are dim and the door is locked. I pull on the door handle a few times, bells clanging against the glass at the top of the door. If Patrick is in there, he'll hear the noise. I slap my palms against the glass and let out a frustrated yell. I feel dizzy with panic. I press my forehead against the door. I'm shaking, from the cold or maybe because I'm about to

disappear. A swell of heat burns through my veins. The me from Before is trying to pull away, to shut down all passageways for emotions. The me from After, the me living in this moment, tries to stay. I make a list.

*My name is Sloan Casey.*

*I'm 21 years old.*

*I live in Richmond, Virginia.*

*I have brown eyes.*

*My nail polish is chipping.*

These things don't matter. The street lights are dimming behind me. The shadows inside The Lounge grow. Patrick has given up, and I didn't see it coming. I should have known it would end this way. The only difference between Before and After is that self-medication with alcohol and cutting has been replaced with real medication. I'm the same inside. Exactly the same.

I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out a tube of lipstick. In Lady Danger, I write out a list of things I want to believe.

*I am loved.*

*I am not a burden.*

*I am enough.*

I need these to be true.

## Chapter 14

We have the posts for the roof stabilized and all the materials for the bench seating. Dad and I work in easy tandem. We're mostly quiet, listening to the country music radio station on the boom box that used to sit in the garage. In my design studio, I never touched anything real. Everything was on paper. Conceptual. We've barely started, but already, there's something magic in seeing my design come alive. It clarifies things, allows me to make minor adjustments as I go. It's not set in stone until it's done.

The Monday after my fight with Patrick, I text my father to tell him I'm not coming in. His response: *If you're not sick, you need to be here.* I hate him a little bit for this, for somehow reading me well enough to know that I'm avoiding something. Maybe he thinks getting me out of the house is a good move, a way of coaxing me out of a relapse.

The writing on the window is still there. Some of it has flaked off from the cold, but my red block lettering covers the door pane. *I am loved. I am not a burden. I am enough.* Maybe that's how Dad knew to make me come in. I open the door as softly as I can, hoping the bell won't chime. It still does. Patrick's behind the counter, and I wish he had another job, something else to do with his life, somewhere else to be. He looks up then goes back to lining cookies on a tray. It happens so fast I hardly see his eyes. I'm not even sure if he knows it's me. But he has to. Otherwise, he'd be welcoming the customer into the shop, guessing their drink order, asking about their day, their hopes, their dreams, making them feel special, laying the foundation that The Lounge is some sort of safe place to be yourself.

I stand there on the small black mat at the doorway, not sure what to do. I pull my cheek between my teeth and bite down. It's harder than you think to draw blood that way.

"You coming in or you just gonna hover?" Patrick asks without looking up.



He's actually pretending like nothing happened. Like he didn't do anything. Now if I walk forward, it will look like I'm accepting an invitation rather than walking in of my own volition. I never should've paused. I take my gloves off and tuck them into my bag. The bell on the door rings, forcing me to move further into the shop so whoever is behind me can walk in. Patrick greets the two men immediately.

I've wondered what this moment would be like, seeing Patrick after Saturday. I imagined him apologizing for what he said, a glass of lemonade as an olive branch. I pictured myself taking the blame, walking behind the counter and burrowing myself into him in tears, hoping he'd forgive my outburst. I had not considered this. A standoff.

I walk past the counter and up to the rooftop. Up there, Dad and Lee, Casey Contracting's resident electrician, stand over a plastic folding table where the blueprint, schedule, and supply lists are taped.

"You made it," my father says.

"Yep." I grab a pair of gloves from the makeshift supply station by the door.

"Everything alright?" His voice tiptoes across this question.

"I'm here, okay?"

Before, I might've gotten a look of disdain or an admonition for speaking to him that way. After, he looks away. I'm not sure if it's because he thinks I'm too fragile or if our relationship is. I wish we had some sort of demolition to do. I need to smash the shit out of something.

"Lee's going to start on electric today," Dad says. "We need to double check where you want outlets. Otherwise, you can work on the benches. It'll be a little while before we get the supplies for the roof and windows."

The three of us look over the plans and mark the outlet placement with painters tape. Lee goes downstairs to examine the electric wiring from inside. We're hoping we won't have to tear too much of the roof up to get things wired.

"There's lumber in the back of my truck," Dad says. "We can bring it up and you can get to work. I've gotta head back over to the housing development today. You won't need me around here until we're ready to mount the roof and install the glass."

"So it's just me?"

"Yeah. Just how you like it."

I don't bother arguing, because that's the me he knows. It might be the me I still am. I don't know anymore. What I do know is that the thought of spending the day up here by myself while Patrick is downstairs, knowing he won't come up to see me, makes me want to die. I'm not sure if I mean that literally or not.

Downstairs, Lee talks to Patrick, gesturing to ceiling tiles and making motions with his hands. Patrick leans one elbow on the counter and nods along with him. He doesn't even look at me.

"Patrick, you mind grabbing a few boards with us?" Dad asks.

Patrick moves to help. He and my father get along well, which was nice until now.

"Don't worry about it," I say.

Patrick hovers near the edge of the counter, not quite stepping around it. "It's no problem," he says.

"You're not dressed for this kind of work," I snap. "Plus, you can't leave the counter unattended."

My words make everyone stop. Lee, with a ceiling tile half popped up. Dad, one hand on the door, cracked enough to let a startling cold breeze in. Patrick, at the corner of the counter, not behind or in front of it. All of them somewhere in between.

“Let’s go,” I say to Dad.

After the first haul, Dad asks, “Do you want to tell me what that was about?”

“Nope.”

“You know you can talk to me if you want.”

“I know,” I say. It’s not that I don’t want to tell him. It would be nice to get it out. But I’m afraid he might side with Patrick. That he might tell me I’m wrong. I can’t hear it again. He leaves when we finish with the wood, and I spend the day measuring it and cutting it, the circular saw slicing through each board, tiny explosions of sawdust falling to the ground.

The days pass like this for two weeks. My message stays written on the door for a few days. Customers comment on the hope in the words, how happy it makes them to be reminded, whether they’re coming in for coffee or just walking by. Patrick agrees with them. He never lets on that it wasn’t a business move or some show of solidarity for those who suffer from mental illness. When someone mentions it, his eyes flick to me for just a second. I get tired of my desperation being on display, even if no one knows, so one day, I go behind the counter and find a rag. I run it under the hot water in the sink, take it outside and wipe the message away. The lipstick smears like streaks of blood across the surface. I repeat the motion over and over, reciting my list in my head.

*My name is Sloan Casey.*

*I’m 21 years old.*

*I have brown eyes.*

*I'm a designer.*

Patrick doesn't ask why I do it. I kind of hoped he would.

In Dr. Garcia's office, I rub my finger against the purple suede of the chair, watching it change from light to dark and light again. "Silence doesn't bother me," he says. Even though I'm sure it's some kind of psychiatric trick, it does make me want to talk, so I tell him what happened at the bar, about seeing Evan, about losing Patrick. How I'm not sure if Patrick is my boyfriend anymore.

"Do you think that maybe you're using this as an excuse to push Patrick away?" he asks.

I don't think I'd still be here if I had any other doctor besides Dr. Garcia. He doesn't shit around; he's always direct. Honesty for honesty, that's our deal. I keep it. Most of the time.

"That's stupid."

Dr. Garcia doesn't say anything right away. He crosses his legs and clasps his hand around a knee.

"Is it?"

Yes, of course it is. I want to be with Patrick. I don't want another failed relationship. At least not one that ends in a destructive fire. I'm not asking for a lot. I'm standing up for myself. Something I never did Before. With Evan, I'd have already begged to be let back in. I'd have taken all the blame and apologized, letting him slip through the argument without fault. I don't want to be that girl After.

"He should come to me," I tell Dr. Garcia.

"Why?"

“Because I’m tired of apologizing when things aren’t my fault.”

Dr. Garcia uncrosses his legs, nods, rests his folded hands in his lap.

“What?” I ask. I can tell he has something to say, something I’m not going to like. He always pauses a few seconds before delivering a harsh truth.

“Have you considered the possibility that this is your fault?”

“It’s not my fault.”

“That’s not what I’m asking,” he says.

Dr. Garcia’s questions filter through my mind for the next few weeks as I bolt the wooden benches to the brick wall surrounding the rooftop. I wonder if Sarah would have been on my side. I pretend, for a minute, that Dr. Garcia is right. If I’m pushing Patrick away, why? If what happened at the bar is my fault, how? Maybe what happened with Patrick reminded me of Evan. Maybe I pushed a little too hard when Evan showed up. Maybe.

With things at the housing development picking up, it’s mostly just me working here. Dad stops by every few days to check in and deliver more supplies when I text him I’m getting low. Most people would find the work tedious, and with just me, it does move slow. But there’s something comforting about the repetition of the work, hitting each nail three or four times, cutting pieces of wood into twelve inch strips, measuring and remeasuring.

I create ledges on the backside of the benches for the planter boxes. I’ve made sure the boxes will fit snug on the sides and be flush with the height of the benches. This way, the liriopoe will create an additional border around the roof, a bit taller than the brick wall. When I go to put the first box in, it doesn’t fit. I grab a rubber mallet and tap each corner a few times. It won’t

budge. I wrestle the box out and remeasure it and the open space. It's off by a quarter inch. I don't know how I fucked it up.

I leave the boxes and tools spread across the roof and head downstairs. When I get there, the shop is almost completely full. Midterms at the university. Behind the counter, Patrick and JT practice trick shots—throwing sugar packets over their shoulders into coffee mugs. The floor is littered with yellow and pink packets. Patrick throws one and turns around just in time to see it hit me in the forehead. His eyes turn into perfect circles as he waits for my reaction.

I pick up a handful of packets off the ground and throw them back at him. He flinches as they pepper his chest. JT walks to the other side of the counter.

"I didn't mean to hit you," he says. His beard is perfectly trimmed, the length I love. I like to run my fingers against while he drives or while we wait to cross the street.

"Same," I say.

"Come on, Sloan." He leans on the counter.

"Come on what?"

"It was an accident," he says.

"Maybe you should get to work instead of fucking around."

"Is this about a couple weeks ago?"

"Nope."

"Say what you need to say," he says. He stands and pushes his sleeves up to his elbows.

I have a lot to say, but standing here, I don't know where to start. His stupid 12-step-making-amends bullshit. The threads I've been holding together snap.

"This is exactly why I didn't want to go on that first date with you. I knew you would turn out to be this way."

“What way?”

“An asshole. You pretended to be so supportive and acted like you understood what I’ve been through, but all along, you were just blaming me for everything behind my back.”

“I’m not blaming you. All I’m saying is that it’s not black and white, the whole world vs. you. It’s more complicated than that.”

I’m glad the counter separates us. Patrick picks up two sugar packets and rubs them together between his fingers. I chew on my thumbnail.

He says, “If you want to move forward—“

“I don’t need an AA lecture,” I say.

Patrick ignores me and continues, “You have to take some responsibility for the things that happen.”

“I’m always going to have this thing hanging over my head.”

“So am I.” He puts his hand out in front of him, palm up, red line slashed through it.

“It’s not the same.”

He drops the sugar packets onto the counter. “I’m not going to stick around and watch you stand in place. I don’t want to be with someone who won’t deal with her shit.”

“You think you’re so much better than me because you’ve got two blue AA chips in your wallet. But you’re not. You’re just another deadbeat drug addict.”

It’s a cheap shot. Not even true, at least not anymore. But it’s the only thing I can think of to hurt him. When I walk out this time, I know he’s not going to come after me. I tell myself that it’s my choice because, technically, it is. When I get home, I dig through my drawers until I find a balled up pair of Christmas socks I had almost forgotten about. I shake them, and they rattle. Sixty white ovals. Right where I left them.

## Chapter 15

In the pocket of my jacket is the bottle of Xanax I've been carrying around for the entire week. Since I broke up with Patrick. Since he broke up with me. Since we broke up. I brought a vanilla latte with me to the river. I don't care about the caffeine anymore because today is the day I'm going to do it. I'll kill myself and do it right. Crunch the pills between my teeth two at a time and then wade into the river. Pass out. Get hypothermia. If I'm lucky, my foot will slip into a water moccasin nest. The current will carry my body downstream until it washes up on a bank.

I dodge calls from my father. I skip an appointment with Dr. Garcia. They both leave voicemails talking about commitments and my wellbeing. I walk across the suspended footbridge to Belle Isle. Other than a few bikers on the trail that leads through the trees next to the river, it's abandoned. The crumbling stone structures scattered along the path seem appropriate this time of year. In summer, they contrast with the families picnicking on the rocks and the college students with their coolers of beer.

For days, the sky has been a sheet of gray. No rain, no sun. Just solid gray stretched from one end of the horizon to the other. Today's no different. The gray fits the emptiness of the isle. Halfway across the bridge, I stop, feeling it sway beneath the interstate. It's an incredible feat of engineering, a thin bridge hanging from an overpass anchored in the river. When cars pass overhead, the whole thing shakes, and it feels like the movement will dislodge the thin metal rods holding it in place. As a kid, it terrified me. I'd run across as fast as I could, dodging bicyclists and couples holding hands. Each time, before I took off, my father made me stand there for a few seconds to prove that even though it didn't feel like it, it was solid. It's a nice reminder as I look down at the white pockets of rapids forming over the rocks. I've always felt close to the water. It's powerful. Tsunamis. Hurricanes. Even the rapids. They destroy things. It



just proves there's something bigger than me out there. All of nature is really just a delicate balance of curiosity and knowing your place.

Every time I open the bottle, all I can do is stare at the pills and count. I tried, sort of, to do better After. To make the most of my second chance at life or whatever. I followed Dr. Garcia's instructions. I planted my little Babylonian garden and tended to my herbs and designed the rooftop and talking to my parents. I let someone in.

But I'm so fucking tired. The kind of tired that keeps you up as the night sky lightens through the window blinds making shadows of tree branches appear on the wall. Too tired to read. Too awake to sleep. Eyes too dry for TV. That keeps you in your pajamas and fur slippers for days at a time. That makes it impossible to lift your arms long enough to wash your hair. The kind of tired that settles in your muscles and makes them ache. So it all ends today. For real this time.

No Sarah skipping class and coming home early.

No paramedics.

No stitches.

No mistakes.

The footbridge ends at an open expanse of land that consists of dirt hills. Beyond the small hills sits a forest. It's colder under the canopy of branches. A light breeze rustles through them. One snaps in the distance. Whether it falls or not, I'm not sure. I walk down a wide dirt path between the trees.

A small animal creeps out from behind one of the stone ruins. It walks without purpose, taking its time as it moves toward the trees that flank the river. I stop moving. I remember vague bits of information about rabid animals attacking people. Any movement I make might be

misconstrued as an attack. I wait for it to cross. Halfway across the path, it freezes, stops mid-step, three pink talon-like feet on the ground, one tucked up to its chest. Its thick, fleshy tail lies flat behind it. A possum. Its tongue hangs out of the side of its mouth. I pause, afraid to get too close. My heartbeat slows from the initial scare as the possum stays still. I grab the biggest stick I can find and move closer to the little gray animal. Its face is a clean white with a nose so pink it looks stained with lipstick. There are long, thin whiskers on its cheeks. I wait for it to bare its teeth, to hiss at me, to pounce, to attack. But it stays there, no movement, not even the rise and fall of its lungs.

I wonder for a minute if it's dead. Maybe I scared it, gave it a heart attack. I bend down to inspect it, careful not to touch. I move the stick back and forth in front of it, but its eyes don't follow. I take the stick and poke it lightly. The possum falls to its side, one leg still curled up. Its tail thumps against the ground once. At this angle, I see its belly move with breath. A natural, necessary action it can't control. Otherwise, completely still.

I climb the disintegrating stone structure and sit at the top. I decide to sit there until the possum leaves. My body twitches. I'm not sure if it's from the caffeine or the cold. I take another sip of my drink. The coffee is burnt, but the silky vanilla tempers it just enough to make it bearable. I miss the fresh beans at The Lounge. The wind grazes my face, ruffles the strands of hair that have fallen from my ponytail, scatters leaves around the possum's body. Overhead, dark gray clouds appear like lumps of charcoal.

I watch it lie there, halfway between life and death, wondering if it's ever going to get up, wondering what it's thinking while it waits there, wondering what it's waiting for. Maybe the possum didn't have a choice. Its mind registered a threat and its body reacted. I'm not sure how

long I wait before the possum rights itself and darts off into the trees, leaving no impact, no proof that it was ever there at all.

Across the river is Hollywood Cemetery where the monumental gravestones spike toward the sky, surrounded by bare branches. Buried there are two presidents, James Monroe and John Tyler. One died a famous president, the other, an obscure trivia fact. With them, Confederate soldiers who died on the wrong side of history, without a chance for redemption. I walk to the edge of the river, the toes of my boots hanging off the rock. A water moccasin slithers past but leaves me unbothered. I pop open my pill bottle and dump its contents into the river, watching the pills disappear under the brown water, riding down the current until they dissolve.

## Chapter 16

When I leave Belle Isle, I have every intention of going to The Lounge. Instead, I circle the surrounding blocks. I can't just walk in. I have to prepare. When I hit 18th, I see an intricate, hand drawn poster in a dark window that reads "My body is a temple with stained glass windows."

It intrigues me, so I walk in. I always pictured tattoo parlors with grunge and anger. This one feels softer, more intimate. It smells like disinfectant and incense. To my right, a man reclines on what looks like a dentist's chair getting a tattoo across his neck. Each time the whirring of the tattoo gun starts, I flinch. The man seems not to notice what's happening to his body. He must be used to it by now, since colorful designs cover his arms and legs. The only one I can make out from my current angle is a giant skull with hollow eyes, a bible verse beneath it. What verse portrays such a dark image?

"Tattoo or piercing?" A girl appears from behind a curtain by the glass cases that serve as a countertop. She has sleeves, just like Neck Tattoo. Vibrant explosions paint her arms.

"Which one hurts more?" I ask.

"Depends," she says, "A tattoo if it's right on the bone. Otherwise, a piercing."

I walk to the glass case and look at the rows of earrings and barbells, all labeled by body part and metal type. Belly button, ear, genital, nose. Silver, titanium, gold, platinum. Some look cheap, with colored plastic spheres on either end. Others have small rhinestones, the daintiest things in the shop.

"What's your favorite tattoo?" I ask.

"Easy," Neck Tattoo says from across the room while the artist dips the needle back into the ink. "Every one."

I study his body, which seems less like a canvas for a collection of small tattoos and more like one large mural in which the artist never figured out the main purpose.

“Yeah,” the girl says. “Each tattoo represents something for me. Even the ones I got when I was an idiot are important to me.”

“Exactly,” Neck Tattoo says as the artist wipes at the tattoo with a white cloth. “No tattoo on my body is mindless. They all have a purpose.”

“What are you getting today?” I ask.

“Come look.”

A black barbed wire chain twists around his neck, raised from the irritation of the needle on his skin. From each barb, the artist fills in small tear drop shapes with a brilliant red. They’re a bit gratuitous, but then again, the guy is completely covered in tattoos. Can anything be considered too much?

“What’s it mean?” I ask.

“I spent five years in prison for aggravated assault. That’s what the five barbs are for. I found the Lord there, so it also represents the crown of thorns. Folks talk all the time about Jesus dying for their sins, but they don’t want to think about the gruesomeness of it. That’s what the blood’s for.”

I want to ask about the assault. Something about him makes it seem impossible that he could hurt someone. His soft eyes wrinkle in the corners, a lustrous green shining under the fluorescent lights of the shop.

Minutes before, I only saw a mass mural blurring together. Now, I see the distinct stories popping off his skin, even if I don’t know them. A collection of Roman numerals across his chest counts out the death of his mother. A compass on his left thigh, a reminder of his life’s purpose.

Maybe in memory of his grandfather, a navy sailor. For the girl, a skeleton key traces the bones on the outside of her hand onto her pinky finger, the exact replica of the one that opened her great great grandmother's hope chest. A yellow sunflower grows out of her shoulder blade and bends in admiration of her neck, the state flower of Kansas, where she lived until she was ten, the place that will always be home. Each picture marks a triumph or failure, a memory, a reminder of who they used to be, who they are, who they want to be.

“How do you make a decision like that?” I ask, reaching an arm into my jacket, running a hand over the scars on my arm, wondering what kind of image can portray what I've lived through.

“Most of my tattoos come to me in dreams,” the girl says. She slips off a thick, double-banded sandal and the sock she wears with it to reveal an elaborate wave, faded cobalt blue, starting on her foot and building upwards, an entire surge curving above the knob of her ankle. On the crest of the wave, the word “*breathe*” curls along the edge, written in a delicate looping script.

“I was in an abusive relationship a while back. I had this dream that I was drowning. Halfway through the dream I realized the ocean was still, but I was holding my breath. I just needed to breathe, and I would make it out. I got the tattoo the next day, and a week later, I moved back to my momma's house.”

The tattoo is bigger than I would choose, but there's a distinct beauty in the message it holds for the girl. I admire her ability to trust her intuition, her surety of herself. I don't know if I possess that.

“This one's from a dream, too,” Neck Tattoo says, pointing at the skull I noticed earlier. “Had a dream I was being chased by skeletons one night. I woke up just before they caught up to

me. My sheets were drenched in sweat. The next morning, the guys doing ministry in our prison invited me to Bible study. They read to us from Ezekiel, the scene where the dry bones come to life. I knew the skeletons weren't trying to hurt me in that dream; they were trying to bring me to God."

These people wear their scars as art, with pride. Stained glass windows fused into mosaics, distorted light shining through.

Their honesty makes me want to be vulnerable with them. I take my jacket off and the sweater under that. In a tank top, I hold out my arms to them. "Any ideas on how to cover these?" I brace myself for their reactions, for mouths to open a bit in surprise, for eyes to widen with pity.

Instead, the artist, who worked silently until now, asks, "We can do a full sleeve and cover them. Or you can look through our designs over there at pictures of scar cover ups in one of the binders."

My instinct whispers, "hide them." But I look at Neck Tattoo, getting a proud reminder of his prison time emblazoned across his jugular, and the girl, her destructive relationship permanently etched on her, physically and mentally. I think about that possum, freezing out of fear without assessing the situation.

"Let me see the pictures," I say.

The girl smiles at me and goes behind the glass counter to grab a binder. Inside are pages of art, ideas for tattoos, tattoos drawn for others, and various fonts sketched out within plastic page protectors. While the artist finishes filling in the red blood drops, the girl and I flip through the pages, looking for something that will cover my entire forearm. I consider getting a small tattoo, just to try it out, an outline of a possum, maybe just a footprint. But it doesn't feel right.

“One arm or both?” the girl asks.

“One,” I say. I like the idea of leaving one canvas blank. My scars have started to fade, less stark pink and more flesh-colored. They don’t even look that ugly to me now.

As the girl flips, I see a double page spread filled with arrows shooting in opposite directions, some plain with a point on one end and a nock on the other. Others are more elaborate, feathers hanging from the ends, colored tips, one even double-sided. I ask for a piece of paper and a pencil. An idea is starting to form, but I need to see it.

It’s a simple design: a plain arrow, the tip a solid black triangle, the end three lines on either side of the center, forming the nock. Through the middle, I want a word, something understated but powerful. The girl, who tells me her name is Liz, and the artist, Greg, offer their suggestions. I cover the paper in arrows and words: strength, courage, forward, resilience. Nothing seems right. They all capture part of my experience, but not all of it. The closest I get is the phrase “so it goes,” from *Slaughterhouse Five*. Even that doesn’t quite fit.

“You’ll know it when you see it,” Greg says. “That’s how tattoos work.”

“You don’t have to get it today,” Liz adds.

If I don’t get the tattoo today, I’m not sure I’ll come back. The entire day feels like a culmination of non-replicable happenstance. I’ll talk myself out of it if I don’t make a decision. I want to be more spontaneous. I want something that will always point to today, to the day I chose to be someone different. After.

And then it comes to me. I draw the arrow again, writing the word “warrior” through it. I concentrate on each individual letter as I write it out. The script is crisp and sleek, fragile, yet within the arrow, it looks powerful, as if the two things together are undefeatable.



## Chapter 17

On the walk home from the tattoo parlor, I call my father to explain my week long absence. My arm is sore as it rubs against my jacket. Since I've been gone, he says, they've finished the wiring, mounted the roof, and installed the windows. These are the parts I wouldn't have been able to help with, but he still gives me a short lecture about keeping commitments. It's the same one he gave me halfway through the one season of soccer I played. He forced me to finish the season, even though I was terrible and hated it. Caseys finish what they start, he always said. I have to finish the benches. Those and the community tables. And the chairs, the plants, the decorations.

He makes a trip out to Mrs. Shumaker's a few days later to bring me scrap wood and nails. I've still got the tool box he got me for my eighteenth birthday. I spend the evening in the backyard pushing nails into the wood with a hammer to form four shallow three by two foot planting boxes. It doesn't need to be perfect. Just usable. One of the nails splits the wood. Another nail goes in at an angle. I keep hammering. The next day, I call my mother and tell her to meet me at the 17th Street Market on Saturday morning. Besides a few text messages, I haven't talked to her since Christmas. I tell her to wear old jeans and a t-shirt.

When I get to the market, Mom's waiting by the entrance. She half listened to me, wearing jeans and her version of a t-shirt, a solid v-neck with a pocket. Close enough.

"I haven't been here in years," she says. "Probably not since..."

She trails off, so I finish for her. "Since you missed my art show in eighth grade."

Anyone looking at her wouldn't notice a difference in her face, but I see how her smile deepens against the pain of the statement, how she looks down at her nails, adjusts the ring on her right hand. I could have had her meet me at Mrs. Shumaker's house, but this place feels

important. I remember the drive out here, how low the river was as we crossed the bridge, counting the cars on the train stopped on the tracks across the way, how bright the sun was as it rose in the pale sky. And worse, how I never said thank you. I walked around with my arms crossed, and even though I was mesmerized by the colors and the products, I stomped around and pretended not to care.

We enter the market, and Mom wants to stop at every single booth. She buys homemade lavender soap and soy candles, a vanilla sugar scrub, and three berry jam. Finally, we approach a stall I'm interested in. A man sells hyacinths and seeds for other flowers.

"I'll take three of these," I say, pointing at the clusters of purple and white buds on green stems. "And some bulbs for lilies and delphinium seeds."

I reach for my pocket, but my mother puts her hand on mine. "Let me."

Our last stop is the same booth where I bought the seeds for my herbs months ago. The woman looks the same, the crooked teeth, the translucent blue eyes. Her seed packets are still in their shoeboxes, still marked in her careful handwriting.

"What plants well this time of year?" I ask her.

"Anything will plant," she says, "but not everything will grow."

We decide on lettuce, broccoli, and tomatoes.

"The broccoli might be a little tough," she warns, taking cash from my mother's hand, "but don't give up on it."

We load everything in the back of Mom's car and drive to Mrs. Shumaker's house. They greet each other at the door. Mrs. Shumaker looks between us, a gentle smile on her face, as if she knows something we don't, like she always did.

“You sure you don’t mind getting those clothes dirty?” I ask Mom, even though I’m not sure she owns anything she’s completely comfortable ruining.

“The clothes will be fine. And I have a nail appointment later this week.”

Of course. I roll up my sleeves to pour the soil into the first planter box. Mom gasps. For a second, anger flares, but then I remember the tattoo. And how much Mom hates them. I wait for her to say something. She stares at my arm, her hands over her mouth, a mother right out of a sitcom. I fill each box with soil, waiting for her response.

“It’s huge,” she finally says, taking her hands down.

“Did you know my name means Warrior?” I ask her.

“I didn’t,” she says, “Sloan was my great grandmother’s maiden name.”

“So technically, we come from a line of warriors?”

“I guess so.”

She pushes clumps of soil from the edges of the boxes into them.

“I was tired of hiding them,” I tell her, transferring the hyacinths into the largest box, covering the roots with soil. Then, I bury some of the delphinium seeds. I’m not sure if they’ll grow well together or not, but we’ll see.

“I think it’s great,” she says, handing me tools as I work.

“No you don’t,” I say. “You hate it.”

Mom unfolds the packet of lettuce seeds. She surprises me and grabs a handful of dirt from the planter in front of her to create a hole for the seeds.

“You want them to be narrower,” I tell her, “but also deeper. Like this.” I stick my pointer finger into the dirt and swirl it around a bit.

She mimics me. We each take a few seeds and put them into the holes we’ve created.

“I don’t *hate* it,” she says. She drags out the word hate.

“You don’t like it,” I say, smiling at her.

“That’s true.”

We both start laughing. Mom puts a hand on her side, the place where you can feel the laugh pulling at your muscles. In the sunlight, her hair shines, especially the few grays sprouting from her roots. We reach down to the planter box at the same time, our hands bumping against each other before digging our fingers back into the gritty dirt.

Anticipating talking to Patrick, I don’t sleep. At five a.m., I drive to the store and buy lemons and raspberry syrup. I squeeze the lemons by hand into a cup. After the first one, I realize this is a mistake, but I’ve already committed. I keep going, ignoring the protests of my cramping hands and wrists. When I have half a glass, I add water and sugar. I’m winging it here. I pour in a bit of raspberry flavoring. I take a sip. It’s awful. Too tart and watered down. The raspberry syrup adds a sugary aftertaste. It’s all I’ve got.

I stand outside The Lounge and wait for Patrick to show up. I still don’t know what I’m going to say. When I told Dr. Garcia I was going to try to fix things, he told me to prepare for the worst and hope for the best. “A useful cliché,” he told me. Then, he had me think through the best and worst case scenarios. The best: Patrick forgives me and we get back together and everything is good again and I finish the rooftop and we spend evenings up there eating stale pastries waiting for it to get dark enough to turn on the lights. The worst: it’s too late and he doesn’t want to be with me and he already has a new girlfriend and I have to see them being cute while I finish the rooftop project and then I never go back to The Lounge again.

“Can you survive the worst?” Dr. Garcia asked me. I think that for some people, it would be a metaphorical question. But I knew he meant it literally.

“I think so,” I told him. It might have been the first time Dr. Garcia gave a genuine smile at one of my responses rather than a smile masking his frustration.

When Patrick walks up, I want to bypass words and hug him. What words can fix what’s already been broken? I think about that day in the bookstore, the first time he called me Warrior, about Russia, about Patrick’s unwavering belief in redemption. His eyes look small with tiredness, and I think that if things were different, maybe I would have woken up next to him, that I would watch those sleepy eyes in the mirror while we brushed our teeth. He points at the door, which I’m standing in front of. I move aside so he can unlock it.

When we get inside, I say, “I saw a possum.”

“What?”

“The other day down at Belle Isle, I saw a possum.” When Patrick doesn’t say anything, I continue, “I was walking and the thing just ran out into the middle of the path out of nowhere. Then it just froze. I mean, it didn’t move at all. I thought it was dead. It was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t stop staring at it.” The story tumbles out of me with no direction. It sounds stupid when I say it out loud. I’m glad it’s mostly dark in here.

Patrick stands still in front of me, his hands in the pockets of his black jeans. He says, “The possum was playing dead.”

His response is exasperated and uninterested. I can’t tell if he doesn’t get it or if he doesn’t care. I push forward.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “For calling you a drug addict, for shutting down when you tried to help me, for all of it. I’m sorry.”

Saying it isn't as hard as I thought it would be.

"What's in the cup?" he asks me.

I'd forgotten I was holding it. "Raspberry lemonade," I say, handing it to him.

He takes a sip and spits it back out. "It's terrible."

"I know."

Patrick goes behind the counter and flips the light switch. He starts moving around. I think he's going to start the coffee pots, start refilling the pastries. Instead, he pulls out the juicer and cuts a few lemons in half. The juicer's buzz fills the shop, and I feel the vibrations in my chest.

"Are we ok?" I ask him.

Patrick finishes the drink with a bit of raspberry syrup and pushes it across the counter.

## Chapter 18

The winding driveway leading to the barn feels a lot like the inside of my stomach, the twisting and turning seemingly endless. You would think that after apologizing to Patrick, this would be easier. This one might be harder. We park the car in a patch of gravel in front of the farmhouse. The wedding doesn't start for another hour, but I need to see Sarah before the ceremony. I was surprised to get the invitation. My mother pointed out that I must have been an afterthought, since I didn't get a save the date. She's probably right. I didn't think I would go, but Patrick promised he'd come with me. It wouldn't feel right to see the pictures, knowing I could have been there.

Two girls from Kappa—Abbie and Lauren, members of my pledge class—appear from behind the farmhouse in identical coral dresses. If it was a few months ago, I would've made a smartass comment to Patrick, who would have talked me down until I was ready to find Sarah. Instead, I take a deep breath and open the car door. I'm tired of running.

“Hey,” I say to the bridesmaids.

Their eyes widen like they've seen a ghost.

“The wedding starts at 5,” Abbie says. “You can wait down by the barn.”

“I'm actually looking for Sarah,” I say.

The girls look at each other. I don't wait for answer; I walk past them and up the small hill beside the farmhouse.

“You can't go back there,” Lauren says. I keep walking.

Through the window, I see Sarah sitting in a leather armchair, her dress gathered into her lap, a fan ruffling the lace fabric. Her head leans against the back of the chair, her eyes closed, her fingers toying with the seam of her dress. Her mother and almost mother-in-law stand nearby

with Hampton and Sarah's sisters, also donned in coral, holding champagne flutes. If things were different, I might be in there. When I knock on the door, Sarah jumps, her dress falling from her hands. The conversation between the four other women halts, creating a palpable beat of silence.

"You look beautiful," I say. "Your hair is perfect."

Sarah touches her hair and smiles without her teeth.

"What are you doing here?" Sarah asks. I prepared what I wanted to say, practiced it in the car with Patrick, but with four extra sets of eyes on me, I flounder. Why did I think I could do this? Did I really expect Sarah to be alone in the hour before her wedding? Or did I expect that anyone would want me around?

"I wanted to talk," I say, "Just for a minute."

"We're about to do the first look," Sarah's mother says. "Now isn't an appropriate time."

I nod. I try not to cry, a combination of regret and humiliation collecting in me. "Right. Of course. Congratulations, Sar. I'm so happy for you."

Turning, I tell myself there's nothing else I can do. I deserve to be shut out, to be a peripheral part of this moment. Everything that happened was my fault. This is one of the natural consequences of my choices. Unlike with Patrick, this is the worst case scenario playing out. Halfway around the house, I hear my name. Sarah stands holding her dress up, her bare feet sticking out from the lifted hem.

"You were supposed to be here," Sarah says. "It should be you making sure Hampton and Jay don't drink too many beers before the ceremony. It should be you keeping track of my phone and my lipstick. I am marrying my favorite person in the universe, and the whole time I planned this wedding, I was furious with you."

I go to say something, but Sarah stops me.



“I’m not finished,” she continues, dabbing at the corners of her eyes. “We were best friends. You made me feel like a failure. Nothing I did for you was enough. You traumatized me, too. I still have nightmares of you covered in blood. And you never apologized or acknowledged that.”

“I didn’t know how,” I say, “Which sounds like an excuse. And maybe it is. But it’s all I have. I know it doesn’t change anything, but I came here to tell you I’m sorry. More than I could ever say in words and more than I could ever show. I ruined everything. I know that. Trust me.”

We stand there, the world around us making a silent shift. Before out in the open. After ripe with hope. I turn to leave, but Sarah says, “I miss Dixie Diner.”

Those two words bring a barrage of memories of sitting on a cold metal barstool in the middle of the night, eating blackberry pie. The perfect, flaky crust. Sugared berries seeping out at the edges. We’d drink a pot of coffee between the two of us before driving the twenty minutes back to our apartment right off campus. Then there were the daytime trips, getting patty melts and Coke before returning to studying during finals. I think of the last few weeks, how often Sarah tried to get me to go with her, how Nancy, our favorite waitress, sent her home with an entire blackberry pie once when she went without me. We ate the entire thing in my bed in silence. Afterward, Sarah braided my hair, and I went to sleep.

“Do you think Nancy’s still there?” I ask.

“She has to be.”

I agree. Dixie Diner wouldn’t be Dixie Diner without Nancy. In our minds, she’ll always be there, even if she does finally stockpile enough money to build her mountain cabin.

“I’m sorry I never told you how much it meant to me. Those trips. The index cards on the mirror. Even your crazy essential oils and healing crystals.”

“You can’t call me crazy on my wedding day,” she says, laughing.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “For loving me.”

“Always have, always will.”

“I brought you something,” I say. “I know you probably have your something borrowed. And your something blue. But...” I flip the hem of my dress up an inch and unpin the sapphire-encrusted golden key—Kappa’s pin—from it. My hands tremble as I pin it to the inside of her strapless dress over her heart. Her key is already there. The two of them together look perfect. One decadent, maybe too much, one a simple, unembellished gold.

After the wedding, I hold a Sprite in my hand, eyes flitting back and forth around the barn. Sarah’s husband—which feels weird to say, even in my head—is Evan’s pledge brother. Evan stood in the lineup at the wooden arch that served as a makeshift altar. I’m waiting for the wedding party to arrive at cocktail hour. I don’t want to be surprised by him this time.

People stare at me, try to catch a glimpse of my arms. They think I can’t tell, but they’re so obvious. A few Kappa sisters are brave. Nicole says, “Did you lose weight? You look *amazing*.”

“Yes!” I say. “The food at Tucker’s ran right through me.”

Her eyes widen in shock or disgust, maybe both. She mumbles, “good to see you,” and heads to the bar.

Another girl compliments my dress, and I tell her that I tried to match the shade of pink to my scars. She looks horrified, so I say, “It’s okay to laugh.” She doesn’t.

Patrick says, “Sloan, they mean well.”

“The staring gets on my nerves. I’m just saying the things they really want to ask about.”

“Take it easy on them. They don’t know what to say.”

Evan’s old roommate waves to me, and I wave back. “Better?” I ask Patrick.

I see Evan as soon as he walks into the barn. When I do, I lace my fingers in Patrick’s. I rub my thumb across the scar on his palm. Evan walks to the bar and gets a beer—PBR, of course—and shakes hands with nearly everyone in his path. He stops when he gets to the girl he was with when I saw him in Richmond and kisses her. Even though I’m here with Patrick, it’s weird to see him with someone else. It doesn’t feel right, but I think that feeling will go away. I hope it will, at least. The girl stands in front of him. He wraps one arm around her shoulders. The other holds his beer.

It reminds me of Before, at Lambda Formals, standing on the balcony eleven floors above the beach, sweeping the grains of sand into a pile with my bare feet, watching Evan stand ankle-deep in the ocean, tipping his head back to drink from his beer bottle. We’d been fighting all week leading up to the trip. Getting to the hotel was no different. Evan wanted me to stop cutting, to get help, to talk to someone about what was happening inside my head. I just wanted him to be there for me. I thought maybe if he loved me the right way, it would fix things. He threatened to break up with me if I didn’t make a change. Up on that balcony, I remember thinking that if I had to live without him, I’d rather fall eleven floors to the concrete. It was the first time the thought occurred to me as something specific. I could end it. I turned and ran down the hall, passing the elevator for the stairs. By the time I reached the bottom, I was panting. I ran outside, the sand burning under my feet. Evan stood in the same place, bottle against his lips. Up close, I could see his blonde hair, damp and sticking out of his visor. Wet, packed sand gave way to the remnants of waves. I wrapped my arms around his waist, pressing my ear to his shoulder

blade. He threw his bottle into the ocean, turned, and held me, water rushing around our ankles, our feet sinking.

That memory, of standing with him in the ocean, my arms so tight he had to ask me to loosen my hold, is the first good memory I've thought of After. Watching him with his new girlfriend fills me with a tenderness for him I didn't know was possible. I understand what people mean when they say they'll always love someone, even when they're not in love with them anymore.

The old me would have escaped to the bar for a shot, but the new me waves when Evan and I make eye contact. He unwraps himself from his girlfriend and walks to me.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I say back.

"Evan." He extends a hand to Patrick, who takes it.

"Patrick."

"You look good," he says to me.

"So do you," I say.

"I mean it. You look...Different. Healthy. Happy."

"I am."

"Good," he says. He sips his beer. "Hampton said you were invited. I didn't think you'd show up."

"Honestly, I didn't either."

"I'm glad you did."

Someone calls Evan's name from the bar.

"Go," I say, waving a hand. "It's good to see you."

There's so much I should say to him. I'm sorry. I understand. I'll remember the sweet things about you. The way your hair sticks up in the morning. How much you love peanut M&M's. That time you dug your car out of fifteen inches of snow just to drive to the store to get me a frozen pizza. And I will remember this, too, your hand on my shoulder, feeling nothing. A final goodbye.

## Chapter 19

I see a red cardinal for the first time in mid-March, and I know that winter is over for good. It perches on the edge of roof while I plant lirioppe in the boxes that I remeasured, recut, and finally fit behind the benches. I watch the bird peck at the soil, his red tail feathers twitching, his black masked face investigating the contents of the surface. Before he flies away, he sings the classic and distinctive cardinal song, two long chirps followed by three short ones, like a message in morse code. From today forward, no one is allowed up on the roof except for me. Not even Dad. The official reveal party is next weekend, and I want everyone to be surprised by the final touches.

I stain the benches a dark cherry, appropriately named “Coffee Cherry.” When it’s done, it looks too dark, so I get a metallic gold paint. It takes an entire day of painting, wiping down the wood with a wet rag and then sanding, but the end result is perfect. The wood shines in places, like light is seeping out of the fibers.

For the roof, I found a collection of lanterns at a thrift store in Carytown. Before I kicked him out, I asked Dad to install hooks so I could hang them across the middle of the roof. I string the cantina lights through the rest of the hooks. Building is fun, watching a space go from empty to occupied, but this is my favorite part, manufacturing the aesthetic. How you build affects this, sure, but these little touches are what make the biggest difference. The gold on the bench. The lirioppe springing to life behind it. The twelve-seater community tables weathered with a deep plum across white oak.

I’m playing with some odds and ends from yard sales and thrift stores, seeing what might work and what needs to be tossed. A globe. An apothecary table. A birdcage. A bunch of old hardback books with silver embossed titles on the side. *Treasure Island*. *Gone With the Wind*.

*The Winter of Our Discontent.* I stack the books inside the bird cage and put it on the end of the table in the corner adjacent to the stairway door. Eventually, creamer and sugar and napkins and stirring sticks will line up next to it.

I hear the creak of the door, and I spin around to yell at whoever disregarded my “No Trespassing” sign. It’s Patrick, his red and black flannel shirt tied around his face with only his nose and mouth peeking out. He holds out a brown paper bag from the sandwich shop down the street and a lemonade in the other.

“What are you doing?” I ask, laughing.

“Delivering lunch,” he says, “but also obeying the rules.”

I peek inside the bag. “There’s two sandwiches in here.”

“I was hoping you’d take a break to eat with me,” he says. “It’s such a nice day. Maybe down by the canal?”

I put my hands on his cheeks and kiss him. It’s only been a few hours since we walked to The Lounge together this morning after staying up too late watching a Vietnam documentary, Patrick’s choice, and eating avocado brownies, my choice. It doesn’t get old, being around him.

“Let’s do it,” I say when I pull away. I loop my arm through his and lead him back to the door. “One second.”

Before we leave, I crawl underneath one of the tables. With a Sharpie, I write:

*My name is Sloan Casey.*

*I’m 21 years old.*

*I am still here.*

*I still want to be.*

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Before the party, I take Dr. Garcia's prescription pad from my desk drawer. I rip the pages off a few at a time. Then, I have an idea. I get a pen and start writing on them. Dogwood trees. New projects. A college degree. Pesto chicken paninis. Sunrises over the James River. Fresh vegetables from the garden. Rainy days. Watermelon Festival. Blackberry pie. The future. Patrick. Sarah. Mom. Dad. Me. I tape them on the wall above my bed until I run out of pages.

When I get to The Lounge, only Sarah and Hampton are waiting inside. I asked Sarah to get here early. We hug. I reintroduce Patrick and Hampton before going behind the counter and getting two paper plates covered in aluminum foil.

"What's that?" Sarah asks me.

"Let's go upstairs," I say.

I open the door, and Sarah says, "This is the Sloan I know."

I'm not sure if she means the space or me or both. I do know that she's not talking about the Sloan from Before. I unwrap the foil from the plates, revealing two slices of blackberry pie.

"It's not from Dixie Diner," I say.

Sarah takes a bite and sighs.

"It's good enough," she says.

We finish our pie and then invite Patrick and Hampton to join us. When they come upstairs, Hampton says, "This place looks awesome."

Patrick runs around, touching the surface of everything. "I'm trying to figure out what my favorite part is. The gold? The birdcage? I love the birdcage. This weird little table? The lanterns? Ouch!" He holds his pointer finger in his hand. A splinter. It's not deep, so I pull it out. Patrick grabs my face in his hands and puts his forehead against mine. This close, I can't make out his features, just the honey color of his eyes. The shadow of his brows.



“You made this, Warrior,” he says.

The air is cooling, the liriopie rustles in the breeze. It’s the liminal time of night, before the sky has started darkening, not yet dusk but no longer day.

I kiss him. That never gets old, either.

My father arrives first, dressed in khaki pants I didn’t know he owned and a button down shirt. He walks around the roof, knocking on things and shaking them, testing their stability.

“This wouldn’t have happened without you,” I tell him.

“You would’ve found a way.”

We stare out over the building tops. In my mind, I erase the buildings and trace the Canal Walk. The sun sags in the cloud-spattered sky.

Mom shows up with Mrs. Shumaker and food. Roy walks in behind them.

“I can’t believe it took me so long to open this place back up,” Roy says.

“You were waiting for the right time,” Patrick says.

“I think I was waiting for the right girl.” Roy winks at me.

Mom pulls foil containers out of one of the bags in her hand. Patrick and Hampton take them from her and put them on the table. Dad doesn’t offer to help. I unwrap trays to find country ham biscuits and turkey on poppy seed rolls. A vegetable tray. Macaroni and cheese. She cuts between the rolls and puts a serving spoon in the macaroni and cheese. She gets plates and napkins from a bag, too. As always, she’s overdone it, but this is how she loves. When she turns around, I wrap her in a hug. I’ve surprised her; it takes her a second to reciprocate, resting the plates and napkins against my shoulder blades.

Before we fill our plates, Roy silences everyone.

“I was skeptical about hiring some girl Patrick had a crush on to renovate the roof. When Hurricane Irene blew through here and destroyed it, I made my peace with closing it off. But I trusted Patrick and he trusted Sloan. I never imagined it would look this beautiful. I’m incredibly thankful to you, Sloan.”

Everyone claps, which feels cheesy and weird. Patrick stands behind me, an arm wrapped around my shoulders. He peppers my ear and temple in kisses. I rest my head against his chest.

“Sloan, will you start us off?” Mom asks, gesturing to the table.

Once we all have food, Mrs. Shumaker asks, “What’s next?”

“You trying to get rid of me?” I ask her.

“Absolutely,” she says.

I haven’t told anyone my plans yet. Because they might not work out. “I was thinking of staying,” I say, “of transferring to school here, finishing my degree.”

“I’d love that,” Dad says.

At the same time, Mom says, “That’s wonderful! Have you looked into what schools will take your studio credits and which program might—”

“I’ve done my research,” I tell her.

“If you need a job,” my father says, “I’ve always got projects.”

Everyone else has gone back to talking, and it’s just the three of us. Dad scratches at his face. He trimmed his beard for this. Mom lifts a hand to twist her earring.

When the sun has almost disappeared and a half moon takes over the sky, I go to the light switch and think about that night sitting at my desk in studio, ripping up my sketches, walking out, and trying to die. The girl from Before survived. *We made this*, I tell her. The paintings from New Year’s hang on the wall, two contrasting portraits: the Canal Walk subdued during the day

and vibrant with color at night. I flip the switch. Hanging lanterns cast shadows across faces, but the stringed lights, with their soft yellow glow, illuminate enough. I run my fingers through the liriopé's soft blades of grass. In a few weeks, they will be cut back to ensure their continued growth. And when everything blazes orange and fades to brown in the fall, the liriopé will begin to bloom, ripe with purple and white.