

THE PARALLEL SERIES



INCLUDES BOOKS 1-4

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PARALLEL

THE PARALLEL SERIES, BOOK ONE

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*To Patrick, Lily and Jack,
who will always be the best thing I ever created.
Oh, and stop reading here. No matter how old you are.*

PROLOGUE

I had a nightmare as a child. A nightmare that visited me again and again. I've never forgotten it, not a single detail, although if my parents hadn't kept the psychologist's report, I'd probably assume the years had added and detracted from it in various ways. But they didn't. It's all in writing, exactly as it rests in my head.

QUINN, age four, was brought into our clinic due to recurrent nightmares. Parents report that patient wakes several times a week, crying for her "husband" ("Nick"), and claiming they've been separated by someone. Patient insists she "isn't supposed to be here" for hours and sometimes days afterward. There are no further signs of psychosis.

AT FIRST THOSE NIGHTMARES—THEIR weirdness, their specificity—made my mother scared for me. Over time though, she also became scared *of* me, and that taught me a lesson I'd continue to find true over the coming years: the things I knew, *real* things, were safest kept to myself.

QUINN
2018

Déjà vu.
It translates to *already seen*, but really it sort of means the opposite: that you *haven't* already seen the thing, but feel like you have. I once asked Jeff if he thought they actually call it *déjà vu* in France or perhaps keep a better, more accurate expression for themselves. He laughed and said, “you think about the weirdest shit sometimes.”

Which is so much truer than he knows.

“Everything okay?” he asks now, as we follow my mother and his into the inn where we will marry in seven short weeks. I’ve been *off*, somehow, since the moment we pulled into town, and I guess it shows.

“Yeah. Sorry. I’ve got the start of a headache.” It’s not entirely true, but I don’t know how to explain this thing in my head, this irritating low hum. It makes me feel as if I’m only half here.

We step into the lobby and my mother extends her arms like a game show hostess. “Isn’t it cute?” she asks without waiting for an answer. “I know it’s an hour from D.C., but at this late date it’s the best we’re going to do.” In truth, the lobby reminds me of an upscale retirement community—baby blue walls, baby blue carpet, Chippendale chairs—but the actual wedding and reception will take place on the lawn. And as my mother pointed out, we can no longer afford to be picky.

Jeff’s mother, Abby, steps beside me, running a hand over my head, the

way she might a prize stallion. “You’re being so calm about this. Any other bride would be in a panic.”

It’s posed as a compliment, but I’m not sure it is. Losing our venue two months before the wedding *should* have made me panic, but I try not to get too attached to things. Caring too much about anything makes perfectly reasonable people go insane—just ask the girl who burned down the reception hall her ex was about to get married in...which happened to be the reception hall we were getting married in too.

My mother claps her hands together. “Well, our appointment with the hotel’s events coordinator isn’t for another hour. Shall we get some lunch while we wait?”

Jeff and I exchange a quick look. On this point we are both of one mind. “We really need to get back to D.C. before rush hour.” *Are my words coming out as slowly as they feel?* It’s as if I’m on delay somehow, two steps behind. “Maybe you could just show us around?”

My mother’s smile fades to something far less genuine. She wants giddy participation from me and has been consistently disappointed with my inability to provide it.

She and Abby lead the way, back to the porch where we entered. “We’ve already been discussing it a bit,” Abby says to me over her shoulder. “We were thinking you could walk down the stairs and out to the porch, where your fa— *uncle*, I mean, will wait.” She pauses for a moment, blushing at the error. It shouldn’t be a big deal at this point—my dad’s been gone almost eight years—but I feel that pinch deep in my chest anyway. That hint of sadness that never quite leaves. “And then we’ll do a red carpet out to the tent.”

Together we step outside. It’s a gruelingly hot day, as are most summer days anywhere near D.C., and this thing in my head only gets worse. I vaguely notice my surroundings—blinding sun, a technicolor blue sky, the rose bushes my mother is commenting on, but all the while I feel displaced, like I’m following this from far away. *What the hell is going on?* I could call it déjà vu, but it’s not really that. The conversation occurring right now, with this group of people, is wholly new. It’s the place that feels familiar. *More* than familiar, actually. It feels important.

They’re discussing the lake. I’m not sure what I’ve missed, but Abby is worried about its proximity. “It would just take one boatful of drunks to create chaos,” she says. “And we don’t want a bunch of looky-loos either.”

“Most boats can’t reach this part of the lake,” I reply without thinking. “There’s too much brush under the water on the way here.”

Abby’s brow raises. “I didn’t realize you’d been here before. And when did you ever sail?”

My pulse begins to race, and I take a quick, panicked breath. They know I haven’t been here. They know I don’t sail.

I don’t know why I let it slip out.

“No,” I reply. “I read up a little before I came.” The words sound as false to me as they are, and I know they sound false to my mother too. If I were to glance at her right now, I’d see that troubled look on her face, the one I’ve seen a thousand times before. I learned early in life it bothered her, this strange ability of mine to sometimes know things I should not.

Jeff’s phone rings and he turns the other way, while my mother walks ahead, frowning at the ground beneath her. “I hope they’re going to water soon,” she frets. “If it stays this dry, that carpet will be covered with dust by the time the ceremony starts.”

She is right, unfortunately. I can see the soil shift loosely before me, the grass burned and threadbare beneath an unrelenting sun, all the way to the pavilion. If there were even the slightest breeze, we’d be choking on it right now.

We round the corner of the inn, and the lake comes into view, shimmering in the early July heat. It looks like any other lake, yet there’s something about it that speaks to me. I stare, trying to place it, and as I do, my gaze is compelled upward, beyond its sapphire depths, to a cottage in the distance.

It’s a tap, at first. A small tap between my shoulder blades, like a parent warning a child to pay attention. But then something shifts inside me, invisible anchors sinking into the ground, holding me in place. My stomach seems to drop as they go.

I know that house.

I want to look away. My heart is beating harder, and the fact that people are going to notice makes it beat harder still, but already a picture is forming in my head—a wide deck, a long, grassy slope leading to the water’s edge.

“How can the grass be so dry with all this water around?” Abby asks, but her voice is growing dim beneath this sudden ringing in my ears.

And then, her words disappear entirely. There is no ground, no light, nothing to grab. I’m plummeting, and the fall is endless.



WHEN MY EYES OPEN, I'm flat on my back. Soil clings to my skin and the sun is beating down so fiercely it drowns out all thought. I'm in some kind of field with a house in the distance, and a woman is leaning over me. Have I met her somewhere before? It feels like I have but I can't place her at all.

"Quinn!" she cries. "Oh, thank God. Are you okay?"

The light is too much. That drumming in my head turns into a gong. I need it to stop, so I squeeze my eyes shut. The smell of parched grass assaults me.

"Why am I here?" I whisper. The words are slurred, the voice barely my own. *God, my head hurts.*

"You fell," she says, "We're at the inn. For your wedding, remember?"

The woman is pleading with me as if I'm a child on the cusp of a tantrum, but nothing she says makes sense. *I am already married.* And since when did London get so *hot*? It's never like this here.

A man comes jogging toward us. His build is similar to Nick's—tall, muscular—but even from a distance, I know he's not Nick, not even close. My eyes flutter closed and for a moment, I feel like I'm with him again—watching the smile that starts slowly before it lifts high to one side, catching the faint scent of chlorine from his morning swim. Where is he? He was *right* next to me a second ago.

The man drops to the ground beside me, and the women scurry out of his way. "She must have tripped," one of them says, "and now she's really out of it. I think she may need to go to the hospital."

I'm not going anywhere with these people, but I feel that first burst of fear in my chest. The throbbing in my head is growing. What if they try to force me to leave with them? I don't even know that I'd be able to fight them off with my head like this.

"Where's Nick?" The words emerge wispy and insufficient, needy rather than commanding.

"The hotel manager is Mark," says another voice. "Maybe she means Mark?"

"Can you sit up?" the guy asks. "Come on, Quinn."

I squint, trying to see him better in the bright sun. *How does he know my name?* There's something familiar about him, but he also just has one of those faces. "Are you a doctor?"

His jaw sags open. "Babe, it's me. *Jeff.*"

What the hell is happening here? Why is this guy acting like we're old friends? I focus on him, trying to make sense of it.

"Your fiancé," he adds.

For a moment I just stare at him in horror. And then I begin scrambling backward, a useless attempt at escape. "No," I gasp, but even as I'm denying it, praying this is a nightmare, some part of my brain has begun to recognize him too, and remembers a different life, one in which Nick does not exist.

Nick does not exist.

I roll face down in the grass and begin to weep.

QUINN

My memory has mostly returned by the time they've gotten me into the car. My mother and Jeff look at each other carefully, but say nothing about the fact that I, for a period of time, did not recognize either of them. I rest my aching head against the seat as they quietly argue outside. God only knows what my mother is making of this.

"It will take you an hour to get back to D.C.," she says. "There's a state-of-the-art hospital in Annapolis."

"Even a state-of-the-art hospital is not going to be as good as Georgetown," he replies. "Look, just finish up with the contract here. I swear I'll take good care of her, and I'll let you know what they say the second I hear anything."

I swallow hard, willing away this desperate thing in my chest, the one I woke with. They tell me I collapsed, but the things I saw seemed so real—*Nick* seemed so real—that it's hard to believe I imagined them. A dream, a hallucination—it should be shadowy, vague. This is not. I remember our first date, our second date, the weeks that went by afterward. I don't see Nick as some blurry figure I could only describe in generalities. I remember his eyes, his mouth, that dimple of his. I remember how familiar he seemed from the moment we met, that I knew before he'd even opened his mouth how he would laugh, how he would smile, how he would kiss. It was as if our relationship wasn't new at all. It was a path so well-tread we could run rather than walk.

My eyes open. Two feet away, Jeff and my mother continue to discuss me, and my chest pinches tight. Jeff's the person I've loved for the past six years. The man I wake up next to each morning, the one who made crepes for my birthday and gave up a day of fishing to walk through the Hirshhorn with me last weekend. I *hate* that I'm sitting here right now wanting someone I've never met.

Someone who doesn't even exist.

But on the way home, the motion of the car lulling me to sleep, it's not Jeff who's in my head. It's Nick, just as I imagined him when I fell.



I WAKE in Nick's flat just before he does. His hand is on my hip, possessive even in his sleep, and I'm smiling at that when his eyes flicker open. I'm also smiling at the view, given that a sheet is only covering his lower half, leaving the rest of him—bare, tan, flawless—on glorious display. Last night he said he'd stopped swimming competitively in college, but he's obviously still doing a whole lot of something.

"You stayed," he says, his grin lifting high on one side. My heart flutters at the sight of it. I can't believe I crossed an ocean only to fall for a guy who grew up a few hours from me.

"I did. Although to be fair, I kind of had to since I have no idea how to get back to my apartment from here." Given that I could easily have called Uber or pulled up a city map on my phone, this doesn't make much sense, but he's kind enough not to point it out.

That dimple of his appears. I want to marry him based on that dimple alone. "All part of my evil plan to keep you here."

I glance around his flat, which I saw little of last night because it was late when we got in and the two of us were, um, a little occupied. It's bachelorish—bare walls, windows in need of curtains, ash-gray hardwood. I decide I'm open to the possibility of being kept.

"Evil plan?" I ask. "So this is something you've been working on for a while?"

"Absolutely. Though 'meet gorgeous female with no knowledge of London' was a surprisingly difficult first step."

We are both smiling right now. How can it be so comfortable? How can I

already feel so connected to him? From the moment we met yesterday, it was as if I was meant to know him, or perhaps, somehow, already did. “So far I sort of like your evil plan.”

He raises himself up, leaning on his forearm. It brings him closer to my mouth. “And I was a perfect gentleman as promised, wasn’t I?”

Our eyes lock. He kissed me for hours the night before, until I was on the cusp of begging him to undress me, but it went no further. His gaze flickers to my mouth. He’s remembering it too.

“You were a perfect gentleman.”

He leans over me, broad, tan shoulders sculpted by God himself. “You can’t kiss me until I’ve brushed my teeth,” I warn.

“Then I’ll focus on other parts.” His lips brush against my jawline and move to my neck. He pulls at the skin just hard enough to elicit a sharp inhale, my body arching against his without thought.

“Jesus,” he groans. “I’m trying to behave here, but you’re not making it easy.”

Since he’s only wearing boxers, that fact was already clear to me, but I don’t care. My hand skims down his broad back to his waistband. I want to slide my palm over his hard ass, and let my nails sink into his skin...

“I want you to make that noise again,” he says, his voice husky and low. He pulls at my neck in the same place he just did.

“Oh God, I like that way too much,” I murmur. “Just don’t give me a hickey.”

He laughs apologetically. “I think it’s too late.”

“Then,” I reply, pulling him back down, “you might as well do it again.”



“HON,” says Jeff, shaking my shoulder. “Wake up.”

I blink, trying to make sense of the fact that Nick is no longer with me. And then I look over at my fiancé, at his sweet face and his furrowed brow, and feel sick with guilt. It couldn’t have been real, with Nick, but I still have the sinking feeling that hits when you discover you’ve done something very, very wrong.

“Where are we?” I ask, my voice raspy with sleep. We’re surrounded by the cement walls of a parking garage, deep underground and lit only by

flickering fluorescent light. It provides no clues.

“The hospital. You fell at the inn, remember? Hurt your head?”

Argh. It comes back to me in a rush. Planning the reception, the sense of déjà vu, the sight of that white cottage in the distance. And then the time I spent with Nick—the time I *thought* I spent with Nick—during which Jeff didn’t seem to exist. It was so real. It still feels real. It would be enough to make me believe in reincarnation, except it was all happening *now*, or close to it. I remember his iWatch on the nightstand. I was thinking about Uber. It was recent. And the very last thing I want is to be poked and prodded by some doctor while skirting around the fact that part of me still thinks it happened.

“I think we can skip it,” I tell him. I’m sure to Jeff this whole thing seems monumental, but my childhood was littered with bizarre little episodes none of us could explain, and this seems likely to fall in the same category, if a thousand times more extreme. “I’m fine now and I don’t feel like sitting in a waiting room for hours just to have some doctor tell me he thinks I’m okay.”

His jaw swings open. “You seem to be gravely underestimating the seriousness of this. You had no idea who I was.” His voice is strung tight—concern or hurt feelings, I can’t tell. “I already called your office and told them you won’t be in.”

I lean my head back against the seat and allow my eyes to shut for a moment. “A few hours of sleep would do me more good than any doctor right now.”

His door opens. “You didn’t even recognize your own mother. We’re getting it checked out.”

I’m too tired for this, but also too tired to argue. I follow Jeff into the hospital, petulant as a teenager. It seems like an even worse idea once we’re inside. While Georgetown the *city* is a haven of the wealthy and privileged, Georgetown *hospital* is not. I walk in expecting private school kids with lacrosse injuries or socialites with adverse reactions to Botox but find chaos instead: police restraining a screaming woman just inside the doors, a guy with an abdominal wound dripping blood off to the right.

Jeff shields me through all of it, placing his broad shoulders between me and the blood and the screaming woman, with no concern for himself. If my father is somewhere watching us right now, he’s smiling. He was so certain Jeff would always keep me safe, and he was right.

Eventually, my name is called, and we are led back to a room with

cinderblock walls and a poster that asks me to describe where my pain rests on a scale between the smiley-face emoji and the crying one. A resident appears moments later to complete an exam of my reflexes, orientation, and medical history. *No, this has never happened before. No, I don't use drugs. Yes, I drink socially, but not much.* And then the attending comes in and does it all over again.

I'm not in the mood to go through it all twice. And it's exhausting, telling half-truths, keeping so many things to myself. "I just fell," I tell her. "It wasn't a big deal."

Jeff frowns at me. "She didn't recognize me or her mother when she woke. She had no idea where we were and was asking for someone named *Nick*." There is a hint, just a hint, of outrage when he says the name. *He's jealous*, I realize at last. That's why this bothers him. He probably thinks Nick is some ex of mine I've never mentioned, and I could attempt to reassure him on that point, but the truth is almost worse. If he could picture what I do—Nick looming over me with that *look*, the one that even now makes me want certain things more than I've ever wanted them before—I doubt he'd be relieved. Especially since it all seemed to be happening recently, during the time I've been with Jeff.

"So, you had a little memory loss and recovered quickly?" the doctor asks.

I try to smile, the way a perfectly normal person who isn't fantasizing about a stranger might. "Yeah, it took a minute and then I was fine. Just a headache, and that's gone now too. I skipped breakfast and wasn't feeling great anyway."

"We'll get an MRI just to be sure," she says.

My shoulders tense. She's probably checking for concussions and it will come to nothing...but I don't love the idea of anyone looking too closely at what's in my head. "I'd really rather not. Honestly, I don't think it was a big deal."

"It's best to be on the safe side," she counters. "Are you sore anywhere?" I shrug. "Not really."

"Let me check your lymph nodes." She moves in front of me and places her hands just beneath my jaw. Her palm hits the base of my neck and I wince. "Sorry," she says. "I pressed on your, uh—" She trails off.

"My what?"

Her smile is so awkward it's physically painful. "You've got a, um,

bruise...on your neck.” I struggle to understand why, exactly, she’s being so weird—until I realize that by *bruise* she actually means *hickey*.

“What?” I scoff. “No.”

“Look in the mirror,” she says, with another awkward smile. I glance at my reflection and there, glaring back at me, is a small purplish-red mark. My pulse rises as Jeff steps forward to take a closer look. His face falls. Whatever is there, we both know he’s not responsible for it. He’s never given me a hickey in my life, and he’s been out of town for most of the past week.

I put these things together and a quiet kind of fear creeps in, spreads icy fingers inside my chest.

Because all that comes to mind is the memory of Nick’s mouth on my neck.



WHEN MY EXAM IS COMPLETE, a nurse directs us upstairs, to neurology. Jeff’s silence on the way is unnerving. He hasn’t said a word since he saw the bruise. “Tell me what you’re thinking,” I say. “You know it’s not a hickey.”

“All I know,” he says without inflection, “is that I didn’t give it to you.”

I groan quietly under my breath. Despite the dream about Nick, there’s no way it’s *actually* a hickey. And I can’t believe he’d even question it. “You’ve been with me all day long. And last night too. If I really had a bruise on my neck the entire time, don’t you think you’d have noticed it by now? I probably just hit a rock or something when I fell today.”

The doors open and his hand goes to the small of my back as we step out. Even as upset as he is, he still wants to take care of me, guide me, shield me.

I guess this is what my father saw in him, long before I did. I was only 20 when I came back home after my father’s diagnosis, and to my mind, Jeff was already an adult—out of college, back in Rocton working as an assistant football coach. Toward the end of his life, my father’s hints turned into pleas. *Jeff will keep you safe*, he would whisper, squeezing my hand, the morphine making his words nearly unintelligible. *Marry him and you’ll always be safe*. I nodded only to comfort him, not really meaning it. But the way Jeff took care of me and my mom after my father passed made an impression on me, and once he really set his mind to winning me over, it was impossible not to fall in love with him. So I guess my dad was right all along.

“We’re looking for imaging,” Jeff says to a nurse passing by.

She doesn’t even look up from her phone. “Sixth floor.”

We glance at each other and return to the elevator, facing forward. His hand remains on my back. I think there’s probably nothing I could do to him, really, that he wouldn’t forgive—not that I’ve actually done anything that requires forgiveness. And that loyalty of his is one of many things I love. My friends come to me with story after story of men behaving badly, and it just confirms what I already know: I got one of the good ones.

He shifts beside me. “Look, put yourself in my shoes. You wake up asking for another guy. You don’t even recognize me. And it turns out you’ve got this hickey on your neck I didn’t give you...”

“You know better,” I reply. “Whatever the explanation is, you should know me well enough to realize I would never cheat, and if you don’t, then you shouldn’t be marrying me.”

The elevator doors open. When we get on, I push the button for the first floor.

“What about the MRI?” he asks.

“I’m totally fine and I’m tired,” I tell him. “I just want to go home.”

He turns and wraps his arms around me. “I’m sorry. You’re right. You’ve never given me one reason to doubt you.”

I allow my head to rest against his chest. “I just don’t get where it even came from.”

“Sometimes...” he begins, and the gust of his exhale ruffles my hair.

“You’re the smartest, most beautiful girl who ever came out of our town. And sometimes I wonder how I got this lucky, like it’s just a matter of time before you figure out you could do so much better than me.”

I ache for him. His issues with work may have taken an even greater toll than I realized. “That’s crazy,” I whisper.

“Can we just forget this happened?”

I nod and give him one last squeeze as the elevator doors open. I’d love to forget it happened too. I’m just not sure I can when the proof it did is staring back at me every time I look in the mirror.

NICK

Meg's alarm wakes me, and my first feeling is regret. I was having the dream again—a girl standing on a boat, seen from a distance. Lithe, golden-skinned. Her husky laugh echoing off the water, sun-streaked curls blowing in the breeze.

Meg's alarm continues shrieking. "Hon," I groan. "Alarm."

She mumbles something, reaching for her phone to hit snooze.

In the ensuing silence, suspended somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, I think of the dream and feel a pang in the center of my rib cage. It's the same one every time, and I never remember much of it. Mostly, it's just the sight of her standing there, nothing but smooth skin and a tiny red bikini I long to remove, and the way she makes me feel—as if my heart is exploding in my chest.

Meg's alarm goes off again and I give up on sleep, padding quietly to the closet for my gym bag. I was at the hospital until after midnight and it feels like I just shut my eyes five minutes ago, but birds are chirping so I figure it'll be dawn soon enough. I don't mind waking up early during the summer anyway. At least with all the students gone I won't have to fight for a lane at the pool.

"Why are you up?" Meg asks, yawning again as she moves toward the stuff she keeps on the left side of my closet. "I thought you went in late on Tuesdays."

"It might have something to do with the fact that you hit the snooze

button three times,” I reply. I’m crankier than normal. That dream about the girl on the boat always leaves me feeling dissatisfied with my life, and guilty at the same time. I have an amazing girlfriend. I shouldn’t be dreaming about someone else. “It’s fine. I’ll get in an extra-long workout.”

She winces as she pulls a clean pair of scrubs off the rack. “Then this is probably a bad time to ask, but do you mind if I crash here for a little while? I want to end my lease but I haven’t found another place yet. I promise I’ll never hit the snooze button again.”

I drop goggles in my bag and look in a drawer for my second pair to stall for time. I know the question should be a no-brainer, but I’m comfortable with what Meg and I have. I don’t know if I’m ready for more, and moving in here temporarily seems like the kind of situation that turns permanent before you know it. “I like your place.”

“It’s just too far from the hospital. I’m here almost every night anyway. What’s going to change?”

I sigh, frustrated more with myself than the situation. She’s absolutely right, and there’s really no reason for me to object. I like having her here. The fact that we share a profession makes things easy with us in a way it hasn’t been with other women I’ve dated. I just really need to stop waking up thinking about someone else. “Yeah, okay.”

She wraps her arms around my waist. “You could at least try to sound enthusiastic,” she scolds.

I drop a quick kiss to the top of her head and grab my bag. “You know I’m just cranky until I swim.”

“Fine, go swim,” she replies, pulling me back for a real kiss, content once more. “But I expect enthusiasm when I talk to you later.”

I force a smile, hoping I’ll be able to drum some up by then.



AT THE POOL, I swim hard, longer than normal, building up from a 4x25 to 4x200 before I work my way down. I take long strokes, feeling the water rush past as my arms slice through. What I love about swimming is how scientific it is. Muscle and position and timing, all simple to adjust when it goes off course.

I only wish the rest of my life was as simple, that I knew which parts

required adjustment. I've done exactly what I was supposed to, dammit—college, med school, residency—but something is still missing, and it's this constant itch just beneath the surface of my skin, wondering what it is.

My mother claims what's missing from my life is a family, but I suspect that has more to do with her desire for grandchildren than anything else. *You and Meg are both 30*, she says. *Her biological clock is ticking even if yours is not*. But every time I even consider it, the dream about the girl in the boat returns to needle me, to leave me dissatisfied with what I have and suddenly uncertain I'm doing the right thing.

It makes no sense, really. I can't name a specific quality about the girl. I can't really see her face. I don't know what she likes, how she will laugh, if she's rude to waiters or hates dogs. All I know is how I feel—as if I'd swim the ocean to save her, walk into battle on her behalf without a second thought. That when I stand on that dock in my dream, I want to give myself to her until there is nothing left of me.

And I don't feel that way about Meg. I've never felt that way about anyone.



MY MORNING IS FULL. It's afternoon before I get in to see Darcy, the patient who kept me here so late last night. Things looked pretty grim fourteen hours ago, but when I walk into her room she's laughing over a cartoon so hard she's got to hold onto her stomach. Her exhausted mother is sound asleep in the chair beside her. Seven year olds bounce back a lot faster than adults.

"*Teen Titans?*" I ask. "*Or Teen Drama Island?*"

"*Teen Titans*," she replies.

I walk over and watch for a few seconds. "And your favorite is the goth one."

Darcy tilts her head. "What does *goth* mean?"

I take the seat beside her and point at the screen. "You know how Raven never smiles and is always wearing all black and looking unhappy? That's goth."

"I want to be goth when I grow up too," she says.

When she grows up. My chest aches, but she's watching my reaction so I force myself to smile as I rise. "Don't tell your mother I gave you that idea."

I go to the nurses' station next to make sure there's nothing pressing to be dealt with. The waiting room is packed, which means I'll be here this evening too. Not a great day to get by on four hours of sleep.

I turn away, but as I do my eyes catch on a couple standing by the elevator. There's something so familiar about the woman, even from behind—about the set of her shoulders, in the way she gathers her long brown hair into a ponytail before letting it fall. I feel a pull toward her I can't explain, and the fact that she's clearly with the guy beside her matters not at all.

"Mr. Jensen's family has called for you twice," says Bev, one of the nurses, thrusting a piece of paper into my hand. "The nursing home wants you to up his meds."

I look back at the elevator but the woman is gone. For a moment I just look blankly at the space where she stood, feeling as if I've lost something.

"You okay, Dr. Reilly?" Bev asks.

I wince. I'm acting like a nutjob today. "Sleep deprivation," I tell her. Yes, that's probably all it is.

QUINN

I dream that night about so many things, some big and some small. Nick's flat in Marylebone, which became *our* flat in Marylebone. Grocery shopping. Trying to make the perfect gin fizz. Sitting with Nick at some pub on a night in late autumn, getting pleasantly smashed, happy in a way I've never been before and didn't even know existed until the day we met.

"Show me," he says, nodding at my laptop bag. In the three months we've been together, there's not been a single project I've completed for my graduate program that he hasn't demanded to see.

"It's just a basic building design. There's no way you actually want to see it," I argue.

"Of course I do," he says, sliding his drink toward me. I take a sip and flinch. I'll never get used to the taste of whiskey. "And then I want you to start throwing out terms like spaciality and cantilevers."

My mouth tips upward despite my every effort to look stern. "You're making fun of me."

"I'm not," he says, placing his palm on my cheek. "I love watching you talk about architecture. Your whole face lights up. And it amazes me that you can do all this."

I laugh. "You can save human lives, but you're impressed I can draw a building?"

"But I don't create things," he says. "And I love that you're so fascinated

by it.”

“You’ll be just as fascinated next year.” During this, the first year of his residency, he’s all over the place—like the neurology rotation that led to our first meeting. Next year is when he’ll get to focus on cardiology, his chosen specialty.

He takes a sip of his drink. “I hope so. I thought with my dad’s heart problem, it would feel more meaningful, but right now I’m not sure.”

“Are you worried it’ll be depressing?”

“There are worse specialties. Like oncology. You know why they nail coffins shut?”

I prepare myself. Doctor humor tends to be on the macabre side.

He grins. “To keep oncologists from trying to resuscitate the corpse.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Just because there are worse specialties doesn’t mean it’s right for you. I want you to be riveted by something.”

His smile is soft. His hand, beneath the table, finds mine and swallows it. “I’m pretty riveted by this patient I met during my neurology rotation.”

“Is that right?” I ask, biting down on my grin. His gaze flickers to the movement of my lips. “Maybe you should ask her out.”

“You think she’ll say yes?”

I smile at him. “I can’t imagine there’s anyone who could say no to you.”

There’s something guarded in his eyes...a secret he isn’t ready to share with me. “I really hope you’re right,” he replies.

I learn that secret of his two nights later.

It’s just after my evening class. I step outside the architecture building to find Nick sitting on a bench out front, jacket thrown over his scrubs, smiling as he waits. When he smiles at me, it’s like his whole heart is in his eyes. I sometimes wonder if it’s even possible for him to feel the way I do, this loopy, out-of-control adoration, but when I see him smiling at me like he is right now, it’s impossible to doubt it.

He rises as I walk down the stairs. “You move like a dancer,” he says. I skitter to a halt in front of him, going on my toes to press my mouth to his.

“I assure you I’m not,” I reply. “Two left feet.”

He hesitates, then gives me a distracted smile. There’s something off tonight, but I can’t put my finger on it. “You could swing dance, though. Anyone can.”

I grin up at him. “I thought I was supposed to be the wild, impetuous one, and you were supposed to be the driven resident who doesn’t know how to

have fun.”

“Until you, I kind of was,” he says softly.

I think of the serious guy I met at the hospital that first day and how much he’s changed since then. The fact that he is good for me is something I’ve known all along. But it’s only now I realize I’m good for him too.

He grabs one hand and places it on his shoulder, pulling me off the sidewalk and into the grass. If it weren’t late, I’d probably refuse, but the campus is mostly empty at this hour. “One, two. One, two,” he says, moving us in a slow circle. “You’re a natural.”

I laugh. “I seem to be a little better at things when I’m with you.”

“That’s because we’re meant to be together,” he says softly.

In our case, it’s not a cliché. Ever since we met, we’ve had a knowledge of the other that was almost intuitive, muscle memory. And I’ve been having these weird dreams about his childhood even though I wasn’t a part of it. Dreams in which I’m his best friend, the little girl next door he shares everything with. I would assume it was wishful thinking if it weren’t for the fact that I wake knowing things I shouldn’t. I referenced his twin, their treehouse, his parents’ place by the lake—all before he ever told me about them. I have no idea how I knew.

My voice is hushed as I meet his eye. “I think...no matter what universe we land in, we land there together.”

He stops dancing. Before I can blink, before I can ask why, he’s lowering to one knee in front of me. There’s a small black velvet box in his hand. “I know it’s too soon,” he says. “I know this is insane. But I also know that you’re the person I was born for, and I don’t want to wait to start our lives together.”

Inside me there’s this new thing, like the start of a sunrise. A dim warmth against the horizon, spreading, spreading until I’m flooded with light. It may be too soon, and everyone will say we’re insane, but he’s the person I’ve waited my entire life to find. To belong to. And now I will.



I WAKE EARLY in the morning, feeling steeped in happiness, cocooned in it, until I open my eyes and see that it’s Jeff, not Nick, beside me. Nothing about Jeff has changed. He has the same sweet face he’s always had, mouth open,

peaceful and deeply asleep. But there's a part of me that doesn't want him here. That misses Nick so much I could weep at the sight of my fiancé beside me. I inch away, struggling with my disappointment and horrified by it, all in the same breath.

The tightness in my chest propels me from the bed and into the living room. How, *how*, could it have felt so real? How can I remember the feel of his palm on mine, the weight of the velvet box I took from his hand? And the shops outside Nick's flat—I can name them. I can name the streets surrounding them—Marylebone, Harley Street—as if they are familiar when I'm not sure I've ever even heard of them before. How could I see London so *vividly* when it's somewhere I've never been?

Yes, I've known things before, things I should not know. But this is different. I'm seeing the life I might have had, if my father hadn't gotten sick and my mother hadn't fallen apart after he died. Because that was all part of the plan—get my architecture degree, move to London for graduate school. This knowledge...it feels like something I'm *supposed* to know. It feels important, like a life-altering conversation held while drunk, recalled only in small flashes the next day.

I grab my wedding binder, the nearest thing I can find. I skip past all the details about shoes and dresses and invitations, until I get to the blank pages in the back, and then I start to sketch. When I'm done, the interior of our flat—mine and Nick's—sits in front of me. The tiny box of a kitchen, half the wall taken up by a radiator that would wake us with its *clunk clunk clunk* each morning. The bedroom, so small we had to edge around our bed to get in and out, and the garden terrace you could only reach by climbing on top of the radiator and out the bedroom windows. I stare at the drawing, feeling unsettled. It's far too specific to be something I just dreamed up.

The tightness in my chest has gone nowhere. I miss it, that imaginary flat. I miss the icy floors on winter mornings and Nick's broad hand pulling me through the window on a summer night so we could sit on the terrace. I miss the smell of chlorine on his skin and the way he'd look at me when someone made a comment—his eyes light and amused while his mouth didn't give an inch—because he knew what I was thinking when no one else did. I miss being understood.

And I don't want to miss anything. A week ago I was happy with my life, and now, *now*, it's as if I've given something up...something I want more than the life I actually have.



MY BOSS IS WAITING in reception to pounce on me when I walk through the office doors a few hours later. Dee is bone thin, unnaturally tall, and prone to wearing a fur stole whenever the temperature drops below 70, which never fails to make me think of Cruella de Vil. The comparison is, sadly, all too apt.

“Where’s the layout?” she demands, tapping her nails on the Lucite console beside her.

“Good morning, Dee,” I reply. “I’m feeling so much better, thanks.”

Not that I expected her to ask how I was after yesterday’s hospital visit. In six years at this magazine, she has never even managed to say *good morning*. For her to inquire about my health would require stronger mood stabilizers than modern medicine has discovered.

Her nose crinkles. “The layout, Quinn,” she says between her teeth. “Where is it?”

“I made the changes from home last night. I just need to print it out.”

“And where’s the Resort Wear preview?”

I sigh deeply. Lots of the people I graduated with love what they do and salivate at the idea of beginning a project. But graphic design was never my first choice, and I’m reminded of that every time Dee assigns me something new. “It’s not due until next week.”

Her mouth tightens. “Just because I give you a due date doesn’t mean you have to wait *until* the due date.”

“Hmmm,” I reply, walking past. As in, *hmmm, how interesting you think so*. I’ve learned over time that the best way to handle Dee is mostly by pretending she hasn’t spoken at all. I should have expected it, really. Do anything so egregious as take a vacation or a day of sick leave, and Dee will always come after you with sharpened fangs when you return.

Trevor, Dee’s lovely but beleaguered assistant, and my closest friend here, appears at my desk moments after I’ve opened up my Mac.

“Hmmm,” repeats Trevor, imitating my airy tone before he gives me a wide smile. “You already aggravate her enough by being so cute, you know, without *also* failing to kiss her ass.”

“She’ll fire me eventually.”

“Never,” he says decisively, perching on the edge of the file cabinet. “You know what she wants before *she* knows what she wants. What I don’t understand is why you stay.”

“I stay because she pays me more than any other graphic artist I know.” The move to D.C. has been hard on us—Jeff’s quit two jobs since we arrived six years ago and was let go from two others—and it’s made my tenure at *Washington Insider* last far longer than I’d have liked. For the foreseeable future, I need to know I can pay our bills by myself, because there’s no reason to think I won’t be doing so again.

Trevor generally manages to keep his opinions about my personal life to himself, but I see the response he’s holding in flash across his face—you *wouldn’t have to stay here if Jeff could keep a job*—before he blinks it away and grins at me. “Anyway, aren’t you going to ask me about my date?”

I groan. Trevor always shows me his dates’ Grindr profiles before he goes out—in part, because he’s excited, but mostly so I can avenge his death if something awful happens. Last night’s date—the guy with five different photos of his greased-up chest, the one whose profile read simply *I’m here to fuck*—actually looked slightly *less* creepy than most.

“I’m scared to ask, but how was your date?”

He closes his eyes, the smile on his face absolutely indecent. “You know when you’re messing around with someone and you want him so much you think you’ll die if you don’t get it?”

I assume the question is rhetorical, but when I don’t answer, he elbows me. “Come on. Jeff’s boring, but he’s still hot. At some point in your relationship, he’s had you ready to beg.”

I stiffen. “Not *everyone* is like that, Trevor. And Jeff isn’t boring. You just prefer guys who oil their chests over guys who call when they’re supposed to call and show up when they’ve promised they will.”

He pets my hair as he leaves, like it’s a fur coat or a cuddly pet. “Pretty, pretty Quinn. You break my heart sometimes.”

It’s nothing Trevor hasn’t said before, but given that I’ve been fantasizing about an absolute stranger for the better part of twenty-four hours, it’s sort of poorly timed.

After he leaves, I send the most recent layout to print and call my mother, who’s already left three messages so far this morning. Because she tends to handle uncertainty poorly, I told her yesterday’s blackout was the result of a pre-wedding diet. Only now do I realize this means I’ll spend the next seven weeks being interrogated about my food intake.

“You had breakfast, right?” she asks.

“Yes.” A nice big breakfast. Of coffee, but it had creamer, so I assume

that counts.

“What are you having for lunch?”

I laugh. “Mom, it’s not even nine a.m. I’m not thinking about lunch.”

“But you’re not going to forget to eat, right?”

“I promise I won’t.”

“Why on earth would you be on a diet anyway?” she demands. “You don’t have a pound to lose. Just please stop doing whatever it is.”

“Okay, I promise.”

She hesitates. “When you woke yesterday, you asked for someone named Nick. Do you remember?”

Crap. I was really hoping she wouldn’t bring it up. “Yeah.”

“That was the name you used to mention when you were little. Those nightmares you had. I guess it was just a coincidence?” There’s a hint of pleading to her voice—she desperately *wants* it to be a coincidence—but my God I wish there was one person I could discuss this with. To say *I miss someone I’ve never met. I grieve for him.* My mother, however, will never be that person. “Yeah, I guess.”

“It was...shocking...hearing you ask for him,” she says quietly. “Just like it was when you were small. You seemed so certain it was true.”

I hesitate. I remember little about the year I spent in therapy, aside from the strain on my mother’s face each time she brought me in. I was her miracle baby, the child she never thought they’d have, and I was flawed. I wanted to become normal for her, but at the end of most sessions my mother seemed a little more hopeless than the time before. “Did the psychologist ever tell you why it was happening?” I ask cautiously.

“She just said you had a very active imagination. But it finally stopped. And the other stuff...” There is a long, awkward pause. We really don’t discuss *the other stuff*. “Well, after what happened with the Petersons, you seemed to grow out of it, mostly.” Her words end on a whisper. Perhaps she thinks saying it quietly means she’s admitted to less. “Anyway, the nightmares stopped, and that’s what matters.”

I wish I shared her certainty that this is over. But when I think of Nick—of his laugh and the way he looked at me, as if he knew me in a way no one else ever has—a sort of panic thrums in my chest. I didn’t want the nightmares. But I don’t want this either. In some ways, it scares me even more.



THAT NIGHT, Trevor and I head out for drinks, swinging by my friend Caroline's office to grab her on the way. Though Caroline was my friend first, she and Trevor have been attached at the hip since I started throwing her work for the magazine.

"Quinn," she says, shaking her perfect, jet-black bob as I walk in, "*what* are you wearing?"

I sigh. I never take her comments too personally—as a stylist, she has a far higher bar for clothing choices than most people—but occasionally, I wish she'd just let it go.

"Instead of telling me how I've chosen wrong, just go ahead and dress me."

She squeals and claps her hands. "I love when you let me dress you," she sings. She grins at Trevor. "It's like having a grown-up doll to play with. You should make her come see me every morning."

Trevor's palm shoots out. "No. Absolutely not. Dee already resents her just for being young and pretty. You start putting her in nice clothes and makeup every day, and we will all suffer."

Five minutes later, I walk out of her bathroom in a Dries Van Noten dress that could pay my mortgage, and Caroline is appeased. "So much better."

I have to agree. I wouldn't say I'm *frumpy* under normal circumstances, but when Caroline gets her hands on me, I wind up feeling like Gigi Hadid, which is an experience words can't sufficiently describe.

"If only Lindsay could see you now," says Caroline. "You could tell her to shove that Hermes purse right up her ass."

I laugh. I cannot believe Caroline is still holding a grudge about the purse incident nearly a decade later. I'm not sure I'd even remember it if she didn't reference it so often.

"Who's Lindsay?" asks Trevor.

"This girl on our floor freshman year," I reply. "She was awful to everyone but she hated me the most because I was there on a scholarship."

"No," corrects Caroline, "she hated you because you were her first experience of not being the hottest girl in the room. That's why she went out of her way to throw her money in your face." She turns to Trevor. "You know that Hermes Kelly bag? Real ones are like ten grand, but we found the best knock-off and I talked Quinn into it. And then we get back to the dorm,

and Lindsay says, ‘Bless your little heart. It almost looks like a *real* Kelly bag.’ And then the bitch goes and buys a real one, just to show she can.”

I shrug. “Well, I’d suggest karma would get her eventually, but she’s got this amazing job and she’s married to some millionaire, so I guess she won in the end.”

Trevor and Caroline glance at each other. “You could have that too, if you wanted,” says Trevor cautiously.

I roll my eyes. “I *don’t* want that. You know I was just joking. And you’re in my wedding in seven weeks, remember?”

“But the job,” Caroline says. “You’re only twenty-eight. You could still go back to school.”

I wrap an arm around each of them and pull them close for a moment as we walk down the street. “I appreciate your concern, guys, but I don’t need Lindsay’s life. The one I have is just fine with me.”

I force myself not to think of Nick as I say these words. But inside, it sort of feels like a lie.



WHEN I FINALLY GET INTO bed, I’m exhausted and a tiny bit buzzed, which I hope means there will be no dreams of Nick. I want to have nonsensical, boring dreams—the kind where the toilet floods and I have to fix it using a car engine, or where my boss is at my wedding demanding I return to work to correct something, although the latter seems completely within the realm of possibility. But even as my eyes shut, I already feel Nick calling to me, as if he’s been waiting for me to find him again, somewhere inside my head.

Nick stands on the dock, shirtless and surrounded by sunlight, like some kind of mythical figure. Watching me float away.

“Hey!” I call, just a hint of panic in my voice. “I don’t know how to sail this thing.”

I don’t know how to sail anything, not even the tiny Sunfish that the current took as soon as he untied it from the dock.

“It’s okay,” he calls out. “Just pull the sail to the left.”

I do what he says, but that seems to send me farther. I stand, balancing in the center and waving to him. “SOS!”

He smiles, sweet and sheepish in the same moment, and that dimple

appears. God, I love that dimple. It makes me feel as if my heart has swelled until it is pushing against my sternum—my ribs stretched to the point of pain. I watch him dive in, all lean muscle and easy grace, the sunlight glinting off his back. His strokes as he swims toward me are long and even. He reaches the boat in no time at all, which amazes me, though it shouldn't. He got a full scholarship based on that particular ability of his.

He pulls himself up and over the side of the boat in a single fluid move. We lean toward each other, and when he kisses me, I forget we're on a boat, in the middle of a lake. All I know is him, warm and sweet and whole beside me. The past few months have been hard, for both of us, but I know in this moment we will be fine. There is something about the two of us that seems to survive all things. Tragedy strikes and we wobble like bowling pins but return to our places, upright and beside each other.

"Thank you for swimming out to get me," I whisper.

His words are low and warm against my ear, his voice serious and perhaps a little sad. "I'll never just let you float away," he replies.



WHEN I WAKE, Jeff is asleep, draped heavily around my back like a blanket, and for the first time in all the years I've known him, the feel of him against me brings with it a deep swell of panic. While I refuse to feel guilty about dreams I have no control over, the fact that I can't stand my fiancé touching me afterward? Yes, I can *and should* feel guilty about that.

I quietly extricate myself, as my head starts to throb, and go to the living room. It's still dark out, and in the dim light the room feels sort of foreign to me. Nothing has changed, yet it just isn't mine somehow. I look around the room and try to remember why I chose this stuff—the staid furniture, heavy wood, dark colors. But then, I guess I didn't really *choose* any of it. I just didn't argue against it.

A traitorous voice in my head asks, for the first time, if that's how Jeff and I ended up together too. It's a ridiculous question, of course, because Jeff and I were bound to end up together eventually—our parents were best friends and he was our rock after my father died. But at the same time, it seems like part of a pattern: my life consists entirely of things that occurred by default or were chosen by someone else first.

I lie on the couch but remain awake until it's light out, wanting only to be rid of this unsettled feeling, this sudden discontentment with everything. Jeff emerges from the bedroom just as I'm rising and regards me through half-lidded eyes, scratching his stomach.

"You having another headache?" he asks.

I am, actually. I've gotten so accustomed to them I barely noticed. "Yeah, they're pretty much a constant at this point."

He wraps his arms around my waist and I lay my head against his chest. His skin is clammy. Wiry chest hairs poke at my cheek.

"What's going on, babe?" he asks. "Is it the wedding?"

I can't tell him the truth. I can't. "Maybe. It's been a stressful couple of weeks."

"Not having second thoughts, are you?" he asks, laughing. Of course he would laugh. Because it's unthinkable. We are not the kind of people who have second thoughts. But we also aren't the kind of people who fantasize about others. And now, it appears, I am.

QUINN

On Monday, it is Caroline who drives me out to the inn to finalize wedding plans, since Jeff was busy and I was nervous about driving alone, given what happened the other day. Caroline is able to take off work without a ration of shit since she's her own boss, and not for the first time, I wonder what my life might be like if I hadn't left school to take care of my dad. Would I have a job I love? Would I be able to set my own hours? If he hadn't gotten sick, if my mother hadn't fallen apart so completely...but what's done is done. You can't change the past.

"I love Trevor," she says, "but his ideas for your bachelorette party leave much to be desired."

"Such as?"

"*Prostitutes*, Quinn. I'm not joking. He wants me to bring in prostitutes."

"Oh my God. To strip?"

"No. You hire *strippers* to strip."

I give a choked laugh. "So for sex? How would that even work? Is he thinking I'd just, like...go into the bathroom with one of them?"

"He said 'guys do it, so why shouldn't she? I want her to see what she's missing.'"

I sigh. "He seems to be under the impression that just because I'm not all 'do me, Jeff, right now,' that we're missing something."

I expect her to laugh but she's oddly quiet. "But you're like that *sometimes*, right?"

I slant a glance at her. “*Et tu, Brute?* Please don’t join the last-minute chorus of people telling me I’m making a mistake. I mean, you’ve had *years* to tell me this, so mere weeks before my wedding is just...rude.”

“I’m not,” she argues. “You know I think Jeff’s great. And to be fair, I have asked you about this before. Right before you moved in with him.”

I broke up with Jeff to move back to D.C., but when he followed me here—showing up on my doorstep with this impassioned speech straight out of a romance—it felt like fate, like the kind of thing I was supposed to give into. I was torn at the time, but it’s all kind of romantic, in hindsight. “I thought you just wanted to make sure I’d thought it through. I didn’t think you were trying to dissuade me.”

“I wasn’t, necessarily. I just didn’t...I wasn’t sure he made you happy.”

“Of course he does,” I reply, shocked she’d even think it. Jeff might not be the most exciting guy, but that’s fine with me. What matters far more is that he is cute and kind, reliable and steadfast. While Caroline and Trevor sit around bemoaning men who forget to call, who change plans without warning or hook up with the blond at the gym, I’ve found someone who remembers every anniversary and doesn’t even seem to realize other women exist. “Where is this coming from? The other day you guys are telling me it’s not too late to change my mind and now this?”

She gives me an apologetic smile before she looks back at the road. “I know you love him, and I know he’s a good guy, but when was the last time you were happy with him?”

My head jerks back. “I’m happy now! And if I don’t seem happy that’s not his fault. It’s just who I am.”

Her eyes flicker to me once more and she frowns. *But it’s not who you were*, her look says.

I turn up the radio and change the subject, because I cannot think about this right now. There are times in your life when you just have to focus, get through something and leave all the considering and mulling over behind. And despite the dreams about Nick, this is that time. I’m getting married in a matter of weeks. It’d be too late to change my mind if I wanted to. And I don’t want to.

I really don’t.



WE SIT in the inn's small restaurant with my mother, going over the guest list. The din of their lunchtime service grates, though it probably has more to do with how on edge I've felt ever since we got to town, just like I was the last time. It's driving me crazy, this feeling. As if I'm supposed to know something I don't.

"Jeff's friends from college," my mother says, "do we keep them all together or split them up? And do you know yet if his friend Tim is bringing the baby?" She clicks her pen, poised for an answer I can't provide. It's easily the tenth question she's asked about Jeff and his friends about which I have no clue.

I groan. "I should have made Jeff come for this."

"Well," my mother says with a fond smile, "he had to work."

"So did I," I reply.

She pats my arm. "When push comes to shove, you need someone who puts work first."

Of course, she would say this. She's spent her entire life on a farm, where work has to come first, where it begins early and ends late and doesn't offer four weeks of paid vacation. And perhaps that's why the transition to D.C. has been so hard on Jeff—because he was raised to believe that putting your nose to the grindstone is the path to success, and it hasn't panned out for him here. No matter how hard he works, there is always someone craftier or cannier taking his clients, stealing his thunder.

My mother puts the guest list aside, apparently tired of asking me questions I can't answer. "Let's walk outside and look at the space again," she says. "I think we need a feel for how it will all be laid out, and you barely saw it the last time."

I feel a twitch, a tremor, in my chest, even as I agree. I realize the little white house in the distance didn't *cause* what happened the other day, much like stepping on a crack will not actually break your mother's back, but...it happened. And I don't want it to happen again.

Outdoors it is stifling, and painfully bright, the very air tinged a harsh gold, making things seem ominous in some way I can't name. But my mother and Caroline are oblivious to it, so I push myself forward, alongside them. They're talking about valets and overflow parking, but I can't seem to follow the conversation.

We pass the edge of the inn. The lake is spread before us, so deep blue it appears bottomless. I inhale and then force my gaze up to the right, to the

white house I wish wasn't there.

I cannot look away.

My mom and Caroline politely disagree about table placement and if we need one bar or two, and my eyes are locked, unmoving, on that house, seeing it in my head, though it's at least a quarter mile away—a wide deck, a dock with a tiny boat bobbing alongside it. I see Nick there too, younger than he was in London. That dream I had last night...it took place there. I'm certain of it. Images sharpen in my mind, and I begin to shiver, hugging myself for warmth.

"Goodness, Quinn, what's wrong with you? It's almost ninety degrees," my mother says, but her voice is distant, tinny, and then there are no sounds at all.



I LAND ON THE FLOOR, hard, my legs tangled in sheets and butt naked aside from them.

I have a single moment in which I am utterly blank. Unsure of the month or the year, or why I'm in this room with high, arched windows, winter sunlight illuminating dust motes in the air. And then a face appears over the side of the bed. Blue eyes flecked with gold, broad shoulders, the flash of a smile.

"I'm trying not to laugh," Nick says.

I grin. "This is very sexy, isn't it, the way I'm all splayed out on the floor?"

There's a gleam in his eye that wasn't there moments before. "Honestly? Yeah. A little."

He reaches one long, perfectly formed arm out to hoist me into bed. I land on top of him, smiling as I take in his face. God, I love him so much it hurts.

"Good morning, Mrs. Reilly," he says, nuzzling my neck.

I breathe him in. "Good morning, Dr. Reilly."

Outside, Paris waits, but neither of us care. We are drunk on the novelty of this, waking up married. I've been a bit drunk, truthfully, on the novelty of having found him at all. Two Americans who chose London at the same time. If I hadn't gone to the hospital for a migraine days after arriving, if Nick's

rotation hadn't gotten messed up, so that he was in neurology rather than peds that week—I can't even imagine. There is obviously something greater at play with us, something more than mere fate. But whatever it is, even if we can never explain it, it's something good.

"We'll need to call home and tell our parents today," he says. We've avoided this, knowing it would meet with nothing but objections on both sides. I'd like to keep avoiding it, personally.

"They're going to think we're crazy."

He pushes my hair behind my ear. "It is a little crazy. But they'll get it once they see us together. We'll go back to the States over break, charm everyone, and they'll be fine."

I sigh. "I'm not sure my mother will be as easily won over as you think. But then, I wasn't easily won over either, and look at me now."

"I am looking at you now," he says. He flips me so I'm flat on my back and then looms over me, his gaze on my mouth. "And it looks like you need to be won over a little more."

I pull him down, waiting for the delicious weight of him settling against me, but before it happens, there is this din in my head, sudden and loud.

The dull throb of a migraine, and a voice—shrill, unrelenting as an alarm. I'd give anything to silence it.

"Quinn!" a woman's voice cries, the pitch rising. My head feels as if it's splitting open from the inside, as if it will cleave into two perfect halves like a watermelon. I groan and push at my temples as I force my eyes open. I'm standing in the grass, beside a lake, being shaken by this panicked woman and Nick...is gone.

The memories flood my brain: the quick wedding in London, Nick and I unable to stop smiling through the whole thing, fully aware it was insane to marry someone you'd known so briefly. The honeymoon itself, spent mostly naked in our hotel room. The dread I felt at the thought of calling my mother.

*My mother. It comes to me with a startled gasp—she's the woman standing here, shaking me. My eyes open and fill with tears. Nick is not my husband. He's not *anything*. How can he possibly not exist when I remember him in such detail? When I feel so much for him?*

"You just completely went blank there, like you were asleep standing up!" my mother cries. "You looked like a corpse! We're going to the hospital."

The pain is unbearable, a pendulum of it swinging through my brain,

bruising me a little more with each rotation. Before I can argue that a trip to the hospital is unnecessary, I drop to my knees and throw up in the grass.



I KNOW it's different this time, that it's serious. After the longest, most arduous car ride of my life, Caroline and I arrive back in the same emergency room I sat in last week. This time I'm taken straight to neurology, where a nurse says she's going to give me something for the pain that will put me to sleep for a while. *Will I even wake up from this?* I wonder, as the needle goes into my arm. *Do I really care if I don't?*

"What's going to happen?" I ask. My words are slurred, my brain sinking somewhere dark and hazy.

"You'll be just fine," she says with a pat on the shoulder. "I'll make sure Dr. Reilly is there to see you as soon as you wake up."

My eyes flutter closed before I can ask if I've heard her correctly.

NICK

I get to the cafeteria just after Meg does and slide my tray next to hers at the salad bar. She watches me make my salad and turns away. “Just once, I’d like to see you live a little.”

“In what way?” I ask, loading a second chicken breast on my plate.

“That,” she says, nodding toward my tray. “You probably burned a thousand calories swimming this morning, but it’s like the world will fall apart if you actually use dressing or cheese, or anything that would make your meal pleasant instead of merely healthy.”

I shrug. “You see people die every day. Isn’t it enough to be alive without needing everything to be *fun* on top of it?”

“I’m not saying everything has to be fun,” she argues. “But the minute you seem to enjoy yourself, it’s like you feel guilty about it or something. It’s okay to have a *little* fun.”

“Believe me, if I was in the mood for fun, it would not involve blue cheese dressing.” I grin at her, but she doesn’t smile back. There’s a shadow to her eyes I’ve seen before, a warning sign that she’s unhappy about something.

I pay and we take our seats, but she remains silent, grim. I pinch the bridge of my nose and brace myself for the relationship talk that appears to be coming. “What’s up?”

Her eyes are on the table instead of me, her palms pressed against it, trying to rein herself in. “You were talking in your sleep last night.”

Fuck.

I'm generally an open book, but there are two recurring dreams I've had for years that I'd prefer to keep to myself, for Meg's sake as much as my own. There's the one about the girl on the boat, obviously, and a similar one in which I'm dancing outside with that same girl—I know it's her though I can never quite make out her face—and trying to summon the courage to ask her something. I've always wondered if it's a metaphor for my fear of commitment, although in the dream I want that commitment as much as I want my next breath. But it's sure as hell nothing I need Meg to hear about. "Yeah?"

She continues to avoid my eye. "Yeah. And it was like you were talking to someone you were *with*. You were promising her she'd be fine and then you were..." she swallows. "You were yelling at someone to get away from her."

I have no idea what she's talking about, but it sounds like an accusation, which leaves me feeling both annoyed and guilty at once. I force a laugh. "Maybe I was dreaming about the EMT that kept asking you out."

Her lips press tight. "You weren't dreaming about me."

I blow out a breath, suddenly tired. Meg and I have known each other a long time. She knew the deal when I returned from London. She knew my romantic history consisted only of brief, relatively meaningless relationships, and that I couldn't promise ours would be any different. And things are going well, much better than I thought, but she can't start scrutinizing what happens in my *sleep*. "How could you possibly know that?"

"Because," she says, "you sounded like you were in love with her. And you've never once sounded like that with me."

Another accusation. It bothers her that I won't say it, that I can't say it. It bothers me too, but I just need to be sure about things and I'm not there yet. "Meg—"

She holds up her hand. "*Don't*. I know you said you just want something casual and you can't make any promises. What bothers me is that you made it sound like you don't think you're *capable* of more, and obviously you are."

"It was just a dream."

She nods. I've never seen her cry but she's swallowing hard now, as if she might, and I hate myself in this moment. I want to be better and do better by her. I've just got to figure out how.



AFTER OUR LUNCH CONCLUDES, I get upstairs and a resident briefs me on my next patient as we walk down the hall. “Quinn Stewart. Twenty-eight-year-old female. Fell last week and suffered some memory loss. Today, she appeared to go unconscious for a few minutes, still standing, and she came to with some memory loss and a severe migraine. The pain was so bad they had to sedate her.”

I rub the back of my neck. A migraine *that* severe is not a good omen. I send him off to check on someone down in oncology, and then tap on the door and walk in. The patient is asleep, but her face is turned toward me.

My heart seems to give one long audible thud and my steps stutter to a halt.

It’s her—the girl in the dream. I’ve never seen her face clearly, and yet standing here the experience of it is the same. If I were standing on a dock right now I’d dive off and swim to her.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. *Jesus Christ, what’s wrong with me?* I’m a neurologist. I should know, better than almost anyone in this hospital, that the brain is capable of tricking you into thinking anything is true. It happens to my patients all the time. I just had no idea it would feel this fucking real.

A guy sitting in the corner chair rises and I turn toward him, extending my hand, scrambling to feign normalcy. “I’m Nick Reilly. And you’re...”

“Jeff Walker. Quinn’s fiancé.”

I frown, irritated by him for no reason. *Focus. You’re here to do a job.* “I saw in the chart that this happened last week too, so I have to ask: does she have any issues with drugs and alcohol?”

“No,” he says. “None. They gave her something for the pain that knocked her out, but she barely even drinks.”

I walk to her bedside. She lies there like a beautiful present, waiting to be unwrapped and discovered. Her eyes are closed, but I already know their color—smoky green, like the forest seen through fog. I can picture them in my head, as familiar to me as my own. Her lids flicker and her hand trails along the side of the bed until it finds mine. Her fingers curl there, as if it’s something she’s done a thousand times. I slide my hand away quickly, hoping her fiancé didn’t notice.

“Hey,” she says, the word slurred, half-asleep. “How was your swim?”

I freeze, wondering if I’ve heard her correctly. “I... How do you know I

went swimming?”

She laughs, a throaty noise that strikes a chord inside me, like a song I’d forgotten I loved. “You’re cranky if you skip it,” she murmurs.

My breath comes short. I can name on one hand the number of people who know this about me, so how the fuck does she? Across the room, her fiancé has gone rigid. It’s like I’ve walked into some soap opera without knowing my part. “Um...have we met?”

Her mouth curves upward but she doesn’t answer, so I try again. “Quinn, how did we meet?”

“Hospital,” she says. “London.”

At last something makes sense. I’m still hard-pressed to imagine how I could have treated anyone who looks like her and *forgotten*, but I’m not sure there’s another explanation. “Right,” I reply. “Sorry it slipped my mind. I was a resident, so I saw a ton of patients.”

She smiles as she drifts back to sleep. “That’s okay,” she murmurs. “As long as I’m the only one you married.”

The words hit me like a hammer. Somewhere inside me they land, settle in and feel true, even though I know they can’t be.

Her fiancé sits wide-eyed, his frown deepening. “You two know each other?” he asks.

For a moment my mind is blank. *Do we?* No. I know I haven’t met her. I know I’d remember her. I shake my head. “People can say crazy things when they’re sedated. I have no memory of meeting your girlfriend—”

He cuts me off. “Fiancée.”

I’m irritated by his outburst and ignore it. “—but I did my residency in London, so she must have been a patient.”

His frown deepens. “One problem. Quinn’s never been out of the country.”

The hairs on the back of my neck go up. She knew about the swimming, and she knew I was in London. How? I only got back to the States last summer and I’ve been dating Meg the entire time.

The guy is staring me down like a detective waiting for the perp to confess. I grit my teeth. I have no idea what’s going on here, but their interpersonal drama is not my concern. “Like I said before, people say a lot of things when sedated. Anyhow, since this is the second episode in a week, I’d like her to remain overnight. I’ll get her on the schedule for an MRI in the morning.”

“She’s not going to like that,” he says. “She’s going to want to get back to work.”

I glance over at her. I’ve certainly encountered workaholic patients who insist they’re too busy to get a test that could save their lives, but she looks so calm right now, so peaceful, that it’s hard to imagine her being one of them. I think she’s an architect—I must have seen it in her chart—and not to demean her profession, but it’s not like the fate of the world rests in her hands. “She needs an MRI,” I reply, my voice hard and unyielding. “So I’d suggest you make sure she gets it.”

He looks taken aback, but I don’t care. I just need to get the fuck out of this room.



I’M NOT MUCH of a drinker, but I need a damn drink. I call Jace, a friend who was in med school with me and then wound up at the same hospital years later. His wife and Meg have become friends, which should make me happy, but instead makes me feel a little trapped.

I meet him at Clyde’s, a few blocks from the hospital. It hasn’t changed since we were in school—same wood bar, tightly packed tables, dim lighting. He casts a glance at the double scotch in my hand and grins. “Heard you and Meg are moving in together. Is that why we’re hitting the heavy stuff before dinner?”

For a moment, the words don’t even register, and then I laugh unhappily. “We aren’t moving in together. She’s going to stay at my place until she finds something else. But it appears you’ve heard otherwise.”

“Maybe I misunderstood,” he says with a smirk. A smirk that says what we both know, which is that he didn’t misunderstand anything at all. “So, what’s up?”

I take a sip of my scotch and then set it down, staring straight ahead at the mirror behind the bar. “I’m going to tell you something that sounds crazy.”

“I doubt it’ll sound all that crazy to me,” he replies. Jace is an obstetrician. Of all our friends, he tends to have the most bizarre stories—patients who’ve contracted sexually transmitted diseases from pets, a woman with a baby hanging between her legs by the umbilical cord as she exits the elevator.

“This may even top one of your stories,” I tell him, hesitating before I start to recount what happened this afternoon. It’s so surreal I’m starting to wonder if I’ve gotten the facts wrong. “I walk into a patient’s room today. A new patient. She’s sedated and her eyes are closed, but when I get to her bedside she seems to know who I am.” I pause, taking another sip of scotch. “She knew that I swim every morning. She knew I was in London for my residency. And then she says something about how we were married.”

Jace tips his head. “Come on, bro. She’s fucking with you.”

“How? Her eyes were closed. She’d never even met me.”

He shrugs. “You had a million fangirls when you were swimming. She’s probably some superfan and knew you’d be the one treating her.”

I shake my head. “I really don’t think so. She knew way too much, and she said it all in front of her fiancé, who was clearly unhappy about it, by the way.”

“What other explanation is there? Unless you believe in psychics.”

I stare at my drink. “Here’s the thing: I’ve seen her before. I mean, not in real life. I’ve dreamed about her.” Jace is looking at me like I’m crazy, which I can hardly fault him for. I wonder if this is how I look at my patients sometimes. God, I hope not. “I know this sounds nuts, but I swear I’ve dreamed about her. And in those dreams we’re definitely together, and then here she is today telling me we’re married. I mean, I know it’s not true, but it’s like I’m somehow not connecting to a huge part of my memory.”

He raises a brow. “Well, no matter what has happened and no matter what you feel, she’s still your patient. You can’t act on it.”

I scowl at him. “Of course I’m not going to *act* on it,” I reply. “Give me a little credit. I’m just trying to figure out what the hell is going on.”

He appears unimpressed by this situation, like it’s an every-day occurrence to feel intensely attached to a patient you’ve never met, and then have her claim to be your wife. “Look, you probably had a dream about a girl who looks vaguely like her, nothing more. And then your mind drew these connecting lines where they don’t exist. The real question is why you’re doing it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He leans on the bar, swinging his stool to face me. “Don’t you think the timing of it is a little suspect? Your fear of commitment is legendary, and now the minute you and Meg start moving in together, *bam*, you decide you’ve been dreaming about a patient you’ve never met. You’re freaking out

and looking for the escape hatch. Nothing more.”

“We aren’t moving in together,” I mutter, swirling the ice in my empty glass.

“Fine, whatever,” he says. “You and Meg are moving forward. Same thing.”

Fuck. I want to be someone who can do that, move a relationship forward. I want it to be with Meg. But the fact that I’m now feeling so attached to a complete stranger tells me I’m definitely not ready to do so. And a piece of me wonders if Quinn Stewart is the reason why.

QUINN

Nick and I are in our favorite pub. It's a recent find, and though the drinks are overpriced, the music is amazing—it's mostly British bands, but they play a fair amount of older stuff from home.

"Everlong" by Foo Fighters comes on and most of the bar starts singing. I've never given the lyrics much thought but as we sing-shout them tonight, I realize how perfect they are. It's a song about love, perhaps a slightly obsessive love, and meeting someone you waited for, maybe before you even knew he existed. I have goose bumps when it concludes.

"I've loved that song since I was a kid," Nick says, holding my eye. "But now I think it's my favorite."

"Mine too," I whisper.

A rotation of British bands starts up next. Arctic Monkeys, Florence and the Machine—music you can dance to. The crowd even manages to dance to Radiohead, though I'm not sure how. "Sofa Song" by The Kooks starts playing and he grabs my hand.

"Come on," he says.

"I don't dance," I whine, pulling back. "Remember? That whole thing where I was so bad at it you had to propose just to make it stop?"

He laughs. "Yes, thank God I happened to have an engagement ring in my pocket that night."

On the dance floor he gets me in position and coaches me once more, with his "one, two, one, two, rock step". Then he spins me out and back to

him. As I land against his chest I feel a shift inside me, and it's as if I'm in two places at once. Here with him now, but also in his childhood treehouse. The treehouse I've never laid eyes on but know intimately. I remember the creak of the floorboards under our feet, the slanted roof he had to duck to avoid. A chill creeps up from the base of my spine. "I feel like we've done this before," I tell him. The words are spoken at a near-whisper. "In your treehouse."

He pulls me closer, knowing this weird knowledge I have of us unsettles me. "All I care about is the fact that you're with me now," he says.

I smile, but my throat tightens at his words. Lately I've had this odd sense that our time is running out, and I have no idea why. "Distract me," I whisper.

With a flick of his wrist I'm spinning away from him, anchored by his hand, and then twirling back. When I look up again, his face is inches from mine. "Distracting enough?" he asks.

"Yeah." My shoulders settle and I smile up at him. "I think we're okay at this as long you're doing all the work."

A feral light is in his eyes that wasn't there a moment ago. "I'm more than happy to do all the work," he says, his voice low and raspy, "if that's what you're worried about."

Desire is like a fist, squeezing tight in my stomach.

"Take me home," I say, going on my toes to press my mouth to his. "You're at your most distracting there."



JEFF IS GAZING at me just as my eyes open. I swallow down that terrible disappointment I always feel when I discover him in Nick's place, closely followed by guilt over the disappointment. He forces a small smile but seems...irked. "I'll be right back," he says. "I'm supposed to let them know when you're up."

He returns with a nurse a minute later. She asks a number of relevant questions about my accident and my general health, as well as a number of ridiculous ones about drug use and suicidal thoughts. She says they'd like to keep me overnight, but when she asks to speak to Jeff privately, I feel a bubble of frustration pop inside me. I am not a child.

“Aren’t there laws that prevent discussing my case with outsiders?” I snap.

Jeff’s mouth falls open. “*Outsider?*” he demands. “I’m going to be your husband in a few weeks, remember?”

The nurse looks between the two of us. “I’ll give you some time to chat,” she says, backing from the room.

I know from Jeff’s wounded expression that I need to backpedal, though I feel like doing anything but. “I didn’t mean you were literally an outsider. But she’s asking all these questions as if I passed out *on purpose*, and then she wants to talk to you alone? I don’t need people discussing my case behind my back.”

He takes the seat beside me and sits there, his jaw shifting. “Hon,” he says quietly, not meeting my eye, “who’s Nick?”

My stomach drops. God only knows what I said when I was sedated, but I can certainly imagine how bad it could have been, given how many hours I’ve spent dreaming about Nick and what we were *doing* during those hours. “I don’t know anyone named Nick,” I whisper. He doesn’t believe me and I can’t fault him—it sounds like a lie to me too.

“You asked for him that day, the first day you passed out,” Jeff says, the words coming faster, carried by an undercurrent that is undeniably angry. “You didn’t even fucking *remember* me, but you were asking for him. And then this doctor comes in tonight, a doctor named *Nick*, and you fucking hold his hand and tell him you’re married to him.”

My heart has climbed all the way to my throat. I have no idea what he’s talking about, but I’ve kept a pretty tight lid on my words for years, and the possibility that I let the lid come loose is terrifying. I scramble back through my memory, but all I come up with is Caroline bringing me here and a needle going into my arm.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. It must be a coincidence.” A bizarre, *humiliating* coincidence. There isn’t a bone in my body that believes the Nick who apparently came into my room earlier is the same one I’ve been dreaming about. Nick is a common name, and, more importantly, it’s just not possible. I press my hands to my heated face. “God. That’s so embarrassing.”

“It’s more than that,” Jeff says, rising, his fists clenched. “You *knew* him. You knew stuff about him you shouldn’t have known unless you dated him.”

I grow still. “Like what?”

“You knew that he goes swimming every day and you knew he did his

residency in London.”

It takes a moment to find my voice, and when I do it’s a shadow of itself. “So are you saying I was *correct*?” I whisper.

“Yes,” he spits. “You were correct. The guy seemed as freaked out as I was. Which really only leaves a few possibilities. You’re stalking him or you’ve been seeing him.”

For a moment, my jaw hangs open, stunned into speechlessness. The fact that the doctor is named Nick could be a coincidence. But the swimming? London? That seems like a few too many coincidences. And if it’s him, if it’s really him...is he a lot older? I was dreaming about Nick when I was toddler. Which means he’d be pushing sixty by now.

I take a deep breath. Jeff is standing there, waiting for a response from me and growing paler every second I don’t offer one. “Of course I’m not stalking him or seeing him,” I finally say. “I don’t even know who you’re *talking* about.”

He presses the base of his hand to his forehead. “Look. I just need the truth. Are you... Is there someone else?”

I blink once, twice, stalling for time. Looking for an answer that won’t be a lie. On one hand, I know I’ve done nothing wrong. On the other, there is definitely someone else, someone who may, possibly, exist. I’m not a dishonest person, but this isn’t a time when the whole truth will help anyone. “No. I’m not seeing anyone. Of course I’m not. And this whole thing is hard enough without you trying to make me feel bad about something crazy I said when I was sedated.”

His eyes close, and his teeth grind against each other. “It’s not just one crazy thing you said. It’s several. Plus the hickey last week.”

I bury my face in my hands. “It wasn’t a hickey! It was just a weird bruise.” I can’t believe this is still a *thing*, that it’s even a question. “My God, Jeff. Is our relationship really so fragile that this is the first conclusion you jump to?”

His shoulders sag. “No, it’s not. I’m sorry. Okay? I’m sorry. You just knew a lot about him, and if it was a coincidence, it was a bizarre one.”

I nod, restraining a thousand questions I would like to ask right now: *what did the doctor look like? Was he our age? Our parents’ age? What was his last name? Did he know me too?* I’m imprisoned by my inability to ask, by the fact that any question at all will trigger suspicion.

There’s a knock on the door and my head jerks toward it, my pulse

racing. A nurse enters with dinner for me and I fall back into the pillow, struggling to hide my disappointment.

“You can have it,” I tell Jeff. “I’m not hungry.”

He shrugs and eats the bland meal without complaint, but that is just him—he takes what he’s given, he’s happy with it and he doesn’t ask for more. Nick, at least as I’ve imagined him, is not like that. He’s hungry—for knowledge and experience and competition. He’s hungry, most of all, for me. I grow wet just picturing that ferocity of his, the restrained violence in him when he flips me on my back and crawls over me.

Jeff looks up from his tray. “You okay?” he asks. “You’re all red.”

Jesus. My fiancé is sitting five feet from me in the freaking hospital and I’m fantasizing about someone else. “It’s hot in here,” I say, waving a hand in front of my face.

My God. What if it’s really Nick, my Nick, who walks in here tomorrow? What if he’s twice my age now? What if it isn’t him at all?

I find each of those possibilities equally terrifying.



JEFF HAS ALREADY LEFT for work by the time I wake the next day, and that’s probably for the best, given that I’ve spent another night dreaming about Nick, and London.

Today I wake knowing it costs six pounds to take the Underground to Kensington. I know how to convert currency. I know that Covent Garden isn’t a garden at all but an outdoor mall, and that *pants* over there actually means *underwear*. And it’s different than things you’d learn from a book, or a show. I know these things, not as if I saw them, but as if I lived them.

I climb from the bed and grab the wedding binder out of my bag. I draw the shops at Covent Garden. I draw a rough map tracing the streets I would take to get to the Underground. The walk to University College. Then, grabbing my phone and ignoring the wealth of angry texts from Dee—who was expecting me back at work yesterday—I go online and type in *Harley Street, Marylebone*.

Before me a map appears, precisely matching my own.

I hit the button to see a photo of the street view and there, on the phone screen, is the exterior I drew a few days ago—Nick’s flat, white stucco and

brown brick. An arched portico, double doors. I even got the bushes in front right.

I slam the sketchbook shut, feeling like I'm going to be sick. *This isn't possible, this isn't possible. I'm seeing things, or this is some kind of extended dream.* I open my eyes and the photo is still there on my phone, assuring me it happened.

There's a light tap on the door, and Caroline walks in carrying a big bag in her left hand. "Hey, sicko," she says, oblivious to my freak-out. "You scared the piss out of everyone yesterday."

I force a smile. "Sorry. I hear I wasn't such a fun travel companion on the way home."

"No worries. The stories I'll have after your bachelorette will make up for everything, especially since I told Trevor to move ahead with hiring the prostitutes."

I laugh weakly and she swings the bag she's carrying onto the bed. "I knew you'd be too freaked out about Dee's wrath to go home to change, so I brought you toiletries and clothes." She reaches inside it and hands me a smaller bag from Blue Mercury. "Plus a few other necessities."

I peek inside: Bobbi Brown eyeliner, mascara, and gloss. "I love you so much."

"More than Jeff?"

"Obviously. All he's ever given me was this dumb ring." I smile as I say it, but Caroline's known me way too long not to pick up when something's amiss.

"What's up?" she asks. "I mean, aside from the fact that there's obviously something wrong with your brain, that is."

I bite my lip. I've had a long history of hiding my strangeness from people, even her. I know all too well it's something even those who love me most are unable to accept. But I can't keep dealing with this on my own. Sighing, I hand her the sketchpad.

"Look," I whisper.

Her brow furrows. "Uh...it's a nice drawing? But you've always been amazing at drawing buildings."

"It's London. Harley Street, in Marylebone. I keep dreaming about it, but I've never even been there. And you know what? Covent Garden. I thought it was an actual garden, but it's not. It's, like, an outdoor mall."

"Everyone knows it's a mall."

“I didn’t. But now I know every store...” I trail off, frustrated by the impossibility of all this. Tears fill my eyes. “I know how to convert the currency. I know how to take their subway from Marylebone to Kensington. I’m seeing my life as if my father never died and it went on as I’d planned it. I’m in London, getting my master’s in architecture. I don’t remember my classes but I even wake remembering things I learned in them.”

She sets the drawings aside and leans back in her chair. “You probably saw this stuff on the Travel Channel. God only knows how much knowledge we’ve all got stored in our brains.”

“That’s not all, though.” My throat tightens. What remains is, by far, the worst part. The part I’m not sure I should say aloud, even to my best friend. “There’s a guy.”

Her eyes light up. “Now it’s getting interesting. What guy?”

“Nick. He’s a resident there, going into cardiology. We’re married. And insanely in love. I can’t even describe it. I had dreams about him when I was little, and they started up again after I passed out last week. But they’re not like dreams. It’s more like I’m living it all for the first time. I wake up and my brain is full of what I didn’t know the day before.” I don’t tell her my doctor here may be the same guy. I think I’m scared to say it aloud, worried I’ll jinx it.

She frowns. “Look, I don’t want you to accuse me of being down on Jeff, because that’s really not what this is, but... it kind of sounds like you invented the guy who represents how you *want* to feel. He’s not real but maybe it’s your subconscious’ way of suggesting you think twice.”

I shake my head vehemently. “But it’s *not* how I want to feel. At all. I just need it to stop.”

Her eyes go wide. “Why the hell wouldn’t you want to feel like that? Everyone wants to feel what you’re describing.”

I don’t, but I can’t entirely say why that’s the case. I just sense trouble. There’s something dark inside me, something I buried so deep I can mostly forget it’s there. But it’s been whispering to me again of late, ever since I started remembering Nick. And the terror of hearing it far exceeds the pull of wanting something more.

Not that I can say any of this to her. There’s a limit to the amount of crazy you can share in one day, even with your best friend.

“Because I already have exactly what I want. If this is my subconscious, I need a doctor who can make her shut up.”

Caroline glances at me. “Or maybe one who can tell you why you’d choose to be less happy than you could be.”

“You’re saying I need a shrink?”

She comes to my end of the bed and wraps an arm around me. “Maybe. Or we just wait and see if Trevor has a better plan,” she says with a grin. “Warning: it may involve prostitutes.”

There are still tears in my eyes, but I manage to laugh. “In that case, let’s keep this between ourselves.”



CAROLINE HEADS OUT TO WORK, actually looking forward to her day. There are many times I envy her, and this is one of them. She’s at a point in her career where she is mostly calling the shots. If she wants to leave in the middle of the day, she leaves. If she wants to jet off on a safari with an Australian rugby player she met at a bar, she just takes off. It makes me think, once again, of returning to school. But as Jeff always reminds me, the money would be astronomical. It would take me five years, if not longer, before I had the education I need to start making money again, and all the while we’d be relying on *Jeff’s* income, which can’t exactly be relied upon. He argues that it’s impractical, and what can I really say in my defense? He’s absolutely right.

A nurse walks in moments after Caroline has left. “How are you feeling today?” she asks. “I have the breakfast menu if you’d like to order.”

“No thanks,” I reply. I still can’t eat. Until I see who Nick is, I won’t be able to hold down a single bite. “Will I...be talking to the doctor today?”

She nods. “Yes, the attendings are meeting with the residents right now, but one of them will be in later.”

One of them. So even if Nick is here, it might not be him I see.

She mistakes my expression for impatience. “It looks like your friend brought you some stuff if you want to clean up. That way you’ll be ready to leave as soon as possible today.”

I grab the bag Caroline brought and hop into the shower. When I emerge, I’m clean and dressed in far nicer clothes than any I actually own—designer jeans, a James Perse T-shirt that hugs my curves like it was made for me. Yes, it would be nice to live like Caroline once in a while.

I shove yesterday's dirty clothes into the bag and have just finished tidying up when there's a knock on the door.

Then Nick, *my* Nick, walks into the room.

NICK

I've thought about nothing but Quinn all morning. I guess I just forgot she might not be quite as ready for our meeting as I am. She sees me and those stormy green-gray eyes open wide, her whole body swaying toward the wall like a tree in high winds. I lunge forward to catch her, and find I am standing far too close, my hands on her arms. But there's a part of me right now that doesn't care. It's not about her looks, though God knows her looks alone would be enough. This is so much more than that. Something about her just compels me to move closer. *She smells exactly like I remember*, I think, before I correct myself. *You can't possibly remember what she smells like. You just met her yesterday for Christ's sake.*

"I'm okay," she says weakly, eyes focused on my chest.

She lets me lead her to the bed, but perches on its edge, a captive preparing for escape. "This cannot be happening," she whispers. She sounds near tears. "You're real. I just...I don't know how this is possible."

There isn't a hint of guile on her face, so I dismiss Jace's theory that she's fucking with me somehow. But I don't really have a theory to take its place. "I'm trying to make sense of this too," I explain. "We must have met before."

She stares at me. Her mouth is like a peony just before it bursts open, full and round. I want to press my thumb to its center. "I really don't think that's possible."

"You've somehow managed to learn a lot about me," I say quietly. "There has to be an explanation for it. When I checked in on you last night,

you knew that I swim. You knew where I did my residency.”

Her hand shakes as she pushes the hair back from her face. “That barely scratches the surface of what I know.” There’s something grave in her voice. An unnerving certainty.

“What do you mean?”

She looks at me for a long moment, searching for something she doesn’t seem to find. “You like bananas but won’t eat anything banana-flavored,” she finally says when I remain silent. “You gave up your shot at the Olympics to go to med school, but every morning you still swim because it clears your head. You had a flat in Marylebone during your residency. On Harley Street.”

I blink. “How—”

“Your favorite bar in London was the Golden Eagle. We were broke, but on special occasions you’d order a single malt scotch. You wanted to be a cardiologist because your dad has this heart problem, and it always bothered you that no one could fix it completely. But now you’re a neurologist, which makes no sense. I was the only person you ever knew who even needed a neurologist.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. It is impossible that she knows these things. If she were to interview every person I’d ever known, she might be able to gather most of this, but not all of it. Meg knows maybe half, at best. I open my eyes to find her watching me again. She glances away, and then reaches for a binder beside her.

“Since I’ve already completely creeped you out, look at this.” She opens the binder and pushes it into my hands. A drawing. Goose bumps crawl across my neck when I realize what it is. She’s drawn my flat in London. The *interior* of my flat. I push against my temples, trying to make sense of this. Nothing feels real, almost as if I’m asleep and will wake up at any moment pondering the bizarre dream I just had about a patient. Because it would be easy enough for her to find my old address with a little sleuth work, but how the fuck does she know what it looked like *inside*, down to the cow-shaped kettle my mother sent me as a joke? “How the hell do you know what the *inside* of my flat looked like?”

“I have no idea,” she says. She is frowning, lips pressed tight. She seems as troubled by this as I am, so I’m inclined to believe her. At the very least I think *she* believes she’s telling the truth. But there has got to be an explanation. I believe in science. I do not believe in reincarnation, ghosts, fairies, vampires, or psychics. I don’t even believe in God, for that matter,

and I think miracles are just another name for things we don't yet understand. With enough investigation, I can *make* this make sense.

"Okay, I'll play along. How did we meet?" I ask.

She winces. "Don't say you'll *play along*, like this is something I want to be part of," she says. Her tone pleads with me more than it demands. "I'm engaged. Do you really think I want to fall asleep every night and dream about another man?"

"I'm sorry. I phrased that poorly. In your dream that told you all this," I say, lifting the sketch, "how did we meet?"

She toys with the hem of her shirt. "I went to the hospital, right after I arrived in London. I had a migraine because I'd left my meds at home. And you came to discharge me."

"And when would this have been?"

Her teeth sink into her lower lip. My gaze flickers to that peony mouth again. "Late August, probably four years ago. You wanted to watch the World Rowing Championship because you had a friend in it. Matt, I think?"

I gawk at her, frozen aside from my heart, which is thumping so hard it would be impossible to miss. How? How could she possibly know this? Matt Langois was a friend from undergrad. He rowed for the US, and I watched it whenever I had time. "This can't be happening," I murmur. "This has got to be...I'm not accusing you of anything, but someone is fucking with us."

She sighs heavily. "*How?* It's not like someone could climb into my head and make me dream all this up."

I have no answer to that, but it reminds me of the real reason I'm here. I glance at my watch. "Let's table all this for now. I've got you scheduled for an MRI in five minutes."

She stiffens. "Is it necessary?"

"There's nothing to be scared of—you're not claustrophobic, right?"

She inhales and sets her shoulders. "No. I just don't...never mind. It's fine. What are you looking for?"

"There are a couple of things that could be going on, but this is just a precaution. In all likelihood, everything will come back completely fine."

I rise but she does not. "What kind of things?"

"A bleed, a cyst, a tumor. Really, it's probably nothing."

She looks worried. I reach out to grab her hand, and I'm an inch from hers when I realize what I'm doing and jerk it back. *What the hell is going on here?* I've never tried to hold a patient's hand in my life. It's as if it was a

reflex.

I'm beginning to wonder if I need an MRI too.

QUINN

Nick Reilly exists.

I sit here on the edge of the bed, my mind trying to grasp it all, but the reality of him is too large to be held in one place and made logical.

Nick, in my dreams, was beautiful. In real life, however, he's so much more. He's vital and male in a way I didn't entirely grasp until now. The bump where his nose was broken, the tiny hint of a scar just to its left from a fist fight with his brother—they don't mar the perfection of his face, they emphasize it. They roughen him up just the right amount, make him *hot* rather than lovely. Nick without that scar, without the small asymmetry, would be a face for photographers, for ad campaigns. Nick with those things becomes someone you want to have pin you to the nearest available surface.

Which I remember him doing so, so many times. But to him, I'm simply a new patient. Potentially one who's been stalking him.

It's me, some voice inside my head whispers to him. Remember? Remember our flat? Remember the way I'd wait for you to slide into bed and wrap yourself around me? Do you remember the first time you told me you loved me? The night you proposed?

That same part of me cries out for him, wants to hold him tighter than I've ever held anyone, wants to breathe in his smell of soap and chlorine and skin and just remain there.

Thank God the rational piece prevails. The part that knows this is not real

life and remembers I'm in love with someone else. *Just because you dreamed about him doesn't mean it ever happened*, the rational piece warns. *It doesn't make him yours.*

He asks how I know the things I do, and I proceed to recite more of them, my stomach sinking at the wary look on his face. Perhaps he'd appear relaxed to a casual onlooker, but I know better somehow. He's restraining himself. Beneath that oxford his arms are taut, braced...against me? I'm not sure. God, I want so badly to press my mouth to that line between his brows, let it fall to the curve of his upper lip. As if I really need to do one more thing to ensure he sends me for a psych consult.

Our bizarre conversation comes to an abrupt end when he suddenly remembers the MRI, the haze in his eyes clearing. We walk down a long hall, and then he uses his badge to open the doors to another area. I'm 5'7", but next to him, I feel diminutive. His head bows just to speak to me. "So, you dreamed we met and what else?"

I realize he's humoring me. *Of course* he is—it's not as if he thinks any of it is true. Even *I* don't think it's true, so why would he? "It's a lot of just... normal stuff. Hanging out...dating stuff."

"That's it?" he teases. "I must have been pretty boring, if that's all you've got." It's a playful side of him, one I've seen in dreams but not in real life until now. He's trying to take my mind off the MRI.

"We went to Paris for our honey—" I trail off. *God. I cannot believe I just said that out loud.*

He stops. "You're telling me you dreamed about our *honeymoon*?"

I should be too upset by what this MRI might uncover to be capable of humiliation right now, but I'm not. I feel the heat in my face and there is no way to stop it. "No comment."

He raises a brow, holding the elevator door open and following me in. "Oh, you're not getting off that easily. If we had a honeymoon in Paris, I need to hear all about it. What did we do?"

I roll my eyes, trying hard not to smile. "It was December and cold as hell, and we were there on our *honeymoon*. What do you think we did?"

He laughs. "Wow. Any other glamorous trips where we never left the hotel?"

I glance up at him as we arrive at our floor. "Not really. Well, I guess we went to the lake, if that counts."

The elevator door opens, but he doesn't move. "What lake?"

I pause, puzzled by the sudden change in him. There is no longer anything playful about his tone. “I have no idea. It’s kind of like the lake where I’m getting married. There’s a dock and a big, white house with a deck, and I’m on this boat I can’t sail, while you watch me go.”

The elevator doors have shut again, and he sags against the wall. His skin looks slightly green under the fluorescent lights.

“Where are you getting married?” he asks.

I hear dread in his voice. For some reason it makes me dread answering him. “Lake Hester? It’s outside—”

“Annapolis,” he whispers. He leans his head against the wall and closes his eyes. “My parents have a place there. Their weekend house. I think you’re describing it.”

He can’t even look at me. I try to put myself in his shoes—some random patient reciting facts from his life, describing the interior of his flat and his parents’ vacation home. I’d have picked up the emergency phone long before now if I were him.

“I’m not stalking you,” I say quietly. “I understand why you’d be freaked out, but I swear to God I’ve never even looked up your name.”

“I don’t think you’re stalking me.”

“Then why—”

“I’ve had that dream too,” he says. “About you.”

I blink. I’ve heard him but his words just...don’t make sense. This is *my* problem, my messed-up brain. If this is his idea of a joke I don’t find it amusing. “What?”

He swallows. “I thought...when I saw you here that my mind was playing tricks on me. But I’ve had that precise dream. You’re standing up on the Sunfish, and then I swim out to get you.”

I feel lightheaded again and lean against the wall of the elevator, the same way he did just a moment before. *How can we share the same memory of something we both know never happened?* I remember seeing him on the dock, I remember the way he dove into the water and emerged moments later, seal-sleek, grinning. There have been other things in the past, other times my brain somehow misfired. But I’ve never had someone else’s brain misfire alongside mine.

He steps closer, his hands on my arms. “Are you okay?”

I nod. My voice is muted, hoarse. “I just need this to make sense.”

“Me too,” he says, pressing the button to open the elevator’s door. “And

I'm not sure a brain scan is going to accomplish that."



THROUGHOUT THE EXAM, I keep my body still, but my mind won't stop racing. What was that look he gave me when he left? The part of me that wants to romanticize all this might call it *longing*. And God knows I didn't want him to leave, but what I really *need* is not to feel anything for him at all. I'm hard-pressed to imagine we will ever solve this, but I don't need it solved, I just need it to stop. I can't keep having these dreams anymore.

When I return to my room, the nurse says she'll get my paperwork together so I can leave. "I'd like to see Dr. Reilly before I go."

"I don't know what his schedule is like today. You may have to book a follow-up with him if you need more information."

My nails dig into my palms. "No. I need to see him today. I'll wait if I have to."

"Yes, all the female patients want to see Dr. Reilly again," she says with a smirk. "But he's a very busy man. I'll see what I can do."

She thinks I'm trying to fuel a crush, when I'm really trying to end one.

My stomach growls loud enough for us both to hear. "There's a room at the end of the hall with snacks," she says. "You can grab something while I get your discharge papers ready."

As it turns out, the only snacks I find are graham crackers and juice, but I'm hungry enough I don't even mind. I reach for a cranberry juice, peeling off the foil and drinking it before I've even closed the refrigerator door.

"You have to shut the door," says a small voice. I look over my shoulder to find a little girl with no hair, pulling an IV behind her. "If you don't, an alarm will go off."

"Want one?" I offer.

She frowns. "I'm not allowed until my test is done." I look longingly at the cranberry juices stacked high in the fridge and shut the door. I can't sit here and drink anything else in front of her.

"So, are you here all day?" I ask.

She drops her eyes. "I kind of live here. When I ask my mommy if we are going home again, she smiles and cries at the same time."

She scans my face, searching for some kind of answer there. I swallow

down the lump in my throat. “Do you miss being home?”

She nods. “And I miss being outside. We used to go get cupcakes. They have cupcakes here, but not good ones.”

“What kind of cupcakes did you get?”

“Red velvet with the white icing that isn’t just white.”

“What about this person?” I ask, pointing to the cartoon character on the T-shirt that covers her hospital gown. “If I come back with a cupcake for you, should I bring one for her too?”

She giggles. “That’s Raven. She doesn’t eat cupcakes.”

“Doesn’t eat *cupcakes*?” I ask, feigning horror. “That’s crazy talk.”

“I should have known Darcy would find you,” says a voice. I look up and Nick is standing there in all his broad-shouldered glory, crooked smile and dimple on full blast.

My heart flutters and begins beating hard. All my good intentions fade away in his presence—I just want to stay right here and follow him wherever he goes. “Darcy was informing me that Raven does not eat cupcakes. I thought *everyone* ate cupcakes.”

“She’s *pretend*,” says Darcy, dragging out the word and giggling at the same time.

Nick grins at her. “You, Miss Darcy, need to get to your room so they can get you ready for your test. And you, Miss Quinn, need to get to your room so we can go over your discharge paperwork.”

I wave at Darcy before she turns away. “Later, Raven. Later, Cupcake Girl.” Her smile is so wide it hurts. A patient like that must break Nick’s heart. She’s breaking mine and I just met her.

When I look up, Nick is watching me in that quiet way of his. I think if I could peek in his head I’d find a thousand words he’ll never give voice to. “So, it looks like you’re ready to leave?”

I want to run my hand over the rasp of his jaw, pull his head low enough that I can press my mouth to his forehead. Exactly the sort of thought that needs to stop. “I was wondering if there is something you can give me to stop the dreams? Maybe some kind of sleeping pill?”

He frowns. “There’s a drug that could help, but one of the primary side effects is headaches. I’m not sure it’s a good idea, under the circumstances.”

“I’ll risk it,” I say quickly. “I need these dreams to stop.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Why? You were in so much pain yesterday you had to be sedated, and it sounds like these dreams aren’t even

bad.”

I’m frustrated more with myself than with him, though it probably doesn’t come across that way. “Because there’s no point. Do you actually think we’re going to figure out why this is happening?”

“Probably not, but it’s possible. I keep thinking there’s some obvious explanation we are both missing.”

“There isn’t,” I reply firmly. “And in the meantime, I have a real life, and these dreams are making it *seem* like a life I don’t want. I would rather not know any of this than be unhappy with what I have.”

His teeth sink into his lower lip, an action that makes my stomach clench in an unfamiliar way. Both pleasant and unpleasant at the same time. “Maybe your dreams are saying you’re already unhappy with what you have.”

I look away from him. It’s sort of what Caroline said too. “Then I’d like them to stop telling me that.”

He sighs. “We’ll need to wait on the results before I prescribe anything. I assume you’re heading home. I can call you there with results when they’re in.”

I shake my head. “I’ve got to get to work. We go to print next week. I’ve lost way too much time as it is.”

“Print?” he asks, frowning. “Aren’t you an architect?”

I still. “What made you think that?”

“I’m not sure,” he says slowly. “I thought I saw it in your file. But...you aren’t? I could have sworn...”

The room grows silent. My voice is a whisper when I finally speak. “I was an architecture major in college, but my father died after my sophomore year and I had to move home where it wasn’t an option. But...in my head, when we were in London, that’s what I was studying. I was there getting a graduate degree.”

The weirdness of it rests between us. “I guess,” he says with a faltering smile, “you’re not the only stalker of the two of us, then.”



I WALK INTO THE OFFICE, hoping to escape Dee. No luck—she’s just leaving as I walk in. She holds the door but remains still, blocking my path. “We are seriously behind,” she says, jaw clenched. “Please try to get caught up. I need

proofs before you leave today.”

A torrent of words I won't say to her rises in my throat: *we've worked together for six freaking years. You know I was just hospitalized and you know I never take sick leave. How dare you act put upon right now?*

I clench my fists and slide past her into the office. We need this job. I could leave and wind up with half the pay and a boss who's just as awful. And then my inheritance, the one I've refused to touch for the past seven years, will be gone as soon as Jeff loses his job, frittered away on the mortgage and groceries and I'll have nothing to show for it.

The layout is already open on my Mac and has obviously been tinkered with by someone who has no knowledge of Photoshop. Only Dee would dare, and she's managed to create twice as much work for me as I'd have had otherwise. I let my head sink back against my chair, staring up at the exposed ceiling, at the gleaming metal of heating ducts and maze of white pipes, wondering how I will feel about Dee and this job if Nick calls with bad news.

Will I be glad I sucked it up all these years, managed to keep us afloat all the times when Jeff was out of work? Or will I feel like this place stole six years of my life?

Except, the magazine didn't steal those years. I stole them from myself. I'm the one who listened when my mom begged me to stay at home after my father died. I'm the one who let Jeff persuade me it would be foolish to go back to school for architecture. I'm the one who chose to remain at this desk for so long.

I never fought for a single thing I wanted, and now it might be too late. The real question, however, is what I will do if it isn't.



IT'S LATE in the afternoon when I finally hear from the hospital. I'm oddly disappointed that it's one of the nurses calling, rather than Nick. "Dr. Reilly is wondering if you can come in tomorrow for another MRI," she says.

I lay my pen down. "Another one? Was there a problem?"

"I doubt it," she says breezily. "It's a different kind of MRI. It may be that the other one wasn't clear."

I convince myself it doesn't mean anything. It's not until much later, when Jeff and I are having dinner and he asks about the test, that I actually

start to worry.

“So what is it again that the hospital wants you to do tomorrow?” he asks.

I shrug as I help myself to seconds, which is something I never do. Poor Jeff probably made extra for his lunch tomorrow and I’m demolishing it, but I’ve had nothing to eat since that juice this morning. “Some other kind of MRI. They didn’t really explain.”

There’s a crease between his eyebrows. “Do you think it means anything?”

I hesitate, will away the nervous flutter in my chest. “It doesn’t sound like it. It sounds like they used the wrong kind of test. Why? Do *you* think it means anything?”

Jeff frowns. “That guy barely looked old enough to be out of med school, so I wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn he ordered the wrong test. You need to switch doctors.”

I set down my fork, but it remains in my grip, stiffly held. I want to argue in Nick’s defense, but it would be poorly received, given what happened in the hospital last night. “I don’t know that he ordered the wrong test,” I reply, the words spoken carefully. “I’m just saying it might be what happened.”

“Well, if this turns out to be something, I still think you should switch.”

No. My shoulders are rigid and it takes everything in my power not to snap at him. His concerns have nothing to do with Nick’s professional abilities. He’s just jealous, and as much as it pisses me off...he’s more right than he knows. For my own sanity, for the health of our future together, Nick Reilly is the last person I should be spending time with.

QUINN

Nick creeps into the flat, trying hard not to wake me. He always does this, on the nights he works late, but I'm a light sleeper and there are little things that give him away long before he sets foot in the room: the clink of keys against a counter, a coat falling against a chair. He keeps a spare toothbrush at the kitchen sink for nights like this, just so the bathroom light won't wake me.

"I'm up," I tell him when he comes into the bedroom, feeling around in the darkness for the dresser before he stubs his toe on it again.

"Sorry," he says. He pulls off his scrubs and slips beneath the sheets, wrapping cold arms around me, pulling the covers up to my chin. "I tried to be quiet."

"I was already awake." I scoot until I'm pressed tight to his chest. His bare skin, his smell, the weight of his arm—they're all I need in the entire world right now. "I had the weirdest dream and woke up all upset."

His calloused hand squeezes my arm lightly in sympathy. "What dream?"

My legs stretch, tangle with his. "We were together but we were teenagers, I think? And we were trying to elope."

His low laugh brushes my ear. "That does sound terrifying. I'm bad enough now. A teenage Nick wouldn't have left you alone for a minute."

I roll his way, wishing I could laugh with him but I can't yet. It all still feels so real. "We were at this gas station and I called home to tell my mother what we were doing and you were inside, in line. And I started crying

because I was never going to see you again. I just knew somehow that it was all over, and I was going to die. And then I woke up.”

I can’t get it out of my head—the sight of him in the convenience store, smiling at me from his place in line, while I stood there panicked, certain it was over. The distress I feel in dreams normally fades immediately. This one though—it remains unchanged.

His lips press to the top of my head. “Hon, it doesn’t require a degree to figure that one out. Call your mom. She’s probably going to be less upset with you for getting married than she is that you waited so long to tell her. And you’re an adult. It’s not like she can ground you and lock you in your room.”

I nod, but I’m not so sure he’s right.



I WAKE MISSING NICK. I close my eyes and can almost imagine the way he fit against me, long arms pulling me tight. The mint from his toothpaste, a hint of chlorine as I buried my face into his chest. Jeff and I don’t cuddle like that, and he isn’t someone I share my worries with—I suppose because I’m too busy shouldering his. I leaned on Nick in that dream, physically and mentally, and it’s something I didn’t know I was missing until this morning. My future with Jeff contains wonderful things: a house, kids, a trip to the Jersey shore every summer. But right now I’m aching for what my future won’t contain instead.

I dress and head to the hospital. My inappropriate eagerness to see Nick outweighs my dread of what he might say—I’ve almost convinced myself that the need for another MRI is meaningless anyway.

I’ve just signed in when his head pops around the corner. Like an idiot, like a teen with a crush, I begin blushing. It’s so strange to see him now, to be a stranger to him, when in my head, we were together an hour ago. I can still remember him sliding against me, bare aside from his boxers.

I blush harder. I remember removing those boxers too.

“Come on back,” he says, holding the door so I can walk past. We go to his office, which is larger than I’d have anticipated. His diplomas are on the wall and there are photos too. I keep my eyes focused straight ahead, scared of what I’ll discover if I look too closely. It’s funny it never occurred to me,

until this moment, that he might not be single. My gaze shifts to his ring finger. It's bare. My shoulders settle again.

He perches on the edge of the desk, long legs eating up the distance between us. "I'm sorry we had to ask you to come back in. How do you feel today?"

"Great," I reply, "but I'm wondering why I need another test."

He nods, his hands wrapping around the edge of the desk. "I don't want you to panic when I tell you this, but we found something on your scans yesterday."

Found something. I freeze, suddenly aware of my heart, pounding louder than normal, so loud I'm surprised he can't hear it too.

He rises, flipping on a light board just to our left. What I presume is an image of my brain hangs there. I'm oddly relieved to see it looks normal, as if I thought it might be half a human brain and half something wildly improbable, like antennae or another set of teeth. "This," he says, pointing at a black dot in its center, "is what we found. It's so small I'm not even sure it's what's caused your seizures. Something of that size, in that location, should not be symptomatic."

"What is it?" I whisper.

He takes the seat beside me. His eyes are the softest gray-blue, like the wings of a dove. "It appears to be a tumor."

Ice fills my lungs, making a deep breath impossible. "A tumor."

His hand reaches out, and for a moment I'm certain it's going to grab mine. But just like yesterday, he stops himself. "The majority of brain tumors are benign, so I really don't want you stressing about this just yet. You very well could have had this for your entire life."

"And if mine isn't benign? What then?"

He nods, his eyes flickering away. "Operating in this area of the brain is impossible. But again, it could very well be nothing. We need to do another imaging test—similar to what we've already done, but this time looking at the metabolic activity around the tumor. It should help us determine the type of tumor it is and how likely it is to grow."

My mouth is dry. I nod, feeling...nothing. Nothing at all. I dig my nails into my palms but it barely registers.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I don't know." What I want more than anything is to dislodge the sense that all of this can't really be happening. I'm only twenty-eight. I'm about to

get married. My life is just starting, and out of nowhere I'm missing him and wanting what I've never wanted, and I may be looking at the end of all of it. I don't know how to put this into words. "My life was completely normal a week ago," I finally say.

"Let me take you down to imaging," he says, rising. "Your life may still be completely normal."

This time he sets me up for the exam himself, helping me onto the table, getting everything into position. He seems to hesitate when it's time to leave. "It's going to be fine," he says.

"You know, even if the tumor is nothing, I'm still having bizarre dreams about someone I don't know and discovering they're accurate."

His smile is soft. "Hey," he says, "I'm not a bad guy. There are worse people to dream about. Unless I'm a jerk. If I am, then your dreams are completely fictitious."

"You weren't a jerk."

"Good." His dimple appears, and I have a sudden memory of him in that convenience store smiling at me through the glass, unaware that my heart was breaking, that we were going to be separated. And as I slide into the MRI to check on my inoperable brain tumor, I can't help but feel history seems to be repeating.

NICK

Meg and I both have an hour free. She wants to go out to lunch and is not happy when I tell her I want to swim instead.
“*Again?*” she asks. “You already worked out.”

I blow out a breath. I am way too keyed up to sit with her for an hour. “It’s just been one of those days.” One of those days when I’m waiting for a report from radiology that won’t fucking arrive. One of those days when I’m going to put a fist through a wall if I hear, *again*, that it’s “on the way.” And one of those days when I can’t stop thinking about a patient, can’t stop picturing her...even though we are both with other people, and, as my patient, she’d be off-limits even if we weren’t.

I get over to the pool and dive in without preamble, with no routine in mind. I just need to push, to swim until I’m too exhausted to think about this anymore. I’ve always hated impossible questions. Medical journals produced nothing helpful, not that I expected them to. There’s no answer to what’s going on with me and Quinn, but I can’t stop pushing and prodding at it, as if something completely obvious will present itself. It spins in my brain until I’m sick of thinking. And thus the need for this swim, which doesn’t seem to be doing a damn bit of good.

I thought I was happy with Meg. Maybe it wasn’t everything I’d ever wanted from a relationship, but it felt like enough...certainly far more than my brother will ever get to experience. Except spending a morning with Quinn was like being exposed to sunlight after an entire lifetime beneath

fluorescent lights. I'm not sure, now, that I can be happy with less.



I HUSTLE BACK to the hospital with my hair still wet, stopping by Darcy's room on the way. I never see her without thinking about what could have been. If her mother had brought her in when Darcy's headaches first started, we could have saved her. As much as this bothers me, it's her mom who's being destroyed by the knowledge, and it wasn't even her fault. When the pediatrician dismissed her concerns, she listened to him. God, I wish she hadn't. Doctors know a lot less than they want you to believe. Especially that one.

Darcy is in bed when I get to the room, with her mom curled up beside her. She smiles wide, more animated than usual, and lifts a massive cupcake in the air. "Look what Quinn sent me!" she says.

Darcy's mother reaches behind her to a massive box from Sprinkles, where ten of twelve cupcakes remain. "Want one?" she asks. "Darcy's new friend sent six for Darcy and six for Raven, so I feel like we may have more than we need."

Something expands inside my chest. Who learns she has a brain tumor and manages to think about a little girl she just met instead? I decline and head straight to radiology, ready to unleash hell if the results aren't in. Fortunately, that's not necessary. I rip the radiologist's report from the envelope before I've even gotten to my office.



SHE ANSWERS on the first ring.

"It's Nick." I pause. "Nick Reilly."

"Hi Ni— Dr. Reilly."

"You've gone on a honeymoon with me, so I feel like we ought to at least be on a first-name basis."

She laughs. The sound is husky, intimate. I have to reach down and adjust myself, which is not exactly typical when calling a patient about her brain tumor. "I'm going to assume," she says, "that you wouldn't be making jokes if I only had a month to live."

This is true, although since I appear to be incapable of behaving normally around her I couldn't say for sure. "It's all good news. We don't see signs of increased blood flow to the area, which indicates it is not growing. It's possible it's been there forever." I've never been so relieved by a scan in my life.

"So I'm okay?" she asks. "Aside from the bizarre knowledge of your personal history, that is."

I grin and lean back in my chair. "Aside from that, I think so. We'll still need to keep an eye on it, but as long as you don't have any more incidents, a follow-up MRI in six months will be fine."

Except, in six months, she could already be married to that tool I met in her room the other night. The thought makes me queasy.

"So if the scan looked okay, does that mean you can call something in for me, to stop the dreams?"

Why does a part of me want to tell her *no*? I sigh heavily. "We've got your pharmacy on file. I'll call it in and check with you tomorrow to see how it worked."

It takes a minute for us to actually hang up the phone. She seems as reluctant as I am to end the call. And I like her reluctance way, way too much.

QUINN

I'm fine. I'm going to live. It's a relief...so I'm not sure why I feel vaguely disappointed when Nick hangs up. I pick up the phone to call my mother afterward but put it down again. She doesn't know about the brain tumor because I didn't want to worry her until I knew more, and I suppose there's no reason to tell her now. Plus, she's worked herself up into a fever over the fact that I've now passed out at the inn twice—which certainly doesn't bode well for the wedding—and I don't feel like listening to any more of her theories about why it's happening. No pesticide or allergy has ever caused the problem I'm currently having. I concocted some theory about the sunlight from the lake affecting my pineal gland, and she's gotten the inn to agree to let us place the tent in front of the main building rather than beside it, so I can avoid looking at the house if necessary.

I pick up the meds on the way to the Metro, bouncing them from one hand to the other during the long ride home. I don't actually *want* to take them. I've seen myself falling in love with Nick, marrying him. It's like a really engrossing TV show that's just ended on a cliffhanger, and I'm desperate to know what comes next. Except, with each of these dreams, I fall a little harder for him, and that is so much more dangerous now that I know he exists.

Jeff's in the yard when I get home, playing football with Isaac, this teenager who lives a few houses down from us. He's in his element right now, and the sight of it is bittersweet. It's who he was meant to be—a

football coach, a big fish in a small pond—and I took it from him by moving here. My friends are less forgiving than I am of his job woes, but that's because they didn't know him back when he was succeeding. They'll never understand how much he gave up to be with me.

My father saw that quality in Jeff. Knew he would always be there, loyal and steadfast in his devotion, willing to follow me wherever I went. I trusted my father's views implicitly, and for good reason—I wasn't the only one of us who sometimes knew things I should not. My father knew I was allergic to shellfish before I'd ever had it. He knew Matisse was my favorite artist before I'd ever set foot in a gallery. So sometimes I wonder if he knew things about my future that I did not, and wanted Jeff to be there by my side when they happened.

I cross the street and Jeff smiles over his shoulder, throwing one last pass to Isaac before following me inside.

"That kid has an amazing spiral," he says. "He's fast too. I could totally have him ready for JV if his mom would just agree."

We make dinner while he continues to tell me Isaac's strengths, and bitches about Isaac's mom's fear of concussions. *That stupid Will Smith movie made everyone paranoid. You know what sport has the most injuries? Cheerleading.*

I was worried my news about the brain tumor would ruin our evening, but the whole time we're cooking he never asks once about the MRI. I try not to let it bother me.

Over dinner he complains about the new asshole at corporate and some policy on travel reimbursement I'm unable to care about. I wait for him to finish his diatribe, resentment churning in my stomach, but when he's done with that he moves on to another topic entirely.

"We need to go back to that development in Manassas," he says, oblivious to my unhappiness. "The agent called today and said the model is open."

I'm already in a bad mood, so the suggestion hits me poorly. "I told you I don't want to live in Manassas. It would take me two hours to get into work."

He shrugs. "Well, it's not like you *have* to work in D.C.," he says. "You can get a job anywhere."

I grind my teeth. I go out of my way not to remind him about his employment history, but the fact that he's managed to stay at his current job for four months doesn't mean my job is suddenly irrelevant. "*Washington*

Insider pays me twice what anyone else will,” I remind him. “And there have been months when we’ve needed every penny of it to pay our bills.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. His shoulders sag and I immediately want to take it back. “I know it’s been rough going for a while. But it’s not like we’re completely screwed if one of us is out of work. You’ve never even touched your inheritance.”

Just like that I’m irritated again. “I want that money to go toward something special. I’m not going to fritter it away on things we should be able afford on our own.”

“You thought you were going to use it on school,” he argues, “but obviously that’s no longer happening. I get not wanting to fritter it away, but let’s at least put it toward something like a house. We can’t stay here. We need a place where we can raise a family.”

Nothing he’s said is untrue, but my stomach sinks all the same. Once that money’s gone, it’s gone. And with it, any lingering hope of becoming an architect. I know it’s probably never happening, but the idea of giving it up hurts anyway. “Yeah,” I say. “Maybe.”

“It doesn’t have to be Manassas, but we would get so much more for our money there. We should at least go look at the model when I get back.”

“When you get back? You’re *leaving*?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Day after tomorrow. I told you about it—Albany, and then down to Miami.”

Is it unreasonable to expect him to stay home under the circumstances? Perhaps. But this, combined with the fact he hasn’t even *asked* about my test results, has me feeling separate from him. As if we are no longer part of a team, but two entities that merely coexist.

I’m in bed, nearly asleep, when he finally slides in beside me. I can’t remember a time in my life when I didn’t think Jeff was hot. He was Rocton’s star football player, and I’m still the envy of half my graduating class for landing him. But tonight, when he starts to tug at my shorts and those wiry chest hairs of his are scraping my back, I feel repulsed. And that’s a first in all our years together.

I remove his hand. “Sorry. It was a long day. Dee was pissy about me being out this morning.”

“Oh yeah,” he says, kissing the back of my head. “I forgot to ask. Everything good?”

Nick wouldn’t need to be reminded, whispers that traitorous voice. I

banish the thought, but something surly and petulant remains behind. It leaves me unwilling to tell him the whole truth, because he hasn't earned it. "Yeah."

Eventually his breathing deepens, turning into small snores, and I realize I haven't taken the meds Nick prescribed. I creep from the room and pop the pills into my mouth before I can change my mind. But instead of returning to bed, I curl up with my laptop on the corner of the couch and do something I absolutely should not: I search for Nick's name and click on *images*. There are thousands of Nick Reillys in the world, but only mine was a top college swimmer, and those pictures are the last thing I should be looking at right now: Nick, shoulders arched as he does the butterfly. Nick, standing with teammates in nothing but a Speedo, a medal around his neck. *Jesus, those abs*. My stomach spasms at the sight of him.

And since I'm apparently determined *not* to do the right thing tonight, I click on a video. The NCAA 400 Freestyle Relay. "Nick Reilly, of UVA, beginning the last lap at a serious disadvantage," the sportscaster says. "Three seconds behind Paul Diering of Syracuse. I see no way for UVA to win the race at this point."

But then something miraculous happens, something I know will happen because suddenly I'm certain I was *there*, sitting in the bleachers, screaming my heart out. Nick starts to catch up.

"But the race may not be over yet!" the announcer shouts. "Look at UVA. That's Nick Reilly, using that powerhouse kick we've come to expect from him, and he's—oh my God—he's really gonna do it. Look at the way he cuts through the water..."

I don't even have to watch—I remember all of it. The way Nick comes out of the turn an arm's length behind the guy from Florida State, the way he consumes that difference and then surges. I was hoarse from screaming after that meet. I watch as he wins, leaping from the pool to be surrounded by ecstatic teammates.

I have absolutely no memory of meeting him in college, but I know I was there. I remember him searching for me, pulling me in for a soaking wet hug. The camera shows no hug, of course, and when it pans to the bleachers, the place I sat is occupied by someone else...someone I knew well—Nick's mom. The sight of her hurts. She is, I think, another person I once loved but lost.

I set the laptop on the table and pull the throw blanket over me in

frustration. It was bad enough when I remembered being in London with Nick, but now I'm remembering times that predate that...and it feels like I was happier in *all of them* than I am now.

Which means a situation that was already fucked up has gotten worse. "I really hope the drugs work," I whisper as I close my eyes.

I do not plunge into dreamless sleep. Instead, I go someplace where I am young. Nick's kitchen, in his parents' home. He and his brother have both been sent to their rooms for the fistfight that erupted at the table, and only his mother and I remain behind.

"I don't know why they were fighting," I tell her. "All three of us can fit in the treehouse at the same time."

She gives me a weary smile. A smile I have seen often of late. "The problem is that there are two of them and only one of you."

It takes me a second to understand what she's really trying to say—that the fight wasn't over the treehouse at all. It makes me nervous. I just want everything to stay the same.

"I don't want them to fight," I tell her. The three of us have been best friends since we were little, and now they're going to ruin everything.

She sighs. "It'll end eventually."

"When?" I ask.

Her smile is sad. "When you decide between them."

NICK

My arms slice through the water, fast, but not fast enough. I'm trying to run away from all of this, but the harder I push, the more Quinn fills my head. After we hung up yesterday, I did my best to shake the whole thing off. She's already taken, and so am I. I couldn't be with her even if that weren't the case.

By the time I'm done, I'm so tired I can barely push myself out of the pool. But Quinn remains front-and-center in my brain. I can't seem to outrun her.



I DON'T ALLOW myself to call her until after lunch. The moment the clock strikes one, however, I'm in my office with the door shut, dialing her number. It feels an awful lot like the first time I called a girl as a nervous thirteen-year-old.

"It's Nick." I pause. "Nick Reilly."

"I know which Nick you are," she says with a soft, husky laugh.

I inhale, fighting the temptation to make this a social call. To joke around with her and ask how her day is. I've never once struggled to act professional until Quinn came into the picture. "I was just checking to see how you're feeling today, and if you had any side effects from the meds."

"No side effects," she says. "But they didn't work, either."

I sit up a little straighter. “So you had more dreams.”

“Yeah,” she says, sighing. “They’re getting worse. I’m not just seeing things from London anymore. I’m seeing things from college and childhood. I know what your kitchen looked like as a kid. I remember being in the treehouse with you and Ryan, and—”

My circulatory system whirs to a halt. I’m so stunned by the mention of my twin that I cut her off, my voice sharper than I’d intended. “How do you know about my brother?” I demand. He’s been gone for over a decade. The only reason I mentioned him to Meg at all was because I had to warn her before she met my mom.

“How do I know about any of this?” she replies, with an exasperated exhale. “I thought we were past the point where you accused me of stalking.”

I bury my head in my hands. Of all the things she’s known, this is the first one that actually kind of scares me. I don’t believe in ghosts but if my dead brother wanted to fuck with me he’d pull a stunt just like this. “We are. I’m sorry. It was just a shock hearing you say his name.” Even my parents won’t talk about him now, at least not in front of me. I’ve often wondered if this is because they know I blame myself for what happened, or if it’s because they blame me too.

She pauses. “Did...something happen to him?”

“He died. In high school.”

“Oh,” she says, her voice catching. “Oh, God. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I assure her. “Really. You didn’t do anything wrong, and it all happened a long time ago. I just was shocked to hear you mention his name.” She’s silent. It makes no sense, but I know she’s grieving Ryan’s death, and it feels like she has a right to. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“It’s just strange,” she whispers. “I had that dream last night, and it’s like this whole box of new memories opened up. A lot of them about you, but a lot of them are about him too, as a child. I just can’t believe...I’m sorry. Never mind. What were we talking about?”

I run a hand through my hair. There’s a whole lot more to unpack here, but I’m not sure I’m ready to hear it. “You were saying the drugs didn’t work.”

“Right. So is there something else I can take to stop the dreams? Something stronger?”

“We can try something else, but...Quinn, if the Prazosin didn’t work, I really doubt anything else will either.”

“Okay,” she says. “Maybe it will go better tonight.”

The conversation has reached its natural end but I’m just not ready to let her go. “Are you back at work?”

She gives a low laugh. “Could you tell by the abject misery in my voice?”

It bothers me that she’s at that job. It’s just *wrong*. “Why didn’t you go back to school for architecture when you returned to D.C.?” I ask abruptly.

She hesitates. “It’s complicated.”

I want to keep her on the phone, but I’ve pushed this as long as I can.

“Okay, well, give the meds another shot, and if they’re still not working, we can try something else.”

She thanks me and hangs up. But I sit here, still holding the phone like a lovesick teenager.

QUINN

I'm so glad you're here," I whisper to Nick. He grips my hand hard through the tangle of wires—IV, blood pressure cuff, oxygen monitor—hinting at anxiety he's trying to keep to himself. He's used to hospital rooms, but usually he's the one barking orders, not the one sitting and praying all will be well.

And in this moment, I suddenly feel certain it won't be.

"There's something I have to tell you," I whisper. "It won't make sense, but I need you to—" I'm cut off mid-speech by a pain so sharp it knocks the words from my brain. His hand tightens. I'll be bruised by it when this is done.

"It's going to be okay," he says, but I see in those circles under his eyes, the greenish pallor beneath his tan, that he is no more certain of that than I am. And he doesn't even know everything: all the horrible truths that have come back to me only recently. I picture him and Ryan as boys and I flinch. The things I did in that other life—would he have forgiven me eventually? I'll never know.

The pain hits again, another wave, wiping my brain clear of its mission, leaving only the panic behind. I struggle to focus around it. "My mother...my mother will explain everything." I cling to his hand so I'm not swept away. "About the Rule of Threes. I'm sorry...I didn't believe her."

"Something's wrong," Nick barks at the staff, his eyes focused on a monitor overhead.

The doctor glances at us. She is setting things on a tray, slow and methodical, without a clue how bad this is about to turn. “She’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

“It’s not,” he insists, and his voice sharpens. “Check everything. Check every goddamned thing you think you don’t need to check because something is wrong.”

“Dr. Reilly, you need to calm down,” she says sternly, “or we’re going to have to ask you to leave.”

He leans over me. His concern has turned to panic. “Honey, you’re okay,” he says, but I feel it already, the dimming inside me. I want to cry out and beg the universe for one more minute, a chance to explain, but I know it’s useless.

My lids start to flutter. The world grows thick and slow, too liquid for me to grasp. I start to sink beneath it.

An alarm triggers. “Goddammit!” Nick shouts, rising. “Look at her blood pressure. I need Levophed, stat!”

The door opens, and that’s when I see her—the woman who enters silently, her pale blond hair shimmering beneath the hospital lights. The room is in chaos and no one but me even notices her. She is capable of terrible things, just like me, and her presence here means the end of everything. Of this life I wanted so badly. “No,” I whisper. “Don’t. Please.”

“There’s no other choice at this point,” she says.

I turn to my husband, taking in the face I love so much. “Wait for me,” I plead. “I’ll find you, but you have to wait.”

Nick’s panicked, desperate face is the last thing I see.



MY EYES FLY OPEN. For a moment my limbs are unresponsive, weighted, and I can’t even cry out. It feels as if I’ve been held underwater for too long. A part of me wants to fight and another part is lethargic, ready to sink low.

It only takes a few seconds before it subsides and I pitch forward, gasping for air, limbs flailing. What the hell just happened? It’s the same dream I had as a child, but it’s the first time I’ve ever woken feeling as if I was dying.

I climb from the bed with my pulse racing, too scared to fall back asleep, and go to the living room. I turn on the TV and all the lights, wishing Jeff

was awake too. What would have happened if I hadn't woken when I did? It terrifies me, the power these dreams seem to hold.

I spend hours pacing or curled in fetal position on the couch. Eventually I'm able to convince myself I only *thought* I couldn't move, but what I cannot shake, even hours later, is the horror I felt—not just of the woman who entered the room, but of myself. I truly believed there was something terrible inside me—something I had to hide from Nick.

I sense it inside me still. And I cannot shake the sense that Nick is the one person capable of setting that terrible thing free.



BY THE TIME JEFF RISES, I have a plan. A plan born of desperation, but surely even that is better than no plan at all. Jeff is the right choice, the good choice, and he deserves far better than what he's been getting from me of late. I need to do whatever I can to stick to the path I've been on for our six years together.

"You were up again?" he asks. "Stress?"

It's easy enough to nod in the affirmative. I've never been more stressed in my life. "Yeah," I say. "And I was thinking...maybe we should just go to Vegas. It seems like the wedding is triggering my seizures, and we don't even know if I'll be able to make it through the ceremony without having one. So maybe the solution is just to get it over with."

He laughs. "I'm marrying the most beautiful, brilliant woman I've ever known. I want everyone we love to see it happen. And people already have plane tickets. Think about the money your mom has spent."

"We can still do the big wedding," I say eagerly. "We'll just do Vegas first. It all feels so monumental. It's like we're wrapping the biggest moment of our lives up with the biggest performance of our lives, and it's too much."

"Honey—" he pleads. I hear apology, and thus refusal, in his tone. "I'm killing myself trying to get stuff squared away so we can go on our honeymoon."

Despair makes my voice hitch. "I know. But it could be a quick trip—"

"Hon, when would we even go? I've got the trip today and three more over the next month. Between that and my bachelor party and your bachelorette, we just don't have the time."

My shoulders drop. He's right. I'm not sure why I even suggested it. Jeff doesn't have a spontaneous bone in his body. "Ignore me. I'll be fine."

He kisses my forehead and moves away. He's relieved, but I am not. It feels like we're racing against time. I don't know the consequences of losing this race, exactly, but if these dreams continue until the wedding, I'm pretty sure I'll find out.



NICK CALLS AGAIN THAT AFTERNOON. I sit rigidly, swearing to myself that he'll be nothing more than my doctor from now on, yet from the moment he says *hi*, I'm rolling the sound of his voice over and over again in my mouth, like it's my last piece of chocolate. "I'm actually calling for a favor," he says.

Excitement and dread both seep into my blood until I can't tell them apart. "What kind of favor?" I ask.

"Darcy—you met her the other day—is having a birthday party tonight at six. It's actually her half-birthday, but...you know. And she's completely smitten with you. She told her mom you look like Starfire."

"Starfire?"

"I guess you don't watch a lot of *Teen Titans*. She's the hot one."

I find myself smiling despite my good intentions. "Do you rank the hotness of *all* female cartoon characters, or just on select shows?"

He laughs low, under his breath. "I keep an Excel spreadsheet. It's not as comprehensive as I'd like, but I have a demanding job. So yes or no?"

Every bone in my body screams *no*, but what am I supposed to say? It's a dying child's request. And as long as Nick isn't there, how much harm could it do? His days start early, so there's no way he's staying until six for a patient's birthday party. "Yes, I'd be happy to."

"Cool," he says softly. "I'll let her know. See you in a few hours."

Well, shit.



I WALK through the lobby of the hospital, trying to convince myself I'm not nervous, not excited. That the girl I see in the mirror as I wait for the elevator—the one with the bright eyes and flushed cheeks—is no different than the

one I see each day.

I am here to see Darcy. I am doing a nice thing for a sick child. Nothing more.

I can repeat these words a thousand times, but it doesn't change the fact that I am moving faster than I should, my feet skittering through the halls at twice their normal speed.

Darcy's door is open. Before I even set foot inside, I hear Nick's low, reluctant laugh. It flares deep in my stomach like a hundred votive candles lit at once. My mouth twitches toward a smile against my will and I pin it down by force.

I step into the room and for a moment, he is all I see. His grin, that dimple, the way something changes in his expression when his eyes lock on mine, like a predator who's spotted what he wants before even *he* realizes it. His smile doesn't lessen but simply morphs, becoming a private thing only for me. It's the smile he had before he flipped me on my back in Paris. I think of that mouth of his sliding over my skin and I can feel it, the way he tugged each nerve ending to the surface.

"Quinn!" shouts Darcy, breaking the spell. She's in bed, sitting with Nick and a woman I assume is her mother.

My smile for her is flustered and slightly panicked. Why the hell am I thinking rated-R thoughts about a stranger at a party for a dying child?

"Hello, Birthday Girl," I say, handing her the wrapped gift pressed to my chest.

Her eyes go round as dinner plates. "You didn't have to get me a present. It's not my real birthday."

I grin at her, and for just a moment—*thank God*—I'm able to forget the man sitting on the other side of her bed. "There's no reason whole birthdays should get all the fun," I reply, wondering what the odds are of her making it to age eight. She's obviously still getting chemo. That must mean there's some hope left, right?

Nick introduces me to Christy, Darcy's mom, as Darcy tears the wrapping paper. Acquiring this present in such a short period of time was no small feat, so I hope I chose well.

She inhales sharply as she pulls the purple satin from the box. "Raven's cape! And face mask!"

I smile wide at her enthusiasm, and as her mother helps her put on the mask, my eyes go to Nick. He is watching me again, neither smiling nor

unsmiling. He doesn't look away when my gaze meets his.

"Thank you!" Darcy cries. She launches across the bed to give me a tight hug, tiny arms wrapping around my neck. The fierceness of the action has me swallowing down a lump in my throat. Have I ever thrown myself that wholeheartedly at anything in my life? I'm not sure I have.

"I don't know when the nurses are coming in," says Darcy's mom, "so maybe we should do cake."

I move to the chair next to Nick's while Christy places candles on the cake they've somehow procured. "How on earth did you find that cake on such short notice?" he asks quietly.

By calling twenty toy stores and taking a profoundly expensive Uber ride to Silver Spring during my lunch break. I shrug. "Just saw it."

His gaze is steady, his mouth ticking upward at the side. "Is that right?"

I can't seem to look away. What the hell is happening between the two of us tonight? I need to make it stop, whatever it is, but I don't *want* it to stop.

Christy begins singing "Happy Birthday" and I finally break the connection, joining the song just as the cake is placed on Darcy's bedside table.

"But that's eight and a half candles," says Darcy.

"Seven and a half, plus one to grow on," says her mom, blinking back tears.

Darcy falters before she gives us a too-wide smile, and I swallow hard. The sight of them, forcing themselves to be brave and cheerful for the other, makes me want to run a thousand miles away.

Christy cuts the cake into massive slices and passes plates to me and Nick. Grief weighs me down. It's a struggle to move the fork to my mouth.

"Hey," says Nick quietly, while Darcy and her mom talk to the nurse who's popped in the room. His hand clasps mine for a millisecond to get my attention, and I glance up at him. "Are you okay?"

I nod, staring at the cake that rests in my lap. "I don't know how you do this."

He hesitates. "I couldn't if it was always like this. But occasionally, instead, you get a woman in who tells you only the most boring details about your honeymoon in Paris."

I laugh. "Maybe if you'd been more interesting in Paris, I'd have better details to share."

"I refuse to believe the fault lies with me. I bet you're the type who wants

to play *Words With Friends* on a date. Or insists on showing me one video after another of your cat jumping around in the snow.”

It’s a struggle to look stern. “My cat, if I had one, would be fascinating. You would love my cat videos if I chose to share them with you.”

“Yeah?” His lashes lower and I get a glimpse of that secret smile of his again, the seductive one. I picture myself pulling the cake from his hands and climbing into his lap, but I realize as it plays out in my head, it isn’t a fantasy, it’s a *memory*. We were in our flat on his birthday, with the sun’s dwindling rays streaming in through the kitchen windows, and I was in his lap. I remember kissing the corner of his jaw, shifting against him and relishing the tiny way he inhaled at the motion. His right hand slid into my hair, grasping a thick handful of it as he pulled my mouth to his.

My fork falls to the floor. Christy and Darcy don’t seem to notice, but Nick’s eyes flicker to my mouth, as if he knows exactly what was going on in my head. I’m so grateful he doesn’t. While this would all be easier if he remembered things in the same detail I do, it would also be ten times more awkward.

I focus on Christy and Darcy, trying to pull my mind out of the gutter. I ask Christy about the candle business she runs out of her home, solely to think about something—*anything*—else, and then tell them I need to head to the Metro before it gets dark.

“I’ll walk with you,” Nick says.

I still. Spending time with him outside the walls of this hospital is a terrible idea. I should tell him no. But I’ve got no idea how to do it gracefully, and—more importantly—I don’t want to. The idea of more time with Nick thrills me as much as it terrifies me.

NICK

I live nowhere near the Metro, but I assure myself there's nothing inappropriate in what I'm doing. She did a nice thing for my patient. Seeing her safely to her destination is just common courtesy.

But there's been nothing appropriate about my reaction to her tonight. Not from the first moment she appeared at the door, all flushed cheeks and bright eyes and uncertainty.

We walk quietly, in step, down Reservoir to 34th Street. Even though school is out, the sidewalks are clogged. My hand reaches out to the small of her back to keep us side by side.

"I had another dream last night," she says.

"More torrid memories from our honeymoon?"

Her laugh is throaty. God, I'd give *anything* to know what she remembers of this supposed trip to Paris. "The opposite of torrid," she replies, her smile fading. "I dreamed we were in the hospital."

"I apparently really knew how to show you a good time in my past life."

Her mouth twitches into a grin. "Yes. I'm sure it was a high point in our relationship."

It's so damn comfortable with her. It's comfortable with Meg too, but this is easier somehow, which is a really unfair comparison. *Of course* it's going to be easier with Quinn—she has no expectations of me. I might not even see her again after tonight. "So, what happened in this dream of yours?"

She swallows. Whatever she saw, it bothers her even now. "We were in

the hospital and it seemed like I was dying or really sick, I'm not sure. And then this woman came into the room, and I knew she was going to take me away from you. It's the same dream I had as a kid."

We reach a crowd of people waiting to cross M Street and stop. "But *I* wasn't in that dream when you were a kid."

"Yeah," she says slowly. "You were."

I blink, wondering if this is a joke. The crowd moves forward and I remain standing here, stupefied. "*That* is completely impossible."

"Even when I was small, I told my parents about you. That your name was Nick and you were my husband. I'm sure it must have freaked them out."

"That—"

She laughs, the sound weary. "*Is completely impossible?* Yes, I know. But my parents sent me to therapy because of those nightmares. It's all documented. You could argue it wasn't the *same* you, but I swear to God it was."

I rub my temples. I believe her. And yet, it is wholly unbelievable. "I don't even know what to say."

She sighs. "Yeah. Me neither. It seemed so real too. My blood pressure started dropping and you shouted at the doctor to give me something. Levo... Levophed? Is that a thing?"

I can only stare at her. It's the exact medicine I'd have used to treat her blood pressure in an emergency, something she's highly unlikely to know. "This just gets weirder and weirder," I reply, starting to move across the street just before we miss the light. "I know you don't want to have these dreams, but don't you think maybe there's a *reason* you're having them? The next dream you have might be the one that helps you make sense of all this."

Her mouth purses. I wonder, fleetingly, what that mouth of hers would taste like—*the cake she couldn't bring herself to eat? Something better?*—and it grates inside my chest, the fact that I'm never going to know. "Maybe, but I doubt it."

I agree with her, but I'm still disappointed in her answer.

We reach the Metro far too soon. It had to be the fastest one-mile walk of my life.

"What line are you on?" she asks.

"I'm not," I tell her. "I live back near the hospital. I just didn't want you walking here alone since it's getting dark."

Something pained and wistful passes over her face. “Thank you,” she says quietly, going up on her toes to press her lips to my cheek. She smells like oranges and sunshine.

I watch her step onto the escalator and remain there until she is out of sight, wondering if this is what it’s like for my brother. If he’s somewhere in the world cataloging all the experiences he’ll never have too.



MEG IS WAITING in my apartment when I get back, which leaves me feeling guilty and irritated simultaneously. I hope some time away from Quinn will make my feelings for Meg return to what they were, but right now they are nowhere in sight. “Hey there. I didn’t think you were coming over.”

She shrugs. “I figured once I move in, we’ll have to get used to working around each other’s schedules, so I might as well stay here anyway. Have you eaten?”

I set my keys on the counter. “No, but I’m pretty beat,” I tell her. “You want to rent a movie and order in?”

“We could,” she says, crossing the room toward me. “Or we could do something *else*.” She goes on her toes to kiss me, her fingers pulling at my tie. “We haven’t been alone in forever.”

I know what she wants and for literally the first time in my adult life, I can’t. I know I’ll be picturing Quinn, and that when it’s done, I’ll feel like I’ve cheated on Quinn *and* Meg, as insane as that is. My hand gently circles her wrist, staving her off. “I did something to my back swimming this morning,” I lie.

“I could do all the work,” she offers.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. “I really don’t feel great.”

I watch Meg walk away, the rigidity of her spine the only sign of her displeasure. I need to get my head straightened out fast, or I’m going to lose the good thing I have—*Meg*—for something that isn’t even an option.



I SPEND the entire weekend trying not to think about Quinn. I spend Monday thinking of reasons I could call her, when I should never have called her last

Thursday in the first place. My role as her doctor had basically ended at that point.

But there are no words for how pleased I am when she calls me instead.

“How’s Darcy today?” she asks.

“I just saw her wandering around the hospital in her cape. It really cheered her up to have you there last week. Thanks for coming by. You’re at work?”

“Yeah. My boss is out,” she says, “probably buying Dalmatians for her next fur coat, so I’m able to actually place a personal call.”

I like the idea of this being a personal call more than I should. “Dalmatian fur is way too hot for D.C. in the summer.”

“You can never plan your fur coat purchases too far in advance.” We both laugh and there it is again—this sense of ease in our conversation I don’t have with other people, not even friends I’ve known all my life.

“So, I was thinking,” she continues. “Both of my seizures, or whatever they were, seemed like they were triggered by that house at the lake, the one that might be your parents’. I was wondering if I could see a picture of it?”

“Sure, but why?”

She sighs. “I don’t know. I’m just wondering if it’ll help me remember something. Obviously, I can’t stop the dreams, but maybe if I can figure out the significance of the house, or at least get used to seeing it, I can stop passing out every time I’m there.”

Because of her wedding. It’s funny how I keep forgetting it’s happening, and how I flinch each time she reminds me. “Sure. Hang on.” I quickly swipe through my pictures, send one and then wait while she pulls it up.

“Oh,” she whispers.

“Is it the same house?”

“Yeah,” she says. “That’s it. But I’m fine.”

I give a small laugh. “I’ve never heard someone so disappointed to not have a seizure.”

“No,” she muses, her voice distant and distracted. “It’s good, obviously. At least I’ll be able to make it upright through the wedding. I just thought... do you think I could see other pictures?”

“Of the house?”

“No,” she says, hesitating. “Of you guys. You and Ryan, your parents. The treehouse, maybe. Do you have pictures of that?”

People always seem worried when they mention Ryan to me, as if I might

have just forgotten that my twin is dead until their reminder. I hear the apology in her voice but it's unnecessary. A piece of me wants to share my past with her, wants to throw open the doors and let her be the one person I let inside. "Sure," I reply. "Give me a sec."

I go into a favorites file on my phone and hit several in a row. A picture of me and my parents when I graduated. My dad in front of our house, captured wearing a hat of my mom's to mow the lawn. Then me and Ryan—as teenagers out on the dock, both of us sun-burnished and way too full of ourselves. As kids, leaning out of the treehouse with big semi-toothless grins.

She laughs. "What is your dad wearing?"

"My mom's hat," I reply. "He has very little shame, obviously."

There's a moment of silence, and when she speaks again her voice is full of dread. "Oh."

I shoot forward in my seat. "What's the matter?"

"Nick?" she whispers, the sound distant and barely audible.

I hear a crash, and then nothing. I shout her name but hear only background noise. "Someone pick up the fucking phone!"

There is only silence in response.

QUINN

How was the first day of school?" asks Nick, leaning against the locker beside mine, lanky and relaxed in the way only someone older and cooler than you can be. Despite that easy stance, concern darkens his blue eyes, furrows his brow. He's always been protective of me, although we're only a year apart, and he's even more so now that I'm in public school for the first time. But his protectiveness is big-brother-like, which I find highly annoying. I've seen the way he looks at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention, so who does he think he's fooling?

"Perfect," I reply.

"You found your classes okay?"

I feel a trickle of evil joy in my chest as I look up at him. "I did. And you'll never guess who just asked me out during Spanish."

Anything pleasant in his face bleeds away. "Who?"

"Colin Campbell." Nick and his twin brother are already stars at our school—both gorgeous, both straight-A students and star athletes—but they are juniors and Colin is a senior. A popular, hot senior. This is apparently a coup of some kind, but mostly I'm just relieved there's a male somewhere in this high school who doesn't want to pretend I'm his sister. Who won't watch me like something he wants to devour and then rub my head like a favorite pet.

Nick's eyes narrow. "He's a senior. You cannot date a senior."

"I'm fairly certain I can, since I said yes," I reply, slamming my locker

shut and heading for the front doors. It's still summer-hot outside, and I have to pick my way through lounging students to get to the path I take home. Nick is on my heels, his eyes the color of a summer storm.

"Where's he taking you?" he barks.

His distress is a balm to my soul. I've spent a solid two years trying to make him admit he likes me. I shrug, the very picture of ambivalence. "Some party."

"He's going to try something. He's at least going to try to kiss you."

He sounds pissed and it serves him right. We've just reached our cut-through in the woods, but I stop and turn toward him, shifting my backpack to my other shoulder. "Remember the time Ryan dared you to kiss me, and you did it, but acted like you were vomiting afterward? That is the grand sum of my experience. So, I hope Colin tries something, because that's a shitty memory to have as my only kiss."

He slaps a palm to his forehead. "For fuck's sake, Quinn. I was nine."

"Yeah," I reply. "And I'm 15. So I'm ready for something better." I turn to walk away and find myself spun back toward him before I've even had time to process it. His mouth lands on mine without hesitation or uncertainty, as if I'm a meal he's been waiting for years to consume.

And he consumes. With his lips, his tongue, his hands. He burns me alive, taking my oxygen and my common sense and leaving nothing but desire in its wake. Kissing is so much more than I realized. Not just mouths and fumbling, but something that turns my core into a pillar of fire and finds me arching against him, desperate for more.

When he finally breaks away, my back is against a tree, his hands are on my ass, and there's a bulge pressing into my abdomen—I suspect I know what it is, but this is all new to me, so I wouldn't swear to it. "Are you going to pretend to vomit now?" I ask.

"No, I'm not going to pretend to vomit." He sounds winded and gravelly. His hands move up, cradling my face the way they once did a robin's egg we found. I remember the awe in his eyes as he carried it. It's how he looks at me now too. "God, Quinn. You have no idea how badly I've wanted to do that."

He's older, and knows more, but this raw, wanting thing inside me surges and takes charge. I pull him down to me by the collar of his T-shirt. "Do it again," I command.

"Fuck," he hisses. "Yes." And then he's pushing me against the tree

again and his mouth is right there, about to land on mine...except my name is being called. Somewhere far away, but it's coming from inside my head, and the voice is...Nick's. Older, different, yet still him. Another version of Nick, calling me home.

I want to ignore him. I want to stay right here against this tree and see what happens next. But that voice I hear has grown desperate and I can't stand it. I have to go.

I tumble through the darkness, but I am not actually falling, like I thought. I'm moving sideways, slipping through walls that press against me like the narrowest hallway, yet are made of absolutely nothing. And as I'm flying by, in the darkness across from me, I see a face. A girl—with long brown hair and gray eyes like nothing I've ever witnessed before—who looks as astonished to see me as I am to see her.

"Quinn," says Nick, stern in his panic. "Can you hear me?"

I'm on a stretcher, in an ambulance bouncing so hard over D.C.'s potholes that it feels like an amusement-park ride.

"Hi," I murmur. The pain is setting in, shearing my brain into pieces, jagged like glass. I want to raise my hands but I can't. "Head," I whisper.

"I have you," he says, pushing my hair back from my face. "It's going to be okay."

He looks at me the way I remember, from some other life: as if I mean absolutely everything to him and nothing else matters. On the other side of me, the paramedic is doing something. Wrong, apparently.

"Give me that," Nick demands, and seconds later, I feel the pain being pushed away, cleared, like he's taken a large broom to the whole area. As everything goes black, I wonder if I'm dying, and my biggest regret is that I won't have gotten to spend more time with Nick before it happens.



WHEN I WAKE, it's dusk, and Nick is sitting in the chair beside me. My hand is clasped in his, and that's as it should be. It belongs there.

"Hi," I whisper.

His hand slides away. "Hey there. How do you feel?"

"Okay. A little achy, but that's it. What happened?"

"You passed out in your office while we were on the phone."

The entire morning is vague to me. I don't remember waking or getting dressed. But I do remember the dream, and the sound of him begging me to come back. "You came for me," I say quietly. "Thank you."

His mouth opens and closes, his hand reaches for mine and falls away. "The hospital called your fiancé," he says after a moment, his lip curling into a sneer at that last word. "He couldn't get a flight out until morning. Is there someone else you'd want me to call?"

I shake my head. "My mother, but she's two hours away and she'd just worry."

He stares at the blankets for a moment before raising bleak eyes to mine. "We got another MRI while you were knocked out."

My hands clench reflexively, nails biting into the soft skin of my palms. His expression is so grim I barely have to ask if it was bad news. "Oh?"

"The tumor is growing," he says, his jaw shifting as he utters the words. "Quickly."

Everything inside me grows still and quiet. I take one deep breath. Another. "But you said it wasn't metabolically active," I whisper. "That it wouldn't grow."

"It shouldn't have. I have no explanation for this. None. I've never even heard of a tumor that could grow like yours without additional blood flow."

I bite my lip, willing myself not to cry. "And it's inoperable," I add.

He is silent for a moment. "Yes," he finally says. He squeezes my hand and I squeeze his back, not letting go as I turn my head away from him. A tear trickles over the bridge of my nose and onto the pillow. I was ready for this last week. Maybe not *ready*, but braced for it at least. Now I can only lie here feeling like I've been hit by a truck. "So how long do I have?"

He reaches out to touch my chin, forcing me to meet his eye. "It's not a death sentence, Quinn. Surgery isn't the only option. There's chemo and radiation. I need to refer you out to an oncologist."

I think of Darcy, tiny Darcy who is not going to be around for long. None of that worked for her, obviously. I think of my father. They told us he probably had five years. He was dead in six months. "And if those things aren't possible, or just don't work for me?"

He exhales. "If it were to stop growing...there are people who are okay. They just sit with it, and we monitor and hope for the best."

He's doing what all doctors do, pretending my one wispy tendril of hope is something far more solid and stable than it is. Except I don't want the best-

case scenario. I want the likely one. “But mine *is* growing. So how long if it continues at the current rate?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “Let’s hold off on making predictions just yet. I’ve got a call in to the best oncologist in the city. He’s on vacation but I should hear back by Monday.” I just look at him, waiting, and he relents. “If it keeps growing at the current rate, you might have a few years.”

A few years, and he’s probably still giving me a best-case scenario. It’s just as likely to mean one year.

My whole life, I wanted two things—to become an architect and to become a mother, and now neither of them will happen. I brush at the tears streaming down my face. It takes me a minute or two before I get it under control.

“You don’t have to stay,” I tell him once I’ve pulled myself together. “I’m sure you have things to do.”

He squeezes my hand. “I’m not leaving unless you force me to.”

We are silent for a moment. The truth is, no matter how badly I don’t want to be dreaming about him, don’t want to persuade myself I feel something for him...there is no one else in the world I want here in his place.

I glance out the window, at the dwindling light, and brace myself as I ask a question I’ve avoided all this time. “You don’t have to be home to someone?”

“I made arrangements.”

Ouch. “You’re married?”

His eyes shift away. “No, but I have a girlfriend, Meg. She’s a pulmonologist here, actually. I told her I was working late.”

My heart sinks. He’s got a girlfriend and she’s a doctor too. It leaves an extremely bitter taste in my mouth, jealousy and also panic. In a few years I’ll be gone and she’ll still be here with him. “You should go home to her then,” I tell him, the words grating in my throat on the way out. “I’ll be fine.”

“Quinn,” he says quietly, staring between clasped hands at the floor, “I want to stay.”

I hear need in his voice, and torment, and the sound of it opens this Pandora’s box inside me. My eyes close. I want to soothe his torment and my own. I want to forget the entire world exists aside from him. But the world does exist, and in it I’ve made certain promises.

“I’ll have to invite both of you to the wedding,” I reply. “Two doctors would come in handy, given the odds the bride is going to pass out.”

My forced cheerfulness fools no one. “Maybe—” he starts. “Never mind.”

“No, come on. You started, so finish it.”

His lashes lower, shuttering his expression. “Maybe you should postpone it,” he says. “The stress of a wedding...I’m not sure it’s what you need right now.”

“People have already bought plane tickets. We’d lose all our deposits.”

“You’re not even sure you want to marry the guy,” Nick says. His hands are clenched so tightly on the top railing of my bed that they are nearly bloodless. “A few lost deposits should be the least of your concerns.”

I stiffen. “I never said I didn’t want to marry him.”

“You didn’t have to say it,” he replies, glaring at me. “I told you he couldn’t get here until tomorrow and you didn’t even blink. And every time you’ve mentioned him, it’s like you’re talking about a work friend, or a cousin. You don’t feel the way you should about him.”

“Oh, but you do with Meg?” I lash out and regret the words immediately. I don’t sound like a patient, or even a friend—I sound like a very, *very* jealous girlfriend.

“No,” he says, his eyes nearly translucent in the dim room. “Because if I felt the right way about her, I probably wouldn’t be in here with you.”

Relief washes over me, sweeps beneath me and raises me high. I allow myself to float there, on its surface. It will all come to nothing, but just for this one night, I’m going to pretend he is mine.

NICK

I told the nursing staff I was staying late because Quinn was an old friend from college. This would probably have aroused less suspicion if she was a slightly less *attractive* old friend from college.

I order in dinner from an Italian place down on MacArthur. As I pull the containers from the bag, I realize this feels a bit like a first date, and a bit like a night with someone I've known all my life. Her eyes are smokier than normal, her face flushed. If this was even a first date I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off her.

I place the first container on her bedside table and she raises her surprised face to mine. "Penne alla vodka is my favorite."

I'm swept by an unsettling feeling I might have already known this. So many things with her seem to be automatic, so ingrained they've become a part of me—the same way I can drive home without paying attention to where I am or type without looking at the keys. "Sorry I couldn't get us any wine to go with it, but I'm already getting enough of a side-eye from the front desk staff without providing alcohol to a patient."

She takes her first bite of pasta and groans, a sound that has me reacting in completely inappropriate ways. Before I can stop myself, I'm imagining hearing that noise with her beneath me, on top of me, with my head between her thighs. Thank Christ the bed rail blocks her view of my crotch. I shut my eyes for a moment, scrambling to think of a topic that doesn't involve her mouth or my dick. Ideally, a topic that references no body parts whatsoever.

Nothing comes to mind.

"I guess this is the point where I'm going to have to tell Jeff and my mother about the tumor."

I set my fork down. At least the erection is gone. "You didn't tell them about the tumor yet at *all*?"

Quinn exhales heavily, staring at her plate. "My mom would have worried, and...with Jeff, I was just being bratty, I guess."

"Bratty how?"

She shrugs. "After that last test I did, he kind of forgot to ask how it had gone. It wasn't a big deal but it made me feel...like an afterthought."

My hand flexes. She's got to be fucking kidding me. "How," I say, "could he not have asked?"

"I'm sure he just assumed things were fine."

Bullshit. If she were mine, I'd have been at the hospital when she was being discharged. I'd have tried to make her go home and rest. I'd have had a thousand fucking questions for her doctor about next steps. I'd have persuaded her to leave the job she hates. There are a million things I'd have done, and he hasn't done a goddamn one of them. "Do you want me to call them?"

She laughs. "Oh my God. If you called my mother, she'd go off the deep end."

"Why's that? My bedside manner isn't that terrible, is it?"

Her smoky-green eyes grow a little hazier. "Your bedside manner is just fine."

I find myself watching Quinn's mouth as she speaks, which was a really bad idea. My dick has a mind of its own and now strains hard against what *was* a roomy pair of pants. "Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is if she learns I've got a doctor named Nick after I spent my early childhood *dreaming* about a doctor named Nick, she's going to lose her mind. I think it was pretty unnerving to have your toddler talking about her husband from a past life." Her jaw tenses. "And my mother is easily spooked."

There's tension there, whenever she refers to her mother. I wish I knew why. "Those dreams...what made them stop?"

Her teeth pull at her lip. "I went to therapy but I don't think that had much to do with it. We had this...incident on the farm. And they became a lot less frequent after that."

I go on alert the moment she says *incident*. She's trying to minimize something I doubt was minimal. I'm guessing she does that a lot. "What incident?"

She stares at her lap, avoiding my eye. "A murder-suicide. My parents had these tenants on the property, this little two-bedroom house... They think the wife wanted to leave, so the husband killed her and their daughter while they were asleep."

"Their daughter? She was a child?"

She swallows. "Yeah. Jilly. She was nine, just two years older than me. She would tell me all about *Melrose Place* after school since I wasn't allowed to watch it. I still don't know if Michael and Jane ever got back together," Quinn says, with a raspy noise that is meant to be a laugh but comes out as something like a sob. She brushes at her face. "God, I haven't talked about this in ages. Anyway, it kind of messed me up a little."

I reach between the railings to squeeze her hand. "That would mess up anyone. But I can't imagine how something like that would have made your nightmares stop."

Her eyes flicker to me and dart away again. "I guess I finally realized caring too much for any one thing...it just creates problems. I was better off letting it go."

Something about her answer doesn't add up. It's obvious she cares about things. She dropped out of school for her parents' sake, and she's getting married. Not the behaviors of someone who fears intimacy. "You don't mean that," I say. "If you really didn't want to be attached, you wouldn't be engaged right now."

"I didn't say I want *no* attachment. I said I don't want to get *too* attached. If Jeff cheats on me or leaves, he does. I'll be hurt, sure, but I won't be destroyed."

It seems like a fucked-up way to go through life. I've spent years waiting to feel *more* for another person, while she intentionally chose someone with whom that would never be possible.

She rolls toward me. "Which reminds me. I did a little research yesterday morning before I called you. There's a doctor in New Jersey who might be able to help me stop the dreams."

Right. The dreams that show her how much better her life should be. I wish I could convince her to pay attention to them, but instead I listen as she describes a study this guy published on repressed memories and sudden

tumor onset, some case in which a teenage girl had a seizure and woke up speaking fluent Italian.

I've been combing medical journals since the day we met for something, *anything*, that could help, and have found absolutely nothing—which means any guy she's found online is probably a crackpot no respectable journal would publish. I lean back in my chair and rub my neck. "Quinn, I'm not trying to dissuade you, but there are a lot of people who try to profit off the misfortunes of others. For every single incurable disease, you'll find at least one charlatan offering some insane treatment that costs a fortune and makes no sense."

"He went to Harvard for medical school. That's got to be worth something."

"It's probably worth a lot less than you think. Guys like that...they either come up with a bizarre cure or a bizarre supernatural explanation for what they can't cure."

She smiles. "Are you ruling supernatural explanations out?"

"Look, even if I believed in ghosts, or reincarnation, you're remembering events that took place within the past few years. Besides, you seemed even more certain than me that there *was* no explanation."

"I know, but I was thinking something." She rolls on her back, her gaze on the ceiling. There are water spots there I've never seen before, but I don't think she even notices them. "I realize it sounds crazy, but the tumor gets bigger every time I black out, right? It was tiny, now it's not. So maybe if I can just figure out why it's happening, even just part of the reason, I can stop it from growing."

"Or maybe," I reply as gently as possible, "it's the progression of the tumor that's causing the incidents in the first place. And now you've got a tumor that needs treatment. We should be focused on getting you in with an oncologist, not some quack's insane theories."

She blinks rapidly, trying not to cry. "I need this to stop, Nick. I need someone to make it stop. Even if the tumor kills me, the way I find myself thinking and feeling...it has to end."

"Why?" I ask, harsher than I intended to sound. "Why does it have to end?"

Her eyes are so tortured as they turn toward me it's hard to meet her gaze. "Because I wake up feeling like everything in London actually happened, and I want it more than I want my real life. Except, my real life is what I have,

and I need to be happy with that.”

No, you don't. You could be with me.

I picture it: leaving here together. Starting over in a new city where no one knows us. Coming home to her every night and finding her beside me every morning. The thought of it makes me burn with want. What I'd like to do right now is hold her face in the palms of my hands and make a thousand promises I'd never be able to keep. Instead I jump to my feet and begin to pace. I'm angry and upset and being unprofessional and I really don't care. “I think these dreams are nature's way of telling you that you are settling for less. Way less.”

“What I have with Jeff is exactly what I want,” she replies, her voice breaking. “I don't want to feel more than that about someone. It causes too much pain.”

I should let this go, because it's not like I have anything to offer in its place—even if every other obstacle was removed, it's never going to be okay for me to be with her. But I find myself arguing anyway. “The only other option is to go through your whole life never deeply loving anything at all.”

“I'm okay with that,” she replies. She looks at me for a long moment. “And you seem to be too.”

QUINN

A nurse enters at six a.m., waking us both. We stayed up talking most of the night, and he fell asleep in the fold-out chair beside me. I have no idea how he explained his absence to his girlfriend.

“Oh,” says the nurse, trying to master her surprise. “Dr. Reilly...I, uh, didn’t realize you were...in here.”

Guilt makes me flinch. I’m engaged and I shouldn’t have had a man other than Jeff stay overnight in my room. “Nick’s an old friend,” I explain.

“From college,” he adds, but he looks far too guilty to be believed. She raises a brow and, after giving him a look I can only interpret as scolding, leaves the room.

“I hope you don’t get in trouble,” I breathe when the door shuts behind her.

He gives me a small smile. “As far as I remember, nothing unprofessional occurred.”

Just the suggestion that something *could* have happened is enough to have me squeezing my thighs together.

“But,” he adds, “Jeff will be here soon, so I should go.”

I dread him leaving. It’s greedy of me to want more time with him, but I want it anyway. *And I absolutely need to stop wanting it.* “Thank you for staying over.”

His fingers brush mine and his eyes shut. “If you’re still planning to go see that doctor in New Jersey, I’ll go with you.”

I shake my head. “You don’t need to do that.”

“You cannot drive that far alone. Not when you’re blacking out every other day. Unless you plan to ask *Jeff*.” The disdain in his tone implies he already knows I won’t. Or thinks Jeff isn’t up to the job.

My hands twist together. The last thing I need are more hours alone with Nick. But he’s taken anyway, so how dangerous could it be? And he’s right—I shouldn’t drive that far by myself, and asking Jeff means telling him about these dreams, which wouldn’t go over well.

I tell myself I’m agreeing because it’s my only option, but the truth is, as much as the idea of being alone with Nick scares me, it appeals to me even more.

So I guess we’re going on a trip.



“QUINN!” my mother says excitedly when she answers the phone. “You must be psychic. I was just about to call. Nordstrom emailed to say they no longer have the heels I wanted you to get for the rehearsal dinner. So what do you think about getting the suede instead? I know you wanted patent leather, but I think they’d work and you’d probably get more use out of them.”

Her words are like small, repetitive drips of water into an empty metal sink. So meaningless. It’s shocking to me that a week ago I’d have been worried about patent leather versus suede. And now I’m so sad for her. I’m about to make her small worries seem as trivial as they are by dropping a big one in her lap.

“Mom,” I say softly. “I’ve got some bad news.”



BY THE TIME JEFF ARRIVES, my tears have dried, but sadness weighs heavily in my stomach. My mother leaned on me so hard when my father died. Who will she have to lean on once I’m gone too? I gave her a best-case scenario instead of the worst, yet it was still the most difficult phone call I’ve ever made.

Jeff walks into the room with his carry-on in hand, looking weary and worse for wear. He presses a kiss to my forehead, drops into the chair that

was Nick's during the night. "I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner. There wasn't a single flight out and then we left late. So what happened?" he asks, gently pushing the hair back from my face. "I called again and again last night but you didn't answer."

Guilt delivers yet another tweak to my stomach. I begin to sweat and fling off the blankets. "I was sleeping a lot," I lie. "But they did another MRI and it's more serious than they thought."

He stills. "I assumed it was just another migraine," he says.

"Not exactly," I tell him, so quiet it's barely audible. "Jeff, I have a brain tumor."

He turns as white as bleached paper. "*What?* But that scan the other day—"

"It was tiny then and there was no blood flow around it, so they thought it wasn't growing. But it is growing. Quickly."

His jaw swings open. "They found a *tumor* and you didn't even mention it?"

I know he's just upset and looking for a scapegoat, but I'm in no mood to be one. "You didn't ask," I reply. "I had to even remind you I'd had a test done."

"I thought you'd tell me if there was a problem!" he shouts, jumping to his feet with his hands on the top of his head. "So, what? This guy missed it on the first MRI, so he had you take another and told you it was fine?"

"No," I begin. "He ran a test to check blood flow and—" He reaches over in the middle of my explanation and hits the call button. "What are you doing?"

"I'm telling them you need another neurologist. This guy obviously has no idea what he's doing."

Irritation claws at me. There are so many things I'm irate about in this moment that I don't know where to begin—the fact that he's making decisions on my behalf, that he's jumping to conclusions, that this moment has become about his distress instead of mine. For the last few years I've shielded him and carried the weight and made him feel like the center of the universe, but just once, I'd like to be the one who gets coddled. I lean forward and grab his arm. "Stop," I hiss. "I don't want another doctor. None of this is his fault."

My words are meaningless to him. They don't even seem to register. "I had a bad feeling about the guy from the moment we met him."

The nurse who saw me and Nick together this morning enters and Jeff rounds on her. “I want a new neurologist for my fiancée. Immediately.”

I hate that he’s demanding things of her like she’s a servant. And I hate even more that he’s acting like his opinion is the one that matters here. “No,” I interject. “We *don’t*.”

Her gaze volleys between the two of us. *Great*. She probably thinks we’re in some love triangle now. “I’ll tell Dr. Reilly you need to see him.”

She walks out and I tug on Jeff’s hand. “Please stop this. *Now*. Nick hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“So he’s *Nick* now, huh?” Jeff asks. “I didn’t realize the two of you were suddenly pals.”

I groan, so appalled by his behavior I’m struggling to form words. “This is not about you! *I’m* the one with the brain tumor, so *I’ll* be the one who decides if I’m changing doctors. And you have no right to be making demands of the nurses on my behalf when I’m sitting right here, so don’t do it again.”

We are glaring at each other when Nick walks through the door, freshly showered. I have a memory of a time like this, a time when he came to my bedside and I pressed my lips to his neck, breathing him in. *Keep kissing me like that*, he said, *and I’m going to climb into bed with you*.

Except right now, there is nothing soft in his face. His sneer is barely restrained as he turns toward Jeff. “I understand you wanted to see me?”

“Yeah,” says Jeff. “I want to know how the hell you managed to miss the fact that my fiancée had a serious brain tumor on her first scan.”

“Jeff,” I hiss. “I already told you that’s not what happened.”

But he’s not listening to me. Neither of them are, really. They’ve already squared off, reminding me of gorillas in some nature documentary, on the cusp of battle. Jeff is not a small guy by any stretch of the imagination, but Nick is bigger, and the set of his shoulders right now seems threatening, intentionally so. “I *didn’t* miss anything,” he says between his teeth. “Her tumor is behaving in a way we haven’t seen before.”

“Well, I think a doctor with more experience might have noticed what you didn’t.”

Nick smirks. “If Quinn wants a second opinion, she’s more than welcome to seek one out. But that’s her decision, or that of her family. And if I recall correctly, *you’re* not family.” He’s baiting Jeff, making a bad situation worse. I don’t understand why he’s doing it, but it’s working: Jeff’s temper is

fraying. It's there in his clenched fists, in the way he steps forward.

"Then she must have failed to mention that we're getting married in four weeks," Jeff replies.

Nick's laugh is an angry bark. "I guess I keep forgetting because you're never around."

Jeff takes another step toward him and I'm on my feet. "Okay, I think this conversation has gone on long enough," I say, gripping the hospital gown as I step between them. "Thank you for coming in, Dr. Reilly."

Nick swallows, his whole body tense. He wants to refuse to leave, and for a moment, I really think he will. Finally, his jaw shifting in protest, he turns and walks from the room.

"You're fucking protecting him now?" Jeff demands.

I explode. "I have a brain tumor, dammit!" I shout. "And all you've done since you found out is yell at my doctor and make a scene. For once, how about if we let something just be about me and not you?!"

He gapes at me, shocked into silence for what is probably the first time ever. And then he sinks into the chair next to my bed, burying his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he says, his voice choked. "You're right. I'm just...it's a lot to take in."

I want to stay mad at him, but I can't. This is my fault. Each time I grow closer to Nick, I'm pushing him away. He senses it even if there's nothing specific he can point to. If he really understood the situation, he'd be a lot angrier than he's been and I'd deserve every ounce of it—because even now I'm wishing it was Nick here instead of him.

He drives me home once I'm discharged, attempting to malign Nick only once before I shut him down. He asks his mom to go keep mine company, and offers to stay home for the day, though I tell him it's not necessary. The truth is I *want* him to go, and I wish he'd stayed gone in the first place.

I keep my final dress fitting appointment that afternoon as scheduled. The gown is a sleeveless Monique Lhuillier with a plunging neckline and a sheer, hand embroidered overlay, so gorgeous even Caroline approved when she saw it. "Your fiancé will die when he sees you walk down the aisle," says the seamstress. But when I look in the mirror it's not Jeff's face I picture at the altar.

Which makes me wonder, for the first time, if I should be going through with this wedding at all.



WHEN I'M DONE I meet Trevor and Caroline out for a drink. I guess I'll have to tell them about the tumor eventually, but I'm going to put it off as long as I can. I don't want to be treated like someone who is dying. I want our nights out to continue involving margaritas and wince-inducing tales of Trevor's hook-ups, not chai latte at Starbucks and solemn conversations about my health.

By the time we arrive, the bar is loud and crowded, full of twenty-two-year-old Hill staffers in khakis, drunk off their asses and pushing each other off barstools. This, oddly enough, makes me smile. I'm still a part of things here. The land of the living hasn't written me off just yet.

Trevor, naturally, is hyper-focused on the events that took place in our office. "You should have seen her doctor," he tells Caroline breathlessly. "It was so hot. He flipped the fuck out—came in demanding to know where she was. And then he didn't even wait for the medic team. By the time they got in the door with that stretcher thingy, he'd already picked her up and was carrying her out, like a bride over the threshold."

Butterflies beat tiny wings inside my stomach, and I take a quick, sharp breath, waiting for them to settle. Nick *carried* me? I had no idea. But I shouldn't be thrilled by it, regardless. "I'm glad you've found a way to romanticize my collapse. I'm sure Nick's girlfriend would love it too."

"Wait," Caroline says, holding up her hand. "Isn't Nick the name of the mystery guy you dreamed about in London? The one you'd never met?"

I groan, wishing I'd never mentioned it. "Yeah. I know it's bizarre."

"What mystery guy?" Trevor asks.

I slump in my chair while Caroline's eyes light up. "Quinn started having dreams about this guy in London...a doctor named Nick...*before* she met him."

Trevor gapes at us. "I can't believe you didn't tell me about the dream thing sooner. It's like a fucking Nicholas Sparks novel happening before my eyes! I'm going to look him up online."

I point a finger at him. "This is exactly why I didn't tell you sooner... because telling you anything like this is going to wind up with the three of us scaling his apartment complex drunk, and I'm too old for that shit."

"Do you know what apartment complex he's *in*?" asks Trevor, completely ignoring the important part of what I just said. "Because honestly,

with just the bare minimum of upper body strength, you can..."

"Trevor, I love you, but we're not stalking him, and we're *definitely* not trying to climb up another balcony. You nearly fell to your death last time."

Trevor ignores me, holding out his phone. "I found him."

Caroline leans over his shoulder. "Oh my God, Quinn. He was a swimmer? You know that's my kryptonite."

Trevor looks her over. "Precious, anything with a package is your kryptonite. And believe me, this guy has a package. I could tell just by the way he carried himself."

I roll my eyes. "You could not *just tell*."

"I've seen a lot of dicks, honey, so yes, I can, but I'll prove it. Let me find a photo of him in a Speedo."

The two of them comb through photos while I pretend this isn't happening. "That one," whispers Caroline, sounding like the lead detective on a police procedural. "Zoom in."

"Oh, Lord," says Trevor. "Quinn, you need to lock that down."

Caroline grins at me. "You really do."

I huff in exasperation. "I'm *engaged*, morons! And you're both in the wedding. I'm not sure why I need to keep reminding you."

"Just look at the photo," Caroline urges, snatching Trevor's phone from his hand and waving it in my face.

I fold my arms across my chest and close my eyes. "I'm absolutely not going to look at a picture of my doctor in a Speedo." In part, because I've already seen those photos.

"Mmm," Trevor says, licking his lips. "You know what I'd love? A photo of him in tighty-whities. Damp tighty-whities. My birthday falls right before Christmas. Get one for me. It could be a combination gift."

"I'm not sure how familiar you are with modern medicine, Trevor, but in *this* country, we don't routinely spend time with our physicians whilst dressed in wet tighty-whities."

He pouts. "I feel like you're not even trying."

QUINN

On Friday morning, I arrive at my office but don't go inside. Instead I scan the street for Nick, who's meeting me here for the trip to New Jersey. He offered to pick me up at home, but it seemed too intimate, somehow. I struggle to ignore the voice in my head insisting that the way we're meeting, on the surface, looks a lot like cheating.

I spy him in a Jeep, idling on the sidewalk with the top down, and my heart does this dorky little skip at the sight of him.

"Hi, stranger," I say, leaning my head in the window. "You wouldn't happen to feel like driving me to New Jersey, would you?"

He smiles at me just the way I remember from some other time, sheepish and cocky at once.

"Sure, pretty girl in a dress. Climb in, and I'll drive you anywhere you want."

I open the door and hoist myself in. "You'd make a terrible abductor."

"I am an *excellent* abductor, I'll have you know."

"You didn't even offer me candy. Candy is the lynchpin to a successful abduction."

He grins and reaches into the back, behind the passenger seat, and places a box of Hot Tamales in my lap. I stare at it. "This is my favorite candy."

His smile falters a little. "Lucky guess." Yes, a lucky guess...like knowing my favorite pasta and being so certain I was an architect when we first met. He doesn't see a past with me the way I do, but that knowledge

exists somewhere inside him anyway.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” he asks. “We could just play hooky instead.”

For a single moment I allow myself to consider it. What would playing hooky with Nick consist of? A thousand possibilities occur to me and all of them appeal. I exhale. “As off-putting as I found Grosbaum’s *excitement* about my inoperable tumor, I do feel like I have to check this out.”

I plug the address into the GPS while he maneuvers through the crowded back streets of Georgetown to get us to Canal Road. I’ve felt vaguely guilty about the fact that I’m doing this without telling Jeff, but he’s traveling again and it’s a sunny day—not a cloud in the sky—so I decide I’m just going to give in to the experience. I may not even be around next summer, so if I want to have one perfect day with Nick—a day that actually *happened*—this is my shot.

“Does Jeff know you’re doing this?” he asks.

I glance at him, wondering if it’s an accusation. “No. Did you tell Meg?”

His eyes remain on the road. “She’s at a conference.”

I guess that’s a no. “I hope it wasn’t a big deal taking off work?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t see patients on Fridays anyway, so I just got someone to cover my morning rounds. What about you?”

I shrug. “I hate my boss and she hates me, but it’s hard to say too much when your employee tells you she has a brain tumor.”

His jaw flexes. “Why the hell are you still there? How *exactly* is it too complicated for you to get your architecture degree? Because it seems kind of simple to me.”

I let my head fall back against the seat and close my eyes. It’s hard to argue on behalf of something I’m not certain of myself. “From a financial standpoint, it doesn’t make sense. I’d be thirty or thirty-one when I finished, and to do what I actually want to do, I’d need a master’s degree. Which means four or five years during which I’m not producing an income.”

“I get it,” he says. “It’s intimidating enough to take money out for student loans without losing your income in addition to it, but long-term you’ll earn it back.”

I suck my lip in between my teeth. “Actually, I inherited some money from my dad. Enough to cover school, at least undergrad.” I could explain why our living expenses are such a concern, but I don’t want to throw Jeff under the bus. Nick already seems to think very little of him and telling him

about Jeff's job history won't improve that. "But we have a mortgage that requires both our incomes. And Jeff really wants to use the inheritance on a down payment for a bigger place, which is probably the smarter thing to do."

His nostrils flare. "Do *you* want a bigger place? Or wait, let me rephrase that: do you want a bigger place more than you want the degree?"

No.

The answer reverberates in my chest. Would I *like* a bigger place, one with hardwood floors and a new kitchen and a bathroom big enough for both of us? Sure. But I don't hunger for it the way I do that degree. It doesn't make my heart beat hard at the thought. When I think of getting a new place, I feel more resigned than anything else. "Probably not," I say quietly. "But if I only have a few years to live, does it really matter whether I got the degree I wanted?"

"It's possible you'll have more than a few years, but that's really a question only you can answer: does it matter?"

My gaze turns toward the window, at the dense wall of trees outside, almost close enough to touch. Does it matter? The practical part of me says no. But there's another voice inside me, something wild and hopeful. And it says *fuck it. I want this. I want that life I've been dreaming about, even if it will amount to nothing. Even if it can't include Nick.*

"You were already at Georgetown and I assume you had good grades," he says, as if he can hear my internal argument. "Why not check and see if they won't let you just slide into classes this fall? And if that fails, I know a few people we could talk to."

I'm like a shaken bottle of seltzer, bubbling up inside but not quite stable. I can't believe we're discussing this—not as a hypothetical, not as a *someday it's possible*, but as something that really could happen. Jeff will not be pleased, but for the first time in my life, I sort of don't care. "I'll think about it."

"I know it's none of my business, but you're my best patient. I want you to be happy."

I laugh. "Best?"

His smile lifts high on one side. "Okay, the only patient who held my hand when we met and told me we were married."

Argh. I'm never going to live that down. I cover my face. "You weren't supposed to mention that! It's so humiliating."

His hand brushes mine, back to back, a quick but intentional sweep. "It's

not humiliating. It's eerie, since you were so accurate. And cute. Maybe the only time eerie and cute have been combined together. But speaking of bizarre things you seem to know, did you have any more dreams last night? I'm still waiting to hear what retirement community we end up in."

I laugh. "That might be too *boring* for me to remember when I wake up. No, last night, it was just us walking around some campus I've never been to. And the bad dream...the one in the hospital. I had it again."

"I can't get my head around that one," Nick finally says. "That I'm in it. Maybe you saw something that's going to happen in the future."

It's occurred to me too, but it just doesn't add up. "You and I are *together* in that dream, but in real life, you're with someone and I'm about to get married, so it can't be the future."

"No one's married to anyone just yet," he replies quietly, and my heart begins that odd, fluttering rhythm. Half terror and half excitement. I shouldn't be in this car, I shouldn't even be entertaining the idea of cancelling the wedding. But I also can't deny that when Nick suggests it, I feel...set free. And I think maybe I haven't felt that way in a very long time.



WE PULL into Princeton just after eleven. Dr. Grosbaum's house, with its crooked shutters and the abundance of dying plants in the front yard, does not inspire optimism.

"You sure you want to do this?" Nick asks.

I square my shoulders. "Yeah."

He reaches out, his hand brushing my cheekbone, resting there for a single beat. "Hey," he says. "It's going to be okay."

I feel a sudden burst of love for him in this moment, warm as the sun. I love that he came here, even though he thinks this is a wild goose chase. I love that he's willing to support me, just *for me*, when it will cause him nothing but trouble. "Thank you for doing this."

His fingers trail away, a hair's breadth from my mouth—I kind of wished they'd stayed—and he smiles. "Even if this doesn't amount to much, I'm glad I got this time with you."

We walk to the door together. I knock, and after a few breathless moments we hear shuffling coming from inside the house. The door opens

and Dr. Grosbaum appears—looking far older than I’d have expected for a man of his age. Though he’s probably in his early sixties, he could easily pass for seventy-five. It’s less about age, I think, than that he’s so grave and unkempt. His white hair is in desperate need of a trim, and he’s wearing clothing that should have been donated long ago. This trip just became even less promising, if possible.

We introduce ourselves, but he is glancing past us and doesn’t seem to be listening. “Come in,” he says. “Come in.”

We follow him into his office, Nick placing himself between us with his shoulders wide and his body tensed, like a lineman just before the snap. We sit patiently while he flips through a file on his desk. On the table behind him there’s a wedding photo, and it takes me a moment to realize the groom is Dr. Grosbaum because he looks so young and so...normal. His bride’s face is partially obscured, but it’s obvious they’re both radiantly happy. I wonder what went wrong, because I seriously doubt she’s still living here—this place hasn’t seen a woman’s touch in a good long time. I look around and realize there are pictures of that same woman all over his office. In each, her face is slightly unclear, but I can tell she’s young, and my initial disdain for him turns to pity. I assume she died, and it appears it wasn’t far into their marriage.

“So, you’re Quinn,” he says. “And who is your friend?”

I knew he wasn’t listening before. I introduce Nick again and Dr. Grosbaum’s head cocks to the side, observing us both like pieces in a museum. “Interesting,” he says, rubbing a pen against his mouth vigorously. “Very interesting.”

Nick already looks irritated. “Your website said you’re affiliated with Princeton?” he asks, his voice heavy with doubt.

“I was,” says Dr. Grosbaum. “The university, in their infinite wisdom, no longer permits me on campus.”

Great. I’m beginning to see all this through Nick’s eyes, and it increasingly looks like a fool’s journey. Nick’s hand squeezes my thigh and I’m not sure if he’s trying to comfort me or signal that we should leave, but either way I remain in my seat. We’ve come this far, and I have to at least try.

“Have you had a chance to look at the images I sent over?” I ask.

He nods. “Didn’t need to, though. Based on your description of the events, I knew what was happening, and your MRI confirmed it.” He flips on a light board, where my scans already hang. “Dr. Reilly, tell me something.

Do you see anything unusual about Quinn's brain? Not the tumor. The brain itself."

Nick studies the images. "The amygdala. They're maybe a bit larger than normal. More oval in shape."

Dr. Grosbaum nods, a teacher rewarding an apt student. "What else do you see?"

Nick sighs heavily. Irritated, perhaps, or maybe he's just reluctant to answer. "You could argue that the frontal lobe has more density and nerve endings than is typical."

"Exactly," says Dr. Grosbaum, turning to me. "Quinn, the frontal lobe performs higher-order thinking. And yours, if I were to venture a guess, has about twice the capacity of a human's."

A small laugh escapes. "You say that as if I'm *not* human."

He shrugs. "Whether you are or are not is arguable. You're certainly a different variety of human than most. You are *thorax laneus tempore*."

I look from him to Nick, who is pinching the bridge of his nose. "Time jumper?" Nick asks. "Are you actually trying to say she jumps through time?"

"I am indeed," says Dr. Grosbaum.

For a single moment I'm speechless with shock. And then common sense returns. "I'm not *jumping* anywhere. I'm dreaming. And this is the only time I know of."

"Except it's not really the only time you know of, Miss Stewart, since you appear to be remembering others, yes? Tell me something: these dreams of yours...are they particularly realistic? Do you emerge from them certain they happened and knowing things you couldn't possibly know?"

The accuracy of what he's said is unsettling, but just because he guessed something correctly doesn't mean his insane theory is right. "I suppose. But I'm remembering things that happened in the past few years, when I know for a fact they didn't. My passport very clearly shows that I've never been to London."

He leans back in his chair, the springs groaning beneath his weight. "If I were to venture a guess, I'd say there's been some foul play. Someone has gone back in time and done something to change the course of your life. I could jump back twenty-eight years ago, for instance, and give your father the job of his dreams somewhere in Germany. Suddenly, you are no longer here. You are Frau Stewart, dining on *wienerschnitzel* in Munich with your

German best friend. One small tweak can alter everything.”

Nick’s lips press together, amused and irritated simultaneously. “So you’re saying she’s jumping between her life as it is and her life as it *could have been*?”

“No, I’m saying she’s jumping between her life as it is and her life as it *was*,” replies Dr. Grosbaum. He sighs. “Although I have no idea how. I’ve met many like Quinn but none who were able to go back and forth between different timelines the way she must be.”

“Why would anyone reset my timeline in the first place?” I ask. “It seems like an awful lot of trouble for someone to go to, given that I lead a pretty uneventful life.”

He gives me a small smile. “Maybe you do and maybe you don’t. You have no idea which of your actions *now* could have a lasting impact on someone else down the line. Maybe she’s trying to stop you from doing something in the future. Maybe she wants something you have,” he says, nodding at Nick.

It’s a struggle not to roll my eyes. He’s just like one of those palm readers who pulls tiny facts from what a customer is wearing or asks about to make predictions that *feel* real. He sees me here with a particularly attractive man and assumes jealousy is a motive I’d understand. I guess he’s not entirely off base, but I resent it all the same. “And the culprit would need to be a female, and from the sound of it a jealous female, because...?”

“Because only females can jump. I’m not sure how, but it appears linked to the X chromosome. Men can carry the mutation, but that’s it. So, your husband here might carry the markers for it to pass on to your children, though it would be incredibly unlikely, but nothing more.”

“Dr. Reilly is not my husband,” I remind him. Nick is tense beside me, ready to walk out the door. “Forgive me for my uncertainty, but this is a lot to swallow. How did you, um, come up with this theory about time-jumping?”

“It’s not a theory. It’s a fact,” he replies. His eyes soften and he looks almost vulnerable. For the first time I see a bit of who he was in those wedding photos. “My wife...she was one of you.”

“Was?” I ask.

“Time travel is far more dangerous than you can begin to imagine,” he says, frowning at his desk. “She jumped back to check on something and never returned.”

Ah. It’s easy enough to see what happened and my heart aches a little for

him. This poor guy was left by his wife—maybe he was already crazy, or maybe her leaving made him so—and he’s created this whole myth to justify the fact that she’s gone.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” I reply. I pick up my purse to signal the meeting’s end. “Well, I guess that’s about it. I appreciate you taking a look at the images and seeing us on such short notice.”

Dr. Grosbaum shakes his head. “You don’t believe me, but you should. Jumping into another timeline, inexperienced as you must be, must be deadly. It’s shearing your brain as surely as I could with a pair of scissors.”

I still don’t believe him, but a part of me wishes I did. I want to think there’s a way to stop what’s happening in my head. And he seems so damn sure of himself when he says it.

“Okay,” I reply, sinking back into my chair. “So how do I stop doing it then? I have no interest in these dreams, or *jumping* if you want to call it that. So tell me how to make it stop.”

“You don’t stop. You get better. You embrace your abilities instead of repressing them.”

“Are you saying that would *heal* my tumor?” I ask.

“It could,” he says. “I can’t promise you that, obviously. But I can promise you that repressing them will only make things worse.”

Nick’s knee is bouncing and I can tell he’s five seconds from calling this guy out for the quack he is. And I’d agree with that assessment. Despite the fact that there have been incidents in my life I can’t explain, I don’t think I truly have some kind of paranormal ability. Certainly nothing as extreme as the ability to travel through time.

I rise. “You’ve given us a lot to think about.”

Grosbaum jumps up, blocking my path. “I’d love to run a quick DNA test before you go.”

Nick, already standing close, steps slightly in front of me. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re not doing her any favors, young man,” Dr. Grosbaum says, his voice tight. “Whoever is resetting the timeline will continue to do so until she gets what she wants from your wife. If the resets don’t kill her in the first place, that is.”

“Quinn is not my wife.”

Dr. Grosbaum throws his pen down in disgust. “And she never will be if the two of you refuse to listen.”



WE CANNOT GET into the Jeep fast enough. Nick holds the door and I practically leap inside, feeling like the good Dr. Grosbaum could, at any moment, come running after us with a meat cleaver and a tranquilizer gun. And yet...as impossible as they are, Grosbaum's theories *would* explain everything. If only they'd been slightly less bizarre.

"I think I see why he's not permitted on the Princeton campus anymore," Nick says, backing out of the driveway.

I feel like an idiot for bringing him up here. If Grosbaum's theories were hard for me to buy, to Nick they must seem outrageous. "I'm so sorry I dragged you into this," I tell him.

His mouth stretches into a grin. "I forgive you, *wife*."

"Yeah, what was up with that?"

He laughs. "I have no fucking clue. So, are we safe to go eat lunch or do you think the crazy time-jumping lady, who wants to stop you from destroying the world, will interrupt?"

I grin. "I think we're safe. Besides, the impression I got from him is that this is about *you*, husband. Some woman wants to steal you away. Bitches be crazy and all that."

"You should explain to her what a dud I was on our honeymoon. Maybe that will dissuade her."

I curl up in my seat to face him. "I never said you were a dud. I said I don't remember."

The corner of his mouth turns upward, that dimple blinking into existence for just a moment. "That's kind of the same thing. All I can say in my own defense is that it'd be memorable now."

My stomach clenches with desire. I think of Trevor's question—*haven't you ever wanted someone so much you think you'll die if you don't get it?* I think I finally do.



WE GET BACK to D.C. just at the start of rush hour. I wish the drive had lasted longer. "Thank you for today," I tell him when he pulls up to my office.

"It was surprisingly fun," he says. His gaze brushes over my face, a

muscle feathering in his jaw. “Will Jeff be home this weekend?”

The mention of Jeff’s name replaces all my wistful infatuation with guilt. “Yeah. He wants to go look at houses. He’s not going to be happy to hear I want to spend my inheritance on a degree instead.”

His nostrils flare. “Only a selfish dick would try to tell you how to spend your money. Especially under the circumstances.”

I shake my head. “Jeff’s just looking out for our future. You probably make enough money that you’ve never had to worry about whether you’ll be able to support a family. Jeff and I are not in that position.”

I turn toward the door and his hand snakes out, framing my jaw. An intimate gesture, one neither his girlfriend nor my fiancé would appreciate, but I can’t seem to pull away. “Please give it some thought, okay? Don’t agree to anything with him just yet.”

My pulse races. I get the feeling he’s talking about more than just the house. I shouldn’t agree, but with his palm pressed to my skin and the way he is looking at me, I’m unable to do anything else.

QUINN

The model home is cute but generic. To listen to Jeff, however, you'd think we were in Versailles. He fell in love the moment we pulled up. And once he saw the huge back yard, he was ready to put a ring on it.

"Think how awesome that yard would be for kids," he says. "It'll be just like how we grew up. Room to roam."

There's an unhappy little twist in my chest. Nick's question yesterday comes to my head—*do you want this more than a degree?* And the answer is still no, I absolutely do not. I'm not even sure I want it *without* the degree. I don't want what I grew up with. I want the city. I want to be able to order Thai food at midnight, walk places, be anonymous occasionally.

The agent gives us a tour and then suggests going to his office to look at pricing. Jeff is all in while I stand back. "Can we have a moment?" I ask the agent, who nods while Jeff's eyes dart impatiently between us.

"I think we need to discuss this," I say, after the agent walks away.

"It won't hurt to look at it," he argues. "We could write a check for the deposit today. We have forty-eight hours to change our minds."

I feel a tiny spark of anger. Has Jeff always pushed *this* hard for what he wants? Because I've made it pretty clear I'm not interested, and yet here he is using his hackneyed sales techniques on me, his future wife.

But maybe he's never needed to push this hard, because until now I've always just rolled over when he wanted something I did not. I'm not sure why it's taken me this long to see it.

"I've actually been thinking about going back to Georgetown," I venture quietly. My hands begin to sweat as I say these words aloud to him, far more directly than I have in years.

His face goes blank, uncomprehending. "As a *student*?"

I look up, rubbing my palms over my shorts. "Yes. I want to finish my degree."

"Quinn...Jesus. Are you serious? You...can't. Do you have any idea how much that will cost?"

Is he really asking me this, like I'm some naïve little girl who has no idea how much tuition would be? I'm the one who *went* there for Christ's sake.

"Of course I do. But I've got that money from my dad, and I think that's how he'd have wanted me to use it."

"On some overpriced degree you're never going to use? Are you kidding me?" Jeff asks, rolling his eyes. "He'd roll over in his grave."

My jaw drops. "Are you actually trying to say you know better than I do what *my* father would have wanted for me?"

He digs his hands in his hair, then pulls me around the corner, away from the raised eyebrows of other people touring the model. "I don't understand what's going on. We've been talking about buying a house for years, and now, when we're finally about to pull the trigger, you think you want to go to school? I mean, is the brain tumor...I don't know, *influencing* you? Because it's coming out of nowhere."

Blood pounds in my ears so loud I can barely think. I can't believe he's trying to blame the brain tumor. I've been talking about school on and off since we first got together, and he just conveniently managed not to hear me. But before I can levy the accusation, he sinks into the stupid wing chair some designer has placed in the model home's mudroom and buries his head in his hands. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry. I'm just under a lot of stress at work right now, so your timing isn't great."

I feel sympathy welling, and I resent it. I don't want to feel sympathy for him right now—it's an emotion that always ends with me giving something up. "What's going on at work?"

"They're laying people off. Our profits tanked last year and haven't come back...rumor is that they'll have cut forty percent of the sales force by the end of the year."

Forty percent? My eyes squeeze shut. I'm going to have to pay the mortgage alone again. And why the hell are we looking at houses if that's the

case? “What will you do if that happens?” I realize, too late, that I didn’t ask what we would do. Fortunately, he doesn’t notice.

He stares at the ground, unable to meet my eye. “I have no idea. I can’t go back to the farm.”

Though I never, ever, wanted to live on his parents’ farm, his words shock me a little. He loved that life and only gave it up to follow me here. I suppose I’d begun to think that maybe, if we didn’t work out, if my doubts got the better of me, he would at least have that to fall back on.

“Why couldn’t you go back to the farm?”

He doesn’t look at me, and he doesn’t respond.

Fear makes my voice sharpen. “Jeff, what happened to your share of the farm?”

“I sold it,” he says. “That first job I took down here, when I followed you? It was a total pyramid scheme. I had no idea until it was too late. I was so desperate to make you happy, to impress you, that I just didn’t see the signs, and I wound up so far in debt that I thought I’d never get out from under it. So I sold my share of the farm to my brother. I already knew for a fact you weren’t ever going to want to live there, so it seemed like the best solution.”

Shock knocks me backward. My mouth opens and for a moment no words emerge. The man in front of me is suddenly a stranger. How could he have gotten into that much debt and never mentioned it? “Why am I just learning this now?” I finally ask. I sound winded and I feel it too.

He buries his face in his hands. “I didn’t want you to know. I was so fucking ashamed that I’d gotten played like that, and I just wanted you to be proud of me.”

My hands clutch my throat. He loved that farm. He loved owning a piece of it, and I never wanted him to give it up. I just didn’t want to be part of it with him. He brought all of this on himself and yet none of it would have happened if I hadn’t insisted on moving to D.C.

He still won’t look at me, so I sink to the floor and put my hand on his knee. This has been my role for a long time—soothing his wounds, holding him together. It comes naturally, but I’m a little tired of doing it. “We’ll figure it out, okay? But if you’re worried about your job, why are we out here looking at a house we can barely afford?”

“I just wanted us to have something,” he says. “I’ll get another job. Maybe not as good as where I am, but I figured if we had a home of our own,

something solid and entirely ours, that it would be enough. We don't have to get this place. I got a little carried away when I saw the yard, but really I just want to know when push comes to shove that we have a place to raise a family. A place where we can get our life underway."

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to temper my response because the sheer stupidity of this plan is mind-boggling, and it's on the tip of my tongue to say it aloud. There's this canyon between me and Jeff, and I think it's always been there. We operate by shouting to each other over it, and it works, the shouting. It's been fine. But now I'm seeing what it's like to feel so close to another person I can barely tell where I end and he begins. And my God I want that. I *miss* it. "Committing to a mortgage we might not be able to cover won't make any house ours," I finally tell him. *Nick would know this*, I think before I can silence it. *Nick wouldn't need to be reminded about my desire to go back to school. Nick wouldn't discover I only have a few years to live and push me to give up a dream.*

"I just need to know that when we say for better or worse in a few weeks, that you mean it. That we're in this together," he says, his voice hitching on the last words. "Are we?"

He is so despondent, this man I love and have made a commitment to. And maybe there are other things I want now, things I want badly enough to weep and beg for them. Somehow, I'm just going to have to learn to let those things go.

"Of course we are," I reply.



ON MONDAY AFTERNOON, I return to Georgetown for the tests I need prior to my meeting with the oncologist at the end of the week. Nick walks into the waiting room with the sleeves of his Oxford rolled up, his tie loosened, the first hint of five o'clock shadow along his jaw. He draws eyes, and not just mine. The teenage girl and her mother sitting across from me nudge each other as they look him over. I'm tempted to tell them both to grow the fuck up, but I guess I'm no better.

I cross the room toward him and his smile is sudden, and stunning.

"Hi." I sound as breathless as a tween meeting her favorite boy band.

He looks around. "I assume Jeff's not coming?" I hear a hint of disdain in

his voice.

“He left town this morning. He had a conference he really couldn’t miss, but he’ll be back for the meeting with Dr. Patel.”

His hand presses against the small of my back as we head toward imaging. “And you didn’t sign any contracts this weekend?”

I stiffen a little. “No.” Though it’s true, it’s also kind of a lie. Because all I did, really, is put off the inevitable.



WHEN MY TEST IS COMPLETE, I head toward his office, with my brain flitting from Jeff to the house to Nick and back. I round a corner and collide with a teenage girl paying as little attention as I am. We look up at the same moment and for a millisecond she is a stranger. A breathtaking stranger with the most extraordinary gray eyes, going wide at the sight of me. It’s her astonishment that jars my memory: she’s the girl I saw as I floated back to consciousness during my last blackout, looking every bit as shocked to see me as I was to see her.

I stagger backward, still grasping her arm. “I saw you,” I breathe. “I saw you in my dream.” I know it sounds crazy, but I’m past caring about that right now, and something about the guilt in this girl’s face tells me she already knows anyway. And knows she shouldn’t have been there.

She swallows. “Yes, that happens sometimes.”

“How?” I ask. “You’re able to put yourself in someone’s dream?”

“No. We were both just—” She grows still, suddenly, her eyes flashing to mine in alarm. “You don’t know.”

“I don’t know what?”

She stares at her shoes, brown-and-white saddle shoes. The school uniform she’s wearing could come from any time, really, but shoes like that haven’t been popular for decades. It takes her a moment to reply. “You weren’t dreaming,” she says. “You were time traveling.”

A chill slides up my spine. Four days ago, I laughed at the suggestion, but there’s nothing about this girl that screams *mad scientist*. Her voice is matter-of-fact, reluctant even. And hearing the same information twice in four days is...unsettling. I lean back against the wall. “That can’t be true,” I whisper. “I’d know if I was doing it.”

“Yeah?” she asks. “So if you hurt yourself—maybe got a tattoo in one of those dreams—would you be hurt when you woke?”

I think back to the hickey on my neck that day, the one that couldn’t have come from Jeff. “That doesn’t prove anything. Maybe it happens when I’m asleep.”

Her mouth curves upward. “You’re getting tattoos in your sleep?”

I close my eyes, struggling to make sense of this, create some logical argument. “Of course I’m not, but I think I’d know if I was time traveling.”

“Apparently not,” she says softly. She’s probably 15 years younger than me, but right now she looks at me with sympathy, like a parent explaining death to a child. And as bizarre and difficult to believe as all of this is, I need answers and she might just have them.

“Can I ask you some questions?” I plead. “I’m trying to figure out why all this is happening, and—”

Her shoulders sag. “I need to go,” she whispers, as she turns to walk away.

“Wait!” I cry. “Wait. Please!”

She turns around the corner and I lunge forward, my hand reaching out... and passing through thin air.

Only her clothes remain, in a pile on the floor.

I slide down the wall, staring blankly at the vacant space where she should be standing. Is it possible she really just did it? Is it possible I could do it too?

I think I’m starting to believe.

QUINN

When Nick finds me, I'm still on the floor, slumped against the wall. "Quinn," he says, dropping to his knees and gripping my shoulders. "What happened?"

"I just watched a teenage girl disappear in front of my eyes," I whisper. "She was there, and then she wasn't." I nod at the clothes in my lap. "These are hers."

I wait for him to smirk, to look at me the same way he did Dr. Grosbaum, but it doesn't happen. His eyes meet mine and in them I see faith. His belief in me makes my throat tighten. There's been too little of that in my life. "Do you have any idea who she was?"

I shake my head. "None. I can't believe I'm about to say this, but...I think it's possible Dr. Grosbaum wasn't quite as crazy as we thought."

"Did she say where she was going?" he asks. "What about her clothes? Did you check them?" He reaches for the clothes in my lap, digging into the skirt's deep pockets and pulling a handful of paper out. Candy wrappers, a few dollars, and something else. He holds it aloft after he's examined it. "It's a concert ticket for tonight. It's in Baltimore, but we could make it if we left right now."

"If she doesn't have her ticket, is she still going to go?"

A small smile cracks his face. "Are you really under the impression that a teenager capable of *vanishing in midair* is going to find a missing concert ticket an obstacle?"

I laugh, the sound slightly unhinged. I can't believe we're discussing this, and I can't believe it really may be true. "I guess not."

He pulls me to my feet. "Then let's go to a concert."



BY THE TIME we've made it through the tangle of traffic and construction on 95, found the club, and bought our tickets, the opening band—who I've never heard of—is done, and the crowd is chanting for the headliner, who I've also never heard of. Fortunately, the show is pretty loosely attended so we are able to push all the way to the front of the stage with ease. We get there and then walk all the way back, but she is nowhere to be found. She was probably my only chance to understand this and it just slipped through my fingers. My shoulders drop. "She's not here."

"We could wait..." Nick urges. "Maybe..."

"It's over," I tell him.

His jaw shifts. "I feel like you're giving up."

"There's nothing to give up. You can't possibly believe that—" I come to such a quick halt that he walks right into me. "She's here," I whisper.

She's ditched the sweatshirt in favor of a half-shirt and is wearing a plaid school skirt just like earlier...only now she's got it rolled up well above mid-thigh. And she's sitting at the bar surrounded by men I recognize from the posters and T-shirts being sold at a table near the entrance. The opening act, I assume. Each of them at least a decade older than her.

"*That's* our lead?" he asks with obvious skepticism.

"Does she look any less reliable than Dr. Grosbaum?" I counter.

"You have a point," he says, placing his hand at the small of my back. "After you."

I hustle through the crowd more easily than Nick because of my size. When I arrive, I lean against the corner so I can make eye contact with one time-traveling teenager and the four losers currently focused on her—one of whom is now holding a shot glass to her glossy lips.

"You guys know she's in high school, right?" I demand. Five faces turn to me, and the girl narrows her eyes. It's perhaps not the greatest idea to make an enemy of the only person who can help me, but so be it. "And I don't know where you're from, but statutory rape is kind of frowned upon

around here.”

The one beside her sets the shot glass down. “She said she was eighteen.”

I roll my eyes. *For fuck’s sake*. The girl barely looks like she’s out of middle school. “Look at her. She’s fourteen, if that.”

The girl scowls at me. “I’m not *fourteen*. And you’re being a total buzzkill.”

“We’d be happy to drink with you instead,” the guy closest to me says, his tongue sweeping his upper lip as his eyes slide over me. His hand shoots out to pull me by the belt of my dress, and suddenly Nick is between us, gripping the guy’s wrist.

“Remove your hand,” he growls.

I blink in surprise. Nick sounds *pissed*. And possessive. It’s a new side of him. I can’t claim to dislike it.

The guy takes one look at Nick and releases my belt. “Sorry, mate. Didn’t know she was with you.”

“Well, now you know,” Nick snaps, “so keep your fucking hands to yourself.”

The girl jumps off her barstool, but before I can lunge forward to grab her, one of the band members does it for me. “Let’s at least get a picture,” he says, wrapping an arm around her waist and raising his phone.

For a second, panic flashes across her face, and then she actually ducks her head to avoid being in the shot. “I don’t like having my picture taken,” she says, darting away.

I step around them and cut her off, grabbing her arm, not that it will do any good if she decides to disappear in midair. Her eyes raise to mine. “I can’t help you,” she whispers. “I’m sorry. I really can’t.”

“Please,” I plead. “You don’t have to do anything. We just need someone to explain this.”

Nick comes up behind me, pulling me to his chest and wrapping his hand around my hip. Proprietary, the way I remember from so many of those dreams. The gesture would have shocked me a few days ago, but now it just feels *right*. All the more reason to figure this out as soon as humanly possible. “Please,” he says. “We’re desperate.”

Her face softens when she looks up at him, in a way it did not for me. She sighs heavily. “I’ll tell you what I can.”



THE BAR IS no place for a delinquent teenager, but neither is the back of Nick's Jeep, so we walk to a diner across the street, where, under the bright lights, she suddenly looks painfully young, and fragile.

We slide into a red vinyl booth and Nick hands her a menu. "Order something," he says. "If you've been drinking, you need food."

She asks the waitress for a cheeseburger and a Coke. Despite the outfit and the fact that we just caught her doing shots with a rock band in the back of a seedy bar, she is polite as she gives her order, and there's an air of privilege about her somehow. I'm guessing she's a trust-fund kid, the kind with wealthy parents who've handed over the child-rearing to their staff.

"What's your name?" I ask.

There's a split-second of hesitation. "Rose."

She's lying, but it hardly matters. "And how old are you really?"

"Sixteen."

Another lie, but I'm not sure that really matters either. "What on earth were you thinking tonight?" I ask. I know I shouldn't be wasting precious seconds lecturing this girl, but I can't stand the idea of her putting herself in a situation like tonight's. "Do you have any idea how poorly things could have gone if you'd left with those guys?"

She smirks. "You watched me disappear. An entire army of rock stars couldn't do anything I didn't want them to do."

Nick flinches at the suggestion that she might be a *willing* party to whatever an army of rock stars want to do. "Do your parents know where you are?" he demands.

She laughs to herself, but the sound is not a happy one. "Sort of."

"What does *sort of* mean?"

She looks away. "It means my father knows he can't do anything to stop me and my mother is dead, so if there's a heaven, she's watching my antics from there."

"Dead?" I whisper, my stomach dropping. "But you're so...young."

"A lot of us die," she replies, carefully aligning her flatware and avoiding my gaze. "There are so many ways a human can die, but for a time traveler, there are twice as many."

I think, fleetingly, of Dr. Grosbaum. I assumed he was lying to himself about his wife's disappearance, but what if he wasn't? How awful would it be to have the love of your life disappear somewhere, leaving you behind, wondering what happened?

“So you’re in this alone,” I say. “With the time traveling.”

“My younger sister can do it, but she was born early and has some... problems. It’s too great a risk.”

“So how do you do it?” I ask.

She laughs. “Why are you asking me? You do it too. I saw you that day.”

I sink back into the booth. “That wasn’t time travel. It was just a dream.”

“Right,” she says, smirking again. “You just chose to go somewhere, then tumbled through darkness to get there, seeing me on the way, but you want to call it a dream.”

I cross my arms, my voice hard. “I’m not *choosing* to go anywhere.”

“Of course you are,” she says. “You just don’t know you’re choosing it. You’re attaching to a memory that exists. But maybe it’s not one you consciously remember.”

Nick buries his head in his hands. “I’m sorry, but I’m really struggling to believe this. I know Quinn saw you disappear, but it must have been some kind of trick.”

She sighs, appearing exasperated by us both. “Look, I could go back a year and meet you, and you’d suddenly remember me now, but I don’t really have time to prove it to you because it would take too much planning. But”—she turns to me—“in about twenty seconds, I’ll need you to bring my clothes to the bathroom.”

“Wha—” I haven’t even completed the word before she slides under the table. And seconds later, she is gone, leaving only a pile of clothes behind.

Nick looks like he’s seen a ghost. “What the fuck?” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “It’s a trick. It’s just a very, very good trick. We’ve apparently met the next David Blaine.”

I laugh weakly. “*How?* Did she build a tunnel beneath the restaurant? Her clothes are under the table, and I’m fairly certain we’d have seen a naked kid running across the room. Everyone would have.”

He rubs a hand over his eyes. “This isn’t happening.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” I reply, giving him a small smile as I grab her clothes. “I’m going to find our naked friend.”



I GLIMPSE bare feet under the closed door of a stall and hand her clothes over

the top of it.

“Told you,” she sings.

“The whole losing-your-clothes part must make all this jumping pretty difficult.”

“You just have to plan.”

She makes it all sound so easy, and so controllable, when I doubt it can be. “So the uniform you were wearing today...was that even yours?”

“My grandma lives near the school. I went to her house first, but she intentionally keeps the worst clothes to discourage us from jumping here, like housecoats and orange jumpsuits. So, I *borrow* from the school’s lost and found.”

She emerges from the stall with a wide smile and walks back to the table, where her Coke and cheeseburger now wait. “The one thing about jumping is that you’re starving when you get back, and sleepy if you’ve gone far. You’ll see.”

She digs into her food and Nick watches, looking deeply unsettled. In a different world, I’d lay my head on his shoulder and pull his hand into mine. It feels like the action I’m supposed to take. I twist my engagement ring on my finger again and again instead.

“Okay, how does this whole thing work, theoretically?” he asks. “How are you able to do it?”

She takes a polite sip of her drink and looks up at him. “Every time traveler has this thing we call the spark. Time traveling’s just part of it. Like, once we reach adulthood, the aging process slows for us as well. But, anyway, it’s a genetic mutation, I guess. The only reason I have it is because both of my parents carry it. So both of Quinn’s parents must have carried it too.”

I laugh. I can believe in many things, but not this. “My mother thinks going to Philly for the day is a major trip. She is *not* a time traveler.”

“You can be a carrier and never realize it. Or sometimes, for whatever reason, people refuse to use it,” she says, glancing at me. “Like you. You obviously can, but you’ve chosen not to.”

Nick rubs the back of his neck. “If Quinn is doing what you are, in *theory*, how come her body doesn’t disappear like yours just did? She’s not waking up naked anywhere.”

“Because she’s jumping into herself. It’s sort of a baby step. But it sucks because you have no control over your actions that way, so you’re just living

something again. And it's dangerous too, because you're under the sway of the brain you had at that time. If you're happy there, you might not come back. You might not even realize you *want* to come back."

It's easy enough to picture. I remember Nick kissing me against that tree outside the high school. If any voice but his had been calling me, I'm not sure I'd have returned.

"These aren't memories, though," I argue. "These are things that never happened. Like, I see myself living in London with Nick, or growing up with him in another state."

She shakes her head. "All those things *must* have happened. You can't travel to something that has never or will never exist. All I can think is that maybe someone changed your timeline."

It's exactly what Grosbaum said. And it would mean that my dreams about London, about Nick as a child and our high school romance...aren't dreams at all. They actually occurred.

Nick blows out a breath, sinking backward into the booth. "*If* this is all actually possible," he asks, "why would someone be messing with Quinn's timeline in the first place?"

"I don't know," she replies, raising a shoulder. "Maybe to make sure she doesn't do something in the future."

"I'm not Hitler," I argue. "I don't have a powerful job. I don't even fudge my taxes. There's *no* reason someone could ever be scared of what *I* might do."

"Maybe she wants something you have," Rose says. "Yeah, a time traveler can just take almost anything she wants but"—her eyes flicker from me to Nick—"some things you can't just *take*. Maybe it's him this person wants."

I can't believe I'm hearing *this* suggestion again too. "We, um...aren't together," I reply.

The girl raises one perfectly groomed brow and starts laughing. "Oh *really*?" She isn't merely dubious. She's acting like what I've said is so ridiculous that laughter is the only possible response.

"Yes. *Really*. I'm getting married next month." Nick's hand, resting at the edge of the table, clenches into a fist.

"Then I can only think of one other possibility," she says. "Someone's trying to kill you and keeps botching the job."

Nick's body leans forward, suddenly shot through with tension. "Why

would anyone want to kill Quinn?”

She glances at me, hesitating. “I don’t think I should say anymore.”

I see her looking around as if she plans to disappear again and my pulse skitters. I *need* to know this.

“Please,” I beg. “We’ve got to figure this out. If I can find a way to stop whatever it is I’m doing, or stop this person, maybe the brain tumor won’t keep growing. You’re my last hope.”

She swallows, looking behind her before she turns back to us. “There’s something called the Rule of Threes.”

Goose bumps crawl up my arms. I recognize the phrase. It’s something I talked about in therapy as a child. “I’ve heard of it,” I say quietly to Nick. “I spoke about it in those dreams I had as a kid.”

Beneath the table his fingers twine with mine as he looks at Rose. “What is it?”

“That spark I mentioned she has?” Rose says. “Imagine it’s like a flame that can be shared but can’t be spread too thin. It’s limited to three females in a family. No one knows why it’s this way, but it’s what keeps the population small and ensures that no family has too much power.”

I must be missing something. There’s absolutely no way that can apply to my family. I have two living female relatives at most.

“So how do you choose who gets it?” Nick asks.

Rose yawns, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. I wonder where she’s from and what time it is there. “That’s like asking how you choose eye color,” she says. “You’re just born with the mutation, or you’re not. And it would be unbelievably rare, but if four people were born with the mutation in one family, then that’s one too many, and the weakest one just... dies. Usually the oldest, unless there’s someone like Quinn, who’s allowed her spark to fade out early.”

“I don’t see why that would lead someone to kill her,” Nick argues.

She shrugs. “Think about me and my sister. It won’t happen, but let’s say my sister gave birth to two time-travelers. Then there’d be four of us, and one of us would die. Killing me would ensure that she and her kids were safe, right?”

Nick scrubs a hand over his face. “There’s no...I don’t know...penalty for that? I can’t believe I’m even asking this question, but isn’t there some authority who keeps you from doing that to each other?”

“There are penalties for a lot of things,” Rose replies, aimlessly pushing

the remaining fries around on her plate. “But not for that, if all the stories about it are true. In theory, if you do it in just the right way—stab a family member with the spark in the heart—it will strengthen yours. It might even heal Quinn’s tumor. Or it could be some crazy old wives’ tale. I’ve never done it, obviously, so I have no idea.”

My fingers tap restlessly on the seat beside me. We are wasting precious time on a line of discussion that couldn’t possibly be relevant. “Look, there’s just no way this can apply to me,” I interject. “I have no immediate family left other than my mom, and she obviously isn’t time traveling. But this weird jumping thing I’m doing—why is it so limited? Every single memory is about Nick and things related to him. I don’t remember my parents or my friends or my classes...it’s like my entire life is a blank slate aside from him.”

“*Limited?*” she asks with a sharp laugh. “Jumping between timelines the way you are—it’s unheard of. I have no idea how you’re doing it and how it hasn’t completely fried your brain, but I guarantee you wouldn’t be sitting here right now if you were letting in *more*. For you to be doing it at all... there must be something there you want super badly, is all I can say. Enough that you’re willing to die for it.”

I flush as Nick’s eyes meet mine. I’m fairly certain we both know what it is I want so badly from those previous timelines. He leans in, his forearms on the table, hands clasped. “So is there any way you can help us?”

“Like what?” she asks warily.

“I don’t know,” he says, staring at his hands. “Maybe you could undo something. Or time travel forward and see if they’ve developed a way to bypass the amygdala so we can reach Quinn’s tumor.”

“I’m fifteen,” she says. “You’re really going to trust what I tell you so much that you’ll cut into her brain based on it?”

His mouth twitches. “Probably not. Especially since you said you were sixteen a minute ago.”

She grins. Her smile reminds me of someone, but I can’t place it. “I’ve jumped back and forth all day. Maybe it scrambled my math a little.”

“Convenient,” says Nick, restraining a smile of his own. “What about going backward to fix things? If someone died, and you knew how to cure it or change something, could you do that?”

I feel a lump in my throat. He’s thinking of his brother, I’m sure, and I wonder once again how devastating it must have been for Nick to lose his

twin. I've never even met Ryan in this lifetime, yet somehow the fact that he's dead is hard for even me.

"Like, could I go back and assassinate Hitler and stop all those deaths in World War II?" she asks. "No, for a variety of reasons, but most importantly, it wouldn't do any good. Once someone is gone"—she averts her eyes—"they can't come back. Otherwise, I'd have gone back to save my mom." For a moment, she looks young, and heartbreakingly fragile.

"Which reminds me," she says, throwing her napkin on her plate, "I have to get home to my sister."

I exchange a panicked glance with Nick. I'm not done. Rose is the key to solving this, I feel certain of it. "Is there any way for us to get ahold of you?" he asks.

She smirks. "Sure, if Quinn finally learns how to time travel." She thinks for a moment, rubbing a finger over her lower lip. "Look, I really have to go. But I can come here tomorrow morning, if you want. Early, though. Like, seven. Just bring my stuff."

With that, she slides under the table. And all that remains behind are her clothes.

QUINN

Nick and I sit alone, staring at each other in shock.
“Dammit,” he says. “I just wish she’d stayed five minutes longer.”

“Well, there’s still tomorrow.” I look at my watch. “It’s already after midnight though. You should go home. I’ll get a hotel up here somewhere and see what she has to say in the morning.”

His jaw sets. “No way. We’re in this together. We’ll stay up here and come back tomorrow.”

My heart flops in my chest like a dying fish. It’s one thing to go get a second opinion with my gorgeous doctor in tow. Jeff wouldn’t have liked it, but it felt justifiable. As did driving to Baltimore tonight. But staying here with him? There’s no stretch of imagination by which that is okay. And yet here I am, nodding in agreement.

We get in Nick’s Jeep. “I’ll go on Expedia,” I say, pulling out my phone. He’s doing all this for me and I can’t possibly let him pay for his own room, but my stomach sinks at the cost of one room, much less two.

He shakes his head, pulling onto the street. “That’s okay. I know exactly where we can go.”

A few minutes later we pull up to the valet stand in front of the Four Seasons.

I flinch. A room here will be a fortune. Six hundred? More? And I’ll have to pay for two. I briefly think of all the things I could have paid for with that

much money. It's half the mortgage. And how the hell am I going to explain this to Jeff? I can't. There's just no way.

"Nick," I breathe. "I think this place might be a little out of my price range."

He does a double take. "You actually thought I'd let you pay for this?"

"Of course I did," I tell him, frowning. "You've already done way too much. I'm sure we can find something more reasonable nearby."

He hands the valet his key and tucks his head, trying hard not to laugh. "Quinn, you're not paying. I think you remember the starving-resident version of me from London. That's no longer the case."

"But..."

"Stop," he says. "Consider it payback for the honeymoon in Paris during which I apparently never let you leave the room."

With that, he places his hand at the small of my back and leads me to the registration desk. He asks for two rooms and the bright smile on the clerk's face fades a little. "You don't have a reservation?" she asks. I'd have thought this was obvious, but apparently not. She goes on the computer and makes a sad face when she looks back at us. "We're pretty much sold out. There are three rooms available but two of them aren't cleaned yet. I can get you in a one-bedroom suite if that will work? It has a fold-out couch."

Nick and I exchange a glance. It's less than ideal for both of us. "Is that okay?" he asks quietly. "I can take the couch."

"I'll take the couch," I argue.

"No, you won't," he says, turning back to the clerk and handing her a credit card. She begins ringing us up. "I promise it'll be every bit as boring as our honeymoon apparently was," he adds under his breath.

The clerk hands Nick our key cards. "Can we assist you with any bags this evening?"

I feel my cheeks turning pink—even though we asked for two rooms, showing up here with no luggage has *cheaters* written all over it. "No bags," Nick says casually. "We got out of a show and decided we'd rather not drive back to D.C. this late."

We head toward the elevators. "You sound like you check into hotels with strangers all the time," I mutter.

He raises a brow. "And you sound jealous."

"You wish," I reply, though he's absolutely correct. I am painfully jealous of any woman who has ever checked into a hotel with Nick Reilly. I

wasn't the first and I won't be the last, and that fact bothers me more than I care to admit.



THE SUITE HAS two double beds with plush white duvets and a mountain of pillows. I eye them longingly as I help him open the sofa bed, which is pretty much the opposite of plush. It also has loose Cheerios inside it, which makes my stomach turn a bit.

"We need to ask housekeeping for sheets," I say. "Go to bed. I'll call down there and wait out here for them."

He laughs wearily. "Quinn, you're not sleeping in this shitty bed."

I pull my hair back into a ponytail with my hands and let it fall again. "You can't sleep out here. This bed isn't as long as you are, even if you sleep diagonally."

His arms fold across his chest. "You are absolutely not sleeping on this thing. I spent many nights as a resident napping in a supply closet. This is luxurious by contrast."

"And you came home afterward totally wiped out and miserable," I counter, before I realize I don't *actually* know this. I sigh heavily. "Look, this is stupid. There are two beds. You take one and I'll take the other, unless this is some kind of ethics thing."

He flinches. "I'm pretty sure I fucked that up the minute I agreed we could stay in the same suite."

Shit. My life is a disaster but am I making his one too? He'll probably need to lie to his girlfriend about this. And what are the consequences if it gets back to his boss? "Are you going to get in trouble for this?"

"It's fine," he says. "Don't start feeling guilty. This was my idea, remember? Look, you were right. There are two beds. And I was a perfect gentleman the night I stayed in your room at the hospital, right?"

I have a sudden vision of him stretched out on a bed—naked from the waist up, only a sheet covering the rest—asking me to admit he'd been a gentleman the night before. I also remember how badly I wanted to suggest he stop being one. My breath comes in a single shallow burst. "Yes," I whisper. "You were a perfect gentleman."

"Do you want to take a shower?" he asks. My eyes widen and he bites

down on a grin. “*Alone*, I mean. Do you want to go shower *alone*, behind a locked door?”

I laugh. “Yeah.”

I rinse off and emerge a few minutes later in a hotel robe. His eyes drift over me before he looks away. I guess what I’ll be sleeping in here once I remove the robe isn’t exactly lost on him, but it’s not like I can sleep in the dress I wore to work.

“You’re all done in there?” he asks.

I nod, hiding a yawn behind the back of my hand. “I’m so tired, I may be sound asleep by the time you’re out.”

His grin lifts high on one side. “Maybe *you’re* at fault for our unmemorable honeymoon.”

The truth is that I have no specific memory of sleeping with him. Just the build up to it, the heaviness of anticipation in the base of my stomach, a small beating heart between my legs. And it’s probably for the best that I can’t remember more than that—the last thing I need is one more way in which real life is unsatisfactory. “No, I feel certain it was you,” I reply, perching on the edge of the bed. “Maybe you were impotent.”

“If you remember *that*,” he says, with a look that makes my whole core clench tight, “you are definitely not remembering *me*.”



BY THE TIME he gets done in the bathroom, I’m in bed with the lights off. There’s just enough moonlight in the room to reveal that he is all muscle, and he’s filling out those boxer briefs in a way that would make Trevor salivate.

“I just saw your underwear.”

I see a flash of teeth. “They’re boxers. It’s like seeing me in shorts.”

“Hmmm. Interesting you think so. Expect my friend Trevor to be stopping by the hospital on casual Fridays from now on.”

He climbs into bed, the sheets pulled haphazardly to the bottom of his rib cage. I can make out the definition of his arms, even in the dim light. I’m torn equally between guilt and a desire to look some more.

He rolls toward me. “We have somehow avoided talking about the most glaringly obvious subject,” he says.

“The fact that we are currently sharing a hotel room?” I ask. “I thought

we'd be better off pretending that wasn't the case."

"Since it could get me fired, you're probably right. But I was referring to the fact that two different, unrelated people have told us over the past few days that you can time travel."

It hasn't been far from my head either. "I'm finding it all a little hard to believe," I reply. "I'm 28. It seems like any magical powers I have should've kicked in by now."

"Rose said you might not even realize you're doing it, though," he counters.

I wave my hand at his words, shooing them away. "How could anyone *not realize* they were time traveling?"

He pushes up a bit, his elbow bent, his head supported by his forearm. I wonder if he has any idea just how good he looks like that. "You've been thinking you were dreaming all these times when you go back to see me, right?" he asks. "Have you ever dreamed something else and had it wind up coming true?"

I hesitate. Swallow down the crazy impulse to tell him things I swore as a child I'd keep to myself. "Yes, but everyone does. That's just coincidence."

"Okay, what about this Rule of Threes thing? There must be something there."

"How could there be?" I ask. "I mean, I have an aunt I've never met on my dad's side, but as far as I know, she never had kids, and I have an uncle on my mom's side, but he's gay. And even if my aunt did have kids, and it kicked this whole thing into play, why would she mess with my timeline? Why not just kill me?"

He laughs. "Good to know how *you'd* handle the situation."

I smile at him in the darkness. "I'm not saying I would. But you know I'm right. If she needs me out of the picture and wants to take my spark or whatever, she could do so pretty damn easily. What good would changing my timeline do anyway?"

His voice is soft when he finally replies. "It might keep you from meeting me."

We both fall silent, and the sudden absence of sound underscores something I'm increasingly certain is true—I was meant to meet him. To remain with him. It's happened before, it may be happening now...and someone is going out of her way to prevent it.

"I wish Rose had been able to change things," he says quietly.

I wish she was too. When it all comes down to it, time traveling seems to have way more negatives than positives. You can't keep anyone from dying, but you're way more likely to wind up dead yourself. "I'm sorry she couldn't help you...with your brother."

"That isn't why I was asking her about going back to save someone," he says. Our gaze holds, locks, for half a second, my pulse racing. I wish for so many things right now. I want to live, I want to solve this. But mostly I want to cross over and slide into bed beside him, if only to press my head against his bare chest, feel his legs tangle with mine.

I close my eyes, desperate to stop my thoughts, and when I open them, he's rolled to his back and is gazing at the ceiling. "It's so weird that you know about Ryan. I don't talk about him to anyone. Even my parents don't talk about it anymore."

For some reason, the topic of his brother opens up this chasm inside me. *Fear*. I don't want to ask about him, don't want to know, yet it feels like the monster under the bed: I'm never going to rest easy until I've seen what's there. "How did he die?" I ask.

"He got in a car with this drunk idiot. I still have no idea why he did it. He knew better. But if I'd gone to the party, it never would have happened." His voice is heavy, quiet with guilt.

"You can't blame yourself for that," I say softly.

"We were bickering about everything back then—competing," he says. "I don't even know what the hell we were competing *about*. It's like adolescence kicked in and suddenly we were at each other's throats. But anyway, I knew he was making bad decisions, but I was sick of his shit. That's why I didn't offer to be designated driver."

A memory of some past conversation with him pushes inside my brain. From London, right after we met. His hands on my face, his eyes so earnest. *How can I possibly deserve this*, he said, *when Ryan got nothing?*

A puzzle piece snaps into place somewhere in my brain. I can almost hear it click. "That's why you're with Meg," I whisper. The words surprise me. I'm not even sure I meant to say them aloud.

His eyes flicker toward me, luminous in the moonlight. "What do you mean?"

I barrel on, saying things I have no right to say but in the dark it feels safer for some reason. "I've been trying to figure out why you're with her when you're obviously not in love with her. And I think it's because you feel

like you don't deserve more, you don't deserve to be happy when Ryan can't be."

He's silent just long enough to leave me wondering if I've pissed him off. "Maybe," he finally says. "So that's my excuse, but what's yours? Why don't you think you deserve more than Jeff? And please don't bother trying to tell me he's everything you ever dreamed of. He obviously isn't."

I guess I brought the question on myself, as much as I dislike it. "Jeff isn't perfect," I reply firmly, "but I'm not either. I love him for who he is, and I forgive him for what he's not."

"And what is he?" Nick asks. The words echo with scorn, but they shouldn't, because there's plenty to love about Jeff. Qualities I've given short shrift to ever since Nick came into the picture, which is so unfair.

"He's a good person. He's kind to children. He stops to greet every single dog he passes. And he's tried harder than any person I know to make D.C. work for him no matter how many times it knocks him down." I could keep going, but I get the feeling there's nothing I could say that would leave Nick convinced. "I know the two of you were at odds the other day and you seem to think less of him for being at work so much, but you've seen him at his worst. We wouldn't have gotten through my father's death as well as we did without him."

"My boy scout leader was a good person too," he growls. "Doesn't mean I need to marry him. And it's great if he helped your family but that was what—seven or eight years ago? What's he done for you since then? Because he seems pretty fucking self-centered from where I stand."

"He's not. He gave up what he loved most to follow me to D.C. And he's stuck it out no matter how hard it's been, all for me."

"Give me a break. He followed you because he *wanted* to. He didn't give up what he loved most...you're what he loves most. He did that for himself. Tell him you're going back to school. Let's see how selfless he is then."

I flip on my back and pull the covers up to my neck. "You're making all this sound so terrible, but it's easy to take one aspect of a relationship and make it seem defective. All couples argue and all couples want different things. I'm not going to fault him for having opinions of his own."

He presses his eyes shut and when they open, I see an apology there. "You're right. I'm sorry. I just feel like you should have more than that."

No, I think. I have exactly what I want. Even though I now remember something better. Even though I can feel in my chest what it was like to be in

love with Nick, the kind of love that expands inside you until you're so full it almost hurts. Because a sort of terror consumes me when I imagine having that now. I can't begin to explain what it is, but as I lie here I know that it's related, somehow, to Ryan. The mere thought of him makes dread seep into my bones.

"I'm sorry about your brother," I finally whisper, as I drift off to sleep.

"It was a long time ago," he replies.

Except I wasn't apologizing for his loss. I was apologizing because I think it might have been my fault.



THE HOMECOMING COMMITTEE has done their best with the whole "Midnight in Paris" theme, but the truth is, a bunch of balloons and drawings of the Eiffel Tower aren't enough to transform our gymnasium into anything other than...a gymnasium with balloons and handmade drawings.

"So, this is what I've been missing being homeschooled," I say, taking it all in. Nick and I exchange a smile. "I feel like I don't even need to go to Europe now."

Nick laughs and brushes a lock of hair back from my face, his eyes flickering over my mouth with a longing I feel down to my core. "So I don't need to worry about you taking off for London and leaving me behind anymore," he says. "Mission accomplished."

"You could always come with me," I suggest. I don't know why my heart beats so hard as I say the words. We're talking about something that's years and years from now. "You could do your residency there."

He moves closer, close enough that his mouth is nearly on mine. "We could get an apartment together. But I should probably marry you before any of that."

He has only the ghost of a smile on his face. I have one on mine as well. But our eyes are serious. We phrase these things as jokes, but we mean every word. "Yes, you should probably marry me."

He releases a tiny huff of air, as if desire is displacing the oxygen in his chest. "God, I want to kiss you right now."

All he has to do is use that low voice on me and I'm weak-kneed. I blow him a kiss and back away an inch. "This is my first homecoming. I'm not

spending it being mauled in the back seat of your parents' Volvo."

He closes the distance between us again. "You love being mauled in the back seat of my parents' Volvo."

I do. I like it way, way too much. But it's too early in the evening for me to be thinking about how badly I want him to do it again. "Come on," I say, pulling him by the hand, forcing him to mingle and pour me a glass of punch, just because it's so ridiculously old-fashioned. He's a good sport about the whole thing, but after an hour he is itching to leave.

"We have to at least wait to see if you're Homecoming King," I chide.

He glances away. "I won't be. I told them to throw out any votes for me." His eyes remain on the floor between us. "I just... Things are tense enough without that."

What he means is that they are tense with Ryan. Because of me.

"Let's dance," he says, trying to distract me—something he accomplishes with ease, because no one alive is more distracting than Nick, whether we're standing in the middle of a crowded gym or alone in the treehouse, though my mother's now forbidden that last bit.

He twines his fingers through mine and leads me onto the dance floor. Some sappy ballad is playing. "I don't think we can swing dance to this one."

Our eyes meet. He tried to teach me to swing dance once, in the treehouse. It was one of the rare times we found ourselves alone, without any adults around. Needless to say, the lesson devolved quickly into something else entirely.

"I'm not sure I got enough of a lesson to do it right," I reply, wrapping my arms around his neck. Even in my heels, he towers over me. His face is boyish, but there's nothing boyish about the rest of him. All his hours of training in the pool have left him with the ripped body of a grown man. I feel heat at the base of my spine, just picturing him climbing out of the water. I made a promise to my mother that I intend to keep, but it's getting harder by the day for us both. Every time he kisses me, I want to climb him like scaffolding.

He leans toward my ear. "Remind me to give you another lesson sometime."

I'm about to reply when he turns me, and I find myself looking directly at Ryan, who is watching us with that look on his face, the one he wears far too often of late. He's here with Lisette Durand, a French exchange student

almost every guy in the school wants to date, yet our eyes meet and his expression—already grim—turns into a scowl. Why can't he just let this go?

"You okay?" Nick asks as I stiffen.

"Yeah," I reply. "But I'm ready to leave whenever you are."

"I'm ready now," he says, pulling my hand. I've promised my mother we'll wait until we're out of high school to have sex, but when we are alone, it's a struggle to remember that. And the look in his eyes right now says it'll be extra hard to remember tonight.

We head toward the auditorium's exit, but Ryan has beaten us there. He stands hand in hand with an irritated Lisette, blocking the door, legs spread like he's ready for a fight.

"Where are you going?" he asks Nick, never glancing at me once, because I no longer exist to him. Not the way I used to.

Nick straightens and his chin goes up. "I don't answer to you."

"No, but you answer to Mom and Dad," Ryan says, his eyes shifting to me, "and you made them a promise."

"I know that," Nick growls. "And I don't need a reminder from you."

"Well, since we now know that keeping agreements is a struggle for you, I thought I'd better mention it." Their mother told them they couldn't ask me out until I turned sixteen, an agreement Nick broke when he kissed me that day in the woods. I was always going to choose Nick. But Ryan doesn't seem to believe it.

"Get out of my way, Ry," Nick says. He has a slow temper, but there's steel in his voice when he's on the cusp of losing it, and even Ryan knows not to mess with him when it's present.

"Don't fucking forget," Ryan says, as Lisette pulls him away.

We go out to his car, but guilt weighs me down the entire way. I hate that I'm the reason things have gone wrong. I stand still by the passenger door, staring at the gym.

"Come on," Nick whispers, the words coming so close I can feel them against my lips. "Let's go before one of the teachers comes out here." He smiles, leaning closer. Anticipation crests in my stomach, making me breathless.

I am not normally the aggressor, but tonight, I am. I ignore his words and pull his mouth to mine, letting the slow sweep of my lips and my tongue do the work for me. I will make us both forget how much Ryan hates us now.

NICK

I am certain I won't be able to fall asleep. Not with Quinn a few feet from me, presumably wearing next to nothing. I try to focus on anything other than her, lest she wake up to find me dry humping the mattress in my sleep, but I can't seem to stop. I'm remembering her face after we left Grosbaum's office, relaxed and happier than I've ever seen it. Remembering the moment she walked into the room for Darcy's birthday party, looking so fucking ethereal she hardly seemed real.

And then I'm thinking of the lake, and when I fall asleep that's where I go. Quinn is in that red bikini, floating away on the Sunfish, shouting at me to come help her, panicked and laughing at the same time. I swim to her, pulling myself up, and her body presses to mine. She is taut and sun-warmed, and as our mouths join, I want to groan with the relief of it—decades, centuries of separation finally behind us. I pull her on top of me and she comes willingly, sliding against my skin. Her top is gone, though I don't remember undressing her. My palms go to her breasts—how could I have forgotten how perfect they are?—and then to her nipples, pressing pebble-hard against my chest. She gasps then, and I lose that last ounce of restraint I was clinging to.

I roll her under me, my hands gripping her hips, my mouth hungry for every inch of skin. I'm hard as nails and just the friction, being pressed to her stomach, has me close to coming. I slide her bottoms off to the side. She's drenched, ready.

Except...there's something wrong here. I want to plunge inside her more than I've ever wanted anything, but how did we get here? How is it that her bikini is gone and beneath us it is soft, nothing at all like the Sunfish's fiberglass bottom?

I open my eyes.

I'm not in a boat. I'm no longer in high school. And Quinn is beneath me, in the hotel room we rented. I have no idea how she wound up in my bed, but she is quite obviously sound asleep, despite the fact that she's arching against me and my hand is...fuck...between her legs. I'm so hard my dick has pushed through the slit in my boxers. With a suppressed, reluctant groan, I remove my hand and go the bathroom to take care of an issue I probably should have dealt with earlier. The obsession with her has to end... It was one thing to have a painful crush, but this has gone too far. I could lose my fucking medical license over what just happened.

I stand beneath the hot spray, one hand pressed to the wall to support myself. I think about the feel of her beneath me and the way her body arched toward mine, begging for more. I think about what would have come next, how I would have thrust into her and fucked her hard and fast, with the kind of desperation that comes from years of denial.

I come in five seconds flat.

QUINN

I open my eyes to daylight streaming in and sit straight up with a gasp. I went to sleep in the bed next to the window. I *know* I went to sleep in the bed next to the window.

I am no longer in that bed. I clutch the top sheet to my chest and turn toward Nick, who is slowly blinking awake. “Good morning, roomie,” he says with a yawn.

“Why am I in your bed?” I grit out.

“Maybe you time traveled there.”

His smile is teasing, but I barely even register it. My heart feels like it’s going to explode. *I knew we shouldn’t have shared a room.* Practicality and sleep deprivation made the decision for me, but I knew better. “I seriously need to know why the fuck I’m in your bed.”

“I think you must have been sleepwalking,” he says. “I woke up and you were there, so I just switched over to your bed.”

My stomach takes a nosedive. He’s making light of it, but the fact remains that I climbed into bed with him, wearing nothing but a thong. Even if nothing more happened, that’s sort of enough, right there. “Oh my God.”

“Quinn,” he says, pausing long enough that I’m forced to look over at him. “It’s not a big deal.”

“I’m pretty sure Jeff wouldn’t agree with that,” I whisper.

He lifts himself up on one arm. The sheet is down at his waist, so I get to watch a thousand muscles blink into life at the movement. For a moment I’m

so spellbound I forget what I just said. “Please tell me you’re not going to feel guilty about something that minor, especially given that it happened when you were asleep.”

“I guess,” I say with a sigh. “It’s still...” *Awful, wrong, humiliating, inappropriate.* There are so many ways to end that sentence. “Bad.”

“Hey, come on,” he says with a grin, “you and I are apparently married in some alternate universe, remember? Technically, I think that means you’re cheating on *me* when you’re with Jeff.”

I laugh reluctantly. “Is that how it works?”

He looks over at me from where he lies, his smile fading. There are words there, right on the tip of the tongue, but they never emerge. He pushes the sheet away and walks to the bathroom instead, and I remain behind, drinking in the sight of him—that swimmer’s back, boxers clinging to his tight, perfect ass. As horrified as I am by what might have happened last night, I sort of wish I could remember every single second of it, whatever it was.



WE ARRIVE at the diner far earlier than necessary, the two of us rumpled and walk-of-shame-esque in yesterday’s clothes. He’s in no rush since someone is covering his morning rounds, so we order breakfast and nurse cups of coffee while we wait. There’s nothing magical about it. The diner isn’t particularly clean and the coffee isn’t especially good. But I’m *happy*. Not that lukewarm, milquetoast version of happy I normally am, but something so much better. For the first time, my soul is full. All I want in the world right now is more of him. More time, more knowledge. “What’s your favorite color?” I ask.

He looks at me for a long moment. “Green,” he says. “Favorite movie?”

I shrug. “I don’t think I have one. What’s yours?”

A small smile warms his face. “*Inception*. Have you seen it?”

I shake my head. I’ve always meant to, but when you’re part of a couple things tend to get decided based on who cares the most, and it’s never me.

“You should,” he says. “Favorite song?”

“It’s an old Foo Fighters song,” I reply. “*Everlong*.”

His smile grows slightly wistful. He rubs a hand along the back of his neck. “Mine too.”

The waitress refills our coffee, and he stirs cream in his until it’s the

lightest beige. Almost the color of his skin right now, with that tan of his. Before I can stop myself I think about that skin, which I saw a great deal of this morning. His smooth back, his broad shoulders. *Stop, Quinn. Those thoughts can only cause trouble.* I focus on my own coffee instead. “Do you think Rose could help with Darcy if she really can do what she says she can? Like go back in time and change something?”

He sets his spoon on the saucer and looks at me, thinking. “Darcy had headaches for months last summer, and her pediatrician blew it off. I suppose she could warn Christy about the tumor somehow, but what would compel her to believe a teenage girl’s advice instead of a pediatrician’s?”

I laugh. “Rose is a lot more duplicitous than either of us. She can probably figure something out.”

“That kid,” groans Nick. “The only thing worse than having an out-of-control delinquent teenage daughter would be having one who is capable of time travel.”

“And lands everywhere naked.”

“*And* aspires to party with an army of rock stars,” he adds, shaking his head. “Anyway, speaking of our troubled new friend, I was trying to come up with questions for her since we might not have much time.”

I nod. “We should ask if there’s someone else we can talk to,” I tell him. “Maybe her grandmother or someone who’s been at it longer would have ideas for us.”

He leans back in the booth. “I think we should also ask if there’s a way she can go back and reset things somehow. If she could keep you away from the lake, maybe you’d never have had these flashbacks at all.”

I feel a sudden urge to smile and cry at the same time. “If I didn’t have these flashbacks, I wouldn’t have met you.”

He glances away. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“No, I...” Heat creeps into my face. It would be better if we hadn’t met. I just can’t bring myself to wish for it. “It’s almost seven. I’d better get in there with the clothes.”

I slide from the booth, before he can see my face, and head to the bathroom, my mind a whirlwind of things that aren’t related in any way to my brain tumor, or the fact that time traveling exists, much less that I might be capable of it. With everything that has happened in the last twelve hours, the most terrifying revelation of all is this: I wouldn’t want to change anything that’s happened if it meant never meeting Nick.

In the bathroom, I lean against the sink and wait for a pair of bare feet to materialize at the bottom of the bathroom stall. How does she do this? How does she land in a bathroom stall without discovering it's occupied? What does she do when there's not someone waiting outside with clothes in her size? If I was capable of time travel, I think I'd avoid it just because it seems so fraught with difficulty.

At 7:00, I watch expectantly. At 7:01, I shrug—just because she can time travel doesn't mean she's punctual. At 7:05, I start to worry. That's when I finally open the bathroom door and find her note.

I'm so sorry. I really can't help you anymore. Good luck—Rose

NICK

Quinn and I are both quiet on the way home. She gazes out the window with unseeing eyes. Her hopelessness destroys me.

“Hey,” I say, reaching out to grab her hand, “don’t give up, okay?”

She forces a smile. “It seems unlikely to me that we will meet a *second* time traveler to answer all our questions.”

“There are lots of other possibilities. You’re seeing Dr. Patel on Friday. Don’t give up on regular medicine just yet.”

She sighs. “This is obviously not a standard tumor. Can an oncologist even help?”

I’ve tried to avoid thinking about it, because I can’t stand where my head goes. Right now, I just need to believe in something, and so does she. “We have no idea until we try.”

She’s quiet for a moment, staring out the window. “Why did you decide to do your residency in London?” she asks suddenly.

The question surprises me, mostly because I really have no answer to it. “I have no idea, to be honest. It just hit me when I was in high school, and I never seriously considered anything else. Why?”

She runs her thumb over her lower lip. “I had a dream about it last night. We were teenagers, and in my dream, I was the one who wanted London, not you. It’s just strange you wound up there anyway.”

She points to a street and I turn, pulling up in front of a small house that’s

seen better days. In a neighborhood that's seen better days as well. I hate the idea of leaving her here alone.

"How much longer is Jeff out of town?" I ask.

Her lips press together. "Just until Thursday night."

I shouldn't have asked and I also shouldn't ask the question I'm about to, but it seems like a very lonely life out here by herself, in this depressing box of a house. "What do you do at night, when he's gone?"

She shrugs. "Usually, I just go home. Sometimes I go out with my friends or walk down to the harbor for a while. People swing dance there when the weather's good."

My spine tingles. It's one of my two recurring dreams—me with a girl I assume is her, dancing in the grass. I never gave it too much thought until now, but I'm pretty sure we were swing dancing, that I was teaching her how. Did it happen before? Is it supposed to happen now? "And you just watch?"

She smiles sheepishly. "I'm too uncoordinated to dance, and I'd look pretty damn silly out there alone, even if I did know how."

"Anyone can swing dance."

Her mouth opens to speak, and then closes again. Whatever she was going to say, she's decided against it. "Not me."

"Maybe I'll come down there sometime and prove you wrong," I say softly.

A hundred emotions flicker over her face. Love and hunger and desire and, finally, grief. I'd give anything to heal that grief, except I think I'm the source of it.



I GO TO WORK, but the thought of Quinn and everything we've just learned is never far from my mind. I stare at the images from a recent scan of one my Alzheimer's patients, studying the tangle of amyloid plaques that indicate its progression. There will be nothing happy about the conversation I'm about to have with his children. I don't regret my decision to enter neurology, as depressing as it often is, but for the first time, I truly consider what led to it.

If Quinn's life changed, mine must have too. Was there a part of me that somehow *knew* she'd have problems this time around? Knew my best shot at finding her again was by entering a specialty she'd be likely to seek out? Or

did some piece of me just long for her and attach to the discipline that led me to her in the first place?

There's a tap on the door and Meg walks in. She's been at a conference for the last week and I didn't expect her back until later today, but based on her presence here now and how deeply unhappy she appears, I assume she came home last night instead...and wants to know why I wasn't there.

Guilt kicks sharply in my stomach. Even if I can cut myself some slack for what I did with Quinn, unknowingly, the bigger issue is this: discovering just how much I feel for her has proven I *don't* feel enough for anyone else. What Quinn said last night was correct—I let things get this far with Meg because it didn't seem fair to ask for more when Ryan wound up with nothing. But Meg deserves to be more than the penance I pay for what I did to my brother.

"I thought you weren't coming back until tonight," I say, at a momentary loss for words.

She sinks into the seat across from mine, her arms folded over her chest. "Yes, that became pretty obvious to me when you didn't come home last night."

I rock back in my chair. "I went to a show in Baltimore, and it was late so I just crashed there."

Her eyes narrow while she looks for the cracks in my response. Thank God it's actually true. "Alone?" she asks. "You went to Baltimore *alone*?"

"Yeah," I say. A small lie, more for her protection than my own. "But I think we need to talk."

She freezes. I suppose the phrase *we need to talk* never leads anywhere good. "Talk about what?"

I place my hands flat to the desk and force myself to say words I know will hurt her, no matter how gently I deliver them. "Meg...you're amazing, but I don't think this is what I want."

Nothing in her face changes. She was unhappy before and she's still unhappy. "I knew you'd do this," she finally says, eyes narrowed. "I've never seen a man more scared of commitment in my entire life."

I rub the bridge of my nose. I should have anticipated an argument. She's not the type to just let things go. "I don't think that's what this is."

"Of course it is!" she cries, throwing her hands in the air. "And *why*? I'm the one who's a child of divorce while *your* parents are still happily married! If either of us should be freaked out, it's me. You don't have a single reason

to be scared. But you are. And that's all this is...you're scared."

If she knew how I felt about Quinn she'd realize how off-base she is, but God knows that wouldn't improve this situation. "I'm so sorry. There's just a certain way I want to feel before I get serious with someone, and it's not there with us. We have a nice time together, but you deserve more than I can give you."

Her eyes bulge. "Are you fucking serious right now?" she demands. "We have a *nice* time? We've been together for a *year*! We've practically lived together for three quarters of that, and all you can say is that it was *nice*?"

I close my eyes. I've never dated anyone as long as Meg, but I've been through some version of this situation a thousand times. "I wanted this to work, but it isn't fair to keep going down this path, when it isn't right."

"Nick," she pleads, her voice catching, "if no one is ever right, it means you want something that doesn't exist. We've had this conversation before, remember? This is just how you are."

I thought she was right at the time. I'd dated more beautiful, intelligent women than I could count, and it never worked—because I was waiting for one specific person without ever realizing it. "I think it exists, Meg."

It's the wrong thing to say. Her eyes dart to mine, reminding me of a lioness zeroing in on her prey. "There's someone else."

"No, not really."

"Not really isn't *no*," she hisses.

I lean forward, clasping my hands on top of my desk. "I'm not seeing anyone, if that's what you're asking."

She brushes the tears from her face. "My landlord already rented my apartment. I have to be out in a week."

Guilt hits hard. I can't break up with her and force her to crash with friends for weeks while trying to find a new place. "You can take mine. I'll find something else."

She buries her face in her hands. "So this is just *it*? Just like this?"

I clear my throat. "Yes. I'm sorry."

She jumps to her feet and marches out. I watch her go, knowing I've made the right decision and wondering, at the same time, if I'll come to regret it. What we had was nice, and it was easy, and I'm not sure what I've opened myself up to, aside from a lifetime of wanting a woman who is about to marry someone else—a woman I couldn't be with even if she were free.

It's never going to be fair to anyone I date, to any woman I end up with.

Because I will always be wishing I was with Quinn instead.

QUINN

Dee spent most of Tuesday pissed off that I came in late. Since I took sick leave, she couldn't really reprimand me, but she spent the day punishing me for it, and Wednesday appears to be no better. "I need a mock-up of the D.C. housing supplement on my desk by four," she barks.

I blow out a weary breath. I expected her reaction, but it exhausts me nonetheless. Maybe it's just that losing my last shot at talking to Rose has left me depleted. "That isn't due for two weeks."

"And now it's due today," she replies with a brittle smile. "If you'd been around more this week, it wouldn't be an issue."

She walks away, and I think of my conversation with Nick on the trip to New Jersey. About architecture, about why I'm shuffling along in this job I hate. I guess it's selfish to consider blowing that money on a degree I may never use when Jeff could start a new life with it after I'm gone. But there's a tiny seed of resistance inside me that says *No, it's not selfish. You've given up enough for him, gone along with what he wants, what's best for him, long enough. No.*

I go online and look up the information for Georgetown's admissions department. And then, with shaking hands, I send them an email asking if I might be able to come back.



JEFF CALLS THAT NIGHT, miserable. He hates traveling, which makes each of these trips, for him, an endless series of small irritations—the long rental car line in Albany, the hotel room that reeks of smoke, fast food for days on end, running out of toothpaste in a town that closed an hour ago. We both knew at the outset this job would be a bad fit in many ways. But he was desperate to find work after his last layoff, and I was desperate too. I probably should have encouraged him to hold out for something better.

“I’m sorry,” I sigh. “Maybe you should look for something else when you get back.”

“The hell with D.C.,” he says. “We should just move home.” It’s not the first time I’ve heard it. In his bones, Jeff will always be a country boy. He wants quiet and wide-open spaces, but I don’t. I never have. “Coach has suggested a thousand times he wants me back as an assistant, and he’s got to retire soon. Up there we could live decently on a teacher’s salary.”

A warning note chimes in my head, a chill between my shoulder blades. I’ve held all the cards during our relationship. I’m the one who left for D.C., ready to end it. He’s the one who followed, who gave things up to be with me. But once we’re married, will I still hold the cards? He knows I don’t want to live up there, but he also knows I’m not much of one for fighting about anything. If he insists, I’ll end up agreeing to go. And my inheritance will no longer be *my* money, it will be *ours*, and he’ll have just as many rights to it as I do, most likely.

“I emailed Georgetown today,” I blurt out. I meant to introduce the topic slowly. *Alas*. “Admissions. To see about coming back.”

He’s silent for so long I begin to wonder if he even heard me. “Honey,” he finally says weakly, “you’re not really considering this?”

He makes getting a degree in architecture sound like some outlandish pipe dream. As if I just told him I want to be an Olympic gymnast or star in *Hamilton*. It’s one of many ways he and my mother are similar—the things they want in life have never required a degree, so to them it’s mostly a useless accessory. A *second* degree, therefore, is completely frivolous. “Obviously I am, or I wouldn’t have emailed them.”

“Jesus, Quinn,” he groans. “I tell you I might lose my job and you think it’s a good time to quit?”

Will there ever be a good time to quit, Jeff? Will there ever be a time when you aren’t about to lose a job? Irritation blossoms into anger as I hold in all the things I want to say. “Why was it okay for me to blow my

inheritance on that house I didn't even want in Manassas, but it's not okay for me to use it on a degree I've wanted my entire life?"

He sighs. "Because a house moves our lives forward. Our neighborhood isn't a good place for kids. You know that. But think about how long your degree will take. Four years? Five years? And all that time you're accruing debt and not working. Which means we're not having a kid until well after you're done. I'm 32. I don't want to wait until I'm in my 40s to start a family, and that's basically what you're asking of me."

"I may only have a few years to live," I reply. "I don't think kids are even in the picture for me anymore."

"Stop saying things like that!" he demands. "You have no idea how long you're going to live! We haven't even met with the oncologist yet."

"Whether I have a year or a century, I'm going to want the degree more than a house."

He's quiet again, recalibrating. "Look, hon," he finally says. "I know I'm not reacting the way you want me to, but you're kind of springing this on me. If the degree is that important to you, we can discuss it, okay? Just wait until I'm home."

I agree, but as I hang up there's only one thought in my head: *that money is mine*. And it suddenly feels very important that I spend it the way I want before it becomes *ours*.

NICK

It's been forty-eight hours since I've spoken to Quinn.
Too long.

I need to hear her raspy laugh and see that surprised smile of hers, the pleasure in her face over the smallest things.

God knows I shouldn't, but I find myself dialing her number on Thursday morning. I could pretend this is a professional call, but I'm not fooling anyone at this point.

"I was just checking to see how many vanishing teenagers you've run into since I saw you last," I say.

She laughs. "My yogurt appears to have vanished from our break room, if that counts. Hey, guess what I did?"

I settle into my chair, leaning my head against the wall behind me. "Learned how to time travel?"

"Think slightly smaller. I talked to Georgetown about coming back."

There's something new in her voice. A certain charge, an excitement, that I've never heard before. "What did they say?"

She sighs. "I, of course, had some ridiculous hope that they might fit me in for the coming school year. I'm too late for that, but they said next fall for certain, and possibly January."

I might be able to help, but I don't want to get her hopes up. "The important thing is it's happening."

"Yeah," she agrees. The excitement has left her voice. "Probably."

“What do you mean by *probably*?” I demand. “This is what you want. There’s no *probably* about it. It’s happening.”

She hesitates. I can picture her there, pressing fingers to her temple or twisting her ring. “I don’t know. If I put it toward a house, Jeff would be able to enjoy it...or he could sell it and move back to Pennsylvania and start over. It’s what he wants to do anyway. Is it selfish to spend that money on a degree I might never use?”

Anger, sharp and all-consuming, pierces me. She has a fucking brain tumor. He should be turning over the world to make every one of her dreams come true. “No,” I hiss. “It’s not. What’s selfish is him asking you to do anything else with it.”

“Well, once we’re married it’s our money, isn’t it? It won’t even be my decision anymore.”

Jesus Christ. The idea of her really going through with this wedding kills me. The idea of Jeff keeping her from that degree bothers me almost as much. “Can you meet me at the harbor tonight? Around six?” I ask. “There may be something I can do. I need to make a few calls first.”

She hesitates. “Sure,” she finally says, her voice soft and a little uncertain.

And I begin to count the minutes until I see a woman I can never have.



THE LIGHT IS ALREADY WANING when I finally get out of the hospital. I walk fast, weaving through the throngs of students and tourists, a pulse of people entering Dean & Deluca, and another pulse trying to escape it. The sun is at half-mast by the time I reach the waterfront, and I scan the crowd with a sinking heart, wondering if I’ve missed her.

She is sitting on a bench in a blue dress, the sheer fabric floating around her knees. The expression on her face is wistful as she watches the dancers. When our eyes meet, the wistful look disappears, and she gives me a smile that is pure sunshine.

I take the seat beside her, trying to focus on my reasons for being here and not her proximity, her smooth skin, the smell of her shampoo. It’s harder than it sounds. “I placed a call today. A buddy of mine works in the admissions office. You’re in this fall, if you want to be. Most of the classes

you'll need will already be full. He said he can find a way to get you into the majority of them. He'll email you in the morning."

Her mouth is open, her eyes wide and uncertain. "Wha...what? You got me into the fall class? Just like that?"

I nod. "If you want to be. I don't want you to feel like I'm pressuring you. I just thought—"

She springs forward and throws her arms around me tight, laughing and crying at the same time. "Pressuring me? You just saved me!" she cries. "Oh my God, I love you so much!"

Jesus, what I wouldn't give to hear her say it for real.

She releases me, pressing palms to rosy cheeks. "This is unbelievable! I'm starting school!" she squeals. "I'm really starting school!"

She's beaming, and it's impossible not to smile back, but I still need to discuss something else with her and it's slightly more sensitive. "I also talked to a friend who practices family law about protecting your money. He said a prenup would be best, but as long as you've signed the contract with Georgetown prior to the date of your wedding, the money from your father will be considered legally committed to your education and should precede any claim Jeff might have to it."

She gives a small nod. "Thank you," she says quietly. "So much. I don't even know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. I just want to make sure you're happy."

She bites her lip as her eyes flicker to mine. Maybe she hears the finality in those words, the way I'm trying to convince myself this is goodbye. And it *does* have to be goodbye. As much as I don't want to walk away tonight, leaving her in Jeff's incompetent hands, I also don't have a choice. It'll have to be enough for me to know she's going back to school. Whether she marries Jeff or not, at least she's getting something she wanted.

I rise. "I think maybe you owe me a dance before we leave."

She looks up with cautious eyes, then slowly stands. "I really have no idea what I'm doing," she says.

I take her left hand and place it on my shoulder, before taking her free hand in mine. "Okay, just step," I tell her. "One, two. One, two. Now rock step."

That dream I always have of us dancing—was it something in the past or was I dreaming about this, right now? What I mostly remember is how badly I wanted her. How badly I wanted to keep her with me forever. I feel it now,

every bit as much.

“Are you okay?” she asks, frowning.

“I guess you won’t be too weirded out if I tell you I think I’ve dreamed about this?”

Her gaze shifts away from me. “I have too. You used to...I mean, I’ve *dreamed* you used to come meet me outside of this evening class I took to walk me home. And one night we danced in the grass.”

Her words settle, fill the blank spaces in my mind. I pull her closer. “Is that why you come here to watch?” Because if I’d known this existed, I think I would have come here too.

Her smile flickers out for a moment as she looks around us. “I think so. And now it reminds me of—” She flushes, letting her words trail off.

My hand presses to her hip. “What does it remind you of?”

She focuses on the ground rather than me. “The night you proposed.”

I stop dancing for just a moment, surprised by what she’s said, but even more surprised that I already sort of knew this. I can’t detail our past the way she can, but I know the color of it, the feeling behind it. I know I *wanted* to marry her, even if I can’t remember asking the question. “I feel like I knew that,” I tell her. She’s still embarrassed by the admission, so I pick up our steps again. “And now we do a little spin.”

“I can’t sp—” she begins, but she is already twirling away from me, unfurling effortlessly like a spinning top before momentum pulls her back. She lands against my chest, and when I glance down, I find our mouths are inches apart. My eyes focus there a moment longer than they should. We’ve been here before too. Exactly here. I wonder if I wanted her as badly then as I do right now.

She swallows and steps away. “It’s getting dark,” she says. There’s a breathless quality to her voice that would give me a semi if I didn’t already have one. “I should probably head to the Metro.”

I want her to stay. I want this goodbye to never end, but it isn’t my choice. We head to the path along the water, though it’s the longer way to go. The sun is in its last gasp, coloring the sky in swaths of charcoal and pink. The crickets seem to begin chirping all at once, although it’s probably just that there’s finally enough silence to hear them.

“I had another dream,” she says quietly. “The night we were in Baltimore.”

I freeze. She’d be better off remaining unaware of some of what

happened that night. “Yeah?”

“About your brother.”

My brother has been dead for over a decade, but the idea that she climbed into my bed seeking Ryan makes me want to throw my fist through a wall.

“Please tell me you don’t remember anything sexual with my brother when you were apparently *married* to me but remember nothing.”

She laughs. “No. It wasn’t like that. I was at homecoming with you, and he was there with...what was her name? Lisette Durand. She was French.”

Jesus fucking Christ. She remembers things even I don’t remember. “So, I took you to homecoming and what you remember about it is my brother. You are singlehandedly destroying what remains of my self-esteem.”

Her laugh is throaty, and the sound goes straight to my cock. “Are you jealous?”

“Weirdly, yes.”

“Don’t be,” she says, smiling. “We wound up in the back of *your* car.”

I groan. This is not what I need to hear in a public place, but I can’t stop myself from asking for more. “And I guess that, just like our honeymoon, you mysteriously don’t remember what happened there either?”

She flushes, her tongue tapping once against her upper lip. “Actually...” she says, “I do.” We’ve reached the Metro at the worst possible moment.

“But you’re not going to tell me any of it, are you?”

She shakes her head, blushing furiously. “Nope.” And, pressing her lips to the corner of my jaw, she turns and walks away.

QUINN

Getting home from Foggy Bottom is never *not* a pain in the ass. It involves taking the orange line back to Metro Center, then catching the yellow line to my stop. I'm bumped and jostled, pushed forward as I climb onto the train, pushed backward when others join us. My toes are stepped on. I inevitably give up my seat for an old person or a child, while some douchebag sits with his legs spread, taking up two seats instead of one.

Tonight is no different, yet I smile the whole ride home.

Going back to school is a part of it, a *big* part of it— it means taking the classes I've been dreaming about for so long and telling Dee to kiss my ass sometime in the near future—but I'd be lying to myself if I gave it full credit. Because what really has me smiling right now, closing my eyes to remember the last hour more fully, is Nick. It's dancing with him, having him walk me to the Metro, the call he placed that singlehandedly made something I've wanted for years happen in an instant.

When the long ride finally ends, I walk home, preparing myself for less happy things—like the discussion with Jeff that's coming. He's in the yard when I arrive, playing football with Isaac, and I stay where I am for a moment to watch them.

"Go long!" Jeff shouts and Isaac runs hard, catching the pass with his fingertips before he turns back to grin at Jeff, waiting for the praise he knows is coming.

Jeff gives him a thumbs-up, beaming like a proud father. The sight makes

me happy and sad at the same time, because this is who Jeff was meant to be. A dad and a football coach in some small town. But instead, he's been trying to fit into my world, trying to constrict himself to my parameters, attempting one thing after another that doesn't interest him or come naturally. He did all of that for me. Have I considered him once while I fantasize about someone else and make plans to quit my job?

There's a brick in my stomach as Jeff sees me walking toward him and smiles wide, clutching the football to his chest. His love for me is so pure and uncomplicated, but I can no longer say the same. "Hey babe," he says, kissing my forehead. He throws the ball back to Isaac and waves to him as he wraps an arm around me and walks me inside.

He opens the refrigerator door. "I was going to start dinner, but I wasn't sure when you'd be home."

His goodness makes me feel petty and small. "I thought you weren't getting in until later."

"I caught an early flight," he says, squeezing my shoulder. "I just needed to see you after our talk last night. I know it's been a pretty stressful couple of weeks, between your tumor and losing our reception hall. And maybe I've been pushing too hard on the house. I just really want—"

"Georgetown is letting me start in the fall," I say, all in a rush.

His jaw swings open. "What? We said we'd talk about it."

"No," I reply. "You said we'd talk about it. I want to finish my architecture degree, and I have the money to do it. I'll give Dee notice sometime in the next few weeks."

"What the hell, Quinn?" he cries. "We discuss these things. You can't just go off and do whatever you want."

I meet his eye, and I feel...different. Like there's another version of myself eager to be brought into the light, one who's tired of sacrificing. I'm giving up everything I could have with Nick, but I'm done pulling my punches. I'm done acting like his happiness and my mother's matter more than mine. "Do we discuss these things?" I ask. "Because I don't remember you saying a word before *you* quit your job. Twice."

"You know I've been trying," he says, almost mute with shock. What he's really saying is *how can you throw this in my face right now?* And maybe he's right. I'm no longer sure of anything. "And what you're talking about is so different. I tell you I might lose my job and you just decide to *quit* yours. Even if I keep my job, do you realize how tight things will be on one

income?”

My hand grips the counter. *Did he really just ask me that question?* We’ve been living on one income—*mine*—on and off for the past six years. I’m not sure I realized, until this moment, how much I resent him for it. “Of course I fucking realize how tight things will be,” I reply, and I march into the bedroom and shut the door behind me before I can say anything worse.

I hear the roar of his truck, and instead of being worried that we’re fighting, I’m just really glad he’s gone.

I want Nick right now. Instead I turn on Netflix and find *Inception*. Even watching it feels like a small act of rebellion. I’m two minutes in when Nick texts, and it doesn’t even surprise me. I needed him, and here he is.

Nick: I’m listening to *Everlong* on repeat.

Me: I’m watching *Inception*. It’s just starting.

Nick: With Jeff?

I hesitate. The impulse to whine to Nick about the fight we just had is an unworthy one.

Me: No, he went out.

Seconds later the phone rings. “I’ll watch it with you,” Nick says. “Where are you at?”

I tell him, wondering if his girlfriend isn’t there or if he’s just been slightly more open with her than I’ve been with Jeff about all this. Somehow, I doubt he has.

We watch, mostly in silence, aside from my occasional pleas for spoilers. “Is his wife going to be okay?” I whisper.

His laughter is low. I can almost feel it against my ear, can almost feel his warmth against my side, smell his chlorine and shampoo. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Just tell me if—”

He cuts me off. “Watch the movie, baby.”

It’s a quiet thrill, that word. I wonder if he realizes he said it.

At the movie’s end, I am weeping. Not pretty crying, but hysterical sobbing. “I’m so glad you can’t see me,” I say with some combination of laugh and sob. “I look like an idiot right now.”

“No, you don’t,” he says quietly, certainty in his voice. “Did you like it?”

I swallow. I am full and heartbroken at the same time. “It was the most

gorgeous movie I've ever seen. But do you think he got home? I guess we're not supposed to know." My voice breaks. I can't believe I'm crying this hard over a movie. "I think he got home."

"I think he did too," Nick says. We sit in silence for a moment, and I let myself picture an entire life like this, one in which all the beautiful and painful things in the world are shared with someone else, someone who feels them and sees them like I do. My eyes squeeze tight. I wish I could have that. I wish he was mine.

QUINN

The next morning, Dee barks at me from her office and I walk to her slowly, teeth grinding. I'm never in the mood for her bullshit, but that is especially true today with so many other things stressing me out. I still have not exchanged a single word with Jeff since our fight last night.

Dee regards me with even more hatred than normal when I walk in her door, but I expected it. Today when I got ready I didn't downplay anything. I put on my favorite pale gray sheath, red strappy heels, careful makeup. I knew I risked a day of her ire by coming in pink-cheeked and shiny. It was *freeing* that I no longer had to care. It's freeing even now. I can't believe I've spent so many years at this job I hate, cowering as if the fate of the world rested on remaining here.

I haven't decided when I will quit—it would make sense to wait until just before school starts, especially since Jeff could lose his job any second now—but I expect it'll be the moment she pushes me too far. Which could be anytime, really. Maybe today.

She has a litany of complaints, of course. She hates the layout, hates the cover, she even hates the design elements she herself insisted on. Funnily enough, it bothers me less than it normally would, because at last there's a finish line, a light at the end of the tunnel. Her time to use me as her whipping boy is running out quickly.

I'm at my desk making yet another set of unnecessary changes when

Trevor pulls up a chair beside me.

“You look gorgeous today,” he says. “And way too happy.”

I grin at him. “The times they are a-changin’.”

“And now you’re quoting Bob Dylan,” he says. “So, you’re either morphing into a seventy-year-old or you finally got laid.”

My phone chimes. Jeff’s name flashes across the screen and my smile fades. He was in bed beside me when I woke this morning. I took in his face, dredging up every good memory I had of us in order to feel the way I’m supposed to feel—but it didn’t work. “No one’s getting laid, I assure you. But I’m leaving early today, which is almost as good.”

“To see Dr. Hottie?” he asks eagerly.

I swallow. “We’re meeting with another doctor but he’ll be there, I think.”

“Jeff and Nick in the same room?” he asks, eyes lighting up. “Can I come today? I’ll be your plus one. There’s bound to be punches thrown.”

I laugh begrudgingly. “I’m not sure you bring a plus one to a doctor’s appointment. And there will be no fight. I plan to tell Jeff he has to be civil.”

Trevor grins. “From what I saw the other day, I doubt it’s *Jeff* you need to worry about.”



I HAND Trevor the proofs for Dee on my way to lunch. When I return, Dee is waiting in reception, clicking those nails of hers on the desk in a failed attempt at self-control.

“This is entirely wrong,” she says, handing me the pages I gave Trevor earlier.

My teeth scrape against each other. “That’s exactly what you asked for.”

“Just start over,” she says. “Start from scratch. It’s all wrong.”

I gape at her. She expects me to throw two weeks of work in the garbage and re-do it all five days before we go to print. “That’s not possible,” I say flatly. “We go to print on Tuesday. There’s just not time.”

She gives me a short, bitter smile. “Then it looks like you know how you’ll be spending the weekend, doesn’t it?”

There’s nothing wrong with the layout. She’s just punishing me. Maybe for the dress, maybe because of my infuriating insouciance all day. Jeff

would ask me why I antagonized her in the first place, but Nick would ask me why I'm still here, and why the hell I ever let someone treat me so poorly. Questions I'm asking myself now.

I slide the layout back to her. "I'm not redoing this."

Her eyebrows go to her forehead. "You seem to be forgetting who signs your paychecks."

I wanted to go out in a blaze of glory, but instead the end will be simple and absent any drama. "Then don't sign them anymore," I reply without emotion. "I quit."

I've never seen Dee shocked into silence. I head toward my desk and she follows me. "You can't do that," she sputters. "We go to print next week."

I grab my belongings, grateful that almost everyone is at lunch so I don't have an audience. "Well, I've noticed that you've been playing around with the layout when I'm not in the office," I reply, "so maybe you'll be able to figure it out."

With that, I head straight out the door. Late July in D.C. is miserable—air so thick it's a struggle to breathe and heat that has your clothes stuck to you the moment you step outside— but right now, to me, it's perfect. Right now I'm not Quinn, the twenty-eight-year-old who might die. I'm eighteen again. A girl with dreams, about to escape the farm and go to the city, with her whole future ahead of her. My father encouraged me back then. I'm not sure what changed when he got sick, what made him so desperate to keep me safe and small with Jeff. But I like this version of me better, and I think he would too.

I pull out my phone and make a call before I can change my mind. Nick answers on the first ring. "Quinn? Is everything okay?"

He sounds slightly panicked. I like, far too much, that he worries about me. "Yes, it's fine, I just... Is this a bad time?"

"No, not at all," he says. "Hang on." I hear background noise, then a door shuts and there is silence. "Okay. I'm in my office. What's up?"

My mouth curves into a smile. "Guess who just quit her job?"

"Are you serious?" he asks. I love him for sounding thrilled rather than concerned. "That's fantastic. Was your boss pissed?"

"So pissed."

He laughs. "God, I wish I'd been there."

I lean against the wall, under the shade of an awning. "It was pretty sweet. I'd say it almost made it worth staying there as long as I did, but that

would obviously be a lie.”

“I’m proud of you,” he says. “I just wish you’d done it years ago.”

“Yeah, me too.” Why didn’t I? Why the hell did I let Jeff decide what I’d do about school? My only answer is that I trusted my father’s opinion about things more than I trusted my own and allowed Jeff to assume that position once he was gone. “Anyway, I guess I’ll be seeing you in a while at the meeting with Dr. Patel.”

“Is Jeff actually attending this one?” he asks. There’s no mistaking the hostility in his tone.

“Yeah.” I sigh, brushing a hand through my hair. “But speaking of Jeff, I, um, haven’t told him I quit. So, if you could maybe not mention that, I’d appreciate it.”

There is a beat of silence. “You told me before you told your fiancé?” he asks. “Interesting.”

I groan. “No, it’s not. I just...” I really have no excuse. The truth is that, in just a few weeks, Nick’s become my person. It’s him, not Jeff, that I want to turn to with all my good and all my bad. I want to hand him my problems in a tidy package and have him help me carry the weight. I want him to hand me his. “I’ll see you later,” I say, ending the call abruptly.

I close my eyes, wishing I could just push a pause button on my life for a week. Long enough to get things straight in my head. Nick’s taken, I’m taken. Even though we’re arguing, I love Jeff. I picture how devastated he’d be if I were to suggest cancelling the wedding and feel this unbearable lurch in my stomach. He’s loved me and trusted me for most of our adult lives, and I can’t just throw it all in his face now, weeks before the ceremony. I just can’t be that person.



I WANDER through the city and arrive at the hospital an hour later. Jeff is in the waiting room when I walk in. He rises and wraps his arms around me.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he says. “I shouldn’t have taken off like that.”

My eyes close and the air slides from my chest. “I’m sorry too.” I’ve always hated any kind of friction between us, so I’m not sure why I merely feel resigned rather than relieved.

A nurse takes us back to Dr. Patel’s office, and as we are introduced, a

joke I heard somewhere long ago comes to mind: *Why do they have to nail coffins shut? To keep out the oncologists.* In other words, if you're faced with an oncologist who doesn't seem optimistic, who doesn't have a long list of options for someone who is obviously beyond hope, you are really screwed.

And Dr. Patel does not seem optimistic.

His smile is muted, rather than encouraging. There's a lack of urgency to his movements, as if he already knows he won't really be doing anything today. "We're a little early," he says. "So we should give Dr. Reilly a moment to get here."

"I think we can start without him," Jeff says, a flicker of irritation in his voice.

"Let's wait," I say. Fortunately, Nick appears at the door just then, with the look of someone who ran to get here—loosened tie and tousled hair. His eyes go immediately to me, his gaze drifting over each inch of my skin so intensely it feels palpable. There is a connection between us, something physical I can't put my finger on. It's as if my nerve endings wake from a long rest whenever he's near.

The two doctors shake hands. Jeff and Nick merely nod to each other, the movement so small and so hostile on both sides that even Dr. Patel seems to notice. Nick pulls up a chair alongside mine.

"So, I've looked at your scans," Dr. Patel begins, facing me, "and the reports from Dr. Reilly. I think he explained that this tumor is an area we can't reach?"

I nod, holding my breath. I want him to lay out options and tell me there's a good chance. A seventy percent chance, but I'd settle for thirty. I'd settle for twenty.

"Unfortunately," he continues, "a tumor like this is unlikely to respond well to available treatments."

My breath releases and my spine bows. I was held upright by hope, and he just took it away from me. Nick's hand clenches into a fist. He knew, just like I did, that the situation wasn't optimistic. We were both hoping for a miracle, when neither of us believes in them.

"*Unlikely* doesn't mean it won't," says Jeff.

Dr. Patel nods. "Right, it doesn't mean it won't. But I think our best-case scenario is that chemo might give Quinn a little more time."

My hands shake, but inside I feel absolutely empty, depleted. *Zero percent* is what he's saying. I have a zero percent chance of surviving this. I

look out the window. There are students in the distance, backpacks slung over shoulders, talking and texting and thinking about evening plans. This is the moment I officially separate myself from them, from all the people in the world who've forgotten the value of time. And Patel is offering me more of it, but I've seen firsthand how that goes. We begged my father to fight. We convinced him to try experimental treatments when the regular ones failed. He got an extra three months out of it, but it was three months during which he was bedridden and nauseous. He turned into a dry, wizened old man before our eyes. "More time during which I am very, very sick," I finally say, still looking out the window.

The doctor frowns. "Under normal circumstances, a tumor of this size would be having significant side effects, and I'm not quite sure how yours isn't. But given how well you're doing, I can see where you might not want to commit to a course of treatment, knowing it will make you feel worse."

I think about that. I think about the fact that I'm finally going back to school. I have a chance of making it long enough to get my degree. *And more time with Nick*, I think before I can stop myself. If I start on chemo, will I enjoy any of it? Will I even be well enough to go to school? No. I'll be sick and frail and miserable.

"I'm not interested in that," I reply.

"Quinn," hisses Jeff. "You can't just dismiss what he's saying. You haven't even considered it." He turns to Dr. Patel. "What are the options? Because the tumor might not be making her sick, but it's definitely affecting her personality."

Nick's head jerks toward Jeff's. He looks like a volcano on the cusp of exploding. "What's that supposed to mean?" he snaps.

Jeff narrows one eye at him and offers his reply to me rather than Nick. "You're making decisions that aren't...that might not be rational. I'm worried it's a sign there's worse to come."

My jaw clenches. Is he really trying to imply that the decision to get this degree is irrational? A product of my tumor rather than the thing I've wanted, without cease, for a decade? I have many, many things to say about that, but not with an audience. "We can discuss this at home," I say tightly. "But I'm not interested in treatment."

"I know you don't want to hear this," he says softly, "but brain tumors do cause personality changes—and irritability and impaired judgment are two of those changes. I read about it earlier. You need to at least hear what the

options are.” He turns back to Dr. Patel. “So there’s chemo and radiation, right? Which of those might help?”

Nick’s voice emerges, a low growl. “You seem to be struggling to hear what Quinn’s saying,” he seethes, “so allow me to repeat it: she doesn’t want treatment.”

Jeff snaps his gaze toward Nick, the thin veneer of civility discarded. “And you seem to be forgetting you’re not a part of this decision.”

Nick’s eyes have this gleam to them that doesn’t bode well. “I haven’t forgotten anything. It’s just unclear to me why you think it’s okay to ignore what she wants and talk over her.”

Jeff stands, pushing back his chair, and in seconds, Nick is on his feet too. Their hatred for each other is a force, the fifth member of our little gathering, and someone is about to get hit.

Fear propels me from my seat. “Jeff, you stay here and finish the conversation,” I say breathlessly. “Find out the options. I have some questions to ask Dr. Reilly outside.”

Without waiting to hear Jeff’s protests, I place my hand against Nick’s chest and push. He doesn’t move a muscle, even with all my force behind it, but I glance up at him, a silent plea, and he gives in, slowly leaving the room with me in his wake.

Nick is rigid as we walk to his office. I suspect it’s taking every ounce of self-restraint not to turn on his heel and pull Jeff back out of his seat.

He opens his door and ushers me in. The last time I was here I refused to look at his photos because I was so terrified I’d see a wife and kids. I’m still terrified by what I’ll see, but this time I look anyway. There’s one of him with his parents, one with him and a bunch of guys in suits...and one of a very pretty woman in scrubs who must be his girlfriend. I wish I hadn’t looked.

He shuts the door, but instead of taking his seat at the desk, he turns to me, standing closer than is safe for either of us. “Are you okay?”

I nod, my shoulders dropping. What Dr. Patel just told us was a shock only briefly. The truth is, I’d never hoped for much in the first place. “I got the feeling from you a long time ago it wasn’t likely to work out. I knew what to expect.”

His eyes close and he leans his shoulder against the wall. “I’m not giving up. I still think there are people who can help us.”

“Maybe,” I sigh. It’s a long shot, but I’ll cling to whatever hope I can find

at the moment. "I should probably get back in there."

Nick moves, closing me in. "So, did you actually have something to discuss with me, or were you just trying to keep me from kicking his ass?"

He's so damn cocky, and it only makes him more attractive to me. I just learned I'm definitely going to die, but here I stand with *lust* my primary emotion. "You say that like you know you'd have won."

He steps toward me—far, far too close. My breath comes in tiny sips. His hand rises, the tips of his fingers grazing my cheekbone as he pushes my hair back, but instead of pulling away, his hand hovers there—cupped, ready to descend at any moment to cradle my jaw. "I'd have won."

God, I want to lean into the warmth of his palm. "I—"

"Tell me what to do," he says hoarsely. "I refuse to give up on this. There's got to be a way to find Rose or someone else and go back to fix things. I will do any fucking thing you name if it will help us figure this out."

There's a desperation on his face that I remember. I saw it when he kissed me for the first time in high school. When I was in the hospital and my blood pressure dropped. When I walked out of the diner's bathroom on Tuesday and told him Rose was gone. His eyes flicker to my mouth, and the pull toward him is so strong it takes all my willpower not to close the distance between us. "I...I can't think of anything."

He swallows. "I'm going to the lake tomorrow. You could come with me. See the house, the dock. Maybe it would jar something."

For a single moment I allow myself to imagine it: the two of us, the way I remember. Him swimming out to me, lifting himself into the boat without effort. The breeze in my hair, the sun beating down on us. His slick hands on my skin.

I want it so badly. And it terrifies me at the same time. "I can't."

"I'm not asking you to do anything wrong. You'd have your own room. You don't even have to stay. Just come out for a few hours."

I shake my head even as some distant part of my brain tries to rationalize agreement. I want to tell myself it's an *investigation*, altruistic in some way. It's not. "Imagine if the situation were reversed," I say softly. "Imagine that I'm engaged to you, and while you're out of town, I go stay at the lake with another guy. Would you think that was okay?"

He is silent, the answer written in the throb of his jawline. "I wouldn't be leaving you this weekend in the first place."

I go on my toes to press my mouth to his cheek. "I know," I reply.

My chest aches as I walk out the door.

QUINN

Jeff emerges from Dr. Patel's office to find me sitting in the waiting room. We walk out to the car in silence and the crowd shifts away from us, fearful our unhappiness might prove contagious.

We get to the car. He puts the key in the ignition, but doesn't turn it, shifting in his seat to face me instead. He seems less angry than he does incredulous. "Why are you being like this? Why are you just giving up?"

"There's nothing to give up," I say softly. "You heard the doctor yourself. There is no chance of survival. None."

"But he can give you time!" Jeff cries. "And you have no idea how much time he could give you because you wouldn't even let him speak. You just accepted the first thing he said like we were discussing a car repair. You didn't even seem surprised."

"I wasn't. I'd already spoken to Nick and I—"

"Nick," he sneers. "Since when are you and *Nick* best fucking friends?"

My stomach drops. Were we so obvious in that meeting today? I tried to make things seem professional, but I doubt I succeeded. Admitting to any of this will get me nowhere however, so I go on the offense. "And since when do you nearly start a fistfight with the doctor who's been trying to save my life? If you really want to help, maybe you shouldn't be going out of your way to make him the enemy."

"I don't like the way he looks at you."

My heart thumps in my chest. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

“He walked into the damn room today and only looked at you, like me and Dr. Patel weren’t even there. Like he was your husband and I was just some lowlife harassing you.”

I glance away from him, knowing he’s right and that I’ll never be able to admit it. “I think you’re reading too much into it. And let’s not move away from the point, which is that you were ignoring my wishes, just like he said. And implying that me pursuing a degree I’ve wanted my entire life is some kind of symptom of this tumor, when really it’s just me refusing to put everything I want in life on the backburner in lieu of what you want.”

His mouth falls open. “I’m trying to move our lives forward. It isn’t about what I want or what you want. It’s about logic.”

Wrong choice of words, Jeff. Resentment, held back for so long, floods me. “It’s funny, then, how your logic always leads to *me* giving things up,” I snap. “Do you realize I’d be done with grad school by now if you hadn’t convinced me to wait? But you did. And then you convinced me we should buy a place, just before you quit your job. Yes, I can see how it’s plenty logical for *you*—you get to flit from one job to the next, knowing I’ll pick up the slack, but how was any of that logical for *me*?”

He stares at me for a long moment, shaking his head like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. “My God, Quinn. Have you felt like this all along? I thought you agreed. I thought you wanted the house.”

“I didn’t *not* want it,” I admit. “I just didn’t know that it was going to mean giving up everything I wanted more.”

“You should have told me,” he says. His shoulders are rounded. Every last bit of confidence he’s regained these past few months seems stripped away from him. “I had no idea.”

My inclination is to take it back, to apologize, but I don’t. “And I had no idea you thought me going back to Georgetown was a sign that my brain was *malfunctioning*. You might have said that in private instead of announcing it to my doctors first.”

He’s silent, and then he leans over and pulls me in for a hug. As much as I want to resist, I don’t. “I’m sorry,” he says. His voice is choked. “I want to be what you need, but this whole situation brings out the worst in me. Everything’s changing, and I hate it. I don’t know what’s going on with us, but I feel like I can’t do anything right with you now.”

I let my head drop to his shoulder. This situation has gone too far and it’s entirely my fault. I’ve been pushing him aside ever since that first day at the

inn, before I even knew Nick existed. I've been telling myself I was protecting him, but when Nick spent the night in my hospital room, when he went with me to meet Grosbaum, when we wound up staying together in Baltimore...I didn't keep those things to myself because of Jeff's tender feelings. I did it because I knew they shouldn't have happened. Each step has been slightly less justifiable than the one before it.

I swallow, forcing myself to make a suggestion I probably should have made long before. "Should we call off the wedding?"

His head jerks back. "Call it off? Why?"

I was hoping it would be obvious to him. "Because we aren't getting along. I mean, are you even sure you still want to get married?"

"Of course I do! What kind of question is that?"

His astonishment leaves me flustered. *Surely* the thought has occurred to him at least once? "It's just...I'm just being realistic." I press my lips together, staring out at the dense summer foliage just beyond the parking garage. These are the last few days of July, and I don't even know if I'll have another one. "We don't want the same kind of life. You want to move home and live on a farm, which is my idea of hell. I'm keeping you from all the things you want in the world, aside from me, and the truth is that neither of us knows how long I'm even going to be around."

His eyes well. "But you're the part that matters, Quinn. You. Not living back home. Not the farm. Okay? So, we are still getting married. If you want to cancel the big wedding, we'll do that. People will get it, under the circumstances. I'll talk to the church down the street and see if they can open something up next weekend."

I freeze. The dread I've been feeling—about the future, about staying with Jeff—it sinks into my very bones at his words. "Next weekend?" I repeat, my voice too breathy. "I don't know if we can pull it together that fast."

"Just family and close friends," he says. "You've already got the dress. Instead of a reception, maybe we just go to dinner somewhere."

An anchor sinks deep in my stomach. I made a commitment—to Jeff, to my father—and it's not as if Nick's an option anyway. I look at the tears in Jeff's eyes and my shoulders sag. I'm not sure a year or two of independence would be worth the number of people I'd have to hurt to gain it.



THAT NIGHT, I try to persuade Jeff to leave town as planned for his bachelor/camping weekend, but he insists on staying. “I’ll leave in the morning instead,” he says. “Let’s just have a nice night in. It’s been too long.”

It’s probably what we need. A night where we’re enjoying something together instead of a night where I’m thinking about all the things he’s not. I could have watched *Inception* with him last night. There’s this ugly assumption inside me that Jeff can’t quite fill Nick’s shoes in any given situation, but I’m not even giving him the chance to try.

“*South Park*?” he asks after dinner, turning on the TV.

“Let’s watch *Inception*,” I tell him, ignoring the strain on his face when I say it. Just because he prefers to watch comedies doesn’t mean he’s incapable of feeling something as deeply as Nick does.

It starts. I’m every bit as riveted as I was the last time, perhaps even more since I know just how badly it’s all going to go. Jeff doesn’t look particularly intrigued, but he’s not complaining either. *Give it a chance, Quinn. Give him a chance.*

At the forty-minute mark, he sighs and hits pause. “I’m sorry, hon,” he says. “This movie doesn’t make a damn bit of sense. You keep watching. I’m going to bed.”

I want to argue. For some reason it seems like my entire future, the fate of our relationship, rests on just getting him to the end of the movie. And that’s insane. He doesn’t have to like what I like. I don’t like to watch football and that’s not a dealbreaker for him.

But as soon as he’s gone the next day, I do what I absolutely should not. I pick up the phone and call Nick.

NICK

Ever since Quinn left my office yesterday, I've been hunting for a solution that doesn't exist. There's a very good reason doctors can't date their patients, especially in a situation like ours. It's possible we could tell the right lies and hide it enough to get away with it, but that still wouldn't make it ethical.

Yet the minute I get her call, I know I'd be willing to do it anyway.

She insists on driving herself. We arrange to meet at a market near the lake, since my parents' place is off a series of unmarked roads.

"And pack the red bikini," I add, only half-joking.

"Nick," she says softly. "I'm still engaged. This is just one last effort to figure things out."

But whether she's admitting it or not, it's also one last chance for her to figure out she would rather be with me.



THE AIR IS warm and moist, the buzz of insects rising toward the clouds. I stand for a moment outside the car just before I leave to meet Quinn, feeling something that's been absent so long I'd forgotten there was a time when I expected it—hope.

All I *should* want from today is that Quinn remembers enough that we solve this, or remembers enough of who she was that she decides to end it

with Jeff. The hope I feel is a warning sign, a reminder that my desire to get her away from Jeff is not wholly altruistic. There are things I want from today for myself as well as for her, whether I'm supposed to have them or not.

She arrives at the market not long after I do. I watch her climb out of an old Jetta, wearing a gauzy sleeveless dress with a slit up the side. I'm trying hard to pretend I don't see a flash of tan thigh as she walks toward me. Today is about convincing her to give this a shot, convincing her that she has no reason to fear me. Thoughts about those thighs straddling me in a hotel bed a few nights ago will have to wait.

"There's a deli here," I say, pulling the door handle. "I thought we could grab some lunch and eat it out on the dock."

She walks in ahead of me and makes it five feet before she comes to a sudden stop, pressing her fingers to her temples.

My hands are on her arms in an instant. "Are you okay?"

She nods, slumping against the glass door of a drink refrigerator. "I've been here before," she whispers. "With you. We were buying food for the weekend, because the grocery store wasn't done yet."

There's a chill up my spine. "Yeah," I say casually, pretending it's not completely bizarre she knows this. "The grocery store opened just before I got out of college."

She looks off into the distance, like she's watching our past on a movie screen only she can see. "We bought a bunch of food here, enough to last the weekend, but we ended up coming back..." She trails off, looking so embarrassed I have to ask.

"What?"

She shakes her head and turns toward the deli. "Nothing. So, what's good?"

"That's not fair," I tell her, gently cupping her elbow to turn her back toward me. "You can't keep starting a memory and not finishing it."

The color rises in her face. "We ran out of condoms," she whispers, not meeting my eye. "So you came here for more. Twice. The cashier gave you a hard time about it."

It's a gut punch, but the good kind. The idea of running through multiple boxes of condoms with Quinn...*Jesus*. I want to pin her against the refrigerator case and make what happened in Baltimore look like child's play.

Pull it together, Nick. I clear my throat. "I could buy some now, only in

the interest of a by-the-book investigation?”

She laughs, as if I was entirely joking. I definitely was not.



MY PARENTS' white, two-story colonial sits at the end of a long gravel road that is dappled with sunlight beneath a canopy of trees. By mutual agreement she rode with me instead of following behind. It still doesn't seem possible that the sight of the house itself is causing her seizures, but a few weeks ago I didn't think time travel was possible either. As the house comes into view, I find her hand in mine. I'm not even sure which of us is responsible.

“Still okay?” I ask.

“Yes,” she breathes. “I’ve been here too. Your and Ryan’s room was up there.” I stiffen as she points to the room I once shared with my twin.

“That’s probably the first time anyone’s spoken his name here in a decade,” I tell her. “My mom—I guess we all try to protect her.”

Her face falls. She couldn't look guiltier if she tried. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Seriously.” I open her door and get another flash of her legs as she climbs out of the Jeep. It’s probably for the best that she refused to bring the bikini. I’m having enough trouble as it is.

We walk into the house and I watch her face, hoping, *praying*, for a reaction. Some memory that will provide an answer we need.

Her mouth curves downward. “It’s just like walking into the home of your favorite childhood friend as an adult. Familiar, but meaningless. Why the hell did I ever think seeing it might heal a brain tumor? I was expecting miracles.”

I return and find my hands wrapping around her arms, forcing her to meet my eye. “Who says it would have to be a miracle?” I ask. “We can’t explain *anything* that’s happening. But there was a time when people couldn’t explain the change in seasons, or sunlight, or gravity. It doesn’t mean there wasn’t an explanation. It just meant it hadn’t been discovered. Why should this be any different?”

She looks away, pressing her lips together. “But the tumor—you don’t actually believe we can stop it.”

I tip her chin up, feeling a little desperate. She can’t start losing hope now. I need her to keep fighting until we find a solution. “Do I think it’s

unlikely this can fix the tumor? Yeah. But your tumor is also unlike anything I've ever seen. And how could I say it was impossible anyway? Every day, you and I are witnessing the impossible. We're having the same dreams, for God's sake. You know things you couldn't possibly know, and from the moment I met you, it felt like you were..."

"It felt like I was what?"

"Mine," I reply.

The awkwardness of that word washes over us both. I've never called anyone *mine* in my life, and she is with someone else. But I also know what I said was right. She is meant to be mine, and somehow today I need to convince her of that.



SHE SITS on the dock and keeps me company while I prepare to pull the jet ski out of the water. I throw my shirt in the grass and I'm just about to pull the trailer up the hill when I glance up and catch it—Quinn's eyes on me, cheeks flushed, her full lips slightly ajar. I've never seen a female watch me with such blatant, unconscious lust. Probably the way I'm looking at her every time we're together. God, what I wouldn't give to act on it.

I catch her eye. "Remembering our honeymoon?"

"Our honeymoon was in December," she says primly. "No one was wearing a bathing suit."

I grin. "If it was a *good* honeymoon, I imagine we were wearing a lot less."

"Yeah," she breathes, her lids fluttering closed for a second. She's fucking remembering it, right here in front of me. Today is going to be a test of my self-restraint, as it is, without having to watch Quinn when she's thinking about sex.

"Jesus, don't do that," I plead, giving the waistband of my shorts a quick, desperate tug.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't say *yeah* like that, as if you're remembering it all while you sit there."

Her cheeks turn pink. "Sorry," she begins. "I wasn't remembering our honeymoon, I promise."

My teeth grind. I haven't gotten laid in weeks and the only girl I actually want has her dress hiked around her thighs and is swinging her bare legs a couple feet from my face. "Well, you were sure as shit remembering *something*. It was written all over your face."

"I had this dream about you," she begins. "We were in high school, right after homecoming, and we were in the back seat of your car. In the parking lot. And—"

Her voice has gone low and breathy again, full of longing. She's been with her idiot boyfriend for so long, she's forgotten what a turn-on she is, even when she's *not* talking. Add in that rasp to her voice while she describes a memory of something that was clearly sexual—with *me*, no less—and I'm a goner. She may not know she's doing it, but my dick certainly does.

"Don't do that either," I tell her, and I turn away, pulling the trailer up the hill. I feel like an asshole almost immediately, but I just don't know how to do this—how to balance being what she needs and restraining what I want all at the same time. I get the jet ski into the shed and return.

She watches me, her face solemn. "What did I do wrong?" she asks.

I push my hair off my forehead, racking my brain for any excuse I can make, before I give up entirely. "Nothing. But you were describing the two of us, together, in the throatiest, sexiest voice imaginable. Let's just say I walked away for a reason."

"Oh." Then her eyes widen. "Ohhhhh."

There's something so innocent about her at times. I love that innocence and want to preserve it, but at the same time, I want to destroy it into a million pieces. The jury's still out on which way I'll go.

QUINN

Nick goes to the house and returns with our sandwiches and drinks in his hands. He hasn't bothered to put his shirt back on, though I wish he would. I find my eyes going south far too often, resting on that trail of light brown hair below his belly button, imagining where it might lead if I flicked the button of his shorts to follow it.

I don't want to be having these thoughts about him, thoughts I've never in my life had for anyone else. But how do you make yourself stop thinking the wrong thing, and wanting it? He swings the bag down behind us, sitting too close. The distance he might sit if I were his and he were mine.

I think of the way he said that word earlier—*mine*—and how it sent a visceral thrill through my chest. The way something inside me—that hard seed that began to flower the moment I met him—took another leap, came into full bloom.

While he pulls food from the bag, I look over at the paddleboards on the beach, the Sunfish bobbing nearby. "Is this what we'd have done if we came here in high school?" I ask.

He gives me a sheepish grin, handing me my sandwich on a paper plate. "Well, I'm guessing, based on your memory of condom purchases, it's not *all* we'd have done."

I feel myself blushing as I remember that moment of intense déjà vu at the deli. It was our first time together. Something we'd waited years for. Different than London, where we must *barely* have waited, given how fast

we got married. I don't know how many lives I've lived with him, but it feels a little unfair that I can't live this one with him too.

He's watching my face in a way I can't pretend is just *friendly*. "I like having you here," he says.

I twist my ring, letting my feet swing over the dock, inches from the water. "It's been the best Saturday I've had in a long time." A disloyal thing to say, but not as disloyal as what I'm actually thinking, which is that it's been the best Saturday I ever remember.

I catch a flash of his dimple. "Even if it's no Paris."

"You say that as if I routinely go to Paris. I've never even been out of the country."

"Why not?" he asks.

I smile. "Spoken like a kid who grew up with everything. I was dirt poor in a town so small you'd miss it if you blinked."

He leans back a little, a casual gesture, but there's nothing relaxed about the way he's watching me now. "I guess that's how you wound up with Jeff."

I bristle at his phrasing. He makes it sound like I'm *saddled* with Jeff, as if I chose him by default. "What do you mean?"

"You're just...ill-suited. He doesn't seem like someone you'd have chosen unless you were someplace where there weren't a lot of options."

He hasn't seen the best side of Jeff since this thing started, but it's not like I chose him out of desperation. I had plenty of options back home. "Going through a tragedy with someone shows you pieces of them you wouldn't have seen otherwise. And when my father died, I realized what a good person Jeff was."

His mouth twists as if he's just eaten a piece of fruit gone bad. "Right. Your dad dies, and Jeff, who'd probably been after you for years, suddenly comes to the rescue."

I place my sandwich carefully on the plate and turn toward him. "He did, yes. Why are you trying to make that sound like a devious thing?"

"I just suspect he had an ulterior motive."

I run my tongue over my teeth, feeling flustered and angry, though I don't know why. While it's true Jeff was interested in me well before I moved home, he didn't act on it for a long time. He just remained quietly in the wings, helping us where he could. "He's not a bad person, no matter what you think."

His eyes are as stormy as the clouds that now gather in the distance.

“He’s also not quite as good a person as you seem to want to believe. He left you alone at the hospital after you had a very serious episode,” he says, his voice low and gritty. “He should have been there. He should have been home every fucking night since it started happening.”

I want to cover my ears like a child, or simply walk away. “Well, we can’t all be doctors, Nick. He was trying to keep his job. And it’s how we were raised. Men wake up at 5 a.m. and work until dark, and they do it until they’re in the grave. That’s how Jeff shows he cares.”

His jaw shifts. “That doesn’t mean you have to accept it.”

This is a fruitless topic to explore. Nick was raised with different values. He will put whomever he ends up with first, always, the rest of the world be damned. There’s a piece of me that cries out for that kind of care, but it’s not reasonable to hope for it from Jeff. “Why are we discussing this?”

He stares hard at the water. “Because I think you should cancel the wedding.”

I glance at him quickly and away. I long to ask if he’s saying it as my doctor, or as something...more, but I doubt he’d tell me the truth.

“Jeff is suggesting moving the date up,” I reply. “He wants to do something small and private next weekend instead.”

His head jerks toward mine. “I wasn’t saying you should skip the big wedding. I was saying you should skip *any* wedding. You can’t seriously be thinking about marrying him next weekend.”

My spine goes straight. “I’ve been with him for years. Why wouldn’t I consider it?”

“Because you’re not in *love* with him,” he says, standing, fists clenched.

“Ah,” I challenge, gathering our stuff as I climb to my feet, “but you and Meg are? It must be a real love story for the ages, what with you spending all your free time with me.”

“I’m not *marrying* her.”

My throat tightens, and I feel the start of tears...*angry* tears. “But you will,” I rasp. “Or someone just like her.”

He steps toward me, pulling the bag from my hand and throwing it behind him before he cups the back of my neck and pulls my mouth to his. Without hesitation or gentleness, he kisses me, and the moment his mouth touches mine, all thought seems to stop. I am only a mass of nerve endings and sensation and want. There is heat and pressure and his hands sliding over my skin, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

I moan against his mouth and he pulls me harder against him. *I've missed this. My God, I've missed this.* For years, for decades. I am molten, nothing but a collection of burning atoms, so weightless I could be floating in midair, for all I know. My hands are on his chest, but itch to lower, to pull at his shorts, to slide my dress around my waist.

Sex for me has always been precise and careful, led by thought rather than impulse. This is the opposite of that. I'm driven entirely by instinct, some ancient part of me rising up and taking over. I want everything from him, right here on this splintery dock. I don't care who sees. His hands are on my thighs and my greedy fingers are already sliding into his waistband before I come to a sudden, shocked halt.

Jeff.

I gasp for air, pushing away from him so fast that I stumble backward, steadied only by his hands on my hips. "Oh my God. What are we doing?"

His hands soften, but he doesn't let me go. "I must be ridiculously bad at this if that wasn't clear."

"You're about to move in with someone, and I'm engaged," I reply, pressing a palm to my forehead. Yes, my actions around Nick haven't been completely pure, and my dreams decidedly less so, but this crosses a line I can't begin to rationalize.

"I broke up with Meg the morning we came back from Baltimore," he says, closing the distance I've placed between us. "Because I want to feel the way I do around you, and I'm not willing to settle for less than that. And you shouldn't be settling for less either."

The world seems to stop. The birds are silent, the air grows still. Nothing exists but Nick in front of me, and this thing in my chest—terror and desire, twisting until I can't tell one from the other. He's offering me everything I want in the world, and yet something inside me panics at the thought of taking it. I hate the idea of disappointing Jeff and my mother, but that's not what this is about.

"Say something," he urges. My hands are pressed to his chest, and I can feel, beneath them, his heart beating away at a pace that can't be normal, his body taut with what could be desire, or could be impatience. I think of his hands tugging at my dress, the heat of his mouth on my neck.

"I can't think when you're so close," I whisper. "I need to leave."

He stiffens. "Quinn—" he starts, but I cut him off because he is too compelling, and already a big part of me is hoping he refuses to let this go,

refuses to let *me* go.

“I’m not a cheater,” I say quietly, focusing on his chest. “I...just need to think. And I can’t make a reasonable decision when we’re standing here like this.”

Slowly, he releases me, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “I know what I’m asking of you is huge, and I’ll take you back to your car. Just please promise me you’ll consider it.”

I tell him I will, but I suspect it’s a lie. Because I don’t really need to think, and it has nothing to do with the size of what he’s asked. What keeps me here, refusing to take what I want most in the world, is a truth it seems I’ve always known, one proven to me as a child: something dangerous lurks inside me, and it would only take loving someone too much to set it free.

And if I allowed myself to, I would definitely love Nick like that.

I’d love him far more than Jeff. In fact, I’m scared I already do.



THE RIDE BACK IS QUIET. He drives slowly, but we arrive at the market much too soon. I’ve never been so reluctant to step out of someone’s car. If only his words didn’t make as much sense as they did. I may not have a lot of time left. Would it be so wrong to make myself happy while I can?

I just don’t know.

My eyes flicker to his mouth, remembering our kiss earlier. I want to lean over and bury my nose in his skin, consume that lingering hint of soap from his morning shower. I want to bite that lower lip of his and climb him like a ropes course. “Thank you for today,” I say instead.

I reach for the door handle, and he tugs me back toward him, his hands grasping my jaw as he presses his mouth to mine for one long moment. I breathe, memorizing all of it—the smell of his skin, the softness of his lips, the pressure of his calloused hands. “Please come back to me, Quinn.”

My ribs squeeze tight. I want to promise him something, but terror and desire...they’re equally weighted right now. Can I really abandon Jeff after he gave up everything for me? Can I move past this nameless fear and give in to that desperate, wholehearted kind of love I’ve felt for Nick in my memories of other lives?

I don’t know. So instead of replying, I press my lips to his cheek, and

then I slide from the car, refusing to look back as I walk away.

QUINN

I'm outside your building," I whisper. My voice is raspy from crying most of the way back to D.C. "Can you let me up?"

Caroline has known me long enough that she asks no questions. She merely says 'of course' and moments later her head is peeking out the door, looking one way and then the next for my car.

We get up to her apartment. Even now, in my despair, it calls to mind the home of some Arabic princess in a Disney tale—a jewel box of rugs and artwork and furniture, all of it vivid and alive.

I sit on her purple velvet couch and she takes the chair across from me, hugging a fur pillow to her chest. "Based on your current level of blotchiness, I estimate you've been crying for at least a full hour."

My laugh is shaky. It threatens to turn into a sob, but I pull it back just in time. "Good guess. You should have a show."

"Like the kid who talks to the dead, but I guess how long people have been crying?" she asks. "I can't see how it could fail."

I smile, but I don't attempt a laugh this time. Too risky.

"So, what's up?" she asks softly. "You and Jeff never fight."

"He left this morning for his camping trip," I reply, flinching a little. He went away for his bachelor party and I *cheated* on him. I can't believe I did it, but I can't quite regret it either. "We aren't fighting."

She tips her head, thinking, and then her mouth opens into a perfect circle. "Oh. My. God. You slept with that doctor."

She's not accurate, of course, but she's not that far off from it either, which is pretty impressive. "I didn't sleep with him."

She leans forward, her whole face alight, more excited than she is concerned. "Tell me everything."

So I do. Jeff's inability to sit through the movie. The trip to the lake. Nick asking me to call off the wedding. The kiss.

That's when her face falls. "That's *it*? He only kissed you?"

I manage another smile. Only Caroline would be disappointed that I didn't cheat *enough*. "I kissed him back, and...I don't know." My voice catches. "I have no idea what I'm even doing anymore."

"Quinn," she groans, "do I need to get a flashing neon sign? Or maybe have God descend from Heaven and speak to you directly? It's so freaking obvious you shouldn't be marrying Jeff to everyone alive but you and your mom."

I sink low into the cushions behind me. I want her to convince me she's right. It's probably why I came here in the first place. And, at the same time, I need to convince her she's wrong—except the objections I can actually say *aloud* are weak ones. "I love Jeff."

"You may love him, but not in the right way," she argues. "He's familiar and you care about him, but there's no spark. I've never once seen you light up about him the way you do when you're discussing Nick."

"Even if that's true, Jeff gave up everything to come down here. And my dad...he *begged* me at the end to choose him. It's like he knew something I didn't."

She leans forward. "He was a dying man high on painkillers, and you were his baby. He just wanted to leave the world knowing you were taken care of. And that's sweet, but that doesn't mean he was psychic."

It's so tempting to let her sway me, but my fears remain. And I can't imagine breaking up with Jeff this late in the game, especially when the rest of his life isn't going so well.

"At least tell me how the kiss was," she urges. "Because if he's the guy who uses too much tongue or whatever, you need to say so upfront, so I know whether or not to encourage your fling or discourage it. You know my opinions on tongue usage."

I laugh through my tears. "Yes, you prefer it sparingly. I know."

"And?"

I can still feel the imprint of him on my mouth. The heat, the pressure.

The smell of his soap, the needy way his fingertips pressed to my skin. I want to groan at the memory. “It was good,” I admit. *Such an understatement. It was perfect.*

“Well, then I feel like there’s only one foolproof way to decide if you should go through with your wedding,” she says. “You have to sleep with Nick.”

I glance at her to make sure she’s joking. I’m not entirely sure she is. “I’m not *sleeping* with him. I’m not a cheater.”

“Fine. I’ll make the ultimate sacrifice and sleep with him myself and report back to you.”

I know she’s joking, but it doesn’t stop jealousy from tearing through me like a white-hot needle. I bury my head in my hands. He broke up with Meg, but there will be someone to replace her eventually. Even if I choose him, there will be someone else eventually anyway, thanks to the tumor. And that thought makes me want to run from all this now, before it hurts even more.



EVENTUALLY I RETURN to my empty home, despite Caroline’s entreaties to join her for enough margaritas that I “forget about Jeff entirely”. I move woodenly through all the normal things I’d do on a night at home. I shower, put on pajamas, and stick a frozen pizza in the oven. There is nothing different about my life. It just makes me feel numb. I think perhaps I’ve been numb for a very long time, and meeting Nick is what’s made me realize it.

I watch hour after hour of a stupid sitcom that doesn’t elicit a single laugh. It’s after ten, and I’m preparing to go to bed when lights turn in the driveway. My heart leaps despite itself.

Jeff’s deep in the Pennsylvania mountains right now. And there’s only one other person who’d show up at this hour.

I know I should make him leave. Maybe I shouldn’t answer at all. But that eager, desperate part of me throws the door open anyway...to find Jeff climbing out of his truck.

He carries his gear into the house and I hold the door, while disappointment continues to carve itself wide through my stomach. I’m not even capable of a fake smile, much less a real one. “What happened to your bachelor party?”

He dumps the last of his gear in the foyer and points at the lightning off to the west. "It's supposed to storm all night. Wasn't really ideal for a camping trip."

There's something forced in the words which makes me suspect I'm not getting the whole truth. "But...you didn't want to go to a bar or something at least?"

He raises a brow. "I thought you'd be happy to see me."

I *should* be. And maybe I actually would be if I hadn't expected Nick in his place. If I buckle down, if I avoid Nick from now on and focus, could I be happy with what we have again? That's the problem though. I'm not sure how you stop craving joy, and fullness, once you realize they exist. "I just hate that your bachelor party was ruined."

He steps close, backing me to the door. "I had an idea anyway, and it inspired me to come straight home," he says. His mouth fastens on mine. His lips are dry and thin, the kiss perfunctory. Has it always been like this? I feel panicked, unable to respond, and my reluctance only makes him try harder.

I slide away. "What was your idea?"

"I was thinking about Vegas, like you said a while back—you were right. I booked us on the first flight out in the morning," he says, pulling me back to him. "By this time tomorrow, you'll be my wife and it will all be over with, just like you wanted."

I freeze. I'm...I'm just not ready. That other version of me, the one from London, says *stop this. Tell him you can't go*. But I just stand here with a blank stare on my face and the words trapped in my throat.

He laughs at my reaction. "Thought I was incapable of spontaneity, didn't you?" he asks, wrapping an arm around my waist.

I did. And I fall asleep wishing I'd been right.



NICK and I are in the master bedroom of the house at the lake. I hear the crinkle of a condom wrapper being torn. The mattress dips as he climbs in behind me, his hand grasping the curve of my hip.

"You can still change your mind," he says against my ear. "At any point. Okay?"

I roll toward him. "I'm not going to change my mind."

Everything I want in life is a distant second next to him. Even the promise I made my mom. I think I've known this for a while, but when he pulled himself into the boat today and said those words—"I'd never just let you float away"—I felt it. And I knew it was time.

My bikini is untied, and the bottoms are tugged down. His hand slips between my legs. "Jesus," he whispers, pressing his face into my hair and breathing deep. "You're already wet."

My hand slides between us, but he stops me. "Just the idea of it has me close. This will be over before it starts if you do that."

He moves down the bed. His breath skates over my inner thigh, closer and closer until he reaches my center. His tongue flicks—once, twice, again—and he slides a finger inside me the moment my back arches. He continues and after a moment he adds a second finger, glancing up at me to make sure I'm okay.

It hurts but it's oddly pleasant at the same time. His fingers move and it becomes less like pain, and more like a small fire that burns and warms simultaneously. I'm floating, anchored only by the pressure of his hand. And I want more.

"Come up," I plead and I feel a pulse of breath against me, his low laugh.

"Not yet." He adds a third finger and my objections die on my lips. It burns, but his tongue is moving faster and without even a second to warn him I shatter, squeezing those fingers of his so hard I'm surprised nothing breaks.

I just came but it's not enough. I lean up just enough to rest my hands on his shoulders and pull him down to me. "Now," I demand.

There's a small, ragged noise in his chest at the words, need and capitulation and relief. He shifts until he's right there. I feel that first hint of pressure, of the fullness that's coming. "I'm not going to last long," he groans.



LIGHTNING strikes outside and I jolt awake, my entire body rigid, seconds from coming. Jeff is snoring quietly beside me and all I want in the entire world is to go back where I was. Because being with Nick just now felt so different, so much better, than anything I've ever known that I can't stand not

having it.

I sit, curling my knees to my chest and pressing my face against them. In a few hours Jeff and I will be heading to the airport and it'll be over. I'm never going to risk anything and I'm never going to know what it's like to hand myself over to another person, to love someone so deeply and want him so much I'd give up anything on his behalf.

Outside, the storm is upon us, and the thunder hammers overhead, making our house shake like a terrified small thing. I slip out of bed and stand by the window, watching the trees sway. My father told me a story once, during a storm just like this, about the good wind and the bad wind. He said they came one day to visit a little girl just like me, because all of his stories were about a little girl just like me. The girl had waited a long time for the good wind to come along and blow all kinds of wonderful things inside, but when it finally came knocking, the bad wind was right there alongside it, which meant she couldn't let in one without letting in the other. "All the wonderful gifts the good wind would bestow could only come alongside the bad wind's chaos and disaster," he said.

"Couldn't she tell the good wind to come back later?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"They're a package deal. So nothing bad ever came into the house, but nothing good did either. And that's when the girl discovered there was something far worse than the bad wind."

I frowned at him. "What?"

He picked me up and set me in his lap, and I think it's only because his voice was so grave and serious when he replied that I remember the story at all. "What's worse than the bad wind is the emptiness of letting nothing in at all," he said.

It puzzles me now, that story. I'd almost forgotten there was a time when he wanted me to eschew safety, to soar to greater heights. But when the end came he wanted the very opposite for me. What changed? Is it possible my father knew about Nick somehow? Because it seems obvious that finding Nick is the point at which my life seems to end, again and again, and pushing me toward another man might have seemed like the only foolproof solution left.

I glance over my shoulder at Jeff and, though I couldn't begin to justify my behavior if he were to wake, I open our window to the storm. Just a crack. Because, at the moment, even a bad wind would be welcome. Anything

would be better than the emptiness I feel right now.



IT'S STILL STORMING outside when I wake. Jeff is up and dressed, standing at the end of the bed. "I'm glad you're up. I figure we might want to get to the airport early because of the weather. I don't want to get bumped off our flight."

I swallow as I look at the empty duffel he's left on the end of the bed. "Okay," I whisper, taking the bag into the closet.

I just need to *think*. I need time.

And there isn't any.

I unzip the bag and begin filling it. My wedding dress is still at the bridal boutique, so I shove another dress in the bag instead, ambivalent about the fact that it will be crushed when we arrive. I can't believe this is really happening. With each passing moment I get closer to a Vegas wedding while some voice in my head screams *Stop! Stop!* with increasing distress.

"Don't forget your swimsuit," Jeff calls.

Am I really doing this? Will we be at some hotel pool tomorrow as newlyweds? I open the drawer where I keep my bathing suits, but my hand climbs past the ones I wore all summer to an older one. Red, tiny.

It makes me think of Nick. For that very reason, I should not pack it, but I do. If I could, I'd clutch it to me like a blanket throughout the whole ordeal to come.



THE CAR ARRIVES, and I take my purse and carry-on to the tiny Honda idling by the curb, the wind whipping my hair around my face. The car smells like something fake and floral, barely covering the odor of dirt beneath. Like our wedding will be—me saying all the right words to cover the ugly ones. *I don't want this. I think I'm in love with someone else. You don't make me happy.*

"I'm not sure we can take off in this weather," I suggest.

"It'll be fine. They take off in worse weather than this all the time." His fingers wind through mine. "How weird is it that the next time you're back

here, you'll be Quinn Walker?"

A chill climbs up my spine. I catch my reflection in the driver's rearview mirror—pale beneath my tan, eyes wide and scared—just as a burst of wind brings the trees to swaying, terrifying life. Inside the car, we are sheltered from it, breathing in only the dirt and its fake floral overlay. And I am so absolutely still, and empty.

I am suffocating here. I need to let the wind in, both the bad and the good. My father gave me two different messages. I don't know what changed, but the version of him that wasn't dying and drugged would never want this for me. He'd want me to embrace the unknown, even if it was dangerous.

Yes, Nick could break my heart, could hurt me in ways that make the tumor's damage seem minimal by contrast. But maybe even that is better than this stillness, than being so empty inside I'm not sure I care if the plane goes down. There are worse things than chaos and disaster. There is death.

This, with Jeff, feels a lot like death.

The cab turns into the airport's entrance and pulls up to ticketing. Jeff jumps out first, grabbing his bag and setting mine on the curb. "Wait," I tell the driver as I slide out. Jeff is halfway to the doors before he realizes I'm still by the car.

"I can't do this." The sound of the words shocks me.

He comes back and reaches for my hand. "Quinn, it'll be fine. They aren't going to put the plane up in the air if it isn't safe."

I shake my head. "I'm not talking about the plane. I'm talking about the wedding." I slide the ring off my finger. "I can't marry you. I'm so sorry."

He steps close, wrapping his hands around my arms. Just like Nick did the other day, only his grip is hard, bruising. "Stop this," he hisses. "We made a plan and we're seeing it through."

My heart stutters, trips over itself. "No." I try to pull back, but his hands tighten. "Let me go."

"Let's just get on the plane," he says, struggling to control his voice. "We've already got tickets. If you really don't want to go through with it when we get there, we won't. We'll just have a fun night in Vegas and come home."

I'm tempted to go along with it, to not make a fuss, because that's who I am. That's who I've been with him, always. Except I don't want to give him another day, or another hour, of my life. He's had far too many of them as it is. "I'm sorry, Jeff. I'm so sorry. But our life just doesn't make me happy."

A vein in his neck throbs. “I can’t believe this shit. Since when does our life suddenly not make you happy?” he demands. “Since you met *Nick*?”

No, I think. *Our life always made me unhappy. I just didn’t realize it until I saw something better.* “You’re not hearing me,” I tell him. “I probably only have a year or two to live. I’m not sure how I want to spend it. But I know this isn’t it.”

I pull out of his grip and step into the Uber before he can find a way to stop me. He’s banging on the window and trying to open the door, even as we pull away.

QUINN

It should only take an hour to get to the lake, but between the weather and the beach traffic, the trip takes twice as long. It would feel long anyway. Now that I've made my choice, I'm desperate to see Nick, and every minute I'm stuck behind the wheel seems to occur in slow-motion.

Yes, maybe there's something evil inside me. And maybe Nick is what will set it free. I'm going to risk it because the reward—*him*—is too great to miss out on.

Jeff is calling, again and again. I don't answer, but just before I can turn it off, my mother calls too... and ignoring my mom when she's upset is never a good idea.

I answer to find her crying uncontrollably, already drinking though it's not even noon. My mother isn't an alcoholic, but when she has a drink or two she flies off the rails. Soon she'll be buying stuff she doesn't need off QVC and telling anyone who will listen that she's heartbroken and her life isn't worth living. Abby's been the one monitoring her mood of late, but I'm guessing, thanks to what I've done, she won't be willing to comfort my mom anytime soon.

I've probably just ruined the relationship she has with her best friend *and* the man she considers a son. *She'll be completely alone when I'm gone.* It's a thought that brings all my misgivings to the surface. If it were for anything less than Nick, I'd probably have called Jeff and taken it all back by now.

I tell her I'm coming up there, make her promise to stop drinking, and

turn off my phone entirely. She and Jeff are the two people I've carried, in one way or another, for most of the last decade. It's a relief to know that for a brief period of time, I won't have to carry anyone but myself.



THE DRIVE IS UNEVENTFUL, despite the weather. It's only when I reach Nick's exit that the nerves hit. I have no idea how it will work. From what he's implied, I doubt he's allowed to date a patient. Right now, I don't really care. I'd live quietly in his basement, hidden from sight, if it meant we could be together. But what if he isn't so willing? I know what he said yesterday, but people say all kinds of things in intense moments, before they've thought them through. At heart, Nick—like me—is logical. And potentially risking your job for a girl who may not even be around in a year is hardly that.

I pull into the parking lot of the market where Nick and I met yesterday and walk inside. Behind the counter is the same old guy who teased us about condoms in another life. "Hope you've got an umbrella," he says, glancing from me to the windows outside. The sky has turned ominously dark all of a sudden. "There's a flood warning."

I smile without teeth and head to the bathroom, where I wash my hands just for something to do and look at myself in the mirror. There, I see clearly the girl Nick married at least once, and chose more than once. I think of what Caroline asked yesterday—if the situation were reversed, would I want to be with him in spite of everything? And my answer is the same. Yes, I would. And he would too.

I walk out the bathroom door, waving to the woman we ordered sandwiches from yesterday, and then come to a shocked, stumbling halt. Up ahead, at the front of the store, is someone I recognize. Not from some past life, but from this one. From the photo in Nick's office.

Meg.

It cannot be a coincidence that she's in a market a mile or two from Nick's parents' house. It *can't* be.

It takes me a second to move my frozen limbs. I step into an aisle, letting a display of chips block me from her view but not blocking her from mine. She's even prettier in real life than she was in the photo, and she's obviously put forth a level of effort I never have. Her hair is curled and her makeup is

done. The guy at the counter is asking about her car. I peek into the parking lot, and there, beside my fifteen-year-old clunker with its rusting paint, is a sleek, silver BMW.

“Lot of dirt roads around here,” the guy says. “Gonna be a mess with all this rain. Hope you’ve got a four-wheel drive as a backup.”

Yes, Meg, the roads are bad. Maybe you should go home.

“It’s okay,” she replies with a too-wide smile. “My boyfriend has a Jeep.”

The potato chips rattle as my body sags against the display. Even as my brain scrambles to create any explanation for why she would be here, I already know the most obvious answer is usually the correct one. Nick called her to reconcile after I left, if he ever really broke up with her at all.

I wait until her car pulls away before I walk out of the store. My shoulders are back and my head up, but I’m made of twigs right now, skeletal and frail, ready to collapse—which I do, the moment I get in the car, leaning my face against the steering wheel and weeping like a child.

Why did it take me so long to leave Jeff? And Nick...did he even wait until I was back on the road yesterday before he called Meg and invited her out here? It takes all my self-control not to turn on the phone and rage at him, blame him for my disappointment, ask him why he said any of those things when he clearly couldn’t have meant them. Mostly I’m just so...blindsided. I wouldn’t fault him at all for deciding I wasn’t worth the risk. But I never thought in a million years he’d change his mind so easily. And maybe if he knew I was here he’d change his mind about her, but if he did, he wouldn’t be the person I know he is.

Or the person I thought he was, anyway.

I’m still crying as I turn my car on and head back to the highway, toward my mother’s house. Time no longer drags for me. I’d like as many minutes as possible between now and the moment I have to stand in front of her defending my decision to leave Jeff—never mentioning that I did it for someone who decided he didn’t want me back.



WHEN I GET up to Rocton, I don’t go straight to my mom’s. It’s not a conscious decision, but when I find myself at the river I’m not surprised. It’s where I came when I was young too, all those times when it seemed like I

didn't belong.

I park on top of the hill, and go sit on a big rock since the ground is soaked, letting my legs dangle over the edge. This view—the lazy river winding endlessly in both directions—used to be one of my favorite things in the world, but today it doesn't touch me. I look at it, but all I'm seeing is Meg's face in the convenience store, vivid with excitement. I understand that feeling. It's exactly how I felt too, until the moment I saw her there.

Did he kiss her the way he kissed me on the dock yesterday? Did he tell her all the things he told me? I'm incapable of imagining it. The man I thought I knew just wouldn't do this.

I dry my tears and take one last glance at the river. As a child, coming up here reminded me that the world was incomprehensibly large, and in it, somewhere, I was bound to find my place, and the one person who would accept me the way I am. Now it just reminds me that so many of the things I wanted as a child didn't come true.

I drive down to the far side of town, to the neighborhood my mom moved to after we sold the farm. It's only a few miles away, but it feels like a different world: shiny, hollow, artificial. All the trees are new and all the houses look the exact same.

God, I don't want to be here.

I don't want to hear everything she's about to say. As bad as I feel about what I've done, my mother will manage to make me feel worse, and I can't even blame her for it. I know how this town works: she'll never walk into the grocery store again without being the object of gossip. Without people discussing what her daughter did, how she and Abby are no longer friends. For the rest of my life, I'm going to be *the girl who broke poor Jeff Walker's heart*. And for the rest of her life she'll be the mother of that girl.

I tap once on the door and then—guessing correctly that it will be unlocked—I walk in. She's waiting for me in the kitchen with a thin smile and circles under her eyes.

“Have you eaten?” she asks, walking to the refrigerator. In two seconds, she's got a pan on the stove and is unloading the contents of the dairy drawer. I feel a sudden burst of affection for her. Even in a crisis, even when I've destroyed her, she still wants to make sure I'm fed. “I could make you a sandwich, but I only have mozzarella. Or if you can wait, maybe we could just go out to dinner. There's a cute little cafe now, where the barber shop used to be—”

“I’m okay, Mom,” I reply. I give her a tentative smile. “So how much have you bought off QVC?”

Her hands grip the counter, her head sags, and I finally see what all her bustling around the kitchen has been hiding—intense disappointment, grief, shame. All caused by me. I should have known a joke wouldn’t lighten the mood. We’ve never had that kind of relationship. “I just don’t understand how you could have done this.”

I lay my palms flat against the old oak table. It fit in the farmhouse, but it’s too worn and heavy for this bright room with its thin walls. “I never meant for any of this to happen. But the tumor has put everything in perspective,” I say, carefully skirting around how limited my time may be.

She frowns. “Jeff thinks it’s the tumor making you behave this way.”

The softness I felt just a moment ago, watching her move around the kitchen, is gone. In its place is something sharp-edged and cold. I know I’m not the daughter she wants. I never have been. She wanted a normal child who couldn’t occasionally predict the future, who didn’t wake knowing things she shouldn’t. And maybe any parent would, but I’m still her child. Her *only* child. And that’s where her loyalty should lie. “How long have you been having conversations with Jeff about me?”

“I’m just—” She stops, throwing up her hands. “I know you won’t want to hear this, but you have to look at it from my perspective. Imagine if I had some disease. If I were schizophrenic, for instance, and suddenly decided to give away all my belongings and live on the streets—you’d intervene, wouldn’t you?”

I’m more weary than I am angry. “I really hope you’re not comparing my tumor to a severe mental illness.”

“I don’t know what to compare it to!” she cries desperately. “You’re making a lot of decisions that don’t make sense. You and Jeff were really happy together, so I *have* to question it when you suddenly decide you want nothing to do with him.”

I’m not sure why Caroline and Trevor figured out so easily that I wasn’t entirely happy with Jeff, while my mom doesn’t appear to have a clue, but I’m guessing it’s my fault: ever since her breakdown after my father’s death, I’ve been on a tight wire, trying to keep her safe from grief or disappointment. Just as I did with Jeff, I made it my mission to hold her together in the wake of tragedy—a role I never allowed myself to retire from. And part of that was convincing everyone I was thrilled to be dating her best

friend's son.

"Mom, I don't know if we were ever all that happy together. Dad pushed this relationship, and then you and Abby did. I don't know what was real and what I was convincing myself of to make all of you happy."

Her lips go into a flat line. "Of course you were happy. Don't start telling yourself otherwise to justify your cold feet. You're throwing Jeff off to the side like garbage now, but I have no doubt that in a week or a month you'll realize what a mistake you've made, and I'd rather you figure it out now."

I know she's wrong. Maybe I'll be sad, and lonely, but Jeff would not make me happy now that I've seen how much is possible. If I got back together with him, I'd spend my remaining few years wanting something else, something more, and it wouldn't be fair to either of us. "It wasn't a mistake. And long-term, Jeff's better off this way too."

"Do you see how unlike you this is?" she asks. "Look at all the people you've hurt. Jeff's devastated. His parents are devastated. And these are people who were good to us, who supported us emotionally for years. Financially, too, when your father died. It's just such a slap in the face."

Ah, there it is...the spiraling guilt. I knew she'd find a way to bring it to the surface eventually. I feel sick, and she hasn't even gotten around to mentioning what a nightmare it will be to cancel the wedding at this late date. The flights people have paid for, the gifts to be returned, the deposits we won't get back. Or the fact that when I die in a few years she will have absolutely no one to lean on.

"Think about your uncle flying out here," she continues. "I bet he can't get his money back for the ticket. Abby's siblings are flying in too. Jeff's grandparents are driving up from Florida, and I think they've already left—they made a three-week trip out of this. It's not just about you."

Maybe she's right, I think. Maybe I should just fix this and suck it up for the next year or two. Leave people thinking well of me, leave my mother's life somewhat intact. The crying and the drive have exhausted me, have left me unable to think clearly, but when I hear those words in my head I feel a kind of sick resignation, a *familiar* resignation. It's exactly what I felt when she asked me to stay after my dad died, and when Jeff followed me to D.C. with his big romantic speech. Fear is what led me to walk away from Nick yesterday. And guilt is what's led me to make every other bad decision in my life. Maybe it's time I took a different path.

"I'm going to lie down for a while," I tell her.

“That’s a good idea,” she says tersely. It sounds an awful lot like what she *wants* to say—*go sit and think about what you’ve done*.

The room I think of as mine is really just a guest room, full of bland white furniture and muted pastels my mom found at some discount store. The quilt at the end of the bed is the only remnant of my past. I curl up, pulling it over me, and feel a fresh wave of tears coming. Was I blind, with Nick? If our situations were reversed I wouldn’t have gone running back to my ex at the first sign of failure. I’d have waited. I’d have fought. It just feels as if there should be more to our story than this pathetic end.



NICK and I lie safely curled in bed, listening to the wind rattling the windows, blowing over the chairs out on the terrace. It’s the biggest storm I’ve seen since I arrived in London so many months ago, and it serves as a reminder—even here, deep in the heart of a foreign city, we’re still never entirely safe. Not that I really needed reminding. It’s rarely out of my head for long these days.

“Mary downstairs stopped me this morning,” I tell him.

He laughs, dragging the fluffy duvet up to my neck. “Did she accuse us of harboring pets again?”

I smile against his chest. “No. She wanted to show me these historic photos she found. Did you know our building was bombed during World War II? She had pictures of it. It was all practically rubble.”

He pulls me closer. “Yeah. It’s weird you’re bringing it up. I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately.”

“Our building being bombed?”

“Not that exactly. Just how terrifying it would be to live here during the Blitz. Especially if we were separated. If I were at work, or you were at school and I couldn’t find you. I never gave it any thought before, and now, especially now,” he says, placing a hand over my swollen belly, “I think about it constantly.”

I think about us being separated constantly too. My reasons are probably different than his, but maybe not...maybe some residual memory tells him he has reason to worry because we’ve been separated before. I place my hand over his. “I’d come find you,” I tell him.

“Yeah?”

“Unless you stopped being hot,” I amend. “In that case, the jury is out.”

His hand slides over my hip, down my bare thigh. “Hot, huh? You’ll have to warn me when I’m in danger of slipping.”

“You’re in no danger,” I say, but the words end on a gasp as his fingers slide between my thighs.

“I wasn’t too worried.” He laughs low in my ear. “If you don’t come find me, there will never be a time when I won’t come find you.”

He rolls me on my back and for a brief time, I forget my fears, but later, when he’s sound asleep, his breathing deep and even, they all reemerge. I look at his face in the moonlight—the boyishness of those long lashes and full lips offset by the sharp jaw, already in need of a shave.

Should I tell him everything? I can’t. It will sound insane, and he’ll never believe me. I figured out the truth months ago and I hardly believe it myself. But I can’t lose him again.

“I’m not going to let her separate us,” I promise him quietly. “Not this time.”



MY MOTHER KNOCKS on the door, waking me. I’m so stunned by the dream I don’t even respond the first time she calls my name. I was *pregnant*.

“Quinn,” she says, more urgently. “I’m starting dinner. Are you up?”

I blink rapidly. “Yeah,” I reply. “I’ll be down in a second.”

I was pregnant. I remember the feel of a baby kicking as I watched Nick sleep. Less like a kick than a bubble popping against my side, repeatedly. I can still feel the warmth inside me as I placed my hand there. I loved that child and now I miss her—I feel certain it was a *her*—almost as much as I miss Nick. We were a family, and I made him promises—that I’d find him, that I wouldn’t let her separate us again. How could we have been so much in that life and so little in this one?

I go downstairs, distress weighing heavily on me. My mother seems to interpret it as repentance. “Nothing’s been done that can’t be undone, honey,” she says softly. “It’ll be fine. Everyone knows you’re going through a lot.”

I lay my arms on the table and rest my forehead against them. “I haven’t changed my mind,” I tell her. “I’m just tired.”

She sinks into the chair across from me with a glass of wine. I wonder how many she's had. Either way, it means the tears will start shortly. "I wish you would think this through," she says.

My jaw falls open. "What on earth would make you think I haven't?" I demand. I've tried to be patient with her, but this is getting ridiculous. "Why are you in Jeff's corner so much? I'm the one you're related to, not him."

Her lips go tight, a flat line that makes them nearly invisible. "It was your father's dying wish."

A small ping of guilt. I ignore it. I've had this conversation with myself enough times. "Mom, he never encouraged it until he discovered he was dying. He just wanted to know I'd be taken care of."

She is quiet, wrestling with something she's not sure she should say. "You know things," she says, her voice barely audible. "You always have. You know things you shouldn't."

I can feel my heart tapping, far too fast, at the base of my throat. We've never, ever discussed this. It's how we both wanted it and I have no idea why she's changing the rules now. I swallow. "I was just a weird kid," I reply. "I had an imagination. Why are you even bringing this up?"

Her eyes meet mine. Saying *if it was merely your imagination, it was a shockingly accurate one*. "Sometimes your father knew things too," she says, her gaze falling to the table. "Things about you. And the way he insisted at the end...it was like when you were a kid and he was so certain about your allergy before you'd ever had shellfish. He was certain about this too, and that's what makes me think you should listen to him. Because it's possible he knew something you don't."

It's the same theory I suggested to Caroline yesterday, but now that I've made my decision, I don't want to hear it.

"Jeff can't protect me from a brain tumor," I say softly. "Maybe Dad did know something, but what I'm certain of is that Jeff is no longer enough for me, and he's not how I want to spend the time I have left."

My mother knows what I'm saying makes sense. Yet I see in the way she swallows, tips her chin in a barely visible nod, that she still thinks my father was right.



DINNER IS PAINFULLY QUIET. My mother drinks throughout. She looks at me each time she pours herself a new glass, daring me to say something. I won't, of course. Her five glasses of wine will hurt no one but herself. My decision this morning hurt tons of people.

Her cell rings during dinner and she glances at it. "It's Abby," she says, not looking at me as she speaks. "She called earlier too. She said you were refusing to take Jeff's calls. Please tell me that's not true."

I rub my forehead. I napped all afternoon, but this conversation makes me want to go straight back to bed. "Mom, I said everything there was to say this morning." She gives me a baleful look and I sigh. "Let me listen to the 400 voicemails he's left and maybe I'll call after that."

She excuses herself for the night, though it's barely seven, taking a new bottle of wine with her, so I retire too. I know I need to listen to Jeff's voicemails, but God I dread it. I can deal with his anger, but I cringe at the idea of his pain. Right now, I've got so much of my own, I'm not sure I can handle his on top of it.

I shower, dry my hair, and dawdle as much as possible before I finally turn on the phone. My heart sinks when I see there are well over a hundred texts.

And stops entirely when I see the most recent one is from Nick.

Nick: Quinn, I'm going crazy. Please just answer me. I need to know you're okay.

He sent it 15 minutes ago. And he texted an hour before that. I scroll through all the messages from Jeff and discover Nick began texting me at ten this morning. Maybe he was just trying to warn me about his change of heart. Maybe he wanted to make sure I didn't show up at the lake and ruin his reunion.

Or maybe, just maybe, he's the guy I thought he was all along.

NICK

I already knew yesterday the risk to my career no longer mattered to me. It was only the remaining question of ethics that kept me from driving back here last night and begging Quinn to give me a chance. As her doctor, it's possible I hold more sway over her than I would otherwise. But I also know this isn't the classic case of a vulnerable patient and predatory doctor. I *know* her. My very bones remember her in ways my brain can't quite catch up with.

And when I woke this morning, I realized there was no longer time to sit around debating—I could go for it, or I could become Grosbaum, growing old still longing for someone who didn't come back to me.

The decision was made, but I never dreamed it would take me eleven fucking hours to get ahold of her. By the time she finally calls, I've spent so long worried she had another seizure that I'm almost as angry as I am relieved.

"Thank God," I say when I answer, before she's even said a word. How could she have let me go that long, unsure if she was even alive? "Why the hell was your phone off?" I demand, pacing the room.

"Why the hell was your girlfriend visiting you at the lake?" she replies. The question—and how hurt and angry she sounds asking it—stops me short.

"What?"

"I saw Meg," she says. Her swallow is audible. "At the market by your parents' house this morning. Talking about her *boyfriend* and his Jeep. I just

don't understand how you could say the things you did yesterday and—" Her voice breaks.

I'm so confused right now. But my anger disappeared the moment I realized how upset she was. "Quinn...I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. I'm not even at the lake. I came home this morning to see you and you never answered your phone once."

"But then—" She stops and takes a deep breath. "But then why was she out there?"

I lean on the counter and run a hand through my hair. None of this makes sense. Why the fuck would Meg have gone to the lake? I saw a voicemail from her this morning but didn't check it. The more important question, to me, is why Quinn was there. "I have no idea. I didn't invite her and I haven't seen her since last week. But...why were *you* there?"

"I wanted to see you," she admits quietly. "But then she was at the market...so I left."

I'm dumbfounded. What I have with Quinn is something I wouldn't be able to replace in a year or a decade or a century—how could she possibly have believed otherwise? "I would never have done that. There is no one for me but you. Not today and not a year from now. So if you stay with Jeff—"

"I didn't," she says quietly. "That's why I came to the lake. I ended things this morning."

The relief is so sweet and sharp that for a moment I'm speechless. "Thank God," I finally whisper. There is so much more I want to say to her right now, but not like this. I need to see her face. I need her to see I mean every word of it. "Where are you? This isn't a conversation I want to have over the phone."

"I'm at my mom's, up in Pennsylvania," she says. "I'm coming back tomorrow night."

Not soon enough. Now that I've spent an entire day wondering if I've lost her, there's not a chance I'm waiting twenty-four hours to really know she's mine. I grab my keys and head for the Jeep. "Give me your address."

"In Pennsylvania?" she asks. "Are you serious?"

I've never been more serious in my life.



IT'S JUST after ten when I pull up to her mother's house.

I'm halfway up the walk when she steps outside the door. I don't slow my pace. I keep going until she's in my arms.

"I can't believe you came all the way up here," she whispers.

"I can't believe you thought for a fucking second I could want anyone but you," I reply. My lips press to her brow, to her eyelids, her temples, the blade of her cheek, the soft spot just below her ear, until I finally find her mouth. She tastes like mint and sugar, and I could spend a hundred years just doing this—memorizing the contour of her lips, relishing the small, solid warmth of her.

She rests her forehead against my chest. "But...can't you get in trouble for this?"

Yes, and I no longer care. "I don't think we have to worry about it too much. As long as we're careful."

She cocks a brow. "That isn't what I asked."

I'm tempted to lie because I know exactly how she's going to react to the truth. But she's *it*—the person I want forever, or for as long as I can have her. For once in my life I want to be an open book. "I could, in *theory*, lose my medical license if someone made a big enough deal out of it."

She jerks backward. "You could lose your license for *good*? But..." She trails off, crestfallen. "You can't risk that. I mean, how long would something with us even last? I might not even be—"

I pull her back to me. "Stop. We have no idea how long you have, and I'm sure as hell not going to let some vaguely possible consequence keep me away from you, so don't even suggest it." I exhale heavily. The next part has to be said, no matter how much I'd like to skip it. "But I need to be sure that this is really okay. You're relying on me to treat you, and you shouldn't feel like there are strings attached. To anyone outside of us, this situation would look kind of predatory. You're in a vulnerable position and—" My words trail off. They sound even worse out loud than they did in my head.

She slaps a palm to her forehead. "*Predatory*? Are you kidding me? I wanted you long before any of this began. Before I even knew about the brain tumor, I was trying to stop dreaming about you. And ever since you kissed me yesterday, I've been unable to think about anything else, which I can assure you has nothing to do with your ability to heal my brain."

My eyes flicker to her mouth, uncertain. I push her hair back from her face, palms on her cheeks. "Does this mean you're mine now?"

She smiles up at me. "I think maybe I always was."

I lean down, capture once more that mouth I've craved since the first time I ever saw her. But I refuse to get carried away like I did yesterday, on the dock. Tonight is our beginning and I want every step of it to be perfect, memorable. Her hands slide through my hair. "I've wanted to do that for so long," she says.

"I have a long list of things I've wanted to do for so long," I reply, my mouth moving from her jaw to her perfect neck, "but they're probably not appropriate for a first date."

She laughs. "Is that what this is?"

I force myself back from her. "Not yet, it's not." Behind her the house is quiet, mostly dark. "I haven't said this in over a decade, and I'm not sure there's anything around here that's open, but are you allowed out after curfew?"

She grins. "Yes. And I know just the place. Wait here."

She runs inside and comes back a minute later with a blanket, a bottle of wine, and two plastic cups. We drive into the hills and turn onto a gravel road, where she tells me to pull off. "We're in the middle of nowhere," I say. "I'd just like to point out that if our situations were reversed you'd probably be getting a little nervous now."

She grins at me. "You're safe. Probably." She hops out and leads me to the top of the hill where, far below us, a river winds as far as I can see, lit with starlight. I pull her close and for a moment we just take it all in. She was right—this is perfect.

"I forgot how wet it is," she says. "I don't think we can sit out here."

"I have an idea." I open the tailgate of the Jeep and spread the blanket out in back. The roof is already off and the back seats are down, so there's just enough room for the two of us.

"You're pulling me into the back of your car but *I'm* the scary one," she says as I lift her up.

"You're safe," I reply. "Probably."

She looks at me from beneath her lashes and her mouth curves upward. "That's disappointing."

Her words and that raspy little note in her voice send blood rushing to my cock. I flinch as I climb in after her, trying to will it back down to neutral. This is essentially our first date, even if it feels like our hundredth. I'm not going to try to get off in here like some sex-crazed teenager, no matter how

hard it is. Literally.

She pours us each a plastic cup full of wine, and then we lie on our sides, facing each other, since there's really no other way the two of us will fit.

"I like it here," I tell her. "How'd you find it?"

She puts her wine down. "My dad and I used to hike up here when I was a kid, and later I started coming on my own."

I hear a hint of something sad in her voice and it puzzles me. I don't understand how it is that her childhood, when she describes it, always sounds so lonely. She looks like the kind of girl who would have had everything—too many friends and admirers to count, the adulation of an entire town.

"Why'd you keep coming back here by yourself?"

She hitches a shoulder. "It was hard growing up here sometimes. It was hard being in my own home half the time. But coming here reminded me how big the world was, and that in a world as big as ours, there was surely a person and place for me."

"A person?"

Her lashes brush the tops of her cheekbones. "The person you're meant to be with. The one who accepts you in spite of everything and matters so much that the rest of the world matters less."

I want to be her person. I already know she's mine. "And did you ever find your place?"

"Yeah," she says softly. "That person I was talking about? I'm pretty sure it's wherever he is."

I lift up her hand and press my lips to the base of her palm. My nose grazes the inside of her wrist, longs to continue a path on her velvet skin. I stop myself. The gesture might merely be romantic with someone else, but I want so much from her right now I think I could turn almost anything into an excuse to remove her clothes. "You still haven't told me how you ended things with Jeff."

She sighs heavily. "It's a long story. Just suffice it to say he's very unhappy with me right now. He filled up my voicemail and spent most of the morning calling on repeat, which is why I turned my phone off. Based on the texts I saw tonight...he's going to need some time to cool off."

"You're not planning to go back to your house tomorrow, right?" I know it's premature but if Meg wasn't in the process of taking over my apartment, I'd ask her to stay with me when she gets back. I feel a sharp stab of desire at the thought of it. Of having her somewhere private, for an extended period of

time. Her splayed out on my bed. *Fuck. I need to think about something else, fast.*

She gives a small, surprised laugh. “It’s been so chaotic I’d barely thought about it. But no, I’ll avoid the house right now. I guess I’ll crash on Caroline’s couch for a while.”

“And is Caroline *Team Nick* or *Team Jeff*? I’m just trying to figure out how many more enemies I have.”

She blushes. “Caroline says I should sleep with you before I decide anything for sure.”

Another stab of desire. “I like Caroline’s ideas. You should listen to her more.”

She raises up on one forearm so she can see my face, setting the wine behind her. “How exactly is this going to work?” she asks. “So you don’t get in trouble?”

I thought about it the whole way up here, without ever arriving at a perfect answer. In an ideal world we would hide this. We’d sneak around and lie to anyone who asks, but I’m not willing to do that, and I’m definitely not willing to ask it of her. “I’ll tell anyone I *have* to tell that I knew you before you were a patient, which doesn’t let me off the hook ethically but helps. And then, after you’re done with your degree, we could—” I stop myself with an embarrassed chuckle. “Sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself.”

She smiles. “You can’t leave me hanging like that.”

“I was going to say that once you got your degree we could go someplace where no one knows us. So congratulations—you’ve turned me into the creepy guy who talks about the distant future on a first date.”

Her smile widens. Even if it’s creepy, she doesn’t seem to mind. “I thought you were a commitment-phobe?”

She is leaning over me with all that hair falling around her face and that perfect peony mouth begging to be kissed and suddenly I can’t stand to keep holding back. “Not anymore,” I reply, wrapping my hand around the nape of her neck to pull her face to mine.

The kiss is gentle at first. I savor it, like the first sip of a really good wine, breathing her in and out, that smell of soap and summer. Lingering on the feel of it, memorizing that ripe, perfect mouth, and her skin, soft as rose petals.

I roll her to the side, cradling her jaw as her mouth opens under mine. That first taste of her turns the kiss into something else. Something deeper

and darker. Territory I'd planned to avoid tonight but can't resist now that it's here.

My hands slide from her hair to her back to her hips, palming curves I've dreamed of touching for months. Her breasts, her waist, her perfect ass. She inhales when my mouth moves to her neck, the sound sharp and full of need. I want to drown in her response, in the way her body arches into mine, asking for more.

It continues and the world starts to narrow—to our mingled breath, to her sounds, to the need inside me that coils and grows until I can barely stand the pressure. I stop thinking of anything beyond what I want from her. Where I want my hands and mouth. Where I want hers.

Our movements become frantic. The desire for her grows vicious, swells inside me until it feels like my skin is too tight to contain me. *It's been too long. I've waited too fucking long for this and I can't keep waiting.*

I start to push her on her back, ready to take everything from her, heedless of my good intentions—but beneath my hand I hit the Jeep's cold metal floor where the blanket has pushed away. My eyes open and reality comes crashing in, an unwelcome guest. We're in the back of my car, her back pressed to bumpy metal, my toolbox an inch from her head. My body is straining for friction, my cock throbbing and wedged between her thighs, and I've never needed to come as badly as I do right now. But this is the woman I want to spend my entire life with, and this is not how our first time should go.

I somehow force myself to stop, rolling to my back and pulling her against my chest. "Now I'm the creepy guy who tells you we're just going to look at some stars and then tries to molest you."

Her mouth curves up. "I wasn't complaining."

Her willingness is not helpful right now. I'm still fighting with myself not to pick right back up where we left off. "I don't want half measures," I tell her, pressing my lips to the top of her head. "I need everything from you. And that shouldn't happen here, no matter how badly I want to convince myself otherwise."

"I think this is all harder because it feels like we've already waited forever. It's like I've been missing you and craving you my entire life, at some level."

Yes. That's exactly what it is. Some part of me, the part that existed in another life with her, has waited all these years to get here. I'm like a man who's been deprived of water for too long. When I finally get it, I want to

drink until I drown.

“If we’re going to get through tonight successfully, some precautions are in order,” I say, grabbing a spare blanket and wrapping her in it twice.

She raises a brow. “Your precautions involve turning me into a human burrito?”

She doesn’t know about the night in Baltimore yet, but even what just happened here should be reason enough. “It’ll help make sure I don’t change my mind. Or at least it’ll slow me down if I do.”

She tucks her head into the cleft of my shoulder. She fits perfectly, as if she was made to be pressed against me like this. “You should have been right here all along,” I say quietly.

“I’m just happy I’m here now,” she says, nestling closer.



It’s the rain that wakes us.

A light mist, fortunately, but even a light mist isn’t something either of us could sleep through.

I drive her back to her mother’s house and walk her to the door. So much about this feels like high school again, but high school as it should have been: spent with a girl I can hardly stand to leave. “I think I kept you out past curfew,” I tell her. “If you get grounded, your mom won’t let me take you to prom.”

She grins. “She’ll have a bigger problem with the fact that you’re thirty.”

I kiss her one last time and then I pull her close. “Seriously, Quinn,” I say. “Don’t let your mom guilt-trip you into changing your mind.”

She goes on her toes to press soft lips to my jaw. “I somehow found you once in London, and then I found you here, when I didn’t know who you were,” she says. “And nothing can keep me away from you now that I do.”

NICK

I arrive at my building just after five. I decide to skip my morning swim in lieu of a few more hours of sleep. In truth, what I'd like to do is just sleep until Quinn is back, and safe. It's new for me, caring like this about someone else. As if my heart is now somewhere outside my body, completely beyond my control. What will I do if we don't find a solution to the tumor? We've only been together for a few hours and I already feel like I won't survive losing her.

I unlock my door and stagger to a halt when I step inside. Meg is sitting in a chair at the kitchen table, looking at me like I'm a cheating spouse caught tiptoeing home.

"I went to the lake yesterday," she whispers, her eyes red-rimmed and raw. She looks from me to the window and stares at it blankly. "I really thought that if I just did things your way, did the stuff you like for once, you'd see how good we could be together. But you weren't there, and you didn't sleep here either. So I want to know who you were with."

I exhale both guilt and irritation. We aren't together anymore. I broke up with her for the right reasons, and I shouldn't have to feel bad about it. I shouldn't have to come home at five in the morning with her waiting to confront me. But I don't want to hurt her either, and the way I feel about Quinn would definitely do that. It could also get me in a lot of trouble if she were to ask about it.

"I was at the lake," I tell her, forcing myself toward the table and taking

the seat across from hers. "I must have missed you there."

"Alone?"

I should lie but somehow the truth slips out instead. "Most of it."

"So you took someone to the lake," she says, voice warbling now, heavy with tears, "but you never took me."

"You wouldn't have wanted to go to the lake."

"That's not the point!" she cries. "The point is that you never asked! I had to drag you kicking and screaming into this relationship, and this girl—this stupid, stupid girl you barely *know*—gets everything I had to fight for. She's the one you stayed out with last week, isn't she?"

My ribs seem to pull in, constricting my breathing. It looks bad. Maybe it is. I should have ended things with Meg a lot sooner than I did. I should have ended them the first time I tried, months ago. "It's not what you're thinking."

"Then what is it, Nick?" she screams, standing and pulling at her hair. "Because I figured out weeks ago that you were interested in someone. I thought it was the patient Lynn said you were spending so much time with, and I figured it would pass because we both know *that* can't go anywhere, so if it's not what I'm thinking, please tell me what the fuck it is."

I sink low in my chair and rest my head against its back, cornered and suddenly depleted. I could lie right now, but I have a feeling it'll come back to bite me in the ass. It'll be easy enough for her to find out who Quinn is and assume the worst. "She's someone I knew a long time ago, and now she's here and"—I pause because the next words sit like something bitter, gritty on my tongue—"she's dying. So I want to spend every hour with her while I can."

Meg's mouth hangs slack. For the first time I see a hint of disgust in her eyes when she looks at me. "So she *is* a patient. Why didn't you turn her over to someone else once you realized you knew her?"

Because I don't trust anyone else to take her case. "She wanted me to treat her."

Meg laughs, an angry, hysterical sound, loud enough to wake the neighbors. "Yeah, I *bet* she did. Who the hell is she? You said you'd never had a long-term relationship."

Cornered again. *Jesus.* For a guy who's been generally truthful through most of his life, I'm getting called on a lot of shit right now. "I haven't. It's complicated...we didn't date for long, but we've known each other forever."

Her arms fold over her chest as she paces. I feel like I'm being cross-

examined. “Where do you know her from?”

The easiest answer would be London, except that’s also the easiest to disprove since Quinn’s never been. “College.”

“We’ve talked about college a thousand times,” she says, throwing out her arms, “and you never thought to mention you were *in love* with someone there?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I wasn’t in love with her,” I say, though it feels like a lie. “I don’t know. Maybe I was. But I just ran into her again, and—”

“Decided it would be fun to fuck someone behind my back while we were making plans to move in together?” she snarls.

“No. Not at all. I didn’t sleep with her. I still haven’t.” Though God knows if we’d been anywhere but the back of my car last night I would have. Repeatedly.

Her jaw tightens and she takes the chair farthest from mine. “You’re a smart man. You see what’s happening here, don’t you? This has nothing to do with some random girl from your past. You’re just scared of commitment. Tell me something: did this magical connection with a girl you fucking *forgot* take place before or after I suggested moving in here for a while?”

I know what she’s saying. As an outside observer, I’d agree with her. But she doesn’t get the fact, and I can’t explain, that some part of Quinn has been living inside me this entire time. “After,” I reply. “And I know how that sounds. All I can say is that it’s real.”

She stands, her eyes damp, pushing the chair back in with too much force. “How long does she have?”

I swallow. “I don’t know. A few years, maybe.”

“A few years, *maybe*? That means a year. And when that year’s up, or however long it is,” she says, heading for the door, “you’re going to be back where you started, with the same job, and the same life. And then what?”

I flinch, unwilling to contemplate the answer. “I don’t know.”

The door *clicks* as it closes softly behind her, leaving only her question ringing in my head. The idea of a world without Quinn is already unthinkable. I can’t imagine what I’m going to do with myself when she’s gone.

Which means that, somehow, I’ve got to find a way to make sure she stays.



THERE'S no way I'm going to fall back asleep now, so I go straight to the hospital instead to take another look at Quinn's scans. There's got to be something I've missed. There's got to be a way to save her. It's light out by the time I've showered, but the city is only beginning to rise. Birds and the clamor of garbage trucks in the distance are all I hear as I walk on silent streets.

The night staff is still on duty when I reach my floor, heavy-eyed and paper-laden as they get ready to change shifts. A few brows are raised when I walk by the nurses' station, but they're too eager to get home to worry about why I'm here so early. I unlock my office door but freeze as I cross the threshold. There is a woman at my desk—inside an office to which only I and one other person have a key.

I grip the door handle, stunned into silence. *How?* How could this woman possibly have gotten in?

I've never seen her before but there's something intensely familiar about her. The pale blond hair, the fine-boned beauty. There's this feeling inside me when I see her face—rage, terror—that I can't begin to explain.

She takes in my shock, unimpressed, then looks back casually at the scans she has spread on my desk. Quinn's brain scans, placed in chronological order. "It looks like nature's done my work for me," she says, her mouth curving into a smile. "Hasn't it?"

Stop her, my sluggish, stunned brain commands. I lunge, but before I've reached the desk she vanishes. Only the scrubs remain behind, sitting in a pile on my chair.

QUINN

The woods behind Nick and Ryan's house are finally free of snow. There are buds on the trees, tiny green shoots poking out of the dirt. Once we fix the steps, we'll finally be able to get back into the treehouse.

"I can't believe your parents let you do that," I say, watching Nick hammer a nail into the wood.

"My dad had a treehouse when he was a kid," he replies. "And he built the whole thing himself."

"Does he still go in it?" I ask.

"Adults don't like treehouses."

"I will," I insist. "I'm going to keep coming up here, no matter how old I am."

He thinks for a moment and then shrugs, as if he's announcing a decision he was already pretty certain of. "I think I'll marry you when I grow up," he says.

I bite my lip to hide the sudden burst of delight in my chest. "Okay," I tell him. "Sure."

I go home to my mother and report what Nick has said as I'm falling asleep. "Maybe I'll go to the future and see if it happens," she says. She's teasing me. The room is so dark I can't see her face, but I hear the smile in her voice.

"You're not supposed to go to the future," I remind her. The stories she

tells me each night about time-traveling are always about the past, because she says jumping to the future is dangerous, and you may learn things you wish you didn't know. She promises when I'm old enough she'll take me with her, but until then, I can only live through her adventures. "Tell me about visiting the soldier. That's my favorite."

"That's my favorite too," she says, her voice a little sad. "But you'll have stories of your own someday. Better ones."

My fears creep in. She's so certain I can do what she does, but if she won't jump to the future, how does she know for sure? "What if I can't jump like you?"

Her laughter fills the quiet room. "Oh, sweet girl. Your abilities will make mine look childlike by contrast."

"But when?" I plead.

She pulls the covers up to my chin and plants a kiss on my forehead. "You'll jump," she whispers, "on the day when you need it most."

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INTERSECT

THE PARALLEL SERIES, BOOK 2

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QUINN

The woods behind Nick and Ryan's house are finally free of snow. There are buds on the trees, tiny green shoots poking out of the dirt.

"I can't believe your parents let you do that," I say, watching Nick hammer a nail into the wood. Our treehouse steps took a beating over the winter, but my mother would never allow me to use a hammer like he is.

"My dad had a treehouse when he was a kid," he replies. "And he built the whole thing himself."

"Does he still go in it?" I ask.

"Adults don't like treehouses."

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she says jumping to the future is dangerous, and you may learn things you wish you didn't know. She promises when I'm old enough she'll take me with her, but until then, I can only live through her adventures. "Tell me about visiting the soldier. That's my favorite."

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"But when?" I plead.

She pulls the covers up to my chin and plants a kiss on my forehead. "You'll jump," she whispers, "on the day when you need it most."

My eyes open. I see moonlight washing over new Ikea furniture, a Monet poster in a plastic frame...my mother's guest room, no more real to me than the room in that dream. If I close my eyes it's almost as if I'm still there: the smell of my sheets and my mother's perfume, the sound of tree limbs sweeping the roof overhead, the soft brush of a cat walking past the bed—they all still linger. *Your abilities will make mine look childlike*, she'd said.

Yet it *had* to be a dream. The house was unfamiliar. We never owned a cat. And most of all, my mother can't time travel. Even if she *could* time travel, she would not. She'd be terrified of the ability, the way she's terrified of pretty much everything that is outside the realm of the normal. I'm willing to suspend disbelief about a lot of things, but it's a struggle to believe the woman in the darkness was my mother.



TAPPING.

My mother's voice outside the door wakes me. "Quinn?" she asks tentatively. "It's 10:00 a.m." I hear the worry that underlies her words. *Quinn never sleeps this late*, she is thinking. The brain tumor, unfortunately, has become the filter through which every unusual behavior must be viewed.

If she could see me at this moment she'd know that I do not look like a dying girl. In the mirror I see eyes that glow and a warmth to my skin that's

long been absent. Nick is undoubtedly responsible for both.

And he is mine now. He's mine *again*, corrects some other, wiser voice in my head. I replay it all like a favorite movie montage—ending my engagement at the airport, his trip here last night. In twenty-four hours I changed my life, entirely for the better. Maybe I am dying, but if that's true, why does it feel like my life has just begun?



I WALK into the kitchen where my mother sits, clutching a cup of coffee between both hands. She offers me a weak smile, but the skin beneath her eyes is dark, smudged with the hours of sleep she didn't get last night.

"I didn't know you'd turned into such a late sleeper," she says, rising from the table.

"It was a pretty...difficult weekend." My mother knows about the difficult part already. The magnificent part—the hours I spent with Nick at the lake on Saturday, our time together last night—will have to wait. If she learns I've already moved on from the man she considers a son, calling off my wedding will get a lot more divisive than it already is.

She gets out a pan. "I can make pancakes?" she offers. "Or French toast?"

I could be sixty and my mother would still want to take care of me. That fact goes a long way toward easing my irritation about yesterday's argument. "I'm fine," I tell her. "I'll get something later."

"It's already 10," she frets. "Any later and you'll have skipped breakfast."

I laugh. "I skip breakfast almost daily, Mom. It's fine."

She frowns but puts the pan away, going to the counter instead and returning with a stack of mail. "We'll need to contact everyone and tell them the wedding is off," she says. "And then return the gifts that arrived here. If you're sure you want to do this."

I meet her eye. My conversation with Nick last night eradicated any lingering concern I felt about calling things off. "I'm sure."

She glances at me with something that looks an awful lot like suspicion. "You seem pretty lighthearted for someone who just called off her wedding," she says.

Guilt makes my pulse go from a slow march to a jog. I hate lying, and it's impossible for me to pretend I'm anything but thrilled right now. Not when

Nick waits back in D.C. Especially not when every time I close my eyes I'm seeing him shirtless, muscles straining as he pulls the trailer out of the water. Or remembering the way he kissed...and if his abilities there are any indication, he's going to be very good at *everything*.



I SPEND the morning sending emails, calling all the vendors to cancel, and my mother helps where she can. As I'm shuffling through the RSVPs, looking at names of distant relatives I barely know, I think once again of the Rule of Threes. Even if there can't be more than three time travelers in one family, I still don't see what that could have to do with *us*. My uncle is gay, so I seriously doubt he's accidentally sired a time-traveling daughter. That only leaves my dad's sister, who ran off to Paris after high school and was never heard from again. The way she left the farm behind always made her a bit of a hero in my eyes, growing up.

"Did Dad ever look for Aunt Sarah after she left?" I ask.

"I'm not sure," she says briskly, staring at her computer screen. "I know they spoke, but he never wanted to talk to me about it."

My eyes lift from the RSVPs. My father wasn't an evasive person by nature. Why was he where his sister was concerned? "Did she stay in Paris? She never came back to visit?"

My mother's expression sours a bit. "If she did, she never came to visit *us*."

In a way it seems as if she didn't even exist. My father almost never mentioned her, even when he discussed his childhood. "I've never even seen a picture of her. Have you?"

"No," she replies, her fingers flying over the keyboard. "Damn these people to hell. They haven't shipped anything yet but they're refusing to cancel the order."

"You've never seen a *single* photo?" I ask.

"She was strange about it apparently, hated having her picture taken."

I freeze. Rose refused to have her photo taken too—with her favorite band, no less. It didn't occur to me when it happened, but what teenager refuses a photo with her favorite band? Maybe one who wants no photographic evidence that she existed in any time at all. Does that mean my

aunt can time travel? It could, but it still feels like a huge leap to take. It's just as possible she simply hated something about herself—crooked teeth or a big nose—and refused to be photographed. And even if she does time travel, the bigger question is this: what is my mother capable of? In last night's dream it seemed that she didn't just carry the mutation...she time traveled, and did so enthusiastically. So if that really happened, in some other life, what would have changed it so much this time around?

"What do you think about time travel?" I ask, watching her face closely.

She frowns, her brows coming together, her mind still on her irritation with the vendor. "I liked *Outlander* well enough, but I'm more of a mystery person I guess."

I hear nothing hidden in her response, but surely there's some piece of her that at least responds to the idea of it when she did it so gleefully in another life. "I was just kind of wondering if you think it's possible?" I persist.

Her mouth sags and then her eyes brim with tears. "Oh honey," she says, as the tears start to fall. "No, I don't think it is."



"I'M STAYING ANOTHER NIGHT," I tell Nick.

I hear his disappointment in the ensuing silence. "Why?"

I laugh miserably. "I made the fatal error of asking my mom what she thought about time travel to see if she'd react in some telling way. Now she's convinced Jeff is right about the tumor making me crazy. She can't stop crying."

"Has she stopped trying to convince you to go through with the wedding at least?"

I lean back against the headboard of my bed and close my eyes. "More or less. She obviously still wishes I would, but it's hard to argue with a dying girl."

"Don't say that," he snaps. "You have no idea if it's true."

My heart twists a little. The closer we become, the harder it will get knowing I'm going to have to say goodbye to him. Which means it will become harder for him too. But I don't want to think about that right now. I want to enjoy this.

"How are things there, with you?"

“Yeah,” he says slowly. “About that. Something happened this morning. I was going to wait until I saw you in person but...I went in early today, and inside my locked office, which only myself and one other person have a key to, was a woman looking at your file.”

I grip the nightstand, as if the world has suddenly turned over, and I’m about to be spilled from its surface. “You’re kidding.”

“That’s not even the weird part. She looked up at me and then she vanished, sitting right there. Just like Rose did.” He draws in a breath. “I think she’s the one behind all this.”

Fear opens wide in my stomach. Having a brain tumor is bad enough, but the threat this woman presents is far more imminent. “God. Nick, all she has to do to separate us is go back a few months. It would just take one little tweak—”

“She won’t,” he says, with a certainty that makes no sense to me. Even his size and strength can’t combat a superpower. “And we’re going to figure this out. There are no security cameras in my office but since she was wearing scrubs, I knew she must have been in the hallway at some point, so I analyzed the hospital’s security footage and found her. I’ll forward you the picture in case you recognize her.”

He texts the photo and I pull away from the phone to look at it.

And then my breath stops.

The same white-blond hair. The same beautiful, severe face. “It’s her,” I finally whisper. “The woman I’ve been dreaming about since I was small. She’s the one who took me away from you.”

“This time we have her, though,” he says. “We’ve got a picture and we can track her down.”

Except I seemed to know exactly who she was in London too, and it didn’t appear to do me any good. Which makes sense, because how the hell do you stop someone who can vanish at will?



QUINN

I leave my mother's first thing in the morning, before she can guilt me into staying another day...or another two years, like she did when my father died. I get back to Caroline's apartment just after ten. The old Quinn would use this day off to pay bills or organize paperwork or get her car washed. The new one, the one who suddenly realizes time is fleeting, chooses to do none of those things. It's entirely possible this could be my last summer. If I'm on my deathbed next year, am I going to wish I'd spent today paying bills or getting my car washed? I doubt it.

Instead I lie out on Caroline's balcony. I start off in the red bikini, as I'm still limited to the clothes I brought for the trip to Vegas, but then, on impulse, I remove the top. Not a soul can see me since she's on the highest floor and faces the woods, but I feel rebellious for the first time in my life. It's Nick. Something about him makes me feel safe, willing to take risks, even when he's not around.

I'm too drowsy to read so I find myself thinking instead, my mind returning again and again to what my mother said: that she thought my father knew something about my future, some terrible outcome that marrying Jeff would help me avoid. I know it's related to Nick somehow, but I just don't see how it's possible. Being with him makes me feel like a better person. It makes me want to run out to the street and hug everyone that passes—clothed, of course.

I just don't see how it's possible something so good could turn bad.



I WAKE SLOWLY to the sounds of Nick getting ready for work. Outside our flat the sky is winter gray, though it is, theoretically, spring, and the light is so dim it must be early. I vaguely wonder how far along he is in the process of dressing...if I catch him early enough I can almost always convince him to get back in bed. I roll over to check, and instead wind up lunging forward, barely making it to the toilet before I expel the contents of my stomach.

Nick follows me in, looking more like a worried husband than a doctor who's seen everything. And in spite of the fact that he's seen far worse, I wave him away. "Don't look at me," I plead. I flush the toilet and he comes and sits on the edge of the tub.

"We're married. I was going to see you throw up eventually."

I shake my head. "You're not going to want to have sex with me after this."

He laughs low. "I fucking guarantee I will still want to have sex with you."

I sit up, leaning my head against the cool tile on the wall. "What if I was pregnant? Would you want to have sex with me then?"

His eyes widen a bit. "Of course I would," he says, tensing. I hate the hint of dread I hear in his voice. "Why?"

I reluctantly meet his eye. "Because I threw up yesterday too."

The next day, after three positive pregnancy tests, an obstetrician tells us we are about ten weeks along, which means we got pregnant pretty much the first time we slept together.

"We were so careful," Nick says, as if he might persuade the doctor she's wrong.

The two of us come home from the appointment, looking at our small one-bedroom flat in dismay. I'm on the cusp of apologizing, though I took that pill every day as if my life depended on it, but before I can he wraps his arms around me.

"Do you think the baby will be more comfortable sleeping on the terrace, or on top of the washer?" he asks with a laugh. "Because that's pretty much the only space we have left."

A sob wells in my chest. He's joking but it's true. We've got no space for a baby. He's just started his residency and I've just started grad school and—my God—we've barely been married a month. "Is this going to be okay?" I

ask, as my tears start to soak through his shirt.

“It’s going to be better than okay,” he whispers, tucking me closer, pressing his mouth to the top of my head. “I’m so happy right now I can’t even put it into words.”

I continue to cry, though. There’s so much he doesn’t know.

He tips my chin up with his index finger. “Honey, I know the timing isn’t perfect but we’ll figure it out. My parents will lend us money for a bigger place. We’ll get someone to help with the baby so you don’t miss class. It’s going to be fine.”

His joy hurts, twists something inside me, because I want this. I want it for him, I want it for myself. I can’t bear the idea of telling him we’re having a baby and tearing it all away from him, but I’m worried that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

“I think this has happened before. When we were teenagers,” I whisper. “That dream I always have, where you’re in the convenience store and I realize I’m going to lose you? I think we were running somewhere because I was pregnant. And I feel like we got pregnant right away then too.”

He’s silent, and when I look up at him, his smile has disappeared. “Why does that worry you?”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. “Because if it happened before, how come I don’t remember a baby?”



I WAKE with a start on Caroline’s deck, my chest as tight as it was in my dream. I sit up, putting it all together, and the pain gives way to shock. Nick and I got pregnant the first time we were together, and it possibly happened in two different lives. Not just as young, stupid teenagers, but as adults who would have been extremely careful about contraception. With anyone else I’d attribute it to chance, or to carelessness, but this feels...unnatural. Rose said there were other qualities that accompanied the mutation—could some kind of super fertility be among them?

I spend the day able to focus on little but that dream. I’m not sure why, but it feels like a warning somehow, just like my father’s dying pleas did. Our lives end before we have a child, and we seem to follow the exact same steps every time.

The real problem is that I think we're following them now too.

Now that I've seen it unfold, I want that future we had ahead of us as badly as I did in London. I want to be the one who makes Nick's face light up when he gets the news. I want it to be *our* child he holds for the first time. But it won't be. All those firsts will go to someone who comes after me.

I force the thoughts out of my head as I start to get ready to see Nick. I could very easily be newly married to Jeff right now, stuck at *Washington Insider* for the rest of my short, miserable life. But instead I'm with someone who is more than I could ever have imagined, and I'm going back to school. I need to appreciate what I have.

Caroline comes home just before I leave. Having no respect for personal boundaries, she pulls at the neckline of my dress to see which bra I'm wearing without asking, and then demands I go change it. "No dude wants to see that thing when he's undressing you for the first time. Put on something lacy or freeball it."

I laugh. As much as I wish the bra I'm wearing would be an issue, I don't see how it could be, given that there's no place we can be alone. "No one is getting undressed," I tell her primly. "This is only our second date."

"I've had sex on a second date," she argues.

I grin. "That would probably carry more weight if you didn't also have sex when there's been no date at all. I'm sleeping on your couch and he's got his ex-girlfriend dropping by all the time, so it can't happen."

She frowns. "That is a huge red flag, by the way. Why does she still have a key?"

"She's taking over his lease," I reply, rubbing lip balm on. "It's really not a big deal."

She ignores me. "Remember Russell? The guy who always had an excuse for why he needed to stay here instead of his own place? He was homeless. I didn't find out until a few months later."

I laugh again. Caroline has had some good experiences with men and a wealth of abysmal ones. I'm sure she has a horror story for every possible situation. "Nick is a neurologist. Russell wasn't employed. I feel like their situations are somewhat different."

"I'm just saying that no matter how hot the guy is, you've got to watch out for red flags. Go change your bra."

I push her away from me as she reaches for my zipper. "He's not going to see my bra! Where would that even happen?"

“Public restroom, back of his car, parking garage, mail room, alleyway, that couch because I’m happy to clear out on your behalf...” she says, ticking them off on her fingers. “Shall I continue or are you going to change your bra?”

I stick my tongue out at her. “Fine, but the joke’s on you when nothing happens.”

Her face grows grave. “Oh Quinn, that won’t be a joke at all. That will be a tragedy, because you need a good shag more than anyone I’ve ever known.”

I don’t argue. Given how I respond when Nick merely *kisses* me, I have no doubt she’s correct.



BECAUSE I’M a little unnerved by what might come out of Caroline’s mouth when she meets Nick, I tell him to meet me in the lobby rather than the apartment. He’s already there when I walk off the elevator, his eyes lighting up as I approach.

He rises, towering over me even in my heels, and places his hands on my hips, pulling me toward him for a brief kiss. Closed lips, held there just long enough for me to breathe him in, relish the way his hands tighten. I may not be the only one in need of a good shag.

“You’re tan,” he says, pulling back just enough to meet my eye. It’s clear from the way he’s looking at me that this is a *good* thing.

“I spent most of the day lying out on the deck.”

He raises a brow. “Red bikini?”

I feel my cheeks heating a little. “Yeah. Well, half of it. No one can see onto her deck and I wanted to see what it was like to have no tan lines for once.”

He grows still. “You’re saying you laid out topless.” He closes his eyes. “Jesus.”

You’d think I just told him I ran down the street naked. “You’re way more puritanical than I thought you were. Than you used to be.”

His eyes open and there is something feral in them that wasn’t there just a moment before. “I’m not puritanical at all,” he growls. “Believe me. I’m just trying not to picture it because it’s having an effect on me I’d like to avoid in a public place.” He pulls me closer until I can feel exactly what he’s referring

to, and desire snaps in my belly, so sharp it's almost painful. If Caroline weren't upstairs I think I'd be tempted to skip dinner. Except until I've told him about the dream, no one is skipping anything.



THE RESTAURANT IS FANCIER than any place I've ever been, the kind where all the food looks like art. Even my margarita comes with leaf-shaped foam floating on its surface. Yet it's a struggle to pay attention to all the careful details with Nick sitting a foot away, creating this painful need in my stomach, making my heart skitter in my throat. I think about the way he pushed me to my back in his Jeep last weekend—his fervor, his lack of restraint—and I want him so badly I feel like I can barely function. Not once, in all the years I've known Jeff, did I ever feel this way.

I stare at the open collar of his shirt, imagine popping the second button, the third, as my mouth moves over his neck. "What are you thinking about?" he asks.

I'm blushing again. This has to stop. "I don't think you want to know."

He winces. "Quinn," he says, exhaling, "you're killing me. Talk about something please. Something normal. Or I'm going to drag you out of this restaurant and take you to the nearest hotel."

Fuck. Yes. Please. He's watching my face, and I'm pretty sure he's seriously considering the hotel plan. Except I still haven't told him about that dream. I can just imagine his reaction to learning I will probably get pregnant the first time I sleep with him. He won't run, necessarily, but he's sure going to think about it, and I'm not ready to watch it all unfold.

Instead I ask about the woman who was in his office. It seems like a sad state of affairs when the woman who wants you dead is the easiest thing to discuss.

"I talked to the police today," he says. "Security gave them the photo and they're searching the database."

I can't say this inspires much hope. "A woman who can vanish at will doesn't seem likely to have ever gotten caught in the past."

He leans back in his chair, blowing out a breath. "I know."

I run my finger over the glass's rim, pondering the situation again. "What I don't understand is why she's going to the trouble. I'm already dying. What

more can she want?”

“You’re not dying,” he says sharply. “And if nothing else, the fact that she can time travel and she’s still bothering to break into my office and look at your file should reassure you. If you weren’t a threat for whatever reason, she’d know, right?”

I glance at him, wondering if he could be right. I’m not sure what she thinks I’m going to do to her in the future, but she must still be seeing it happen somehow. “I suppose. But if she can do what Rose does...why hasn’t she killed me already? She got into your locked office. She could find me anywhere I was alone and kill me with ease. So why doesn’t she?”

“We don’t know all the rules,” he says, his mouth slipping up at the corner. “Maybe she needs to wait for the full moon.”

A low laugh slips from my throat. “You’re confusing your supernatural beings.”

“At the rate we’re going,” he says, “I’m going to end up fighting a werewolf over you.”

“*Would* you fight a werewolf over me?” I ask, reaching across the table to swipe a grain of salt off his lower lip. The change in his expression holds me there for a moment. His eyes are dark, drugged, focused on my mouth. Finally he blows out a slow breath. “In a heartbeat.”

I laugh, the sound slightly too high, thrown off kilter by a sudden surge of desire. I would follow him to any of those public places Caroline suggested without a second thought. *Pull it together. You still haven’t told him.* “I won’t make you do that. We’ve got enough problems with the exes we already have.”

He frowns. “Which reminds me—Meg knows about you. She got wind of stuff from the nursing staff and I figured it was best to get ahead of the story.”

I freeze. We just began officially seeing each other two freaking days ago and people he works with already know. That *can’t* be a good thing. “What did you tell her?”

“That you were a friend from college,” he says. “She wasn’t happy but she seemed to believe it.”

A friend he’s gotten pregnant. *Twice.* I wanted to put it off but I have to tell him.

I take a deep breath and stare at my plate. “Speaking of our time together in the past—I had another dream last night.” I glance at him warily.

“Yeah?” His mouth edges up. A dirty smile that makes me want to change the topic entirely.

“I dreamt that we got pregnant.”

His smile fades. “That’s not where I hoped you were going with that,” he finally says. “Which time was it?”

“I was dreaming about London,” I reply. “But when we were in London I knew it had happened before, when we were teenagers. And here’s the thing: both times it was an accident, and in London, at least, it happened fast, probably the very first time we slept together, even though we were careful.”

His wariness turns to open-jawed shock faster than I ever could have imagined. “A teenager’s version of ‘careful’ is probably very different from yours or mine,” he says after a moment. “Believe me, if we dated when I was a teenager I wouldn’t have been capable of ‘careful’ with you.” His gaze flickers to my mouth. “I’m not even sure I’m capable of it now.”

I shake my head. “We were adults in London—you were doing your residency and I was in grad school. *And* I was on the pill there. It just didn’t work. It’s like we can’t avoid getting pregnant no matter what we do.”

“We must have done something wrong,” he says. There is desperation in his voice.

I want to let him believe it, but I can’t. I lived through London. I remember it in detail. We did nothing wrong. “So you’re willing to believe in time travel but not that some kind of super fertility accompanies it? Dr. Grosbaum said I was a different *species*, remember?”

He scrubs a hand over his face. “I’m able to believe it but...I just don’t know what the hell this is with us. It’s not like anything I’ve ever experienced before.”

The way he phrases it makes it sound like a bad thing, but at least he’s not calling for the check. “In what way?”

“There’s something going on here I don’t understand,” he says, leaning toward me. Beneath the table his hand squeezes mine. “I had this connection to you from the moment we met. That’s easy enough to explain away... If we really had these other lives together, it makes sense to me that the connection would remain. But it’s more than that. It’s not about our past lives or our present one. It’s like we’re both being led toward something.”

Another piece of the puzzle clicks into place. I hadn’t thought about it consciously, but I know exactly what he means. “There’s some purpose to all of this.”

“Yes,” he says. “And it really bothers me that we don’t know what it is.”
It bothers me too. And thanks to this brain tumor, I’m not sure we’ll get a chance to figure it out.



WHEN DINNER ENDS he drives me back to Caroline’s, which I guess means my roommate’s long list of places where I could potentially show him my bra won’t be coming into play, not that I expected they would.

We walk into the building slowly. He stops when we reach her door and hesitates. *Is he even scared to kiss me now?* He leans down, his mouth brushing mine, but there’s a tension in him I haven’t felt before. It’s not until my mouth opens under his, that he finally gives in to it, his kiss harder, needier. The hands that kept their distance land heavily on my hips and my back is pressed to the door as we strain for more friction, more closeness. His mouth moves to my neck, tugging at the skin in a way that makes me gasp. The bulge, currently pressed to my abdomen, seems to pulse with need, and his hand slides under my dress, slips beneath the elastic of my thong. I’m already soaked, gasping at the briefest touch, and he groans above me.

“God I want...” he begins, and suddenly he pushes away with something close to panic on his face. “Sorry,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “*Fuck.*”

I stare at him, dizzied by the change of direction, longing for him to come back and resume what he was doing seconds before. “What’s wrong?”

His tongue pokes out between his lips and then he shakes his head. “Nothing. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

I nod, bewildered, as he presses a kiss to my forehead and waits for me to unlock the door. What the hell just happened? And what did I do wrong?



“YOU LOOK DAZED,” Caroline says with a grin as I stumble into the apartment. “He must have done something right.”

I lean against the door. “He didn’t do anything at all.”

“What are you talking about?”

It just ended so abruptly. After all the build-up between us over these

long weeks, how could he just walk away like that? “I’m saying he walked me to your door, kissed me, then apologized and *left*.”

She is outraged. “Why the fuck did he apologize?”

I huff in frustration, slumping into the chair across from her. “Exactly. I don’t get it.”

“And you’re sure he’s single?” she asks. “Because this exact thing happened to me with that douche Eric. Remember him? He told me he was single and then he was all weird about it during sex and it turned out he was fucking *engaged*.”

I close my eyes. “Yes, I’m sure he’s single.”

“Maybe he’s visiting here from the Victorian age, where you only kiss a woman you’re engaged to?”

I laugh, the sound stilted and uncertain. It’s a little unnerving to hear time-travel jokes under the circumstances. “I am going to go out on a limb and say I don’t think that’s it.”

“Then what was it?”

I’d assume it was just what I told him about my possible super-fertility, but it’s not like we were going to get pregnant *kissing*. And why apologize? I was embarrassingly wet, which he seemed to like well enough for a second but, God, who even knows? I’ve only ever been with Jeff. I know nothing about what men like. “You know how inexperienced I am. Maybe I’m just... bad at it?”

“If this is your way to get me into *Cruel Intentions*-style girl-on-girl action, you need to say so outright.”

I laugh, and this time it’s a real one. “Fuck off. You know what I mean.”

She throws a pillow at me. “I know what you mean and you’re being an idiot. You kissed plenty of guys while we were in school and there were never any complaints. Maybe he’s just old-fashioned.”

He didn’t used to be, I think to myself. I have a very distinct memory of waking up beside him after our first date. And maybe that’s the issue—those other times he didn’t know where sex with me would lead, and there was nothing at stake. This time, he’s risking his career to enter a relationship that may never get past third base. If he changes his mind, I’m not sure I could even fault him for it.

NICK

I feel like there's a target on my back.

I can tell by the lingering looks as I pass the nurses' station, the conversations that stop when I walk up, that Meg has been talking, and I'm guessing she didn't leave out the fact that I'm now dating a patient. This is definitely going to get back to the administration and when it does, things will get complicated.

The conversation with Quinn last night is never far from my head either. Her words replay again and again, like clues that are out of order or missing some key piece.

There's some purpose to all this.

It's like we can't avoid getting pregnant no matter what we do.

You're willing to believe in time travel but not that some kind of super fertility accompanies it?

Regardless of how many times I think about it, though, it doesn't come together. She's been with Jeff for years and managed not to get pregnant. What is it about *us*?

Jace is waiting when I return to my office. "Lunch?" he asks, in a way that sounds more like a demand. I guess he's heard about Quinn too. He's one of my oldest friends and it's going to all come out sooner or later, but there's no way he's going to be okay with me dating a patient. Especially a dying one.

We go up the road from the hospital to a sandwich shop we used to

frequent when we were in med school. The place is as packed as it ever was. “I’m starting to remember why we stopped coming here,” I tell him after a woman with a stroller runs over my foot.

He frowns. “I figured this is a conversation that should be held outside the hospital.” I hear condemnation in those words. Jace is not a guy who’s grave all that often, but he sure as shit is right now.

He waits until we’re sliding into a booth before he shakes his head and looks directly at me. “Okay let’s hear it.”

I lean my head back against the seat with a sigh. “Sounds like you already have.”

“What I’ve heard is that you were cheating on Meg with a dying patient,” Jace says. “I’m hoping your version makes you look a little better.”

Fuck. Meg is making sure everyone hears the absolute worst version of this story. I should have expected it, but it’s still a blow. “I broke up with Meg before anything happened.”

“Yeah,” he says, arching a brow, “it wasn’t the timing of it that bothered me. Are you really fucking a terminal patient? Seriously?”

My eyes close. The lie is necessary, even with Jace. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. We dated in college and lost touch until she came to the hospital.”

“Dude,” Jace groans. “It still looks bad. You should have transferred the case. She’s dying and you’re her doctor, which makes you a port in the storm. It’s fucking wrong to sleep with her even if she’s willing.”

I blow out a breath. He’s not saying anything I haven’t said to myself a thousand times. The guilt I thought I’d moved past comes tearing back. “I didn’t transfer her because I don’t trust anyone else to take care of her. And I know what you’re saying and all I can tell you is that this is different.” If I could utter the term *soul mate* without sounding like a complete pussy I would. Unfortunately, that’s not possible.

“Let’s say you’re right. Let’s say you’re her everything and she’s yours and this was written in the fucking stars. The girl’s still going to die, Nick. You’re putting your professional reputation in serious jeopardy for a relationship that can’t go anywhere.”

My anger is probably more at the situation than him, but it’s a struggle to rein it in. “I don’t need a lecture. And if you learned Julie was dying would you just take off?”

“Of course not,” says Jace, “but Julie’s my *wife*. This is some girl from college you forgot about.”

“I never forgot about her. Not really,” I tell him. “And it’s different with her. Night and day.” I wish I could explain what it’s like—that it feels like a compulsion, that I feel out of control around her in ways I never have before—but it wouldn’t exactly help my case.

“Of course it’s fucking different. Sex with someone new is always going to be more exciting, but that doesn’t mean you’re meant to be with her.”

My shoulders sag at the introduction of yet another sore subject. “I haven’t even slept with her yet.”

Jace’s eyes widen. “You’re risking your career for someone you’re not even sleeping with? Dude...really?”

“Which one is it?” I snap. “Is your problem with the fact that we’re together at all, or is it that I’m not sleeping with her?”

He sighs. “Neither. Both. Look, before this goes any further I just hope you really give it some thought. She’s relying on you to save her life, so you may be really into this girl, but you need to ask yourself why she’s really with *you*.”



Ask yourself why she’s really with you.

I gnaw on that phrase the whole way back to my office. It’s not that I actually doubt Quinn is with me for the right reasons. Our connection was there long before she needed to worry about the tumor. But if there’s really some greater purpose to our union, why *me*? She has a super power, even if she doesn’t use it. But I’m a normal guy. Why would nature or God or whoever is orchestrating this need me involved too? If her purpose is to change the world or stop some terrible evil from happening, shouldn’t it be fucking Superman by her side? She definitely needs someone who can do more than diagnose neurological disorders and swim a fast 400. But it is me, and I feel certain there must be a reason for that. I’ve just got no clue what it is.

“Reilly,” barks a voice. I turn to find Ed Philbin, the head of the department, coming up behind me quickly. “We need to have a chat.”

I thought I had a few weeks to get this figured out. Apparently not.

“Hey Ed,” I say, turning toward him reluctantly. “What’s up?”

“There’ve been some rumors going around,” he begins and my stomach

sinks. “Heard you’re single now.”

My tongue pokes at the inside of my cheek. I’m not sure if he’s leading up to my relationship with Quinn or hoping I’ll cop to it myself. I shrug. “Not exactly. I just started seeing someone. Why do you ask?”

His gaze is steady. It could be his gaze is always steady, or it could be he’s trying to hint that he knows more about the situation than he’s letting on. “We have our rec league basketball playoffs Friday. Could use your help.” Ed’s asked me about this more times than I can count, I suppose because I’m four inches taller than anyone on the team. But this time it feels different—it feels a bit like a quid pro quo: *you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours*. I’ll come help them out, and he won’t look too closely at the rumors.

Which means I really don’t have a choice.

QUINN

I rise, trying to put Caroline's ridiculous doubts from last night out of my head. She left a note this morning that she was "plotting" to get me laid on tonight's date with Nick. Her goal is over-ambitious, obviously, but I'd settle for a kiss that doesn't end in an apology.

I walk down the street to get a bagel. Maybe there are some imperfect things in my life at the moment, but I'm out and about on a Wednesday morning without a single responsibility and it's hard not to feel pretty good. Nick texts as I walk, making my heart take another small leap. The mere sight of his name stirs something giddy and ebullient in my chest. I've heard other girls describe this phenomenon, but it's a first for me. All he's said is *good morning* and I want to break into a song and dance number right here on P Street. Maybe he's freaked out about the pregnancy thing but he's still texting me. It's got to mean something.

Nick: Any dreams last night?

Me: I'm not sure it's something I should be putting in a text while you're at work.

Nick: Okay, I absolutely need to know right now. Were we naked?

Me: It would take all the fun out of it if I told you that.

Nick: I had some dreams too. I have no problem telling you we were naked. We'll compare notes tonight.

Not the response of a guy who isn't interested. I'm smiling as I walk into the lobby, so unaware of anything but my own happiness that I don't even notice Jeff until he's standing right in front of my face.

He's unshaven, wearing jeans and a T-shirt instead of work clothes. I've been letting his calls go to voicemail, so I suppose I owe him a discussion of some kind—I just really don't want one.

His face is tight, a vein throbbing in his temple. "Can we talk?" He glances toward the front desk. "In private?"

A week ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to be alone with him. But I don't know the person who stands in front of me, looking like he wants to put his fist through the wall. I don't know the guy who called so many times he filled up my voicemail twice. And I haven't mentioned it to Nick, but this is also the guy whose messages have grown increasingly furious. He's said things on my voicemail I never dreamed I'd hear him say. I know people can behave badly when they're wounded, but listening to those messages makes me feel like I never really knew him at all. "We're good here."

His jaw drops. "You were ready to marry me four days ago and now I'm some kind of deviant you can't be alone with?"

In the last voicemail he left, he called me a lying bitch. I'm not feeling any guilt about refusing to be alone with him. "I never said that. But given how you've been acting, I'd prefer to discuss this in a place where I have the option to walk away."

He blows out a breath and folds his arms across his chest. "How *I*'ve been acting?" he demands. "Are you fucking serious right now? You dumped me at the airport after more than six years together and won't even pick up the phone."

"Think about what you've said on my voicemail. Can you blame me?"

"I just want an answer. I just want to know how you go from being perfectly happy with someone you're about to marry to miserable overnight?"

I raise my eyes to his, and though I'm stunned by how badly he's reacted to our break-up, I still wince at what I'm about to say next. "That's just it, though. We weren't perfectly happy."

He narrows his eyes. "Don't you dare say we because you don't get to speak for me. I was fine."

I sigh. Jeff always was a bit oblivious about things, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that he's oblivious here too. "You learned I had a fatal illness,

and you continued on with your job like nothing had changed.” It’s strange to me now that I didn’t see how wrong it all was, but that was before I knew what it was like to be with the *right* person. The one you can’t live without. It’s so clear to me now how different Jeff should have been, because I see how Nick *would* have been in his shoes. “I’m not faulting you for it. But the point is this: when the person you are supposed to love above all others tells you news like that, you stop worrying about whether the suppliers in Ithaca are going to meet their shipping deadlines.”

“So that’s what this is? You’re punishing me for leaving? For trying to support us both?”

I feel the tiniest spark of irritation at *trying to support us both*, as if I didn’t work too, but I force myself to let it go. “I’m saying that if you felt the right way about me, you would not have been willing to leave. Knowing I’m dying...it’s just put a lot of things in perspective. And we’re one of those things.”

“Your father begged me to take care of you,” Jeff says. “You know that? When he was dying he begged me to make sure you were safe. And I know he spoke to you too. It was his final wish. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

Will the guilt over that ever go away? Until it does I just have to pretend it isn’t there. “The two of us together is nothing he’d have wished for before he got sick. So no, I’m not going to let that be the thing I base my future on.”

His whole body softens as he changes tack. He reaches out to grasp my arms and it’s a struggle not to shrug him off. “Can we go to dinner tonight, hon? Just to talk. We can go to Zatinya. You always wanted to try it.”

The suggestion makes me long to roll my eyes. I begged him to go there for six years, but suddenly he’s someone who cares about what I want? “No,” I reply. “I don’t want to go to dinner. You aren’t going to change my mind. Please just let this go.”

“Never,” he says. “I made your father a promise. And I intend to see it through.”

My stomach drops. Now that it’s over, I just want to be done with him, and the look on his face tells me I won’t be for a good long time.



THAT AFTERNOON, Caroline and Trevor walk in carrying garment bags. “We’re here to play fairy godmother,” says Caroline.

“Unless you think he’s gay,” says Trevor. “In which case, you can play fairy godmother to me. *Literal* fairy godmother.”

Caroline slings the hanger of her bag over the closet door. “Shut up, Trevor,” she says. “You know he’s not gay.”

He hands her his garment bag and pulls a blind down to keep the bright afternoon sun out of his face. “Maybe it wasn’t lust like we thought. She’s beautiful. Maybe he’s just fascinated by her the way I am with that Renoir at the National Gallery of Art. I could stare at it for hours but I don’t want to put my dick in it.”

“You’re making me feel worse,” I tell him.

He sits beside me and pats my leg. “You know I’m just kidding. I promise he wants to put his dick in you.”

I laugh and rest my head on his shoulder. “That’s sweet. Thank you.”

He gets out his phone and I hear the ping of a text arrive on my phone and Caroline’s a moment later. “I’m sending you both the deets on my date tonight, by the way. He looks like a criminal.”

“Which is your type,” I add.

“Yes. But it also means he’s slightly more likely to kill me after sex than Nick is likely to kill you after sex,” he replies. “Perhaps because *you’re* less likely to have sex in the first place. Anyway, if I don’t turn up at work tomorrow, avenge my death.”

I lean back on the other end of the couch. “You do realize we’re the most ill-equipped people ever to avenge you if something goes wrong?” I ask. “I’ve never hit anyone in my life. And Caroline talks a good game but she’d mostly be worried about protecting her designer shoes if there were an altercation.” Caroline ignores this, unzipping the garment bags with a reverence normally reserved for the Mona Lisa and religious artifacts.

“You’re right about Caroline,” he agrees. “But *you’ve* got hidden scrappiness. Like Jennifer Garner in *Peppermint*. One day you’re just plain old Quinn and then some senator will kill me to cover up our affair and it brings out your inner badass. Next thing you know you’re walking down the street with a loaded shotgun.”

“So just to be clear, you’re saying that when you are killed, you want me to engage in maybe a year of martial arts and weapons training, and then go kill a US senator?”

“Okay,” says Caroline, clapping her hands to get our attention. “Enough irrelevant chitchat. Trevor is likely to die on one of these dates and neither of us plan to lift a finger because it’s his fault for choosing criminals.” She looks at the outfits she’s pulled out and hands me a jumpsuit. “Try this first. It’s perfect.”

I gnaw on my lip, taking it in. It’s sweet that she wants to help but I’m a pretty conservative girl, nude sunbathing aside. And this is not a conservative jumpsuit. The whole back is bare, and I’m not sure it wouldn’t give a complete view of my breasts in profile either. “It looks, um, *revealing*. It’s basically an apron.”

Her eyes roll. “Maybe the problem isn’t *him* after all, Virgin Mary. Go try it on.”

I stick my tongue out at her but take the jumpsuit, my hand brushing over the heavy, luxurious fabric almost against my will. It looks expensive. It even feels expensive. I go into the bathroom and slip it on. It shows as much skin as I thought. And yet, as always, I feel glamorous in a way I never do when I dress myself.

“Stop overthinking it and come out here!” Caroline shouts.

Warily I emerge. “It shows too much side boob. And I won’t be able to wear a bra with it.”

“Isn’t that the *point*?” asks Trevor.

“I want him to *want* to see my boobs,” I argue. “I’m not trying to expose myself to him against his will.”

“We’ll use double-sided tape on the outside to make sure there’s no nipple reveal, but let’s let him have a tiny hint of side boob,” says Caroline. “Men go nuts for that. It reminds them of being horny teenagers desperate to see a hint of cleavage.”

Once I’m dressed, the two of them take over my hair and makeup, and when it’s all done, they’ve given me red lips and what *appears* to be naturally glowing, bronzed skin. “If he can resist you looking like that,” says Trevor, “then I really *am* going to take a shot at him.”



I’M STILL SO unnerved by Jeff’s visit that I make up an excuse to meet Nick out rather than having him pick me up. I Uber to the address he gave me,

experiencing a moment of shock when I discover it's a hotel before someone points toward the bar on its roof. I take the elevator up way too many floors and emerge to a panoramic view of D.C., along with an even better view—Nick standing in a ray of sunlight, looking slightly too godlike to be real. He's in a white button-down and jeans, a head taller than any other guy here, not noticing that half the wait staff is looking him up and down like something they plan to divide and consume in its entirety.

He glances in my direction as I begin to walk toward him, and when I see that look in his eyes—surprise, followed quickly by joy and something far more carnal—I forget all my earlier angst. This is Nick. We've somehow come together no matter how many times we were separated. He's not going to let a little thing like excessive fertility get in our way.

"Hi," I say, sounding a little breathless. I go on my toes to kiss his cheek, and he pulls me close, wrapping his entire arm around my back, his mouth to my ear.

"You're killing me," he groans. "You know that, right?"

I gaze up at him. "Is that a good thing or bad?"

His gaze flickers over the low V of my top, catches there for a moment, and he flinches. "Both," he says, wrapping an arm around my waist as we walk toward the hostess stand. "I got us one of the private areas."

I have no idea what he's talking about but at the moment I'm pretty content just to be plastered to his side. He speaks to the hostess and she leads us through a door at the north side of the bar, and onto a terrace with a vine-covered trellis on either side and an amazing, unimpeded view of D.C. from the front.

She takes our orders and points to a button on the table. "If you need anything else, just hit this," she tells us, and then she leaves, shutting the door behind her.

My eyebrows go nearly to my hairline. "What is this?"

He gives me a sheepish smile, complete with dimple. I want to eat him alive because of that smile alone. "It's just one of those bullshit VIP things so we don't have to fight for space out there." His hand wraps around my hip and he pulls me closer. "Which enables me to do this." He leans down, grazing my lips with his, holding them there a moment. My eyes flutter closed. I don't want him to stop. *Please, please don't stop.*

His hand releases my waist and his fingers twine with mine. "Let's sit."

Restraining a sigh, I follow him to the couch, curling up in one corner of

the loveseat while he sits beside me. Off to the west I see the Pentagon and feel something sink inside my chest, the way it always does. 9/11 was one of those days, one of those days I knew what would happen before it did. When I saw footage of the first plane hitting, I *knew*. I knew more planes would hit. It was on the tip of my tongue to say it aloud, but I took one look at my mother and closed my mouth. I was all too familiar with the way she would look at me for weeks if I was proven correct...as if she was scared of me. And while no one would have listened to the premonitions of a ten-year-old, the fact that I stayed silent has always made me feel complicit somehow.

“Everything okay?” he asks.

I’m tempted to tell him the story, but that old fear creeps into my throat. I never want him to look at me the way my mother did. I smile. “Of course.”

He rubs the back of his neck, a gesture I find unbelievably hot for some unknown reason. “Why did you insist on meeting me here instead of letting me pick you up?” he asks.

I hold my breath for a moment, trying to come up with a plausible excuse. I can’t claim I didn’t want him to go out of his way...he only lives a few blocks from Caroline. My breath releases. I don’t want to lie. “I went to get a bagel this morning. Jeff was waiting in the lobby this morning when I got in. I was worried he’d come back.”

His eyes widen. “And you really thought the solution was to not have me there if it happened?”

The waitress taps on the door at that moment and delivers our drinks. I wait until she’s gone before I answer. “I don’t want you to get into trouble for this. Jeff’s...hurt. And angry. And he’s not being rational. He’s saying things on my voicemail I never imagined he was capable of saying. There’s not a doubt in my mind he would try to create problems for you if he had a shred of proof.”

He runs his hands through his hair, tugging at it. “I don’t give a shit if Jeff creates problems. But I don’t want you dealing with him by yourself.”

I sort of love that Nick wants to protect me, but I’m not letting him get fired over this. “He’s not violent,” I reply. “He’s just upset.”

Nick’s expression sours. “The last two times I saw him it nearly turned into a fist fight. So don’t pretend he’s not violent.”

I smile and squeeze his hand. “And you were just as eager to fight him. Doesn’t that make *you* violent by definition too?”

He laughs reluctantly. “No comment. But I want the truth about this stuff

from now on, okay? And maybe you ought to share some of it with your mom, since she's still so convinced Jeff is perfect for you."

My mother's adoration of Jeff brings out the sullen teenager in Nick, which has me fighting a smile. "She just hasn't met *you* yet. Maybe she won't think my judgment is so impaired when she does." I wish I'd never asked her about time travel. Even when I left yesterday morning she was on the cusp of tears. "But that reminds me—I asked my mom if there were pictures of my aunt, the one who ran away when she was a teenager, and my mom said she doubted there were many because apparently Sarah was weird about having photos taken."

His brow furrows. "I'm not sure I'm following you. Lots of people don't want their photos taken. My mom will only get in front of a camera if she's got a full face of makeup and her hair is done."

"But remember Rose? I mean, didn't it strike you as weird...this 15-year old girl is hanging out with her favorite band but refuses to be photographed?"

"She was a total delinquent, Quinn," he argues. "She probably just didn't want her dad coming across it."

I lean forward. In the process of trying to convince him, I'm beginning to convince myself. "Think about it, though: why would a time traveler make a point of refusing to be in any photos? Because she doesn't want anyone finding her picture on two dates that are a hundred years apart. The safest thing to do would be to make sure you never leave a trail."

He takes a sip of his scotch, but I can tell he's pondering what I've said. "You might be right," he finally says, setting his drink down. "And if your aunt can actually time travel, then we need to find her. She might be able to tell us what to do. At least how to make the tumor stop growing."

I sigh heavily. "My mom's got no address for her, and I'm not sure looking up *Sarah Stewart* and *France* is going to yield a lot of useful results. I don't even know what city she's in."

"Your dad must have an address for her somewhere. Do you guys still have his old files?"

My father had tons of files. Are we really going to be able to find her address in all of that mess? It seems unlikely, but we can't just not try. "Most of them are in storage. Everything's in storage, actually."

"Then we should go up there this weekend and take a look. I have to play in this fucking basketball game on Friday, but we could go up on Saturday

morning and spend the night at the lake on the way home.” He hesitates. “You’d have your own room,” he adds.

I frown. Any other guy would be capitalizing on the situation, and he’s doing the opposite. He sure didn’t seem this reluctant Sunday night in the back of his car. “We don’t need separate rooms,” I say quietly. I’m blushing, unable to meet his eye, as I utter the words.

“Yeah,” he says, his voice hard. “I think we do.”

I’m humiliated and annoyed at the same time. We’re adults. I shouldn’t feel like a slut for suggesting we stay in the same room. I slap a palm to my face in frustration. “What the hell is going on, Nick?” I ask. “You apologize for kissing me last night like it was a mistake and now you’re acting like we’re just...*buddies*.”

He laughs unhappily, which just frustrates me even more. “You think I don’t want more? I want *more* so badly I’d cut off a limb to get it.”

Then take it! I want to scream. Even if we don’t have sex there are plenty of other options. “So what exactly is the problem?” I ask.

He sighs and clasps his hands in front of him. “Look, the truth is I’m worried I’m going to take it too far.”

My brow furrows. “Take *what* too far?”

“You *cannot* get pregnant right now, Quinn. We can’t risk anything exacerbating the tumor.”

I’m blushing all the way to my ears but desperation drives me to persist. “There are lots of things besides intercourse.”

I hear a groan stifled low in his chest. “I’m aware. But when I kiss you, I want so much more I stop thinking rationally. And if we’re doing all the other things you’re referencing, my guess is I’ll stop thinking at all. At some point, it’s going to lead to sex. It just is. We...need a plan.”

“A plan?” I ask with a small smile. “I could put a note on my forehead that says ‘don’t fuck Quinn’?”

His teeth slide over his lower lip and he blows out a breath. “Even hearing you say the word *fuck* sends my mind down a bad path. Where I start rationalizing things. It feels predatory.”

“Nick,” I say, my eyes slowly raising to his. “I’m okay with predatory.”

He inhales sharply, leaning his head against the back of the loveseat and squeezing his eyes shut.

“What—”

Before I can finish the sentence, he is pulling me over him, my legs on

either side of his. His hands grip my hips, pull me down so that I'm flush against him. "Do you feel that?"

I nod. I couldn't miss *that*. It feels like he's got an extra limb pulsing between my legs.

The fingers of one hand slide through my hair, gripping it at the root. He does nothing more, but his eyes are on my mouth, dark and hungry in a way they weren't a moment before. His other hand curves around the side of my neck, his palm rough against the soft skin, drawing goose bumps to the surface. "You have no idea what you're saying when you tell me to be predatory, Quinn. Every bone in my body tells me to take from you until there's nothing left. So we need a plan."

I stop holding my weight and sink against him, leaving him pressed right where I want him, with no distance between us. A shudder begins in my center, radiating outward, and he pulls my mouth to his in a way that turns me wet and loose and desperate. I want more but before I can demand it of him, he demands it of me, groaning as his mouth opens, as his free hand cups my ass, squeezing it tight until he is all I can feel.

That hand moves straight to the bare skin on the side of the jumpsuit, as if it's a destination he's been thinking of for a very long time.

"Jesus Christ, this thing nearly killed me when you walked in," he grunts, his mouth moving over my neck. His index finger slides under the side, the tape there giving way easily, as if it were made of air. That finger brushes against the soft skin at the base of my breast then moves up, up, finding my nipple, which immediately grows so hard it hurts.

"Fuck," he groans. His hand slides free only to push the straps of the jumpsuit down, leaving me bare all the way to my rib cage. "You have no idea how badly I've wanted—"

His words are cut off by a quick tap at the door. There's only a moment for me to jump off his lap and pull at my jumpsuit before the waitress pokes her head in. Since our lower halves are blocked by the back of the couch, she can't see Nick's skyscraper-sized erection, but her eyes flicker to the one strap of my outfit that still hangs off my shoulder. "You hit the buzzer?" she asks.

"We did?" I glance at the table, realizing even as I ask that when his hand slid inside my top, my toes curled right along the table's edge. "Sorry. I think it was an accident."

"Do you want another round?"

I shake my head, thinking I need her gone as soon as possible, and also permanently, but Nick says yes.

When she leaves, he presses the base of each palm over his eyes. “Jesus Christ. We need a fucking chaperone.”

My stomach sinks a little. That is not the direction I thought he’d go once we got rid of the waitress. “We apparently have very different views of what just happened.”

“I just tried to undress you in a public place, Quinn.” He waves his hand at buildings in the distance. “Anyone could have seen you.”

I shrug. “They’d need binoculars to get a good view. If anyone wants to work that hard to see me half-naked, they’ve earned it.”

He gives me a dark look. “No one but me gets to see what’s under that outfit. No one.” His bossy tone makes the blood in my veins hum, plucks that sharp note of desire at the base of my abdomen. I want to scale him like a rock wall.

I press my lips together. They feel raw, swollen from his kiss, and our eyes catch. “Don’t look at me like that,” he pleads.

“Why not?”

“First of all because I need this hard-on to go away before the waitress returns,” he says. I glance down. The skyscraper is still standing firm.

“Second, because it makes me want to do a lot more than we did, and being with you sends common sense out the window. The second we start, there’s a serious lack of restraint.”

It’s not a lack of restraint. It’s an *absence* of it. The minute he touched me I stopped caring about anything but shedding his clothes, feeling him push inside me, watching his teeth sink into that perfect lower lip as he tries not to come.

“We don’t need a plan,” I tell him. “You’re like someone who decides not to eat at all until he’s figured out how he wants to lose weight. There’s no way it can work because the hunger is going to build up until he snaps.”

His mouth twitches. “So you’re proposing the sexual equivalent of a healthy salad with grilled chicken, whatever that is.”

“That makes it sound way less fun than it should be. It’s more like I’m proposing we eat one piece of pizza instead of the whole pie.”

He swallows, his eyes halting on my mouth. “You think we’ll be able to stop at one piece?”

“I was thinking of many, many pieces spaced out in small increments,” I

whisper.

“Fuck,” he growls, pulling me back into his lap. “Yes.”

“So you agree?” I ask.

“No,” he replies. “I’m just not good at turning down pizza.”

QUINN

Is it a bad idea? Of course it is. It's the worst possible idea. If he's right about his lack of control and it goes too far at the lake, he'll never touch me again.

However, thanks to my own lack of control, I just want it too badly to say no.

I try to convince Nick to meet me away from Caroline's on Saturday morning. I've caught Jeff following me twice since Wednesday, and though it's unlikely he'd be waiting this early in the day, I just can't be sure. He's unraveling, turning into someone I don't recognize.

I haven't told Nick about the incidents because I suspect he'd react poorly. My suggestion to meet in a neutral location fell on deaf ears, but he'd have refused whether he knew about Jeff or not.

He's idling outside Caroline's building in his Jeep when I get to the street. I never dreamed I could feel so excited about going on a trip to comb through a storage unit, though if I'm being honest, most of my excitement is reserved for what will come *after* the storage unit.

"Holy shit," he says. "If I haven't mentioned it before, you look really good in shorts."

"I'm a student now," I remind him. "Well, almost. Time to start dressing like one."

His eyes flicker over my legs. "I'd never have made it through college or medical school if you'd been back at my apartment dressed like that."

Immediately, I'm picturing it, all the things he might have done to me back then if our lives had gone differently. I lean over the console to brush my mouth against his. "If I'd been back at your apartment," I say low against his ear, "I'd probably have been naked."

"Fuck," he says with a heavy exhale, pulling onto the road, "you just guaranteed I will be thinking about you naked this entire drive, no matter what we're discussing."

"Current affairs?"

"Nope, still seeing you naked."

"Hmmm. Small children attending their first carnival?"

"At the risk of sounding creepy, I'm still thinking about you naked."

I eye the bulge in his shorts. "I like you thinking about me naked."

He raises a brow. "We need to change the topic," he says. "Or separate rooms isn't going to be enough to keep me away from you."

The idea of sharing a bed with him warms something inside me. Even if we never even touch. "We don't actually have to sleep in separate rooms you know," I tell him. "I trust you. And I trust myself, more or less."

"You shouldn't," he says.

I turn to face him. "I shouldn't trust myself or I shouldn't trust you?"

He glances over quickly before his eyes return to the road. "Either. There's something I never told you about that night in Baltimore."

Baltimore. A night in a hotel, in separate beds. Where I woke up in his and he woke up in mine. "Tell me," I whisper, trying to hold my dread at bay.

"We came extremely close to sleeping together," he says quietly.

My breathing comes to a halt. "*What?*"

"We were both asleep," he says hurriedly. "I was dreaming about you. It's *only* because something about it didn't make sense that I woke. And when my eyes opened you were sound asleep in my bed and we were seconds from having sex."

The idea that I fall asleep and dream about things that happened in another life is bad enough. The idea of falling asleep and actually doing things I don't remember—in this or any life—chills me to the bone. I dreamed about him that night. I dreamed I was the aggressor, the one who pushed him into the back seat of his parents' car and had my way with him, sort of. Was I dreaming or was I actually acting it out in real life? I press my hands to my face. "Oh my God."

His hand leaves the steering wheel and finds mine, giving it a reassuring

squeeze. “I’m sorry. I probably should have told you, but I was just worried you’d feel guilty. And I guess if I’m being honest, I didn’t know whether you’d blame me, or avoid me afterward.”

I release a long breath, thinking of how badly that might have gone. The possibility that I could have gotten pregnant, obviously, but also...if I’d known it had happened, I’d have stayed a mile from him. There would have been no dance at the harbor, no talk in his office, no visit to the lake. I would have allowed my own guilt and shame and fear of him to lead me to all the wrong decisions. “Thank God you didn’t. I think I’d have wound up married to Jeff, solely out of guilt, if you had.”

His hand tightens around mine. “But that’s why I think we need separate rooms. It’s too out of control with us anyway, and if it can happen when we don’t even know it’s happening...” He takes another glance at my bare legs. “Yeah. You definitely need your own room.”

I can’t argue with him. And it’s not even for my protection—it’s for his. He’s so worried about being predatory, but I’m no longer sure he’s the one we should be worried about.



IT TAKES a little over two hours to get to the small town where I grew up. I point out the road to the farm as we pass. I have good memories of my childhood there, but the bad memories are enough to kill any nostalgia I might feel.

“I guess your mom is no longer there?” he asks.

“God no,” I reply.

“Why so adamant?” he asks.

For a moment my pulse begins to trip and sputter, as I contemplate telling him the truth of what happened, but it’s too engrained, this habit of keeping those secrets to myself.

“Farms are a lot of work. Although the storage-unit passcode is our farm address so maybe she didn’t hate everything.” I inhale deeply. “Shit. I hope she didn’t change the code.”

He frowns. “Can’t you just call and ask her for the new one?”

I take another deep breath. “No, because then she’s going to want to see me, which means she’ll see *you*.”

“You’re doing wonders for my ego here.”

“You expect me to believe a super-hot neurologist who’s also a former college athlete could get his ego damaged over *that*?”

He laughs. “It might take one or two more serious blows, but you do intend to introduce me to her at some point, right?”

I smile at him. It sort of thrills me to see *my* super-hot neurologist so adamant about meeting my mother. “Of course. Just not one week after I cancelled my wedding. Turn here.”

He follows the direction of my hand and we pull up to the storage facility, me breathing a quiet sigh of relief when the code works. Nick lifts the rolling door and flips on the light...where we discover wall-to-wall boxes. My shoulders sag. “I moved most of these in here myself, but I forgot how bad it was.”

He shrugs. “At least they’re labeled.” His face lights up as he grabs a box that says *Quinn Photos* on it. “I think we should start here.”

“The sooner we get out of here, the sooner we get to the lake,” I remind him.

“Right as always,” he says, putting the box back where he got it. In the end I have him retrieve a box labeled *Photo Albums* and two boxes labeled *Files*.

I flip through the photo album of my father’s family. There are pictures of my father and Sarah as toddlers, two towheaded babies with sunny smiles. And then nothing.

“Nick, look at this,” I tell him, drawing him away from the files. “There are pictures of Sarah as a baby and a toddler, but then they just stop.” His eyes follow mine to the remaining pages, which feature only my father, as if Sarah never existed. His life is documented thoroughly...each birthday party, his high school graduation and wedding.

But nowhere in the entire book is there a picture of Sarah past her babyhood. Nick releases a slow breath. “Okay, yeah, that’s pretty weird.”

I glance over at the stack of papers he’s set on the floor. “How’s it going with the files? You find anything?”

He shrugs. “Well, I’ve discovered that your parents have saved their tax returns going back to 1980, which seems a little paranoid. But I did find this,” he says, handing me a file, labeled *Quinn, Psychologist Reports*. “I didn’t look.”

I hesitate and then hand him a sheaf of papers from it while I take the

other. “I’m not too worried about you discovering my innermost thoughts when I was five.”

I read through the first few pages of mine. It’s mostly background and psychobabble about tests they performed. It angers me more than anything else. My parents didn’t have two pennies to rub together during most of my childhood. Yet I’m sure this psychologist had no problem insisting I needed a bunch of irrelevant tests. My IQ? A cognitive-motor assessment? How could these things possibly have made a difference?

“Holy shit,” whispers Nick.

My heart thumps hard in my chest. “What?”

He’s still staring at the paper. “You really did remember everything.” His voice is empty with shock. “You told them my name and that I was a doctor. You told them our address in London. You told them I swim. My name is all over this, and not in some vague way. I can *tell* it’s me.”

I still. Waiting for the look, the one I saw all through childhood. When these things happened, my mother would grow purposefully quiet, trying to hide her fear, and her eyes wouldn’t meet mine for weeks afterward. But when he finally turns to glance up at me, his eyes are gentle, awed. “It’s fucking amazing,” he says.

The relief is so sweet and sharp, I have to look away from him, worried I might cry.

He continues to read, whipping through pages as if it’s the most fascinating thriller ever created, and I return to mine, skipping ahead to the final few pages—a transcript of what appears to be my last session.

Patient was asked to draw a picture of her family, it says. Unlike previous drawings, “Nick” is excluded.

JC: Can you tell me who these people are?

QS: That’s Mommy and Daddy and me. And that’s Cocoa (dog).

JC: You didn’t draw Nick this time. How come?

QS: Nick can’t be part of my family. (Patient evidences notable sadness at this statement.)

JC: Why can’t Nick be a part of your family?

5-sec delay.

QS: Because Nick is going to make me do a bad thing.

JC: What kind of bad thing?

Patient hesitates again, is uncomfortable.

QS: I can’t tell you.

JC: Did Nick ask you not to tell?

QS: Nick doesn't even know it's going to happen.

JC: Can you tell me more about this bad thing he's going to make you do?

Patient begins to cry.

QS: I can't. But it's very, very bad.

Ice slips down my throat, fills my chest. It's impossible. I must have gotten something wrong. Nick would never, ever *make* me do something bad. Maybe I pictured sex and misinterpreted it. Except I told the doctor that Nick didn't even know it was going to happen.

Beside me he is still reading avidly. I take in his beautiful, bright face. I must have gotten something wrong.

He looks up. "Anything there?" he asks.

I slide the papers back into the folder. "No. All garbage."



WE LEAVE EMPTY-HANDED. Perhaps in one of the hundred boxes in that storage unit there exists a scrap of paper or an old envelope with Sarah's number on it, but we're never going to find it.

I wish hadn't gone, but Nick feels otherwise. He brings up the psychologist's report again and again.

"You even described your wedding ring," he says, glancing at me with those stunned eyes before they return to the road.

I hadn't remembered the ring at all until now, but the moment he mentions it, I can see it clearly. "It was your grandmother's," I tell him. "Don't ask me how I know that because I don't have a clue. This oval diamond with tiny diamonds all around it."

He frowns. "There's no ring as far as I know."

I grin at him. "Maybe the ring you gave me sucked so my imagination embellished things a little."

He gives me one long glance before his eyes return to the road. "The ring won't suck, I promise." My heart quickens and I swallow, uncertain if I'm thrilled or panicked by how serious we've gotten already. I suspect it's a little bit of both.



WE ARRIVE at the lake late in the afternoon. Nick's still insisting we sleep in different rooms, and after what he told me I don't have the heart to try to change his mind anymore. He shows me to the master bedroom so I can change into my suit—a red bikini, naturally. As I open my bag I notice a picture of Nick and Ryan as babies on a nightstand, and it makes my heart twist painfully. I miss Ryan and I barely remember him. How bad must it have been for Nick and his parents?

I change and head downstairs to find Nick standing just inside the pantry—and wearing nothing but swim trunks. My God. How much swimming does he *do*? Because I could swim twenty-four hours a day and not even approach a stomach like his. The brain tumor isn't what's going to get me in the end. It's *this*, trying to behave when Nick is shirtless.

"What are you doing?" I ask a little breathlessly.

He backs out of the pantry. "I thought we had more staples but—" His eyes sweep over me from head to foot. "Holy shit."

I grin. "It's not like you haven't seen it before. Sort of."

He coughs. "Let's just say the experience of the red bikini is a little different in person." He walks over to me but hesitates. I'm the one who bridges the distance, going on my toes to press my lips to his, waiting to feel his self-restraint lessen just a touch. When his hands grip my hips, pulling me tighter against him, the need for him sharpens—a pulse in my belly that is half pleasure and half pain. He breaks the kiss suddenly, breathing fast as he pushes a hand through his hair. "If you are going to make noises like that we will not get out of this house."

I'm dazed and desperate to continue. "I didn't make a noise," I argue weakly.

"Believe me. You made a noise." He blows out a breath. "Let me feed you before I take this in a very different direction."

I'm tempted to object, but lunch was hours ago and it's not going to hold us forever. I need to let him move at his own pace anyway. "So there's no food?"

"Yeah," he says. "My parents' housekeeper must have tossed the food I bought last weekend. I need to run over to the Captain's Market."

"I'll go with you," I tell him. "I have to call Jeff really quick but then—" His face falls and I put up a hand before he has time to object. "I have to. His

mother texted twice today, begging me speak to him. He drove home yesterday, and it sounds like things are going poorly.”

Nick’s jaw hardens. “You don’t owe them anything.”

I wish I agreed with him. It would be such a relief just to wash my hands of the whole thing. Nick and I were meant to be. I just wish it hadn’t left so many people damaged in its wake. “That’s not true,” I say softly. “Abby was there for me after my dad died. And Jeff was too. I...I do feel like I owe them this.”

He sits on the counter, staring at the floor, his teeth grinding. “I can’t tell you what to do,” he says, a hard edge to his voice that wasn’t there before. “But all these calls and these visits of his—he’s not looking for you to *explain*. He’s trying to bully you into coming back, and he’ll use guilt and fear and anything else at his disposal to do it. He’s gotten his way for a long time, just by playing on the fact that you were too nice to draw blood.”

I think of the house in Manassas. The way Jeff returned to the topic again and again, trying to persuade me. Is this any different? “Maybe,” I reply. “But I do still need to call.”

“If he gives you shit,” Nick warns. “Draw blood. Because if you don’t, I will.”



I WALK to the grassy hill leading down to the dock, taking a single deep breath before I hit Jeff’s name on speed dial.

He answers immediately, and my stomach sinks a little. I guess I was hoping he might not answer at all. “Are you fucking kidding me?” he asks, in lieu of greeting. His words are overloud, slightly slurred as if he’s been drinking. “Six years together, our wedding invitations already out, and all I get is a two-second conversation in your lobby? That’s all I deserve?”

No matter how much I wish it wouldn’t, guilt is mounting inside me, a small shrill alarm in my blood that is only going to get louder. “I’m sorry,” I begin. “I—”

“No,” he cuts in. “It’s not your turn to talk, it’s mine. And this is some crazy fucking bullshit. You’re going to tell me to my face you don’t love me. Do you? Do you love me or was it all a fucking lie?”

I’ve never thought of Jeff as a bully before, not until Nick said it, but as

Jeff unloads on me it's striking a chord. "I don't love you in the right way," I reply, each word meted out carefully. "I care about you, but this isn't what I want."

"What, precisely, don't you want? Name one goddamn way in which I'm not what you want."

A voice inside me whispers *bully, bully, bully*. And it's not Nick's voice, oddly enough, but my own...a voice I didn't know existed until this moment. "I—"

"Because everything I am I did for you. I moved to D.C. for you. I took this job for you. I gave up everything for you and you don't even appreciate it."

"I never asked you to do those things," I tell him. I didn't want him to do those things. I remember the sick resignation I felt when he showed up on my doorstep, telling me he'd gotten a job in D.C.

"You sure didn't complain about it, though, did you? You were more than happy to let me give up football and move from one shit job to the next, all so you could stay in D.C. So I want you to tell me what's so wrong with our life. What is suddenly, out of nowhere, so terrible you just can't stand to be with me anymore?"

I never asked you to give up football. If you hadn't moved to D.C., I'd have gone back to school. I wouldn't have gotten talked into a mortgage I wound up paying on my own most of the time, a mortgage that took school off the table entirely. All the things I thought during our worst moments but kept to myself...those words are bubbling in my throat, demanding to be released. But I've done him enough harm without that, so I force them back down. "Nothing is terrible," I tell him. "It's just not what I want."

"Then what *do* you want? Because I think you don't have a fucking clue. That brain tumor is making you crazy and you're the only one who doesn't see it."

I pushed everything down for so long, and when I finally act on my own behalf he tries to convince me I'm not sane? For some reason *this* is the last straw. "What I don't want," I hiss, "is someone who insists on moving to Manassas or back home when he knows I've got no desire to do either one, and who discourages me from following my dreams. I don't want to be with someone who talks over me in the hospital and tries to start a fight with my doctor. I don't want someone who suggests I'm insane the second I speak up for myself. And you know what, Jeff? *No one* would want that. So instead of

blaming the brain tumor, take a look in the mirror.” The words tear out of me, with a thousand more behind them that I manage to keep to myself, and I don’t feel scared, the way I thought I might. I feel strong.

“Do you hear yourself?” he demands. “Tell me you hear yourself, because this is not you, and if it’s not the tumor I don’t know what it is.”

I laugh. It’s his default, I realize. Blaming me, blaming my tumor, is way easier for him than accepting a shred of responsibility. “I can assure you it’s me. You just might not recognize it because I haven’t *been* me in a long time with you, if I ever was.”

“Believe me,” he snarls, “if it weren’t for that tumor, you’d be humiliated by what an absolute cunt you’re being right now.”

I’m so stunned I nearly drop the phone. I’ve known him since I was a little kid, and I never dreamed he’d use that word, much less direct it at me. But it’s freeing, seeing how low he will sink when he doesn’t get his way. Any lingering guilt I felt releases into the air like a balloon. “You have no idea what a cunt I can be. Keep harassing me and you’ll find out.”

I hang up and turn to find Nick standing a few feet behind me with a shirt on and keys in hand, eyes narrowed to slits.

“Tell me he didn’t just call you that,” he says, his voice flat. It would be easy to mistake him for calm, but there’s nothing calm about him right now.

“It doesn’t matter.”

His nostrils flare and his fist is clenched so tight I’m worried the keys are going to cut into his palm. “The fuck it doesn’t.”

“Believe me—if you intervened, it would just make things worse for everyone involved.” My mouth twitches upward. “And I took care of it.”

“Why are you smiling?” he demands. “Because I’m fucking pissed.”

I laugh and close the distance between us, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Did you hear me? I was kind of a badass for the first time in my life. I was feisty.”

He grins reluctantly. “Yeah? And? Did you enjoy it?”

I go on my toes to press my mouth to his once, quickly, before I drop back to the ground. “Yeah, I really did.”

He pulls me back to him. “Good,” he says, his lips a whisper from my mine, “because I think seeing you feisty is unbelievably hot.”

Desire spasms low in my stomach at the look on his face. “You might not like it so much when it’s directed at you,” I reply, my voice suddenly breathless.

His lips graze my temple, my cheek, the corner of my mouth. He teases me, avoiding them, moving down to my jaw and my throat. "I think I'm going to like that even more. But I'm going to fuck you until you can't climb out of bed afterward, so wait until that's an option."

I groan. The combination of his mouth on the side of my throat, and his words, and the image of him doing exactly what he said...I want it so badly I don't know how we're ever going to avoid it. "You can't say things like that." I feel *winded*. "Or I'm going to beg you to do it."

He is hard against me, and his hands now contain a tension on my hips they didn't have before. As if the rage that was boiling in his blood only moments ago has suddenly been channeled elsewhere. "Jesus. You have no idea how badly I want you to."

I vibrate with the need for more. His hand slides from my hip to my thigh, beneath the bikini bottom. His fingers glide over me, slip inside, and he groans low in his chest—a stifled, desperate sound. This isn't carefully planned like we'd intended, but it no longer matters. I can't be content with just his fingers. He could make me come ten times, just like this, and it still wouldn't be enough. My hands are at the button of his trunks, sliding them down even as he lowers me into the grass. On an open hillside, in daylight, for all the world to see, and it just doesn't matter.

He looms over me, his eyes heavy-lidded and hazy. He pulls my bottoms to the side and his cock rests between my legs. "Jesus, Quinn. You have no idea how hard it is not to push inside you right now." I want to beg him to do it. The need pulls every cord of my body tight, except there's a tiny voice in the back of my head, warning me. "We can't."

His mouth finds mine as he glides against me. The head of his cock bumps my entrance and I gasp—90 percent want and 10 percent fear. Our eyes lock. The strain of holding back is written in every line of his face. "We can't," I repeat, "but I just need...just don't stop."

He flinches and continues to glide against me, faster, harder. He unties the sides of my bottoms and pulls down the top before his lips fasten on one nipple, hard. "Faster," I plead, my legs wrapping around his back. He complies and the sight of him above, his face strained and desperate, unleashes something inside me.

I shatter without warning, crying out so loudly I can hear the sound echo down the hill, over the water. He jerks away and spills across my stomach. "Fuck," he growls. His eyes are squeezed shut, his jaw taut with the strain.

We aren't even done and I already want more.

His eyes open slowly, still in a haze. "Jesus Christ. The last time I came from dry humping someone was the day I got my learner's permit."

He presses his mouth to my forehead and then pulls away, preoccupied and unhappy, only now glancing toward the lake to make sure we didn't have an audience. He hands me my bikini bottoms and pulls up his trunks, then strips off his T-shirt to wipe my stomach—all of it in complete silence.

"That's exactly what I was talking about," he finally says, collapsing on the grass beside me. "If you'd told me to go for it, I would have. I'd halfway rationalized it before we hit the ground. If it was anything like this before, I understand how you wound up pregnant so fast."

Except I was on the pill in London, and it's worked without exception since I started dating Jeff. I assume Nick's managed not to impregnate anyone either—so what is it about the two of us together that causes the problem? And the woman I always see in my nightmare—is it a coincidence that she appeared in his office mere hours after the two of us got together?

Of course it isn't.

I can't believe I didn't see it sooner.

"It's not about us," I gasp, sitting up. "It's about the baby. In that dream I always have of us in the hospital? We're there because I'm delivering, and that's when she stops us. She doesn't want us to have the baby."

He sits up too, looking at me warily. "Why do you say that?"

"Neither of us have a single memory of me that goes past the point when I was pregnant, right? That's where our story ends both times. I remember feeling panicked in the hospital. Scared something bad was going to happen, even before she came in, and also desperate to get through it before she could stop us." I'm talking so fast I'm barely stopping to breathe. "She keeps changing aspects of my life so we don't meet at all. The first time we grew up together, were children together, and so she changed it. The second time we grew up apart but found each other in London, and she ended that too. But she doesn't care about the two of us being together. It's only when we get pregnant that she tries to change things."

Nick stares at the water, frowning, his expression grim. "It has to be related to the Rule of Threes, right? The baby must make the fourth in the line."

"Yeah. And you know what this means, right?" I ask. "If this is related to the Rule of Threes, this kid we have must be a time traveler. And for that to

be the case, *you* have to carry the mutation as well. Which means it's just as likely to be someone in your family behind this as it is mine."

He cocks a smile. "She's not even your mother-in-law yet and you're already blaming shit on my mom." I'm so startled by that *yet*, as if it's a foregone conclusion, that my mind goes blank for a moment. Fortunately, he doesn't seem to notice. "I wondered what my role was in all this, why it's the two of us who keep being brought together, and I guess the mutation would explain it. But I don't have a lot of family either. I'm not seeing an obvious culprit anywhere. I can't picture my mother having some kind of supernatural power, and I don't have any sisters."

I pull my lip between my teeth. "You should probably ask her, though. Your mom, I mean."

He laughs. "You want me to ask my mom if she *time travels*? And I thought telling her I broke up with Meg was going to be the most awkward conversation I'd have with her anytime soon."

My gaze flickers to his face. "I guess she liked Meg, then? Is she going to be upset?" Her son was dating a beautiful doctor who will probably lead a long and healthy life. I'm not sure what exactly he got in exchange for that. His mother will probably blame me, and I won't be able to fault her for it.

His fingers slide through mine. "She's going to love you. It wasn't anything about Meg, necessarily. She just wants grandkids." He grins. "Believe me, if she had any idea how easily you can get pregnant and how badly I seem to want to do it, she'd be sending us upstairs to a bedroom right now."

Just the mere suggestion of it has me feeling needy and overheated. I lean back on my elbows, gazing up at him from beneath my lashes. "So, just out of curiosity, how badly do you want to do it?"

He groans. "Quinn, stop looking at me like that or I'm going to show you exactly how badly I want to, and I think we've both just realized how excruciatingly careful we need to be."

My tongue slides over my lower lip in anticipation. "Baby steps."

His eyes close and suddenly he's on his feet. "Fuck it," he says, grabbing my hand. "If we're going to take baby steps, we're going to start right fucking now."



WE GET TO HIS PARENTS' room. The moment he kisses me I start sinking into a darkness I don't want to come back from. I only know his mouth, his hands, the rasp of his five o'clock shadow against my skin and the sound of his sharp inhale. My bikini bottoms and his trunks are pushed to the floor and I'm not even sure how it happened.

He winces. "I'd like this to last longer than five seconds this time."

I would too. But there is absolutely nothing rational about us right now.

I step away from him and go to the bed, pulling down the covers before I lie on one side. "Come here."

He turns. It's my first real look at him completely unclothed, and the sight leaves me purring...and intimidated. He's so beautiful, but Trevor's guesses about the size of the *package* were absolutely on the mark, and something that size will be a novel experience for me if we ever get around to having sex.

He gets in on the other side of the bed and rolls to face me. My fingers tentatively press to the center of his chest and roll down an inch or two. "We were here before. Just like this," I tell him.

"Was it good?" he asks, his voice strained.

"What do you think?" I allow my hands to slide outward, to the curves of his triceps, up to his perfect shoulders, over his clavicle. His eyes flutter closed and he swallows. There is nothing hotter to me than the way he is struggling for control. "Too much?" I ask.

He pulls me against him, where he is every bit as hard as he was earlier. "No," he says between his teeth, pressing his mouth to mine, his body taut with restraint. I want to dig my hands into his hair, wrap my leg over his hip, but I sense there's something so tightly coiled inside him it could snap with very little effort.

His hand skims the outside of my bikini top, which is the only shred of clothing still separating the two of us. "Too much?" he asks.

"No."

He swallows. "You need to tell me when it is." His fingers glide over my skin—up the curve of my hip to the dip in my waist, my body strung tight with anticipation. His hands span my rib cage. His index finger moves, drawing a smooth line up my breast until he reaches its tip, already hard, waiting for him. "I need to see you."

He unties the bikini. His eyes find their destination, and then he leans down, taking my nipple in his mouth—pulling with his teeth, soothing with

his tongue—until I am flat on my back and gasping, arching fruitlessly for more. He moves his hand down my belly, slipping between my legs to find me slippery and ready for him, while I let my own hand wander, skimming that line of hair below his belly button. When my hand wraps around him, the air hisses between his teeth. “Jesus,” he groans.

His fingers glide against me, infuriatingly slow. My grasp on him is harder, from his base to the tip, which leaks copiously enough that my palm slides easily, and faster.

“Fuck,” he gasps, rolling me to my back, pulling at my knees so he can push between them.

“Nick,” I whisper, and at the sound of his name his eyes open, hazy and unfocused. “Don’t.”

He gives me the smallest nod, as if some distant part of him has heard what I said. The pace of his hand between my legs quickens and we begin to kiss. No longer careful, but sloppy, voraciously.

“Oh God,” I whisper. The moment I start to come he does too. And the world is still dark and full of stars but I already want more from him in a way I cannot explain. As if one orgasm was merely foreplay.

He supports his weight, still breathing heavily, before he finally flips onto his back, pulling me with him. “Jesus Christ,” he says. “I told you it was going to be slow and I lasted about twenty seconds.”

“As long as you keep your super sperm away from me, we’ll be fine.”

He grins. “You realize we were young and stupid those other times, right? God only knows what we were doing.”

I raise a brow. “We weren’t that young in London. And it sounds like someone’s making excuses to do something he wants to do.”

He laughs hard, as if relief and happiness have twined together. “There might be some of that going on.” He climbs out of bed and grabs a towel, wiping my stomach off, and then he is back under the blankets, pulling me against him.

“You okay?” he asks, pressing his mouth to the top of my head.

“I’m so much better than okay.”

“Me too,” he says. “Although I think more baby steps might be necessary.”

The mere suggestion of it is all I need. “How soon?” I ask, my hand sliding beneath the covers. Already he is coming back to life.

He groans. “Right now works.”



HOURS LATER, the room is only illuminated by moonlight and I'm cuddled up against him. Sometime between the second orgasm and the seventh—we ordered a pizza in the hours between them—things changed between us. I've never felt more naked or vulnerable, but his faith in me is a solid thing at his very core. Nothing I say to him is met with fear or disdain. It feels like I don't have to be careful around him the way I did before, as if I finally know I'm safe.

"I lied to you," I whisper.

"You did?"

My tongue darts out, tapping my upper lip—one of a thousand nervous gestures left over from childhood. "Earlier today I told you my mom hated the farm because it was a lot of work, but that's not why she left." I hesitate. That old warning in my head echoes: *don't tell, don't tell, don't tell*. But I'm tired of keeping secrets, and he is not like my mother. There is nothing conditional in his acceptance of me. My heart is tumbling and tripping in my chest and yet I know this is going to be alright.

"I told you about the murders on the farm. It was awful, obviously, but what really upset my mom was—" I stop as fear begins to crawl in, replacing my newfound bravery.

His hand cradles the nape of my neck, slides into my hair. "It's okay, Quinn. Just tell me."

"She thought I had something to do with it," I whisper, raising my worried eyes to his.

He looks every bit as stunned as I imagined he would. But not scared. "What?"

My nails dig into my palms. It's the first time I've ever repeated this since it happened, something my parents made me swear I'd never tell.

"The morning after Jilly died, I came downstairs and told my parents I'd gone to her house in the middle of the night and tried to stop them from being murdered. My parents had no idea what I was talking about. I was insisting it was Thursday, and that Jilly had died the day before, but they showed me the calendar and I was wrong. It was still Wednesday, and they kept telling me Jilly was fine, that it was just a bad dream. But I kept insisting. I remembered all of it. The police and the caution tape the day before, how I snuck to their house during the night and one of our dogs followed me but I was too late."

He's so still he barely seems alive. "Then what happened?"

"My parents told me it was just a dream. I started to believe them..."

My breath is coming in small pants now. His hand slides over my back. "And...?" he prompts.

"Our dog was missing. My dad heard him barking in Jilly's house, and went to check. When no one answered, he unlocked the door and discovered Jilly and her parents in there, dead. My father was the primary suspect for a while, because the dog was in there and his footprints were outside." I'm not sure I'll ever recover from the guilt I felt when the police took him in for questioning.

"Jesus," he whispers. "You must have been terrified. And that means... you must have entered the house and seen them yourself, right?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. It's like I blacked a lot of it out. But I told my parents I'd had to leave really fast. That's why I couldn't get our dog. My mother...she never looked at me the same way again."

I venture a glance at him, waiting to see condemnation or fear or uncertainty. But his eyes are the gentlest gray.

"You time traveled."

I shake my head. "I didn't know how to time travel. I still don't. I think I just kind of *knew* things as a kid. I had a premonition and created a story to explain it. Maybe I remembered it happening before. From one of these other timelines I have memories of. Like 9-11. When I saw the footage of the first plane hitting I knew what would happen next. I was just remembering it from before."

"You know you don't need to make excuses for it to me, right?" he asks. "Your mother's response was just...wrong. She never should have reacted like that."

"I can't blame her. Anyone would have been scared of me."

"I'm not," he says.

I glance at him and feel a small crack, a sliver of light entering that dark place inside me. "Yeah," I reply, smiling. "You're not."

He presses his mouth to my forehead. "I hate that you seem so surprised by that. You deserved to spend your entire life surrounded by people who treated what you could do like a gift instead of a curse."

My heart stumbles and falters. *He's wrong*. I bury my head to his chest and try to ignore the thought. But it remains anyway, a tiny undercurrent of guilt I can never quite place. There's the dread I feel when he mentions

Ryan's name. And in that dream about the hospital in London, my certainty I'd done something Nick wouldn't forgive me for—it means something. At some point, in one of these lives, I think I may have done something very wrong.



“I HAVE TO PEE.” I mean to whisper but it comes out loud enough for half the room to hear. “I think I’m drunk,” I add.

Nick’s eyes crinkle at the corners, his dimple coming out as he tries not to laugh. “Yeah, I think you might be,” he says. “And you’re a cute drunk, but my brother isn’t, so maybe we should find him and get out of here.”

My stomach sinks at the mere mention of Ryan. He was once my closest friend, after Nick—I still remember the kid who sat under my window when I had mono and played chess with me, moving pieces as I instructed. The little boy who brought me tulips when I broke my arm...tulips he cut from his mother’s garden without permission, a move he’d later be punished for. But now his bitterness about the situation has ruined everything, no matter how hard he tries to restrain it.

“Hey,” says Nick, tipping my chin up. “What’s up?”

It’s something we don’t discuss, normally. But alcohol has loosened my tongue. “He hates me now,” I whisper.

Nick pulls me toward him. “No, it’s me he hates. He thinks I stole you. And maybe I did, but I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

He kisses me, tasting like beer and spearmint, which is oddly not an unpleasant combination, but he ends it with a reluctant sigh. “This isn’t a good idea when you’re drunk,” he says.

I step into the space he’s created between us. “I think it’s an amazing idea.”

He groans and closes his eyes. “No, it’s not, because you won’t make the same decisions you would if you were sober, and if we keep going I’ll be tempted to let you make the wrong ones.” He pushes away from me, his shoulders set in a way that means there’s no arguing with him. “You pee while I go find Ryan. I’ll pull up the car and meet you in front.”

Somewhere in the far recesses of my inebriated brain I know he’s right, even if I don’t like it. I promised my mother I’d wait until I was out of high

school. It's just getting harder and harder to keep that promise.

He leaves in search of Ryan while I move through a dark hall and into an even darker bedroom in search of an unoccupied toilet. When I'm done I stumble blindly back through the bedroom, running my hand along the dresser to find my way to the door.

"There you are," says a familiar voice, pulling me against him. "I've been looking for you."

I press my head to his chest. Now that I've peed all I want in the world is to go to sleep. I'm so tired I'm not sure I'll even make it to the car. "I thought we were meeting in front," I murmur.

"I'd rather meet right here," he says, as his mouth lands on mine. Even inebriated I recognize it's not his normal kiss. It's harder, pushier, needier. He stumbles a little and my hip slams into the side of the dresser, but he doesn't seem to notice. Something is wrong with him and I can't quite form the words to ask. His hands are on my ass, gripping me the way they do when we've taken things too far and he's desperate to come. I don't understand what's happening, but when he pops the button on my jeans, it triggers an alarm inside me: Nick wouldn't. He wouldn't be like this. He wouldn't do this here.

"I don't think we —"

"I wanted you first," he says.

My blood turns to ice and I put a hand on his chest to push away from him. "What?"

The door opens. Light from the hallway illuminates the room, and Nick stands there, the blood draining from his face as he takes in my open jeans and my hands on Ryan's chest.

"No!" I cry, jolting myself awake. I sit up, struggling for air, and press my knees to my chest, my forehead between them, forcing myself to take controlled breaths. Beside me, Nick—grown-up Nick—is in a deep sleep. What did I do? Did Nick understand? Did he forgive me? Unlike all the other memories, even the bad ones, I feel tainted by this. I want it just to be a dream and I know it wasn't. My head bumps against the frame of the bed and Nick rolls toward me.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," I whisper. He pulls me down beside him. My leg slides over his and, half-asleep, he rolls toward me, pressing his mouth to my neck, his body far more awake than his brain. It distracts me from my panic of a moment

earlier. I want him to keep distracting me. I want to forget it entirely.

QUINN

Well, we made it through the night without having sex,” he announces over breakfast.

In the bright light of morning, with Nick here, grinning at me like something miraculous has occurred, the dream last night feels distant. I tell myself it was just a nightmare, a figment of my imagination. I ignore the part of me that knows it wasn’t.

I smile back. “As far as we know, anyway.”

“If I managed to have sex with you while I was asleep I’m pretty impressed with myself, given everything else we did last night.”

I look at him under my lashes. “I think you should be impressed with yourself either way.”

“Keep looking at me like that and I’m going to insist on impressing you some more,” he says, shoving his plate to the side.

The memory of Ryan hisses in my head, a poisonous snake I want to lock away in some dark corner and forget. I push my plate to the side too. “You say that as if you think I’d be threatened by it.”

“You might be,” he says, pulling me into his lap, “if you had any idea how much more I’d like to do to you.”

I feel a hum of pleasure in the middle of my chest. “Tell me more about these things you’d like to do.”

“I’d like to have dinner with you every night,” he says softly. “And wake up with you every day.”

My head tips back to look at him. “That’s way less filthy than I was expecting.”

He grins. “There are plenty of filthy things I want too, but I’m trying to focus on the bigger picture at the moment. I want you to move in with me.”

I blink, wondering if I’ve misheard him or if I’m somehow misunderstanding him. “*What?*”

“Move in with me,” he says, pulling away just enough that he can see my eyes. “I want your face to be the last thing I see every night and the first thing I see every morning. I haven’t even been trying to find a new place and I just realized it’s because I want it to be your choice too.”

My heart begins to trip in my throat, excitement that is joyful and frightened all at once. “We’re not supposed to be dating in the first place. Sharing a home might make it a little hard to keep this a secret.”

“We’ll figure something out. We’ll get a house with a back entrance and I’ll sneak in at night.”

I allow myself to picture it, him coming home to me, sliding between the sheets of our bed in the darkness the way he did in London. I want it so badly I can taste it, but this isn’t London and there are so many consequences this time around. “But we can’t even *be* together,” I reply, flustered. “Physically. You know what I mean.”

“That isn’t going to last forever,” he says. His eyes darken in a way that makes me momentarily forget we were ever discussing anything other than sex, and us having it. “It can’t. And we’ve found plenty of other ways to deal with it.”

We’ve found so, so many ways to deal with it since yesterday. Desire flares again and I struggle to ignore it. “But we’re only on, like, our fifth date. You cannot ask me to move in on our fifth date. God, I can’t even imagine how everyone would react if I moved in with you right now.”

“Fuck everyone else. And this is more like our 15th date,” he argues. “What about the night we danced at the harbor, or when we went to Baltimore, or sat up all night at the hospital?”

I laugh. “Okay. You cannot ask me to move in because it’s only our 15th date.”

“Fine,” he says. “You’re right. I’ll wait til our 16th. Which is tomorrow, just so we’re clear.”

I shake my head, but I also don’t say no. The sensible thing would be to wait...until we see where this goes, until my fear recedes. But I no longer

have forever to put the things I want on hold.



WE SPEND the day out on the water. He teaches me how to paddleboard and standing there, watching him restrain his grin as I struggle to maintain my balance, it's easy to forget about the dream last night. It's in the quiet moments, when he's pulling the boards out of the water and I'm standing idly by, that I'm struck by a fresh wave of guilt.

"What's wrong?" he asks, studying my face when he returns to the dock. I want to tell him the truth. He wouldn't hold it against me, would he? It's not even *this* version of me that's responsible for what happened, if he even blamed me in the first place. Does it count as cheating if you don't know you're doing it?

I smile. "Nothing. The wind is picking up. You think we'll be cold on the boat?"

"Why don't you grab a sweatshirt while I store this stuff?" he asks. "There's one in my bag. It's still in the other room."

I make my way back into the house. The room he once shared with Ryan rests at the end of the long hall. A part of me doesn't want to set foot inside it, wants to avoid any other memories that linger.

The room is bathed in sunlight yet feels dangerous to me. Two beds sit there, with matching navy-and-white quilts, pillows shaped like footballs. It's still the room of children. One of whom is no longer alive.

A framed photo rests on the nightstand between the two beds. Nick and Ryan as boys. Baseball uniforms and big smiles. I put the photo back where it was, wrestling with this sense of dread in my chest. There's more here, I know there is.

And I'm scared to learn what it is, because I'm pretty sure it was my fault.

QUINN

It's dark when he pulls up to Caroline's apartment on Sunday night. The streets are quiet and the air is balmy but not hot, and I wish we could just stay right here and not emerge from our bubble a little longer. He climbs out of the Jeep and grabs my bag for me.

"Don't walk me in," I tell him. "Just in case Jeff is in the lobby."

He raises a brow. "You really think that would *discourage* me from walking you in?"

There's no arguing with him, but my stomach doesn't relax until we've reached the elevator. He wraps an arm around me as we ascend and I rest my head on his shoulder, wondering what comes next. He hasn't brought up moving in together since this morning. Maybe he's giving me space, or maybe he's come to his senses. It would be best for both of us if he had, but it depresses me all the same.

When we reach Caroline's door, sadness hits me hard, out of nowhere. I don't want him to leave. He sweeps the hair that's escaped my ponytail behind my ear, his fingers and his gaze lingering on my face. "What's the matter?" he asks.

"Nothing." My smile is forced, fleeting.

He presses his mouth to mine and in seconds I give into the pressure of his lips. Wanting more, as always. I arch against him and my bag falls to the floor as his hands grab my hips to pull me against him.

His mouth is on my jawline, my neck. I purr like a cat in heat.

“More,” I whisper, grabbing the neck of his T-shirt and pulling those perfect lips of his to my own.

I feel the groan of need rumbling in his chest, feel the moment something snaps inside both of us and we stop caring that we are in the hallway. His hands pull at my ass, so that he is pressed to the junction between my legs. My dress slides up and all that separates us are his shorts and my panties.

My leg wraps around his hip and my hand is on his zipper when the elevator dings and unloads a carful of laughing twenty-somethings. It’s the splash of cold water we need. In an instant my leg is back on the floor and he’s pulled my dress down, but by their suppressed laughter and raised brows as they pass, I intuit they got an eyeful of something.

He presses his forehead against mine. “Jesus Christ,” he whispers. “I’m sorry. I—”

“Stop apologizing,” I say, pressing my mouth to his. Within seconds his hands are sliding up my thighs again and almost as fast he pushes away, pinning me to the wall so I can’t chase him.

“I’m not going to ask you to move in again,” he says, pulling his lip between his teeth.

I nod, swallowing hard on my disappointment. “It’s probably for the best.” I stare at the floor to avoid his eye.

His index finger tips my chin up to meet his gaze. “I want to move in with you more than I have ever wanted anything. Okay, there’s one thing I probably want more.” His eyes flicker over me, a half-smile on his face. “But I’m not going to be Jeff. It was pretty easy to figure out what he was saying to you on the phone yesterday. I’m not going to be one more guy who tries to push you into doing what he wants. Just know that I hate that I’m going home without you.”

And then, pressing his lips to my forehead, he turns and walks away.



INSIDE THE APARTMENT, Caroline is lying on the couch with a huge smile on her face. “You look like you had a very *satisfying* weekend,” she says.

I sink into the chair across from hers. “Not entirely the way you’re thinking, but yes.”

Her mouth falls open. “You went away for the entire weekend and didn’t

sleep with him?”

I would like to tell her everything, but it sounds too far-fetched, even for a best friend inclined to believe anything I say. “We’re just taking it slowly.”

“Oh my God,” she says, flinging herself dramatically across the couch, “a whole weekend with a gorgeous man and not a single orgasm? That’s *terrible*.”

I grin. “I didn’t say there were no orgasms. I just said we’re taking it slowly.”

She rolls toward me so fast she nearly falls right onto the floor. “I need details.”

I laugh to myself. She’s going to be so uninterested in the detail I’m about to share. “He wants me to move in with him.”

All the delight is sucked straight from her face. She sits upright. “*Not* what I was looking for. Tell me you’re not considering it?”

“I am,” I admit. “I’m just concerned—”

“Of course you’re concerned!” she shouts. “You’ve only dated him for a fucking week!”

“That’s not what bothers me,” I reply. There are things I’ve been keeping from her and Trevor, but it’s gotten to the point that I need to come clean. I’m no longer optimistic Nick and I are going to discover some magical cure. “It’s mostly that it’s not fair to him, because I have—” I stop to take a deep breath. “I have a brain tumor.”

Caroline’s ever-present insouciance fades. “What?” she whispers. “If this is some kind of joke it’s not funny.”

My eyes shift away from hers. “It’s not a joke. I’ve known for a few weeks, but I didn’t want to mention it because I was worried you and Trevor would treat me differently. And I was sort of hoping I’d find a cure.”

She stares at her knees, her cheeks sucked in hard. “I guess you didn’t, then, if you’re telling me now,” she finally says in a tiny voice.

My heart aches. She’s been my best friend for a decade. I wish I’d found a better way to break the news. “Right. I didn’t.”

She presses her fingers to her temples. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.” Her voice is barely audible.

“I didn’t want everyone being upset and serious and talking in hushed voices, reminding me something’s wrong. I want you and Trevor to continue to be assholes whether I’m dying or not.”

She heaves a sigh and throws her head back against the cushions, looking

at the ceiling instead of me with eyes that are suspiciously bright. “I promise I’ll go back to being an asshole. Just give me a minute.”

I wait for her to pull herself together. “This is bullshit, Quinn,” she says through a raspy voice. “You’re finally going back to school and you’ve jettisoned your loser fiancé and...this is just bullshit.”

My throat tightens a little. I sort of agree, but I’m realizing life really doesn’t work out like the movies do. Sometimes things are unfair, and they just remain unfair. “But you see the issue,” I finally continue. “Nick should be finding someone he can have a future with, and that person might not be me. It probably *shouldn’t* be me, given that it could impact his job.”

“He’s a big boy,” she says dismissively. “Just think about if the positions were reversed: if he had the tumor, would you want to be moving on, or would you just want to capture every day with him you could?”

I know the answer in my very bones without even considering it. I’d want to capture every day and I’d be in agony if he wouldn’t allow me to do it. “I’d want to be with him,” I admit. “But even with that, I’m still scared. This won’t make sense, but I just feel like I might...care about him too much.”

“That is literally the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, aside from a minute ago when you said you were going to move in with a guy you just met. You might care about him *too much*? What does that even mean?”

I curl into myself. “I don’t know.” I really don’t. I only know it feels dangerous somehow to get even closer to him than I already am.

Caroline shakes her head. “I can’t believe I’m encouraging this, because I think it’s fucking insane, but you’ve spent most of your life cowering and—”

“I haven’t been *cowering*,” I argue.

She arches a brow. “Really, Quinn? Dropping out of college because your mom was a mess? Getting back together with Jeff just because he quit his job to follow you here? For whatever reason, you have been shying away from greatness your entire life. So tell me something: how’s that worked out for you?”

My arms fold across my chest. I can’t really argue. I just hate what she’s saying. “Not especially well.”

“No, it’s worked out fucking *terribly*. So I say if something you want scares the hell out of you, go for it. Because the other way isn’t working.”

QUINN

The following afternoon, Nick steps into one door of the imaging waiting room just as I emerge from the other. Despite his sweet, lopsided grin, he looks more like an Olympic athlete about to take over a press conference than a doctor collecting a patient. My eyes move straight from his face to his shirt to his belt, cataloguing what I'd like to remove in precise order.

"Escorting me back to your office?" I ask under my breath. "Don't you have people for this part?"

For just a moment he allows the back of his hand to tap the base of my spine before it falls away. "Yes, Miss Stewart, I do," he says quietly. "But there are a few patients I escort from imaging personally."

I glance up at him. "The ones you're moving in with?"

His smile lifts high on one side and I get a glimpse of that dimple I love. "Yes. Those. The agent is meeting us at five."

He holds the elevator open for me and I walk in, shaking my head. I looked at the listings he forwarded. They're way too expensive. I knew housing in Georgetown was insane, but I didn't know it was *this* insane. "I could pay four months of my mortgage for the rent on a fixer-upper here. We should just look at apartments."

He bends toward me and his laughter brushes my ear, husky and warm. "I am a neurologist with no kids and no debt and nothing I would like to blow my money on more than this."

I purr under my breath at his nearness and he moves away, leaning against the opposite wall of the elevator. It's a respectable distance for any security cameras, but the look in his eyes is positively filthy. Or maybe that's just where my mind had already gone, because his shirt is unbuttoned just enough to get a glimpse of that chest I so enjoyed this weekend, and already I am picturing my mouth pressed to the hollow in his collarbone as I pull his belt loose.

"I don't know what you're thinking," he says, "but if these elevators weren't monitored by security I'd make you demonstrate every one of them."

The doors open and I slide past him. "You're all talk," I say over my shoulder.

"Such a smart mouth," he replies, the words half spoken and half growled. "Let's see how smart it is when I get you alone."

I raise a brow. "Easy to say when there's no place we *can* be alone."

"You think?" he asks, opening his office door and pulling me inside. The moment the door shuts, I'm wrapping my arms around his neck, pressing my face to his blue oxford, and breathing in the smell of his skin beneath the starch of his shirt.

"God, I've missed you and it hasn't even been 24 hours," he says, seeking my mouth. My hand palms him outside his khakis, and his fingers slide up my inner thigh, beneath the elastic of my panties. "You're already wet," he says with a quick, rough breath. "Get on the desk."

As much as I would love to do just that, I have something else in mind. "Maybe I feel like being the one in charge today," I reply, dropping to my knees. I slide his khakis down and then slowly pull him free of his boxer briefs.

His head falls back against the wall. "Fuck."

I saw plenty of him this weekend but it was mostly prone, in the dark. Seeing him like this, in a well-lit room, is another thing entirely. His size is... intimidating, which should probably make me nervous but instead only makes me want all the things we *can't* do even more.

The hallway outside echoes with footsteps, chatter, the wheels of a gurney. Inside here, though, it is whisper-quiet, his small sharp breaths the only sound as I begin to tease him with my hands and my tongue.

For so much of the time I've known him, Nick has been the expert, the one leading the charge—calm, responsible, stoic. But here he's at my mercy, and I can feel his desperation in the hitch of his breath, in the way his fingers

—already tangled in my hair—struggle not to press to my scalp, to demand more. “Jesus, Quinn,” he finally begs, “you’re killing me. Stop playing with it.”

I obey, finally giving him what he wants. The heat of my mouth, my hand firm around his shaft, his hips bucking to chase me whenever my head backs away. His fingers lose their restraint, begin to press. He looks down at me and then his eyes squeeze tight. “You have no idea how badly I want to fuck you right now,” he grunts. “None.” I try to take more of him, until he hits the back of my throat. He gasps and I do it again.

“Oh fuck,” he says on another gasp. “I’m gonna come.” With the smallest pained cry he lets go, my head held tight in his hands until he sags backward against the wall, his chest heaving.

I rise from the floor, unsteady with want. I’ve never been the girl who licks her lips after giving a blow job like some porn star but he’s made me into that girl and I’m not ashamed of it. He watches me through eyes that are heavy-lidded, drugged. “Holy shit,” he says, pushing both hands through his hair. “Get on the desk.”

Watching him come just now left me so worked up I can barely stand it, but I force myself to be responsible. “We need to meet the realtor.”

“Get on the fucking desk,” he growls. He backs me into it and lifts me himself before I can even think of arguing, shoving my sundress around my thighs and dropping to his knees. His mouth is between my legs, against the cotton of my panties, inhaling me, his tongue pressing against the fabric but not moving beyond it.

The tables have turned and it’s me who’s desperate now. I throw his words back at him. “Stop playing with it.”

I feel his low laugh against my skin, but he slides the panties down, kissing along the inside of my thighs, nipping the skin a little, before he pulls a knee over each shoulder to hold me open. His tongue flickers over my clit—fast, hard, relentless—and just as I feel myself getting close he changes tact—long sweeps of his tongue like I’m a melting ice cream cone at the height of summer. He increases the pace, groaning over my skin, and then slides a single finger inside me.

I come before I even have time to warn him it’s going to happen, with a small cry I barely manage to muffle. My eyes are still closed, my arching back hasn’t even fallen back to the desk, I’m still *coming* and I already want more. I want the feel of him inside me like I’ve never wanted anything in my

life, enough to beg, to bargain with God, to do whatever is necessary.

He apparently does too. When my lids finally flicker open, he's rising with that drugged look on his face once again, pushing me farther back on the desk, so hard it's almost impossible to believe he just came five minutes ago. He stands between my legs, the tip of his cock resting in precisely the right place. I feel the first hint of pressure, the fullness that will come, and I know I should stop him, but *God* I don't want to. I've never seen him look quite as desperate, as needy, as he does right now. He wants to shove inside me as badly as I want him to. His nostrils flare, the tendons in his neck strain, and then he leans down and rests his forehead against my chest, trying to regain control. "God, this is hard," he whispers.

"I know." It just doesn't seem to ever be satisfied—the need. No matter how many times he makes me come, in the end I find myself exactly where I am right now—trying to justify doing the one thing we cannot do.

He finally backs away, leaning against the wall while I brush my hands over my sundress and pull my hair back again.

"Am I presentable?" I ask.

He grins at me as he pulls up his pants. "Are you asking if you look like you just came?"

I laugh. *He* certainly looks like it—his eyes are glazed over, his cheeks flushed. "I'm pretty sure there aren't a lot of moments I *haven't* looked like that of late, but yes."

He pulls me against him, pressing his mouth to my forehead. "You just look hotter than hell. You're lucky we have to meet that agent or I wouldn't be letting you out of here today."

I straighten his tie and then, with his hand at the small of my back, he opens the door and we step into the hall—where we come face-to-face with a woman in scrubs who goes pale at the sight of us. With a sinking stomach I realize the woman is Meg. She isn't done up like she was at the market a week ago, but it's almost easier to appreciate her perfect skin and bone structure without the makeup and curls. It's petty, but I wish his ex was less attractive. Especially since she'll be the one who's still here when I'm gone. And based on the look in her eyes, I think she'll be more than willing to take him back.

Nick exhales. His shoulders relax but it's a forced gesture, the same thing he used to do before swim meets. His hand falls away from my back but it's too late. She saw how we emerged from the office and her nose crinkles in

disdain at his attempt to cover it up now.

“Hi Meg,” he says. “This is Quinn.”

Her eyes move toward me, not nearly as full of loathing as I’d expect. She’s angry, but there’s something else there too. It takes me a moment to realize what it is: pity. Did Nick tell her about my brain tumor? Does she know I’m dying? I’m not sure why it bothers me so much, but it does.

She says nothing. Just stands still as a statue and then steps around us. Nick pulls my hand and leads me to the elevator, while I grapple with a stew of sick thoughts I wish I was not having. I stare at the floor, wanting to pull my shit together so when I voice a thought, it’s the right one.

“Hey,” he says, pulling me to him. “I’m sorry about that. Are you okay?”

I press my head to his chest and close my eyes, needing comfort and distance at the same time. My imagination is off to the races now. She’s moving into his apartment after all. She thinks their lives might just pick up where they left off when I die, and I wonder if, at some level, he’s thinking they will too. If I were a better person I’d want that for him, wouldn’t I? I’m not a better person. The idea of him with anyone but me makes me feel like I’m going to be sick. I step away from him, leaning against the wall. “You told her, didn’t you?”

“Told her what?”

“You told her I’m dying.”

He swallows. “She knows about the tumor.”

She doesn’t *just* know about the tumor. That look she gave me wasn’t the kind you give a person who might recover. “And is she just...waiting for you?” I ask. My words snap like lightning but there’s grief behind them. “Letting you go spend time with the dying girl, knowing the two of you will pick up where you left off in a few months?”

I’m not sure what I expect from him in response, maybe blithe reassurance, a little pat on the head. Instead, he stops the elevator entirely and closes the distance between us until I’m pressed to the wall and so close to him I can barely breathe. “Are you serious right now?” he asks. “Please tell me that was not a serious question.”

I exhale. “I wouldn’t fault you for it,” I reply, my voice small. I think it’s true, although the pain is so fresh right now it’s hard to imagine. “I mean, you deserve to have a life after I’m gone. But...”

“It may have escaped your attention,” he says, voice low with fury. “But I am crazy about you. I’m so crazy about you I seem to care very little about

everything that mattered a month ago. Not my reputation. Not my job. Not my future. All that exists for me is the time we have left, and after that, honestly, I can't imagine wanting to go on."

The pain swells and releases, and I weep, my face pressed to his shirt. It can't all be about seeing Meg or the possibility that he'll move on. I've been building to this for a while. Every day I spend with him just makes it hurt even more that it can't last. "I'm sorry."

He holds me tight to his chest. "Not as sorry as I am."

NICK

Our talk in the elevator lends our house-hunting trip a new gravity. *This is probably the last place she will ever live.* It focuses me. I want to choose the perfect home for us. The one where we might have stayed forever.

We follow our agent over the cobblestone streets. She's talking on the phone, so I tug Quinn closer and press my mouth to her hair. She's recovered from the incident in the elevator but I'm not sure I have. *It's actually going to end*—for some reason, it didn't seem real until now. She's already preparing herself for the day when I'm here without her. The emptiness I feel at the idea of it terrifies me.

"Like anything yet?" I ask.

We've seen two townhouses and a few apartments. They were fine, but none of them were *enough*. I'm beginning to wonder if I'm just asking too much.

"They're all great," she says. "I just can't get past the idea of spending that much on a place."

"It's really not that much," I counter. "Everything we've looked at isn't a ton more than I'm paying for a one-bedroom right now."

"I guess you take the girl off the bankrupt farm, but you can't take the bankrupt farm off the girl," she says with a small laugh.

I raise a brow. She's implied before that she grew up without money, but she's got this inheritance and her mother's new home couldn't have been

cheap. It doesn't add up. "Your definition of bankrupt and mine must be different. Your mom looked like she was living pretty well to me."

She shrugs. "My dad had this massive life insurance policy. About two million. And 200 grand of that was earmarked for me. That's what I'll be using to pay for school."

I shove my hands in my pockets, thinking. People who are broke don't take out insurance policies that size. He'd have had to pay premiums on it he could have barely afforded. "Doesn't it seem a little strange that your dad would have taken a policy that large?" I ask.

She nods. "Yeah, especially because my father was the cheapest man alive. He once went an entire day in Philly in the summer without anything to drink because he couldn't find a water fountain and refused to pay for a bottle." She smiles a little at the memory. "But thank God he did. We found out about it at the last possible moment, right before the bank was going to foreclose."

"It wasn't in his will?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. If I hadn't dreamed about that policy I think we still wouldn't know."

The agent is on the phone again so I stop, tugging her hand to face me. "You dreamed about it and then it happened?"

She laughs. "I see where you're going with this, but no. I just had a dream in which I remembered talking to him about needing a policy and when I woke up I knew where to look."

"Rose said you may be time traveling in your sleep without even realizing it."

She shakes her head quickly. Too quickly. For some reason her default position is to deny that there might be anything supernatural going on, no matter how bizarre the circumstances. "My friend Caroline dreamed her missing passport was under her toaster once and found it there. Does she time travel too? Sometimes we just forget stuff, tuck it away some place we can't reach it when we're awake."

I'll table this for now but we're coming back to it later. I have a feeling her mom did a number on her where this stuff is concerned, and I need to rectify that immediately.

We arrive at the next house, a single-family Cape Cod on Q street. "The owners have spent the whole year redoing the interior," the agent tells us as she opens the door.

Given how many “redone interiors” we’ve seen that have fallen short today, it doesn’t mean all that much, but I’m more willing to keep an open mind once we get inside. It’s in better shape than a lot of the places we’ve seen, and the owners have put in wide-plank hardwood floors and a new kitchen. Quinn’s unwilling to tell me she likes anything simply because she’s worried about the money, but I see the way her eyes soften when we enter, and once we pass through the kitchen I know for certain. The back of the house is a wall of windows, looking out on a private garden. It reminds me of my flat in London. Quinn stands at the French doors with this look of wonder on her face, taking it all in. And that’s the look I’ve been waiting for from her.

“This is it, eh?” I ask, smiling.

She forces her mouth into a straight line. “How do you know that?” she asks. “I haven’t said a word.”

I twine my fingers through hers. “How do I know anything?”

“Yes,” she replies with a small laugh. “This is it.”



OUR CELEBRATION DINNER takes place at an Italian bistro two blocks away from our new home. Seeing her across from me—incandescent, pink-cheeked with the excitement of what we are doing—makes any consequence I suffer at work worthwhile.

Beneath the table her legs cross, brushing mine by accident. I try to ignore the images that flash through my head. This afternoon in my office took the edge off but that edge is back, and it’s multiplied. What we’re doing was supposed to quench the fire but instead it just seems to spread and spread. I’ve been picturing her bent over this table at least once a minute since we sat down. I was picturing her bent over my desk until we got here.

“What’s the matter?” she asks, tilting her head, brow furrowed. “Are you worried about moving in together? Please be honest.”

“I was thinking about how badly I wanted to fuck you on my desk this afternoon,” I reply, watching the pink in her cheeks deepen. She’s a little shocked but there’s a gleam in her eye that tells me she likes it too. “How I wanted to bend you over and push that dress around your hips and pound you loud enough for the whole fucking floor to hear. Honest enough for you?”

She tucks her head, smiling. "That was pretty honest."

"Sorry," I reply. "To use your diet analogy, anything I do with you is like eating a single potato chip. All it does is remind me how much I love potato chips."

"And then you want to fuck them over your desk."

I laugh. "Exactly. I want to fuck the potato chips into oblivion."

"Is it weird that this conversation is turning me on?" she asks. "I'm picturing your dick in a bag of Ruffles and I'm a little wet."

And all she has to do is use the phrase *I'm a little wet* and I've got an erection that will make leaving the restaurant impossible. I shift in my seat. Adjust myself. It doesn't help. "We need to talk about something else," I plead. "Something that will not make me think about what you just said."

"You mean that I'm *wet*?" she teases. "So wet you could slide right—"

"Stop," I say with a low groan. "Please."

She laughs. "Fine. Then we can talk about logistics. That's a boner killer if there ever was one. What happens when the hospital finds out we share an address? I could just have my mail sent to Caroline's, I guess."

It's occurred to me too, but I refuse. I get one chance at this life with her and I'm going to do it right. "No. We aren't half-assing this. Look, I've told the few people I've discussed this with that we dated in college. If push comes to shove, it's what I'll tell the administration too. We'll just hope for the best."

It's on the tip of her tongue to argue. I can see the struggle in her face. She wants to remind me it might not last that long. It feels like she's always trying to remind me of that, as if I could possibly forget it. "God, I wish we could find Rose and just ask her a few more questions," she says instead.

"You know," I venture. "There is one way we could talk to her."

Her brows raise nearly to her hairline. "There is?"

"You could time travel back to her."

A laugh escapes, and then she sees my face. "Oh my God, you weren't joking."

I don't know why she persists in acting like this is some crazy impossibility. Haven't we had enough proof she's capable of doing *something*? "Rose said you could do it. She said you've *been* doing it."

She shrugs. "They're just memories though. I mean, you've remembered things too."

"Not like you do," I argue. "Not with that level of detail. And what about

the insurance thing? Don't you find it pretty freaking hard to imagine you completely forgot a conversation like that with your father? And then the new policy turns up the very next day?"

She waves her hand. "Coincidence."

"That's one hell of a coincidence. All these things you just know too. Think about the story you told me about your neighbor: you dreamed you'd tried to save your friend and the dog followed you. What if it wasn't a dream? What if you really did travel backward to save her?"

She pauses. For a moment I see a hint of fear and then she shakes her head and laughs. "Come on, Nick. If I'd tried to go back to save her, I'd probably have died too. Yes, there've been times when I've known stuff I shouldn't, like about architecture, about you and London. But that's because we lived them before, somehow. The thing with the neighbor was...I don't know what it was, but there's no way I actually went there. If I don't know how to time travel now, I sure as hell didn't know how to then. It's like I told you before. If we actually existed in some parallel time, maybe I read about the murder there."

Her refusal to believe she's capable of doing this is almost pathological. If I, the biggest non-believer of all time, can buy into it, why the hell can't she? "Dreaming you had a conversation with your father about life insurance and waking to discover he actually acted on it is a once-in-a-lifetime," I tell her. "Dreaming your neighbor has been murdered and that the dog followed you when you went to save her—and being right? Another once-in-a-lifetime. So how many other times did you dream something that came true? Don't just reflexively argue with me. *Think* about it."

She folds her arms over her chest, and I see the temptation to argue written all over her face. But she doesn't. And after a moment her shoulders sag, as if she's finally admitting the truth to herself. Another second passes, and then her eyes go wide and she gasps. "Oh shit."

I look behind me, expecting to see Jeff or Meg or my boss. "What's wrong?"

"It's possible."

She looks so shell-shocked I reach across the table and grab her hand. "I didn't expect you to come around to my viewpoint so quickly. What's the matter?"

She takes a single deep breath and a controlled exhale, her eyes wide. "I just remembered something that happened. It was so weird at the time that I

didn't even tell my parents about it and then I lied so they wouldn't know." She looks up at me in shock. "I think I might have shot a kid out of a tree."

I had no idea what she might say but it wasn't that. "You *shot* a kid?"

"With a slingshot," she amends. "This little asshole, Robby Harding. He used to sit in this tree, shooting birds with his BB gun. And one day he threw the dead birds at my back as I ran home, trying to get away from him. I fell and was all scraped up afterward, bad enough my mom thought I might need stitches. But that night I dreamed..." She flushes, looking anywhere in the room but me. "I don't know. It will sound ridiculous."

"Tell me," I urge. "You dreamed what?"

"I dreamed that I waited in a tree behind him and shot him with my slingshot, and he fell. When I woke in the morning, all my cuts had healed. It was as if they'd never happened. I wore pants for a week just so my parents wouldn't ask how I could have healed overnight like that. And Robby..." She flinches. "Robby was in the hospital with a broken leg, because he'd fallen out of a tree the day before. He told everyone he got hit by something. I thought it was karma. But maybe it was just me."

I laugh. Maybe it's wrong, but the idea of little Quinn shooting a kid out of a tree is so damn cute. "You're not going to start telling me about all the people you wished dead who died the next day, right?"

She squeezes her eyes shut. "Don't even joke about it. I mean, what if I did?"

I grab her hand beneath the table. "You aren't a murderer."

"I may have shot a kid out of a tree," she argues. "He could have broken his neck. But if it's true, if I'm really doing this," she says, "why can't I do it when I'm awake?"

The question is a relief. I've been convinced for weeks that she is time traveling, but I needed her to actually believe it before I could push her toward the next step. "Have you *tried* to do it when you're awake?"

She looks at me blankly. "Of course I haven't."

I lean in and tighten my hands around hers. "Then maybe it's time you did."

QUINN

That night, and into the following morning, I'm still thinking about what Nick said. About Robby and the life insurance and all the other bizarre incidents in my childhood. Maybe it should be enough to convince me I can time travel, but it really isn't. There have been a thousand things in my life I'd have changed if I could. If I really had the ability, it would be more than some shadowy thing that occurs when I'm asleep. Nick is pushing this because he needs something to believe in. I suppose I need that too. But it's not going to be this.

The next day I go to campus to fill out some last-minute forms. I've always loved the Georgetown campus. Half of it is deliciously old and reminds me more of Hogwarts than anyplace else I've ever been, although I suppose that's no longer true if you count London.

Nick meets me when I'm done, bringing us lunch from the hospital deli, and we sit under a tree, hidden from passersby and the blinding August sun. When we're done eating, we lie side-by-side while I geek out over the courses I'm signed up for and he tries to get me to admit to shooting children other than Robby.

"Just give me a number," he says. "Approximately how many kids do you think you've shot?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "One, at best."

He bites his lip, trying hard to keep a straight face. "Okay, maybe I'm being too specific. How many kids have you injured, stabbed, maimed,

decapitated, or otherwise wished ill upon?”

I roll my eyes. “*Wished ill upon* is a ridiculously broad term. I’m guessing I *wished ill upon* plenty.”

“In ways that led to their deaths?” he asks with a cheeky grin and I swat him with the folder I got from Admissions.

“You’re a terrible human being.”

His smile fades. “Speaking of terrible human beings, have you heard from Jeff?”

I wish he hadn’t brought it up. Discussing Jeff is definitely not how I want to spend the only time I’ll be with Nick until this evening. “He showed up at Caroline’s this morning on his way out of town. Building security finally asked him to leave.”

His jaw grinds. I know he hates the idea of me being confronted by Jeff without him, but the alternative—me *with* him—is so much worse. Jeff would love to find someone to blame for what’s gone wrong. “When are you picking up your stuff?” he asks with a heavy sigh.

“Tomorrow,” I reply. “He has a meeting in Harrisonburg every Wednesday, so I know he won’t be home.”

His frown deepens. “Wait til I get off work and I’ll go with you. I don’t want you over there without someone, and besides, you’ll need help carrying stuff, right?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think I will and the absolute last thing I need is for him to see you involved in any way. Besides,” I add with a grin, “at least he doesn’t sit around accusing me of killing children.”

He gently pushes me to my back, looking around before he leans down and bites my lower lip. “That’s for comparing me unfavorably to Jeff. And I’m joking about the kid thing, but have you given anymore thought to it?”

“Killing a child?”

He laughs. “No. Time travel. Just try it.”

I squint up at him in the sunlight. “Kiss me again nicely and I’ll consider it.”

I hear his small hum of satisfaction as he leans back to me, pressing his sun-warmed mouth to mine, which opens and begs for him to sink farther, do more. “Please try,” he whispers.

He pulls away, leaving my body thrumming with a desire to skip this time-travel nonsense and yank him back to me. Except if I skip it, we probably have no future. “I have no idea how.”

“Rose said something about fastening on a memory, right? So try that. Lock onto a memory and see if you can move toward it.”

I desperately wish he'd drop it. I probably won't succeed, and if I do, there's so much that could go wrong. “What if I wind up somewhere naked?”

“Good point,” he says, his thumb brushing my lip. “Go somewhere you can land naked safely. Like the dock last weekend.”

The sun flickers through the trees overhead and his hair glints gold, his eyes a dusky blue I could never replicate. There are moments, like this one, where I wonder if he can even be real. “Landing on your dock naked seems like the most dangerous thing I could do.”

His mouth curves upward. “True. I promise to behave,” he says with so little sincerity that I'm chuckling as I shut my eyes.

“Fine. If I succeed, do you have any special requests? I was going to offer to go meet you back in the treehouse until I realized how creepy it would be, given that I'm now 28.”

His eyes light up. “I assure you, 16-year-old me would be willing to overlook that fact,” he says. “But if it's off the table, go buy stock in Apple and Microsoft.”

I arch a brow. “That seems slightly...I don't know...unethical?”

“Please don't let your ethics get in the way of us owning a Caribbean island once it's all figured out,” he says. “But I'd rather just find you on my dock. Naked is preferable. That bikini was easy to remove, so that's also an acceptable option.”

“Your erection is making it hard for me to think about time travel,” I reply.

He laughs. “I'm not thinking about time travel so much at the moment either.”

I picture that weekend anyway. It feels safe here, with him beside me. I picture him shirtless, those navy swim trunks hanging low. I picture the perfection of his stomach, the small trail of hair just below his belly button that I wanted to trace with my tongue.

My eyes open. He's watching my face, his eyes dark with want. “It's not working,” I tell him.

“What were you just picturing?” he asks. He knows. Maybe not the specifics but I can tell just by the look on his face, the twitch of his lips, that he knows where my mind went.

“You in your bathing suit. You have this tiny little trail of hair right

here,” I reply, running my finger just above his belt. “I was imagining tracing it. With my tongue.”

“Fuck,” he whispers. “I shouldn’t have asked.” His eyes are hazy as he leans down to kiss me. My hands slide into his hair, tugging at it, and with a low groan, his mouth opens, pressing mine to do the same. My fingers slide over his warm skin and land at his waistband before I even realize what I’m doing. I flinch and break the connection, feeling the hum of his skittering heartbeat pressed to mine. We move in together next weekend. I hope I learn a little more restraint before then, or we are really going to be in trouble.

NICK

After lunch, I get back to the office and call my mother. I don't even fully admit to myself why I'm calling because it's insane that I'm already thinking the things I am with Quinn.

My mother, as always, sounds both relieved and irritated when she answers. I try to be decent about calling home, but it's never enough—especially the past month. I should have been better about it. If things were different, she'd have two sons and possibly a few grandkids. I'm sure her retirement is a lot less full than she imagined. "I haven't heard from you in ages," she says. "You're avoiding us."

I can't deny it. Her questions always seem to focus on my personal life, and for the better part of the past month I wasn't sure how I'd answer. "I texted."

"That's not the same. When you don't call it's because there's something you don't want me to know. So go ahead and give me the bad news."

I laugh wearily. "There's no bad news. I just had a question. I was wondering if you or Dad might have inherited a ring from Grandma Reilly or Grandma Sawyer?"

"What kind of ring?"

I feel idiotic even bringing it up. But Quinn hasn't been wrong once. "An engagement ring."

"*Engagement?*" she asks, her voice kicking up an octave or two. "Finally! If you need money for a ring you know we're happy to help, although with as

much as you make I can't imagine you need it. Does Meg have any idea? I thought this day would never come."

I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. How could I have forgotten what a big deal this will be to my mother? She's had her hopes pinned on Meg for a long time, no matter how many times I told her to unpin them. "I broke up with Meg."

"What?" she cries. "No! Meg was perfect for you."

I lean back in my chair and close my eyes. "You never thought she was perfect for me, Mom. You just thought she was good enough to provide you with a grandchild someday."

She exhales heavily. "At the rate you're going I might as well stop hoping for that at all. What happened? I thought everything was going so well."

"I met someone," I admit. "Before you jump all over me, I didn't cheat. I didn't even think she was a possibility...but meeting her just confirmed I didn't feel the right way about Meg."

"So you're already with someone else and you want to *propose*?"

Yes. I'd marry Quinn tomorrow if I thought she'd say yes, if it wouldn't be so fucking insane to ask when we haven't even been together for two weeks. I don't expect my mother to understand this, and while I'm slightly embarrassed by how irrational it must seem, I'm not embarrassed enough to drop it. Quinn will want that ring and no other. I'm sure of it.

"It's kind of complicated, but...it's something I can see happening."

"Nicholas, I cannot believe you're this serious with someone and you never even *mentioned* her to us."

Part of me wants to keep Quinn a secret and part of me wants to tell everyone I meet that she is mine. I opt for the middle road with my mother. "Like I said, it's been...complicated. Her name is Quinn. She—"

"Quinn?" my mother demands. Her voice is sharp, startled.

I sit bolt upright in my chair. "Yes. Why?"

She is silent for a moment. "No reason."

She's lying. She wouldn't have cut me off like that if it was really nothing. "Mom," I plead, "is there something you're not telling me? Did you already know about her somehow?"

"No," she replies. "I just...I have dreams occasionally, about you and Ryan, fighting over a girl."

I inhale deeply. Somewhere inside, my mom holds memories of Quinn too. There's not a doubt in my mind that Ryan and I would have fought over

her. We fought over everything. “And the girl’s name is Quinn?”

There’s a long moment of silence. “Yes,” she finally says. “I’m sure it’s nothing. It’s just an unusual name so it’s kind of odd.”

“What happens in these dreams?”

She hesitates again, reluctant to say it aloud. “They’re just a combination of make believe and real life, like all dreams are. You and Ryan are younger at first and you’re in this fistfight over her, and then all of a sudden Ryan is older and getting in that truck with Tyler, but I know it’s because of her. I always just figured she was kind of symbolic.”

“Symbolic how?”

“You and Ryan were at each other’s throats once you hit adolescence. I never knew what exactly you were competing for, if it was recognition from us or from your peers or something else. But I thought maybe she was the symbol of whatever it is you both wanted.”

Fuck. It’s a gut punch, those words. Because I think maybe Quinn was more than a symbol. I think of the immediate spark of rage I felt when she first mentioned dreaming about Ryan at the homecoming dance, before I knew anything else about it. Was our belligerence in this life just some remnant from another one, with Quinn at its core?

My mother begins to cry. “It’s my fault. I should have found a way to make it stop.”

“Mom,” I say softly, “no one could have stopped us. It wouldn’t have made a difference anyway.”

“You don’t know that. If you’d just gotten along...” She trails off but I already know what she thinks. If Ryan and I had been getting along I’d have gone to that party with him. I’d have carted his drunk ass home before he got in Tyler’s truck. I know what she thinks, and what’s worse is I agree.

After a moment she coughs, clears her throat. “So when do we meet this new girl? We’re leaving for Brazil this weekend but maybe we could drive up when we get home?”

“Sure,” I reply. “And you’re positive there’s no ring? Something in the family?”

“Nick, are you having money issues?” she asks. “We’re going to have a long talk about finances if you’re outspending *that* salary.”

“No. I just think Quinn would prefer a family heirloom over something new. That’s all.”

“Well, my mother’s still alive and they never found your father’s mother

after she disappeared, so I assume that means they didn't find a ring either."

There's a chill at the base of my spine. My grandmother died long before I was born, when my dad was small. But I never heard she'd *disappeared*. "I thought she drowned."

"No one ever knew for sure. They never found a body... Everyone's best guess is that she drowned in the river."

I'm struck silent by the admission. I think of Grosbaum telling us about his missing wife. Is it a coincidence my grandmother disappeared too?



"YOU'RE *WHERE*?" Quinn asks.

I push my way past the crowd heading to baggage claim. Given I left straight from the office with nothing but my gym bag, I won't be needing to join them. "Florida. Sorry...I tried to call on the way to the airport, but I got your voicemail."

"I heard your message but I just don't understand. You left town just because your grandmother disappeared decades ago?" she asks.

I expected her to be as excited as I am, because this is our first real lead since Rose. She very clearly is not. "Quinn, she *disappeared*. Think about it. Your aunt disappeared too, right? And Grosbaum's wife? Disappearing isn't a standard way for people to die. And if she was a time traveler then my grandfather might know something. Or at least he might know someone who can help us."

She sighs. "Okay. I'm just...well it's stupid but I'm just disappointed. I was really looking forward to seeing you tonight."

"I was too," I tell her. "You have no idea how much. But we don't have time to waste. Any information we get could be the piece we need." And I really hope to God I find that piece here.



IT's dark by the time I arrive at my grandparents' house. In the moonlight, I see the banks of the small inlet where my grandfather took me and Ryan fishing when we were kids. It's easy enough to imagine how someone might disappear around here. Between all the water and the gators, I'm certain my

grandmother isn't the only person in town who just never made it home.

Grandma Sue, the woman my grandfather married a few years after his first wife disappeared, is the only grandmother I've ever known. She's always doted on me to such an extent that it was a shock when I learned we aren't actually related. She flutters around me from the moment I walk in the door. "Why didn't you tell us you had a meeting down here?" she asks. "My friends will be so upset they missed your visit."

"Sorry. It was just kind of last-minute." It feels a little disloyal that I'm here to ask about her predecessor. My grandfather has been a good husband, I'm certain, but there's apparently never been any doubt where his heart lies. Sue deserved better than second place.

We eat dinner while Sue grills me, asking in every roundabout way possible when I'm going to settle down. "We need babies running around the house again," she says. "How much longer are you going to make us wait?"

"I don't know," I reply. I think of Quinn pregnant; I think of us raising a child together. That it will probably never happen makes my chest tighten. We'd have been good parents. "I'm not sure that's in the cards for me."

I call Quinn after dinner but only get her voicemail. I know she's out with Caroline, but I call it again, just to hear the sound of her voice, that tiny rasp when she says her name, the sweetness of it. I just saw her a few hours ago and I already miss her. What's it going to be like if she leaves me for good?



THE NEXT MORNING, my grandfather and I head out on his boat, just as the morning sky morphs from black to lavender. Fishing has always been more his thing than mine, but the traditions involved—waking up at dawn, the thermos full of coffee, and a small cooler with the breakfast my grandmother prepared for us—brings back memories.

"Don't imagine you do a lot of this in D.C.," my grandfather comments as we cast our lines.

"I don't think I'd want to eat anything that came out of the Potomac."

He nods. "So why don't you tell me why you're really here," he says. "Because no one travels to a medical conference with nothing but a gym bag. Did your dad send you to check up on me?"

I laugh to myself. My grandfather never did miss much. "No." I close my

eyes and take a deep breath. “I did want to ask you some questions, though. About your first wife.”

A shadow crosses his face, a kind of sinking, deep-seated grief I suspect is always present, just hidden.

“What do you want to know?” he asks, his voice slow, gravelly with caution.

I lean forward, my elbows pressed to my knees, and turn my head toward him. “Do you really think she drowned?”

There’s a flash of something in his eyes, *knowledge*, gone nearly as soon as it appears. “No one knows for sure,” he replies. “Why do you ask?”

I hesitate. There is a ninety percent chance he’s going to decide I’m nuts by the time we get off this boat. “The woman I’m seeing, Quinn, may have a genetic mutation, one I think I may have as well. And I’m trying to figure out where I got it.”

He grows still. “What kind of mutation?”

I adjust my line, as if his question or my response are casual. “The kind that might be responsible for someone’s disappearance. Something not a lot of people seem to know about.”

My grandfather is silent, staring hard at the water. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Quinn has a brain tumor,” I reply quietly. “Unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Growing with no sign of blood flow to the site. We’ve been told she can do things other people can’t.”

“What sort of things?” my grandfather asks.

I’d hoped to get him to talk without being forced to admit what I’m getting at. If I’m wrong he’s going to think I’m crazy. “Time travel.”

He’s quiet. He’s quiet for so long I grow certain he’s looking for a diplomatic way to end our fishing trip entirely before he goes home to tell my parents I need medication. “And you’re wondering if your grandmother did it too,” he says. “Because she disappeared.”

I run a hand through my hair, realizing how insane it sounds when stated outright. I jumped on a plane and flew down here like a fucking lunatic because a woman who lived next to the water disappeared over fifty years ago. “I know it sounds crazy,” I tell him. “We’re just a little desperate.”

He doesn’t look at me but stares straight at the water. “It doesn’t sound all that crazy to me,” he says quietly.

My head jerks toward him. “Are you saying she *did* it?”

He sighs. “She did.”

I grip the fishing rod, stunned into silence. I came here because I thought it was possible, but learning it’s true still shocks me. It also means Quinn’s theory may be right—I carry at least one mutated gene and she carries two. Which means there’s a 75 percent chance any daughter we have would be able to time travel.

“It’s funny,” my grandfather muses, “how you can convince yourself of anything until you learn otherwise. Once I knew the truth about your grandmother, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t wondered. She had these eyes like nothing I’d ever seen before, and she was so beautiful we couldn’t walk down the street without getting stares. But I never questioned it.”

I didn’t either. I noticed the same things about Quinn—the way people stare as she passes, the color of her eyes—and it never occurred to me that she was anything more than genetically blessed. I guess it’s human nature to explain away the unusual. Quinn denies all these strange incidents in her childhood meant anything, my mother and I both have these bizarre dreams we rationalize away. We’ve spent our lives insisting unusual things were normal. Maybe it’s time we stopped.

“So when she disappeared,” I ask, “did you know what happened? Do you know where she went?”

His face sags. He stares ahead at the water, but his mind is somewhere else. “I was trying to save money for medical school and she kept saying she could go back a few years. Make an investment for us. I always said no. I didn’t want her to do it, not until your father was grown, because it was a dangerous business, time travel. Never know what you’re going to find or where you’re going to get stuck. And I think she mostly didn’t do it, but the temptation was just too strong I guess. A few months after she disappeared I got a financial statement from a broker. We somehow had 400,000 dollars in stock, which was a fortune back then. I researched it, of course. It looked like the original investment was made in 1921. I kept hoping she’d come back—” He flinches. After all this time, the memory still hurts. “Obviously, it didn’t work out that way.”

I can already feel it, the sick turning of the gut I’d have in his place. That could be Quinn. She could go back and I’d have no fucking way to find her. “How would she have gotten stuck there? Couldn’t she just time travel right back out?”

He pulls off his hat and straightens it. “She once told me if you go back a

ways, it sometimes takes all you've got. You're so exhausted you have to recover before you can jump back. And if you stay someplace too long you weaken until you *can't* get back. But I don't think that's what happened to her."

"No?"

He shakes his head. "She was only 25 when it happened. If she somehow just got stuck in 1921, she'd have still been alive when she got to 1962. Even if she didn't want to come back to us, she'd have let me know somehow that she was okay."

I'd pictured it as something simple, like a jump over a yardstick. It's not simple at all. It's deadly, and here I've been pushing Quinn to try. "I'm so sorry," I whisper.

He looks over at me for the first time since the conversation began. "I've had almost sixty years to get used to it. Sounds like you're the one in need of sympathy. This girl of yours—there's no other way to cure the tumor? Radiation? Chemo?"

I grit my teeth as I realize I'm going to lose her whether she time travels or not. "No," I reply. "And maybe I'm fooling myself, thinking that if we can just talk to the right person, someone who knows what's going on, we can solve it. But I have to try."

"I wish I could help," he says. "But your grandmother was the only person I ever knew who could do it."

"She never mentioned anyone? A friend? A family member?"

He shakes his head. "There are rules," he says. "I don't understand them, but there are rules about who you tell. She never even told me until she was pregnant—said we had to share a blood relative."

I think about Rose and her initial refusal to help. "What would have happened if she'd told you before?"

He shakes his head. "I never knew a lot about it. Didn't want to know. But she implied if you got caught it was bad for everyone involved."

I try to ignore the twist of guilt in my stomach. If any teenager was duplicitous enough to get away with breaking some time traveling code of ethics, it was Rose.

We sit in silence for a while longer. Nothing is biting, so eventually we turn toward home. It's only as we're climbing off the boat that my grandfather's hand lands on my shoulder. "I hope you know what you're doing. It's a hard life."

“Time traveling?”

He shakes his head, staring at the rope in his weathered hands. “No,” he says. “Being the one who has to stay behind.”

QUINN

It feels like days since I've seen Nick and it hasn't even been twenty-four hours. Caroline and Trevor took me out last night, but even they couldn't cheer me up. He'll be back tomorrow. It's pathetic how badly I want to beg him to come home tonight instead.

It will be an unpleasant day on so many fronts, I think, as I pull into the driveway of the house I shared with Jeff. It's probably the last time I'll ever come here, but what makes me unhappy right now is the fact that I wound up here in the first place. I never wanted this house. I never wanted the furniture we bought. I never wanted to live in the suburbs. The thrilling part of being in D.C., after my years on the farm, was how lively it was. I loved that I could walk to restaurants, that I never had to drive anywhere if I didn't want to. It was Jeff who wanted what we had, and I gave up everything again and again, without a fight. It's almost as if I was scared to ever want anything of my own too much.

I walk back into my former home, uncertain where to start. It would be frugal for me to take some of the furniture, but I really don't want it. I go through the kitchen and find that I don't really care about anything there either, even though I purchased most of it myself. They were *supposed to's*. Because you're supposed to have a fancy cappuccino machine, even though I rarely drink cappuccinos. You're supposed to have the panini press, the salad swiveler. They were things I chose in an attempt to fill the hole in my life, but it was like pouring water into a pit made of sand...far too soon the space

it took up siphoned into nothing and left me empty again.

I move to the closet instead, carefully folding the clothes I wore to work, the T-shirts I bought on sale at the J Crew outlet or Ann Taylor Loft. After about ten minutes I dump them out of my suitcase and put them in a bag of donations.

I'm not taking anything into my new life with Nick that I don't absolutely love.

The suits go, as do the blouses, the heels I spent too much on but never wore because they killed my feet. I throw in the pantyhose, the slippers, the worn, old bras I held onto for no reason other than frugality. Caroline was right when she said I'd spent my life cowering. From my career choices to my boyfriend to the clothes I wore, my whole life has been about shrinking myself, trying to become less than what I was because it felt like the safest course. With Nick it no longer seems necessary.

In the end it only takes two suitcases and a few boxes to hold every single thing I actually love: my favorite jeans, my softest sweaters, the dresses and shoes I can't live without. A few books, a few photos. It's astonishing, and depressing, that in a two-bedroom home crammed with stuff, I loved and wanted so little. All of it fits tidily in the trunk of my car. I think I had more stuff in the college dorm room I shared with Caroline than I have right now.

I arrange for the bags of clothes I'm giving away to be picked up, and I'm in the process of dragging the last one outside when Jeff turns into the driveway. I freeze, rooted to the spot as if I've been caught breaking in. I wasn't really scared of him before, not the way Nick thought I should be. Now I realize how foolish that was. There's no reason for him to be home today at all—and certainly not at this hour—unless he somehow knew I was here.

He climbs from the car, stalking toward me with narrowed eyes. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Inside, I quake, but I refuse to let him see it. "Why aren't you in Harrisonburg?" I counter.

"What's the point?" he asks. "I was only at that job because of you. And you didn't give a shit."

The guilt trip he's given me over the jobs he's held here is getting a little old. It's not like I pushed him, and in fact with his current job I lobbied against it because it was such a bad fit. "I never asked you to take that job."

"Don't try to act like it had nothing to do with you. You could have told

me no at any point and you never did.”

I swallow and stare at the ground. He’s being an asshole, but he’s also right. I should have shut him down when he first came to D.C., but I was so desperate to keep the peace, to do what my father wanted and to feel safe, that I wound up doing something so much worse: I stayed with someone I was never meant to be with. “I’m sorry,” I say quietly. “And I know an apology makes up for nothing and can’t give you those years back, but I’m truly sorry I put you through this.”

He steps closer. I fight the urge to back away. “Tell me something. How much of this bullshit is about your tumor, and how much of it is about Nick fucking Reilly?” His arms cross over his chest, his legs spread wide as if he will actually block me from heading to my car. “I knew he was after you from the first fucking moment he looked at you. You weren’t even *conscious*, and I knew. That’s what this is about, isn’t it?”

My heart beats faster. I’m shit at lying, and he’s right. If I’d never met Nick, I probably would have continued with my blinders on, marrying a man I didn’t deeply love, going through the motions of a life I never wanted. But the truth won’t work here, not with him as angry as he is. “No. It’s not.” Liars look up and to the left, as I recall, which is probably why my gaze desperately wants to veer away from his. “I just want this year, if it’s going to be my last, to be perfect.”

“Bullshit,” Jeff hisses. “You’re covering for him because you know how much trouble he could get into for this. You’re his patient. I’ll bet he’s not even allowed to date you, is he?”

My hands start to tremble, and I shove them into my pockets in case he notices. “Is it really so hard to accept that I don’t think you and I are meant to be together? We don’t like the same things; we don’t want the same things from our future. You’ve been unhappy with every decision I’ve made for months. Don’t start trying to make this about someone else.”

His nostrils flare. “You know why I know it’s about someone else? Because you’re too goddamn weak to have ever left on your own. You’d never have been willing to hurt me and my family and your mother unless there was someone else. And the second I get proof I’m going to make that asshole pay. He’s taking advantage of a dying girl. You’re probably not the first one he’s done it to, but you’ll definitely be the last because when I’m done with him, he’ll be out of a job.”

My stomach starts to spin, whipping fast and faster until the knots are tied

so tight I'm not sure they'll ever come loose. "You sound insane," I reply, doing my best to sound flippant when it feels like I'm about to vomit on his shoes. "And you're just convincing me I made the right decision."

I walk away, swallowing my pain and my terror until I'm behind the wheel of my car. And then I drive exactly one block away, press my face to the steering wheel, and cry, wondering exactly how much of Nick's life I'll have ruined before this is through.

NICK

My grandfather and I enter the house after what could only be considered an unsuccessful trip—no fish, no information that can save Quinn. Just a new kind of anxiety eating at my gut when I imagine losing her the way my grandfather lost his wife.

It's barely been twenty-four hours since I saw her, but it's already been too long. I miss the curve of her lips, the way her lashes lower when she's thinking something she shouldn't. The raspy note at the base of her laugh, the velvet skin on the underside of her wrist. I want to hear about her day and tell her about mine. In an ideal world I'd do a whole lot more than all of that.

Just after lunch I call her. My relief when she answers fades the moment I hear the choked sob in her voice. "What's wrong?" I push the bedroom door closed behind me. "What happened?"

She takes a deep inhale, trying to pull herself together. "I went to go get my stuff from Jeff's. He showed up as I was leaving and..."

I'm going to break every bone in his goddamn body if he laid a finger on her. "I thought he was out of town."

"I did too." Her swallow is audible. "But he's convinced I broke up with him over you. He didn't seem to have any actual proof, but he said he could get some and that he'd ruin you."

The news tires me more than anything else. Neither of us has time for this bullshit right now. I sink onto the bed. "I knew the risks when I started this with you."

“Nick,” she whispers, “I can’t be the reason you lose your job.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. God, I wish we weren’t having this conversation over the phone. “You won’t be. Let’s just cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“We’ve already *come* to it!” she cries. “Jeff is going to do whatever it takes to find proof. And there’s nothing about this that is good for you. I’m just taking up a year of your life that should be spent finding someone you can actually end up with. It was selfish of me to even consider it. And I definitely can’t let you risk your job over me too.”

I grip the phone tightly, appalled by the shift this conversation has taken. I thought I was on safe ground but it’s as if I’ve suddenly found myself scrambling up a crumbling rock wall instead. “Quinn—”

“No. Don’t try to convince me.” Her voice breaks. “When you care about someone you want what’s best for them, and I’m definitely not what’s best for you. I’m trying to do the right thing here. And I need you to let me.” She hangs up the phone and I sit here in shock, staring at it in my hand.

She’s crazy if she thinks I’m going to let her walk away over this.



I’VE TOLD my grandparents that something came up. We say our goodbyes, and my grandfather walks me to the car, resting a hand on my shoulder as I reach for the door. “Are you sure you want to get involved with this girl? Even if you save her, it’s not likely to end well.”

As if I wasn’t painfully aware of that fact. “It’s too late,” I reply. “It was too late from the day we met.”

He sighs, reaching into his pocket. “I thought you might say that,” he replies, holding out a small black velvet box. “It was your grandmother’s. I never told anyone I had it because I’d have to explain why her ring and her clothes were still here the day she left. But she once told me that if something were to happen to her, I should hold onto it for the right time. She never told me when it would be, exactly, but I feel like it’s probably now.”

I pop the box open. It’s a very large oval diamond, surrounded by tiny ones. The exact ring Quinn described.

Which means my grandfather and I have had this conversation before.

QUINN

I've managed to stop crying but just barely, and my tears threaten to return every thirty to forty seconds. Trevor and Caroline gather in the apartment with a bottle of wine in an attempt to cheer me up. I appreciate the effort, but the truth is there isn't enough wine in the world to make me anything other than despondent right now.

"You're being ridiculous," says Trevor. "Jeff can't follow the two of you everywhere."

"That's what I said!" Caroline shouts. She's been drinking at a much faster rate than the rest of us.

"He wouldn't *have* to follow us everywhere," I say quietly, staring at my glass of wine. "He'd just have to follow us *once* successfully."

Caroline throws her hands in the air. "This guy is obviously your soul mate! And when you find your soul mate, you can't just curl up in a ball and decide to skip it because you've hit a little roadblock. Especially with a dude who looks like *that*."

I wish they'd leave so I could sleep. I want to sleep until this is over with, whatever *this* is. Grief, pain, shock. Except it's not going anywhere soon. "It's not a *little* roadblock," I reply. "He's going to lose his medical license because of me if this continues. Do you know how many years he's invested in this? How much money? Four years of college, four years of med school, four years of residency. All to end up empty-handed because of me. It would be selfish to even allow him to continue this."

“Well, I think it’s selfish of you to try to make his decisions for him,” replies Caroline.

I swallow hard, running a finger over the rim of my wineglass. “I hung up the phone earlier today and he never called back, so he must agree at some level.” It’s for the best he didn’t argue with me about it, even if it sort of hurts at the same time.

The two of them continue to argue until the doorbell rings. Then they exchange a glance and jump to their feet.

“You invited someone else?” I ask.

They both ignore me. “Get your purse,” Trevor says to Caroline.

“Wait...” I demand, rising. “What’s going on here?” I start moving farther from the door. Knowing Trevor, he’s called a male prostitute to cheer me up.

“You, my little sad sack, are going to do some chatting,” says Trevor, heading toward the door with Caroline at his heels. They open it and walk out, which is when I hear a voice I’d recognize anywhere.

Nick.

He walks in, so beautiful I want to weep at the sight of him. He’s wearing a navy-blue tee that makes his eyes look impossibly blue and ends right at his biceps. An arrow saying *look at my magnificent arms* couldn’t do a better job of calling attention to them. “It’s ridiculously unfair that you’re wearing that shirt,” I whisper, my voice hoarse with the need to cry.

His eyes move over me—hair, face, moving down to the floor and back up—before he remembers to shut the door. “I needed to use every advantage available,” he says, with the barest of smiles.

I want nothing more in the entire world than to fall into his arms like this is some dumb movie, but it’s not. “I assume Caroline and Trevor are behind this?”

He shakes his head, his eyes never leaving mine. “Nope, this is all on me. Fortunately, they both agree you’re being insane.”

I groan. “It’s easy for them to say that. They’re not the ones who will lose a medical license because of this.”

He crosses the room and presses me to the wall. “I’m not going to lose my license either.” His mouth lands on mine, hard. He kisses me with a desperation I feel all the way to my bones, one that matches my own. His hands move from my hips, slide into my shirt and it’s only when I gasp—the good kind of gasp—that he backs away.

“Fuck,” he groans. “What am I doing? I’m trying to persuade you to take me back, but not like this.”

I inhale sharply, wishing I could regret it as much as he seems to. So far, my attempt to do the right thing is going really poorly.

He pulls me against his chest, tucking my head safely beneath his chin. “I’ve been sick to my stomach since you called.”

My breath hitches, a small sob trapped in my throat. “If I were healthy it would be different. But I’m not. How can I let you risk everything for what will amount to a year or two of your long life?”

He pulls back just enough to see my face. “I can only assume you don’t feel nearly as much for me as I do for you or you’d get this. I don’t care about the years after you’re gone. I’m not even sure I *want* those years. I just want the time you have left, every fucking minute of it.”

I feel light entering more of the dark space inside me, as something that’s waited a lifetime to blossom begins to unfurl. But this isn’t about me. “That’s exactly how I feel too, but Nick...you should have seen the look on his face. He was really determined. He’s going to stop at nothing until he has proof.”

He gives me that cocky grin of his. “We’ll just need to be a little cleverer than him which—no offense—shouldn’t be that hard. He might try to trail you for a little while but eventually he’s going to tire of coming up empty-handed. In the meantime, we figure out what’s behind the tumor and if we can cure it, and maybe we find your aunt or somebody else who can fabricate a past for the two of us.”

I sigh. “Okay. I’ll try harder—to time travel, I mean. Maybe I can—”

“No,” he says fiercely. “I don’t want you to try anymore.”

My eyes widen. “Why the sudden change?” I ask. “A day ago, you were pleading with me to try.”

“That’s before I talked to my grandfather. We can discuss it later, but suffice it to say, it’s a lot more dangerous than I realized. We need to find another way.”

“What if we don’t, though?” I ask.

“We will,” he says. “We’ll find another way because there’s no other choice. You’re my life. You’re the only part of it I want. And we will find a way to fix this.” I love his words and they break my heart at the same time, because there’s this deep sadness to his eyes as he voices them, a sadness I can’t explain. Maybe he’s finally decided I’m not going to beat this. Whatever the reason, I have no doubt I’m the source of his pain, and that I’ll

continue to be for a long, long time.

QUINN

Three days later, the perfect little house becomes ours. I oversee the delivery of our new bed and couch, then wait impatiently for Nick to get back from packing his place so we can christen one, or both. The last time we were alone for any extended period of time was last Monday in his office. Needless to say, we are both about to burst.

“Honey, I’m home!” he calls. His voice echoes over the bare hardwood floors.

I lean over the upstairs railing, smiling down at him. “I think we might need some rugs.”

“It’s perfect like this,” he says, taking the stairs toward me, two at a time. “I can demand a blowjob from any room of the house without even raising my voice.”

He walks right into me, lifting me as he continues on a path to our room. “Are you planning to demand a blowjob?”

He grins. “Of course not. I’m assuming you’ll offer one long before I get to that point.” He presses his mouth to mine and holds it there a moment before he sets me down in our room. “So this is the bed.”

“This is the bed. Is it everything you hoped it would be?”

“All I hoped for was a flat surface big enough to pin you to, so yes, it’s perfect.” He glances at the corner of my room, to the boxes I carried in from the trunk of my car, and frowns. “You already started carrying stuff in from Jeff’s? I told you I’d get it.”

I shrug. “There wasn’t much. I’m already done.”

His frown deepens. “Wait. You’re saying that’s *it*? That can’t possibly be all of your stuff.”

I slide my hands into his. “The tumor kind of brought everything into focus. I decided I was only bringing the things I really loved.”

This, to me, is a good thing, but when he averts his gaze I remember how much he hates even the smallest reminder this is all going to end. “Nothing about your tumor is normal,” he says, turning away to drop his wallet, phone and hospital ID on one of the boxes. “Your last MRI showed it hadn’t grown at all. Possibly it was even smaller. And also—it’s not affecting you. At all. I mean, aside from those seizures, you haven’t had a single symptom, right?”

“I guess not.”

“You should have,” he says, turning back to me. “So maybe it’s...this is going to sound crazy, but maybe it was just some weird time-traveling thing and it’s all solved now that you’re doing what you were supposed to. We’re back together, you’re getting your degree...maybe that’s it.”

There’s a desperation in his voice that saddens me. It’s what he wants to believe. And, God, I want to believe it too. I wish I’d never said anything—today is a day for us to enjoy what we have, not destroy it with thoughts of what’s to come. I slide my shorts off as he watches. “I feel pretty healthy at the moment,” I reply. The T-shirt is removed next.

His eyes flicker over me, gone sharp and feral in the blink of an eye. “You *look* exceptionally healthy.”

I walk over and lie back on our brand-new mattress. “How do you feel about taking advantage of an exceptionally healthy girl?”

He runs his tongue over his lip and unbuttons his shorts. “I’m feeling better about it by the second.”



THAT NIGHT we order Chinese food and eat it in our garden, on a blanket under the stars—a romantic way to deal with the fact that our kitchen chairs are backordered for the next month.

“When was the moment you knew you’d break up with Meg?” I ask him.

He sets his plate off to the side and leans back on the blanket. “That night in Baltimore. Sometime between leaving the diner with you and jerking off in

the shower at 3:00 a.m. because of you.”

“You didn’t,” I gasp, wide-eyed and completely turned on by the idea at the same time.

He grins. “Are you kidding me? We were two seconds away from having sex when I woke up. There was no way I was falling back asleep without taking care of it. What about you? When did you know you were breaking up with Jeff?”

I try to focus on the question, but really I’m a little too busy imagining him in the hotel shower. I might need him to stage a reenactment. “It’s not nearly as exciting as your story. There’s almost no jerking off in it at all.”

He pulls me down beside him. “I kind of figured that much. But seriously, when did you know? I mean, you went to the airport with Jeff so it had to be kind of last-minute, right?”

I stare at the sky, wondering if I’m looking at the Big Dipper or just a bunch of random stars. “My dad told me this story when I was a kid, about the good wind and the bad wind, and how you had to let them both in. I always thought it was his way of telling me not to be scared of storms, but that morning on the way to the airport, I finally realized it had nothing to do with weather. It was about opening yourself up, risking all the bad that can come along with the good, because without it you will suffocate. And I knew I was suffocating.”

He gives a low laugh. “Wait, are you saying I might be the *bad* wind?”

I roll toward him, taking in the upward curve of his generous mouth. Right now, it’s hard to imagine him being the bad *anything*, but that’s precisely what makes him so dangerous. “You’re both, potentially. Because the more you let someone in, the more they’re able to hurt you, or drive you to do something terrible.” I get a sudden flash of Nick’s face when he walked in that room and saw me with Ryan, the agony there, and there’s a tightness in my chest—dread. Is it just residual guilt, or is it because I made a mistake after that, a grave one? That party was the night Ryan died. I already know I shot a kid out of a tree. What else might I have done that I couldn’t take back?

“I’m never going to hurt you,” he says, pressing his mouth to the base of my wrist.

I focus on the warmth of his mouth against my skin, trying to drive away thoughts about Ryan. “People hurt each other all the time without meaning to. It doesn’t have to be malicious. Like Darcy. When she dies it will destroy

her parents. I'm not sure how anyone recovers from that."

He brushes the hair back from my face and lifts my chin toward him with his thumb. "That's why you're hedging your bets," he says. "You dumped Jeff and you were willing to risk being with me, but you're still scared. You're still trying to hold a little of yourself back."

I'm on the cusp of arguing when it strikes me: he's right. I agreed to *marry* Jeff but for some reason that never seemed risky, while with Nick it feels like I've gotten behind the wheel for the first time, and the only way I can stay safe is by riding the brake the whole way. "A lot could go wrong with us," I whisper.

He pulls my head onto his shoulder. "And a lot could go so, so well. I can wait. You're going to let me in eventually."

That's what I'm scared of. Because it feels dangerous, being with him. And I'm worried I won't find out why until it's too late.

QUINN

We spend a blissful week acting like newlyweds. He goes to work, and I putter around the house, putting our meager belongings away, going to the store every five minutes for mundane things like trash cans and spatulas, the sort of stuff that doesn't seem important until you discover it's missing.

I've also tried to time travel a bit, without success. I know Nick doesn't want me to—he's too worried about what happened to his grandmother. Every night he comes up with some new way to find Sarah's address: he tells me we should check my dad's will, go to the state department, search my parents' computer. But it seems like it would be so much easier if I could just go back and find Rose myself, and it's frustrating when I come up empty, time and time again.

For the most part though, we exist in a happy little bubble, and it's easy enough to shrug off my fears. We cook together, shop together, sit out on a picnic blanket under the stars each night to eat our dinner. We could have gotten plastic chairs until the real dining chairs arrive, but I sort of like our little tradition. I like that there is no TV, that we aren't on our phones, that I get his full attention and he gets mine. And then we go to bed, where we do a lot of things, but we don't have sex.

Which is getting more difficult to deal with by the day.

It shouldn't be. We should be fine just as we are. But I miss it, desperately...not with Jeff, but with Nick. I miss something I don't even

remember having and he does too. Each night I see the toll his restraint takes, the way his teeth clench as he tries not to head in directions we can't go.

We are in bed and he is above me, separated only by the paper-thin fabric of my boy shorts, and he's got his eyes squeezed shut, wanting the feeling of being pressed against me and tortured by it all the same. "Maybe we should," I whisper. I'm not sure if it's logic or desperation speaking.

His eyes open, a hazy blue, with that drugged look they get when he's in this exact position. "What?" he says.

"Maybe we should just do it," I whisper. "We have no idea what will happen this time and I'm on the pill. So maybe we should."

He is hard as steel against me the second the words emerge, and then a sort of panic comes over his face. "God, Quinn," he groans, pushing harder against the fabric, burying his face into my shoulder. "Do not say that to me right now." His leg swings off me, and in a flash he's gone, nothing but a blur walking straight out the bedroom door.

I guess my timing could have been better, but I don't feel like it was a mistake. I'm no longer sure what I believe in, but I know being with Nick makes me happier than anything in my life ever has, and every step we've taken together has only improved things. It's just hard to imagine sex would be any different. It's hard to imagine something so good could end up going bad.

Nick returns a minute later, and lies down beside me. "I'm sorry I left like that."

"Why did you?"

He laughs unhappily and pushes his hair off his forehead. "Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to stop every time? Suggesting it might be okay at *that* moment, when my defenses are down...could have been disastrous. I had to get out of here because it was the only way to make sure I didn't lose it entirely. I mean, what were you thinking?"

"What I'm thinking is that we don't know everything," I reply quietly. "And that we are supposed to be together, and there is obviously something driving this. Fate or history or something else. Maybe it knows more than we do."

His hands go to his hair again. "*Don't*. Don't go down the path of justifying it. It fucking kills me, the fact that Jeff has had something I want this badly. And every day it gets harder. But until something changes, until we know you could actually survive a pregnancy, we cannot take that risk.

Because as badly as I want it, I want you more. I want you to survive and be here with me for the next seventy years.”

I don’t realize I’m crying until he pulls me against his chest and brushes away my tears. I want everything he does. I want to give him those seventy years. And I’m so bitter right now about all the things—fate, the crazy blond lady, whatever—conspiring to separate us again.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON I go to the hospital to visit Darcy. I’ve been in a few times, but this is the first where I can say definitively that she’s getting worse. She’s thinner and pale and the circles beneath her eyes have gone from lavender to a bruised sort of blue. There’s a wheelchair in her room permanently now, which leads me to think she no longer roams the halls freely dragging her IV behind her.

It’s late in the day when Nick walks in to join us for the cutthroat Connect Four tournament now underway. He smiles at Darcy and Christy before he allows himself to look at me, but when he does there’s a single long moment where I forget there’s anyone else in the room.

“Who’s winning?” he finally asks.

“Darcy. Never bet her money on this game.” I’m not trying to pump her up—she’s truly unbelievably good at it, and every time she wins I’m swallowing down a lump in my throat. It’s so fucking unfair that I’m dying now that I’ve found Nick. And it’s so much *more* unfair that she’s dying before she’s experienced anything at all, before she’s gotten a chance to even uncover that amazing potential inside her. I hate that she’s getting worse. Even over the course of our game she’s been falling asleep and then jolting awake a minute later, without seeming to realize she was asleep at all.

Christy smooths a hand over her daughter’s head, where only tiny wisps of light hair remain. “That’s exactly what Darcy’s father says.”

Nick raises a brow at her. “Any progress with that?”

Christy shoots a wary glance at her daughter, who’s dozed off again. “Nothing yet.”

I know, from Nick, that Darcy’s father was stationed in Afghanistan and is recovering from serious injuries there. The hope is he’ll be stable enough to be transported back to the States before Darcy gets too ill. Except, based

on how thin she is and those circles under her eyes, I'm beginning to wonder if he's going to be too late.

"Quinn," Darcy says, opening her eyes as if nothing's happened, "what's Prom?"

My lips press together and I try not to think too hard about why she's asking me this. "It's a dance. In high school. Girls wear long dresses and boys wear tuxedos."

She drops a yellow disc into a row, basically trapping me. No matter what I do, she will win on her next turn. "Who did you go with?" she asks.

Nick's eyes flicker to mine, waiting for my answer. "Um...his name was Josh. Josh Casey."

"Did you kiss him?" she asks. "Was he a football player?"

"Darcy," her mother scolds softly, "that's a little personal."

I smile at them both. "It's okay. Yes, I kissed him. And no, he played hockey. He still does, actually. He plays for Vancouver now."

"I just won," she says, dropping in her last yellow disc. Her eyes close for a long moment, but then open again. "Are you still friends?"

I shrug. "I guess. He moved away so we only see each other at Christmas." When I glance up at Nick, I find his jaw is set. And he looks absolutely miserable. He can't possibly be jealous of someone I dated a decade ago, but it would certainly appear, to look at him, he is exactly that.



HE SAYS nothing about it as we leave the hospital. We maintain a safe distance between us until we're outside and have crossed to Reservoir Road. That's when his fingers twine with mine. "I hate that," he says quietly. "I hate that there were other guys. It feels like whoever's changing your life has stolen something from me. I should have taken you to Prom. I should have been your first kiss, your first everything, and I fucking hate that I wasn't."

I sigh. I've tried not to let myself think about it, but there's always a small weight in my chest, knowing he's been with other people. From the sound of it, a *lot* of other people. "I know. It bothers me too."

"And with fucking Josh Casey of all people," he mutters. "You went to Prom with Josh fucking Casey. I can't believe you never mentioned you used to date a pro athlete."

I shrug. “I don’t think of him as a pro athlete. I just think of him as a nice kid from the town over who was obsessed with hockey. And I didn’t sleep with him, if that helps. Jeff’s the only person I’ve ever been with.”

“It helps less than you think. No guy wants to picture his girlfriend with the center for the Canucks in any capacity.”

I laugh and lean my head against his arm. “He was a kid, Nick. And actually...this is going to sound crazy, but I think it’ll help both of us: I want to see pictures. I want to see who you took to Prom. I want to see the first girl you ever slept with.”

He stops walking entirely. “Why the fuck would you want to see that?” he asks incredulously.

“Because I think it’ll make me feel less jealous. I’m picturing supermodels, but really, they were just girls. And Josh Casey was an 18-year-old boy who was badly in need of a haircut and had terrible taste in music.”

“I’m taller than he is,” he mutters, unappeased.

I go on my toes to kiss his cheek. “Yes, baby, I know. Now let’s go find some pictures.”



BECAUSE I JUST UNPACKED, it doesn’t take long to unearth my childhood photo album, but Nick’s box of memorabilia is a little harder to come by, so it takes a few more days before we finally get around to the big *reveal*. When I show him the infamous Josh Casey of a decade ago, his shoulders relax. “Okay, you were right. I feel better.”

“Your turn,” I reply, nodding at the box. It will bother me, no matter who the girls are, that I wasn’t his first for anything. But I think it will normalize it a little—as long as they’re all not as attractive as Meg.

He digs into a large box he’s brought up from the basement and stares at the contents in dismay. “I have no idea what half of this crap is,” he says, handing me a pile of papers. “But the yearbooks may be at my parents’ house.”

I begin looking through the stuff he’s handed to me. “Are you hoarding love letters from old girlfriends?”

“Doubt it,” he says, retrieving another stack of miscellaneous cards and photos, “but you seem to remember my life back then better than I do, so you

tell me.”

My smile fades as I pick up a picture of Nick and Ryan. “You really were almost identical.”

“Yeah, even my father confused us occasionally.”

Was I really at fault that night I confused them? I know there wasn’t a bone in my body that thought I was kissing Ryan until the horrible moment when he said *I wanted you first*. But should I have figured it out sooner? Did Nick continue to blame me in some quiet corner of his brain?

He comes to a sudden halt, staring at something in his hands, a half-second of hesitation before he shuffles the paper to the back of the pile.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

He glances at me and away, handing the paper to me. “I kept the flyer from Ryan’s memorial service. I don’t know why. I can’t seem to get rid of it.”

I don’t want to take it.

But I find myself reaching for it anyway, and darkness closes in the moment it’s in my hands.



EVEN AS RYAN’S coffin is being lowered into the ground, I’m thinking about the party.

Nick sits beside me, crushing my fingers with his own, his face pale, empty. On the other side of him, his mother is bent low, shoulders shaking. I did this.

It was so simple, time traveling back a few hours the night of the party. I stood there watching Nick and Ryan beat the shit out of each other—because of me—and it felt like the world was caving in. And it was so unnecessary, when I had the power to fix it.

It never really occurred to me that I shouldn’t go back. I’d done far harder things with my mother over the preceding years. It was all so easy. Traveling back, convincing Nick to skip the party. And when I was in the treehouse with him, pulling his T-shirt over his head, it didn’t feel like an act. It felt like the night we should have had all along.

Until the next morning, when I heard Ryan was dead. That’s when I realized how wrong I’d been.

There's no one I can tell. Not Nick, who would never forgive me if he knew. Not Ryan, who will never hear my words, my apologies, again. And not my mother, because she warned me. Time and time again she warned me that when you go to the past to fix things, you risk making them worse. And she was right. I should have just left it alone. I have done a terrible thing, and I will never, ever do it again.

NICK

It's going to be okay."

I've said this aloud so many fucking times, and I'm not sure if it's for her or for myself. I just know that repeating it a thousand times still won't make it true.

It's been several hours now. Me with my useless words. The only response—that rhythmic beat of the heart-rate monitor, the constantly bleat of the alarm on the IV. I can't get her latest MRI images out of my head. The tumor is swallowing her brain. The radiologist's face as he handed me his report said it all.

She is heavily sedated...I know this. I'm responsible for it. But no one is even sure she'll regain consciousness and Jesus, I need to see her open her eyes. I need to know she's still with me.

I squeeze her hand, tell her again that she's going to be fine. I'm grateful she can't hear the lack of certainty in my voice.

How did I exist without her? That two months ago I didn't even know her seems impossible to me now. And if she doesn't come back...I can't even think about it. I was such a dick the other day, when she suggested we sleep together. So appalled and so desperate for it at the same time I could hardly put two coherent words together. If I'd realized how little time we actually had left, I'd have given her everything. I just didn't know.

The staff mostly leaves us alone. None of them approve of the fact that I broke up with Meg and am now clearly with my patient, but they seem to

sense I'm too close to the edge to be pestered. I should have handed her case to someone else a while ago, but no one is going to monitor her as carefully as I will. No one else will be as thorough as I'll be, will refuse to leave a single stone unturned. I dare any of them to even suggest it.

There's a timid tap on the door and then Sully, the only male nurse on the floor, pops his head in. "They sent me to deliver the bad news," he says with wary eyes. "There's a guy outside saying he's Quinn's fiancé. The hospital must have called..."

I don't even let him finish the sentence. "No." There's not a chance in the world that asshole is getting anywhere near Quinn right now.

He swallows. "I checked her file—he's still listed as her next-of-kin. I'm not sure what to say to him."

My blood boils at the thought of Jeff in this room when he knows she wants nothing to do with him. "Tell him I said to go fuck himself," I reply. "If he complains, let me know and I'll deal with him myself." *Gladly*. The only reason I'm not already out there is because I don't want to leave Quinn's side.

I hear shouting down the hall less than a minute later, and then the door is thrown open. Jeff storms in, freezing at the sight of me sitting beside Quinn. "Why the fuck are you here?" he asks.

I rise. Nothing seems to matter anymore. Not my job, not what happens after this. Only that Quinn walks out of this hospital again. "For the same reason I've always been here with her when you're not. Because I'm the only one of us she wants."

He lunges. There's a security button on the wall. I could have back-up here to deal with him in a matter of seconds. But my mind empties. This hatred toward him...it's been in me since the first night we met. And I want to expel all of it, right here, while I've got the chance.

He flies into me with his hands on my throat and the two of us topple to the ground. Within seconds, though, my fist makes impact, and I sling him off me, with his back to the floor. I could stop now, but it isn't enough. When he groans at the second hit and stops fighting back at the third, it is still not enough.

Security rushes through the door. I should have stopped two punches ago, but it's not until they grab me that I finally allow reason to intervene.

"You okay, Dr. Reilly?" asks one of them. They're still holding my arms but it's the way your buddy does when he's pulling you out of a fight.

I give him a stiff nod, breathing heavily more from anger than exertion as I rise.

The other security guard helps Jeff to his feet and starts pulling him away. “You’re dead, motherfucker,” Jeff says, turning back toward me when they reach the door. “I’m reporting you. You hear me? You’re going to lose your job.”

The words mean nothing to me. Maybe he’s right, but I’m already back in my seat, my fingers twining through Quinn’s, pleading with her to wake up.



“HEY.” The word is raspy and uncertain. My head, resting against her hand, jolts upright. She is heavy-lidded, but there’s a weak smile on her face.

I haven’t cried since my brother died but I have to swallow hard to keep it at bay right now. My jaw clenches as I try to get a grip on this illogical twining of grief and joy. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry,” she says. “You may need to get used to it.” Her hand reaches out, brushes my cheekbone. “Is that a bruise?”

It’s been hours since the fight with Jeff. I’d almost forgotten. “I had a little scuffle with your ex.”

Her eyes open wide and she tries to sit up, but I gently push her shoulder back to the mattress. “It’s fine. Believe me, he looks a lot worse than I do. How do you feel?”

“I feel great,” she says dismissively. “Are you okay? What happened with Jeff?”

I smile. It’s so like her to regain consciousness worried about *me*. “I told you it was fine. You’re the one who’s in a hospital bed. Let’s focus on you.”

She looks like she wants to argue but restrains it with a frown. “Did you already do an MRI?” she asks.

God, I wish she hadn’t asked. Even her best-case scenario at this point is a shitty one, and I know she’ll see that no matter what I tell her. I stare fixedly at the bed rail, gripping her hand tighter. “Your tumor has doubled in size.”

She nods, lips pressed tight, trying to hold it together. “And what does that mean?”

It means you could be dead in a week, in a day. It means the staff will be

shocked you even woke up. God, I can't tell her any of this. "It's close to the point where it's going to impact things—your memory, your gross motor function," I reply. "I'm surprised it hasn't already."

I watch this sink in, and then her fingers tighten around mine. "That's not how I want you to remember me," she whispers, "so when it happens I want you to promise you'll stay away. I'll go to my mom's when it gets to that point."

I sigh. If she thinks I'd ever consider that, she doesn't know me at all. "I am not fucking leaving you."

"But—"

"Ask me a thousand times and the answer will still be no."

"Such dedication," she begins, brushing at her eyes, trying to make light of it. "It really must be true—" She stops herself, flushing at the conversation she's opening up. A conversation she thinks would be ridiculous this early on. Except it isn't ridiculous at all. I've been dying to say it for weeks.

"Love," I reply, completing the sentence. My eyes hold hers. "Yeah. It is."

QUINN

Nick stays with me for hours, feeding me water through a straw like I'm an invalid. "I can hold my own cup," I scold. "Or do all your patients get this level of service?"

His lips twitch. "I'm pretty sure you're the only one."

I throw my head against the pillow. I feel fine and it's not like being in this room is going to extend my life, so I don't want to waste what's left of it here. "Can't we just leave?"

"Soon," he says, brushing the hair back from my forehead. "In the meantime, your food is on the way, and I was thinking if you're up for it, we could go down the hall to see Darcy. She's been asking for you."

"How is she today?" I ask.

A shadow crosses his face. I wonder if he can't think about Darcy without seeing my future at the same time. "Not good, apparently," he replies.

We just saw her a few days ago, and she wasn't doing great then. The possibility that she's *worse* sickens me. "Let's go see her now," I say, squeezing his hand. "The food can wait."

His tongue slides over his lip—his tell, the thing he does when he's worried and thinking something through. "Okay," he says. "Let me just get a wheelchair."

I roll my eyes. "I don't need a *wheelchair*."

"It's a long walk and you've had a heavy sedative," he says. I open my mouth to argue and he continues. "It's also hospital policy. So you're getting

the wheelchair. I need to make sure she's awake anyway."

I love the bossy, no-bullshit doctor side of Nick. If I didn't have about fourteen wires attached to me I'd suggest he lock the door so I could show him just how much I like it. "Fine," I groan. "You win."

He kisses my forehead. "Be right back."

The truth is he's probably right. The sedative still must not be out of my system because I feel like I could sleep for days. Except each time I allow my eyes to close, I see Ryan's coffin being lowered into the ground and the grief on Nick's face. I remember my thoughts and my guilt, but I have no memory of actually time traveling. I just see two different experiences that occurred on the same night—one in which Ryan kisses me at a party, and another in which Ryan dies.

Am I really going to admit any of this to Nick? Am I really going to tell him that the version of Ryan's death he remembers is a result of the version I was responsible for? I can't. But I hate that he's hinting he loves me when he has no idea who I am and what I may have done. *Nick is going to make me do a bad thing*, I told the psychologist. Was Ryan's death that thing?

A searing pain in my arm sends my thoughts scattering. My eyes open and go first to the needle pressed into my skin before jumping to the person who wields it.

I suck in air, begin drowning in panic before I can call out.

It's a face I've seen in a thousand nightmares, always with that long blond braid hanging down her shoulder. She has the face of an angel, but she couldn't be further from it. Words I mean to say stumble over my lips and vanish. The drug...it's slipping through my veins like a heavy blanket, smothering my ability to react.

She smiles. Sweetly, as if she actually cares about me. "Don't worry. You won't feel a thing."

My arms hang limply against my sides, refusing my commands to move as she pulls down the saline dripping into my IV and hangs an identical bag in its place. She speaks again, but I can no longer hear what she says. The fluid from the IV is so cold it seems to burn. And then everything goes black.

NICK

Darcy is asleep. Maybe it's for the best...as soon as I suggested a visit it occurred to me Quinn might see herself in Darcy's pale face, in the way she now struggles to form words and falls asleep mid-speech. She's gotten so much worse since that Connect Four tournament just a few days ago.

Since I'm here, I do a quick check of her vitals. Her blood pressure is low. I take a subtle look at her hands, examining their pallor, looking for the hint of blue beneath the nails that means the end is near. Nothing yet, but soon there will be.

I glance at Christy. "If there's any way her father can be transported, I think he might want to get here soon."

She blinks away tears. I'm not telling her anything she doesn't know, but it's no less hard to hear. "He's still in bad shape. They think it's another week at least," she whispers. "How's Quinn?"

I close my eyes. "Not good."

We sit in silence for a moment. Misery may love company but there's little solace in it for me. "I know it's wrong," she finally says, her voice rough, "but it makes me glad they'll be together, her and Darcy. I know Quinn will look after her."

I flinch. I'm not at a point where I can discuss what happens to Quinn after she's gone, but even if I were, I wouldn't picture what Christy does—a heaven of clouds and harps and people walking hand in hand. She imagines

Quinn taking Darcy to some heavenly zoo, buying her ice cream, tucking her in at night. I envy her belief, but I'm unable to share it.

Quinn has to survive. No other option is acceptable.

The halls are quiet as I head back, typical for a Sunday afternoon. A nurse is in Quinn's room when I push open the door, shaking down her saline as if she wants it to run faster, though the fluids were fine when I left.

I step inside. "Was there something wrong with the..." I begin, my words trailing off when I see her face.

The second our eyes meet, I know. I know who she is and why she's here. I can grab her, or I can get the line out of Quinn's arm. I don't even need to debate it—I lunge for the IV. The woman is long gone by the time it's out. I hit the alarm and the code team rushes in with security on their heels. But despite all the noise, all the chaos, Quinn lies there, unmoving, completely still.

QUINN

The doctor conducting the sonogram sees something. I can tell by the way his brows go up, and my heart starts to race.

“Is there something wrong?” I whisper.

He glances back at Nick, who is staring at the image like it’s about to step off the screen and offer him the secrets of the universe. “Do you want to tell or shall I?” he asks Nick.

Nick swallows and points to one tiny dot of flickering light on the screen. “There’s one heartbeat,” he says, sounding awestruck. He points to a second light. “And there’s a second one.”

Twins. We are having twins, when we hadn’t even planned on one baby just yet.

The doctor laughs at the look on my face. “Don’t worry. You’ll get used to the idea.” I nod, grinding my teeth to hide my panic. He has no idea what this means, and Nick doesn’t either. But I do.

It means the predictions are coming true.

It means we have to hide this, or she’s going to take it all away again.



MY EYES BLINK OPEN. It takes a moment for the bright lights and the beep of the alarm to sink into my brain.

Hospital. I can’t remember why.

Nick sits beside me with circles under his eyes and a day's worth of stubble, the only man alive who could make exhaustion look this good. "Hey," I whisper.

He startles. "Oh thank God," he says with a choked inhale. His lips press to the back of my hand.

I frown, trying to figure out why I'm here again. I remember Ryan's memorial service and waking up here. My stomach takes a nosedive as I recall Nick's news about the MRI. But everything after that is a blank. "What happened?" I ask. "I remember being here, but..."

And then I remember her face, her long blond braid, her pretense of care. I gasp, struggling to sit up. "It was *her*. The woman who—"

He places a gentle hand on my arm. "I know. She was here when I walked into the room."

"You caught her?"

His face falls. "No. I'm sorry. She changed out your saline with something, so I grabbed that first, and by the time I turned around she was gone. Security has her on camera and they found her scrubs in the closet around the corner."

I deflate immediately. "So we have nothing."

"No," he says. "This time we might have something."



NICK HAD the foresight to go through the pockets of the scrubs she left behind before security got to them, and in one of those pockets he found a receipt. It has no name on it, but there was a note: *Deliver by October 11*. And if there's going to be a delivery, it means that somewhere at Green Thumb Plants, just up the road from the hospital, there's an address for this woman. All we can do now is wait, impatiently, for the manager to return Nick's call.

I'm chomping at the bit to get out of the hospital and see what we can find out, while Nick is infuriatingly adamant that I stay right where I am. It's been nearly an hour and I'm completely fine—well, mostly fine—but he won't listen to a word I say. "You were just drugged with something we can't even identify," he says. "Until it's out of your system, you're not going anywhere."

I groan and throw my head against my pillow like a child. "But we need

to investigate.”

“They’re closed by now,” he says, “and we aren’t going to be investigating anything. She just attacked you. I want you as far from this as possible.”

I sigh. I’ll deal with that little objection later, but first I just need to get out of this damn bed. “Fine, but I don’t need to stay here. I feel great now. And I don’t know if anyone’s told you this, but my boyfriend happens to be a doctor.”

He gives me a lopsided grin. “A doctor, huh? He must be brilliant.”

He is, I think to myself, and it’s unbelievably hot. That assessing look he gets on his face when he’s mulling something over and his decisiveness during my time here would do it for me no matter what he looked like. “I don’t know about that. I’m mostly with him for his body.” I look at him from under my lashes. It’s a longshot, but sex is the only strategy that might possibly overcome his irritating professionalism. “A body I could *thoroughly* explore if we were home.”

He laughs, which means I’ve failed miserably. “Nice try. But you’re staying here. It’ll be fun. We’ll order in dinner and watch a movie.”

My lower lip juts out. “I’m not even vaguely interested in dinner or a movie right now.”

“Well, our options are pretty limited otherwise,” he says. “Connect Four? I’m no Darcy but I’d do my best.”

I should probably give up and admit that I’m staying in the hospital tonight, but I’ve seen Nick when he’s turned on plenty of times—rational thought abandons him when he’s pushed far enough. I slide out of the hospital bed and climb into his lap, which would probably be sexier if I weren’t still attached to a heart rate monitor. “There is only one thing I want to do,” I reply, whispering the words into his ear. “And with that security guard right outside my door, I know for a fact it’s not happening here. You know how loud I am.”

He hardens underneath me. This attempt at seduction was more about manipulation than lust when it started, but at the feel of him there it no longer is. I’d forgotten that rational thought abandons me too. I lean in and tug his lower lip between my teeth and there’s this ragged noise in his chest in response.

“Please don’t tempt me,” he pleads, sounding a little desperate. “I just need to know you’re safe before we go home, okay? We’re still waiting on

the toxicology report, and at least here I know no one is going to walk in and kill you the second my back is turned.”

“If this woman wants to kill me she doesn’t have to walk in. She can just apparate or whatever.”

He laughs. “Are you using terms from Harry Potter?”

I kiss his forehead. “I’m not sure what’s dorkier... that I accidentally invoked a term from Harry Potter or that you recognized it as such. But anyway, you see my point.”

He shakes his head. “No, I don’t. She went to some pretty extreme measures to get in before. She stole scrubs and a security badge and brought in her own drugs...she wouldn’t have gone to all that trouble if all she had to do was *wish* she was in your room and *wish* her way back out.”

“I hate when you’re right,” I mutter, returning to my bed.

NICK

We get through a night in the hospital, barely. Quinn says something dirty to me pretty much every hour we're awake, and it's working. I'm so keyed up it hurts. But they still have no idea what was in those fluids she was given, and she's safest here no matter how badly I'd like to take her home.

I wake in the morning in the chair next to her bed and sneak out to my office to call the nursery again. Perhaps I'm investing too much hope in what we found, but I need this, something to focus on, something to help me believe there's even a chance she can survive.

I'm intercepted by Ed Philbin just as I reach the door. He can barely meet my eye as he asks if we can "have a word." I already know what he's going to say. I've been expecting it since I threw that first punch yesterday.

We walk into the office. I'm not sure if I should bother sitting down for this or go ahead and pack my shit. "I assume this is about Quinn's former fiancé?" I ask, taking the seat behind the desk.

He blows out a breath. "He's claiming you seduced a dying patient, Nick. It doesn't look good."

A few months ago, I'd be sick to my stomach right now. Instead, I'm numb. I can barely summon the effort to lie on my own behalf. "Quinn and I dated in college," I say flatly. "We picked things back up when she came to the hospital."

"Then you should have transferred her case," he says, leaning forward

with his hands clasped. “Do you have any proof you dated before?”

Does a psychiatrist’s interview with a five-year-old count? I imagine it does not. If our past was erased, all the evidence of it must be erased too, but if I admit I’ve got nothing I’m dead in the water. “Maybe. I can probably find some pictures.”

“Look,” he sighs, running a hand through his thinning hair. “You’re a good doctor and I don’t want to let you go. We’re already understaffed as it is. But this guy is making a huge stink. He called board members at home yesterday. I’m going to have to put you on administrative leave until this is resolved.”

This, too, is not the blow I’d have anticipated. I’d rather be home with Quinn right now anyway. “How long will that be?”

He averts his eyes. “I looked at her file,” he says. “I think under the circumstances they’ll let this go once...”

I wait for him to finish the sentence until I realize he’s not going to. *Once she dies*. Those are the words he’s not saying.

He rises. “Go home with your girlfriend. See if you can find some pictures. And...I’m sorry. We’ll be here for you once this blows over.”

I stare bleakly at the door when it shuts behind him. I don’t give a fuck about my career right now, but Ed’s certainty that Quinn is going to die soon opens this jagged wound in my chest. Am I being naïve, hoping we can track down the woman and stop this? Probably. But I am drowning, and this is what drowning people do: they grasp at any goddamn thing they can hold onto, even the things that don’t float.

I pull the crumpled receipt from my pocket and dial Green Thumb’s number. When I finally get ahold of someone in charge, I emphasize *neurologist* and *Georgetown*. Saying you’re a doctor can be a lot like saying you’re a cop—people almost feel like they have to hear you out. “We had a customer of yours come in,” I tell him. “We only know because she left a receipt here. We’re trying to get contact information for her.”

“Ummm...she didn’t give *you* her information?”

“Unfortunately, she took off before we could get it, but we just got results from her blood work, and there is a very serious issue we need to discuss with her. We’re hoping you can help us out.”

“So you just need a phone number?” he asks slowly, uncertainly.

I take a quick breath and try to rein in my eagerness. “Yes. That or an address. If you can even give us a name, we might be able to find her from

that.”

“Look,” he says, “I don’t know if I should just be giving out a customer’s information. How do I even know you’re a doctor?”

“You can look me up online.” I spell my name, direct him to the Georgetown website. “You can send the information there if you’re more comfortable.”

He takes the order number off the receipt and then tells me he’s only the assistant manager. “I’ll have to talk to my boss when she comes in and let you know.” Which is precisely what I heard from the person I spoke to yesterday.

“And when will that be?” I ask, straining to keep frustration out of my voice.

“She’s at the beach this week,” he replies. “She’s back next Friday.”

Six days from now. He wants me to wait six fucking days.

I’ve always thought of myself as an honest person. It’s funny how the qualities you value in yourself go out the window when you really need something. “Look,” I reply, “I don’t want to pressure you, but this might be a bit of a public health hazard, so the sooner the better. And if any of your employees came into contact with her I think they’re going to need to be quarantined.”

I wait, holding my breath, until the guy gives a long, exaggerated sigh. “1649 Avon Lane,” he says quietly. “But it didn’t come from me.”

“Okay. And what’s her name?”

He tells me, and the pen falls from my hand.

I expected a name. I just didn’t think it would be a familiar one.



QUINN is awake when I return to the room, showered and grinning at me.

“Now can we leave? Look how healthy I am. I could go run a marathon right now. That’s how good I feel.”

My mouth curves despite myself. “I didn’t know you were a runner.”

“Well,” she says, “I could go run a marathon if running didn’t suck.”

My hand clasps hers and I pull her toward the end of the bed and have her sit. “I called the nursery. They told me who placed the order.”

She freezes, her face gone pale beneath her tan. “That should be good

news, but it obviously isn't," she says, watching my face carefully.

I flinch and then open my eyes to meet hers. "Quinn...her name is Sarah Stewart."

Her mouth opens. Closes. Opens again. "That's impossible," she finally says. "My *aunt*? The woman in here wasn't old enough to my aunt. She barely looked older than *me*."

I press my mouth to her forehead. "Rose told us they age slowly, remember?"

"But—" she begins, swallowing, and trails off as she comes to terms with the possibility that the hero of her childhood—the woman who exchanged a dreary life on the farm for a glamorous one in Paris—is the same person who now wants her dead. "Why? Why would my own aunt want to kill me? She's never even *met* me."

"It must be the Rule of Threes. She doesn't want you to have a child because that child would be the fourth in the line."

Her shoulders sag. "It can't be that. I'm not pregnant, obviously. She knows how unlikely it is that I ever *will* be. It must be the spark thing. She wants mine."

"I'll stop her before that happens," I reply. Though God knows I've got no fucking idea how. "I've got her address. I'll get you home and go check it out."

She springs to her feet. "I'll come with you."

"Not a fucking chance are you getting anywhere near her," I say, grinding my teeth. "She's already tried to kill you once that we know of, Quinn. I'm a big guy, but even I can't be sure you're safe around someone who can vanish in midair and reappear anywhere she wants."

"Well, you're sure as hell not going *alone*," she snaps.

I blow out a heavy, aggravated breath. Does she not realize how much danger she's in? Does she not realize having her there would only make things worse, and that I just want to know she's safe?

She rubs a finger over her lower lip and looks out the window, where the sun is shining and life isn't painful, *ending*, for the people who walk by.

"Let's get out of here. Please. I don't want to think about this now."

"We will," I tell her. "Soon. Let me just take care of a few things first." After she agrees, I walk out of the hospital and head straight to my car.

Honesty, I've decided, is highly overrated.



OUTSIDE, the air is crisp, less humid than normal, the first hint that summer might be on the way out. It's start-of-the-school-year weather. When I was a kid, it always felt like a time for new beginnings, for optimism, but when I arrive at Sarah's pristine Georgetown home, all optimism fades. I'd expected, for some reason, to find the kind of place you'd see in a horror film—a creepy old Victorian, shutters hanging ajar, a broken window or two. But it couldn't be further from that. Like every other place on the street, it's worth millions. Confirming what I should have known all along: there is nothing this woman needs and therefore nothing I can bargain with.

I start up her walkway anyhow, but pause when I see the three newspapers in her yard. It means she probably hasn't come home since her little adventure in the hospital.

Fuck.

I'm not going back to the hospital empty-handed, and I'm sure as shit not setting this up so Quinn can return with me. Something needs to happen *now*. I glance around. The street is mostly empty, and even if someone's looking out their window, it's Sunday morning—I doubt anyone's going to pay much attention. I head down the small alley leading to the rear of her home and climb the stairs to her back deck, laughing at the futility of what I'm about to attempt. It is wildly unlikely a woman with this much money has left a door unlocked. It's also wildly unlikely she doesn't have a security system. I'm going to wind up in jail today, and then what? Who tracks this woman down while I'm behind bars? Jeff would be more likely to imprison Quinn in his home than help us out.

The door is locked—no surprises there—so I look for something I can wrap around my hand to punch in the glass. I'm about to remove my shirt when I glance at the doormat.

She wouldn't leave a key, would she? It would be idiocy, and she doesn't strike me as a stupid woman. Yet when I use the tip of my shoe to lift the mat, brass gleams. It's as if the key was waiting here just for me.

I slide it into the lock, pausing for a moment to strategize. I'll only have a minute before the alarm goes off, and maybe another minute or two before cops arrive. So three minutes max, and I don't even know what I'm looking for.

I take a deep breath and push the door open. I'm as surprised by the lack

of a warning chime when I enter as I am by what I find inside: Sarah lives very well. Not that I've ever given a lot of thought to what a time traveler's home would look like, but I guess I'd have expected antiques, lace doilies, needlepoint pillows, and creepy dolls. Instead I stand in a kitchen with thick marble countertops, gleaming fixtures. A glass table without a single fingerprint on it. Quinn's aunt is either OCD or has a whole lot of cleaning help.

I carefully place one foot after another, making my way through the kitchen, not sure what I'm looking for. I guess she wouldn't have left anything quite so obvious as a list of her diabolical plans. Just beyond the kitchen I find a small room that appears to be Sarah's office. Books and files are stacked to the ceiling, but I may not have to investigate any of it because there, atop the glass desk, is Sarah's planner. I slide it toward me, scanning the August calendar. A small sticky note rests on yesterday's date: **IAD to CDG, 6:30 p.m.**

Dulles Airport to Charles De Gaulle. The next three weeks are blocked out.

She is in fucking Paris for the next three weeks.

I slam my hands down on the desk. I don't know if Quinn even *has* three weeks to wait. I've tried to be optimistic, but my gut feeling is that if the tumor makes another leap like the last one, she will not leave the hospital the next time she goes in.

I flip through the planner, looking for any other sign of where she may have gone, and come up with only this—scribbled on the back of an envelope, an address: 37 Rue des Trois Freres.

I could go there. It's such a fucking longshot, but it's all we have. I can't imagine leaving Quinn right now, when anything could happen—these might be our last weeks together—but I can't not try. I can't.

I head out the back door, replacing the key under the mat. Shocked that I've gotten away with it. But next comes the really hard part: telling Quinn I'm leaving.

QUINN

Nick's "last-minute things" take forever. Some of my impatience has to do with Sarah, but mostly it's the way the clock is ticking faster. Nick and I no longer have a year. We might not have a month, or a week. At the start of each new hour, I acknowledge the possibility that it could be my last. And I don't want to spend it here, especially away from him.

By the time he finally returns, I'm going nuts. I know he has other obligations, but how does he not see the urgency here?

"You ready?" he asks. His face is deadly serious, and there's a rigidity to his shoulders that wasn't there when he left.

I was irritated a second ago. Now I'm just scared. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," he says, but his glance flickers away.

He's quiet during the drive home, his fingers twined so tightly through mine it almost hurts. What happened after he left my room? There are so many things it could be—my prognosis or his job seem the most likely contenders—but I'm praying it's something simple. Maybe he's just eager to get back to work.

We get into the house and I turn to him. "Don't feel like you have to stay home with me today. I know you've got a lot going on." Every bone in my body wants to beg him not to go, but what I want even more than that is to fix this, whatever it is.

His tongue pokes inside his cheek. "About that," he says. "It's nothing to

worry about, but I got placed on administrative leave.”

I gasp. “*What?*”

“It’s fine. Jeff complained to the board. I knew it would happen even before I hit him, and I just didn’t care. I still don’t.”

I feel sick. It really happened, just like Jeff said it would. “God. I’m so sorry,” I whisper, pressing my face to his chest. “Tell me what to do. I’ll give a sworn statement that we were childhood friends. I’ll swear we’re not together.”

He gives me a half-smile. “It’s going to be fine. If they fire me, they fire me. I’ll find another job.”

“It’s not fine. You really think I can’t tell when you’re upset?”

“It’s not about the job,” he says, sighing into my hair. He places his hands on my shoulders, holding me in place. “I went to your aunt’s house. When I told you I had some stuff to do at the hospital.”

My jaw drops along with my stomach. “How could you do that? Oh my God. Do you realize how badly it could have gone?”

His mouth curves into an almost-smile. “I’m 6’5” and she’s not any bigger than you. What exactly do you think she could have done to me? Anyway, she wasn’t there. I found a key under the mat at the back of her house and—”

“Oh my God,” I groan, staring at the ceiling. “Please tell me you didn’t break in.”

“I didn’t have to break in. There was a key, remember? But my point is that I found her planner...and she’s gone. She flew to Paris last night.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure what I thought it would accomplish, going after her. But that it’s all amounted to nothing knocks the air from my lungs. “Wait. Why the hell would a time traveler need to *fly*? Couldn’t she just, like, *wish* herself there?”

“I have no idea. Maybe there are rules. Maybe she just sucks at it. We know nothing. Which is why I’m going to Paris.”

I stiffen. “*No.*”

“It’s our only chance,” he says, placing his palm against my cheek. “I have no idea how your tumor is going to progress, but we may not have time to wait for her to get back.”

“Then I’ll come with you.”

“You can’t,” he says softly. “God forbid, but what if you had a medical emergency halfway over the Atlantic? You might need oxygen. You might

need...Jesus, there's so much you might need if it happens again that I can't stand to think about it. And they can't do an emergency landing in the middle of the ocean. It's just for a day or two."

I stare at him, feeling completely helpless. I know I can't dissuade him, but I still have to try. "She's insane, Nick, and she can time travel. What are you going to do when she vanishes and appears behind you with a loaded gun? Use your medal-winning butterfly stroke to disarm her?"

He pushes the hair back behind my ear. "I'm so in love with you I can't even breathe when I imagine you not here, and I'll never be able to live with myself if I don't at least try to find her. So don't ask it of me."

I meet his gaze. His desperate, determined gaze. There is not a thing I can say to stop him. I press my forehead to his chest, trying to stave off tears. "When?"

"I've got a ticket on the six o'clock direct flight out of Dulles tomorrow. Tonight's was already full."

A sob swells in my throat and I can't contain it. "These could be our last hours together," I whisper.

"Don't," he says. His palms hold my face. "Don't even think it."

"But—"

His mouth closes on mine, stopping my words but not my thoughts or my desperation. The kiss is hard, punishing, as if it can somehow make the truth other than what it is, and my fervor matches his, fueled by the knowledge it might never happen again.

I'm still crying, even as need coils tight in my stomach. My hands tug at the hem of his shirt and pull it over his head. My fingers are greedy. It's not enough for them to trail over his shoulders, his biceps, his chest. They want to absorb him, consume him whole.

He grabs my ass and yanks me against him, hard, groaning as his mouth descends to my neck. My shirt is removed, my bra is released with a quick flick of his fingers. That old voice, the one that warns about the consequences of going too far, is silent. I no longer care what it means to give him everything. How could it possibly matter at this point, when it might be our last chance?

My shorts slide to the floor, and his follow, his hands clenched with need as they pull my hips toward him again. "Quinn," he growls. "I need more. I'm not going to stop this time."

"I don't want you to."

He lifts me onto the couch and is above me in seconds, fingers slick between my legs, confirming what I already know: I'm so ready for this. Beyond ready.

He grabs himself, sliding against me once and then twice before his cock sits right at my entrance. The tip presses, stretches me and I need more, everything. "Do it," I beg. He slides inside me slowly, with excruciating care. I know he's worried, trying to let me adjust, except I don't want him to go slowly. I'm so stretched and so full I can barely think, but I want more. When he finally bottoms out, he freezes there for a moment, a small, ragged noise at the base of his throat.

"Are you okay?" he grunts, eyes squeezed tightly shut, holding himself still.

God yes. I'd say this aloud but all that comes out is a moan. I arch against him, demanding more, and he gives it to me, slowly pulling out, coming back. We are sweating and slick, gliding against each other, mouths pressed to skin. My nails bite into his back and I clench him like a fist, holding him there on this high wire, pleasure so intense it's almost painful. "Don't," he begs. "You're so tight and I'm too close. I don't want it to end yet."

I don't either, but when he starts to move again, more forcefully now, I feel that sharp pluck in my belly and arch up. Swelling and tightening around him. He pulls my legs up, over his shoulders, hitting an angle that has me gasping and helpless. "Faster," I demand and he complies, his mouth on mine, the muscles of his back tightening beneath my calves. I dig my heels in and he thrusts harder, triggering an orgasm so violent I can't even hear my own noises. I'm deaf and blind as I give over to it, soaring through a constellation of stars, only vaguely aware that any world exists beyond the two of us. He slams into me and then his pace jerks, stutters. He comes with a sound that is pained and relieved at the same time.

His forehead lands against my chest. He's dead weight, pressing me into the couch. I welcome it. The last wave of pleasure recedes and when it does I finally find it—the deep contentment I've been chasing since the day I laid eyes on him. The satisfaction that's eluded me no matter what else we did, no matter how many times I've come.

"Holy shit," he gasps, still winded.

I barely feel capable of speech. "Yes." I exhale. "We're probably going to need a new couch now."

He falls to the side, his body loose with exhaustion, and pulls a throw

blanket over us both. “Totally worth it. Christ, I needed that. I had no idea how badly until now.”

God, me too. Everything we’ve done before, no matter how perfect, pales by contrast. I smile against his chest. “It was amazing. So amazing we probably ought to try it again.”

“I don’t see us doing much of anything else until I leave,” he replies. “I’ve spent fifty percent of my waking hours thinking about this for months now.”

I smile up at him. “Only fifty percent?”

He grins sheepishly. “I do have to think about doctor shit occasionally. And I thought it would sound creepy if I said ninety.”

Is sex supposed to be like this? I’m not sure. It’s not like I had complaints when I was with Jeff. It was fine. But it was never *this*. And I have no other basis for comparison. “Is it always...” I trail off, embarrassed by the question. “Was this normal?”

He laughs, leaning up on his forearm to press a kiss to the top of my head. “I can’t speak for you, but no...for me, this was really different. Why?”

I sigh. I don’t want to be the person who sees something supernatural about every single thing in my life that’s different from the norm, because everyone has moments that are different—when you make a wish and thirty seconds later there’s a shooting star, or when you’re thinking about a song you really want to hear and it’s the one that plays next. And yet... “I know that I want to be with you, that this is exactly where I’m supposed to be. I just sometimes wonder if the universe is trying to, I don’t know, *incentivize* us. Everything is so heightened. We talked about there being some purpose to all this. I think this is a part of it.”

His hands rake through my hair. “Yeah, it occurred to me. Or maybe it’s just that this was meant to be.”

I like his explanation better. And even if there’s more going on here, it doesn’t mean he’s wrong.



MANY HOURS LATER, after we made it to the bed and exhausted ourselves into sleep, we wind up in the kitchen, naked still—the benefit of having a private backyard.

“I had no idea I was so hungry,” I groan, pushing the remains of a second sandwich away from me.

Something flickers in his eyes and his smile fades. “You just got out of the hospital,” he says. “And you barely ate yesterday. I shouldn’t have—”

“Stop,” I reply, climbing into his lap. “I know where you’re going with that and just stop, right now. It was...” *our last chance*. “It was just something that had to happen.”

“When you’re in my lap naked, you make it very hard to have a real conversation,” he says with a sharp inhale, hardening beneath me. He holds my face in his hands and kisses me before he pulls away. He is no longer smiling. I see grief in his eyes though he’d never admit the cause. “I love you, Quinn Stewart. And even if you can’t say it back, I know you love me too.”

My eyes well. “I—”

He holds a finger to my lips. “You don’t need to explain anything. Just promise you’ll wait for me. Promise you’ll be here when I get home.”

I press my mouth to his forehead. It’s as close to a promise as I can get.

NICK

I arrive at Charles de Gaulle on Tuesday morning, exhausted and determined, and in no fucking mood for the line at Customs, which stretches as far as the eye can see. I should be home in bed with Quinn right now. For the briefest moment I allow myself to imagine the feel of her wrapped around me, all lush curves and smooth skin. Her face at rest, the graceful perfection of it—soft mouth, long lashes. My heart twists in my chest. I’ve been missing her since the moment I boarded the plane last night, staring at the cellophane-wrapped blanket in the seat next to mine and wishing it were hers. I’d have been content just to have her head resting on my shoulder, although an overnight flight under the cover of two blankets would have made for an interesting trip as well.

When I finally get through Customs and out the doors, I discover Paris is every bit as hot as D.C. and even more congested, if that’s possible. The air smells more like gas fumes than anything reminiscent of art and haute cuisine.

Once I’m in a cab, there’s more waiting to endure. The highway is hopelessly clogged by morning rush hour, and only the motorcycles manage to make headway, whizzing through the narrow spaces between cars. It takes nearly an hour before we are finally in central Paris, with its maze of tightly lined streets, and another ten minutes to Montmartre. The bell tower of Sacre-Coeur looms ahead of us the whole way, a jagged cutout in the blue sky. I wish the sight didn’t feel as ominous as it does.

“*Vous êtes pres,*” the driver says. I don’t speak French, but I can guess what he’s saying. And I wish he were wrong, because 37 Rue des Trois Freres is not a hotel like I assumed. It’s not even a business as far as I can tell—merely a bright red doorway with a street number beside it, otherwise unmarked.

I came here solely because we’ve run out of options, and staring at the simple, unassuming building makes me realize what a fool’s errand this has actually been. If Sarah isn’t on the other side of that door, and I doubt she is, we are fucked. I thank the driver and climb out with my overnight bag in hand, preparing myself for the possibility—a dwindling possibility—that I’m about to meet Quinn’s aunt.

Everyone wants something, I remind myself. Even a murderous time traveler. I just need to figure out what she wants more than Quinn’s spark. If it’s in my power, I’ll give it to her.

I knock, and after a moment there is shuffling, and the door opens. The woman who answers is old and stooped. She is definitely not Sarah, and seems an unlikely partner-in-crime for a time traveler bent on destruction.

“*Bonjour,*” she says. “*Souhaitez-vous que je vous lise les lignes de la main?*”

I’m ill-equipped to have the conversation I need to right now. I nod, though I have no idea what I’m agreeing to. I just hope to God she doesn’t start to undress.

She opens the door and I follow her into a small shop. Tiny drawers line the walls, along with thousands of glass vials, leading me to wonder if witches are her customer base, because this definitely looks like someplace a witch would shop. Painstakingly I put together a sentence.

“*Je suis désolé, je suis ici parce que...*” *I am sorry. I am here because...* This is all I have. I don’t know how to say *search* or *look* or *need to find* in French. I sure as hell don’t know how to say *time traveler*. I begin fumbling with my phone, looking for a translation when she stops me.

“Why don’t we speak English instead?” she asks. “Your accent is atrocious.”

I laugh and sigh in relief at the same time. “Yes, I know.”

She’s still scowling. “I mean, it’s truly, truly terrible. I barely even understood you. You should work on that.”

I nod, torn between laughing and rolling my eyes. “I will.”

“A foreign child on this soil for one day speaks better French.”

I see she's getting hung up on this, so I decide to nudge her along to something I actually care about. "So the reason I'm here is that—"

"You want a reading, yes? Of your palm?"

In my sleep-deprived haze it takes me a moment to understand what she is asking. A palm reader? Why the hell would Sarah need a palm reader? Can't she just jump to the future and find out for herself? "Well, not exactly. I—"

"Let me read your palm first. You can clearly afford it."

I'm obviously not getting any help unless I comply, so I slump into the chair she points to, letting my laptop bag sag to the ground. I'm so tired I could fall asleep right here. I hold out my hand and she takes it, smoothing her calloused fingers over the lines.

"You're American," she begins, and I once more contain the urge to roll my eyes. I wish Quinn was here. She'd be every bit as cynical about palmistry as I am, even now that we've both watched people vanish in front of us.

"You're a swimmer." Lucky guess. Lots of people swim. Maybe she smells the chlorine. "And you're in love," she adds. Again, lucky guess. She had at least a fifty percent chance of being correct with anyone she said that to.

"A girl you've loved through many, many lifetimes." This feels like slightly less of a lucky guess. Her eyes brighten. "She is carrying your child. No, wait. I see two children."

Shock has me attempting to withdraw my hand, but she holds it in her tight, clawlike grip. "That's not possible," I say quietly.

She laughs. "Oh, I'm afraid it is, papa. As for the tumor..." I stiffen. Not a lucky guess. There's no fucking way she could have known. Her face grows sad and she withdraws her hand. "You never know. That'll be twenty euro. *Vingt euro*. You still need to learn French. You'll be spending a lot of time here, Nicholas."

My eyes widen. "How did you know my name?"

She looks at me reprovingly. "Well, I had to figure it out since you so rudely failed to introduce yourself. I am Cecelia, by the way."

Cecelia is definitely a hell of a lot more than a mere palm reader. I hand her a bill and with it, the photo of Sarah I got from the hospital security cameras. "I'm looking for this woman. Her name is Sarah Stewart. I saw something indicating she might visit you."

Cecelia slides the photo toward her, peering at it with a blank expression on her face. She nods. “Amelie, yes. She’s picking up a shipment.”

My hand flexes against the edge of the table. “Amelie? The woman I’m looking for is named Sarah. She’s not French.”

Cecelia nods. “Amelie Bertrand, *oui*. She is French.”

I seriously doubt Quinn’s aunt, who grew up on a Pennsylvania farm, speaks with the flawless accent of a native. But God knows this woman would be sure to comment on it if she did not.

“Maybe there’s another woman who looks like her?” I insist. “This woman is American.”

She looks vaguely insulted. “She’s as French as I am. I’ve met her many times, the woman who does not age.”

I inhale. I guess that means we’re talking about the same person after all. “Do you know when she’s coming in? Or where she’s staying?”

She tilts her head, regarding me. For a moment I wonder if she’s even planning to answer. “Sometime over the next few days, I believe. She is quite secretive, you know. This is why she comes to me when things could so easily be delivered.”

“*What* could be easily delivered?” I ask, thinking of the solution in the IV bag Sarah tried to switch out. Toxicology is still wholly unable to identify it. They said it appeared to be herbal, but that doesn’t mean it was harmless. I don’t trust that Sarah does anything without intending harm, at least where Quinn is concerned.

She looks even more insulted than she did when I implied Sarah wasn’t French. “I can’t tell you *that*.”

I press my fingers to my temples. “Look, the tumor you saw when you read my palm...it’s my girlfriend. My supposedly pregnant girlfriend. And I think this woman could help. I just need to talk to her.”

She rises, gathering items from the shelf behind her. “I do not know where she is staying. I will text you when she arrives, but if you plan to kill her, please do so outside of my shop.”

My head jerks backward. “*Kill* her?” I ask. “I’m not planning to kill anyone.”

She turns to me again and raises a brow. “Aren’t you? If she has what you need to save your girlfriend, would you not do anything necessary to gain it?”

I stiffen. Would I? I’ve never pictured killing someone in cold blood, but if Sarah had what I needed, if killing her would accomplish it, would I? Yes,

for Quinn I would. “If I need something from her, killing her wouldn’t do me any good, would it?”

She smiles. “*Au contraire*. I think killing her would solve everything.”

QUINN

I promised Nick that while he was gone I'd stay with my mother or Caroline. I also promised if I went to my mother's I would not drive myself, but I feel so healthy it's hard to take the whole thing seriously right now.

When I arrive the morning after Nick leaves town, my mother's eyes sweep me over, head-to-toe. "You're glowing," she says.

I'm guessing it's related to the sheer number of earth-shattering orgasms I've had over the past day, but my mother and I don't have the kind of relationship where I'd share that with her. "Yes, I...feel good."

I sit at the kitchen table while she moves around the room. "You want to explain why you're glowing?" she asks, her mouth pinched.

I heave a sigh. "It would seem Jeff's already told you."

She glances at me from the counter, where she's pouring me sweet tea, though I didn't ask for it. "You're dating your doctor, apparently." She returns her gaze to the glass. I get the feeling she's struggling to control her words. "I'm surprised at you, Quinn," she finally says. Her *surprised at* sounds an awful lot like *disappointed in*, but instead of feeling guilty, I'm irritated. Nick and I did nothing wrong, but we are getting endless shit for the decision to be together, a decision that truly has only hurt two people and will ultimately be in their best interest.

"I didn't cheat on Jeff."

She sets the tea down in front of me, so heavily it sloshes over the sides.

“Even if you didn’t, you need to realize that love means staying focused on the commitment you’ve made, not grasping like a child at the first shiny thing you see.”

A thin seam of rage spikes in my chest. “That is not what happened, and you need to start remembering that *I’m* the one you’re related to.”

“Of course I remember,” she says. “But you can’t expect me not to say anything when I hear you were cheating on your fiancé.”

“I wasn’t cheating. And he’s my ex-fiancé now. Who’s been stalking me since we broke up, waiting in the lobby of Caroline’s building, following me when I won’t talk to him, forcing his way into my hospital room when I’m unconscious.”

“Hospital room?” she repeats. “You were in the *hospital*? Why? Why didn’t you tell me?”

I flush. I didn’t tell her because I was a little occupied once Nick and I left. “I had another blackout. Anyway, a woman came in, wearing a nurse’s uniform, and replaced my saline with something. Nick stopped the IV in time.”

Her hand flutters to her chest. “My God. That’s... insane. Why?”

My shoulders sag. “That’s part of the reason I’m here. They didn’t catch her but they did find a receipt she left behind and they were able to trace it.” I look up. “Her name is Sarah Stewart.”

I watch my mother’s face, waiting for it to sink in. It does, first as confusion and then astonishment and finally denial. “Oh. But that’s...no. You think it’s your dad’s sister behind this?”

“What are the odds she *isn’t*? It seems like too great a coincidence, doesn’t it?”

“Your aunt would have no reason to do this. She’s never even met you.”

I feel certain this will not be a productive question, but I have to ask. “Could there be something she wanted to inherit, maybe? Something in the family that would pass on to her instead of me if I weren’t around?”

I want to see a light dawn in her eyes, some hint that what I’ve said rings a bell, but instead her arms cross and her brow furrows.

“That’s ridiculous. Anything your father left to me goes to you if I die. Anything you have goes to whoever you want. He didn’t leave her anything.”

“So you have no idea why she’d try to kill me?”

She stares at the table. “It can’t be her. It must be a coincidence. The woman’s never even *met* you.”

“Mom,” I say gently, tapping her hand to get her attention. “This matters. For a lot of reasons. We think she might have some answers about the brain tumor. If there’s something you’re not telling me, please...I need to know.”

She hesitates, and in that hesitation I realize she knows something. Something she has no plans to admit. She rises from the chair. “I know nothing about her and I’ve never met the woman.” She opens the refrigerator. “So what should we have for lunch?”



NICK CALLS IN THE AFTERNOON, his voice groggy from being awake most of the last forty-eight hours. In typical fashion he’s mostly worried about me, when he’s the one in a foreign country pursuing a potential murderer. “How are you? Did Caroline drive you to your mom’s?”

“Something like that,” I reply.

“Quinn...” he growls.

“It’s fine! I’m here safe and sound. You can punish me for it when you get home.”

He laughs low in his chest. “I think you’d enjoy the way I’d punish you too much.”

A small fire starts burning in my stomach. “Remind me of that when you get home. Did you find anything today?”

He sighs. “Yeah. The address I had? It wasn’t a hotel—it was a palm reader who insisted on doing a reading. And it was unsettling because she got so many things right.”

I groan. “Let me guess: she said you were American and wanted to be happy? The one palm reader I ever went to told me something was drawing me to Europe.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Who *isn’t* drawn to visiting Europe? It’s like saying you’re committed to breathing oxygen.”

He laughs but it fades away quickly. “She was slightly more specific, babe. She knew about your brain tumor. And she knew my name.”

The fine hairs on the back of my arms stand on end. “Oh....I...wow.”

“Yeah,” he says. He takes a deep breath, releases it. “Cecelia—the palm reader—also said you’re pregnant.”

My heart begins to race. It's impossible. I'm on the pill, my period is due any second now and it's only been twenty-four hours. I'm not sure I could even have *conceived* anything yet. I force a laugh. "Wow, is it like some kind of vampire baby who grows at superhuman speed?"

It's disturbingly quiet on the other end of the line. "Maybe she got that wrong." He doesn't sound like he means it though.

It's too much to think about right now. And too ridiculous. I couldn't possibly be pregnant and even if time traveling exists, I refuse to begin believing in palm readings, tarot cards or anything like it. "Did she know anything about Sarah?"

"Yeah. She's met her several times but doesn't have an address for her."

I'm both relieved and disappointed. I guess I held some small hope this might work, but mostly I just want him back, and safe. "So then you're done, right? And you're coming home?"

He exhales. "Not exactly. This woman sells...I don't even know what she sells. It looked like an old-time apothecary, the kind of thing you'd associate with England in the 1600s. Anyway, your aunt is supposed to be coming in at some point. She's going to let me know as soon as she gets there."

With his words, my heart is hollowed out, empty. "*At some point?*" I ask. "That could be...that could be more than two weeks from now."

"I know," he says.

He sounds tortured by it. And I'm tortured by it. This might be all the time I have and he's the way I want to spend it. Him and only him. "Come home," I beg. "This isn't worth it. Please."

"Don't do that to me," he whispers. "You know I have to stay. I have to see what she knows and what she wants. It's the only way I can think of to help you and I won't be able to live with myself if I don't."

"And what happens when you find her?" I ask desperately, pacing the room. "She's more likely to kill you than she is to sit down and have a nice heart-to-heart."

He pauses. "Actually, Cecelia suggested that killing *her* would solve everything."

A startled laugh escapes my throat. "*Killing her?* Holy shit, Parisian palm readers are dark." He's silent in response. "Why are you not laughing? It's obviously a completely insane thing to say."

"Quinn," he says reluctantly, "it's...something to think about. Remember what Rose told us? That stealing someone's spark can strengthen yours?"

Well, maybe if you steal Sarah's it will cure this thing."

My mouth falls open. I can't believe Nick, of all people, is in favor of this. "Your career is dedicated to saving lives. You cannot actually be suggesting I kill a woman in cold blood on the *off chance* it might allow me to live?"

"She tried to kill you first, remember?"

"Nick," I breathe. "I...I don't even know what to say. We have no idea if she was actually trying to kill me and I just...*no*. I can't kill anyone. I'd never be able to live with the guilt."

"I could live with it," he growls.

It's easy to say when you haven't done it yet. I have though. I wake each morning sick about what I might have done to Ryan, and it wasn't even this version of me who's responsible. "No," I tell him. "I won't let you do that for me, if it would work anyway, and it wouldn't."

"I'm just saying it's something to think about."

I can't. I won't. If my desperation to stay alive is going to turn me into a monster, I don't deserve to live in the first place.



I WAKE EARLY the next morning and come downstairs with my bag packed. My mother is already up, sitting pale and bleary-eyed, both palms pressed to a cup of coffee.

Her eyes go to my bag and her face falls. "You're leaving already?"

We haven't always gotten along, especially of late, but I hate that I'm disappointing her. "There's a doctor in New Jersey I need to talk to. Are you okay?" I ask.

"I was thinking we could spend the day together," she says quietly. Her palms press harder to the coffee cup. They are nearly bloodless. "We could go to Philadelphia and get lunch, go to the Barnes Foundation. You always loved that when you were little."

"I have this appointment, Mom, or I would."

She nods but I swear to God it looks like she's about to cry, and I think it has nothing to do with my tumor.



I ARRIVE at Dr. Grosbaum's house just before lunch. I've decided to keep the trip from Nick since he'd worry unnecessarily, and if it's okay for him to break into the home of a potential murderer with supernatural powers and not mention it until afterward, I can probably visit a neurologist with some offbeat ideas and not mention it either.

The sight of his house no longer scares me. It just makes me sad. How long has he been waiting for his wife to return? Will he die alone, still waiting?

He steps back in silence as I walk through the door.

"I owe you an apology," I begin, as I follow him to his office, but he waves my words away.

"Several universities thought the same things you did and were far ruder in their dismissal," he replies. "I'm accustomed to it. But I'm curious to hear about this time traveler you met."

We both take the seats we took a few weeks ago. My heart lurches a little at the emptiness of the chair beside me. Nick should be here. He should never have left.

"She was young," I reply. "Barely even a teenager. I saw her once in my head when I'd blacked out, and she insisted I hadn't blacked out at all, that we'd just passed each other time traveling."

He frowns. "But that's..." He stops, shaking his head. "And do you believe her? That you were time traveling?"

I nod. "Yes, but it only seems to happen when I pass out and maybe at night though I'm not sure, and *then* it's completely effortless. When I'm awake nothing happens. I don't know if I'm doing something wrong, or maybe I'm just not relaxed enough?"

He leans forward, tapping a pen against his lips. "Or perhaps your conscious mind fears it, so the ability sneaks around in the background instead. Time traveling PTSD, if you will."

"Why would I fear it?"

He shrugs. "Maybe you were raised in a very religious household? Or it had some negative association for you? I'm not sure."

The funeral. Nick's hand clenching mine and the certainty it was my fault. "Like maybe if I caused someone harm." I pose it less as a question and more as an admission of guilt.

He's quiet for a moment. "It's always a struggle for people with your gift. For all the good you can do going back in time, you risk causing just as much

harm. What you don't realize is that any human's life is just as full of choices." He leans back in his chair and observes me solemnly. "Say you set up two friends on a date and they marry. People will pat you on the back, but you've also *deprived* other people of marrying them. The children they might have had with those other people are now not born. Every action we take, even the best ones, may cause harm. Time travelers just have the unhappy side effect of knowing what they've done."

My eyes flicker to his. "What if I'm the reason someone died?" I venture. I sound as guilty as I feel. "There's no good side there."

"You have no idea what would have come of that person's life," he argues. "If you caused a murderer to die early on, would you have done the world harm or performed it a service?"

Except Ryan wasn't a murderer. He was a brilliant, funny boy who looked so much like Nick and had just as much potential. He might be a doctor now. He might have kids. And I took all of it away from him. It makes perfect sense to me that I'd have decided, long ago, that I would never risk using my abilities again. "I was hoping I could talk to someone about this. I'm obviously not the only one of your patients with this, um..."

"Talent?" he offers. I was going to say *issue*, but I nod. "Unfortunately, my files are organized by identifiers but there are no names or contact information, for your protection."

My brow furrows. "*Protection?*"

He nods. "Even the fact that we sit here now, discussing it, is a threat. Time travelers are like the rest of us in that there are some good and some bad. And the bad ones...are very bad. They wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone who showed signs of unusual ability, something greater than theirs. And I suspect, based on your ability to jump between different timelines, you'd fall into that category. Which reminds me...the DNA test."

"What will that tell you?"

"Right now I'm just trying to keep a database, determining family lines, trying to see what makes some so much more powerful than others. There are those of you who excel at jumping back through time but struggle to change your location. Some can direct themselves anywhere, but can't quite pinpoint time. And then there's someone like you, who can jump back through worlds that no longer exist. It's...rare. No, not just rare. It's unheard of."

A chill crawls up my spine. I think of that voice whispering to me in a darkened room, saying my powers make hers look childlike by contrast.

“Full disclosure,” he says, with a heavy sigh, “I’m also trying to get information about my wife. She was pregnant when she got lost. I don’t know where she went. I don’t know how far back she went. I just keeping hoping that...if I find a time traveler with our DNA, it might mean our child survived. It might even mean she stayed there and led a happy life.”

I sit with that, feeling heartsick. I could do this very thing to Nick if I jumped. “I’m so sorry.”

He stares at his desk before finally raising his head to meet my eye.

“Make no mistake, Quinn: being able to time travel is both a blessing and a curse.”

NICK

Two days pass. Two long days during which I do nothing but miss Quinn and imagine the worst. What if I come up empty-handed? What if something happens while I'm gone?

I walk for hours without seeing anything. I've been to Paris before, and there are places I'd like to go again, but right now this city is only a reminder of all the things I'll never be able to show Quinn—restaurants I can't take her to, museums she would love. A whole world I might be able to offer if I could just fucking fix this, which looks less likely with each hour that passes.

I've searched for the name Amelie Bertrand, but there are thousands, and ostensibly this one is cautious about giving out her address, though it seems she had no issue with giving it out as Sarah Stewart. With every new piece of information, the questions only grow.



QUINN CALLS when she wakes up. We try not to talk about Sarah, about the tumor, during these calls. I want just a few hours of seeing what it might have been like to have a normal life with her, and I think she does too. So she tells me about the garden, about the bulbs she'll plant once the weather cools, and the small blueberry bush she found in the back corner of the yard. I tell her about Paris, about the things I'd like to show her.

We talk about where we'd move if we had a family, whether we'd put a

pool in the back yard, where we'd go on trips. I'm smiling throughout all of these conversations, but they cut like a knife at the same time.

That night I go to a bar down the street. Though I've never been a big drinker, I've become a regular here during my short stay. The weight of missing Quinn, of worrying about her, is killing me. I need to take the edge off. I'm on my second bourbon when another American shows up. He's already drunk at 10 p.m. and loud as fuck, which I'm not in the mood to put up with.

"Check, please?" I ask the bartender. "*Billet, s'il vous plait?*"

"You American?" the guy shouts across the bar.

Fuck my life. "Yeah."

"Then you're from the best country in the goddamn world," he replies.

Drunk asshole. "If you say so," I reply, sliding a few bills to the bartender.

"I do say so!" he shouts. "You got a problem with that?"

He's an idiot. Normally I'd laugh this off. But tonight I'm in no mood. I'm angry. I'm bitter. What I want to do is blame God or fate or whatever is responsible for this situation, and in its place, he makes for an easy target.

"No, but I have a problem with you running your mouth about it in someone else's country."

"I'll run my mouth wherever the fuck I feel like it," he says, climbing off his barstool and crossing to my side of the room.

"Yes. Obviously." I'm a big guy and aside from scuffles with my brother, I've never lost a fight. The sight of him moving my way leaves me more tired than worried.

He pushes me, and my fist slams into his face before I've even realized I'm doing it. I welcome the opportunity to tear something apart. It feels like the first thing I've actually fucking *succeeded at* in weeks.

He hits me back. I welcome that too.

My fist sinks into his stomach, and he gasps. I relish it. I even relish the sharp snap of pain when he hits my jaw.

I want all of it. I welcome all of it. Until the cops arrive, that is.

QUINN

I sit in our adorable backyard, lying on a blanket in the garden and looking at the stars. It normally brings me peace, but I'm unable to find it tonight. In part because Nick didn't call when he was supposed to. But there's something else too. It rests at the back of my brain, some small answer waiting to be recognized, a puzzle piece waiting to be put in its proper place. I have missed something big.

Something about Sarah.

It's not just that she wants me dead...it's that she's not making sense. Why would someone hell-bent on killing me leave the country right now? Shouldn't she be waiting here to hover over at me at the moment of my death and take whatever it is she plans to take? And why would someone who's been so careful and methodical in her planning—she's obviously been at this for a good long time—suddenly begin slipping up? Letting herself get caught by Nick. Leaving an address where she can be traced in the pocket of her scrubs.

I picture the key under her mat as Nick described it. Gleaming and new. Who leaves a key under the mat when they live in a home worth a gazillion dollars?

It's too easy.

The address, the key, the journal left open with her dates of travel, an address. Sarah has left us a trail of breadcrumbs to find her, to chase her. She is laying a trap and Nick is going to fall right into it—if he hasn't already.

Why didn't he call me? Panic, which was merely a whisper moments before, turns into a roar.

It's the middle of the night there but I call him anyway. It goes to voicemail. I call again. It goes to voicemail. He's too worried about me to have shut his phone off, and he's not a heavy sleeper. My hands palm the ground, press into it. I know I need to stay calm, but already I'm envisioning the worst. If Sarah's done something, how the hell will I ever find him?



FOR FIVE HOURS I remain awake, calling him, pacing through our house, sick to my stomach. Do I call the police? The state department? I can just picture how much attention they'll pay to a girl complaining that her boyfriend is in Paris and hasn't called her back. His parents might have better luck but they probably don't even know I exist. For all I know they still think he's with Meg.

When my phone rings, it's two in the morning. I open my mouth to speak and promptly burst into tears.

"Quinn," he croons. "Stop, honey. I'm so sorry."

"I was worried sick," I cry. "I didn't know if you were hurt, and your parents don't even know I exist, and I had no idea who to call, and would they even have told me if you were hurt? Would they?"

He laughs softly. "Yes, my parents know about you. I'm sorry I put you through that. I kind of got arrested, so I didn't have my phone for a while."

My tears come to a sudden, shocked halt. "*Arrested?* For what?"

He sighs. "I got in a fight, in a bar. I know it sounds bad and you're probably now wondering if you're stuck with a violent alcoholic. All I can tell you is it was the first time since college that I've gotten into a fistfight at a bar. It's hard, being apart like this. I'm just not myself right now."

I curl up and press my face to my knees. This is insane, us being apart. We've waited our entire lives to get together, and once it happens we're separated by an ocean. "Then just come home. Please. I want you to stop anyway. I was thinking about it and Nick...it's a trap. It has to be. She's left us a trail of breadcrumbs straight out of *Hansel and Gretel*. The receipt? The key under her mat? She *wants* us to follow her."

"Maybe she wants *you* to follow her. But *you're* not, so we're fine."

I press my hand to my forehead. He doesn't get it. She can time travel. She's always going to be ten steps ahead of us. "Nick..."

"I'm sorry I worried you. It's the last thing you need right now. Seriously, I'm fine. Just a few more days."

"I don't think you're grasping how bad this could go. Sarah might not even be the only person you have to look out for. Grosbaum told me—"

"Grosbaum? You called him?"

I sigh heavily. *This is going to go over well.* "I drove up to see him."

"Jesus Christ," he says. "Why?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I counter. "He was right about everything, so I thought he might know something more. He thinks—" I hesitate. Telling him Grosbaum's PTSD theory opens up the topic of what I might have done wrong in another life. "He thinks I'm scared to use the ability, so it only comes out when I'm sleeping or unconscious and can't repress it."

"You're right to be scared to use that ability," he says. "Please tell me you're not trying anymore."

I could point out that there's nothing left to lose, but he sounds so despondent I decide not to argue with him. "I let Grosbaum do a DNA test. He wants yours too. I apparently have 'unusual' ability and he thinks your DNA is what would determine how powerful our child could be. Maybe that's why Sarah's trying to stop us."

"I don't want to brag," he says, "but I bet my DNA is fucking awesome."

I laugh, and then it fades away. "In this case it sounds like it would be a bad thing." I tell him about Dr. Grosbaum's missing wife. About those who target travelers more powerful than themselves.

"Fuck," he groans. "I wish I didn't know that. I thought we just had Sarah to worry about, and now it sounds like we have a whole universe of these people who could come after you. I hate that you are there, and I can't protect you."

Says the guy who just got out of jail and is hunting down a potential murderer. "You're the one in danger right now, not me," I reply.

"It's going to be fine," he says. "This will all end soon."

We hang up, and I walk out back to stare at our pretty garden, still flourishing in the warm August air. I'm glad something's flourishing. Nick obviously isn't, and I'm not either. I've felt a little worse every day since he left. We are not meant to be apart.

And I'm tired of him telling me it's fine that we are.

QUINN

I have a passport that's never seen the light of day. I still remember when it arrived eight years ago—how thrilled I was by the possibilities it offered. That was back when I still believed I'd be spending my junior year abroad. A week later I learned my father was going to die, and I threw it in a file and tried to forget.

Today, for the first time in all these years, I retrieve it. The cost of a last-minute ticket to Paris makes my stomach churn but right now, I need Nick and he needs me, and every other consideration is irrelevant.

I arrive in Paris just as the city is beginning its day—the tourists trickle while the Parisians move with brisk, impatient steps, dodging bikes and cars that zip down the street at twice the speed they should. The buildings rise on all sides, intricate and ancient and so amazingly *different* from home that if it weren't for the prospect of seeing Nick, I'd just want to start walking, drinking it in.

I arrive at the hotel and text Nick, who has no idea I'm here.

Me: What are you up to?

Nick: At breakfast. It's 3:00 a.m. there. Why are you awake?

I gather my bags and go in. After a brief and apparently persuasive conversation with the guy at the front desk, I'm standing inside Nick's room.

Me: Getting in shower. I like our room btw.

I take a selfie with his suitcase in the background and hit *send*, then go into the bathroom. As much as I'd like to stand under the hot spray for an

hour or more, I hustle, because I imagine Nick's going to be here within minutes of getting that text. I've just finished shaving my legs when the door slams. Before I can turn off the water, Nick is there, pulling back the shower curtain, staring at me in shock.

His eyes sweep over me from head to foot, and I'm not sure how to interpret the look until he steps into the shower fully clothed and pulls me against his chest. "I'm going to kill you for flying," he says, his mouth buried in my hair, "but God, I'm so glad you're here."

I lift my mouth to find his. "Me too," I reply. "And you're wearing way too many clothes."



LATER, we lie in bed, a slight breeze blowing in from the open doors of the Juliet balcony, sunlight streaming in. "I still can't believe you did that," he says for what must be the seventh time. "I don't think you realize how badly it could have gone."

I smile. "Except it didn't. The guy beside me hogging the armrest was the worst thing that happened the entire flight."

He isn't impressed. "You still have to get back home."

I stretch my arms over my head. Given that I'm naked and the sheet's fallen to my waist, I'm assuming I can distract him once more into forgetting his worry. His eyes fall to my chest and his hand slides over my stomach to cup a breast. His brow furrows and his hand moves to cup the other one. "They feel...bigger."

"Maybe it's all the sadness eating I've done since you left."

He is absolutely still for a moment. "You wouldn't *only* gain weight there, Quinn."

I laugh. "I know what you're getting at but...you can't possibly believe I'm pregnant. Aside from the impossibility of it, we just wouldn't know this early. I wouldn't have gained weight *anywhere* yet. It's only been a week."

His frown deepens. "We've already established that nothing about this is normal. We've also established that it at least *seems* as if you got pregnant right away in the past, no matter what kind of contraception we used. And if you're not technically human, there's no reason to think a pregnancy would progress at a normal rate anyhow."

I feel the tiniest whisper of worry and banish it. “That palm reader is making you paranoid.”

“Maybe,” he says. “But you could take a test, just to be sure.”

I grab his hand and press it to my sternum. “Stop,” I whisper. “It’s not possible, and we’re in Paris. Together. Please don’t ruin this for me right now.”

I see the effort it takes him not to argue. He forces a nod. “Then I suppose I ought to let you enjoy a part of Paris that isn’t this bed?” he asks, rising. “I’m telling you right now, it’s the best part. And please don’t argue with me or you’ll destroy my self-esteem.”

I take in the naked backside I’ve missed so damn much for the last week. “It’s been an okay part so far,” I tease.

He turns back toward me, arching a brow. “I know you didn’t just refer to sex with me as *okay*.”

“It was totally...pleasant,” I counter, digging my nails into my palm to keep from laughing. “Just, you know, brief.”

He kneels on the bed, his gaze dangerous. “Three hours was brief?” he growls. “Then by all means, tell me what you’d consider *not* brief.”

I smile at him as he hovers over me, supporting his weight on his forearms. “Three hours and fifteen minutes ought to cover it.”



EVENTUALLY WE DO MAKE it out of the room, into the sweltering heat of Paris in August. “So what do you want to see?” he asks.

There’s so much I want to see that I don’t even know where to begin. I start throwing out names, ticking them off on my fingers as I go. “The Louvre, the Orsay, the Palais Royale, Notre Dame, Sacre-Coeur, the Jardins du Luxembourg, the...”

He laughs. “Sorry, I should have been more specific. What would you like to see *today*?”

I bite down on a smile. “You tell me. I’ve only been here on our honeymoon, so all I remember is the room.”

“Which is precisely as it should be,” he replies solemnly. “But I’ll humor you since it’s your first day.”

He leads me to the path above the right bank of the Seine, where we end

up walking mile after mile, solely because there's never a point when I'm ready to stop looking. As soon as the Eiffel Tower fades from view, we are looking at Les Invalides and the Alexander III Bridge, leading to the Champs-Élysées, but I'm not ready to stop.

All day he indulges me and my excitement never dims. We eat dinner at a bistro in Ste Germaine des Pres Nick's heard of. I'm so tired I'd probably collapse if we were home, but here I just want more and more and more.

We sit outside in a light breeze, under the hum of stars and streetlights, and I'm so happy I'm not even sure what to do with it all. I feel like a bottle of champagne that's been shaken hard and needs to explode.

"We should walk along the Seine when we leave," I suggest, though my muscles are burning from all the walking we did today. Fifteen miles, easily.

Nick shakes his head. "I'm putting my foot down. I don't know how you're still going when you've been awake for two days straight, but I'm telling you, any moment now the fatigue is going to hit and you'll be comatose."

"Never," I swear. "I'm staying awake the whole time we're here."

He laughs at me quietly. "I give it an hour."

In the end it takes less than that. By the time our meal is over, I'm leaning on him like a drunk just to walk to the Uber. I struggle to stay awake in the car but it's futile. My head jerks up as I try to regain consciousness.

His laugh is low and affectionate. "Go to sleep, baby," he whispers. "I'll make sure you get home safe." His mouth presses to the top of my head as he settles me back against his shoulder. "Superheroes need their rest just like everyone else."

It's the last thing I remember of our entire magical day.



NICK and I stand next to a pay phone, outside a convenience store/gas station that is the only landmark for miles. The dry spring has stripped the ground down to nothing but beige earth. Only the occasional weed is there to provide it a hint of color.

"You want me to stay?" Nick asks, pulling my hands into his. I want to say yes. I swallow the desire down.

An 18-wheeler lumbers into the parking lot, blowing dust into our faces,

deafening us both with the squeal of brakes.

"Go ahead," I say, nodding at the market. "Get the food. It's just a matter of time before someone asks why we're not in school, and I don't want to lose our head start."

Nick laughs and runs his hand along my arm. "I don't understand why you're so worried. Our cell phones are off. She's not going to stop us if she can't find us."

That's where he's wrong. She has a thousand ways to stop us, ways Nick can't begin to imagine. I know I need to explain this, and now that we're pregnant I finally can. But it also means admitting everything else: about my role in Ryan's death. The ways I changed not just my timeline but his as well. This time tomorrow we'll be married, if everything works out. If I wait until after it's done, he might not forgive me. But he might not forgive me if I tell him beforehand either. I can hardly blame him either way, given that I'm unable to forgive myself.

"Maybe I'm paranoid," I say, forcing a smile. "Humor me."

That dimple flashes and it makes my smile a real one. "Red Gatorade?" he asks. Since the moment the pregnancy symptoms hit, I've wanted nothing else. I nod and he holds my face in his hands, gently brushing my mouth with his own. "I'm buying you some carrots too. This kid must need something other than sports drinks."

Despair hits again as I watch him walk away. I'm too young to be a mother. I need help, and the one person I want to turn to has been at war with me since Ryan's death. I'm pretty sure she won't even speak to me once she knows everything.

I drop quarters into the pay phone and dial. My heart is beating faster than it should.

"Where are you?" she shouts immediately. She sounds less angry than she does desperate. It makes me feel even worse.

"I'm okay," I soothe. "Really. You don't need to worry. We're just going away for the weekend. We'll be back." It's partly a lie, but I can't tell her everything. If she knew, she'd just check to see which states allow you to get married under the age of eighteen without parental consent. And there's only one. She'll find us.

"I know you're pregnant," she says, and my stomach drops to the dusty cement at my feet. I lay my head against the phone booth's clear wall. How could she possibly know? I've been so careful. I didn't even look up anything

related to pregnancy on my phone. "I've met the twins you'll have. They've visited me."

Twins. I sway against the phone booth like I've been hit. Twins who were able to visit her. I know what it means, if all of her Rule of Threes lore is actually true.

"They've been coming back for years," she continues. Her voice catches and she has to stop for a moment and pull herself together. "I didn't want to tell you because I wanted your life to be normal. I didn't want you to know what's ahead, but we no longer have that luxury."

Nick and I are having twins who time travel. It's impossible. Unheard of. I struggle to find my voice. "No one knows for sure if the Rule of Threes is real. It's a legend."

"When the twins first visited, they didn't know me. Which meant I'd died when they were born. And I was fine with that. But Quinn..." She heaves a deep sigh. "After Ryan, after you let your spark fade...they came back. And now they don't know you."

The air leaves my chest without ceremony. It's just gone, and I stand here, holding the phone, unable to even form a response. Through the store window I see Nick in the checkout line. He smiles, holding up the red Gatorade.

If she is right, in five months I'll be dead. Will his smile ever light up the same way again? I'm leaving him to raise two daughters alone. I pull my hoodie up to cover my face and begin to weep. I'm going to ruin Nick's life.

"All you have to do is jump again!" she cries. "If you just get stronger, everything will be fine."

"So you die instead? I can't. You know I can't."

"If you refuse to jump," she says, "I will make the choice for you."

My stomach is bottoming out. I already know exactly what she's going to do. "No."

"I'm sorry," she says. "But if you'd never met Nick, none of this would have happened."

I reach desperately for the only threat in my power. "If you do this, I'll never forgive you."

"Of course you will," she says gently. "You're not even going to remember it happened."



MY EYES BLINK OPEN. For a moment I'm still seventeen. Pregnant and grief-stricken, waiting for Nick while the trucks blow past. Talking to a woman who seemed to be close to me—my mother, perhaps? Except she wasn't. She didn't sound like my mother, and even the way I felt about her was different. But who the hell could she have been?

Nick—an older version of him, an even hotter version of him—stirs beside me. His hand curves around my hip, keeping me close, protecting me, even in his sleep. The early morning light is just beginning to filter through the sheer curtains, the start of another day in Paris, but it won't be like yesterday. I know what he wants. Every time he's cupped my breasts, he's grown still, as if trying to restrain his thoughts. I guess he's indulged my desire to not know the truth long enough.

He wakes, pulling my back to his chest.

"We can do it," I tell him.

"I kind of assumed we would," he says, laughing a little as his hand slides down my bare hip.

I turn to look at him over my shoulder. "I was talking about taking a pregnancy test."

"Not where I thought you were going with that, but still a good idea," he says. He climbs out of bed and goes to his suitcase, from which he produces a box. "I bought them yesterday. I figured you'd give in eventually."

I take the box to the bathroom, half terrified and half...something else. I guess there's a part of me that wants it. That wishes I could dream and plan for a baby just like anyone else. It's a selfish desire, one I try to ignore as I tear open the package. My best-case scenario is that I will give birth to a child, or children, who Nick will have to raise on his own. The worst case scenario is...much worse.

"How's it going?" he calls.

"I'm still urinating. The test doesn't work *that* fast, even for *tempore sphincter* or whatever the hell *shifter* was in Latin."

I hear a low laugh. "I'm fairly certain the word isn't *sphincter*."

I finish and lay the stick on the counter before I exit the bathroom. "I'm too nervous to look," I tell him.

He nods, setting his shoulders. "I'm looking for two lines, I assume?" he asks.

I raise a brow. It's not that I don't realize he's slept with people before me, but that doesn't mean I have to enjoy the reminder. "Know a lot about

pregnancy tests, do you?”

He gives me a half-smile. “Obstetrics rotation.”

Of course. And how fucking ridiculous that I have room in my head for jealousy right now. “Yes. Two lines.”

He walks in. I can’t see his face as he looks at the test, but he stiffens, and I know right then what it says. He turns around, his face drawn, and hands it to me.

Two lines.

I sit on the mattress, too shocked to stand. We are silent, the two of us, dumbfounded. My mother calls at that very moment, and I let it go to voicemail. “It’s just not possible,” I whisper. “I’ve been on the pill without incident since I was 21. Seven years. And now we have sex once and ...”

Nick’s mouth is a hard, set line as he thinks things I know he won’t share. “It was a lot more than once.”

“Fine, we have sex 700 times over the course of twenty-four hours, and I’m pregnant? It’s just not possible.”

He sits beside me. “There’s something that defies the laws of nature in almost everything about the two of us,” he says heavily. “I guess this is no exception.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. “Am I...am I even going to live long enough?”

He takes my hand and squeezes it hard. “Yes. Because I’m going to find Sarah and solve this. But it means Cecelia was right, so I might as well tell you the other thing she said.”

I take a deep breath. “That we’re having twins?” I ask quietly.

His jaw drops. “How did you know?”

I was really hoping he’d tell me I was wrong. But this means my dream happened, and is happening again. “I dreamed about it last night—we were teenagers, and someone, maybe my mom, told me our twins had visited her.”

He leans forward, hands braced on his thighs. “They visited her? How is that possible?”

The answer dawns on his face as I softly deliver it. “They time travel, Nick.”

“Fuck,” he says, staring straight ahead, his eyes empty. He rises and begins to pace with his hands on his head. “Jesus. I just...how are we going to keep them safe?”

He’s thinking of Rose, as am I. Rose the wild teen with the absent mother

and a father who had no way to keep her in one place. She, at least, had a grandmother to guide her. If I live long enough to give birth, who will my daughters have to turn to? “Nick, the other thing you need to know is that when they visited, they didn’t know me. Which means either the brain tumor or the Rule of Threes is...”

“No,” he says harshly. “Just because you saw something from another life doesn’t mean it’s going to happen in this one too.”

I lean forward, pressing my fingers to my temples. “What I don’t understand is how Sarah figures into this. In the dream last night, it was my mother or someone I was close to trying to stop us. But in London, and here, it’s Sarah.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know. But if only three of you can survive, maybe she’s just trying to make sure she’s one of the three.”

I bury my head in my hands. We’ve done this twice before, and the odds are stacked against us even more this time around. “We shouldn’t have done this,” I whisper. “We gave in and we shouldn’t—”

“I’m going to find her,” he says. “And this time I will stop her. If we don’t find her, we hide until they’re born.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him this, but I’m pretty sure we tried that strategy before too.



WE BOTH LIE DOWN, not saying much. Because what is there to say? All I can think about is how badly I want this life I’m not going to have. I want to meet this product of the two of us. I want to hold them and raise them and I’m never going to get the chance.

My mother calls again. It’s the middle of the night back home and I know I should answer but I just...can’t. Not just because of this news I can’t share with her, but because of what never occurred to me until just now: if she and Sarah and I all can time travel, and I’m having twins who can do it too, it’s a death sentence for *two* of us.

“We never ate,” Nick says. “I’m going to go downstairs and get you some food.”

“I’m not hungry.”

He pushes my hair away from my face. “It’s not just you anymore,

remember?”

He puts his shirt on, all those abdominal muscles flexing as he does it. I watch appreciatively, wishing I hadn't taken the test, wishing I'd just had one more day of enjoying this trip with him before we found out. I want to get us back where we were last night.

“You're looking pretty good there, Dad. Why don't you take that shirt off and come back to bed?”

A light flashes in his eyes, a half-second where he is considering the offer, and then he frowns. And continues to dress. “You need food.”

I groan. “Argh. So you're going to be overprotective *and* turn me down for sex too. This is getting better and better.”

He laughs, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Believe me, once you've eaten I'll accept any offer you want to make.”

He leaves and is back within minutes, carrying bread, cheese, jam, and juice. “It's all I could find at the moment,” he says. “Eat this and then we'll go get a real meal.”

It's more than enough food for four. My smile is wistful. I want this version of Nick, the overprotective expectant father. I want us to relish this, but how can we, under the circumstances?

My phone buzzes on the nightstand. My mother again. We both glance at her name on the screen but make no move toward it. “There must be something going on,” I say, biting my lip. “It's not like her to call back-to-back like that.”

“She's probably wondering if she can talk you into marrying Jeff again.”

I close my eyes, wondering if Nick would be better off if I had. I've done nothing but cause him pain.



EVENTUALLY WE MAKE our way out of the room, but Paris is no longer the same. We head to the Louvre, taking the path along the Seine, and all I see are children. Babies in strollers, toddlers playing in the grass. Nick sees them too. Every time a little girl passes, his worried eyes follow her.

He'd be the best possible dad under different circumstances. Under these, I'm not sure. “You've got to promise me you won't be like Rose's father,” I say, squeezing his hand. “If I can stay pregnant long enough to have these

babies, you can't be weighed down by everything after I'm gone. You need to put them first."

He comes to a stop in the middle of the path and presses his palms to his forehead. "Stop saying things like that," he says quietly. "You *are* going to make it. We are going to figure this out."

It's the least reassuring response he could give. It tells me that, much like Rose's father, he cares so much about my outcome he can't put anything else ahead of it, at least not right now.

We keep walking and exit the path at the Tuileries. Rodin's *The Kiss* stands outside. My favorite sculpture of all time, out in the open as if it's nothing special.

"I can't believe it's just sitting here, like any old thing," I whisper, as if the shock of it has stolen the air from my throat. I close my eyes for a moment, overwhelmed. Paris is like a life-size jewel box, and I'm standing in the middle of it all with the only person in the whole world I want to be with. How can there be this many wonderful things in the world? Nick, Paris, children—it would be too much good fortune for anyone.

"You alright?" he asks, his breath against my neck.

I swallow and nod, feeling a little choked up and a little terrified. "It's perfect," I reply.

"It's one of my favorites," he says, assuming I meant the statue when I really meant *this*, all of it. It is the high point, the moment when so much good fortune falls upon you at once that you know nothing else can ever match it.

Which reminds me it's all going to come to an end. Soon.

NICK

The call comes that afternoon, just after we're back from the Louvre. Cecelia gives me an address. "You should hurry," she adds before she hangs up.

I lunge across the room for my shoes and Quinn jumps to her feet. "Was that her?"

"Yes. And you're not coming," I snap, shoving my wallet into my pocket.

She ignores me as she pulls her sneakers on. "You don't make the rules. I'm here and we're in this together."

I groan. I should have realized this would be a fight. "Not this, we're not. She tried to kill you, Quinn, and if you're there I'm going to be so worried about protecting you I won't be able to focus on anything else."

"At least tell me where you're going," she demands.

"You know I'm not doing that. You'll give me 15 minutes and then start to worry and come after me."

She folds her arms across her chest. "You know I could just follow you right now."

I gently push her to the bed and kneel in front of her. My lips graze her forehead and then her belly. "You have someone to protect. Maybe two someones. I need you to be safe, and this is going to be fine. It's a conversation, nothing more."

Her shoulders sag in unwilling agreement. In truth, I'm not sure it will just be a conversation. I press my lips to the top of Quinn's head, and hold

them there, just a moment longer than I should. I hope to God it's not the last time I ever do it.



I GIVE the driver the address and he heads back toward the Champs-Élysées. I have no idea if this is going to be a polite visit or an altercation. Cecelia's words—*killing her would solve everything*—echo in my head. It's funny how the oath I swore about doing no harm becomes meaningless when Quinn's life is on the line.

We cross the Pont des Arts, heading toward the left bank. There's some legend about the bridge—lovers putting a lock on the bridge and throwing the key into the Seine. Quinn and I didn't do it. I'm wondering now if we'll ever get a chance, if doing it would have brought us some extra hint of luck we now don't have.

We arrive in a section of town that's seen better days. While most of Paris is old and charming, the houses here are only old, minus the charm. Their brick facades are crumbling and several of them lean precipitously to the right, one good storm away from annihilation. We stop in front of a stone structure that is easily 300 years old if not more. Given how well Sarah lives in Georgetown, I'm hard pressed to imagine *this* is where she stays in Paris. Even the driver seems to wonder if we're in the right place. "*Ici?*" he asks, with a single brow arched.

I nod and slide from the car, watching him speed off. With a single deep breath, I knock on the door. No one comes. I knock again, then try the handle. The door swings open into an entryway with a large kitchen just past it. The remains of breakfast sit on the counter—a pot of jam, a loaf of bread with the serrated knife still lodged inside it—almost as if whoever was here ran out in a panic, which doesn't bode well.

I'm trying to decide if I should wait outside or explore the house for clues when I hear a door shut below me. Someone is in the basement. Someone who may be hiding from me. I pull the knife from the bread, because this is clearly not going to be a friendly conversation, and go to the basement stairs.

She will have heard me creaking around up here so it's not as if I can surprise her, but if she's lurking near the bottom of the stairs in the dark she could sure as fuck surprise me. I flip on the light.

The floorboards creak underfoot as I descend into a basement straight out of every horror movie ever made: poorly lit, water dripping, crammed with dusty furniture strewn with cobwebs. “Hello?” I call. “Sarah? I don’t want to fight with you. I just have questions.”

I walk toward the back of the basement, to a second door. I brace myself as I reach for the knob, and the moment I do, feet skitter, flying up the stairs. There’s an almost childish giggle as the basement door slams shut. I run up the stairs after her, not at all surprised to find the door is locked from the outside. Even when I throw my shoulder against it, it does not give.

I will need to call the police for help since I refuse to drag Quinn into this mess, and if they don’t arrest me for breaking and entering...what then? How the fuck am I going to find Sarah if she doesn’t want to be found? If she can disappear on a whim?

I pick up my phone and dial. Silence greets me: I have no signal.

The trap Quinn warned me about—I see it now. This was never about me meeting Sarah. It was about Sarah getting Quinn alone.

QUINN

Nick was right. Only twenty minutes have passed and I'm going crazy. If he'd given me the address I'd already be there, banging on the door. I text him but there is no answer, so I pace the room, taking deep breaths that don't help in any way, shape, or form.

I finish dressing, ready to leap into action. But what action can I even take? I should have forced him to give me the address. I should have followed him. I sink onto the edge of the bed and bury my head in my hands, tug my hair in frustration. What if he doesn't return?

It's at the 45-minute mark that I finally hear the chime of a text. I pounce at my phone, laying on the bed. It is from an unknown number.

Your boyfriend needs help.

And then there is a video. A doorway, and someone pounding on it from the other side. A stream of profanity from a voice that is unmistakably Nick's.

I can almost hear the sound of Sarah's trap slamming shut. She played us both like clockwork. She knew he'd be desperate enough to do anything to save me, and I'd be desperate enough to do anything to save him. And we walked right into it like fucking toddlers. The wise thing, of course, would be for me to not take the next step, not go wherever she directs me. I already know I won't be doing the wise thing. I just can't.

I ask where he is and after a single, labored minute, the reply finally comes: *25 Avenue Montaigne. If you call the police, I will have no reason not*

to kill him. And as you must realize by now, I'll never be caught.

I scramble to my feet. I know he asked me to stay. I know he wanted me to protect our child. But if only one of us is going to survive this trip to France, it needs to be him.

I'm unnervingly calm as I climb into the back of the car, because it's not Nick she wants, it's me. I have no illusions about surviving the day, but right now it just doesn't matter, and there's something freeing in the fact that I care so much about his outcome that I've stopped caring about my own.

We fly past the Seine, past all the wonders I gawked at yesterday, never dreaming my time here would be so fleeting. The phone rings—my mother again. Her timing couldn't be worse, and yet...do I really think I'm making it out of this place alive? It's me Sarah wants, not Nick. And my mother is back home in Pennsylvania, clueless. I'll never have told her goodbye.

I pick the phone up. "Hi, Mom," I say, swallowing down my sadness. We were very different people, and yes—maybe her fear of what I really am set me back—but she loved me the best way she knew. She deserves better than to be left alone in the world.

"I have to tell you something," she says, her voice quavery. "It's something I should have told you a long time ago."

"Mom, I'm so sorry but this might not be the best time. Sarah's causing trouble and it's sort of an emergency."

"She isn't your aunt," my mother says breathlessly, as if trying to expel the words before I can hang up the phone. "You were adopted."

For a moment I don't understand what she's saying. "What?"

"You were adopted," she weeps. "I-I wanted to tell you so many times but your father said no."

"But...that's not possible. I've seen my birth certificate." Even as I say the words though, things are clicking into place...that I tan while my parents both burned. Their stick-straight hair versus my waves. The green eyes when theirs were both brown. I was different in so many ways. I just tried not to see it.

"We faked it," my mother whispers. "Someone gave you to your father and he brought you home. We had no paperwork, nothing. We were scared the state would take you from us since we didn't do it all the right way."

"Who gave me to him?" I demand.

"I don't know," she says. "I asked him so many times and he wouldn't say. He told me you were our miracle and that there were some things you

don't question. So I let it go."

That dream I had, about a version of my mother who time traveled...was that person my birth mother? Did she raise me once? I felt, in that dream, as if she loved me. As if I was her entire world. Which makes me wonder: did she give me up when my timeline was reset, or did someone take me from her? Under normal circumstances I'd need an hour or a day or a decade to unpack this, but the driver is pulling over, and the truth is it hardly matters. Not when Nick's life is in the balance. "I'm here, Mom. I really have to go. But thank you...for everything. I love you."

I hang up before she can question me. I just hope my final words were enough.

I climb out of the car, shocked to find I'm surrounded by mansions. And the biggest one of all says 25 Avenue Montaigne on a brass plaque outside its open gates.

I swallow hard and move toward it. The building is intimidating, formidable, older than any building we have at home. It makes no sense that I've been led here, and it worries me that it feels...familiar. Is this where another of my lives ended too?

There's a pounding at my temples I try hard to ignore as I walk through the wrought iron gates, half expecting to be tackled by security and somewhat surprised to make it to the front door unscathed. If Sarah is not a blood relative, then why the hell is she doing this? How would she even know I can, theoretically, time travel? Things make even less sense than ever, but there's not a doubt in my mind she's the one who took me from my birth parents.

My hand raises to knock, but I think better of it. I'm not stupid...I know I'm walking into a trap. And this bitch has Nick, so I have no intention of being polite. If there were time, I'd stop to laugh at how much in my life has changed. Obedient Quinn, who was marrying someone she didn't love, who wasn't willing to rock the boat no matter what it cost, is now someone ready to fight to the death. I've come a long way in eight weeks. It's a shame it took me so long to get here.

I open the door and find a foyer that looks like it belongs in a museum. The heavy carvings, gold-leaf sun and rays, suggest the place was built in the 1600s, during the reign of the sun king, Louis XIV—although I'm not sure how I know that. The brass lamps on the walls would be a more recent addition, but even they would have been added in the late 1800s. I take a few careful steps inside, my mind racing. The video sent to me showed a

buttressed door, gothic. This place was built several centuries later. Which means Sarah has sent me to the wrong location. I step backward. That's when I hear the click of a gun, far too close to my ear.

"Quinn," says a voice, so pleasant, so melodic, you'd never dream it could belong to something entirely evil. "I was wondering when you'd arrive."

I allow my head to turn, just an inch, and watch as she moves around to my side of the column, the gun still pointed at my head. She is exactly as I remember—the long pale blond hair, the eyes a blue I've never seen on anyone else—an angel come to life. A terrifying angel who might, I now realize, kill Nick just because she can.

I swallow. "Where is he?"

"If you haven't noticed, I'm the one with the gun so I'll be setting the agenda." She nods at the door ahead of me. "Go downstairs."

I'm no ninja. I can't kick the gun from her hands as if this is a movie. Even if I were to disarm her, it's not like I could hold her at gunpoint. All she'd need to do is disappear. My only option is to run, which might not succeed, and which might be a death sentence for Nick. I glance from that door to the one behind me anyway, wracking my brain for another solution. "If you run," she adds, "Nick will be stuck in that basement forever. He'll die thinking you didn't care enough to come for him. I'll make *sure* that's what he believes."

My eyes narrow. "How do I know you're not going to leave him there anyway?"

"You have my word," she says with a saccharine smile. "He'll be freed the moment you've followed my instructions."

I've hated people before, but never like this. Never enough to kill. I would tear her apart with my bare hands if I could. "Do you actually think your word means anything to me?"

"Ah. I see your point," she says, tipping her head to the side. "However, you don't have much of a choice, do you? Follow my instructions and you might save him. Don't follow them and I assure you, you won't."

I take one last glance out the window. This time, not with any thought of running, but solely because I know I won't be seeing all these things again—sunlight, grass, flowers, the flash of a car as it drives past.

"Down the stairs," she barks, irritation straining her attempt at civility.

I glare at her as I begin to move. "Why are you doing this? Is this about

my...spark, or whatever it is?"

Her eyes narrow. "Someone's been talking to you, I see. Move."

I climb down the stairs, rotting boards sagging beneath my feet. It is dimly lit, with only a dirty, cement floor—not a dungeon, but not far enough away from it to be all that comforting. "You see those shackles against the wall?" she asks. "Go lock yourself up."

I hesitate once more. The moment those shackles lock around my wrists I'm out of options. But I've been out of real options from the moment I heard she had Nick. "Time's running out, Quinn. If you try my patience I'll just kill you both."

That's all she needs to say. I go to the wall, grab the first shackle, and attach it to my wrist. "This seems like a lot of effort to go to," I say, glancing up at her. "Why not just shoot me?"

She gives me a bored look and nods at the other shackle. "It's more complicated than that, obviously, or I'd have done it long ago." Because she's going to stab me in the heart. It's really not how I thought I'd go, and the prospect would terrify me if I wasn't so scared for Nick instead.

I'm barely able to get the second shackle onto my wrist, one-handed, but it finally pops into place. "Okay, I did what you wanted. Now let him go."

She smiles, unhurried, untroubled. "He'll break the door down soon enough. He's very clever, your Nick, isn't he?"

I hang my head. He'll get back to the hotel soon and when he arrives I'll be gone, and he'll have no idea why. "Is he ever going to know what happened to me?" I ask quietly. "Or am I just going to disappear?"

"He'll know," she says. She raises her phone and takes a photo of me.

"Do not send him that," I bark.

"Why?" she asks, with the sweetest smile. "You look just as cute as ever. He's going to love it."

I press my forehead to my knees and take short, panicked breaths. He could get over this. He could return to his old apartment, his pretty ex-girlfriend, his old life and I *want* him to—but a photo like that will haunt him forever. "Please," I beg, my voice cracking. "I don't want that to be the last memory he has of me. He's going to blame himself and just...please. I'll do whatever you want."

She looks up from her phone, all blue-eyed and guileless. "But the photo has already been sent. Besides...how is he going to know he needs to save you if I don't show him?"

I strain against the shackles. “You lying *bitch*. You said he’d be free.”

She takes a seat on the floor a few feet from me and sets the gun behind her. “As he will be. If he chooses to come here after you, that’s up to him.”

If I’d just listened to him, if I’d just stayed at the hotel, would none of this have happened? Probably not. Sarah was never going to free Nick. Even if he broke out of the basement, she’d find a way to catch him.

“Why? Why involve him at all?” I plead. “You’ve got me. Stab me in the heart or whatever it is you’re going to do and leave him out of it.”

“This is all your own fault,” she says with a shrug. “It could have been avoided if you’d just done what you should have. Or if you just stayed away from him in the first place. Do you know how often I’ve had to go back in time to try to reset things? Countless. I’m tired of being nice about it.” She stares at her nails, delicately flicking at dirt there. “It’s such a shame too. I’ve seen your twins, you know. Beautiful girls. Their power, together, could be staggering. Which is a bad thing, to be honest.” She smirks at me. “So this is kind of three for the price of one, isn’t it?”

My twins. They exist somewhere out in the world at the moment, somewhere in the future. And when she kills me they’ll just disappear. If Nick is raising them, he’s going to lose them both at once. Maybe he won’t realize they ever existed, but I think they’ll remain inside him somewhere, a longing he can’t explain, the same way I did. I curve forward as if it can ease the ache in my chest. “Why couldn’t you have done this before I met him?” I cry. “Why do this now?”

She looks surprised, like the answer should be as obvious to me as it is her. “Lots of reasons. I mean, would you have shackled yourself to the wall for that boy you *were* going to marry? Of course not. You had nothing to live for until you met Nick, and you certainly wouldn’t have flown all the way to Paris to chase the other one down.”

I hate that she’s right. I hate that she knows me so well when I have no idea who she even is. If Jeff were in Paris depressed, it wouldn’t have occurred to me to come see him. And if someone trapped him, my reaction would have been pure logic. I’d have recognized I’m neither James Bond nor Bruce Lee, and I’d have called the cops despite her warning not to. “Why does it have to be Paris?” I ask, my lip curling. “Do you try to limit your murders to some distinct geographic area?”

She frowns at me. “Sarcasm is an unbecoming trait, Quinn. It needed to be in Paris because I want my husband nearby when this finally ends,” she

says. Her head tilts and the smile on her mouth is almost...affectionate? "He's waited a long time for this."

I doubt she's married to anyone I could actually appeal to, but my head swivels, looking for him anyway.

Her eyes follow mine and she laughs, as if I'm a child trying to read a book upside down. "He's here, just not in this time. Some of us excel at traveling through time but not place. Places are difficult for me, while you were good at both, until you decided to give it all up. Such a waste. I understand you've somehow been able to jump back to previous lives too. I have no idea how, but that power you're hiding must be tremendous. It could have ruined everything if you'd just remembered a little more." Her mouth curves in disgust, and, seeming to remember her purpose here, she grabs duct tape off the desk and walks back to me. "I'd better muzzle you before he arrives. Not that he appears any more likely than you to care for his own safety."

I swing my head away but there is little I can do and in moments, I'm effectively silenced.

If I could, I would curl up on the floor and weep, but instead I lean against the wall, trying not to choke on my sobs. I still don't understand why she is forcing Nick to be here to watch me die, and I'm going to leave this world without ever knowing if he's okay when it's done. She is no longer interested in me. She returns the tape and gun to the desk—there's a knife there too, which I suppose is for me—and busies herself around the room, cleaning up, going through a stack of papers on a desk nearby, ignoring me completely.

Upstairs, the door hinges creak. My heart climbs into my throat, *beating beating* like a battle drum. A wary footstep echoes across the marble floor above us, then another, and another.

I want to shout into the tape but this will only gain his attention, so I sit, still and silent.

Sarah just laughs at me, in no rush to alert him to our presence. "I lured him all the way here and you know what I'm capable of. Do you really think if you stay quiet I'd just let him walk out? That farmer and his wife did you a disservice if they raised you to be so naïve this time around. I should have given you to someone else. It's not nearly as much fun as it could have been."

I thrash against the wall, in agony over what Nick is about to see, and so frustrated by what she's done and all the things I don't know. Who did she

take me from? Does my birth mother even know I'm alive? Did my father know I was stolen?

I'm about to die without the answers to any of it.

NICK

I *f you want to save her, you will come alone*, the text said, accompanied by a photo of Quinn chained to a wall. The picture sends me into a rage so fierce I can barely function around it. How could I have let this happen? I should have hidden Quinn, kept her locked up somewhere and guarded within an inch of her life. All that fucking education and when it came down to protecting her, I was worse than useless. I still am, but there's no choice anymore—Sarah has Quinn, which means she's got us by the throat.

I run to a main road and call a car, urging the driver to hurry in my pathetic French. “*Vite, s’il vous plait. C’est un...emergency.*” I don’t know the word for *emergency* in French. *Fuck*. I can’t do anything here, can’t control a single fucking thing, not even my ability to speak.

The driver seems to figure it out. My hands clench into fists as we fly back toward the sixth arrondissement, arriving at a home not too far from where I’ve been staying this entire time. Was Sarah nearby all along? Why is she going through all this? She could easily have killed Quinn, if that’s what she wants to do.

None of it makes sense, but whether it makes sense or not, I’m no longer thinking in terms of negotiation, of convincing Sarah to help us. As I reach the front door of the mansion Sarah directed me to, I’ve only got two goals: to save Quinn and to make Sarah pay for what she’s done. Killing Sarah no longer seems extreme. It seems well-deserved.

I push the door open and walk inside. The place must have been spectacular once, though it's mostly empty now. I hear noise coming from the back of the house and creep toward it, over floors that squeak no matter how quietly I tread. I pass several doors until I get to a small salon and come to a stunned halt. The noise was just an open window. What stops me are the hundreds of photos hanging on the walls, every last one of Quinn. As a pink-cheeked toddler cradling a duckling. Her first day of kindergarten, with a wide, toothless grin. With rain boots on, ankle-deep in mud outside a barn. Her high school graduation, her prom. Every important event lovingly documented. It's as if Sarah has been stalking her since birth.

Or as if Sarah loves her.

QUINN

Down here, Nick,” Sarah sings, grabbing the gun from the desk. She sounds cheerful, like she’s inviting him to join her potluck.

His legs come into view, then his chest, and with each step I’m futilely hoping he’ll suddenly turn and flee.

He doesn’t.

When he reaches the bottom step, he’s so relieved to find me alive he doesn’t even notice Sarah until the moment she raises the gun and pulls the trigger.

His eyes meet mine as it happens. One last, panicked glance as the bullet hits his leg. He staggers and falls. All my screaming is silenced by the tape.

This can’t be happening. This is a dream. Wake up, I scream at myself. *Wake up.* But nothing changes. Nick’s on the ground, bleeding. He’s struggling to get to his feet, so Sarah walks to me and presses the gun to my head. “Shackle yourself and stop struggling,” she says to him with a click of her tongue. “Surely you realize that the more you struggle, the faster you’ll lose blood.” She waits until he’s shackled himself before she puts the gun in her waistband.

Nick grinds his teeth as he twists his leg to make the wound face up. “You fucking bitch,” he says. “What do you want with us?”

She tips her head to her shoulder, amused by his anger. “This is a good start. I never dreamed it would all go quite this well. But don’t worry. I’m going to give Quinn here one more chance.”

One more chance to do what?! I already told her I'd do anything she wants. She's toying with us, as if this is fun for her, a lark.

She turns to me. "Just look at him. You could save him, you know, if you wanted to. That wound won't kill him. Not immediately, anyway. But now I can shoot him in the head from two feet away, and *that* will. And it's entirely your fault."

I struggle against the shackles, weep so hard I begin to choke, and she strolls over and finally rips the tape from my mouth. "Tell me what to do!" I scream. "Just fucking tell me! I'll do it. *Anything.*"

"Quinn," Nick groans. "Don't."

She crouches in front of me. "You want to save him? Then come get me. If you wanted it enough, you could have your hands around my throat in a moment. You just don't love him that much."

I thrash against the shackles. "I do!" I scream. "I do! I just don't know what you want!"

"If you love him so much, I want you to show me," she says, smirking. "Close your eyes and place yourself behind me. See that knife on the table? Picture yourself there." I think of that dream I had weeks ago at my mother's house. The voice telling me I'd be able to jump on the day when I needed it most. I couldn't possibly need it more than I do right now, yet there is nothing there. I'm as impotent as I ever was.

"I can't!" I cry. "I'm not like you."

"You can. You were once such a talented little time traveler. Remember? Remember how you rushed back to change Nick and Ryan's timeline? The way you swore you'd never wish for anything again after you messed up. You should tell Nick what you did. Go ahead."

My head is shrieking but I see it. I see the decision. I picture the moment I stood there, watching Nick and Ryan tearing each other apart, how I couldn't stand that I was at fault. "No," I cry, my eyes squeezed tight.

"The three of you were at a party and your brother was drinking too much. Sulking, as always, because he thought you stole Quinn from him," says Sarah without emotion. "He kissed her against her will and you caught them."

Nick's face is so pale, twisted with pain, but he stills at these words. My head falls backward. He's going to hate me, but maybe it's better that way, if she lets him live. Maybe hating me will make this easier when I'm gone.

"Tell him what you did, Quinn," Sarah says. "Tell him what you did, or I

shoot him again and end this.”

I turn toward him. He looks at me with absolute faith in his eyes, and he never will again. “I went back,” I weep. “I went back and convinced you not to go to the party because I wanted it not to have happened. I didn’t want it to come between us, and I was scared you and Ryan would kill each other. And Ryan went alone and got in that truck, and he died.”

Nick’s face gets even paler, and he stares at me in shock. He’s just...blank. As if everything he felt toward me a moment before has seeped out along with the blood pouring down his leg.

Sarah turns back to me. “You didn’t just stop time traveling, Quinn. You stopped fighting for anything you want, and I’m sure today’s no exception. You’re going to roll over again and because of it, Nick will die.”

“I’m not! I just...please...I don’t know how to do what you’re talking about!” I plead.

Sarah groans in aggravation. “Enough! Enough of this nonsense. He dies.” She walks toward the desk for the gun.

“Quinn,” says Nick, suddenly still. “It’s okay. Look at me.” I comply, stunned by how calm he is, how resigned, as if there’s no use fighting it anymore. That blank look on his face a moment ago is gone. His heart is in his eyes now, a heart that’s entirely mine. “I love you. So much. And even if you can’t say it back, I know you love me too.”

Love. It’s what holds Nick calm right now, in the face of his own death, worried about me instead of himself. It’s what led him to give up everything to try to save me. And yes, it leads to bad things too—our tenant murdering his wife in a fit of jealous rage. Me accidentally killing Ryan simply because I wanted to prevent a kiss, a stupid fight. But ultimately, it’s a beautiful thing, enabling the weakest of us to transcend our fear and our failings and our desires on behalf of someone else. And I never wanted to open myself up to it, not with him, because I knew it would lead me to this moment—the one in which the door I held so tightly, only letting a tiny bit of air come through, finally swings open. Love for him rushes in, brilliant and painful at once.

But something deadly is there too—and after way too many years, I’m finally able to welcome it. “I love you,” I whisper. “And I’m not going to let you die.”

My eyes go to Sarah, to the knife on her desk. I focus so hard that my brain shrieks in response, black oozing into the corners of my vision. But I do not let it go. I stare at the desk while she cocks the gun and points it at Nick’s

head.

There is a rush of air. Darkness flecked with tiny pinpoints of light. I ignore all of it and focus: *the knife on the desk, the knife on the desk*. I picture it in my head until it no longer seems like a picture, until it is real.

And I land. Free of the shackles, naked, on the floor behind Sarah. My brain begs for mercy, and I want to curl up in a ball at the pain, but I force myself forward to the desk, grabbing the knife. I don't know how far back I've gone, but when I glance at the wall I realize Nick isn't here yet. Which means there's one last thing I need to do in order to save him.

My vision narrows to only a pinpoint of light. I am half here and half in the place I go when I collapse, that land of darkness and absence. Sarah turns toward me just as I hear the door upstairs creak open. There is no time to think, to argue. I lunge, tackling her, with the knife in my hands. Her hands surround mine, and together we drive the knife into her chest. It hits bone first and then sinks in easily as we both fall to the ground.

My vision is gone, but I hear her speaking to me. "Good girl," she whispers. "You finally did it."

There's a question on my lips but it washes away along with everything else. I no longer hear Nick upstairs. I no longer see. The floor was cold a moment before and now it's...nothing.

I give into it, the inky blackness, and the pain begins to ease as night sweeps through my veins. *Nick*, I think, just before the blackness obliterates thought. *I found you before. I will find you again.*

QUINN

It's just after 4:00 a.m. when my mother calls.
She knows London is six hours ahead. She wouldn't call right now unless it was an emergency.

Despite that, I don't want to pick up the phone. Over the past months I've been remembering so many things from a life with Nick that isn't this one. Warnings. I'm not sure what happened, but I know she tried to keep us apart somehow, and I know the pregnancy is why. That's why I've kept it a secret this time.

"What have you done?" she asks. She sounds as if she's been crying.

She knows. Why did I think we could hide this from her? I press my hand to my stomach. The twins are so big I can no longer see my feet when I look down. "I don't know what you're talking about," I reply coolly.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. Your twins visited me, Quinn," she says. "I know everything. And I know they're born a month from now."

My twins time travel. Which means if the Rule of Threes she's harped on forever is real, one of us will die, and it will probably be me since my spark has faded.

"Did you know?" I whisper. "Is this why you always pushed me so hard to time travel?" In my entire life it's the only thing we ever really fought over. She's begged and argued for well over a decade, but I always sensed a danger in it I couldn't put into words. Maybe the danger was what I did to

Ryan in that other life I remember. Or maybe the danger is that when I give birth to twins, it will kill either my mother or myself—and I couldn't let it be her.

“Yes,” she admits. “I’m sure you’ve figured out by now this isn’t the first time we’ve been through this. You and Nick grew up together, until I changed things, and you got pregnant in high school. I did the only thing I could to save you.”

I rest my hand on my stomach. I already love my daughters. It’s far too late for her to convince me to take it all back. “Leave me alone. It’s my life and you have no right to decide how I spend it.”

“I’m your mother. Do you really think I’m going to just let you die? I’ll reset your timeline and we’ll try it again.”

I remember this panic. It’s what I felt in that dream, the one where I was standing outside a convenience store, talking to her on the phone. Looking at Nick inside and knowing we were going to be torn apart. Except it wasn’t a dream, it really happened. And she really did exactly what she threatened to do.

“You will fail again,” I tell her. “No matter how many times you try to keep me from Nick, I’m going to find him.”

I hear the sound of something shattering. She’s breaking pottery, which is what she does only when she’s at her angriest. “Your love for him is your Achilles heel. You won’t act on your own behalf, but for him there’s no depth to which you won’t sink. And don’t think I won’t use that to my advantage.”

I stop breathing. “Use it how?”

“By making you take my spark,” she replies calmly.

I sink onto the bed. “You can’t make me do that.”

Her voice is steady now, determined. “Of course I can. I’d just have to convince you to kill me.”

QUINN

I'm cold.
Ice pricks the surface of my skin, pins and needles that begin at my neck and work their way down my arms. A hand is holding mine, and then I find it pressed to something wet and warm. Sound then...the gurgle of strained breathing.

"Good girl," a voice whispers. "Good girl. You finally did it." She sounds as if she is proud of me, like I'm a child who's taken her first steps.

My eyes open. It's Sarah clutching my hand, pressing it to her chest.

Images explode in my brain. Scenes in which this woman I thought I hated was the person I once loved most. I'm a child playing in the woods behind my house and Nick is there too.

"I think I'll marry you when I grow up," he says. She's the one who smiles at me in the darkness when I tell her this. She's the one I'm hiding from in London, because I know she will stop me somehow if she discovers I'm pregnant with twins.

My mother. The woman who kept changing the timeline, refusing to let me die. Who begged me to kill her in order to save my own life.

"Mom?" I cry. The word is choked, horrified. I want to stop this, save her, but I still can't seem to move. "Oh my God. What did you..."

She squeezes my hand. "I couldn't lose you. I did the only thing I could think of." She sounds tired, winded. "The brain tumor—I'd altered too much of your life and your brain couldn't...keep up. You wouldn't kill me if you

knew who I was. So my brother agreed to raise you.”

She gave me away. And made me believe she was the enemy.

That bad thing I knew I was capable of, the thing I’ve dreaded my entire life—it wasn’t time travel, and it wasn’t causing Ryan’s death. It was what I’ve just done—I’ve killed my mother to save Nick and myself.

“I’m so sorry,” I weep, clutching her hand. “I’m so sorry.”

Her eyes flutter open. “It all worked out the way it was supposed to. Just keep the twins safe, because this will change everything.”

The ice eases from my hips, and then outward. I try to sit up, but she clings to my hand. “Not yet,” she whispers.

“I’ve got to get help,” I plead. “Tell me what to do.”

Tears roll down her face and she smiles up at me. “You just did everything I needed you to.”

“But—” My eyes squeeze shut. It’s too much. It’s happening too fast. “Why is it so hard for me to remember you? How could I not have known who you were? Just please...stay.” I feel so much inside me right now, all this love from another time, for her, and I have no place to pin it because the little I can remember of her is so dim.

“You shouldn’t have remembered anything at all, sweet girl. You just loved Nick too much to let him go, the same way I did your father.” Her palm rests against my cheek. “I have to tell him it all worked out. We both love you so much.”

And then her eyes flutter closed for the last time.



“QUINN,” says Nick. The word comes out as a low, pained gasp.

He’s frozen, standing at the bottom of the stairs. I look down to see that I’m naked, covered in blood. “I’m okay,” I whisper but he’s already crossing the distance between us in two bounding steps. He drops to the ground, pulling me into his lap, and as he does, my mother starts to disappear. First feet, then limbs, then the rest of her. I lean my head against his chest and weep.

“Are you hurt?” he asks. He sounds desperate, panicked.

I shake my head, crying so hard it’s difficult to speak. “She saved me,” I finally whisper. “All she ever wanted was to save me.”



WE ARE in a private room in the hospital waiting for MRI results. It's sterile and brightly lit, silent aside from the clamor in the hallway. It couldn't be further from the place we left a few hours ago.

I remember very little about leaving the basement. Nick dressed me and carried me out. There was still no trace of my mother. I hope that means she got wherever she was trying to go.

In spite of witnessing the way her body disappeared with his own eyes, Nick still doesn't entirely believe my version of events—my mother has been the villain in his mind for so long he can't bring himself to see her otherwise. "But she *did* try to kill you," he insists. "Remember the hospital? *And* you say she shot me. So something's not adding up."

I get it...my faith in her is absolute because I remember her—not everything, but enough to know she loved me more than anyone alive. He doesn't have the benefit of those memories though. "We have no idea what she gave me in the hospital. And she shot you in the leg. If she really wanted to kill you, she could have."

He frowns but doesn't argue. "And you really time traveled? You're sure?"

I nod. It was all so fast I'm not even sure what happened myself. If Nick hadn't found me naked I'd still be wondering if I hadn't imagined the whole thing.

There've been enough revelations in one day to last a lifetime. Not just about the twins, or that I can time travel, but that my parents were not actually my parents, and the man I thought was my father was actually my uncle. That we were related is something I'm sure my mother didn't know. I understand why my father kept it to himself—if he was helping Sarah with her plan, he couldn't risk anyone telling me the truth— but my mom won't. She'd be so hurt if she learned it now. When I call later, I'll thank her for raising me, for caring for me so well that I never knew I wasn't hers. But the thing about my dad is a secret I will take to the grave.

"I still can't believe Sarah was your mother," Nick says. "It's weird you didn't remember her at all."

It hurts, the empty space where her memories should rest. There's this ache inside me for her, even though the lives before this one are almost entirely a blank. "I shouldn't even have been able to remember *you*," I tell

him. “She didn’t seem to know I could do it, until recently. But yes, if I’d remembered any more than I did it would have all been for nothing.”

“How did she know it was happening at all?” he asks. “It’s not like we told a lot of people. Was she spying on us?”

I know the answer to that question, but he definitely isn’t ready to hear it. “No, she wouldn’t do that.” I glance at the clock. “Why is this taking so long?” I ask. “I know I’m fine. Can’t we just leave and have them call us with results?”

Stabbing my mother cured me, but like everything else, it’s harder for Nick to believe than it is for me. He pushes my hair back from my face, two frown lines between his brows. “Please don’t get your hopes up just yet.”

My hopes aren’t just up. I’m *certain* this worked. I have never felt better in my entire life than I do at this moment. There’s an energy coursing through my blood, like some combination of sugar and heat and excitement. I feel powerful.

And even if I’m not powerful, at the very least I am now brave enough to tell him the truth. Another gift from my mother. She forced me to tell Nick what I did to Ryan so I’d finally understand that he will forgive me. It might take a while, but he will. “We need to talk,” I say, swallowing, “about why I stopped jumping in the first place.”

He raises a brow. “*Stopped?*”

I nod. “The first time we were together, in high school? Something happened. It’s been coming together bit by bit over the past few weeks.”

He squeezes my hand. There is such blind, absolute faith in his expression, and I really pray I don’t lose it once he knows everything. “I’m the reason your brother died.”

He goes absolutely still. “My brother died in a car accident.”

“We were all at a party,” I say. I can no longer meet his eye. “You went to get the car and I walked out of the bathroom into this dark room and he kissed me. I only realized he wasn’t you just as you walked into the room and caught us. I never would have gone along with it if I’d realized. But I was drunk and in the darkness...he was your height, he had your voice. I had no clue.”

“How far—” he begins. He sounds gutted. “How far did it go?”

I haven’t even gotten to the bad part and he’s already destroyed. “Not very. It was just kissing and when he tried to...when he tried to do more I knew it wasn’t you. You were never aggressive like that.”

His jaw ticks at the corner. “And then what happened?”

I tell him the rest. How the two of them got into a fistfight unlike anything I’d ever seen before, both big enough to do damage and so evenly matched that neither would back down. I tell him how I panicked, watching it, until it occurred to me I could fix it.

When I conclude, his body is rigid, his tone neutral only by force. “I don’t see how that makes you responsible for Ryan’s death.”

“If we’d been there, he wouldn’t have gotten in Tyler’s truck. I wanted to tell you the truth, but I just couldn’t,” I admit. “I was too scared you’d hate me afterward.”

I see emotion filter through his expression at long last. A flash of surprise. “You really thought I’d *blame* you?” he asks.

“Who else could you possibly blame? I’m the reason we weren’t at that party to give Ryan a ride home.”

“I blame *Ryan*,” he says angrily. I jolt a little at his tone and he tugs my hand into his. “I’m sorry. I’m pissed off right now but not with you. I’ve spent over a decade thinking I should have gone to that party, but it wouldn’t have made a difference, would it? He was still getting in Tyler’s truck no matter what I did.”

“But—”

“No. Ryan did a shitty thing. You can’t tell me he didn’t know he was tricking you, grabbing you in a dark room like that, and I’d kick his ass for it all over again if he was here now. What this tells me is he was going to ride with Tyler no matter what.”

I look at him with wide eyes. Maybe I should just accept his forgiveness and move on, but I don’t think he really gets it. “If I hadn’t tried to change things, he might have come home with us.”

He laughs, but the sound is harsh and unhappy. “Are you kidding me? Do you actually *remember* my brother, Quinn? He was stubborn, and he hated to lose. If we were fighting over you, I guarantee there’s no way he’d ride home with the two of us from that party. And maybe he’d still have gone with Tyler and maybe he wouldn’t have, but my guess is that nothing you did changed anything for Ryan.”

I shake my head. “You’re taking this way better than I expected.”

He pulls my hands into his lap, holding them between his. “I’ve been sick with guilt about his death for over a decade. And now you’ve just given me the original story, and it’s one in which I am not the villain, and you aren’t

either. But Quinn, even if you had been at fault, there's nothing you could do that would make me stop loving you. I just wish you'd known that when it happened."

I realize, suddenly, that he can't remember what I said to him in the basement. He's said he loves me so many times now, and here he is still patiently waiting for me to come around. "I love you," I whisper. "I should have said it a long time ago."

His palms slide to either side of my face, and his lips brush mine. Our foreheads rest against each other's, noses touching. "I knew," he says with a small grin. "But I'm glad you figured it out too. It would be awkward to propose to a girl who can't even admit she likes you."

I pull back. "*Propose?*"

He bites down on his lip to keep from laughing. "Have you forgotten we're having twins already?"

I guess I should have known this would come. He's the kind of guy who steps up, always. But this isn't like our other lives, when we'd been together a while before it happened, and he shouldn't have to marry a semi-stranger until he's actually ready for marriage. "You don't have to do that," I tell him. "It's still really early and I'm just not that old-fashioned."

He laughs and pulls me into his lap. "Do you honestly think I'm asking out of obligation? I've been planning this since the night I drove to your mom's house."

I smile, warmth spreading through my chest, and press my mouth to the corner of his jaw. "Okay, but you are not allowed to propose to me in a hospital room."

There's a sharp tap on the door, and the attending walks in. His eyebrows raise for a moment at the sight of us, me in Nick's lap, our mouths a hair's breadth apart. But we're in the city of love, after all. I figured they'd *expect* it here. I sheepishly rise and take my seat.

"*Bonjour*," he says. "You're American, yes?"

We nod, and Nick grabs my hand hard, channeling all his fear into it. "You've got the scans?" he asks.

The doctor nods, shifting uncomfortably. He's frowning, and my heart starts to tap in my chest, faster and faster. I really believed what my mother just did would save me, would save all of us. *All the effort she made, the years she put in, what she gave up...it cannot be for nothing.* But the look on his face alone is crushing my hope into a million pieces. Nick's shoulders go

rigid, bracing for the worst. “The staff, uh, they tell me you are a neurologist?” he says to Nick.

Nick nods and glances at me. Fear is written all over his face. His hand presses tighter.

“We do not have your images from before,” the doctor says, moving to the light board, “but I am confused.” He hangs the scans up, one and then the next. “You said she had a brain tumor, but we see nothing there.”

I’m not a doctor, but even I can see that each image shows a perfect, tumor-free brain.

Nick’s utter shock turns to something else. He swallows hard, stares at the floor as he tries to compose himself. “I guess,” he says in a choked voice, squeezing my hand, “that you were right about your mom after all.”

QUINN

When I wake the next morning in the hotel, I'm alone. A note on the nightstand from Nick tells me he's off finding "breakfast for the four of us." I lie back, smiling at the ceiling. It was a long time coming, and a lot of sorrow on the way, but I think we're finally getting our happy ending.

I called my mother—the one who raised me in this life—last night. She was so relieved by my news about the tumor that she didn't even ask about the emergency I'd mentioned earlier on the phone. She *did* ask if I'd consider going back to Jeff now that I'm healthy again and I laughed. I haven't told her about the pregnancy yet—it's best to give her surprises in small doses—but given that I'm carrying someone else's kids, I seriously doubt Jeff would want me back even if I were willing.

I hop into the shower, eager for this last day in Paris with Nick, and just as eager to get home and start our lives. He's returning with two full bags of something fragrant and newly baked when I emerge.

"When you said you were buying food for four," I say, tying the sash of my robe, "I didn't realize you meant it literally."

He grins, a little sheepish. "I got carried away. You'll probably need to get used to it." He hands me a Styrofoam cup. "Caffeine-free."

I accept the coffee and blow on the steam coming from the lid, while he opens a bag and pulls out a variety of pastries. "Why do I feel like you're buttering me up?" I ask.

He exhales. "I grabbed something from the desk at Sarah's yesterday," he says. He goes to his laptop bag and hands me a manila envelope with my name on the front. "Things were so heavy at the time that I thought I should wait. But since I'm not sure what's in there, you probably need to take a look before we go home. I can give you some time alone to go through it if you want."

I take a seat on the bed, patting the spot beside me, and then I carefully unclasp the envelope. Inside, the stack of papers clipped together is nearly an inch thick. I remove the letter on the very top and hand the rest of the pile to him. In a way I don't want to read it. This is the last thing I'll ever receive from my mother, the last piece of her I'll hold. But I hope, at the same time, that it will help me remember her.

To my Beautiful Daughter —

In this envelope you'll find deeds to some of my properties, and my lawyer will pass on the rest soon. Needless to say, it is all yours now. I have taken care of things so there will be no questions about my disappearance. And there are some photos here to help both of you, but I've broken my own rules to acquire them. Once you begin time traveling, you should take pains not to be photographed.

And now for the hard part. I've had a long time to think about what I would put in this letter, and yet now that it's finally time to write it, I'm at a loss. There are no words for how much I wish I could be there during this next stage of your life, how much I wish I could be a grandmother to your girls, but I'm so grateful you've made it where you are that it's hard to want for much at the moment.

Never regret what happened. Your daughters needed you, not me. There will be times, I know, when you will question this, but you shouldn't. Remember, I saw the outcome of them growing up without you and I know exactly how it would have turned out. They would have come far too soon, leaving one of them very ill and one of them bitter, with a father who never quite recovered from losing you. You will change all that. You will give all of them the life they are meant to have. There's more, but it can wait. Come back to see me and let me know how it all turned out.

**All my love,
Mom**

I can't say it helped me remember her, but there's still hope. Eventually I'll go back and get reacquainted with the mother I don't remember and, perhaps too, with the father I never met. I brush at my eyes and turn to him. My voice is raspy. "Anything there?"

He starts shuffling through the papers. "You have property," he says. "You have a *lot* of property. Greece, Paris, London, Brazil, California... Jesus, it goes on and on."

My breath releases in an audible huff. After an entire lifetime spent worrying about money, I'll never have to worry about it again. I wonder why she never shared it with my father—*uncle*, I correct, though he will always seem like my dad—but realize she probably tried and he was just too proud to take it. "I suspect that's the tip of the iceberg," I say quietly.

He presses his mouth close to my ear. "So you're telling me I fell in love with an unemployed student and it turns out she may be an *heiress*?"

My lips tug upward. "I hope you'll be able to live with it."

"I'll manage," he says with a grin, which fades when he shuffles through the last of the papers and comes to the photos.

Photos of us, together. In a previous life.

"What the hell?" Nick whispers.

In the first, we are in the treehouse—I'm sitting between him and Ryan, and all three of us are grinning wide, missing teeth. The second is the two of us at the lake as teenagers. The shot is taken from behind, but our faces can be seen in profile. The third is of us dressed up for a dance of some kind, maybe in college. Me with regrettable hair and him all arms and legs in a tux that doesn't fit quite right.

"Are they photoshopped?" he asks.

I smile, marveling at my mother once again. "No. There are elements here you can't fake. So even if someone wanted to argue that we'd Photoshopped it, any expert would testify on our behalf that it couldn't be done."

"But how? If you can't even time travel with clothes, how the hell can you time travel with photos?"

I shake my head. I have no idea. While some of my memory has returned, time traveling and its rules remain, for the most part, a complete blank. "I don't know. Now do you believe my mother wasn't evil?"

His smile fades. "I'm getting there, but there's something we need to discuss. What she said, about going back to see her—" He sighs. "I know you're going to want to go, and I know I can't stop you. I shouldn't even ask. But...I can't get Grosbaum's wife and my grandmother out of my head."

"Grosbaum's wife was probably doing things I wouldn't," I argue. "Your grandmother too. I'm not looking to go to China in the 1600s or something."

"You have no idea what they did," he counters, "but you *do* know they had more experience at it than you. Quinn, I..." He stops, jaw grinding as he runs a hand through his hair. "I couldn't fucking stand it if you were stuck somewhere. Not knowing if you were safe. I couldn't. I feel like I just got you back."

I swallow. I'd feel the same way if our situations were reversed. "I know," I reply. "And I swear I won't go crazy with it. But I do need to go see my mom, somehow. There are things I need to learn and not just out of curiosity."

He leans forward unhappily, elbows to thighs. "Like what?"

"We are going to have twins who *time travel*, Nick. And they're especially good at it, according to my mother. We can't go into it blind."

His eyes close. I wish I could give him the simple life he'd have with someone else. A life where his girlfriend can't be stuck in another time, where his children won't be in danger. Except he didn't want that life in the first place. I already know he'd choose this one with me, dangers notwithstanding, a thousand times over.

"Then at least promise me you'll wait," he finally says. "It's bad enough to worry about you, but the thought of you somewhere pregnant kills me. What if something happened? Even if you survived you'd have children you couldn't bring back and I'd never even know if you were okay."

My stomach churns. I hadn't thought about that. The twins could be stuck somewhere with me for well over a decade before they came into their powers. Nick would miss their entire childhoods. "But Darcy..."

He shakes his head. "I already know what you're going to say and believe me, I want to go back and change what happened to her as much as you do, but you can't risk three lives to save one. Even if it's hers."

My mouth opens to object and no words come out. He's absolutely right. I just don't want him to be.

"Quinn," he says, pushing my hair back from my face, "even if you managed to go back a few years, where would you even go? You might be

able to find Sarah, but if you couldn't...what then? I didn't *know* you. There's a small chance you'd fix things and a huge chance you'd make things worse."

I picture it, me meeting Nick a few years back—I'd be a stranger to him. A naked stranger, begging him to listen to my story about time travel...it could ruin everything. But saving Darcy was my one goal other than saving myself. And now I'm going to abandon her.

"Maybe we'll find Rose," says Nick. "Maybe Sarah left names in her office of people we can talk to."

I nod. I know it's the responsible decision. But it feels like the wrong one.

QUINN

On the way to the airport, we take a quick detour...back to Cecelia, the palm reader who must have helped my mother with her plot. She opens the door, and when she sees me her eyes fill with tears. “*Ça fait longtemps, Quinn,*” she says, placing a hand on my face. *It’s been a long time.*

“*Je suis désolée,*” I reply, glancing from her to Nick in alarm. “*Je ne pense pas vous avoir déjà rencontrée.*” *I’m sorry. I don’t think we’ve met.*

Nick gawks at me. “Since when do you speak French?” It’s only his question that makes me realize I *am* speaking French. Fluently. The words tripped off my tongue without forethought. “I...have no idea.”

“And unlike you,” says Cecelia to Nick, brushing away her tears, “her accent is flawless. Come in, come in. You have questions.”

We follow her inside. We take seats at a small table while she puts her dogs out back. I look around the room—Nick was right. It does look like something out of the 1600s. “Wow,” I whisper to Nick, directing his glance upward. “Look at how they did the ceiling.”

I hear a low laugh from the base of his chest. “Only *you* would visit a psychic palm reader to learn about your time traveling mother and be fascinated by the ceiling of her house instead.”

Cecelia comes back into the room and takes a seat. “I suppose you have many questions.”

I don’t even know where to begin, but Nick does, apparently. “Did you

know the plan all along?” he asks. There’s a hint of accusation in his voice—I think it’s going to be a long time before he gets over what we went through—but it doesn’t seem to bother her in the least.

She smiles. “Oh yes. That was my niece you chased out of the basement. Don’t worry. She loves helping.”

Nick shakes his head. “Why all the insanity though? Why make us come to Paris?”

Sadness flickers across her features for a moment. “Sarah wanted to be near Quinn’s father. She worried, in her weakened state, that she might not be able to master traveling through both time and place. That basement was where he died.”

It saddens me that my father is dead, and I’ll never know him, but not as much as it might under other circumstances. The truth is I had a father, a good one. And I would never want to change that. “Did you...know him?” I ask.

Her eyes go a little brighter. “Not well, but yes. He was a wonderful man.”

“I don’t even know his name.”

She twists a ring on her finger. “All good things in time, Quinn. You’ll learn everything when you’re ready for it.”

The temptation to argue with her is strong. Why do I need to be *ready* just to learn my own father’s name?

“Things could have gone wrong so easily,” Nick says. “If just one of those steps hadn’t worked or if it had gone on a week longer, Quinn might have died.”

“Sarah would have just changed the timeline again,” Cecelia says. “In fact she had to change several things...Nick’s little scuffle at the bar went a lot worse the first time. She went back and had the cops appear before it could go too far. But you did cut it very close with that tumor, didn’t you?” she says, turning to me. “We bought you more time with the herbs in your IV, but the future seemed to change on a daily basis. Anyhow, it all worked out. Your mother will be pleased.”

My head jerks. “*Will* be?”

“I have no doubt she jumped to the future too. You’ll see her again there, as will I.”

My pulse takes an excited leap. I thought we’d have to struggle to find someone to help Darcy. Perhaps we won’t. “Then can you also...?”

She shakes her head. "No, no. It's quite rare, you know. My grandmother and aunt could, but the ability to reproduce among your kind seems to be dying out rapidly. Fewer and fewer of you are born, and your survival...well, you know."

"I'm having two time travelers by *accident*," I reply quietly, pressing my hand to my stomach. "It can't be *that* hard to reproduce."

"Twins among your kind are unheard of," she says softly. "They are special, your girls. Your mother and I, we both thought they must have a purpose."

"What kind of purpose?" Nick asks with an edge to his voice. His chair slides backward. Already he's thinking he needs to find a way to protect them from whatever lies in their future. I'm pretty sure he can't.

She shakes her head. "I don't know. That's for them to discover." She looks back at me and her eyes soften. "The last time I saw you, you were an infant. Before your mother gave you away. Oh, how she wept when you left. But I've followed your life through all the pictures her brother sent."

I swallow hard. It hurts a little, that he knew and kept it a secret. I know he did it for me, and that hurts in another way. I wish I could thank him. It had to have been so difficult to keep it all to himself. "Did he know? That I could jump?"

She nods. "Oh yes. He believed you would learn to time travel when you became a teenager, that you'd save yourself."

"But I didn't," I reply, feeling that all-too familiar grief in my throat. All the stories he told me as a kid...they were allegories. He was trying to convince me not to fear it. Perhaps it's why, at the end, he pushed me so hard to marry Jeff. He thought he could save me by keeping me from Nick instead. "He never lived to learn that it all worked out."

"You can go back and tell him," she says.

Nick tenses at that but I lean forward. Even if I can't time travel right now, we've got to find someone who can. "We have a friend, a little girl. We need to find someone who can go back in time to warn her about something, but I can't risk trying it while I'm pregnant. Do you know of anyone who can help us?"

She shakes her head. "There is much secrecy, you know. You can only tell someone with whom you share blood."

"But...you're discussing it with me now. And my mother discussed it with you."

Her smile is gentle. “A mystery for another time, *mon cheri*. You have a plane to catch, yes?”

We nod and rise reluctantly, thanking her, though the visit was hardly enlightening. When we reach the door, she stops and grabs my hand, whispering to me in rapid-fire French. Saying words she already knows Nick will object to.

He waits until we’re walking to the car before he asks what she said.

“You won’t like it.” I can’t say I liked it much myself.

“Tell me anyway.”

I sigh, turning to face him while he opens the car door. “She said it’s not just the twins who are powerful, that my gift is meant to be shared.”

His jaw flexes. “You’re right. I don’t like it.”

She predicted his reaction too. “And she also said overcoming my fear was only half the battle. Overcoming yours is the other half.”

His mouth is set in a grim line. “Quinn—”

I open the door, shoulders sagging in resignation. “I know. I know what I promised.”

I think of Darcy. I’m still not sure it’s a promise I should have made.

QUINN

By the time we land at Dulles, Nick's received an email from the hospital board, who examined our photos and deemed that the relationship was not a breach of ethics. Unfortunately, this means they expect him to report to work the next day.

I lean my head against his shoulder as we ride home from the airport. "I was really looking forward to a few days with you, where no one has imminent death hanging over their heads."

He pulls me closer. "We can get away for a few days next month. Let me just get all my patients taken care of and put in for leave."

"Doctors get to put in for leave," I pout. "Students do not."

I see a quick flash of his dimple. "I bet your professors would understand if you missed a day or two because you were on your *honeymoon*."

I laugh. He's relentless—this is at least the fifth time he's brought up marriage—but I sort of love it. "What would everyone say? I just called off my last engagement a month ago."

"I don't give a fuck what they'd say," Nick replies. "When we hit our 50th wedding anniversary, they'll know they were wrong."

"You really pick the most romantic places to discuss this," I reply as the driver turns onto our street. "Hospital, cab ride. I'm assuming you'll propose while I'm peeing or vomiting next."

"Those weren't proposals." He grins. "Believe me, when I propose, it'll be memor—"

His words are cut off by a low groan. *My low groan.*

Jeff is sitting on our front steps.

“What the fuck?” Nick snaps.

“My mom.” I smack my head. “She must have told him when we were getting in.”

“I think it’s time you have a conversation with your mom about who she’s providing information to,” he says. “Stay in the car. I’ll deal with this.”

“If I’m capable of stabbing my own mother,” I reply, climbing out after him and ignoring the driver’s gaping mouth, “I’m capable of dealing with Jeff.”

Nick turns toward the walkway and sets the bags down in front of him. “Get off my property,” he says. His voice is flat, calm, but somehow far more threatening that way. “I’ve already kicked your ass once and I’d be more than happy to do it again.”

“I want to talk to Quinn,” Jeff says, moving toward us.

I step forward and Nick gives me the side-eye. “You never listen,” he mutters.

I glance up at him, trying not to smile, before I turn back to Jeff. “Say what you have to say.”

Jeff’s eyes shift to Nick. “I don’t want *him* here.”

Nick growls in response. “If you think I’m leaving you alone with her, you’re out of your mind.”

Jeff visibly struggles to control his temper. I wait impatiently, already knowing exactly what he will say. I’ve heard it so many times now that a part of me doesn’t feel capable of listening to it again. “I just want to know why you—” he begins.

I can’t do it. I can’t listen to him even one more time. “I’m pregnant.”

He actually steps backward, as if he’s been struck. “Bullshit,” he whispers.

I pull my T-shirt up just enough that he can see the swell of my stomach. A swell that’s never been there before. Even *I* can’t imagine why I’m showing so soon, but today it’s come in handy. Because I see, in his shock, that this is the one way to make Jeff give up.

He stares so intently that Nick finally tugs my shirt back down. “Whose is it?” he asks mutinously.

“I think you know the answer to that,” I reply. It’s been months since we slept together.

The ugly words he wants to say are flashing across his face. But I know how he was raised—I'm going to be a mother, which creates a line he won't cross.

He swallows. Holds his ground. Then marches past us without a word.

Nick stares him down until he's in his car and driving away. "I think that's the end of it," I say, turning toward him. "Which is a good thing. You've got to be sick of getting in fights on my behalf."

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me close. "I will very happily fight for you and our family until my dying breath," he replies, his mouth near my ear. "And if our daughters are anything like you, I'm guessing I'd better plan on it."

QUINN

Nick is up bright and early the day after we get home, trying to get back on schedule.

I watch him pack his gym bag, smiling to myself. These tiny moments with him aren't something ephemeral, they're something I might get to live again and again. It seems like too much good fortune for one person. "We could have sixty more years like this."

He looks over and grins. "I was just thinking the same thing. Although it was mostly to convince myself I'll have plenty of opportunities to climb back in bed with you."

I stretch my arms overhead. "You should totally climb back in bed with me," I reply throatily.

His eyes move over me, linger on my curves under a single flat sheet, before he forces himself to look away. "You should be sleeping in while you can," he says. "And you're not eating enough either. Red Gatorade is not food."

The craving for Gatorade—and absolutely nothing else—is new. Maybe the twins are going to be athletes. "I feel like a million bucks. I'm *pregnant*, not dying."

His eyes close and he smiles. "You're going to be a complete pain in the ass about this, aren't you?"

I laugh. I was just thinking the exact same thing about him. "Fine. Go to work. I can't wait to hear what your colleagues have to say when they find

out you're dating an undergrad."

"I think the bigger news will be that I *knocked up* an undergrad," he mutters, knotting his tie. He presses a kiss to my forehead. "I hope you plan to rest today. You've been through a lot the past few weeks."

Argh. I suspect he will not approve of my plans for the day. "I was thinking I'd go by my mom's place in Georgetown to see if she left any files. There may be someone I can contact to help Darcy."

He frowns. "I just get through suggesting you rest, and you respond by telling me you plan to break and enter?"

"It's not breaking and entering if it's *my* home."

He arches a brow. "The title wasn't in the papers she left us. So do you have a single way to prove it's yours?"

"Yes," I say, petulant as a child, "but I may need to break and enter to find it."

His mouth twitches but he flattens it out just in time to look stern again. "Just wait," he says. "I'll leave early today and we'll go over there together. I don't need my pregnant girlfriend walking into another deadly trap alone."

I climb to the edge of the bed with the sheet wrapped around my chest. "How can you still be so suspicious? I'm *healed*."

He sighs. "Look, it's not that I don't trust Sarah. But I don't trust what we'll find there. I don't trust that there isn't some new fucked-up thing that's going to make shit go haywire."

"Like what?"

His raises his hands, exasperated. "I don't know! That's the problem. What if she's got some magic portal to the future you don't even know you're walking into?"

I laugh so hard that I collapse back on the bed. "Did you really just say you're worried about *magical portals*?" I glance down at my stomach. "I'm so sorry to tell you this, little embryos, but your father is a total dork."

"How is *that* any more unlikely than time travel?" he argues. "Just wait. I'll try to come home for lunch and we can go then. But just so we're clear, if there is a magical portal that pulls you away forever, I'm going to be very annoyed."

"If that happens you can say *I told you so* all you want."

He glares at me. "If you're pulled away forever you won't be able to hear me say it."

I grin at him over my shoulder as I head to the bathroom. "Precisely."



AFTER HE LEAVES I finish unpacking, carefully placing the knickknacks I bought Darcy on the kitchen table so I don't forget to bring them to her this weekend. I hold the Eiffel Tower snow globe in my hand, watching the flakes settle along the banks of the Seine. She's never going to see that. All my dreams came true in one fell swoop, while not a single one of hers will. She's never going to travel, or fall in love, or have children. I understand Nick's point about the dangers, but it's just so fucking wrong that I'm not even going to *try* to help.

I walk to the store, but once I've done my shopping and returned home, the silence of the house eats at me. No—not silence—*guilt*. Because maybe our caution is for no reason whatsoever. We don't know what Grosbaum's wife was *really* doing when she disappeared. Maybe she decided to go to medieval England during a vicious bout of the plague. Maybe she met some real-life version of Lord Darcy and decided to stay. And maybe if I took baby steps I could build up to jumping a few months, back to the day I saw Rose. How badly could I possibly mess things up? I'm not even sure I'm capable of doing it outside of really extreme situations.

I should at least see how hard it is.

Am I breaking a promise to Nick if I just try it? One *tiny* jump, an hour back in time? Yes, probably. But if it was up to him, I'd go through the rest of my life encased in bubble wrap, and while I agree that any major attempts at time travel should be avoided for the time being, I just don't see how much harm this could possibly do.

I ignore the twinge of guilt I feel, and try to remember what I did in Sarah's basement. I close my eyes, just like I did then, and picture the upstairs hallway, maybe an hour earlier. I squeeze my eyes tight, clench my fists, try to make my mind go there.

My eyes open to discover I'm still standing downstairs like an idiot. Absolutely nothing has happened. So perhaps all my angst over not helping Darcy is unnecessary, and finding a friend of my mother's is our best bet.

I've finished unpacking the groceries and started a load of laundry before I decide I should try again, once more. A smaller jump. Maybe five minutes.

I picture the hallway, focusing on it as if nothing else exists. I picture the divots in the hardwood, the way the balusters are slightly loose and in need of paint. At last I feel the rush of air in the darkness, see a night sky flecked with

light. Fear and triumph twine together in my stomach, but I ignore them both, and I land exactly as I pictured—naked in the upstairs hallway. The clock in the bedroom says I’ve gone back only a few minutes, just as I planned.

“Now to see if I can return,” I say quietly. I’m slightly unnerved by the idea of jumping down a floor, but I ignore it. I close my eyes and think of the kitchen.

Nothing happens. I’m just standing naked in the upstairs hallway, five minutes back in time. *How does this even work if I’m unable to return? Does Nick come home to an empty house, or am I here, just five minutes behind?* I don’t want to find out.

I close my eyes and try harder. I imagine the smell of bananas starting to ripen, freshly ground coffee beans on the counter, empty Gatorade bottles in the recycling bin. I hold onto it and don’t let it go, and at last there’s a rush of wind. I land precisely where I pictured, with a ridiculous smile on my face. It’s hardly going to change the world, my ability to go up and down the stairs this way or move forward in time by a whole five minutes—but it’s a start. I could build up to a week, and then two weeks, then three. I’ll tell Nick so it’s not as if I’ll be lying, and maybe if I get good enough at it, if it starts to come as easily as it did long ago—the prospect of going back a few months to find Rose won’t seem so terrifying to either of us.

I try it twice more. It comes to me more effortlessly, and though I’m tempted to keep going, I decide I’ve pushed it far enough for now. I get my clothes on and make a smoothie. I’m about to take it into the garden when I hear my phone ringing in the bedroom. I turn toward the stairs, wishing I *could* just jump for it. It would certainly make getting around here a lot more efficient. *With my luck*, I think, *I’d end up going back a year and give the old tenants a heart attack*. I laugh to myself as I picture landing naked upstairs on a summer night in a different year.

By the time I realize the air is rushing around me, it’s too late to take it back.

NICK

I move through my morning rounds, wishing I could have gotten the day off. Quinn starts school Tuesday, and even though we have the weekend, I wanted just one idyllic day with her after the upheaval of Paris.

My first stop is Darcy's room, which I enter with a heavy heart. She went into a coma while we were in France—a fact I haven't shared with Quinn—and while it's always hard for me to lose a patient, this one hits harder than most. I can't believe she's never going to open her eyes again. She's never going to correct me when I try to discuss *Teen Titans* with her or crush every opponent at Connect Four.

I know I should have told Quinn when I heard, but she'd been through so much with Sarah that I decided to give it a day or two. I suppose, selfishly, I also didn't want to tell her anything that might encourage her to time travel. But I cringed, watching her buy souvenirs for someone who will never be able to see them.

Christy's face as I enter the room is blank. I've seen this look from patients' families too many times before. Exhaustion and distress, at a certain point, don't just weaken you. They empty you. "There's not much longer, is there?" she asks, her voice flat.

My lips press together. "I don't think so, no."

She looks at her lap, and when she speaks again her voice is choked. "Her father's on a plane home...I just wish he could have seen her while she was

still conscious.”

I flinch. I know it’s selfish, what I’m asking Quinn to do. And standing here, I’m no longer certain I’ve made the right call. She has a gift, and maybe it’s meant to be used. If it were anyone but Quinn, I’d probably insist it should be. Except I just got her back. I can’t stand to lose her all over again.



I FINISH my rounds and call Quinn to suggest we meet at her mom’s house. Mostly it’s to appease my guilty conscience, but who knows? Maybe we’ll find something there. Sarah must have known someone else who time travels. As thoroughly as she seems to have planned for various outcomes, I have a hard time imagining she didn’t leave Quinn with some backup.

The phone rings but goes to voicemail, and I have to force myself not to panic. *She no longer has a tumor. I can’t freak out every time she doesn’t answer her phone.* I go see my next few patients, but I’m only half here. The other part of me is wondering where the hell she is and why she hasn’t called me back.

An hour passes. I call again. She still doesn’t answer.

QUINN

I land in my upstairs hallway, but it's nighttime, and the bass is so loud downstairs that the floorboards vibrate beneath my feet.
Oh shit.

From where I stand I can hear people outside in the garden. A girl is shouting something about beer I can't quite make out.

I want to be wrong. Please God, let me be wrong. Let me open our bedroom door and find Nick there, asleep.

He's not. Instead I find a mattress on the floor and two beanbag chairs where our beautiful king-size bed should rest. There are clothes everywhere, as if three suitcases exploded at once.

The air conditioning tells me it's summer. Aside from that I have no idea how far back I've gone, although I hear Rihanna's voice coming through the speakers, a song that's only a few years old, so it couldn't be far.

I've got to get home. What if I can't? My heart pounds in terror at the thought and I force it out of my head. Right now, I'm naked inside a stranger's home. First things first.

I grab a pair of denim shorts and a flannel shirt off the floor and throw them on quickly. Rihanna stops singing and Bruno Mars takes her place, a song I think only came out last summer. If I'm right, it's just 2017.

Which means I could, potentially, save Darcy.

I know what I promised Nick, but this was an accident, and the opportunity to save her has basically fallen into my lap. I can't *not* try. For

most of my life I blindly did what my father told me. When he died, I let Jeff assume that role. I love Nick, and I trust his opinion more than I did either of theirs, but I'm done letting someone else make my most important decisions.

I creep down the stairs, though with the volume of the music, it's not as if anyone could possibly hear me. Avoiding eye contact, I push through a wall of bodies toward the front door. I'm almost there when someone grabs my arm.

I've begun to mount a defense about the stolen clothes when my eyes go to the tatted-up college kid who's grabbed me. I seriously doubt it's *his* shorts I'm wearing...these things barely cover my ass.

"Hey," he says, as if we're friends. "Where are you going?"

"Home," I reply, pulling my arm from his grip. I take two large strides and get out the front door with him on my heels.

"Slow down," he says. "I just want to chat." I keep walking, fully intending to ignore him and possibly run if he keeps following, when it occurs to me I have no fucking idea where Darcy even lives.

I whirl around so fast he's forced to take a step backward. "Can I borrow your phone for a second?" I ask. "I left mine at home. I just need to look something up."

He unlocks his phone and hands it to me. "It's an iPhone 7?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says, smirking. "Why? Would an iPhone 6 not be fancy enough to borrow?"

I laugh out of relief more than anything else. An iPhone 7 means it's definitely 2017, because the house wasn't occupied in 2018 until we moved in, and the iPhone 7 didn't exist in the summer of 2016. "I'm not that picky. Just curious."

Christine Whitley, Washington DC, I tap out on the keyboard. Safari returns a gazillion listings for Christine Whitleys who live nowhere around here.

Shit. With a heavy heart I start to return the phone, and then one more possibility occurs to me. Her candle company—I close my eyes to picture the business card she gave me. *Heart in Hand Candles*, it said. I type the name and an address comes up immediately. *Thank God.*

They live in Cleveland Park, just a few miles from here. I could walk, but I want to get this done as fast as possible so I can get home to Nick. I hand Skinny College Boy his phone. It's annoying that he stopped me and even more annoying that he *followed* me, but he does not look dangerous.

“You go to Georgetown?” I ask.

He nods. “Business major. You?”

I make a split-second decision. “Do you have a car? Can you give me a ride? I need to get to the Giant in Cleveland Park.”

“I have a motorcycle,” he offers. “Just to warn you though, I don’t have helmets.” I shrug and follow him, already imagining how I will explain this to Nick later: *Yes, I know I said I wouldn’t jump but I did. And then I stole some clothes and got on the back of a motorcycle with a stranger who followed me out of a party. Oh, and—fun fact—we didn’t wear helmets. How ironic would it have been if I’d died of a head injury right after recovering from a brain tumor?!*

I doubt he’d find it as amusing as I do.

I climb on the bike behind him, not allowing myself to dwell on the stupidity of this venture. He takes off so fast that I’m forced to cling—intentionally no doubt. My nose is pressed to the back of his shirt, which smells like weed. So this terrible idea just got worse, something I didn’t realize was possible.

We arrive in Cleveland Park a few minutes later. If I’d realized just how close we were and just how poorly he drives, I’d have walked. “We still have all of our limbs,” I say with a shaky laugh as I climb off. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“You want to get a drink before you go?” he asks.

I flash him a smile. “I’d love to but I’m pregnant, so I probably shouldn’t.”

He’s still staring at me, jaw gaping, as I turn and walk into the store.



FIVE MINUTES later I’m walking back out with a note clutched in my hand. Customer Service lent me pen and paper. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to consult with them on how best to explain to someone that I’ve traveled back in time to warn her about her daughter’s brain tumor. As badly as I longed for subtlety—a casual mention of a case similar to Darcy’s, a newspaper clipping—there just wasn’t time. I went for candor instead and I pray it will work:

Your daughter’s headaches are more serious than your doctor realizes. She needs an MRI ASAP. Go see Nick Reilly at Georgetown.

I leave the store, my feet stinging as they slap against the rough pavement. I wish I'd stolen shoes, because God only knows what I could catch. I cross Wisconsin Avenue, narrowly avoiding broken glass, and turn onto Porter. Darcy's house is two blocks down the road, a tiny Cape Cod. There's a purple bike dumped in the yard, chalk fading on the sidewalk in front. It takes a second to realize the bike is Darcy's. I've only known the version of her that exists in 2018—pale and bald and far too thin. I'd almost forgotten she wasn't always that way. *Please let this work*, I pray, hand pressed to the mail slot for only a moment before I push the paper through.

One job done.

Now I've just got to figure out how to get home to Nick.



I SIT in the grass a few blocks away, hidden by darkness, attempting to focus. I think of our little house, our bed. I think of Nick mowing the lawn on a Saturday morning, shirtless. Small flecks of grass clinging to his skin. There's a flutter in my belly but it's cut off by a thought—*Am I going to wind up back in the house on Saturday morning instead? What then?*

What if I can't get home? Just considering the possibility is enough to make my stomach bottom out. My muscles go stiff, my heart starts to race. Like test anxiety, but with much higher stakes.

I close my eyes and try to focus again. When I open them, nothing has happened. I'm still sitting in the grass, in the oppressive summer heat, the screech of crickets almost painfully loud.

Our house. Go back to our house. I try again. I picture Nick lying in bed, his profile sharp in the morning light. The sound of birds outside, the twitch of his mouth as he starts to wake, his hand curving around my hip the way it does, as if discovering a lost favorite toy. Even if I wind up there a few days off, it'll be close enough. *Go.*

But the air remains still and stagnant, clinging to my skin like something tangible. The tightness in my chest threatens to strangle me. *How long have I been gone? Is Nick back from work? Is he worried?*

I try again, but all I can see is him—brooding, desperate. When he finds my clothes in a pile, the glass I was holding shattered, he's going to panic. He's going to sit there thinking how unlikely it is I will find my way back.

Which introduces another terrible question: *What if I get home too late?*
What if it's two years from now and he's with someone else?

I bury my head in my hands, realizing how right he was when he begged me not to jump. This is no longer about just me—it's three of us he loses now if I can't make it back. And *then* what??

I try to focus, I try to make myself jump again and again, ignoring my terror. Hours pass and nothing works. I try small steps, like I did this morning: five minutes later, a minute earlier, and my repeated failures make desperation tighten in my gut. If I knew my mother's address in Georgetown I could ask her what to do. But I don't. How could I have let this happen? How could I have been so unprepared for it?

Daylight is now only an hour or two away. I pull my knees to my chest and press my forehead against them, thinking. I'm not sure how long I can walk around D.C. barefoot and filthy and penniless, before this whole thing gets worse. I could go see Caroline and pray last year's Quinn doesn't show up at her door at the same time, but it won't solve the real problem. And how would I ever explain the problem to her anyway? I can't tell her the truth. I don't remember how to time travel, but some sort of ancient knowledge now rests in my gut—telling people you're not related to has consequences. Terrifying ones. I would die before I'd do that to her.

The inky black of the sky has begun to soften to the east. Daylight right around the corner. I just wish I could rest. I wish I could lean on Nick for a minute, feel his chin against the top of my head while he tells me things will be fine, that he's going to fix this somehow. Nick is my wall—but I can't lean on a wall that hasn't been built yet.

Or can I?

Nick is here, in D.C., newly back from London. I can't ask him to hold me, to reassure me, but it might be enough just to see him. He's religious about his morning swim, so I know where he'll be. It's not without risks—if he meets me now as a barefoot, disheveled girl wearing too few clothes, it will change things when we meet later on. He won't think of me as someone intriguing who knows way more than she should. I might instead become the creepy girl who lurked outside the Georgetown pool the summer before, looking like she was coming off a bender at Coachella.

But I need to see him, so it's a risk I'll have to take.

I break into a run, down the long hill to Georgetown. Past the cathedral, past the stores, until I'm sprinting through the very neighborhood where we

house hunted a few weeks ago. It's light outside when I finally arrive on campus, winded and sweating. I stake out my spot in the parking lot beside the gym, and collapse on the curb, debating with myself about what I'll do when I see him. *Could I tell him? Would it change things?*

For the next fifteen minutes, I wait. My heart leaps each time I see a car swing into the lot, and plummets when, again and again, that car is not Nick's. He should be here by now, and the idea that today might be the day he skipped makes me long to weep, which I'm on the cusp of doing at the precise moment his car pulls into the lot.

He stops about twenty yards away from where I sit. I watch as he steps out, and it's just so *him*: his preoccupation, the slight frown on his face, the morning stubble, the way he slings his bag over his shoulder. It's so perfectly, absolutely him that I can't stay where I am.

I don't know what I can possibly say to make him remember me, make him believe a sweaty, half-naked girl is someone he'd ever want to move in with, but there must be something. I jump to my feet. He'll know he's mine the same way, as I watch him get out of his car, I know I'm his. He has to.

I step off the curb and have taken two steps into the lot when the passenger door of the Jeep opens and a woman climbs out, dressed to run, pulling her hair back into a perky ponytail as they chat on opposite sides of the car.

Meg.

The shock of it forces me backward, knocks the air from my chest.

You don't arrive at the gym with a *friend* at 6:00 a.m. They're together. They were together last night. They slept together, woke up next to each other. In this timeline, she is the last person he kissed and she's the person he will sleep with next. It's her he wants right now, not me. My stomach churns at the thought.

She walks around to his side as she puts her headphones in, placing her hands on his shoulders and going on to her toes to kiss him goodbye. He doesn't linger on it the way he does with me, but it hardly matters. I'm watching the father of my children kiss someone else after spending the night with her. As he heads toward the gym—never looking my direction once—I sink to the curb and allow myself all the sadness and desperation I am feeling, face buried into my grass-stained palms.

I just want to be home. God, I wish I was home. It's a mantra that plays on repeat in my head. The desire to press my head to Nick's chest is so strong

it's almost real. I can feel the way his arms would wrap around me, smell the soap and chlorine on his skin. I imagine his relief when I land, the way we'd cling to each other and thank God it turned out okay.

Air rushes around me, and then there is absolute darkness.

I land on a hard floor, falling to hands and knees at the suddenness of it. For a moment I'm too scared to open my eyes, but when I hear Nick shouting my name and the thunderous clamor of his feet flying up the stairs, I finally look around me. *Home*. Relief surges through my blood like a drug. It's nighttime here, but I'm home with him and nothing else matters.

He reaches the hallway, wild-eyed, and drops to the ground, pulling me to his lap and rocking me like I'm a child. "Thank fucking God," he says. His voice is rough. "Thank God."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I tell him, weeping hard enough that I'm barely coherent. "I didn't mean to. It just happened and I couldn't get home..."

His arms tighten around me. "I know." He buries his face in my hair. "You scared the shit out of me. Are you okay?"

I nod. I can feel the panic in him still, like a stain he can't wash away. "I need to clean up," I whisper after a minute. "I was barefoot all night. My feet are a mess."

He gently lifts my foot and stiffens. "You've got some cuts."

His voice is flat, purposefully emotionless. He picks me up like a child and starts to carry me toward the bathroom.

"I can walk," I argue, but he ignores me. His profile is so rigid it looks cast in steel as he sets me on the counter and inspects my feet.

"We'll get them cleaned off first," he says, running the water in the tub. "Stay here."

I watch him stalk off, suddenly unsettled. What the hell is happening here? He was relieved when I came back—beyond relieved—but now it feels like he doesn't even want me around.

I limp to the tub and rinse my feet, watching as the water goes from muddy to clear, and then I push down the plug and step inside, sighing as the water begins to fill around me. He returns with a first aid kit and Gatorade, which I chug as if I've been wandering the desert.

"You're dehydrated," he says with a harsh exhale, not meeting my eye.

I'm not sure if I want to snap at him or burst into tears. I've just been through one of the worst nights of my life and he's acting like I did something wrong.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I tell him. “It just happened.”

“I know,” he says, jaw clenched tight. “I saw all the shattered glass where you dropped your drink.” Maybe his disapproval isn’t aimed at me, but I feel it anyway. And I can’t entirely blame him—inadvertently, I risked my life and our children’s lives as well.

I stare at my bent knees, at the water rising beneath them. “What time is it, anyway?” I ask. “Were you waiting long?”

He runs a hand through his hair, not quite looking at me. “It’s about midnight. I came home when you didn’t answer the phone this morning and found your clothes on the floor.” He continues to look away. Those hours were just as hard on him as they were on me and he’s trying not to blame me for what I put him through, but he can’t help doing it anyway. I feel this distance between us like a physical thing, made of air yet impossible to reach through entirely.

I hold out my hand. “Come in with me.”

He swallows. “You need to rest and if I get into that tub you know it’ll lead somewhere.”

“Please,” I say quietly, staring at the water. After another moment’s hesitation I hear his clothes hitting the floor and then he climbs in behind me, sliding his long legs on either side of mine. I lean against his chest while he pours the body wash in his hands, lathering it up before he washes me off. Feet, legs, arms, back.

He buries his face in my hair. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I hate what you must have gone through. I hate that I’m mad about it when I know it wasn’t your fault. But we need to find a way to make sure it doesn’t happen again. Especially not when you’re pregnant. I feel like tonight took a decade off my life.”

My stomach sinks a little. The truth is, it was absolutely my fault. I should never have been trying to time travel in the first place. “It was stupid. I’d been practicing a little. Just going from the kitchen to the upstairs hall, thinking maybe I’d get good enough that we could help Darcy, but—”

“Darcy?” he asks.

I turn back, glancing at him over my shoulder with a raised brow. “Yes, Darcy. Who else would I be trying to help?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I slide away so I can turn toward him, staggered. “Darcy Whitley. Your patient. Seven years old? Brain tumor?”

He looks at me blankly before his eyes open with recognition. “Oh, right. How the hell do *you* know about that? I only saw her once, and it had to be a year ago.”

My eyes fill for at least the tenth time since I got home. “Are you saying she’s not your patient? She’s fine?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, I assume so. She just had a little glioma, if I recall correctly. It was no big deal. I referred her to neurosurgery. I’d have heard if there was anything else going on.”

It worked. I take a quick breath as the relief hits, but once it’s gone my throat tightens a little, happy and sad all at once. This, I realize, is what it’s going to be like to time travel. I may do good things, but it means losing people too, losing shared experiences. Darcy no longer knows me, and I’m the only one who will ever remember sitting beside Nick at her birthday party.

“It was a big deal. You won’t remember, because I changed her timeline,” I whisper, hugging my knees. “Today when you went to the hospital, Darcy was a dying patient without much time left because the first doctor they saw blew off her headaches. So I warned her mother tonight. During that visit you barely remember, you saved her life.”

He frowns. I get it, the way it’s impossible to grasp that something has happened when you don’t remember it, but he also has faith in this—and in me. “No,” he says. “You saved her.”

Either way, I’d do it all over again, even if it means the memory of Nick with Meg is stuck in my head forever. It’s stupid that seeing him with her is still bothering me, but the problem is that even if it took place in 2017, it *feels* like it was minutes ago.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, wrapping his hands around my ankles. “Are you just tired or is it something else?”

My head droops. I could choose to keep pretending things are fine, but not telling him things just doesn’t seem to work out for us. “I saw you,” I say quietly. “I ran from Cleveland Park to campus, thinking if I could just watch you walking into the gym I’d feel better. And then Meg got out of your car.” I press my face to my knees. I don’t want to cry in front of him over this and it’s completely unfair to make him feel guilty over it. I just don’t know what else I can do. “You’d just spent the night with her, obviously. It was sunrise. And I know it was a year ago or more but it feels like it just happened.”

“Jesus,” he says. “I don’t know what you saw, but no matter what it

looked like, I was never in love with her. Never even close.”

It helps, a little. “I know. It just felt real. It feels like it just happened.”

He slides toward me and his hands cradle my face. “In my whole life it’s only been you. You’re the only person I’ve ever been in love with, and tonight when I contemplated the idea of life without you, I finally got what Grosbaum must have gone through, because I’d have waited forever just hoping you were coming back.”

He kisses me. A real kiss, one without any blame or terror. His lips are gentle on mine, as if I’m so fragile I might shatter right here in his hands.

I’m the one who needs more, and demands it. I climb over him, placing a knee on either side of his hips so there is no distance between us. With a guttural noise, his hands twist in my hair, and the kiss grows hard and desperate. I slide my hands over the broad shoulders, the perfect chest I missed so much, and then lower.

“Quinn,” he groans, his mouth still against mine, “we really shouldn’t. You should rest.”

I rise, move him against me, watching his weak attempts at restraint falter.

I start to sink on top of him but hold myself aloft instead. “Are you sure we shouldn’t?” I taunt.

“No,” he grunts, arching upward. His head falls against the back of the tub as he bottoms out inside me. “*Fuck*. That’s so good.”

He watches as I move, his eyes heavy, his mouth ajar, his hands slipping over my chest. With each thrust he drives the memories of Meg a little further from my head.

“Faster,” he pleads quietly, grabbing my hips.

“I can’t in this position. My knees...” I begin, and find myself lifted and carried to the bed, with him still inside me. He lies me on my back and pulls my knees over his shoulders, hitting an angle that never fails to drive every other thought from my head. “Oh God,” I moan.

He watches my face, desperate to come, waiting for the telltale arch of my spine. I see the strain in him, in his shoulders, in the tendons of his neck. He slips his fingers between us and I go off like a rocket. He follows, my name a pained whisper falling from his lips.

After a moment he carefully removes himself and flips to the side of me.

He opens one eye. “I told you that would happen.”

I grin. “Are you saying you regret it?”

He pulls me against him, dragging a blanket over us and tucking my head into the crook of his shoulder. “As long as we’re in the same place, I’m never going to regret anything again.”

QUINN

The following week, just before my classes begin, Nick and I have our first obstetrics appointment. He's already in the waiting room when I arrive.

"Decaf latte," he says, placing a Styrofoam cup in my hand as he leans down to kiss my forehead.

I smile at him. "You're spoiling me. What happens when the novelty wears off?"

He tips my chin up with his index finger. "The novelty of you is never going to wear off. But you know how to scare the shit out of me if I ever start taking you for granted."

"I have less stressful ways to remind you that you like me," I reply, and I get his dirtiest smile in response.

"Once this is done we should go home so you can remind me again," he replies.

A few minutes later we are called back, and I go through something I only vaguely recall in the past...the cold jelly spread over my stomach, the smooth paddle sliding over it. Nick is watching the screen so avidly you'd think he expects one of the babies to speak to us. He finds what he is looking for and stares at it awestruck.

"You see something?" I ask.

His smile goes wide. "Yeah."

"I see two somethings," says the doctor triumphantly. "You're having

twins, Mrs. Reilly.”

I try to pretend I’m surprised, and I don’t correct him on the name. I guess I’ll be Mrs. Reilly soon enough.

QUINN
TWO WEEKS LATER

I've finished getting ready, though I'm wearing clothes Caroline will undoubtedly find lacking because they don't cost ten million dollars. "You're sure you don't want to come?" I ask Nick for the third time.

Nick kisses my forehead. "Go have fun with your friends," he replies. "I'll see you when you get home."

Between school and the pregnancy and my unending obsession with Nick's eight-pack and biceps, there hasn't been time to see Trevor and Caroline since we got back from France. I'm excited to have drinks with them, even if I won't be drinking, but I wish Nick was coming with us. When we're apart it feels like something is missing, and the world becomes nothing more than a series of stories and experiences to dissect with him later. "I'm not sure how much fun it will be watching them drink margaritas while I sip water."

"I thought you were meeting someone Trevor is dating."

"The senator," I reply, grinning, "in *theory*."

"Trevor is dating a *senator*? You said he prefers criminals."

"Let's not kid ourselves. *Senator* and *criminal* aren't mutually exclusive terms. But no, it's just some legislative aide. He and Trevor do this roleplay in which he's a senator who trades political favors for sex. And thus the nickname."

Nick shakes his head. "That was slightly more than I needed to know

about Trevor's sex life."

"Admit it. You'd love to play senator with me."

He gets that smile on his face—slow and dirty, his eyes a little feral. "Senator Reilly has a nice ring to it." He pulls me in for a kiss. I can feel his cock pressing against my stomach as if it's knocking on the door to beg entry. I really wish I wasn't already running late.

He sighs as he pushes away, glancing downward. "Now see what you've done?"

I bat my lashes. "Oh, *Senator Reilly*, I'm so sorry, sir," I reply, my voice high and breathy as I grab my keys. "If there's any way I can make it up to you, let me know."

"Not helpful," he growls at my retreating back.



TREVOR'S MARGARITA looks like the most delicious thing I've ever seen in my life—the dollop of foam on the top, the frosted glass, the neon green that couldn't possibly come from nature. Pregnancy is a miracle of life, blah blah blah. I'm still allowed to miss margaritas.

"It tastes like piss, I swear," says Trevor, catching my glance.

I laugh. "Right. That's why you ordered a second one."

Just as I expected, they made me change clothes for this, Trevor insisting the jeans I wore were unacceptable because "we are not dock workers," whatever that means. The outfit is of Caroline's choosing, a white, Tom Ford wrap dress, cut low and flaring out at the waist. It seems like a lot of effort for what is definitely going to be a short evening, but I'm not complaining. *Senator Reilly* is going to enjoy this look a great deal when I get home.

"Look at your boobs," Caroline says, shaking her head. "They're stupendous. You've gone up at least one cup size, if not two. You know I really don't want kids but wow you're making me think twice."

"There are easier ways to get boobs," says Trevor, rolling his eyes before he turns toward me. "But speaking of kids, when's Nick going to make an honest woman of you?"

I shrug, feeling the tiniest prickle of worry that I instantly push aside. "We're not in any rush. There's enough going on." The truth is I *do* want him to ask but he seems to have just forgotten about it. Maybe I shouldn't have

shot him down those first few times he brought it up.

“Watch out,” says Caroline. “Remember Daniel? He was—”

“Oh, *here we go*,” says Trevor. “Now she’s going to tell you a warning story about the time *she* was a mother of twins too.”

“Shut up, Trevor. Anyway, he was always saying he wanted to marry me and then it turned out he was *already married*.”

I laugh. Their stories appalled me before, but now that I’m with Nick, the stories seem too terrible to even be real. “I’m pretty sure I’d know if Nick was already married, given that we live together and haven’t spent a night apart in weeks.”

Trevor gets a text and his face lights up. “It’s showtime. The senator is down at the waterfront.” He and Caroline exchange a quick glance and then they both wave frantically for the bill.

“What are you not telling me about this guy?” I ask, looking between the two of them.

“Nothing,” they reply in unison, which makes it that much fishier.

“Neither of you can lie for shit. What’s the deal? Is the senator someone I know?” I ask, and then I gasp. “Oh my God. It’s *Jeff*, isn’t it?”

Trevor rolls his eyes. “As if. I don’t have a straight bone in my body, but if anyone could bore me out of homosexuality, it would be him.”

We head down Wisconsin Avenue toward the river. I remember the days when I’d look at all the bars we are passing longingly, a desire for the years of being a wild, single college student I missed out on. Now they do nothing for me. Going to any of them would feel like a punishment if I could be home with Nick instead.

We cross the street to the waterfront just as the sun begins its slow slide over the horizon.

“Hey, isn’t this where you went dancing with Nick?” Trevor asks.

I glance at the couples shuffling over the waterfront’s travertine tiles. “Yeah, right before—” my words falter at the sight of a tall, broad-shouldered hunk in a suit cutting through the dancing couples. Nick. My heart is doing pirouettes in my chest. “Hey!” I shout, moving as fast as I can in the four-inch heels Caroline forced me to wear. “I thought you said you didn’t want to—”

He drops to one knee. His face is every bit as sweet, as earnest, as it was when he was a teenager. He looks at me as if I hold his entire world in the palm of my hand, as if I’m his to crush or to keep. He reaches into his pocket

and pulls out a black velvet box.

The couples around him have mostly stopped dancing. Caroline, standing on one side, and Trevor, standing on the other, push me forward until we are in front of him. “Since I couldn’t ask your father, I asked them instead,” Nick says with a shy smile. The dimple blinks into existence.

“You have our blessing,” says Trevor.

Caroline kisses me on the cheek. “I’d totally let him get me pregnant,” she says as Trevor pulls her away.

I’m so astonished all I can do is stare: at Nick, at the box, at the dancers and setting sun. It feels as if my brain is moving a little more slowly than normal.

“Marry me,” Nick says. People around us are listening, so his voice drops to add, “in this lifetime and any others we find ourselves in.”

He pops the box open and I gasp. It’s *my* ring, the oval diamond I remember from London. I reach for it and he pulls the box back. “You have to actually agree before you get the ring, greedy girl.”

“But how...where did you find it?” I ask.

He grins. “My grandfather gave it to me when I went to see him. I’ll tell you about it later. *After* you answer.”

Goose bumps crawl over my arms, but they’re the good kind. The kind you get when you’re so thrilled and astonished at once that you have no idea where to begin. “Yes,” I whisper. “In this lifetime and all the other ones, I will only want you.”



IT’S LATE. We both should be asleep, but I’m way too giddy for that. Every five seconds I’m holding my ring up so I can see it in the moonlight. “It’s even more perfect than I remember.”

He laughs. “You said that before.”

I said it during our celebratory drink with Trevor and Caroline. My explanation of how I could *remember* a ring I’d theoretically never seen before made little sense, but fortunately they’d had enough to drink they didn’t notice. “That was awkward. I’m going to have to be more careful in the future.”

He runs a hand over my hip. “Don’t you think you ought to just tell them

the truth?” he asks. “As weird as they are, they do seem to have your back.”

I shake my head. “I couldn’t. You know the rule...you can’t tell anyone who isn’t related by blood.”

“That *can*’t be true. Grosbaum knew about his wife. He talked to us about it.”

“Anyone can have a theory about anything and discuss it. That’s all Grosbaum did with us. His wife was pregnant. That’s what made them related by blood. Your grandparents were the same... your grandmother never said a word until she was pregnant, right?”

“Then what about Rose?” he argues. “She told us everything and time traveled in front of us more than once.”

My mouth twitches. I’ve dropped so many hints since we got back and he hasn’t picked up on a single one. “For a smart man, you’re occasionally very slow about some things.”

“What are you talking about?” he asks, but his body tenses beside mine.

“Rose is a blood relative. *Our* relative.”

He freezes. “But for that to happen she’d need to be—” he groans. “No. No. *That* was not our kid.”

My hand slips through his while he grapples with the fact that the juvenile delinquent we met drinking with erstwhile rock stars, is one of the tiny blinking shapes he just saw on an ultrasound a few weeks ago.

“She said she had a younger sister who can time travel, but her mom was dead,” he says. “That can’t be you.”

I smile gently. “Her sister is younger by about five minutes, I’m guessing. And her mother was dead because we hadn’t changed our future yet.”

He flinches. “You can’t possibly know that. You’re just guessing.”

“Don’t you remember how she laughed when we asked if her parents knew she was there and said ‘kind of’? The way she completely softened when she saw you because you were the parent she knew? Nick, think about it. She had your smile. She looked at you like she knew you.”

He groans. “I’m not saying it doesn’t make sense. I’m just saying I desperately want you to be wrong.”

I’m not. I figured out while we were still in Paris what Grosbaum began to tell me in that last meeting before he stopped himself: you can only run into someone during the process of time traveling if you share their spark. I’m not sure how I know this—little facts just seem to appear in my brain now, from another time—but I’m certain of it.

“The girl we met that night grew up under entirely different circumstances than our daughter will. So the girl you met is not who our daughter will become.” I also suspect if something is going to go wrong, my mother will find a way to let me know. Cecelia did tell me, after all, that she jumped to the future too.

He looks over at me balefully, intent on being unhappy about this. “Even good parents have kids who go off the rails. And that kid was born *wanting* to go off the rails.”

I push his hair back from his face. “We managed to overcome changing timelines and jealous exes and a brain tumor. I’m pretty confident we’ll be able to handle *parenting*.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain. She was doing *shots*, Quinn,” he says, tugging at his hair. “With guys in a *band*.” I’m getting a glimpse of a whole new side of my fiancé—Nick as a father. It’s going to be interesting.

I climb over him, planting my knees on either side of his hips, linking our hands together. There’s generally no better way than this to make him forget what he’s worried about. “Do you have faith in me?” I ask.

He shifts beneath me, trying to cling to his fear, while certain parts of his anatomy push to pursue a different type of conversation entirely. “Of course I do.”

“Then you’ll just have to believe me when I say that I know it’s going to be alright.” I’ve spent my entire life riddled with uncertainty. But I feel certain about the twins in a way I’ve never been before. “Nick...this is supposed to happen. And we were meant to raise them. It’s all going to be perfect.”

Actually, I guess it already is.

THE END



THE WEDDING

THE BONUS NOVELLA

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It's a silent sort of island.

Lush and mountainous, with cliffs that tower over the sea beneath. The kind of place you'd expect to find very few people, even fewer homes—and absolutely no churches like the one that sits on its shores, its stone facade wind-blown until it's nearly as white as the sand it overlooks.

I stare at the picture on my laptop, the one that's popped up unannounced while my mother yammers at me by phone. I never believed in anything even vaguely magical or supernatural before the past few months, but the more I open myself up to the possibility, the more I see it around me, in the smallest things I'd have called coincidence before—and there's a hum in my blood as I look at the photo that tells me I can't call this a coincidence either.

"I just don't know what people are going to think," my mother is saying. She's used this phrase no fewer than twenty times since I told her Nick and I are getting married. She thinks it's "unseemly" to get married so soon after I've called off my engagement to someone else, but that it's even *more* unseemly to be visibly pregnant during my wedding. "I can't go telling everyone that you're marrying someone new so soon after you broke up with Jeff. But if you wait any longer everyone will know you're pregnant, and that's almost worse."

I wasn't listening all that carefully in the first place, but now with this photo staring back at me, I barely hear her at all. The church—how the hell did they build it? It's surrounded by cliffs and water for miles. There is absolutely no way they could have gotten limestone there in the quantity necessary except by ship, and no ship could have docked anywhere in the

vicinity of that cove without crashing into the cliffs.

Nick, sitting across the room, is watching my face. His eyes sharpen as they flicker from me to the phone in my hand, and he rises. He was protective before. Now that I'm pregnant he treats me like Murano glass. If he could bubble wrap me, he absolutely would.

My mother is saying something about Abby and Jeff—no doubt about how insensitive I'm being, but I'm not really listening closely enough to be certain. "Mom, I have to go. I'll call you back."

Nick runs a hand through his hair as I hang up, trying to mute his frustration. "I know she's your mom and I'm trying not to get involved, but I'm getting pretty sick of her upsetting you," he says.

I bite my lip. "For once it wasn't her," I reply. "But come look at this."

He walks over and leans over my shoulder.

"Wow," he says. "That's amazing. Where is it?"

"The Isle of Eader. It's somewhere to the north of Saint Lucia."

Nick rests his hands on my shoulders. "I wish we had a church like that around here," he says. "That looks like the perfect place to get married."

He says the words and something begins to seep into my blood—contentment and certainty. The same things I felt when I ended up with him—as if some piece of me floating in space had finally found its way home. I reach back and cover his hands with mine. "Yes," I reply. "It does."



A WEEK LATER, we are on our way.

All I can see outside the window is water, in every direction, but there are storm clouds ahead, the kind a little plane like ours shouldn't be flying through. I bite my lip. We are traveling to an island neither of us have ever heard of, a place we could barely find on a map, to see if it's a good spot to hold a wedding. And by the look of those clouds in the distance, we won't even make it there without taking our lives in our hands. "Was this insane?" I ask.

He grins. "I'm just happy you didn't break up with me at the airport."

I raise a brow at him. "That joke will never grow old for you, will it?"

"It's one of the best things that ever happened to me. You can't expect me just to forget." He presses his lips to the top of my head. "But are you okay

with this? Obviously it's going to have to be a very small wedding if we do it here."

That part doesn't bother me at all, actually. It was just the two of us when we married before, and really, the journey that got us to this point was ours alone. No one outside could possibly understand what we've gone through to make this happen.

"Oddly enough the only person I'd actually want here is Sarah." My throat swells a little at the thought of her. My biological mother gave up so much to make this possible. My memories of her are filmy, scattered, but love for her sits inside me as solidly as it must have in other lives. I've always missed her, I think, the same way I always missed Nick. I just never knew what to blame for that sense of loss, so I blamed myself. "Are *you* okay with the fact that it'd be a small wedding?"

"If it were up to me there'd be no one there but us. I could do without another night listening to your mother comparing me unfavorably to Jeff, among other things."

I smile at him and lean my head on his shoulder. "She never compared you unfavorably to Jeff."

"No, she just brought up the fact that he's your hometown hero *ten times* during a one-hour dinner and said something about football being more *manly* than swimming."

"You should have reminded her that you're the one who knocked me up with twins the first time we slept together. That's fairly manly."

"I thought about it. Speaking of which, have you found anything?" he asks, nodding at the laptop in front of me, where I've been combing over the files I downloaded from Sarah's hard drive. In a little over eight months, I will give birth to twins who will eventually be able to disappear at will. If there's a way to control them, to keep them safe, I felt certain Sarah would have let me know, but after hours of searching, I'm beginning to have my doubts. "All garbage so far. It's bizarre—mostly term papers, really badly written ones with no names or dates." I turn the open laptop toward him.

"A history of the liberation of Paris at the end of World War 2," he reads. "She had a home there. Maybe it was just idle curiosity."

My lips press together. I didn't give it too much thought before but now that I am, it's not adding up. "Why save all of it though? I wonder if maybe she was there?"

"She told you she wasn't good at traveling from place to place. France

during the mid 1940s seems like a bad area to visit if you can't really control where you're going to end up."

He's right, and while I don't remember everything about her, I know she was never reckless. "I just don't know why she'd save all this crap and not leave a single word behind to help us out. Maybe she thought I'd just travel back in time to see her."

His jaw shifts. I feel dread at the prospect, but I know he feels something ten times that. "She must have known you'd have babies at home. And that you'd refuse."

My nod is small, symbolizing my desire to agree with him and my inability to do so. Because the truth is that if we don't find something soon, if I don't figure out how to protect our daughters, there won't be any other option. I push the laptop toward him. "Feel free to take a look if you'd like. This stuff is all blurring together."

"What I'd like to find is some information about your dad," he says. "You had to have inherited a mutated gene from him too, so it's possible he still has family who time travels."

I push a hand through my hair. "I haven't really been looking. There's only one reason that palm reader would have been reluctant to tell me who he was."

Nick frowns. "What are you talking about? I can think of a thousand reasons she wouldn't want to tell you."

Nick wants to see the best in me. He's incapable of believing anything bad—even telling him I played a role in his brother's death didn't make a dent. I'm less able to see things that way. "Come on. He had to have done something bad. And I mean really bad. She probably thought I'd be better off not knowing that half of my DNA."

He laughs. "Don't you think you're sort of jumping to conclusions? Maybe it's because he died tragically, and you'd already been through too much. Or maybe his family doesn't know about you and she needs to prepare them first. Your mother loved him. How bad could he have been?"

I exhale slowly. "Well there's nothing in my mother's files so far and I have no idea where I'd even start looking for him."

"Sarah said he died in that house, and that he died before you were born. So I'd say we start by looking up the address of her house in Paris and see if anyone died there around that time."

I guess he's right. And maybe it's better to just know whatever terrible

thing my father did than to sit here stewing about it. Until I know for certain, all the worst things are possible, and perhaps the truth is only moderately terrible—maybe he was just a petty criminal or went to jail for tax evasion. “I’ll look it up when we land.” I glance out the window. “*If* we land.” The clouds ahead of us are a charcoal so heavy, so dense, they look drawn into the sky with a heavy hand, and we’re heading straight for them. I’ve always been a nervous flyer, but this situation would make anyone uneasy. I don’t know a lot about planes, but I know this tiny eight-seater was not cut out for the storm we’re heading toward.

Nick’s hand tightens around mine. “Why the fuck isn’t he trying to go around those clouds?” he asks. “I’m going to talk to him.”

He reaches for his seatbelt just as we hit our first bump and I grab his hand. “Don’t,” I beg. “It’s too late. You need to stay belted in.”

“It’ll just take a second, hon,” he argues, but before I can even reply we hit a bigger bump, and then another, and finally knock into a wall of clouds so hard that I can feel the plane shudder and slow in response. Nick’s arms encircle me like a vise, though there’s nothing he could do to protect me at this point. My head is pressed to his chest and I can feel his heart hammering just as hard as mine. We bounce again and the plane wobbles and seems to still. For one breathless moment I wait, ready to feel us freefall from the sky. But instead we bounce again and then leave the clouds entirely.

The island appears just ahead of us, bathed in sunlight, even more beautiful than in the photos we saw. There is not a cloud in the sky.

Nick and I exchange a look. Nothing about our desire to get married here has been normal. But what just happened seals it. Something has driven us to come to this island.

I just hope it’s something good.

We land in the middle of nowhere, on a tiny landing strip surrounded by trees. If I hadn't already decided as we plowed through that storm that we couldn't hold our wedding here, I know it for certain now.

"There's not even an airport," Nick says, quietly astonished.

I tuck my passport back into my purse. "There's no way we can hold a wedding here."

He wraps an arm around me and sighs. "Yeah, I guess we're back to the drawing board, but I'm not going to complain about two days alone on a tropical island with my gorgeous fiancée."

I smile up at him. "I'm not complaining either. Although I *am* wondering how the hell we get to our hotel. I'm guessing Uber doesn't have a thriving business here."

He raises a brow at the Range Rover sitting in the grass beside the tarmac. "I think that's probably ours. The hotel set it up."

"They sent a Range Rover?" I ask. "Good grief. How expensive is this place?"

He picks up our bags and starts toward the car, grinning at me over his shoulder. "I thought we agreed it was best that I leave you in the dark about the cost of this trip."

It's exactly what we agreed, because while I have a great deal of money coming in and am about to marry a guy who makes a very good living, I still have a hard time stomaching the kind of prices Nick doesn't blink an eye at. "You can tell me."

He shakes his head and leans down to press a quick kiss on my mouth. “Not a chance. We’ve got two nights here and I’m not spending them camping on the beach because you think the hotel room is unreasonably priced.”

He puts our bags in the back and we climb in. The hotel has already programmed their address into the GPS, so we follow its commands, heading down one long road and up another, toward the island’s eastern side.

Our hotel is built into the cliffs, impossibly chic even from the outside. Staff members step forward before I even have time to gawk or—again—ask Nick how much it cost. We are hustled forward to the check-in desk, where a girl stands—smiling at us so broadly I actually look back over my shoulder to see if she’s looking at someone else. There is no one there.

“Welcome, Doctor and Mrs. Reilly,” she says. “This is a great honor.”

Nick’s gaze flickers to mine—a *great honor*?—and then he smiles a little awkwardly. “Uh, thank you. We’re excited to be here.”

He tries to hand her a credit card and she waves him off. “That won’t be necessary. Your trip has been paid in full.”

Both of us still. What she’s saying just isn’t possible. We didn’t tell a soul about this trip. Not our friends, not our parents. “Paid in full by *whom*?” I ask.

She glances at her computer. “Cecelia Boudon? She’s upgraded you to the presidential suite as well.”

“Are you sure?” Nick asks. “I don’t think we know anyone by that name.”

She raises a brow. “That’s what it says here. There’s a gift bag for you as well,” she says. “Let me get it from the office. I’ll be right back.”

The second she’s out of sight I turn to him. “Did you tell someone?”

He shakes his head. “Not a soul. And I definitely don’t know anyone who could have afforded the presidential suite. That room costs fifty grand a night.”

My jaw drops. “Fifty *grand*? For one night? My God that’s...”

“Insane,” he agrees. “For once I agree with you on that. Do you know anyone named Cecelia? The only person I can even think of is that palm reader in France, but obviously it couldn’t be her.”

The girl emerges and hands me a gift bag full to bursting, and introduces us to a bellman who will take us to our room. We follow him from one hall to the next, until he at last opens the door.

We step in after him and stop, staring in shock. The room looks like a celebrity's vacation home straight out of *Architectural Digest*—plush white linen couches and glass tables, and the entire seaward wall is missing so when you face forward all you can see is water and the green peaks of the mountains on the other side of the island. Outside there's a huge deck with lounge chairs and a fire pit. But it's missing one very critical item.

"Where's the bed?" Nick asks, just as my mouth opens to ask the same question. Not that we're above having sex on the couch. God knows it's happened enough times back home.

The bellman opens what I assumed was a closet door and nods. "Right this way sir," he says.

We follow him into what turns out to be an elevator, and then emerge into a room even more astonishing than the one we came from. A huge bed, gleaming ebony wide-planked hardwood floors, another open wall looking on to the mountains, but this time the deck ends with a private infinity pool at its edge.

"This..." I begin and then trail off, looking at Nick to complete the sentence.

"Is unbelievable," he concludes.

The bellman hangs his head with a bashful smile. I realize only now that he seems to be struggling to make eye contact. Nick tries to tip him, and he waves his hands. "I could not accept," he says. "It's an honor to have met you." And with that he turns and gets onto the elevator, closing the door behind him.

"That was strange," I whisper. "But at least it was the good kind of strange?"

Nick nods, looking around us. "Definitely the good kind of strange." His gaze reverts to me, and he tips my chin up to plant a light kiss on my mouth. The sun bursts out from the clouds all of a sudden, and we stand in a beam of light. Something about all of this—the weather, the island, the church, the room—feels preordained. It's possible I'm reading into things too much, but whether it's something supernatural or not, I plan to enjoy every moment of it. "We need to figure out who the hell got us this room."

I nod, reaching for my phone. As amazing as all this is, it just makes no sense...and I'm tired of things making no sense. I type the name Cecilia Boudon into the search engine—and the palm reader's face is the first thing I see. Except it's an entirely different version than the one we met—almost

unrecognizably so, with salon-perfect hair and jewels and a Chanel suit that fits her trim figure in a way that only comes with tailoring. “It’s her,” I gasp.

Nick pulls my back to his chest and looks at her over my shoulder. “What the hell?” he whispers. “She looks completely different.” I click on the image and her Wikipedia page opens, proving that this situation is even weirder than we thought:

Cecelia Boudon, widow of philosopher Jean Marc Boudon, is reputed to be among the wealthiest women in France. She is the founder of HSD, one of the country’s largest purveyors of electronics, and the first company to bring televisions and microwaves to France. Boudon used her earnings to become one of the country’s most successful investors, recognizing the value of stock in Microsoft and Sony long before those companies became household names. Her mansion, on Rue d’Exupery, is considered one of Paris’s most magnificent homes.

“So it was all an act,” I say quietly. “The house, the palm-reading thing. It was all an act. But why?”

“Maybe she thought I wouldn’t go barging into her mansion?” Nick suggests. “Or maybe there are details about her she didn’t want us to know.”

I scroll down to the next paragraph. **Born Cecelia Durand, the daughter of a stage actress and a farmer...**

“Durand,” Nick says. “That’s the name your mother was using in France. I assumed it was just a pseudonym...but maybe not. Do you think you might be related?”

I look at the woman in the picture. I see nothing in her face that reminds me of my own, but she’s nearly seventy—I’m not sure I’d recognize much with that kind of age difference. “I guess she’d be the right age to be my grandmother?” I say. I glance back down at the phone. The rest of the article really only discusses her investing prowess, but a final line at the end rules my theory out. “It says here she had no children.” I put the phone down.

“Maybe your father was illegitimate. It would have been a bigger deal back then than it is now.”

I turn toward him. “Or maybe he did something terrible and she didn’t want to be associated with him.”

He laughs again, tipping my chin up to find my mouth. “Hon,” he says quietly, “there is no way your father was evil. I know you and I’m telling you it’s not possible. The only reason you think that is because of how your parents reacted to your abilities as a kid.”

I close my eyes and press my face to his chest. He's probably right. I just wish I knew for sure. "I don't want to think about this right now," I tell him. "Let's just enjoy this trip."

Nick's hands curve around my neck, thumbs pressed to the corners of my jaw. "Are you tired? Do you want to lie down for a while?"

I go on my toes to pull his mouth back to mine. "I tell you I want to enjoy our trip and you ask me if I need to rest?"

"It seemed more considerate than immediately suggesting you take off your clothes."

I tug at the button on his shorts. "You're pretty considerate when our clothes are off too."

He pulls my shirt over my head. "I'm going to be especially considerate today."



WE'D INTENDED to explore the island on our first day, but we never make it out of the room. Between school and Nick's job, time like this—time where we have no responsibilities and can just enjoy each other—has been rare. And as far as I can tell, there's nowhere to go really, anyhow. I've seen no sign of restaurants or stores. It's bizarre—you'd think on an island this size there'd be some kind of tourist industry—but I sort of prefer it this way. This room, this view and Nick are pretty much all I require to be 100% content.

We swim and lie in the sun gorging on the fruit the hotel sent up. We've both agreed that the island is too hard to get to for a destination wedding. But it's a shame, because with every moment I spend here, I just want more.

I emerge from the bathroom at dusk but stop for a minute and just watch him. He's on the balcony staring at the ocean, clad only in swim trunks. I take in his broad, tan back, his narrow hips, the long, lean line of him. We were supposed to drive down the mountain to go see the church, but the church is the last thing on my mind.

I walk up behind him, press my palms and my mouth to his sun-warmed back. He shudders. The good kind of shudder, his body tensing slightly as if preparing to pounce. I go on my toes to kiss his ear and the soft skin below it, feeling that delicious tension in him grow. He turns and pulls me to him, the palm of his hand beneath my jaw, soft mouth pressed to mine. A small groan,

low in his throat.

Every once in a while it strikes me all over again: *I* am marrying Nick Reilly. *Me*. I've been blessed in so many ways, but sometimes it seems like winning him is too good, too much luck, for any one person.

And I suppose I'm pushing it, but I really wish I was marrying him here.



THE NEXT DAY we force ourselves from the room to go explore the island. It's mostly wild, and half the roads consist of only gravel or sand. We follow the GPS mile after mile down a sand road, under the impression that it is leading us to the beach. It leads, instead, to a dense wall of trees.

Nick wants to return to the room, but I object. "It's right on the other side of these trees," I insist. "I mean, look at the map. There's absolutely no way that the beach isn't right there."

"I'm not walking my *pregnant* fiancée through a fucking forest in the middle of nowhere in search of a beach. Didn't you ever watch *Lost*? Do you how much awful shit can live in a forest?"

"The beach is right there," I reply, hopping out of the car. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Nick follows. "On a weirdly uninhabited island that is shielded from bad weather and has absolutely no infrastructure but somehow supports a hotel worth *millions*?" he grumbles. "Yes, it sounds like a completely legit place where *nothing* weird happens."

We find a sand path so narrow and overgrown we have to walk single file. He insists, naturally, on going in first. After five minutes, the path widens and then suddenly stops at a wide beach with powder-fine sand and water so clear and calm you can see to the bottom.

"Quinn," I say aloud to myself, imitating Nick's voice, "you were completely right about this place. I'm sorry I was being such a pussy."

He turns back to me with an incredulous look. "Did you seriously just call me a pussy because I was worried about protecting my pregnant wife?"

"Girlfriend," I correct. "And technically, I didn't call you a pussy, because *I* would never use that word. I pretended you were calling yourself one."

"That does it," he says, swinging me over his shoulder. "You're going

in.”

I squirm. “Don’t you dare throw me in! I’m pregnant! I’m fragile!”

His laugh is low and slightly sinister. “Too late to play that card.” He plows forward until we are waist-deep and pretends he’s going to throw me but then, at the last minute, sets me gently down in the water instead.

“Thought you were going to throw me?” I tease, wrapping my arms around his neck as he sinks lower into the water. He grabs my ass and pulls me tight against him.

“I had second thoughts at the last moment.”

I wrap my legs around him and feel something rigid pressing against my abdomen. “Did those second thoughts involve your penis?”

He laughs, his mouth moving down over my neck. “Pretty much all my thoughts involve my penis to one extent or another. But yeah,” he says, sliding my bikini bottoms to the side. “This one was particularly penis-oriented.”

We stay on the beach longer than we probably should, but given that we no longer need to go look at the church it probably doesn’t matter. We exit the water and stand side-by-side, staring out at the view. It was a hard trip to get here. I can’t imagine we’ll ever come back, especially given that we’ll have twins eight months from now. My throat tightens at the thought. “I wish I knew we’d be coming back here.”

He wraps an arm around me. “We will. As soon as the twins are old enough to be left at home, we’ll come back.”

I hear a noise in the distance. It sounds like the giggle of a small child. We both look back toward the woods.

“It sounded like a kid,” I whisper.

“Great,” says Nick. “Mysterious giggling ghost children who live in the forest.”

He swings me back over his shoulder and heads for the woods.

“Are you serious right now?” I demand. “I’m pretty sure I can handle a child on my own.”

“What if it’s some crazy supernatural ghost child, like the twins in *The Shining*?” he counters.

I seriously doubt a crazy supernatural ghost child is going to be so intimidated by Nick’s size that it would really make much of a difference, but I love that his first thought is about protecting me at all costs. I can’t wait to see him as a father.

Nick sets me down when we finally get to the car and opens my door, where we find flowers resting on my seat. Calla lilies and peonies, my favorites, tied in a thick satin bow, like a bridal bouquet. It's the kind of thing Nick would do, but I can't imagine how he'd have pulled it off here, and the astonished look on his face suggests he's as in the dark as I am. "What the hell?" he breathes. "We're in the middle of nowhere."

"This just gets weirder and weirder," I say, climbing into the car with the bouquet in my lap. It's as if someone around us knows more about our future than we do and wants to help us along.

Or as if someone wants us to choose this place for our future wedding despite the difficulties involved.

"Let's go look at the church after all," I tell Nick when he climbs in.

He glances at me. "I thought you said it was too hard to get to."

I shrug. "It is. I just...I don't know. I feel like we're supposed to go see it."



THE CHURCH IS BACK on the other side of the island, not far from our hotel. Because it's built at the base of a cliff, we can't drive there and instead need to park on the top of a scenic overlook and walk down the steep staircase built into the cliff wall. The area is every bit as wild and uninhabited as the beach we just left, but to our surprise, the doors are wide open.

I hesitate, though I'm a little more scared of angry priests than supernatural ghost children. Nick grabs my hand and we walk in together. The church is even more massive inside than it appeared, airy and light. It seems less a temple to God than it does a temple to nature, to the beauty of the limestone that crafted it, the bare stone floors, the roar of the ocean, dust motes in a stream of sunlight. We seem so small within it, and yet it feels right, as if we belong here, as if we too are part of what makes this place alive. The breeze whips around us, and I picture it, marrying him here. I'd want it to be exactly like this—just us and the sunlight and the ocean behind us. Not my mother clucking her tongue about what people will think, not the few people who choose to weather the long trip while talking behind their hands about how unseemly it all is. Even Caroline and Trevor, my closest friends...they aren't a part of this really. I'm not sure I believe in God,

necessarily, but there is something holy in this place, something bigger than the two of us, and yet exclusive to us in the same moment.

A side door opens and a small man walks into the room. He looks nearly as old as this church, his body wizened, his skin darkened by years under the sun. He moves toward us with surprising speed, given his age. "I'm so happy you've finally come," he says, beaming at us like a grandparent might. And as if he was expecting us. "It's a marvelous place for a wedding, is it not?"

Nick's hand tightens in mine. I know his thoughts are along the same lines: *how did this guy know that's why we were here? Was it our age? A lucky guess?*

"We'd love to get married here," says Nick. "But I think logistically it might be difficult."

"What logistics?" the priest asks. "You're already here. We have no licensing requirements on the island."

"It was a long trip too," I explain. "I'm not sure we can ask everyone to travel that distance, and there'd be no place to hold the reception."

"And you very badly want this reception?" the priest asks. Again he asks in a way that implies he already knows the answer...and he's *right*: I *don't* want a reception. No one alive really understands what we've gone through to get to this point, and in an ideal world, it would just be the two of us. Here, in this holy place. And afterward, alone. On the deck of our hotel room, the balmy breeze swaying our hammock to and fro. I suspect Nick would be okay with that too, but his mother and mine would not be. "Our families would be very upset if they weren't invited," I explain.

"Well, I'll let you think about it," the priest says, clasping each of our hands in turn. "I'm here if you change your mind. And if nothing else, you must come back to baptize the twins."

My jaw drops. He is already walking away. "How did you know about the twins?" I call after him.

He turns back to me with a smile. "Quinn Stewart Durand, I know more than you can begin to imagine."

He walks into his office and closes the door while Nick and I stand there, speechless. Nick runs his hands through his hair.

"He called me Durand," I whisper.

"And he knew about the twins," Nick says. "We've only told a few people. And certainly no one here."

I bite my lip. "I know we should be weirded out, but I'm sort of...not?"

“Yeah,” he says, clasping my hand. “Me neither. And that’s probably the weirdest thing of all.”

We spend our last night in Eader out on our deck. We order room service and dine under the moonlight, watching as the waves crash against the cliffs across from us. We swim and lie in the hammock together in a blanket. He rolls me on top of him. “We can’t possibly have sex in a hammock,” I argue.

He puts one foot on the floor to brace us. “Watch and learn, Mrs. Reilly.”

Eventually we rouse ourselves just enough to shower and go to bed. When I wake in the morning Nick is sound asleep, flat on his back, one arm stretched over his head. And completely naked. It’s extremely hard not to wake him up, but in an act of supreme selflessness I instead climb from the bed and go to our deck, leaning against the railing to watch the night sky give way to morning, the sun bursting out over the peaks to the east like a ripe peach begging to be pulled free.

I love my life with Nick back in D.C. but there is something about this place—it feels like home in a way nothing else ever has. I picture a different kind of life here with Nick, one I spend barefoot and free, one where our daughters tumble out onto a wide white beach each morning and run wild.

Nick comes up behind me, clad only in boxers, and rests his hands on my shoulders, pushing my hair aside to press his lips to the side of my neck. I lean back against his chest. “Do we have to leave?”

He wraps his arms around me. “Unless you want to give birth to the twins on an island which appears to have no medical care, I think we do. But I had a thought—how do you feel about eloping?”

I turn to face him.

I wrap my arms around his neck. “I feel pretty good about that.”



WE WEAR the clothes we brought to go to dinner, before we discovered there'd be no place to go. Nick is in a white button down and suit pants, I'm in a white sundress. I bring the bouquet that was left on my seat yesterday. The flowers, which I placed in water last night, still look as fresh as they did when I received them.

I emerge from the bathroom in my dress, no make-up but the tan I've gotten since we arrived and a touch of lip gloss. Nick walks toward me slowly, placing his hands on my arms. “You have no idea how lucky I feel right now.”

I have some idea. I go on my toes to kiss him. “I just need to put my hair up and we can go.”

Nick runs a hand through it. “Leave it down. I want you to look exactly the way you do at this moment,” he says. He pulls my hands to his mouth and kisses both. “This, just as you are right now, is who I want to marry.”



THE PRIEST DOES NOT SEEM at all surprised to find us at his doorstep at 8 AM on a Monday morning, but why would he be? He seems to know everything before we do. He throws the massive doors of the church wide before he begins, securing them with bolts so they remain open during the ceremony. It's oddly perfect. The beach and the sea behind us feel, to me, every bit as holy as the inside of this church.

He brings us to the altar. I set the flowers on the pew behind me and join hands with Nick. He's smiling at me in that way of his—shy and pleased, unable to keep that dimple of his in check. He is so unspeakably beautiful. I swallow down the lump in my throat.

“Will you, Quinn Stewart Durand, take this man to be your wedded husband? Will you love him, comfort him, honor him and keep him, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, so long as you both shall live?”

“I will,” I whisper. My voice is slightly hoarse. It's a struggle not to cry.

“And will you, Nicholas James Reilly, take this woman to be your

wedded wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honor her and keep her, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, so long as you both shall live?"

Nick's eyes hold mine. "I will."

"By the power vested in me by this church," the priest concludes, "I now pronounce you man and wife."

Nick's mouth twitches upward. "Where's the part where I get to kiss the bride?"

The priest laughs. "She's your wife now. You are free to do as you wish."

Nick cradles my face in his hands. "I'm going to make you the happiest woman alive, Quinn. I swear it."

"You already have," I whisper. He leans down and when our lips meet, there is only him. There is no priest, no roof over our heads, nothing but him and the wide, wild world around us, a breeze—fragrant with sea myrtle and sandalwood—drifts around us like a blessing.

Finally I drop back to my feet. The priest waits, marriage decree and pen in hand, at the altar. I take the pen and sign, and then hand it off to Nick just as something at the back of the church catches the light.

A long blonde braid swaying as a woman exits the church, while a man I've never seen stands just outside waiting.

I know her. I know her in my soul before I even put it together, but then she turns and smiles at me over her shoulder. Sarah, my mother, younger than she was when I last saw her. Two small girls on either side of her—one blonde, one brunette—grasp her hands. The brunette turns back and gives me a big, cheeky smile just before she's pulled away. I get just enough of a glimpse to see that her eyes are an astonishing gray. *Rose*. Or the twin who told us her name was Rose, anyway.

They are gone before I can even utter a word. And a wiser part of me knows that I am not meant to meet them just yet. I can't imagine how the twins were able to time travel here at such a young age. I can't imagine how my mother managed to be here when I saw her die with my own eyes. But I suspect it means our lives are about to get far more bizarre than they've already been.

Nick finishes signing and the priest hands us the certificate. "In this marriage, you will be blessed beyond measure, and you will produce daughters who will be a blessing to the world. Protect them. Protect each other. Go forth," he says, "and begin the life you were meant for."

The life we were meant for. A life that will involve time traveling twins, a

supposedly dead mother stopping by for surprise visits.

“You ready, Mrs. Reilly?” Nick asks.

I look up at him. At the pleased, sheepish smile, his heart in his eyes, and I know that as long as I have him by my side, we can handle whatever our lives throw at us.

“Yes,” I reply, taking his hand. “I’m ready.”

THE END

ACROSS TIME

THE PARALLEL SERIES, BOOK THREE

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PROLOGUE

1918

The woman walks with brisk steps, her dress sweeping her ankles. She'd forgotten what a bother it was, having skirts so long. She's tripped over them three times already, but hastens toward the square anyway, eager to have this behind her. The sun has begun to set, and there's a prickle of tension along her spine. She tells herself it's merely that she's longing for home, for 1935. Her daughter will be waiting there. Marie-Therese is seventeen but remains a child in some ways. *A child who still needs her mother*, the woman thinks, her heart drumming in her chest.

The square, sitting in the shadow of Sacré-Coeur, is unnervingly quiet. She can't escape the feeling that today is an ending of sorts, and thinks again of her children—Marie at home and Henri, away in England now. They're too young to be orphans.

"Chin up," she says, forcing her feet forward. Her children are the reason, after all, that she is here in the first place. They both will play a role in the prophecy, with the help of the woman who is coming. She can at least do this much to set them on their way.

A gust of wind whistles through her wool coat, whipping leaves around her skirts. The sound almost masks the crunch of gravel behind her...but not quite. She hears it and she knows, before she's even turned her head, that this was a trap.

A needle plunges into her neck. As she falls, her thoughts are of her children. She prays this is a beginning for them, rather than an end.

And that the woman who will save them doesn't take too long.

1987

Saint Antoine is one of those crumbling, quaint cities you see on travel shows about France. The streets are cobblestone, every restaurant has al fresco dining, and the shops sell things you would never buy at home and wouldn't buy if you lived here either: champagne bottles full of candy, bags that say *J'aime Saint Antoine*, boxes of macarons. The passing tourists are excited, gleeful, hitting me with their bags and elbows as they unfurl maps. I wish I were one of them.

Sleep deprivation begins to weaken my resolve. *Am I really going to do this?* I've upended my life to get to this point, but for the briefest moment I fantasize about backing out. I'm only twenty-one. Shouldn't I be allowed to wander the streets like a normal college girl, buying things I don't need and stuffing myself full of brioche? *Someday*, I swear to myself, *I will be that normal girl*.

But I won't be her today.

I find a pay phone and dial my mother's number with a churning stomach. The coins I've stacked in front of me are optimistic. Odds are she won't answer, but even if she does our conversation won't last long. She didn't care for me before Kit died. It became exponentially worse afterward.

"Hi Mom," I say when she picks up. "It's me." The words come out too eager, too needy—something she hates. I wince at the mistake.

"Oh," she says, a blunt, disappointed sound. "Why aren't you calling from your own number?"

I swallow hard. I guess I know why she answered.

“School ended last week,” I tell her, taking a deep breath—this where the lies begin, and she always knows when I’m lying, though perhaps it’s just that she always assumes I’m doing something wrong. “I’m in France. For my internship. It was supposed to be in New York but something better came up.”

She sighs. The sound is disgusted but also weary, as if I’ve failed her and it is nothing more than she expected from me. “What about Mark? I thought he was proposing or something.”

My stomach churns anew. This was the one week Mark and I would have had together in months. I bought him off with some promises I wasn’t quite ready to make, but he still didn’t understand. There’s so much he doesn’t know, and telling him the truth—*my dead sister is haunting my dreams, demanding I help a stranger in France*—wouldn’t exactly have cleared things up. Especially since he doesn’t even know I had a sister.

My relationship with him is the only thing about me my mother has ever approved of, so my answer will only disappoint her. “He’s in Nepal most of the summer,” I reply. “I guess it’ll happen when I get back.”

“You do realize,” she says, “that if he ever finds out what you are, it’s over.”

What you are. She makes it sound like I’m some kind of demon or vampire. In her eyes, I suppose, I am. “I’m changing,” I whisper. “Really.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” she says, her voice hard. “Well, I should go. Steven and Natalie are coming over for dinner.”

“Okay, take care of—” I begin, before hearing the dial tone. “Yourself,” I conclude quietly, hanging up the phone. For a single moment I allow my forehead to rest against the wall. I was stupid to have hoped the call would go any other way. My ability feels more like an addiction than a gift most of the time, especially when I hear myself swearing I’m going to change. Until I stop, there’s no chance of earning my mother’s forgiveness.

But until I’ve used it one last time, there is no chance of earning Kit’s.



I CLIMB into a cab for the final leg of my journey, staring at a picture of me and Mark as if it can offer me a way out. It’s from the summer we met, when

I was interning at a gallery in New York City and he was getting ready to leave for grad school. It's all kind of a blur now, but I remember how happy I was then—perhaps for the first time.

I made him happy too, and I want to keep doing so. I want to be the woman he believes I am, and that's not possible right now. The nightmares have gotten so bad that I'm barely getting through the day anymore, jumping at every unexpected thump, terrified of falling asleep. The night before last I woke in my bathtub with the shower on, screaming at the top of my lungs, and it wasn't the first time. I can't let Mark see that version of me, have him hear me crying for the sister he doesn't even know I had.

Which leaves me stuck, once more, with this ridiculously vague plan, based on nothing more than a terrifying dream. *Find them*, Kit begs me every night. *Save them, help Marie*. No mention of what they need saving from or how I'm supposed to help.

What I know about Marie-Therese Durand, thanks to my sister's hints and a long day at the library, is almost nothing: she was born in 1918, and lived on the outskirts of Saint Antoine until 1940. There is no record of her beyond that, and I don't know if this means she died during World War II or if she simply left home—given it's the year France fell to Germany, either possibility seems likely.

The cab comes to a stop in front of some massive industrial farm. There are thousands like it back home in Pennsylvania, but I'd expected a quaint farmhouse, not huge silos and aluminum siding. I suppose my mistake was expecting anything in the first place, since I'm going into this blind.

This, right now, is my last chance to back out. I pay the cab driver and climb from the car. *One last jump*, I swear to myself, *and I'll never, ever do it again*.

The sound of the door closing feels unsettlingly *final*. And with what lies ahead of me, it's entirely possible it is.

When I pictured pre-war France, I envisioned sun-dappled fields of lavender that would capture me like a fragrant cloud. But that is Provence, not Saint Antoine, and I've landed indoors despite my best efforts. I hit a hay bale so hard I flip over it—I'm pretty sure I'll never master a graceful landing—and I know before I even open my eyes that I will find hay wedged into my hair, my mouth and...other parts. This hay has now hit more bases than Mark ever has.

On the bright side, the barn I've landed in is not the modern one I saw only moments before. It's old enough that the wood has warped to let sunlight into open spaces. I see no trucks, hear no machinery.

As I force myself to stand, I feel the deadening fatigue setting in, my head fogged as if I have one of those colds that puts you to sleep for days. My limbs are growing heavier by the moment, weakness setting ever faster into my bones. A cow not four feet from me bellows a warning, and I can't even summon the energy to jump in surprise.

And I'm hungry. My God I'm hungry. *If I could just eat*, I tell myself, *I'd have the energy for this*. I spot an apple sitting on a stool five feet to my left—small and dull, barely fit for livestock, but right now it might as well be a large pizza with a side of cheese fries.

I grip the stall door and take one small step on trembling foal legs, but catch movement outside before I can take another and dive back down to the hay, trying not to cough as I inhale the dust around me.

It's a man who's entered. I can tell by the heaviness of his tread, the certainty of it. He moves through the barn and a bucket clangs against the

metal hinge of the stall next to mine. There is a moment of silence, during which I hear no movement, no breath. "*Ici*," he says—to the cow I assume—and then mutters something else in French that I don't quite make out as he sets the bucket down.

The steps recede, and after a moment of silence I rise, forcing myself, one foot in front of the other, toward that apple. I've never wanted anything more in my entire life. Just as my hand closes around it, the man steps back inside the open barn door, this time pointing a gun straight at my head.

He is about Mark's age and handsome—a lock of dark hair falling over his forehead like some old Hollywood film star. Though I freeze in surprise, it's hard to picture him as a killer. I'm more bothered by my nudity than I am his gun.

"*Pourquoi etes-vous ici?*" he demands. He wants to know why I'm here.

Good question, I think. *I wish I knew*. I'm too exhausted and unsettled to form a reply in French. "Can I... Give me your shirt."

His eyes flicker downward. I guess he didn't notice I was naked until I pointed it out. My hair covers my breasts and my hands cover the rest, but he looks unsettled anyway. "I think not," he replies in perfect, British-accented English. "In order to give you my shirt I'd have to put down my gun."

It's illogical, but his British accent sounds sort of posh and James Bond-ish and puts me at ease. Granted, lots of villains in James Bond movies have British accents too, but they generally don't look like this guy.

"I'm looking for Marie? Marie-Therese Durand?" I explain. "Do you know her?"

I wait for a sign of recognition. Instead his eyes narrow and he raises the gun higher, pulling back the hammer. "There is no one here by that name," he snarls. "You need to go back where you came from."

I sway on my feet again and grab the stool to hold myself steady. "Please lower the gun," I whisper.

A hint of softness passes over his face before he blinks it away. He grabs a horse blanket hanging off the wall and throws it at me. "Are you ill?" he demands.

I somehow manage to catch the blanket and wrap it around me, but the effort of standing up on my own is getting to be too much. With each moment that passes I feel a bit further away from him, as if I'm sinking fast in a deep, dark lake.

"No. Please just let me talk to Marie-Therese and then I swear I'll go." I

meant to sound stronger, more forceful, but it feels as if I'm speaking to him from under water.

"Again, there is no Marie here," he says. "So you can go right now. Don't think for a moment I'm reluctant to use this gun."

I don't entirely believe him, but even if I did, I wouldn't have the energy to obey. I'm barely remaining on my feet.

"Please," I beg. "I can't...I'm too—" I reach for the wall and use it to stay upright. If I allow myself to fall asleep right now, I'm not certain I will ever wake up.

Footsteps approach and from around a corner comes a shockingly lovely girl about my age. I recognize her from the photo I found, the one that led me here, and my hunch is confirmed: she is a time traveler. Our looks are what set us apart, and though I'm blonde and fair, while she's brunette and olive-skinned, there's a similarity between us as well, in the symmetry of our features and in our eyes, which are backlit, as if a fire shines just beyond the pupil.

"Mon Dieu," she whispers, staring at me as if I'm a ghost. She hisses at her brother in rapid-fire French and he lowers the gun.

My mouth opens to tell her why I'm here. But I pitch face first to the ground instead.

When my eyes open, I'm lying on a grossly uncomfortable bed in a sunlit room. It takes a moment of staring at the exposed wood ceiling, listening to squawking chickens in the distance, before I remember I'm not in my own time.

My arrival here is a bit of a blur, sort of like when you rise in the middle of the night to deal with something you're only half-awake for. I remember the man with the gun, and an exhaustion like I've never felt before.

Most importantly, I remember that I found Marie. Now I just need to figure out what it is she needs from me.

I rise slowly. Every muscle in my body hurts and the fatigue weighs so heavily on me that I am sorely tempted to lie back down. But the sooner I get downstairs, the sooner I can return home.

I'm still naked, but a dress lies on the chair across from me, white and dotted with small pink flowers. It's already too hot for a dress. I think longingly of home, of tank tops and shorts and air conditioning, before I slowly pull it over my head.

I limp down the stairs like an old woman, gripping the handrail for support, and find myself in a room that is plain by the standards of home: stiff velvet chairs, a small coffee table covered with a lace tablecloth, a few vases. But the house itself is well-constructed and elegant, with high ceilings, arched windows, and French doors that lead to a small stone porch off the side of the room. If you have to pass out in a strange place, this wasn't a bad one to choose.

"Ah, awake at last," says a musical voice. I turn to find Marie-Therese

there, smiling at me as if I'm long-lost family. "Three days you've slept! I thought you'd never get up!"

Three days, and I'm still so drained I can barely put one foot in front of the other. Any hope of getting this all over with quickly and catching Mark before he leaves for Nepal begins to dwindle. I blow out a breath. It was silly to hope for it in the first place, and I probably ought to focus on my present difficulties anyway.

"You're much friendlier than the guy was," I suggest, wondering for the first time if he *still* plans to hold me gunpoint and make me leave.

She glances over her shoulder before she gives me a small nod. "I'm sorry. My brother Henri—he didn't like that you knew who I was and *what* I was, but he's being ridiculous. You already know what I am on sight, just as I know what you are. Come. You must be famished."

She turns and I follow her into a kitchen that is slightly less ancient than I was expecting, but still pretty rustic. Cracked farmhouse sink, old cabinets that appear hand-made, copper pans hanging from the ceiling and a big white and black Aga stove.

"Please sit," she says. "You must be famished. Is it always like that with you when you time travel? It must be highly inconvenient." She speaks of the gift so openly, so plainly, as if it's the color of the sky or the day of the week. I was raised to do the opposite.

I take a seat at the rough-hewn trestle table where she's placed a loaf of bread and a small pot of jam. I long to shove the bread into my mouth like a savage, like it might be ripped away from me. I'm so hungry it feels as if I could never get full. It's only by force that I take reasonably sized bites.

"I'm not sure. I've never gone this far back before." I flush. How is it possible that I'm ashamed of what I'm able to do, and *also* ashamed of the fact that I'm not good at it? "What year is it? I'm...not great at landing where I plan to."

"It's 1938," she replies.

Three years closer to the Nazi occupation than I intended. I should have been more careful. "Then I've traveled...about fifty years."

"*Mon Dieu*," she says on a gasp. "Fifty years?"

For better or worse, the future remains a mystery to her, just as my future remains one to me. While the past is neatly blocked off, what lies ahead for my kind is hazy. It would be like jumping off a ledge on a foggy day, clueless to whether you were five feet in the air or five hundred.

I open my mouth to say more, but am cut off by a preemptory knock as the door swings open. A woman steps over the threshold, basket hanging off her arm. Her mouth is pinched, her eyes narrowed. "*Marie, tes poules sont —*," she begins, her words dying off as she notices me. "*Qu'est-ce que c'est? As-tu un invité?*" She sounds positively indignant to find me here.

Marie-Therese's mouth has opened to reply just as Henri bursts through the door, looking at the two of us with panicked eyes. I remember thinking he was handsome when I first saw him, but in truth the word barely does him justice. He has features that would be called exquisite were they on a woman—high cheekbones, full mouth—but with a strong jaw and broad shoulders that render him not feminine by any stretch of the imagination.

"*Oui*," says Marie, shooting an alarmed glance at Henri. "*Notre cousine... um... Amelie. Amelie Durand.*"

"Our cousin Amelie," Henri translates, looking me hard in the eye, as if I'm a child in need of scolding. "Amelie, this is our neighbor, Madame Beauvoir. *Amelie est Americaine. Elle ne parle pas le Francaise.*"

I'm tempted to argue that I do indeed speak French, but the guy *did* just hold me at gunpoint. It might prove useful to overhear what he believes he's saying in private. Between my exhaustion and how fast they talk I struggle to follow the conversation anyway. I catch a few sentences here and there: *she's had a long trip, the daughter of our uncle, we were not expecting her*. Mostly what I get from the conversation is Henri's eagerness that I be gone. For every time his sister expresses pleasure at my arrival and suggests I might stay a while, her brother says precisely the opposite.

Eventually I tune them out and let my gaze drift toward the window, realizing for the first time that their home is in the middle of a vineyard, lush and peaceful in the late May sun. *I wish Mark could see this*, I think, though in truth it wouldn't be his cup of tea. He'd want a luxurious vineyard experience, the kind that offers 600-thread-count sheets and a butler. Probably the sort where they actually *want* guests, too.

At last Madame Beauvoir rises to leave. She looks me over from head to toe like a dress she might consider purchasing, though she doesn't especially like it. "*Elle est très belle, n'est-ce pas?*" Madame Beauvoir thinks I'm beautiful. Maybe she's not as awful as I thought.

Henri shrugs, looking me over once from head to foot. *I don't see it*, he replies, *but not all men have options*.

My teeth grind in response.

He walks her to the door and watches her drive off before turning back inside and latching the door behind him. "*Dieu*," he says, glancing at me. "Trust the old witch to barge in just as the new witch finally wakes."

Witch harkens a little too closely to the type of words my mother used all my life, because she views time travel as something akin to drug dealing or human trafficking. And I might put up with them from her, but I'm definitely not putting up with them from him. "I'd watch who you start calling names."

He raises a brow. "Is that right? Because I'm fairly certain you can't jump right now, and I'm the one with the gun." He turns to Marie-Therese. "And why exactly would our *American* cousin have a French name?"

Marie-Therese heaves a sigh. "I panicked. The only American females I could think of were Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt. And she's too pretty to be named after Eleanor Roosevelt."

He comes forward with heavy steps, reluctantly taking the seat across from mine. "And did you get her actual name," he asks Marie-Therese, "or were you too busy giving her yours?"

My mouth opens but Marie-Therese holds out a hand to stop me. "No, don't. For your own safety, it's best you give us as little information as possible about who you are or where you're from. So for now, you are Amelie Durand. I am Marie-Therese, as you know, and the sullen one here is my brother Henri."

A muscle ticks in his jaw. "Well don't get attached. We have no idea who she is or what she's capable of."

"What she's *capable* of?" Marie-Therese asks with a laugh, setting a round of cheese in front of me, along with more bread. "She was comatose for days after she traveled here. You can't think she's capable of much."

She's right, but it's not the most flattering defense I've ever heard.

"Maybe it was all an act," he counters.

I turn toward Henri with an exasperated exhale. "What on earth do you think I'm planning to do? I'm a college student, not a criminal mastermind."

He rolls his eyes. "Believe me, I know you're no criminal mastermind. You couldn't even manage to steal an apple from my barn without being caught. Now tell us why you're here."

I'm deeply tired again, and my temper has begun to fray. "I'm here to help you, though you're making me wish I hadn't bothered."

Henri leans back in his chair, arms folded across his chest. "*Help?*" he scoffs, his pretty lip curling up at the corner. "Is this a joke?"

"Henri," snaps Marie-Therese. "*Tu es impoli.*"

"You've forgotten," Henri says to his sister, "that our future *savior* doesn't speak a word of French."

I'm officially sick of his shit. "You don't have to be rude about it."

He sighs. "And you don't have to be idiotic about it. Who arrives naked in a country where she can't speak the language and can't even stay awake?"

Marie swats his arm and turns to me. "Ignore him. Our mother insisted we both become fluent in several languages. Henri seems to forget not everyone has been so fortunate. Please continue."

"By all means," says Henri, turning back to me, "you were in the process of telling us how you—who showed up here naked and defenseless and proceeded to sleep for over two days—could offer assistance?"

His attitude leaves me longing to lash out rather than respond, except...he has a point. I'm young and terrible at time jumping. Aside from giving them some vague warnings about the future, I have nothing to offer.

I sigh, trying to think back to the weeks and weeks of nightmares before they finally got a little too realistic. They were always about Marie-Therese—other things came up too but since they made no sense to me, I mostly ignored them.

"My sister told me to find Marie-Therese, and I was hoping she'd understand. All I know is it's got something to do with saving people and a circle of light."

Marie-Therese's jaw drops and the legs of Henri's chair land heavily on the floor. They exchange a quiet, stunned look that worries me. It obviously means way more to them than it does to me. "*C'est elle,*" Marie-Therese breathes, so stunned she's reverted to French. *It's her.* "*Ma mere*—my mother, she told me you would come."

Ummm...what? "I don't know your mother. This is the furthest I've ever gone back."

But Marie's eyes are bright, her head nodding eagerly. "She told us someone would come and would be important to us," she argues. "That you would help us. It must be you."

I shake my head. "I seriously doubt I'm the person your mother was expecting, but maybe if you told me what you need help *with* I could do something."

She and Henri exchange another look. It's clear that whatever it is she wants, Henri wants the opposite.

“Marie,” he growls. “*Non.*”

We need to know, she hisses back at him before she turns to me. “My mother left three years ago without explanation and never returned. If I travel back to see her, she won’t tell me anything. She’ll realize she’s not going to return, and she won’t say a word. But *you* could go.”

The conversation and Marie-Therese’s expectations have begun to drag on me like a weight. It’s the fatigue coming back, I’m sure, but the fact that I’m going to disappoint her in a minute doesn’t help. “You really have no idea where she went?” I ask.

Marie-Therese stares at the table. “Her car was found in Paris, along with her clothes, but we don’t know what year she was visiting.”

A chill goes down my spine. I have a disappearance in my family as well—my aunt, who left for Paris long ago and never returned. Though it happened before we were born, the mystery of our missing aunt always fascinated Kit. More than once she suggested I should travel back in time to help her. But if two people disappeared going after the same thing, I’m certain I don’t want to be the third.

“What’s the circle of light thing about?”

Marie-Therese’s eyes widen. “Did your mother never tell you the prophecy?”

Henri’s eyes narrow. “Marie, if she doesn’t know, it’s not your place to tell her.”

Marie shrugs. “She’s a time traveler. She’s supposed to know,” she says before returning to me. “The prophecy says that there will be a child born after a great war—it calls her the *hidden* child—who will produce this circle of light, which is somehow supposed to keep our pasts safe.”

My shoulders sag. I don’t especially believe in prophecies, particularly ones passed down by word of mouth. Honestly, it’s a little shocking that both my aunt and their mother might have believed in it enough to actually go seek it out.

“What’s it supposed to keep you safe *from*?”

Henri frowns. “From you,” he says. At my startled look he begrudgingly completes the thought. “Not you, specifically. But from future time travelers. My sister, any children she might have...even those of us who don’t have the power, we are all at risk. Any one of you can come from the future and destroy everything, can’t you? Even this impromptu visit right now...what if you’ve changed something? What if the simple act of your arrival has led to

some trickle that will become an avalanche?"

I close my eyes and take a small breath. Even in 1938, I can't escape people who think I'm evil. Not that I disagree with them.

Marie-Therese frowns at him. "You've done nothing wrong," she assures me. "My mother believed the circle could keep us from having our futures stripped away."

I could point out that their futures could be stripped from them anyway. I did a fair amount of research about what's coming for this part of France when I was preparing to jump to the 1930s. Saint Antoine, given its position between Germany and Paris, will be Nazi-occupied throughout the war, but I hold onto that information for now. I'm not here to change the past any more than is necessary to get back home.

"I don't really see how I can help you with any of this," I tell her. "I'm sorry I got your hopes up."

"Please," Marie-Therese begs. "If you could get her to tell you her plans, we might still be able to save her."

Henri's face is drawn and sad in a way that makes him, momentarily, hard to hate. "Marie," he says quietly, "she's not trapped. She's dead, and that's something even you can't fix. No matter what year she went to, she'd have found her way back to us by now if she were alive."

"You don't know that," Marie breathes. She turns to me. "Please consider it. I have to find her."

I think of the nightmare that led me here. Kit, sitting up in her coffin, her skin a mottled blue and white like a sickly robin's egg—the way it looked when they pulled her out of the lake.

You have to find them, she told me again and again. For one horrible moment I wonder if it wasn't Marie I was supposed to save, but her mother and my aunt. I dismiss the thought immediately. Wherever they went, it was obviously very dangerous, and no time traveler alive is more ill-equipped to make that journey than I am. Even Marie shouldn't attempt it, and I'm not sure I want to help her try.

"I'm sorry," I reply. "My aunt also went missing in Paris, which tells me that what you're talking about might be a little harder than it sounds. And I'm just doing this one thing for my sister. Once I return to my own time, I'm never jumping again."

Marie-Therese laughs as if I'm joking, or a child making insane promises I can't keep. "Of course you'll continue to jump. We can't stop ourselves."

Her laughter irritates me, perhaps because my greatest fear is that she's right. I've done nothing *but* try to stop since I started jumping a decade ago, and yet here I am, time traveling again when it feels like my whole future depends on giving it up.

"I can," I reply.

Marie-Therese's hands press to the table. "Your aunt is missing, my mother is missing. How many others must there be? Don't you at least want to see if you can help?"

"I'm mostly interested in not dying," I reply. "Maybe we should all just take their failure as a lesson and stay the hell away from wherever they went."

Marie-Therese's shoulders drop. I barely know her and I already hate that I've disappointed her. "But your sister said you were supposed to help me."

My stomach swims uneasily. The nightmares have been unrelenting for weeks and escalated dramatically before I got here. If I don't provide *some* kind of help they'll start back up. I'm sure of it. "Maybe I can help in other ways. I can tell you what's coming."

"We don't want to know what's coming," Henri says firmly.

I'm officially too tired for this. I press my head in my hands, resting my eyes. "Fine, whatever. I'm sorry I'm disappointing you. If you could give me one day here to rest, I'll be out of your hair."

"You're not going anywhere," says Henri. "You've identified my sister, a secret we've guarded our entire lives. I can't just let you go back and tell others."

Panic begins to rise in my chest. I think about my arrival, his hand on the hammer of the gun. He was really prepared to shoot me for being here. I wonder if he still might be.

My head swivels, looking for the exits and his eyes follow mine. "There's one exit to this home, and I stand between you and it. Don't even think about trying to get by me."

First he's demanding I leave, and now he's basically holding me hostage. One extreme to the next, and both extremes suck. Henri is proving to be far less delightful than those pouty lips of his might lead a female to believe.

"And how do you propose to keep me here once my powers have returned?" I demand. "You're going to kill me? That's your plan?"

A muscle ticks in his jaw. "No. It's not my plan. I just haven't come up with a better one yet."

I was being sarcastic. I'm not sure he is.

"Look," I say with a heavy exhale. "I don't know what you think is going on here, but I'm not evil. I'm just a stupid college student who thought she might be able to help you, and you live more than five decades before my time anyway. What possible use is your sister's location to me?"

Marie-Therese looks at her brother as if it's a valid point, but I see something in his eyes before he averts them. Fear, knowledge. What does he know about this situation that his sister does not?

"You may remain until we figure it out," says Henri.

He rises and I watch as he returns to the vineyard. My sense of self-preservation tells me I should run at the first opportunity. Except I've barely got the energy to walk, so running is out of the question.

Marie places a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry. I know my brother. He talks big but he doesn't have it in him to kill a pretty young girl."

I raise my worried face to hers. "I'd feel better if you'd just said he doesn't have it in him to kill anyone."

Her smile falters. "I wish I could tell you that too."

I return to bed for most of the day, so ill I'm beginning to wonder if perhaps I just truly have the flu, because the exhaustion feels exactly the same. Even when I try to wake up I find myself drifting back to sleep, my dreams feverish and illogical, blending the morning's incidents with memories from home in various ways I'm certain never happened.

When I finally get downstairs again, Marie-Therese pushes me to sit and I'm too tired not to obey, but I also feel guilty just lounging here while she appears to be doing five things at once.

"Let me help with something," I say.

"You could knead the dough?" She slides it to me on a floured wooden board and goes back to check on whatever's bubbling on the stove.

When she turns back a minute later she laughs. "What are you doing?" she asks. "You have to form a ball and punch it down, with your ummm..." She holds up her closed hand. "Fist? Is that not how you do it in your time?"

I raise a shoulder. "I don't know. I've never done it before."

Her jaw drops. "Never? Mon Dieu. How? You must be quite wealthy."

My family is anything but wealthy, which is sort of ridiculous given how many ways my ancestors and I could get money. "It's just not a thing people do in my time," I explain. "We're too busy. We just buy it at the store."

She frowns. "What is it that keeps you all so busy?"

I bite my lip. I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. "Well, most women work or they're in school. They aren't home to make bread." But it's not as if Marie-Therese has a life of leisure here, and when I'm not in class I have plenty of down time. "I guess maybe we're not all that busy. We'd just rather,

you know, read. Or watch TV.”

“TV?” she asks.

It slipped, but is there any harm in explaining it? “Television. It's like a box in your house that plays movies and shows. I guess it hasn't been invented yet.”

Her eyes go wide. TV has never struck me as a wondrous invention, but I see in her face that it really must have been something when it first came out. Like a rollercoaster that comes to your home when you want to ride it. “I've heard of something like this—it was at the world's fair, I think. I just never imagined it would become common.”

“What about you?” I ask. “What do you do for fun?”

Her smile grows a little sad. “I help with the language classes at the church or sometimes see my friends. Things changed...after my mother left.”

I feel my first flicker of guilt and dismiss it. I've done what I agreed to. I found Marie. If she and her brother don't want to know about the future, there's not much more I can do, and doing any more would be breaking a promise I made to myself, and also to Mark, even if he doesn't know I made it. I don't care what Marie-Therese or her brother say. The second I'm recovered I'm going back home.



HENRI COMES in just before dinner. Even after a day outside, with sweat on his brow and bits of hay falling from his trousers, he's the picture of a handsome 1940's soldier or movie star. All chiseled perfection, a lock of hair falling forward.

He walks into the room and sets apples on the table in front of me. His hands are large, tan from days spent outdoors. "So you won't need to steal them," he says.

I glance up. I've got just enough energy to slap that smirk off his face, I'd bet. "Are you always so pleasant to your female guests? I'm beginning to see why you're still single."

His mouth slips up on one side. "You think I'm single for lack of options?"

Marie-Therese smiles fondly at him. "Our Henri can't throw a stick without hitting a lovesick girl," she says. "It's almost irritating going into

town with him, the way they all stop us and try to talk to him.”

I don’t doubt for a moment this is true, but I still long for a way to take him down a peg. “I assume it must be entirely women who don’t know you well,” I murmur.

Henri arches a brow. “Do you always bait men who hold your life in their hands?” he asks.

I’m more annoyed by the remark than I am threatened, because I’m still hard-pressed to imagine him as a killer. “Sorry. I’m not entirely clear on the rules,” I reply. “No one’s ever threatened to kill me before.”

He turns toward the room just past the kitchen, which I assume is his. “With the mouth on you,” he says, “I find that very surprising.”



AFTER HENRI EMERGES, freshly bathed and irritatingly handsome, we sit down to eat a dinner that is relatively simple, yet smells better than anything I’ve ever smelled. I’m still so ravenously hungry it feels like I might never get full.

“What happened to the bread?” Henri asks. I sigh. I should have known he’d comment.

“It was my first time.”

He narrows one eye. “How exactly is it that a girl of your age has not learned to make bread?”

It’s no different than the question Marie-Therese asked earlier, except that he seems to regard even the most minute things about me as indicative of some greater evil, and it’s getting old.

I set down my fork. “Is there ever going to come a point where you don’t act like I’m the antichrist?”

“Perhaps if I got to know you well enough,” he says, cutting into his ham, “but I don’t plan to. So why do you not possess such a basic skill?”

My lip curls. I think the inherent chauvinism of this era would kill me long before Nazis or my ineptitude at household chores. “Because where I’m from, we don’t need to make our own bread. Once life *improves* a few decades from now, the ability to cook and produce children will not be considered a woman’s foremost accomplishments.”

“But you still need to eat,” argues Marie-Therese. “Who cooks if women

aren't?"

"People eat out a lot in my time. And cooking is easier too. Faster."

She sits forward, suddenly fascinated. "Faster how?"

"Are you sure I'm supposed to be telling you this?" I ask.

"No," Henri intones. "You shouldn't. You shouldn't even be here."

Marie-Therese shrugs. "Tell us anyway. I want to know. I want to know everything that's different. Just not anything bad."

I frown. The bad is probably what she most needs to know. I've spent less than a day with her, but already every bone in my body wants to urge her to flee—to move to the United States or some distant island that won't be touched by the war. Except it's not a choice I should make for her. As her asshole brother pointed out, I shouldn't even be here in the first place.

Ignoring Henri's thoughts on the matter, I tell them about microwaves and VCRs and MTV and drive-thrus. I tell them about air conditioning, something they could sorely use right now: even with the windows open my dress has been stuck to me all day. I explain that few people farm, and that—at least where I'm from—most people go to college and wind up working indoors.

Marie-Therese is enthralled by the life I describe, gushing over the idea of having weekends free to go to parties or movies or galleries. But Henri just listens, seeming to carefully weigh every word that comes out of my mouth with his arms folded across his chest.

When Marie-Therese runs upstairs to get her needlepoint, he leans back in his chair. "I think you'll find our small life here rather unpleasant," he says.

"There's only been one unpleasant part so far," I reply, narrowing my eyes at him. I rise to my feet, too tired to sit here being baited by him and he rises too, looming over me. Between his height and the width of his shoulders, I feel a little more vulnerable than I did when we were seated.

"You've charmed my sister, *kelpie*," he says, his eyes brushing over my face, "but I promise I won't be quite so easy."

I don't know how to translate *kelpie* and decide not to ask. I'm almost certain it isn't anything good.

When I wake the next day the sun is beating down on me through the open window, and the air in the room is so thick and oppressive it would make me feel groggy no matter how much sleep I'd gotten. I should be in New York City right now with Mark. There was a new gallery in SoHo he wanted to take me to, and as much as I love discovering new artists, it's the appeal of a darkened room and air-conditioning that speaks to me most at the moment.

I put on yesterday's dress and limp downstairs, a trickle of sweat rolling down my chest and landing somewhere inside the God-awful, too-small bra. Marie-Therese is bustling around, sprightly and all smiles. "Oh goodness," she says, coming to a halt. "You look worse."

I twist my hair off my neck, trying to cool off. "It's just hot," I say weakly. I take in the small basket she's packing. "Are you going out?" My heart beats unsteadily at the prospect of being left here with Henri. I still don't think he's a killer, necessarily, but I like having her here as a buffer regardless.

She nods. "I teach German on Friday mornings, but if you'd like I could take you to town when I'm done."

Despite my fatigue, the idea appeals to me. Here on the farm, life does not feel drastically different from home. But in a town, with the shops and all the people, it might truly feel as if I'm in France, just before the occupation. Sort of like a Renaissance festival or 50's day in high school, albeit it one where the participants don't realize they've got nearly a decade of suffering ahead.

"I didn't have time to milk the cows so there's only water to drink, but I left you bread and cheese," she says, grabbing the basket. "I'll be back after lunch, but in the meantime, take a bath. It might help you cool off."

I see her off reluctantly and then go to the bathroom. For a moment I simply stare at the tub, arms folded across my chest, wondering how I can avoid this. It's been a decade since I last had a bath instead of a shower, but I assume it's my only option here.

I strip and force myself into the tub, sitting in two inches of water and emptying a pitcher over my head to wash my hair. I find shampoo but no conditioner. It's depressing to exert so much effort just to have my hair feel like straw when I'm done.

Showers, conditioner, shorts and cool air. This is what I miss most, so far. That and the absence of Henri.

I get back into my clothes. By the time I'm done dressing I'm hot again, and exhausted, but I grab the pail Marie uses for milking and head outside. Though ours ceased to be a working farm once my father left, I still remember a thing or two, and Marie has enough work to do without me adding to it.

I get as far as the pump when I sense something behind me and glance over my shoulder. Henri is in the field there, a vine in one hand and shears in the other, but he's gone completely still, watching me. When our eyes meet he throws the shears to the ground and begins to march my way.

Right. Because I'm a criminal here to steal his shitty little apples or something. "You don't need to get the gun just yet," I say testily as he approaches. "I'm just milking the cows."

His tongue darts out to the corner of his mouth. He almost looks amused. "Do you even know *how* to milk a cow? Don't you have a magical device in your time that milks the cow and churns the butter and carries it all to your tongue?"

Well, for the most part, yes. I lift a shoulder. "I assume it can't be that hard if you can do it."

His hands link behind his neck, observing me. "Hopefully you've taken on this chore in lieu of making the bread."

"Marie-Therese and I are going to town today," I reply, rolling my eyes, "so your bread is safe."

His jaw drops. "*To town?*" he asks, and then he laughs unhappily. "*Non.* My impulsive sister is so thrilled to have someone around that she's not using

her head. You will stay on the farm and go nowhere else. You've caused enough trouble as it is."

I'm growing tired, standing in the sun, and though I do sort of enjoy sparring with him, my will to do so is dwindling by the second. "I must be growing on you if you're so desperate to keep me close."

"Hardly," he replies. "But Marie-Therese attracts enough attention and two of you together, in the same household? It could raise suspicion."

I throw out my hands. His paranoia is getting really, really old. "What does it matter?" I exclaim. "Is Marie-Therese a fugitive? A celebrity in hiding? Why would anyone care where she is? I don't care that she knows where *I* am."

His eyes shift away. Hiding something again. "It's never safe for any of you to know each other, and the fact that you're pretending not to know this isn't helping your case."

"How would I know that? Marie's the first time traveler I've ever even met!"

His eyes narrow. "Not your mother? Your grandmother? A sister?"

My family history is like an overstuffed closet. Pull one thing loose and you'll find yourself buried in the rest. I go with the simplest explanation instead. "It skipped my mother, and my grandmother died before I was born. I've traveled back to see her, but asking her to explain things would..."

"...let her know she'll die before her time," he concludes. He understands because it's the same reason Marie won't at least try to go back and visit her mother. I see a flicker of something in his eyes. I'd suspect it was sympathy if he were anyone else.

"Yes." I feel unsteady now, between the heat and the exhaustion. I need to end this conversation before I pass out.

He reaches back to rub a hand along the nape of his neck, flinching. "You had no business jumping back like this when you know so little. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking your sister needed help, because the information came from a pretty reliable source." Though I'm not sure a message from beyond the grave would necessarily be considered *reliable*.

I sway suddenly and he grabs my waist to hold me upright. I can feel the pressure of his hands through my dress, and this sudden awareness of him—of his size and his strength—unnerves me. "You need to lie down," he says.

"I'm fine," I reply, but it's a lie. I can't think straight right now, between

the exhaustion and his hands on me. My eyes close for a moment and he scoops me up like a child and heads for the house. I'd like to argue but I feel like I'm about to pass out. And dazed though I am, I can't help but notice that—for all his belligerence—he's gentle with me now. Gentler than I'd have thought him capable of.

"You think you're being brave," he says softly. "But bravery like that will get you killed one day, kelpie."

That word again. "That's the second time you've called me that," I murmur. "If you're going to insult me, have the balls to do it in English."

He raises a brow. "A lady would not use that expression. And not only do you not know French, you don't know your own language as well. Kelpie is a Scottish word I think. A myth."

"So enlighten me," I say, as he sets me on the couch. "What is a kelpie?"

He hesitates, his eyes on my face for a long moment before he turns away. "A monster in human form."



BY THE TIME MARIE-THERESE RETURNS, I've already taken a nap but don't feel much better for it. She prepares a broth over the stove, her mouth pursed with irritation over Henri's edict about me remaining on the farm, though in truth I'm probably too tired to make the walk anyway.

I cut carrots for her while she peels potatoes and asks me question after question about university. She wants to know everything: the classes I've taken, my plans for the degree, what it's like to live on my own. Each question sounds more wistful than the one before it.

"Did you ever think about going?" I ask.

She grabs the carrots I've chopped in two certain handfuls and drops them into the pot on the stove. "I couldn't leave Henri all alone," she says. "Perhaps when he marries."

"That poor woman," I sigh. "She has no idea what she's in for with *him*."

She laughs. "Oh no. Did you see him today? Is he still being a beast?"

"Yes, and he called me a kelpie for the second time, which is apparently a monster in human form."

A small smile graces her lips. "If it's any consolation, it's actually a monster who takes the form of a beautiful woman."

I grimace. "It's not really much of a consolation."

"Poor Henri. We finally get a beautiful girl around here and she hates him. Like I said, you've seen him at his worst. He was so different before he came back from England."

"England?"

She nods, blowing on a steaming spoonful of the broth to taste before bringing it to her lips. "He was there for university."

For some reason the news surprises me, though it shouldn't. His posh British accent was one of the first things I noticed about him, after all. "I didn't realize he'd gone."

"It wasn't for him so he left," she says with a shrug. "But please just ignore him if he's being rude. I know you can't see it yet, but there's not a sweeter, more caring man alive than my brother. Your presence here worries him, and I suppose he's lashing out a bit because of it."

"If he's threatened by me, I'm guessing he's threatened by almost anything," I say with a sigh. "As you've both pointed out, I'm terrible at time jumping and not even good at stealing."

Her shoulders fall as she turns back to the stove. "We've already lost both our parents, and I think he blames himself a bit...for not being able to help our mother."

For reasons I doubt I'll ever understand, only women can time travel. It hadn't occurred to me until now how painful it must be for Henri that his sister could choose to charge back and save their mother, but he cannot.

"He's made it his sworn duty to keep me safe and yet the Germans are getting bolder—it's said they've now crossed the river into Allemagne—and with Madame Beauvoir popping in unannounced and now you...these things happen and it makes him feel like he's failing."

I don't want to feel sorry for Henri, I really don't. But in both of them I'm seeing a life of promise that's been waylaid somehow. If I planned to stay, and I don't, I might think *this* is what Kit wanted me to fix. That perhaps she wanted me to save Marie-Therese and Henri from themselves, from this sad, isolated little life they've created, though I wouldn't have the first idea how. And it doesn't matter anyway, because I'm definitely not staying.



OVER DINNER MARIE-THERESE is all smiles and laughter, while Henri continues to regard me like some kind of vampire who might lunge forward at any moment to sink my fangs into his neck. The more his sister seems to like me, the more his aversion grows.

"Henri," Marie chides, "you must smile at least once tonight so Amelie realizes you're capable of it."

"She's the guest," he says, eyes on his stew. "I believe she's the one who should be charming."

I pat my lips with my napkin and give him a saccharine smile. "I'm not generally charming to men who've held me at gunpoint. It's a personal thing."

"And I'm not in the habit of smiling at vipers who land naked on my property and refuse to leave."

"*Refuse* to leave?" I demand. "You're holding me hostage, remember?"

His eyes meet mine across the table. "Fine. You are free to go," he replies. He glances away then. "The sooner the better," he adds, almost to himself.

I should be relieved but feel oddly hurt instead. It's an old kind of hurt, as if he's pressed upon a large bruise I've had so long I can't remember where I got it. The experience of not being wanted is something you never entirely get used to.

Marie-Therese rises, snatching things from the table. "Henri, you're being rude," she says. "Amelie will not be well enough to travel for days or even weeks, and more importantly, I don't want her to go. It's been years since I've had another female around the house."

He leans back, folding his arms across his chest. "Yes, I'm aware. And it's making you a little too comfortable. Taking her to town, Marie? You really think people won't talk about our American 'cousin' once they've seen her?"

"You worry too much," Marie-Therese says with a dismissive wave of a hand. "Humans can rationalize almost anything, and it's not as if it's a secret by now. You know what a gossip Madame Beauvoir is."

He exhales heavily. "And you don't worry enough. I've asked you multiple times to jump back and change the way that visit went. There's no reason anyone needs to know she's here."

She glances at him, and then me. "No," she says, finally. "There's no point. I think Amelie might stay with us a while, so I'm not going to exhaust myself trying to hide her."

I open my mouth to assure her I do *not* plan to stay for a while, but Henri,

lovely man that he is, is way ahead of me. "*Stay a while?*" he demands. "Are you insane? She remains here until she's recovered and not an hour longer, do you understand?"

Listening to the two of them fight has made me tired, and depressed. I close my eyes for a moment and lapse into a fantasy that's carried me for years now, even before I met Mark, though it's his face I see when I picture it of late: the two of us married, living in some luxurious apartment with enough of everything that I no longer need to jump—enough money, enough support, enough care. I will be normal at last. I won't need to feel conflicted about the things I haven't told him because they'll no longer matter. If you go long enough without time traveling, you generally lose the *ability* to time travel. I picture my mother visiting us, proud of me at last.

I just need to stop jumping, and in order to do that I need to get home. As Henri himself said, the sooner, the better.

On my third conscious day in 1938—my sixth total—I finally rise feeling slightly closer to normal. My level of fatigue is more akin now to a serious hangover, or the day after an illness, as opposed to the worst flu of my life. My limbs are still heavy, though, and I feel an emptiness inside that warns me I probably couldn't jump up a flight of stairs, much less jump to the next decade or beyond.

Which means I definitely won't get back in time to see Mark before he leaves for Nepal. I hate that he's leaving with this strain between us, hate that we had our first argument in two years just before I left, and over something that seems stupid in retrospect. He'd asked me to move to New York City with him, which would mean dropping out of college with one year left. *My goals matter too*, I said to him. "Just transfer to a school in the city," he said—as if it was all so easy, as if leaving an Ivy League university and losing a year while I applied for the transfer was meaningless—and I reacted poorly.

My days here have reminded me, though, what a novelty it is to be wanted at all. He pushed me hard because he loves me, because he enjoys my presence. I still don't want to transfer, but I wish I'd handled it better. I wish I'd been grateful rather than indignant.

I wish, most of all, that I hadn't come here in the first place.



I SPEND the morning with Marie-Therese, "helping" her make scones and pie, though my help is nothing a six-year old couldn't provide. I cut and peel

apples while she does pretty much everything else.

"What's with all the baking?" I ask. It's just pure laziness on my end, but if I were her I wouldn't be filling up every available moment with unnecessary work. And to me baking seems like unnecessary work.

She shrugs. "I thought we'd have tea today."

"Tea?" I ask. "Isn't that a British thing?"

She laughs. "We do tea here as well, though to be honest I thought it was also an American thing. I was trying to keep you from being homesick."

She probably doesn't realize I've never once in my entire life been homesick. Even now, what appeals to me most about my own time is not the people, but the idea of showers and air conditioning. "That's really thoughtful of you. It sounds like fun."

Marie-Therese smiles. "I enjoy baking anyway. My mother and I cooked together every day of my life, from the moment I was old enough to climb on a chair and stand at the stove beside her." Sadness flickers over her face.

"She'd have liked you, my mother. Though she'd have convinced you to cut your hair. Is that really the style, in your time? To wear it so long?"

I shrug. "There are lots of styles. I keep mine this length so it covers things up in case I land somewhere naked. Unlike you, I don't seem to have much choice about where and when I land."

"I've been thinking about that," she says. "I wonder if you struggle so much because you have some other ability. Perhaps the energy I devote to landing in the right time and place is for you...diverted elsewhere. To some other gift."

I laugh aloud. "Trust me, I have no other gifts. And it doesn't matter anyway, because I will never jump again, after this." My eyes catch on Henri outside, walking past the window on his way to the pump. He's down to a t-shirt today, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that he has the most amazing biceps I've ever seen in my life. Mark spends hours at the gym each week lifting weights, but apparently working on a farm provides a little added *oomph* no gym can provide.

"Of course you will jump again," she counters, combing through the pantry. "You haven't visited my mother yet."

Henri pulls the t-shirt over his head and I stare, fascinated, at smooth olive skin and muscles I didn't even realize were possible until now.

"I'm not going to visit your mother," I say faintly. "I told you that."

Henri cups his hands and drinks, then cups them again to dump water

over the top of his head, shaking it out of his eyes as it falls. I flush, suddenly aware that I'm gawking and my hands have fallen still.

"I know what you said," she replies with a small smile. "But I feel increasingly certain you're wrong. We're out of sugar. I'll be right back."

Before I can ask where she's going, her dress has fallen to the floor and she is gone. When I choose to jump, I'm a lot like someone trying to justify breaking her diet: *here's why I should make an exception and I've been super good and it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity*. But Marie-Therese treats time travel as if it's spinach or kale—something without a single negative repercussion, the kind of thing you can binge on without guilt.

I've barely blinked before there's a clatter upstairs, and then she's walking back down in a new dress, calmly grabbing a full tin of sugar from the pantry and placing it in front of me before she begins folding the clothes she discarded a moment before.

"Did you really just time travel to go buy *sugar*?" I ask. "That has got to be the most boring use of a superpower ever."

"Even more boring than that. I just added it to yesterday's shopping list." She sees my shock and smiles. "It just makes life easier. Surely you've gone back at some point to remind yourself of something?"

I shrug, unwilling to admit she's right. When I've done it, it's only been for important things...or things that seemed important at the time. Missed homework assignments, pop quizzes. But I've never done it without feeling like I was cheating somehow, whereas Marie-Therese clearly suffers no such qualms. As much as I want to look down on her for using her gift so shamelessly, a part of me is envious at the same time.

"Don't you worry you'll depend on it too much? You won't be able to just disappear in front of your husband and children."

"I would not marry a man I was unwilling to tell," she says. "Although I probably won't marry, so I doubt it will be an issue."

Her answer surprises me. As pretty as she is, I'd think her possibilities were limitless, and she's awfully young to have given up anyway. "Why don't you think you'll marry? I'm sure you have your pick in Saint Antoine. There must be *someone* here you'd consider?"

Her gaze drifts away and her cheeks grow rose pink. "There is no one suitable here."

Her choice of words is odd. "Suitable?"

The blush deepens. "The only man in this town I'd consider is not..." she

takes a deep breath and looks away. "He is not available."

My eyes go wide. Marie-Therese seems so sweet and innocent, so proper. I never dreamed that she'd be lusting after a married man. "And I guess he'll never *become* available?" I ask. "Divorce is probably frowned upon now?"

"Divorce?" she gasps, and then flushes again. "Dieu. He's not married! What do you think of me?"

I throw up my hands. "You said he wasn't available."

She throws an unnecessary amount of vigor into rolling out the dough. "No, no, no. I don't like anyone. I was just saying there's no one here I would consider."

Except that's not what she said, and she is still blushing fiercely. Maybe it's someone Henri would not approve of? Someone poor? Someone Jewish? Of another race? I wish I were staying long enough to help her sort it out.

But, again, I am not.



THAT AFTERNOON, she serves tea on the side porch, which is pleasant in the shade, and forces Henri to come inside to join us. He raises a brow as he eyes the table. "What's the special occasion?" he asks. "Is she leaving?"

Marie-Therese frowns at him. "I thought it might help Amelie feel like she was back home."

His mouth twitches. "Americans don't take tea," he says.

She rolls her eyes. "Yes, so you tell me now."

I take a scone with clotted cream, doing my best to ignore Henri while he ignores me. Poor Marie-Therese is left to fill in the gap in conversation, and begins telling me about Henri as a teen, trying to borrow the car to meet a girl in the middle of the night without making his mother aware. It's hard for me to imagine Henri being *fun* enough to sneak out with the car. He's close to my age and yet he seems a decade older simply because of the weight he carries on those broad shoulders—I see it in his wary eyes every time he looks at me.

"His plan was to push it to the road before starting it, but instead, it went careening into an irrigation ditch," Marie says, laughing. "So he woke me, begging and pleading with me to jump back a few hours to warn him it would happen."

"Which you refused to do," adds Henri.

"Henri was the golden child in our house," Marie-Therese explains. "I thought every once in a while I should not be the only one in trouble. And naturally, he *still* didn't get in trouble, even when my mother found out."

I look toward the vineyard, stretching green and lush as far as I can see, and wonder what it would be like to live in a household where rivalries are merely *amusing*. Where the preference for one child is slight enough that no one minds all that much.

"If you had to live with a sibling who could do no wrong, you'd understand," Marie-Therese says, interpreting my silence as disapproval.

"I did," I reply. Unlike her, though, I don't have any fun stories to share. In my home, after my sister died, I expected nothing from my family other than what was required to survive, and even that didn't seem like a certainty. "My parents didn't approve of our gift, so I never stood a chance."

"Didn't *approve*?" asks Marie-Therese as if she might have misunderstood. "But why?"

I shrug. Though I tell myself it doesn't bother me anymore, at times like this I find it requires a certain amount of effort to act ambivalent. "My mother never liked it, but after—" I stumble over my words, trying to sum up the past without giving any of it away. "After my father left, she seemed to decide it was a little...evil."

The mere act of referencing my mother is sometimes enough to open a hole inside me. I can feel it even now, black and shapeless, filling my head with all her accusations over the years. It's always been as if she knew slightly more about me than I knew about myself, and what she knew was deeply, irredeemably terrible. Even as I struggled to deny what she said, I always found evidence she was right. Every single time.

I look up to find Henri's eyes on me, and for once they aren't narrowed in suspicion or disdain. He's looking at me like I'm something passing by too quickly, something he wants to see and understand before it's too late. And then the expression is gone, leaving me to wonder if I imagined it.

Marie takes a sip of her tea. "Your family must be worried about you, coming here all alone the way you did."

My smile falters a little, and stays in place only by force. I shrug. "No one knows I'm here, actually. Like I said, they wouldn't have approved." I'm sure my mother was relieved by my absence. But once I get home and announce my engagement, maybe she'll start to see me in a different way.

Maybe then she'll start to care.

Henri sucks in his cheeks. "So where does everyone think you are?"

"I told them I got an internship in France studying art. My boyfriend was leaving for the summer anyway, so..."

"Boyfriend? I didn't realize you had a young man," says Marie-Therese. There is a tiny wrinkle between her brows. "I suppose you're not allowed to tell him what you really are unless you have children together."

My eyes go wide. "Mark will never, ever know."

"Ever?" she asks, flabbergasted. "You must not be serious about him then."

I sit up a little straighter, feeling oddly defensive. "Of course I am. We're getting engaged after I return home. But no, I'm not going to tell him. He wouldn't understand."

She and Henri both look dumbfounded. It's as if I just announced I was marrying a family member or someone in prison. "Wouldn't understand?" Marie-Therese repeats. "I'm sure he'd understand quite quickly once you demonstrated."

I flush. "Not that. I mean he...wouldn't appreciate it. It's complicated."

Henri remains still. His hand rests on his fork, unmoving. "That's what a woman says when she makes excuses for a man," he says.

I narrow one eye, flicking him with my most disdainful glance. "I'm sure the women you date make plenty of excuses, Henri."

Marie-Therese snickers beneath her hand but Henri glances at me coolly, without emotion. "So tell us, then, how it's so hard to explain."

It feels like even his most innocuous questions are tinged with suspicion, and a thousand responses he'd deem *unladylike* come to mind. Most of them some version of *go fuck yourself, Henri*. I lift my chin. "Fine. He's from a very wealthy family. They just don't...they aren't strange. They would not appreciate a strange ability. He wants a normal wife, and that's fine because I plan to be one. Once I get back home, I'm done with jumping. This is my last trip ever, and then it's behind me."

"Pah," Marie-Therese says with a shocked laugh. "You can't be serious. What if you need something? What if you need to escape? What if you need money?"

I rise and begin to gather dishes. "I won't. Mark's family is wealthy and well-connected. There's nothing I'd need to time travel for that they can't make happen."

Henri rolls his eyes, tipping back in his chair as if the conversation is over. "So you've chosen to marry for money," Henri says. "And he's marrying you for your looks. Apparently some things haven't changed, from my time to yours."

My face heats. "I love Mark," I hiss. "It's a happy coincidence that his background means I no longer have to be something I'm not interested in being." I thank Marie for the tea and retreat. From the moment my mother's name came up I've felt this dark shadow overhead, and Henri's words only compound it. He seems to live to find weak spots in my armor, and God knows I've got enough to make his work easy for him.

I go out to the coop and swing handfuls of feed around. My mother's voice is in my head, asking what Mark would think if he could see me now—chickens scurrying around my feet, which are clad in Marie-Therese's old shoes, scuffed and two sizes too big. *He'd see that you're a liar*, she whispers. There is no art history internship, no glamorous, can't-miss journey throughout the country.

That's the problem with the things my mother said about me: there was a grain of truth in every single one of them. I *am* a liar. I'm lying to Mark, to my mother. I'm lying to Henri and Marie about not understanding French and by implying that my sister is still alive.

There are so many bad things in the world and I know, deep in my heart, that I am all of them to some extent. And I don't see any way to stop being them aside from starting fresh with Mark when I get home. If I never jump again, once I get back, will it be enough? Or will I always be telling him a lie of one kind or another?

The sound of an opening door draws me out of my thoughts. Henri is walking out of the house but his eyes are on me. I'm never in the mood for his bullshit, but at this precise moment, I feel too fragile to hear a word of it.

His mouth opens and I cut him off. "I spent my entire life raised by a woman who thinks I'm the devil," I snap. "So whether you're about to imply that I'm a thief, or a monster, or a gold-digger, just save it. I assure you I'll hear all that and worse once I return home, and from someone whose opinion I actually care about."

I snatch the milk pail I set outside the coop and turn toward the barn. In spite of what I just said, I feel a sob swell in my throat. I know I'm just tired, but there are days when it feels like I'm not up to another decade or year or hour of being hated for what I am and all the mistakes I've made because of

it.

I've just begun to milk the first of the two cows when I hear the crunch of hay underfoot. He stops a few feet away and I ignore him.

"If you pull from the top of the udder," he says quietly, "it'll come faster."

I brush my eyes against my sleeve, wishing he would leave so I could take a deep breath.

But he doesn't. "I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I don't actually think you're a monster, or a thief."

I glance up at him. For the first time ever, he looks contrite. "Then why do you keep saying it?"

He rubs the back of his head. "Because with each hour you spend here, you're making things harder," he replies after a moment. "No matter what you say to Marie-Therese, she's convinced you're going to find out where our mother went. Whether you intended to or not, you've gotten her hopes up."

I stand, wrapping my arms around myself. I liked it better when Henri's objections to my presence seemed ridiculous. But this one isn't. "I thought you agreed that me traveling back to see your mother was a bad idea."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "I do. I know my mother wouldn't want Marie-Therese following her, and there's probably a reason she left in secret. But my sister can't move on from her obsession while you're still offering some possibility of assistance."

I stare at the ground, trying to gather my thoughts. What he says makes perfect sense. God, I'm tired of getting everything wrong. "And you want me to leave before it gets worse," I conclude.

He runs a hand through his hair and exhales. "I'm sorry. If things were different, I—". His gaze rests on my face, more wistful than I've ever seen it, and then he shakes his head. "Things aren't different though," he sighs, more to himself than me, and he turns to walk out of the barn.

Once he's gone, I lean my head against the back of the stall. "Kit," I say quietly. "Why the hell am I here? What do you want me to do?"

There is silence, of course. Those nightmares drove me to the brink of insanity, but this was obviously all a stupid mistake. I'm not saving or helping anyone. I'm just making their lives worse, and it's time I left well enough alone.

My departure plan is less than perfect. I'm not even close to being ready to jump home yet, so I will sneak out tonight after they've gone to bed and stay toward the outer corners of the orchard until my strength has returned. They don't venture out that far much, and if I hear them, I can always just hide in the woods. The blueberries are ripe and I should be able to sustain myself on those until I get back.

Dinner is simple that night, ham and cheese and bread and fruit. When they are not looking, I push bits of ham and cheese into my pockets. I'm not sure they'll stay good outside in the heat, but I'm probably going to be getting sick of blueberries before I can get home, so it's worth a shot.

Over dinner, Henri is almost pleasant. He's polite and manages not to call me a single name through the entire meal. What a shame that on the one night he's proven capable of behaving himself, I'm too exhausted and worried to appreciate it. I'm worried for myself, of course—the idea of sleeping outdoors with no shelter in particular—but mostly I'm worried for them. The Germans will be here within the next two years, and it's within my power to warn them. I'm just not sure if I should.

"If...something bad was coming," I venture, "would you want to know?"

"No," says Marie-Therese. "Of course not. I don't want to spend years and years dreading something that might not happen."

I glance at Henri. He looks less certain about that than his sister but finally shrugs. "She is probably right," he says. "It's best we just live the lives we were handed."

I wish this hadn't been their answer. *It's already too late anyway, I*

remind myself. If they die in the war, I can't undo that.
This fact doesn't reassure me at all.



I RETIRE EARLY, but when the house is finally quiet I sneak downstairs in the borrowed dress, the one with its pockets full of food, and write a quick note to Marie-Therese, telling her I hope we meet again, which is true. If I can find her in my time, perhaps then I can explain why I snuck out the way I did. I slip outside with my shoes in hand, holding my breath as I pull the door closed behind me.

The night is silent. A light breeze and crickets in the distance. There's a bright moon and once my eyes adjust, I think I'll have no problem picking my way through to the orchard's outskirts. Yet as I put my shoes on, the plan feels a lot less simple than it did during daylight. The prospect of traversing the dark fields in the middle of the night has a chill inching along my spine, and falling asleep in them is difficult to even contemplate.

I cross the yard, going around the barn so I don't wake the animals. Even in the moonlight it's hard to see the uneven ground, and I stumble in a small divot, feet sliding a few inches over gravel before I regain my balance.

"In the mood for a stroll?" asks a voice. I jump, heart hammering, and turn toward the sound.

Henri. Sitting against the back of the barn, drowsy but unsurprised to find me here.

"You sleep outside?" I ask. It's all I can think to say.

"Not if I can help it," he replies, rolling the blanket under his arm and walking my way. "But I could only think of one good reason a guest would be shoving food in her pockets all night, and it turns out I was right."

I sigh heavily. "I'm just trying to do what you asked."

"I don't recall asking a half-dead girl to go sleep in the woods and starve while she's trying to return to health." He reaches my side. "Don't worry. I'm not planning to stop you. I could carry you back but I can't watch you all the time. You'd just sneak out again."

His response couldn't be more reasonable. I suppose that's what's so surprising about it. I look up at him in the moonlight, feeling unexpectedly sad that I will never see him again. I swallow. In two years' time will he still

be on this farm or will he be off fighting? I don't want to know. I'm glad I'm leaving here before I start to care.

"Well...goodbye. Please tell Marie-Therese I was sorry to leave so suddenly."

I turn toward the orchard, but within seconds I hear the sound of feet behind me, matching my pace, as if the two of us are out here for a leisurely walk, nothing more.

I stop and round on him. "What are you doing?"

"I assume you were planning to sleep near the orchard, but I can't have a dead girl on my property," he says simply.

Oh my God. And to think I was getting all choked up at the idea of him going off to war. "So you're escorting me off your land so I don't *die* here?"

He shrugs. "No, I'll just come with you and make sure you leave in one piece."

I huff in frustration and pick up my pace, but as we approach the orchard, the trees begin to block the moon and it's so dark I can barely see a foot in front of my face. Anger keeps me walking fast despite that fact. "Your presence defeats the purpose. And you can't leave Marie alone. She'll panic."

I stumble and his hand reaches out to grab my arm. "She'll be fine for a few days."

He's making no sense at all. How has he gone from incessantly worrying about Marie-Therese to *she'll be fine for a few days*?

After five minutes of walking, we've reached the orchard. He points to a small clearing near the woods. "This seems like a good spot to sleep?" He's already begun spreading his blanket.

I hate him for ruining this. I was trying to do the right thing and now it feels as if I'm a tantrum-prone child being humored by her dad. "I'm not sleeping with you."

His mouth twitches. "Well, that definitely removes some of the fun from the evening. But there are wolves here, so you might at least want me close by."

Any pride I might have had goes skittering away at the word *wolves*. I slide down to the base of an apple tree across from him, leaning against it with my arms folded.

He spreads himself out on the blanket and glances over. "Didn't you bring something to sleep on?" he asks. "You're not very good at this running away business."

God I hate him.

"I didn't want you calling me a thief for the rest of my life. Just leave the blanket for me and go. I promise to drag myself off your property if I'm dying."

"That's exactly the kind of promise you won't be able to keep if you're being torn apart by wolves," he says, his tone conversational. "They are regrettably less than thorough, wolves are. They'd leave your head and bones behind."

I sort of want to laugh, and I sort of want to throw something at him. His hands fold under his head and he closes his eyes. Wishing I'd planned more thoroughly, I lie down on the patchy grass beneath me. "I wouldn't do that," he says, eyes still closed. "Not if you haven't checked for snake holes."

I freeze. "You're making that up," I hiss.

"Am I?" he asks with a small tick to his lips. "I guess we'll see."

I know he's just messing with me, but within five seconds I'm off the ground and marching over to his blanket. "Move over," I demand.

"Decided you'd like to sleep with me after all, then?" he asks without opening his eyes.

"No, I just figure that you're larger and slower, so the wolves will kill you first," I reply, lying down beside him.

Compared to the bare ground, the blanket feels surprisingly luxurious, and there's a breeze keeping the air almost pleasant when it was stifling in the house. It would be okay if I were here with pretty much anyone else.

I try to picture Mark in Henri's place but I can't. Mark and I would never find ourselves out in the middle of an orchard on a hot night with nothing but a blanket beneath us. His one and only camping experience took place on the golf course of his parents' country club, where a staff provided all their meals and even set up their tents. I'd laughed at the story and he had too, but I remember thinking I wanted that: a life where you could pick and choose your hardships. Where even the worst experiences were shaped into something soft and mild enough that you could survive them.

"I did this once," he says, "as a boy. My mother followed me, just as I've done to you."

"Was she as annoying about it as you are?"

"Worse," he says. "She brought an entire pie and a tub of cream and began to eat in front of me."

The idea of it makes me smile. I'd like to be a mother like that one day,

but can you be a good parent if you weren't raised by one? I'm not sure. "I think I'd have liked your mom."

"She'd have liked you as well," he replies. "She had terrible taste in people."

To my surprise, I laugh. "I don't suppose you've brought a pie?"

"Unfortunately, no," he says, rolling toward me and propping himself up on his forearm. "And I don't suppose you'd know how to make one."

I squint up at him. "No, but I think the lack of a stove might be the bigger issue."

"We could always go back to the house," he says. "There's still a bit of pie left there. There are also beds, and pillows. And fewer bloodthirsty animals."

I roll up to my forearm, mirroring his position. "Why?" I ask softly. "You wanted me gone, and it made sense that you did. I even agreed with you. That's why I'm here."

He's quiet for a moment. "I went overboard," he finally says. "I do worry about Marie-Therese, but she'll survive. I realized during dinner that half of what worries me is how sad she'll be when you leave, and it made me feel...guilty."

It's the longest Henri has ever spoken to me without being snide, without insults or sarcasm. It's a side of him I suspected existed, but never thought I'd get to see firsthand. "Guilty? Why?"

"Because it reminds me how much happier she might be in another life. If we could move to Paris, or even into town. If she could go to university."

"Are you sure those things aren't possible? I'm the same thing she is, yet I go to university and I live in a big city and it's never been an issue."

In the moonlight his face grows guarded. "One of the last things my mother ever asked of me was that I keep Marie-Therese hidden here, and safe. I'm incapable of saving my mother. No matter what Marie wants to believe, I know she's dead. But the very least I can do is obey her last wishes."

He blames himself for his inability to save her, and he also blames himself for limiting Marie-Therese. There is no good option for him, no way that he isn't at fault regardless of what he does. I understand that a little too well.

"Perhaps when you marry?" I ask softly. "Then there will be another female in the house for Marie?"

His frown deepens. "A wife would make Marie feel as if this is no longer

her place. I won't marry until she's found someone and left home."

Henri is obviously staying here on this farm, alone, to take care of Marie. And she is staying on the farm so her brother won't be alone. How are the two of them ever going to have their own lives if they're so worried about each other's?

"You could marry a terrible cook so Marie feels necessary?" I suggest, half-joking, before I realize it sounds as if I'm offering myself as a candidate. "One from your own time, that is."

He lifts a brow. "So you are not willing to stay here without your air cooling and the thing that cooks a potato in seven minutes?"

I grin. "I might be able to live without microwaves, but television is really cool. You'll have to take my word for it."

He flips on his back, and after a moment he breaks the silence, addressing his next quiet comment toward the sky. "You will never hear me say this again, and I will deny it if asked, but I would like it if you'd stay. Until you're better, that is."

I feel a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth, something soft and warm in my chest. Thank God none of it is visible to him. "Well, since it turns out I know less about wilderness life than I realized, I'll take you up on that. I suppose that means we should return to the house."

"I suppose." He shrugs, as if he's truly ambivalent about the idea. And maybe I am as well. There's absolutely nothing special or fancy about lying on a coarse woolen blanket outdoors on a summer night, but it hasn't been all bad.

We rise and walk silently back to the house. Once inside, I turn to head up the stairs but feel his hand at my forearm, pulling me toward the kitchen, where he grabs the pie off the counter and sets it on the table with two forks.

"Come on, little thief," he says. "I know you want some."

I slide across from him and grab a fork. "Perhaps you could come up with a nickname for me that *isn't* monster or thief?" I ask. "It doesn't even have to be something good. Just something that isn't uniformly negative."

He holds the fork to his lips. "So a neutral nickname then. *Mon petit fromage*, perhaps? Cheese isn't an offensive word, I assume?"

"You'll need to say it in English, whatever it is. Even the worst insults sound cute in French."

"What if I just call you *thief*, but in French? *Voleuse*. You see? Accurate, yet not too harsh."

I raise my chin. "It's not accurate at all."

"Says the woman with pockets full of ham," he replies, but he's grinning, and to my surprise, I laugh. Since I've arrived, for the most part, every word out of his mouth has tapped into this well of shame inside me. *Thief, liar, monster*. But tonight there is no rancor in his words. Instead I hear a hint of begrudging admiration: he likes me better for the fact that I stole the ham, that I tried to preserve myself while doing the right thing. "It was brave," he says softly, as if he can hear my thoughts. "Stupid, but brave."

It *was* a little brave, I realize. And stupid, yes. But brave first and foremost.

I hide a smile. For the first time in ages, I feel as if I've done something right.

I spend the morning planting Marie-Therese's pumpkin and watermelon seedlings in the sunny patch of ground to the side of the house.

When I come in at lunch time, Henri is already there. On the surface, nothing has changed between us. And yet I can feel the change before he even opens his mouth.

"Still here then, I see," he says.

"Apparently God has answered your prayers."

"The only thing I've prayed for of late is more wild game to shoot." He looks me over, as if perhaps *I* am the wild game.

I grin. "So we're back to death threats."

He shakes his head. "I've given up on that plan. My day is already too full. There'd be no time to dig you a grave."

"You could always burn me," I suggest.

"Like the witch that you are," he says with a smile, rubbing his chin contemplatively. "I like it."

"*Dieu*," says Marie. "I have no idea what to make of this conversation. And who ate all the pie?"



FOR THE FIRST time that night, my body is not weighted by sleep when dinner is over, which is when I discover how very dull their evenings are: Marie is in the other room, working on a lesson plan, and Henri is reading. I pick up a book, but not only is it in French, it's also about economics, which I wouldn't

be willing to read in any language.

“Why did you run away?” I ask Henri.

He looks up from his book. “Pardon?”

“Your mother sounds like she was nice,” I elaborate. “I’m just surprised you wanted to run away at all.”

“I wasn’t actually running away from her,” he says. “There was just something I wanted to see outside of Paris, and she refused to take me so I decided to go on my own.”

I tilt my head. “What did you want to see?”

“Corbusier had just completed this villa in Garche. He’d used the golden rectangle—this pattern in nature—in its design.” He smiles. “I thought I could just head toward the sunset, since Paris is due west, except it turns out the sun doesn’t take very long to set. I left late and it was dark by the time I got to the end of the orchard. I was too proud to actually return home, so my mother came to me.”

“I had no idea you were so interested in architecture. Did you ever consider studying it?”

He nods, something darker coming over his face. “I did study it,” he says. “School was not for me. I prefer to stay on the farm.”

I’m not sure what just happened, but I miss the warm, open version of him that was here a moment before. “I understand wanting to remain where you grew up,” I say softly. “Lots of people prefer small towns and places they know.”

He looks at me for a long moment. “But not you,” he says. “You’d hate it.”

My childhood has more bad memories than good, and I want to get as far from what I know as I can possibly get. “No,” I reply. “Not me.”

Marie enters the room, looking a little shocked to see me and Henri actually speaking, free of sarcasm or insults. She picks up her sewing and sits beside me on the couch.

“So this is what you do every night?” I ask with a sigh.

“We don’t have to do this,” she says, putting her sewing down. Her eyes widen. “I know! We could play hide and seek. Time traveling hide and seek!”

“No,” Henri intones. “Absolutely not.”

Marie pouts. “You just know you’d lose.”

He returns to his book. “Yes, or perhaps I just don’t care to repeatedly witness my own sister running around in the dark naked,” he replies.

"It must have been so fun, growing up with a sister," Marie says dreamily. There's a small pit in my stomach. Did I momentarily *forget*? "I was the only time traveler in my family, so it wasn't as fun as you might be imagining."

"But did you play tricks on them at least?" Marie asks, eyes alight. "Once I learned how, I used to jump in and hide things. My mother would be cooking and I'd practice sneaking in to move her stuff." She laughs. "Do you remember, Henri? She used to get so angry with me."

His mouth lifts at the corner. "As I recall it led her to blame you anytime anything went missing."

She sighs. "Well, yes. But it was fun at the start at least."

"My household was very different than yours. My mother doesn't look on time travel as much of a gift."

"But why?" asks Marie.

Because it's the reason my sister is dead, I could tell her. But even that isn't it entirely. My mother hated time travel long before Kit died. For as far back as I remember, it's been as if she could see this evil inside me, something I couldn't alter or eradicate. I'm not sure I'll ever understand it, but I keep hoping that if I can stop using the gift, she'll be able to care a little bit. "She believes it does more harm than good," I reply quietly.

"Nonsense," Marie exclaims. "You and I are like Rapunzel! We can spin straw into gold if we choose."

I glance at her and then around the room. Buckingham Palace this is not. She sees my look and frowns. "We have money. My mother, and now Henri, are just ridiculously concerned with spending it. They think it will draw attention. If it were up to me we'd be living in a mansion overlooking the Seine, and I'd have a servant for every finger and toe. But you could do that, once you're home."

I flush. "That's not how I want to live. Once I'm done here, I'll never travel again."

"That's right," says Henri, with a touch of acid to his voice. "The perfect Mark will meet your every need and time travel will become a thing of the past."

Mark. The mention of him cuts me sharp as a shard of glass. I haven't thought about him once all night, and I should have. He leaves for Nepal tomorrow and this would have been our final evening together, one I'd have loved though he'd probably spend the hours begging me to come with him,

begging me to give up my virginity, or both.

“You seem to enjoy making Mark sound like some mercenary choice on my part,” I snap, angry at Henri and also myself. “Why is that?”

“Because,” he replies, “you’ve never said anything to imply he’s not.”

My mouth opens to argue and I close it. I don’t have to justify anything to a farmer who’s going to live alone for the rest of his life. But thank God I’m nearly ready to leave.

It's another few days before I feel rested enough for the journey home, the hours enlivened by a constantly time-jumping Marie, who appears in the kitchen without warning, reminding this earlier version of Marie to warn a friend about standing too close to the stove, or to go check on Madame Brun's sick baby and persuade her to take him to the doctor. It had never occurred to me until now that it was even possible for time travel to be used for good, but it doesn't change how I feel about my own ability. I'm every bit as eager as I ever was to be rid of it.

I spend my final day with the Durands doing something no one would consider restful: laundry, which is an unbelievable pain in the ass in 1938. Marie and I are stuck indoors all day long, using a scrubbing board to clean every single shirt and dress and undergarment *individually*. The water is in heated copper tubs and the room is damp as a sauna the whole damn day.

"Jesus," I say, wiping my brow on my sleeve. "Don't washing machines exist yet?"

Marie shrugs, indifferent to the idea. "It's not so bad."

"Marie, we could wash all of this—*all of it*—in one hour without scrubbing a single thing. You can't tell me that doesn't sound like an improvement."

"I doubt it works as well," she replies.

"It works better."

The next time Henri comes to the pump, Marie walks to the front door and calls to him. "If washing machines have been invented," she tells him when he walks over to us, "I think I'd like one."

“Tell the little thief to keep her suggestions to herself,” he replies.

He steps inside just as I’m grabbing the tub of dirty water to dump it. His hands fold over mine as he takes it from me. “Please don’t tire yourself today. You’ll need all your reserves to make it back safely tomorrow.”

“A washing machine would allow everyone to save their energy,” I reply with a small smile.

His mouth curves upward. “I’ll consider it,” he says softly, taking the tub to the garden to dump it.

Marie watches him go and then turns to me. “You’re better at persuading him than I am. What other appliances should I demand before you leave?”

My mouth opens, and then closes. She truly has no idea how drastically her life will change in the coming years. If she did, she wouldn’t be asking for appliances, she’d be asking for a safe place to live.

If they will die in the war, I can’t stop that from happening. But what if they survive? What if they survive *badly*, painfully, because they weren’t prepared?

I never had anyone to teach me the rules of time traveling. But I think I’m about to break a very important one.



THOUGH I’M TOO nervous about tomorrow to have much of an appetite, Marie makes cassoulet for my final night here and I eat. Will I be able to hide somewhere in my own time before I pass out, naked and defenseless? If I’d known just how poorly I would fare over long distances, I doubt I’d ever have come here at all.

Henri appears worried too. “Do you think...” he begins, swallowing, “that your trip home will be easier?”

“Maybe,” I reply, unconvincingly. Returning to the point where I belong is definitely less work. It’s mindless, like the way you can drive all the way home with your mind on something else. But I sort of doubt it’s any easier physically, and that’s the real problem.

“You were somewhere private when you jumped?” Marie asks.

I nod. “I jumped from the woods. It should be fine.”

Henri flinches, imagining it, which makes me smile a little. When I first arrived, I thought he was nothing more than a very handsome jerk. And I still

think he's a handsome jerk, but he is also intelligent, funny, driven...and unexpectedly kind. All of these women Marie says he has to fight off when he goes to town—do they see all that in him? Or is he just a chiseled jaw and set of broad shoulders they can pin a couple of romantic daydreams on? Either way, he deserves to choose one and start a family. And with the war coming, I'm not sure he's going to get a chance.

"I'm going to tell you what happens," I say quietly. "Even though you said you didn't want to know." My heart thuds in my chest.

Henri and Marie-Therese look at each other. And they wait.

My hands twist on top of the table. "There's going to be another war with Germany. Not just them. Japan and Italy too."

Marie Therese stiffens, her hand sliding to the base of her throat. Her father died in the last war. Millions of French men died with him. What are the odds Henri will survive if it happens again?

"Hitler's troops come to Paris," I continue. "In 1940, I think. And there are airstrikes as well. Not just in Paris, but in the countryside. It doesn't last long. After a few weeks, France surrenders."

"Pah," says Henri. "Never. You're remembering wrong. We beat them in the great war. They wouldn't dare come after us again."

"They do, and they win. You don't have the troops and you don't have the weapons."

"We have the entire Maginot Line defending us," he argues.

I bite my lip, struggling to remember the little I know about France's fall to Germany at the start of World War II. I wish I'd studied it a bit more. "It doesn't hold. They're going to cut through the north instead. Somewhere mountainous. Avon? Ardent?"

"Ardennes," he says quietly, the truth finally sinking in as he realizes that I only know this because it's become an important part of the past. "What happens then?"

"France will be occupied by the Germans for the entire war. They take over your homes, steal your livestock." I could say so much more right now, but the truth of what will come is so gruesome it will seem impossible to them. Right now what matters is that they believe me and do what's necessary to survive. "What I'm saying is, if you're capable of leaving right now, you should. Go to the United States, or if you insist on staying in France, head south. I think that's where the French government went, anyway."

They both look stricken. This *hint* I've dropped was far more than either of them expected.

"We can't leave," says Marie. "What if our mother comes home? How will we know? How will she find us?"

I'd expected an argument from Henri, but not *her*. "Marie," I plead, "be reasonable. Do you really think this is what your mother would want? You stuck in this house with a bunch of German soldiers leering at you?"

She raises her chin. "What I know is that until I'm sure my mother isn't coming home, I'm not leaving this farm."

I look toward her brother, hoping he'll hear what I'm saying and persuade her. But his jaw is locked tight. He knows it's a lost cause.

"Then we need to prepare to fight," he says.

Our eyes hold and I'm possessed by a sudden urge to weep. He will die here. He was a small child during the last war, but he is exactly the sort who dies when his country is attacked, who will climb the roof of his barn when Nazis come to take his home and will care about nothing beyond killing as many as he can before they catch him. He has no sense of self-preservation.

"Not just fight. Hide food. Hide money. They are going to take everything."

He nods, a weight on his shoulders that wasn't there when the evening began. It hits me hard for the first time, just how much danger he's in. Many of those graves in Normandy belonged to American and British soldiers, but so many of them belong to the French as well, and I can't save him. Their future is already written, already in the past. It's not that Henri *might* die during World War II. It's that he might already be dead.

But Marie, at least, is likely to survive. And might avoid a great deal of suffering if she could just be reasoned with.

"What would persuade you to leave?" I ask her quietly, desperately.

"If I knew for certain about my mother," she replies. "Then I might consider it."

The gauntlet is thrown down. I refused to go back to see her mother when it was simply about satisfying her curiosity, but this is different. How can I possibly say no when it could change the course of the next decade for her?

My stomach begins to churn. It's time for me to return home and put my days of jumping behind me for good, but it looks like that isn't going to happen just yet.

"Then I'll go," I tell Marie. "I'll go talk to your mother and find out

where she went.”

"No," says Henri harshly. "You won't."

Marie turns her wide eyes from me to him. "How can you say that?" she demands. "Don't you want to know?"

He runs a hand through his thick hair and grips it hard. "What I want is for my mother to not realize, through a series of questions, that her death is imminent," he says. "And what is supposed to happen when you get your answer? You try to follow her, put yourself into the precise situation far more experienced travelers haven't survived? Wherever she's been, she's been there too long. She won't be able to travel forward to us."

"I just need to know where she went," Marie pleads. "I'm not saying I'll follow her."

"Amelie is *not* going," says Henri. "I forbid it."

Wrong words, Henri.

I smile at him. "I'd like to see you try to stop me."

Madame Durand disappeared just after Marie's birthday, so Marie has decided I should appear right around that point.

"My birthday was November 12th, and my mother had just given me the most beautiful coat—aubergine with fur cuffs. If I'm wearing that coat, it means you haven't gone back too far," she says. "Henri will be away at school, so if he's here, you've not gone far enough." She gives me a few other landmarks, but they are less reliable, based on the state of a weathervane, a broken door—so I hope I'm not going to be forced to use them.

She's so excited about my trip she can hardly contain herself, whereas I feel mostly dread. Traveling back by years is not hard—you just count, like jumping squares in hopscotch—but landing in a particular week requires more specificity, and that is not my strong suit.

Actually, I'm not sure I have a strong suit where my gift is concerned.

I time my departure fairly early in the morning, so that if I land in the right place I'll be there to see Marie leave for school in the coat. I walk to the barn with Marie and, to my surprise, Henri comes too.

He looks as if he might not have slept, and he definitely hasn't shaved. I imagine placing my palm over his rough jaw and telling him to go back to bed, imagine the feel of my lips brushing his skin as I say it, and then I blush, shocked at where my mind goes at the strangest times.

"I wish you wouldn't do this," he says gravely, shoulders slumped.

"I won't let her know what's coming," I whisper. "I swear it." My plan is to introduce myself as a friend of Marie's from the distant future, one with

whom Marie has discussed the circle of light, and explain that my aunt disappeared searching for it, and I'm hoping to track her last days.

He holds my gaze. "Be safe," he says. He actually looks like he means it.

I force a smile. "I guess that's better than a few weeks ago, when you were planning to shoot me."

I close my eyes, needing to shut out Henri's worried face and Marie's hopeful one in order to focus. In my head I look back, the way I might if I was just remembering the past. There are small hints when you are about to travel—a slight breeze over the skin, a weightlessness—I feel those hints now, and I allow them to come. The breeze is barely noticeable, and then it picks up as my body grows lighter and lighter. With the rush of wind and darkness closing in, I can feel time around me, almost like a rope I cling to. My body wants to fly forward, toward home, but instead I force myself backward, estimating the way I might if I were measuring a small distance in my yard. I go slowly, given the need for accuracy, counting by months rather than years, and when I reach what I believe is November of 1935 I take a deep breath and land on the other side of the barn, up to my knees in snow.

Marie never mentioned snow, and surely snow in early November would be memorable? I can't see the broken weathervane from here so I creep through the barn's back door, jerking to a stop when I see Henri in the distance, standing beside their car. He's younger, dressed in much finer clothes than I've seen him in. He looks like a handsome prince, one of those carefree rich boys who attend Eton and worry about nothing more than sports and girls and gambling. Except there is utter grief on his face.

I've arrived after their mother is gone, I realize. A part of me wants to continue to watch this version of him, so handsome and stricken and lost as he stares blankly at the fields, but it's dangerous, and my legs are growing numb. I close my eyes once more and move further back, this time creeping along—moving by inches, rather than feet.

When I land the snow is gone, but it is still chilly. The weathervane and the shed door are broken, because Henri is not home to fix them. This may not be the week she left, but it's probably as good as I'm going to get. I grab the horse blanket off the hook and huddle in the barn's corner, waiting for Marie to leave on her way to school. I'm tired. It's not the obliterating exhaustion of traveling from my own time, but it's worse than I should feel having gone back only a few years. I'm contemplating curling up in the hay for a minute when Marie finally appears, looking very young and happy,

wearing the new aubergine coat she told me about. I wait one more minute, and then I cross the yard and knock on the door, saying a silent prayer that Madame Durand likes strangers a little more than her son.

The woman who answers does not look old enough to be a mother of teenagers, but I see Henri and Marie in the slope of her cheekbones and the shape of her eyes, which widen at the sight of me.

"*Bonjour*," I begin in halting French. I know she speaks English, but it seems rude not to at least begin in her language. "*J'espère que vous pouvez m'aider.*" *I hope you can help me.*

Her eyes narrow just a touch. I see Henri's keen intellect in irises that are brown, rather than green. His guardedness too. "What do you need?" she asks in English. "You should not be here."

I take a deep breath. "Marie told me you might be able to help me find my aunt." At the sound of her daughter's name she softens just a bit, and then, with obvious reluctance, she opens the door and asks me in.

I don't realize how cold I am until I've followed her inside, but as the warmth reaches my frozen feet I begin shaking with it. She looks at me and hesitates again. "I shall get you some clothes. Go stand by the fire."

I sit on the hearth and she returns with a blanket, a sweater and a pair of trousers. "These belonged to my son when he was much younger. We do not need them back."

She goes to the kitchen while I pull on Henri's things, which drape over my frame, making me feel like a child. When she returns with a tea tray, she gestures to the seat across from her and pours a cup for me, more dutiful than willing. As a time traveler, she is unsettled by my presence, but with a daughter not much younger than I am now, she can't bring herself to let me freeze.

"So what is it you need?" she asks, frowning as she hands me the cup.

I find, when lying, that it works best if you stick as closely as possible to the truth, and that is what I do now. "My aunt disappeared searching for the circle of light. I told Marie, and she said you might be able to give me some information."

She lifts her head, fastening me with those questioning eyes, so like Henri's. "She would not have discussed this with just anyone," Madame Durand says. "In fact, I'm inclined to think she wouldn't discuss it with anyone at all, and that leads me to suspect that you are lying."

I take a nervous sip of my tea. "I'm not," I reply. "But I guess a liar

would say that too.”

“You must finish your tea and warm up,” she says, “before you go on to your next destination.” There’s a finality to the words—which means I’ve failed. Marie is going to be so disappointed and I realize that I am too. I did want to give her some closure, if nothing else.

I pick up the framed photo of a very young Henri and Marie that sits on the side table and smile at Henri's chubby little cheeks and mischievous eyes.

"That's Marie-Therese, who you claim to know, and my son, Henri, who is away at university now." She laughs almost to herself. "He would very much have enjoyed meeting *you*."

I seriously doubt that. Though I should probably just finish my tea and leave, I can't help my own curiosity. "Where is he in school?" I ask.

"Oxford," she replies.

I blink. *Oxford*? Even back in 1935, it must have been an honor to be accepted there. So why did he leave? "Does he...does he like it there?"

She smiles, her suspicion of me lost in a cloud of adoration for her son. "He is in love with it, with all of it. My son was never cut out for a small life here with us, I'm afraid. The top student in the village."

It's almost the opposite of what he said the other day. I think of his youthful obsession with architecture, the fact that he was willing to run away from home just to see some architectural principle at play. How exactly did I convince myself he was just too provincial for life in a big city? That he preferred being a farmer? Something changed, and I wonder what it was.

"This is him now," she says, reaching for another frame on the mantle and handing it to me. Henri grinning in rolled up shirt sleeves, a rugby ball tucked beneath his arm and other smiling boys around him. He looks so handsome and carefree, but the sepia of the photograph and the clothes remind me how long ago this all actually was. That Henri, in my time, is old. It's hardly a revelation but it hits me now with a sharpness it didn't before.

"You must miss him," I say faintly. Weirdly, it feels as if *I* miss him. As if I miss this carefree boy in the photo, so different from the man I just saw in 1938. I can't seem to take my eyes off the picture.

Her smile is fond and sad at once. "He has much greater dreams than a small farm, I'm afraid. His friends have already invited him to stay with them out in the Cotswolds next summer, and what can I say?" she asks with a shrug. "All you want as a parent is for your children to love their lives. He does, and if it means I see less of him it's a small price to pay."

It hits me at last: he didn't return because he missed the farm, because he preferred home. He came back because his mother disappeared, and there was no one to protect Marie.

I look at this beautiful, beaming woman across from me and wish to God she hadn't left. The odds that she's still surviving somewhere are so slim, but I find myself praying for it anyway. If we could save her, Henri could have his life back, and so could Marie.

She's watching me carefully again. "Do you *know* my son?" she asks softly.

We are getting into dangerous territory. Telling her I *know* Henri would indicate that he and Marie-Therese are probably in the same place—which runs counter to what she will expect, given that she just told me she doesn't think he'll return home. But I don't feel capable of telling an outright lie.

"Yes," I reply. "A little."

Her brow furrows. A single moment of uncertainty and worry. "He is well, where you're from?"

"Very."

She smiles and tips her head again. "And is he still very handsome?"

I'm willing to admit to myself that Henri is attractive, but saying it aloud is something else. I'm not sure why—I've told Mark a thousand times about my crush on Sean Connery. But that's different. It's not real. Which I suppose means my crush on Henri sort of...is.

"We should probably not speak too much of the future?" I suggest gently, and she nods in agreement, but worry creases her brow again.

She has guessed, or is at least wondering, if I'm describing a future in which she does not exist. She's asking about the son she adores and she wants to know that he's okay.

"He's the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on," I tell her quietly, looking once more at his photo before I set it on the table.

When I glance up at her something has changed in her face—as if I just gave her the critical clue in a mystery she could not make sense of until now. She refills my tea. "You were asking about the circle of light," she says. "What did you want to know?"

I blink in surprise. Two minutes ago she was politely asking me to leave, and just as suddenly she appears to have changed her mind. I lean forward, eager to get an answer before she rethinks the decision. "I'm trying to figure out why my aunt went after it and where she would have gone."

She tsks. "Why she went after it? Because it's what we all crave, of course. Surely your mother explained all this to you?"

"My mother can't time travel. And if she did know, she wouldn't tell me." I swirl my cup in my saucer. "She thinks time travel is a bit of a, um, curse."

She gives me a sad smile, one that reminds me of Marie. "That must have been very hard for you," she says. "People can be very ignorant sometimes. If she were capable of it, she'd feel differently."

I can't say I agree. What good has time travel ever brought into my life? Could a few trips backward to warn myself about pop quizzes and a paper I was going to botch possibly be worth all the terrible things it's been responsible for?

"I can do it, and it seems to have led to more bad than good for me."

She holds my gaze for a moment. "Without it, I'm not sure what we'd have done after the war. It's saved my life and my children's lives on more than one occasion. It's how I was able to visit my husband during the war," she adds with a small, wistful smile. "Which is the reason your friend Marie exists."

I grin. Madame Durand time traveled to have sex with her husband during the war. Henri seems like the type who would hate knowing that. It's going to be so tempting to let it slip.

"Anyway," she continues, "you know the prophecy, I'm sure."

I sip my tea. "Only the outlines."

"*In France there will be a hidden child born of the first family, conceived during a great war and born on the other side of it,*" she recites. "*In her our hope shall rest, for she will produce the circle of light, and within that circle, our past and present will be safe from those who would do us harm.*"

Marie got most of it right, but she left something out: *a product of the first families*. I'm not sure who the first families *are* exactly, and I don't dare draw her suspicion again by asking.

"None of us are certain what the circle of light is," she continues. "To be honest, I always thought it would be a *person*. But there were reports of something that sounded like it just after the war—a mysterious golden circle people saw just behind Sacré-Coeur."

My stomach sinks. The war ended in 1918. If that's where she went, twenty years have passed. She'd have gotten home by now if she were going to.

"A mysterious golden circle doesn't seem like much to go on," I reply.

“That could be anything.”

“It was all over the news. For weeks there was chaos in Paris—the city was flooded with visitors, entirely female. Clothing and food disappeared to such an extent that it became international news. And in Paris they began calling it *le plus beau mois*, the most beautiful month, because of the loveliness of the women. It's suspicious, do you not think?”

I sigh. It's very suspicious. An object straight out of a prophecy, and an influx of what very obviously sounds like time travelers coming to check it out. “And no one found it?”

“Not as far as we know,” she says, her mouth tipping up at the corners. The way Henri smiles sometimes when he's trying not to. “Not yet.”

Don't go, I want to plead. *Don't do this*. *How could it possibly be worth what you'll lose?* “What would make anyone believe they could find it when no one else has succeeded?”

She smiles again. “Haven't you ever heard the legend of King Arthur?” she asks. “Only the chosen one could remove the sword. Perhaps the circle of light is the same.”

There is something she is not telling me, but what is it? She clearly doesn't realize there's such a risk involved in going back for this thing, but she isn't a naïve woman. Why would she think she could do what no one else could? And why wait seventeen years if she thought she could?

“I'm surprised you didn't go try to find the circle at the time,” I suggest.

She looks out the window, seeing nothing. “I was a widow with a newborn and a toddler. I was in no position to go anywhere. And there'd have been no point—it's not as if *I* am the chosen one.”

It makes even less sense, then, why she'd be going to see it now. But I'm not here to understand it. I'm here to know where she'd have gone.

“So if I were to go looking for my aunt, where and when should I go?”

“Fall of 1918,” she says. “The circle is seen in the evening, in a small square called Parc de la Turlure. The war ended on November 11th, so the day after might be best.”

November 11th, the day before Marie's birthday. It seems significant somehow. I let the facts rattle around in my head like spinning coins, waiting for them to fall. The dates. Madame Durand's decision to go look for something she already knows isn't for her. And the prophecy: *in France, a hidden child*. Hidden. It's a word Henri has used multiple times, discussing Marie and their life on the farm.

Marie, who was conceived during the war, and born one day after it. For some reason, this has led Madame Durand to think Marie is the prophecy's hidden child. And Henri thinks so as well.



I LAND in the barn no more gracefully than usual. It was only a few years but —perhaps because I'm still not in my own time—I'm not sure I have the energy to put on my clothes. I grab the blanket and wrap it around me, taking one step toward the house before I change my mind.

"Just for a few minutes," I say aloud, curling up in the straw. My words are slurred as if I'm drunk. I hear the sound of footsteps approaching but I'm too tired to open my eyes.

"Amelie," Henri says, his voice husky, concerned even. I force a single eye open. He is crouched beside me, and indeed looks very worried.

"Just need sleep," I slur. "Five more minutes."

"Ridiculous girl," he says with a soft laugh. A moment later I feel myself scooped up in his arms and carried. I'm more than half asleep, but some distant part of my brain registers everything. His smell: hay and sweat and soap. His warmth, his size, the bulge of his bicep beneath my head. How gentle he is when he lays me down on the mattress.

I want to tell him what happened. I want to tell him how proud his mother was of him, how she glowed at the very mention of his name, but my brain is short on words. "You went to Oxford," is all I can manage. He's pulling the blanket over me, his face a mix of pleasure and sorrow.

"My mother was talking about me," he says, forcing a smile.

It's so unfair. She adored him and now she is gone. I can't understand why it causes this pain in my heart, why I ache so much more than I should for what he's lost.

I'm falling back into the darkness, drifting away from him, and I wish I could stay. "She loved you so much," I whisper.

I don't realize I'm crying until I feel his finger on my skin, brushing a tear away. "Yes, I know," he says with a quiet laugh. "It's only you who dislikes me."

I don't dislike you anymore, I think as I drift to sleep. I'm not sure I ever did.



WHEN I WAKE, hours later, he is there, sitting in the chair by the bed with a book in hand.

I yawn, stretching like a kitten and begin to rise. "I'd be careful about that," Henri says with a brow raised. "You're naked under that blanket."

Oh, right.

I clutch the quilt to my neck and sit up. My clothes have been laid out for me on a chair, with my underthings sitting atop them. I flush.

His eyes track mine and he laughs. "Very pretty."

"If you are expecting me to act embarrassed you'll have a long wait. I'm not the one who entered a sleeping girl's room and sat there like a creep."

There's an amused set to his mouth, but it fades quickly. "We need to speak...before you talk to Marie."

He rises and shuts the door behind him, sliding his chair next to my bed. "I need to know what my mother told you," he says quietly.

"She told me all about you at Oxford," I reply, watching his face. "You didn't leave because school wasn't for you. You weren't even planning to come home for the summer because you loved it there so much."

His eyes meet mine. "Someone needed to watch Marie. If she knew why I really came home she wouldn't stand for it."

"Except she's an adult now," I counter, "and could easily take care of herself, yet you stay."

He gives an ambivalent shrug. "I'm used to how things are. Until she's married, I'll remain here." He's hoping that's the end of it. He's about to be very disappointed.

"Even *you* aren't quite that selfless," I reply.

He grows still. "What are you talking about?"

I hold his eye. "You think Marie's the hidden child."

He runs a hand through his hair, and gives a particularly forced laugh. "That's crazy."

"Is it? Because she was conceived during the war and born after it, in France. You've referred several times to hiding Marie, and your mother said she thought the circle of light might be like Excalibur...something only a *chosen one* could access, but she knew she wasn't the chosen one. But you can pretend I'm wrong if you want. I'll just discuss the theory with Marie and see what she thinks."

His jaw grinds. And then he exhales slowly, unhappily. "Fine, yes. In the last letter my mother wrote me, she told me what she believed and asked that I make sure Marie stays hidden here."

I'm glad he's admitted I'm right, but the whole thing still doesn't make a lot of sense. Hiding Marie here because of a theory about who she could be is a little extreme, and Henri is usually level-headed. "But she might not even *be* the hidden child. I mean, lots of families probably conceived daughters during the war and gave birth to them afterward."

"Yes," he says, "but of the first four families to ever develop the gift, only one resides in France. Mine."

"How could you possibly know that?" I ask.

"Nothing is certain, of course, but on my mother's side it's all been pretty thoroughly documented. Since so few of you can carry the ability, it's pretty straightforward."

I sit with that a moment. If he's right, it pretty much has to be Marie, doesn't it? So maybe it's not extreme after all. "So when I first arrived here, when you were so awful to me..."

He looks away again. "I thought you'd found her. I meant to shoot you but I just couldn't."

"And here I was just thinking you were an aggressive jerk."

He gives me a lopsided smile. "I wouldn't rule that out either."

"I won't tell anyone about Marie when I go home," I say. "I assume that's why you were worried about me visiting your mother in the first place."

He shakes his head. "No, I already knew you wouldn't. My concern was that you'd tell Marie."

My eyes go wide. He can't expect to hide this from her? "But—"

He holds up a hand. "Yes, she deserves to know," he says, "but first I think she deserves to have a normal life. This circle of light, if she's this hidden child of the prophecy—we have no idea what it really is. How does she follow her heart with that kind of pressure? I want her to make the decisions she's going to make, free of it. That's what my mother wanted for her too."

I put myself in Marie's shoes. You'd think this circle of light she's supposed to produce is probably a child, but even if it isn't, the responsibility of it could freeze her in place. Because how will she ever know if her next decision is the one she's *supposed* to make. One bad choice—turning the wrong corner, choosing the wrong mate—could ruin it all.

"You'll need to tell her eventually," I reply.

"I will, but not yet. Let me give her a few more years. Let her fall in love, decide on the life she will have."

Meanwhile, he puts everything he wants from life on hold in order to protect his sister, to preserve her ability to choose a direction for herself.

"I won't tell her," I say. "But I'm going to give her the information she seeks...about where your mother was headed."

He stiffens, his head bent low as if he's waiting for a judge's sentence. "What year?"

He has stated before that he's certain she's dead, but I still wish I wasn't the one who had to confirm it. "She went back to 1918," I reply. "I'm sorry."

He nods, his head still bowed. "I already assumed she was dead," he says quietly.

I think of the moment they found Kit in the lake. The sight of the policeman carrying her tiny frame, her long hair a waterfall over his arm. Until that moment, it remained possible she was simply lost or playing a prank.

I lay my hand over his. "There's a difference between suspecting something and knowing it for sure."



HENRI LEAVES me to dress and then I slowly walk downstairs. My speed has less to do with exhaustion and more to do with dread. I wish I didn't have to be the person who destroys Marie's hope.

She smiles at me when I enter the room. "Back safe and sound," she says, so casual she could be mentioning almost anything—the weather outside, the amount of sugar in my tea—but her hands tremble as she places a plate in front of me. I glance up and in her face is everything: she remains a girl who longs for her mother. She is envious of the time I just had with her. And I envy her for having the mother she did, even for a short while. "I already know about your trip, to some extent," she says. "You weren't even back yet when I suddenly had this *memory* of my mother telling me about your visit, as if it was something I'd known but buried. Isn't that amazing?"

I frown. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to change your memories."

She shakes her head. "It was a good memory and I'm glad to have it."

Meeting you reassured her about the future."

I can't imagine how that's possible, but I'm glad if it's true. "She was lovely. I was able to enjoy her company despite the resemblance to Henri."

His mouth tips up at that but Marie seems like she hasn't even heard it.

She takes the seat across from me and clasps her hands on the table. She appears calm but her hands are twisted so tight they're nearly bloodless. "And she didn't have any clue what was to come?"

I shake my head no, although, to be honest, I'm uncertain. I saw something in her quiet appraisal of me that was both happy and sad at once. "No. And she didn't want to tell me anything, but once I got her talking about the two of you she opened up." Marie holds herself still, braced for bad news, and I can't put it off anymore. "There were reports of the circle of light being seen behind Sacré-Coeur, just after the war," I say gently. "I think that's where she went."

"But that—" She closes her eyes as the color bleeds from her face. "That was twenty years ago."

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I know you were hoping..."

She shakes her head, brushing tears from her face. "It's okay," she whispers.

Henri has been silent, brooding, throughout this conversation. "It's for the best that we know," he says. "At least we can finally put it behind us now."

Marie's head jerks up. "Put it behind us?" she exclaims. "She could still be out there somewhere, trapped. Maybe she has amnesia. There's nothing *behind* us."

Henri and I exchange a stunned glance. I don't think either of us imagined Marie still hanging on to her hope at this point. "Marie," says Henri, shoulders sagging under a sudden weight, "there's nothing to be done now. You have to realize that."

She turns to me. "My mother said you'd be important to us. Maybe you and I are supposed to go back to 1918 and find out what happened to her."

"Absolutely not," growls Henri, and though his edicts typically inspire a desire to rebel on my end, I hear the panic that rests just behind his words. "Our mother and Amelie's aunt both disappeared going there. The two of you risking your lives to find out what happened would be insanity. Our mother would kill you herself for even suggesting it were she here."

I agree with him. And while I still question if I've done enough for them, if I've done what my sister wanted me to do, there's no way *I* could be the

best person to travel to 1918 with her. I'm the worst time traveler I've ever heard of, while Marie can flit from place to place and time to time as easily as she breathes. If two people far more skilled than myself got trapped there, it'd be a death sentence for someone like me.

"I'm not saying we do what they did," Marie argues. "They had no idea it was dangerous, and we do. We can just travel there and watch from afar. See who's responsible."

"Marie," I plead, "I can't possibly be the person your mother claimed was coming to help. My abilities are ridiculously limited, and I'd be so exhausted by the journey you'd need to spend a week nursing me back to health in 1918 before we were on our way. If someone is meant to help you with this, it is not me."

She nods, looking down at the table. "Someone else will come then," she says, and then she looks at us both with a forced smile. "And for now I will simply enjoy your company. You will stay with us, yes? Another week or two, perhaps?"

I glance up at Henri. At his shoulders straining against the linen of his shirt, that lock of hair falling over his forehead. *I will miss him*, I realize. I adore Marie but it's him I'm truly sad to leave. And that is so, so wrong. None of this is real. He's an old man and I'm practically engaged.

I avert my eyes. "I'm sorry," I reply. "I really think it's time I went home."

"You aren't ready," says Marie-Therese. "You are swaying on your feet even now."

"I'll rest tomorrow and leave the day after. What's the worst that can happen?" I ask with a forced smile. "If I can't make it all the way home, you'll just host me 20 years into the future."

The idea makes my stomach swim unhappily. I picture the two of them still here, alone. No children. Their faces lined with years and hard labor. Or perhaps Marie-Therese will be gone and Henri will be here with a wife and children. I don't much like that image either.

Neither does Henri. When Marie goes into the other room, he looks at me, his face a little sad. "When you return home, I'll be an old man," he says. "I don't want you to see me that way."

I shake my head, the smallest possible movement. He will be lucky to make it to old age, to survive the war. I don't want to care. And I already do, more than I ever imagined possible. It makes me wish I'd never come here in

the first place.

"Doesn't it seem...unfair somehow?" I ask. "People who are older than us always seem different, almost a different species. As if they were always old and faded and cared about the wrong things. I wish there were a way for us all to see each other exactly as we would like to be seen. To freeze ourselves at a certain age and stay that way if we choose."

"There is a way," he says. "You already have it. All you time travelers do. My mother was 39 when she left but she could have passed for 18. She came to see me at school once. My mates all assumed she was my sister."

"What good is staying young if the people you love can't stay young with you?" I ask.

His gaze holds mine. For one moment, and then another. "You're right," he says quietly. "It would be nice if we could all be young at the same time."



WHEN I FALL ASLEEP, I dream about weddings. A wedding in my apartment, which I'm not prepared for, and guests are knocking on the door while my roommate and I frantically hide all the dirty clothes.

Then I dream I'm at Mark's parents' estate in Westport. From the window I can see the white chairs set out on the hill overlooking the river, the guests milling around already. Mark is there greeting everyone, his gold hair catching the light, million-dollar smile flashing. But my mother is out there too, walking toward him, and my stomach drops to my feet.

I need to find him, I think. I need to tell him the truth before she does.

I go downstairs, pushing my way through the crowd, and then find myself alone, standing just at the river's edge. *No, not alone*, because Kit is here too, flailing in the water a foot away. Her small hand latches around my ankle, the grip strong as an adult's, trying to pull me in. "Kit, stop," I beg. She only pulls harder, glancing behind me at Mark, who is coming toward us with eyes that are wide and shocked, staring at her muddy hand, at the hem of my dress turning black.

"He doesn't even know who you are," Kit says. She tugs again, harder. Both my feet sink into the mud and the water rises around my calves. My breath come in tiny, shallow bursts.

"Kit," I beg. "Please stop."

"Promise you'll help Marie."

I'm sinking now and Mark is just watching, as if he knows exactly what led us to this point, as if he'll never forgive me for it. *It was insane to think I could tell him the truth. He will never understand what I am, or what I did.*

"I'll help her," I cry. "Just please don't pull me in."

"I will drown you if you don't," she replies, in my mother's voice. "Mark and I will drown you."

I wake crouched in the corner of the room, weeping. I can still feel Kit's grip on my ankle. And I can still feel the promise I made in that dream like a brand on my skin. It's a promise I'm going to break, though, and I wonder exactly how she'll make me pay for that once I'm home.

I'd hoped my last full day here would be pleasant, but when I wake the rain is coming down in sheets. Henri drives Marie into town to teach her class and I'm stuck inside, alone and bored out of my mind.

I pace aimlessly, trying to ignore my anxiety about returning home, as well as my anxiety about Kit.

Last night's dream is never far from my mind. *Mark and I will drown you if you don't*. Was it just metaphorical—my own subconscious telling me I'm going to drown in guilt if I don't tell Mark the truth? Except telling him is not an option. He would never accept me. He would never accept what I've done. Whereas, I can live with being drowned by guilt. I've survived it ten years already.

I continue to pace, biting my nails and wandering closer and closer to Henri's room. I've never been inside it. Under normal circumstances, the very idea of snooping gives me hives—I can barely even stand to watch it on TV because I'm always waiting for the person to get caught.

But I need something to take my mind off the return home, and cars in 1938 are far too loud for anyone to sneak up on anyone. The truth is, I just want to see his room. Henri is like a song you want to hate yet find yourself humming, ears straining for even a hint of it. Even if I'd never admit to my curiosity openly, a part of me wants to know who he really is.

I push the door open, feeling a trifle guilty but mostly curious. It's fairly austere, as I'd have expected. He's not exactly the needlepoint-and-flower-arrangement kind of guy. Mostly what I notice are the books—lining the shelves, stacked on his nightstand, piled on the dresser.

Yesterday's clothes hang over the back of a chair. I'm not sure what compels me to do it, but I let my fingers run over his trousers. They are heavy, like military fatigues. His shirt lies just under the pants, a coarser material than I'm used to. It smells like him. Like lye soap and skin and something male I sort of like.

I picture him dressing in here alone, and undressing, climbing into that neatly-made bed at night. Who does he think of when he slides between those sheets? My heart gives a single, hard *thud* at the idea of it.

I run my hand over his pillow, then pick up the book on the top of the large stack near the bed. Baudelaire. *Poetry*. It's hard to imagine Henri reading anything but farming journals, but it reminds me that he wants things he'd never dare say aloud. A small and very wrong part of me wishes I could be the one to discover what they are.

I hear the rumble of a car on the road and quickly duck out of the room, closing the door behind me. It feels as if I'm leaving a mystery behind, one I'd very much like to solve.



MARIE RETURNS LATER in the day, but there is no sign of Henri, despite the weather, until he appears at dinnertime, pissed off and covered head to toe in dirt.

He bathes and changes clothes before dinner, but it does not seem to improve his mood. Marie is doing her best to make my last night here a cheerful one. Henri is making no such effort.

"I do wish you would stay," Marie says. "With one more week, I could definitely teach you how to cook. In spite of microwaves, wives should know these things."

Henri looks up from his plate. "Personally," he says, "if I were Mark I'd prefer a wife who could tell me the truth."

I roll my eyes. "Are we really back to this? I already told you I'm not jumping again once I get home. So it *will* be the truth."

He sits back, pushing his nearly-full plate away from him—something I've never seen him do before. "No, it won't, because that's not who you are," he replies, a dangerous light to his eyes. "You're giving up everything for a man who doesn't even love you."

His words shouldn't hurt, but they do. "What fascinating theories you concoct with absolutely no basis."

Henri's eyes raise to mine—darker now, like the forest at dusk. "You're deluding yourself if you think otherwise. How could he possibly love you? He doesn't even know you."

I once again see Kit's hand around my ankle. *He doesn't even know who you are*, she said.

I feel a sob swelling in my throat and I refuse, refuse, to cry in front of him. I just won't do it. I jump up from the table. "Excuse me," I say, but my voice cracks on the last word, ruining the effect entirely, and I bolt out the front door. The rain is coming down so hard I can barely see an inch past my face but I just need to get away from him. *I'll leave now*, I think. *I'll leave right this second and Henri will never know he made me cry.*

I run toward the barn, soaked to my skin, ignoring the sound of him shouting somewhere behind me.

But just as I arrive, I find myself airborne. Plummeting down, down, a fall that seems to occur in slow motion. Long enough for me to wonder if I will survive it.

I land feet first. Hear the snap of a bone and the sharp shot of pain above my foot. I crumple, flailing as I fall to the ground.

Above me somewhere a match is struck. A torrent of profanity, all in French. Then a ladder slides into the hole and Henri is scrambling down it faster than I ever dreamed someone could. He drops to the ground beside me, and his hand reaches out to hold my face. In the dim light his golden skin appears pale for the first time.

"Are you alright?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't want to cry but the pain makes it nearly impossible not to. "It's my ankle. I think it's broken."

"I'm so sorry," he whispers. "This is all my fault. I was being awful tonight and I don't know why. I didn't think you'd take it to heart like that."

I'm still not sure why I did. Perhaps because, as always, there was a grain of truth in the ugly things he said, and I was able to find it.

"Please don't cry," he begs. His thumb brushes a tear away, and he continues to hold my face, looking at me like I'm the only thing in the entire world that exists for him. For a moment, I wish that I was. I wish he would pull my face to his and kiss me, and I wish for it in a way I've never wished for it from Mark.

A spark of pain from my ankle jolts me back to the present, reminding me that what I'm thinking is insane. Henri, in my time, is a 72-year old man. And it's that, more than anything else, that has another sob swelling in my throat. "Why is there a hole here?" I ask.

"You told me we'd need to hide food and weapons," he says. "I never dreamed you'd run out here tonight like this."

"*Mon Dieu!*" cries Marie, standing at the edge of the hole. She speaks French so quickly I can't understand a word she's saying, but I know she's angry, and it seems entirely directed at Henri.

"*Je sais, je sais,*" he replies. *I know, I know.* Finally, he holds up a hand. "Enough, Marie. You can yell at me later. Right now I'd like to get her out of here so we can set the bone."

I shudder a little at that last bit...*set the bone* has me picturing Civil War hospitals, biting down on a rag as limbs are fixed, or amputated. Will it be any more advanced here, with these two French people my own age in charge of the repair? I doubt it.

"I'm going to carry you over my shoulder," he says. He lifts me as carefully as possible and begins to climb the ladder, holding me with one hand and the rungs with the other. He's trying not to jolt me but even the tiniest movement around my ankle is intolerable.

"Hurry, Henri," urges Marie Therese.

"She's heavier than she looks," he grunts, ruining what might have been a decent moment between us.

"Or maybe you're just not as strong as you look," I reply between gritted teeth.

"So you think I look strong," he says in response as he takes the final steps out of the hole. "Good to know."

He puts me down and I take weight on the good ankle, which doesn't feel all that good. Marie's arm comes around me.

"Poor Amelie," she whispers. "It looks like you may be stuck with our company a little longer than planned."

I almost laugh when I realize how simple the solution to this problem really is. "No," I say. "Wait. If you just time travel to earlier tonight, you can warn me it's going to happen and I won't run out of the house. Problem solved. I'd do it myself except I can't jump backward without landing on my ankle."

The answer is so obvious and so easy, but there's something strange going

on with her. I expect her to readily agree, but instead her eyes slide from me to her brother, and then rest there, her mind both on us and also somewhere very far away. "But then *I* might fall in the hole," she argues.

Henri exhales loudly. "For God's sake, Marie. You know how to land well. You've never injured yourself once. And if you're so worried, just go back a few days, before it was dug."

She folds her arms across her chest. "No."

My jaw and Henri's drop at the same time.

"You cannot be serious!" Henri yells. "She's in pain! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Marie's arms fold tighter. "I think perhaps it was fate. And I am not one to interfere with fate."

The pain in my ankle makes it hard to argue and harder still to think straight but I do my best. "Why could fate possibly require I stay in 1938 for *months* while my ankle heals?" I demand. "I'm not even supposed to be here." I suppose I could jump on my own but the idea of it makes me wince, when I can hardly bear standing right now on my *good* ankle. But I'll have to, if she can't be reasoned with.

Henri sees the look on my face and scoops me up again. I want to weep with relief.

Marie shrugs. "I guess we'll know once your ankle is better," she says simply. "I'll go call the doctor."

She walks ahead of us and Henri follows with me in his arms, careful to avoid jolting me. "I know you're planning to jump backward yourself if she refuses," he says. "Please don't do it."

I would laugh at how well he knows me if I wasn't in so much pain. "Why not?"

His eyes close. "Think about how poorly you land under the best of circumstances. I knew you were in the barn both times you arrived here because I heard you falling. If you jump back on your ankle, in addition to how unbearably painful it would be, you're likely to break something, and then what? Or what if you land in another place, or another time? You'll survive a broken ankle. But it could be so much worse."

I sigh. He makes a good point. Knowing me I'd wind up with a shattered spine in the wrong year. But if I spend two months here, two months will pass at home as well, and that can't happen. "I guess it just depends," I reply. "I have to be home by August, no matter what."

He carries me inside, placing me on his bed rather than my own. I'd probably find this all pretty exciting but the pain in my ankle is getting worse and Henri seems to sense it. He pushes both hands back through his hair, gritting his teeth.

"The doctor won't drive at night," he says, dropping beside me. "I'll go get him but it might take a while. Thirty minutes at most. But first, let me try to talk some sense into Marie."

He leaves the room and begins yelling at his sister in French, so quickly I can only grasp a few adjectives here and there—*cruel, insane, thoughtless, selfish*. The more urgent he grows, the more stubborn she becomes.

I know he's given up when I hear the door slam behind him.

She comes to my side then with a bottle and a spoon. "Open wide," she says. "I don't trust Doctor Nadeau to give you enough for the pain. He's quite stingy."

The fact that I'm going to *need* a lot of pain medication just angers me more. First, because it never works for me the way it's supposed to. Mostly, because I shouldn't have to take it at all. I move my head away from her. "Would you trust him more if he could fix my ankle with a simple blink of the eye and *refused*?"

She frowns. "I know what I'm doing does not make sense. I just have a feeling about these things sometimes, and I'm not often wrong. It's not so bad here with us, is it? You've been happy."

"You're right. It doesn't make sense." It's just so unlike her. Marie has been my ally for weeks, and now she's actually making *Henri* seem like the pleasant, reasonable member of the household. "This isn't my home," I cry. "And I need to get back. Mark is expecting me."

She shrugs. "Then you stay here eight weeks and return as if you've been gone two."

I groan. "You know that doesn't work." I've done it before, on a smaller scale—reclaiming weeks you've already spent feels *off*, like jet lag that never quite goes away. My teeth grind as I force myself to appear cooperative. "Look, if you want me to stay, I'll stay, but don't make me go for weeks and weeks in a cast. It's just cruel."

She hesitates, as if she's actually considering what I've said, and then shakes her head. "*Non*. We already know you don't mind lying. And sometimes fate is cruel." She pats my knee with a smile that is either sweet or psychotic, depending on the context. "Now, open wide or it will hurt a great

deal when your ankle is set."



A SHORT WHILE later the doctor arrives to pronounce what we already knew—I have one broken ankle, one sprained. He says it will likely take me six weeks to heal, and I once again consider the situation. I don't want to stay here that long, but I *could*. I'd still be out of here by late July, which is weeks before I'm due to meet Mark in Paris, and means I'm not jumping backward on a broken ankle and risking a broken spine in its place.

The doctor gives me pain medication but—true to form—it doesn't make a dent.

Henri stands in the doorway with his arms folded across his broad chest. He looks as if he could burn a hole through Marie, but she hardly seems to notice. She's right at my bedside, pretending my ankle is her greatest concern.

"I'm going to set the bone now," the doctor warns. "This will hurt, but only for a moment."

Marie grips my hand and I glare at her. "It doesn't *need* to hurt at all."

The doctor twists something and I gasp, meeting Henri's gaze over the doctor's head. He's flinching, brow damp with sweat though the room isn't especially warm. *This is harder on him than it is on me*, I realize, just before the doctor twists again and the world goes black.

When I wake, the sun is out and I'm in Henri's bed, wearing a nightgown. I look around the room for my dress before I realize it's probably in tatters from that fall.

Before I can begin worrying about poor Marie and the dress I've ruined, I remember that *poor Marie* has the power to go back and fix my ankle, yet refuses.

A single crutch is leaning against a wall. It's too tall for me but I grab it and hobble out of the room. Henri sits at the kitchen table. His eyes go wide before he averts them. "You need a robe," he says, rising. "You can borrow Marie's."

I look down. The nightgown covers twice as much skin as any school uniform I've ever owned. "You refused to give me clothes the day I arrived here and now you're acting like the sight of my neck and arms is too much for you."

"The day you arrived I was too worried to notice much," he says, walking away.

Which means he *is* noticing now? I hate the way something in my stomach goes soft and gooey at the idea of it.

He returns a moment later and hands me the robe, which I dutifully wrap around myself. "Where's Marie?"

"Teaching. Or perhaps just hiding in town to avoid my wrath." He glances at the crutch I've leaned against the wall. "I'll have better ones for you by the end of the day. And we'll switch rooms since you won't be able to manage the stairs for a while. I'll clear my things out once the crutches are made."

I shake my head. "You don't need to do that."

He laughs, but there's more misery than joy in the sound. "Of course I do. You're stuck here now for weeks because of my sister. And also because of me. I goaded you into what happened last night."

I give him a half-smile. "You realize you're stuck with me for weeks now, right? That seems like punishment enough."

"Yes, I suppose it's a punishment for us both," he replies. He's smiling but just behind that smile I see something else: he's worried. And I wish I knew why.



THAT AFTERNOON, Marie comes home both wary and unapologetic. She's brought me chocolate.

"You don't think you can buy me off with a candy bar, do you?" I demand. "I live near the world's largest chocolate manufacturer, but instead I'm here and I can't even *move*."

She shrugs and pushes the chocolate off to the side. "Henri is making you crutches. They're nearly done."

"Henri should not *have* to make me crutches!" I climb to my feet, as if I plan to march off somewhere, except I can't even stand without clinging to the table. "Jesus, Marie. Why are you doing this?"

"I'm sorry," she says airily. "Some things don't make sense until after they're done."

I slap a hand to my forehead. All this time, Marie has been so mature, so logical. It's as if she developed multiple personality disorder last night, and the personality that emerged is a freaking sociopath. All, undoubtedly, because she thinks if I remain here she'll convince me to go with her to 1918. "This is never going to make sense. I need to get home. I told my mother I wasn't going to jump again. If you keep me here, she'll know when she sees me at the end of the summer. Please, *please* don't do this."

She looks at me with sympathy. "I'm sorry," she says. "Someday she'll need you to use your gift, and when that day arrives, she'll see her mistake."

I sigh heavily. She clearly doesn't understand my mother, a woman who hasn't viewed time travel as a gift for any of my twenty-one years and is therefore unlikely to so in the future.

"If I'm not there soon, Mark is going to worry."

"You can fix that."

I huff out a breath in anger. "I don't want to *have* to fix things. Don't you see how complicated you're making all this?"

She smiles. "Yes, and I apologize for that. Now what shall we make for dinner?"

"We won't be making anything," I reply. "Not until you fix my ankle."

She gives a one-shouldered shrug. "It's no matter. You weren't likely to be much help. I picked up some books in English for you at the library, by the way. They're in my bag."

I can barely even reach her bag. I have to hobble toward it, clutching furniture to get there. I'm not even trying to make her feel guilty; between the one ankle in a cast and the other sprained, every movement is awkward at best and agonizing at worst.

In the bag is *Mansfield Park*, my least favorite Jane Austen, and *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

"*Tender is the Night* is quite new," says Marie, flouring the butcher block like she's Betty Crocker. "I couldn't believe they had the English translation in our library."

It's not new, I think, annoyed. Nor is it a *translation*. And if I didn't get the hype about *The Great Gatsby*, I seriously doubt I'll love Fitzgerald's *least* popular novel.

I push myself out toward the stone porch, collapsing into the same chair I sat in a week ago, having tea. If I was a better person I'd appreciate the fact that I'm here in France with good weather and a gorgeous vineyard for a view. Instead I let my eyes shut, wishing I was anywhere else, wishing my ankles didn't hurt and the weather was mild. I find myself thinking of the night I laid on a blanket with Henri in the orchard—a pleasant breeze, moonlight flickering through the branches overhead, him with that ever-present smirk on his face. His response when I said I wasn't sleeping with him out there: *Well, that definitely removes some of the fun from the evening.*

I'm smiling, remembering it, when my body lightens, and a breeze rustles around me. My eyes fly open suddenly to find that my arms are translucent. Half here and half gone. I force myself back into the terrible present, my heart beating hard. If I hadn't stopped myself, I'd have landed somewhere on my bad ankles, the cast left behind with my clothes. So it's absolutely critical that it not happen again, but what's shocking is that it happened at all. I

haven't *accidentally* time traveled since I was young—twelve or thirteen, perhaps—and I can't believe it nearly happened now.

And happened when I was thinking about *Henri*, of all things.



TENDER IS the Night deserves to be Fitzgerald's least popular novel. If I thought all Americans were as annoying as his characters, I'd avoid the country entirely. I'm forcing myself to read it when Henri comes out to the porch with the crutches in one hand and two small glasses of wine in the other, one of which he hands to me.

"My sister said you were churlish this afternoon and need loosening up."

I groan, loudly. Churlish? *Really*? "Did you suggest she might be churlish too if she had a life-threatening injury I refused to fix?"

His mouth turns up at one corner. "Life-threatening? Is that what we're calling a broken ankle now?"

"Maybe it's not *my* life that's in peril," I reply, glancing inside at Marie while I take a sip off the glass he's handed me. I don't even like wine, but I need something to take the edge off my anger. "I don't know what I'm going to do if my ankle isn't healed when it's supposed to be."

He takes the seat across from mine. "What precisely do you need to rush home for?"

I sigh. I'm sure the truth will only confirm what he already thinks about me—that I'm a liar, a fraud. Whatever. "My pretend internship is ending on August 12th—I said it to buy myself extra time here just in case—Mark is supposed to be meeting me in Paris right after that and I might not even be there."

He takes a sip of his wine. "I still don't understand why you felt you had to lie to such an extreme," he says. "Especially to your mother. She already doesn't approve of you, so why keep trying?"

I'm not sure if I'm frustrated by his lack of understanding, or if I just don't like that there's some truth to what he's saying. "Because I still have a chance of fixing this," I reply. "I'm trying not to use my gift, and once I stop...she'll know. She'll be able to tell. And then maybe..." I don't complete the sentence because it's too goddamn pathetic to be said aloud. "I don't know."

“Your parents won’t be suspicious when you go through the entire summer without calling them?”

I flush. That I can’t make my parents care still feels like a personal failing, no matter what I tell myself. “My father left when I was twelve and I never heard from him again,” I reply stiffly. He contacted Steven, but never me. More proof that I was flawed and that what I did was unforgivable. “And my mother...well, she’d prefer not to hear from me. When I call, she just tries to get off the phone anyway.”

He’s watching me again, and before he’s even opened his mouth, I know I’ll regret having told him so much. It’s more than I’ve ever said to Mark, and I have no idea why I suddenly decided to be so regrettably *open* about my family.

“Is she really worth all this, then?” he asks. “All the lies, just trying to earn her respect? She doesn’t sound like much of a mother.”

But she’s all I have, I want to say. It’s not true, of course. I have Mark. I have my brother. But that’s different. Mark has no idea what I am, and Steven only has the vaguest understanding of it. It’s my mother who knows, who was raised among time travelers and truly realizes how much harm it can do. Persuading her that I’m not evil might allow me to persuade myself.

“Her respect is the only thing I’ve ever wanted.”

His nod is small and in his eyes I see what looks an awful lot like pity. I wanted him to agree with me and it scares me that he doesn’t. Maybe there’s absolutely nothing I can do to win her over—no job, degree or spouse capable of fixing it. Perhaps even giving up my ability won’t be enough, because what I want even more than her respect is her love, and there might be something inside me that just makes that impossible.

He runs a hand through his hair and releases a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t how you would choose to spend a summer.”

For the first time in hours, I manage to feel bad for someone other than myself. I know he feels guilty about what happened and I’m not going to make him feel worse. “It’s not that,” I reply. “I’m just going crazy, sitting here like this all day. But the crutches will help. Thank you for those.”

He’s lost in thought for a moment and then glances at me. “Do you ride?”
“Horses?”

He laughs a little. Of course he means horses. “Yes. I could take you riding. You just have to promise you can keep your seat.”

“I grew up on a farm. I can keep my seat.”

"You said you could milk a cow too, as I recall," he counters. "But tomorrow then, we will ride, though only *after* Marie-Therese is gone. I wouldn't want to give her the impression that you're enjoying this."

We both glance inside at her, still humming and working on her pie. I never thought I'd see the day when Henri and I were united against something. And I definitely never thought that thing would be Marie.

The next morning after Marie has left for the school, Henri returns to the house, handing me a small pair of trousers and a shirt he's dug out of the trunks in the attic. Once I've struggled to pull the pants over the cast, I hobble to the door where Fleur, the calmer of their two horses, awaits.

I lean the crutches against the door as he comes to lift me into the saddle. "Are you sure you're up to this?" I ask. "As I recall, you said I was heavier than I looked."

"And as I recall," he says, lifting me high in the air, seemingly without effort, "you said you thought I was strong."

His hands, firm and gentle at once, stay in place until he's certain I'm stable, though his proximity makes me feel far more unstable than the weight of the cast. I swear I can feel the press of his fingers through my clothes, and it makes my breath come short. "I'm okay," I say.

He releases me and jumps onto Napoleon—so named, he says, because as a foal he was "little but mean"—and heads toward the vineyard, trusting me to follow.

The vines are lush and green, dotted with tiny purple clusters. I've never been in a vineyard before, and it's beautiful, yet my eyes want to lock on Henri instead—on his broad shoulders ahead of me, or on the nape of his neck, where the hair is shaved close and would feel rough to the touch. Like his jaw might, this late in the day.

I picture pressing my mouth there for a moment and flush when I catch my own thoughts. I've been away from Mark too long, is all. I force my eyes

back to the vines.

“So the wine we’ve been drinking,” I say, “did you make that?”

He shakes his head. “Mostly, no. We have a few Beaujolais vines here, but we’re too far north for them to grow well. On the nights when we’ve had a good wine, I can assure you it wasn’t ours.”

I shrug. “I don’t really like wine anyway, so I can’t tell the difference.”

He glances at me with a furrowed brow. “You don’t *like* it?” he asks, as if he thinks he misheard me.

I like daquiris and margaritas, which are essentially slushies for adults, and that’s about it. Mark teases me about my unsophisticated palate, but I hadn’t even turned twenty-one until the month before I left, so it’s not as if I’ve had a lot of exposure to anything but beer at this point in my life.

“I’m starting to get used to it.” I look around. “So what are these if they’re not the Beaujolais?”

“Champagne. You’re in the champagne region of France. Didn’t you know?”

I guess that explains all the champagne bottle-souvenirs in town when I arrived. I give him a rueful smile. “I didn’t read up much before I came. The only thing I wanted to know was when the Germans would arrive.”

He looks at his vines and his smile fades. “As much as I wanted to study architecture, I love all of this too. It would be hard to watch the Germans destroy it.”

I follow his gaze, looking out over the acres of green in the bright sun. “The Germans like champagne too, so I can’t see why they’d ruin it. But when they come...” I swallow. “I hope you don’t plan to try to fight them for it.”

He laughs. “You’re not serious? You really think I’m just going to hand my home over to them?”

If I’d given it any thought before I spoke, I probably wouldn’t have suggested it. That’s not who he is. “No, but you should. You know why Paris falls so quickly once it all begins? Because they’re completely outmanned, and they’ve got to choose between total destruction or possibly surviving the war and preserving the city. There is absolutely no chance they can prevail, and there’s no chance you can either. Your single gun won’t last you an hour against a couple dozen well-armed Nazis.”

“That’s not the point,” he mutters. “It’s the principle of the matter.”

“Your *principle* will get you killed.”

He glances at me with a small smile. "A horseback ride through a French vineyard and all you can do is scold. What a lucky man Mark is."

I roll my eyes. He doesn't want to discuss it and there's no point anyway. He's too stubborn to listen to anyone but himself. I suddenly notice we're heading toward the woods. "Where are we going?"

"There's a lake at the border of the Bousonne Wood you might like."

I stiffen. "That's okay."

He turns to look at me. "You're getting tired?"

"No," I reply. "I just don't like lakes."

He looks at me for a moment, waiting, perhaps, for me to explain. Saying you don't like lakes is like saying you don't like good food, or comfort. Who doesn't like lakes? When I say nothing, he just shrugs. "We can ride to the eastern meadow. It's a sea of wildflowers at the moment."

We turn and head north, picking our way through the vineyard and then the woods, until the trees clear and a hill stretches in front of us. "Just to the top," he says, hovering close to me as we proceed.

When we finally ascend the hill, my breath releases in one long, contented sigh. It's not merely a field of flowers. It's a field of lilies, so densely packed it's hard to believe they're real.

He climbs down and before I can stop him, he's grabbed me by the waist and set me gently on the ground. "The horses will graze and we will rest."

I have far less faith than he does in the animals' obedient nature. "What happens if they run off?" I ask.

"Then I will walk home and leave you for dead, of course."

I laugh. "It was probably your plan all along."

He nods, rubbing his chin contemplatively. "I do wish I'd thought of it sooner."

He helps me lower myself into the grass and I lie back, letting my face turn toward the sun. We sit in silence for a few minutes, and when I open my eyes, he's watching me with a hint of a smile.

"What?" I ask.

"I'm wondering if you've realized yet what happened the day before yesterday?"

"That I broke my ankle? No, I didn't realize it at all. No wonder it's so painful and encased in plaster."

He laughs. "Always so sharp-tongued. I was referring to the fact that you asked—no *begged*—my sister to use a gift you yourself claim to neither need

nor want."

"I certainly realize she *refused*."

"That's not the point. The point is that some part of you desperately wanted this thing you claim you hate. What makes you think you won't need it again, just as badly?"

"I won't. Mark's family is very well connected. There's nothing they can't access."

"They can heal a broken bone with the blink of an eye, then?" he asks.
"Money can accomplish that in your time?"

He has a point, of course, but I refuse to consider it. "No, it can't. But a bit of suffering is part of life, and using time travel constantly—it becomes a habit, an addiction, to avoid things you'll live through just fine. Maybe you'll even grow from them."

"But you didn't want to grow from the experience of this broken ankle, it would seem."

I've come around to Henri, but his constant harping on this topic is getting old. I frown at him. "This is different. It's a special situation. I'm not in my own time. I'm ready to be a different person, and I can't do that until this is all behind me."

He's silent for a moment while the lilies rustle in the fragrant breeze. "I don't think you need to be a different person," he finally says.

"What about my unladylike behavior?"

He grins at that. "True. I'll amend what I said. You don't need to be an *entirely* different person."



BY THE END of my first week in a cast, I've finally realized my sulking does not seem to be changing Marie's mind in the least.

I take over baking the bread and help her make preserves of the strawberries she's picked for days and days. It's hard to do much else, however. I can milk the cows, but I can't carry the milk. I try to feed the chickens, but I'm not coordinated enough to do it while holding onto the crutches. And no matter how hard I try, I can't stop feeling resentful—of her freedom, of her mobility, not at all helped by the fact that she's now busier than ever. Between her language classes and all the things she does for the

church, she's never home. I'd suspect she was doing this hoping a romance might blossom between Henri and myself, except it's just too absurd. Surely she must realize that even if I didn't have someone waiting at home, I could never give up my own time to stay here.

Though I'd be lying if I said I never thought of Henri that way. We're spending so much time together it would be hard *not* to. He's been coming in from the fields early on the days when Marie is gone and we spend those afternoons together on the porch, reading or playing chess. I reread *Mansfield Park*, which isn't as bad as I remember, and finish *Tender is the Night* out of desperation. I find a new stack of books on the porch a few days later, better books. Some that I've read—*Sense and Sensibility*, *Gone with the Wind*—and some that I haven't, such as *A Handful of Dust*, *Decline and Fall*, and *Howard's End*.

It's not a bad way to spend a summer, yet I can't get past being annoyed that I'm confined while Marie's not. When I enter the kitchen the morning after I've found the new books, she is packing her bags to leave. The rain is going to start at any moment, yet I still envy her ability to go at all, to control her life in small ways I cannot. I should be home right now, doing the only thing I can to win my mother over, and every minute I stay here puts that off, which is aggravating because I've already waited a lifetime. How could Marie possibly think this situation will persuade me to do *anything* for her?

I have to force myself to be polite. "Thank you for the new books."

Her brow furrows. "I didn't get you any books. I haven't been back to the library this week."

I bite my lip. It's strange that Henri would have done it. And that he'd have chosen so well.

"I'll be out until after dinner," she continues. "You and Henri won't kill each other while I'm gone, will you?"

The animosity between Henri and me has grown into an odd thing. He still routinely acts like it's an unpleasant surprise to find that I'm here, and I still ask if he's thinking of killing me. But almost anything he says to me, no matter how terrible, just makes me laugh.

"I'm small and I don't know how to handle a gun. Also, you might not be aware of this, but I have a broken ankle. So I think your brother is safe. No promises on his end, however."

A small smile turns her full lips up at the corners. "I suspect you're safe. And you've forgotten you do have a weapon or two."

I glance down. "Are you talking about my breasts?"

She explodes in laughter. "*Dieu, Amelie*. I meant your cooking, but if you think your breasts can kill also, by all means use those if necessary."



HENRI DRIVES HER INTO TOWN, and I find myself at loose ends. On crutches, I'm mostly too inept to help with much. I could cook something, but my best-case scenario is wasting a lot of their food and my worst case is burning their home to the ground.

I'm tired of reading. I'm tired of my own company. I while away the time by swinging my body around the living room on the crutches, trying to see how fast I can cross the room. It's a stupid and potentially dangerous game, but I don't know what to do with myself today.

When Henri walks in, he is drenched to the skin but stops, looking over at me with suspicion. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"Absolutely nothing," I reply. "Perhaps you should entertain me."

He laughs, brushing wet hair off his forehead. "I have a fence to mend."

The rain is coming down so hard I doubt he could even see a foot in front of his face. Why does he never give himself a day off? "You can't mend a fence in this weather. It's pouring rain. You'll get sick."

"Better a cool rain than a hundred degrees and sun," he says.

"Come on," I wheedle. "Stay in. It'll be pleasant on the porch."

He gives me a half-smile. It's enough to light up his whole face. "So you want me to entertain you? Shall I sing? Dance?"

"*Can* you sing or dance?"

"*Non*," he says, mouth still turned up.

"And you're not funny, and you don't say all that much, which really makes you a poor choice on my part, but I don't see a lot of options."

He leans back against the wall with his arms folded over his chest. "So I'm to struggle to entertain you while you insult me today. This sounds better and better."

"I won't insult you," I promise, holding up my hand as if I'm taking an oath. "Not more than usual, anyway. And I'll even...I'll make you hot chocolate."

"You know how to make hot chocolate?"

I shrug. "Sort of."

"Fine," he says. "Let's see you *sort of* make hot chocolate. Then, perhaps, I'll stay."

"Go get on dry clothes, first," I order.

A single brow raises. "You're worrying about me now?"

I flush. Why *do* I care that he's in wet clothes? "No," I reply. "I just don't want you dripping all over the floor."

He goes up to his room to change and I stand at the counter, struggling to remember the recipe for cocoa. It's always been a skill of mine, this bizarre ability to recall things when I need to—I just have to focus on the memory and it's almost like I'm there again, seeing what I need to see. I close my eyes and try to picture the back of the Hershey's cocoa box. It's been ages since I've made it from scratch. Probably not since Kit died.

My eyes are squeezed shut, but I hear him come back into the room. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"Remembering the recipe for cocoa," I reply, pressing an index finger against my lips so he won't ruin my concentration.

I see myself as a child, in the kitchen with Kit after a day of sledding. Her cheeks are pink and her hair is soaked through. *How long will it take?* she asks, jumping in place. She always had so much energy, a constant blur of movement from the moment she woke until she collapsed into sleep. I'd forgotten that about her, and remembering hurts. I guess it's why I try so hard to avoid thinking about her.

I pick up the Hershey's container and begin to read from the back of the box.

"I need sugar," I say to Henri, my eyes still closed. "Half a cup. Four cups of milk. A teaspoon of vanilla—the recipe calls for slightly less but we like it with more. A third cup hot water, a dash of salt, and a quarter cup of cocoa."

I take one last look at Kit. *I'm sorry, I think. God I'm so sorry. If one of us had to die, it should have been me. Not a single member of the family would say otherwise.*

And then I open my eyes and find Henri standing across the counter, staring at me. His eyes are all pupil. "What was that?"

"I *told* you I was going to make cocoa. I was just remembering the recipe."

He shakes his head, slowly. "*Non*. You didn't just *remember*. You seemed to flicker in and out like a candle. You were...shimmering. I saw it."

My breath stops for a moment, and then releases. It's not possible that I time traveled. I'm not even good at being in *one* place at a time for God's sake and being in *two* places at once...it's just not a thing my kind does. "You were seeing things."

"Then how did you recall that recipe verbatim?" he challenges.

"I just have a good memory."

He tilts his head. "Tell me again how much cocoa you need then."

I blink, searching my head for the answer. When I was reading the ingredients, it's as if I was channeling it all. "I told *you*. You were supposed to remember."

He gazes at me, still with that assessing look, like I just escaped from a locked cage wearing a straitjacket, and he wants to know how I did the trick. "I do. A quarter cup. My point is that you *don't*. So don't try to tell me this was your fabulous memory at work."

I sigh loudly. "I didn't time travel, if that's what you're trying to say. I was standing right here the entire time."

He tips his head, as if he's conceding the point. But it's clear as day in his face that he doesn't quite believe me.



FIFTEEN MINUTES later we are seated on the porch with our cocoa. While he sets up the chess board, I gaze out over the fields, surprised by how oddly content I am right now. I love the colors of the farm on a sunny day, but I think I almost like this more: against the charcoal gray of the sky, all the colors seem deeper. The grass and vines a lush green, the air pleasantly balmy rather than sweltering.

We begin to play. Slowly, carefully. Even a week ago, I wouldn't have done this with him solely because I couldn't stand to see him win. Now, oddly enough, I'm not sure I'd even mind. Perhaps I'm giving him too much credit, but he's surprisingly easy to be around at the times when you'd expect him to be unbearable.

As the game carves its way through the afternoon, we put the mugs of cocoa aside and replace them with glasses of wine, which I'm starting to come around to, although perhaps I merely like that it's accompanied today by salty olives and fresh bread.

We finish the bottle and he opens another. "You must have a hollow leg," he says. "Marie-Therese would be falling out of her chair right now."

"I suppose that's unladylike, according to you?"

He grins. "Not at all. Though it would be unfortunate if I were *trying* to get you drunk."

Butterflies flutter in my stomach at the mere suggestion of it. "Is that your strategy on dates?"

He gives me another half-grin. "I have a few others I try first."

I'll just bet he does. He probably doesn't even need to get a girl drunk. He can just smile at her the way he's smiling at me right now and she'd pull her dress up to her waist.

"Do you and Mark do this?" he asks.

For a second I think he's asking about sex. I blink. "What? Oh, chess? No, we..." The truth is that I'm not sure what we do. We haven't lived in the same place since the summer we met and our time together has always been in short bursts of togetherness, jam-packed.

When we see each other, it's always a reunion, and therefore a celebration...a slightly exhausting one. I sleep for a full day when I come home from a trip with him. I've been looking forward to the time when we could have a day like this, yet I'm hard pressed to imagine it. Mark never wants to stop. The idea of staying home on a rainy day might drive him insane.

For so long, he's represented how I will grow, how I will become the person my mother wants me to be, once we're together. But now it occurs to me for the first time that I might be giving something up in exchange.

As the weekend approaches, Marie attempts to demand that I attend church.

“She can’t,” Henri argues. “She sticks out like a sore thumb.” *Trust Henri to find the most unflattering light to put me in.* “Just let her stay home.”

“We had an excuse last week. She’d just broken her ankle,” says Marie. “We no longer have one.”

I swing forward on the crutches—I’ve gotten pretty adept at getting around on them as long as there is level ground. “I’m on Henri’s side for once,” I tell her. “I have no desire to go to church.”

Marie raises an eyebrow. “What about heaven?” she counters. “Do you desire to go there, or would you prefer somewhere a little warmer?”

I ignore her. “Can’t you just tell everyone I went to Paris for the day? Surely when people visit here, they sometimes go elsewhere?” God knows I’d be on the first train to Paris right now myself, if it were a possibility.

“I will very reluctantly stay home with her,” Henri says with a gallant bow. “Otherwise they’ll wonder how she got there.”

Marie shakes her head vehemently. “And how do we explain it if someone stops by, or sees the car here?”

“We could actually go?” I venture. “To Paris, I mean. I’m dying to see it before the war.”

Henri shakes his head. “You’re on crutches and I can’t be responsible for two of you in Paris. You’ll attract too much attention.”

“I can’t go anyway,” says Marie. “I’m helping Father Edouard set up the

small social after mass. But the two of you feel free, since you're so ambivalent about where you'll spend the afterlife."

Ignoring this, I turn to Henri. "I've gotten so much better on the crutches," I say eagerly. "I think I'll be fine."

I fully expected him to object and am delighted when he shrugs in agreement instead. "A day in Paris always beats a morning at church. Yes, little thief. Even one spent with you."



THE NEXT MORNING Marie wakes me early, giddy with excitement on my behalf. She makes me wear a different dress – baby blue serge, with a v-neck and collar. "I took up the hem a bit last night after you went to sleep," she says. She forces me to wear hose and garters with it, acting like going into Paris without hose would be the equivalent of going there nude, and also insists I put my hair up.

Because I refuse to cut it, which is the style here, she uses curling tongs to roll it under at the nape of my neck so it *looks* as if I have shoulder length hair, along with a few waves on top. When she's done and she's got me in the dress, she claps her hands together. "You look like a movie star," she says with a dreamy sigh. "Henri, look at our Amelie," she says, turning me to face him. "Does she not look like Carole Lombard?"

I find I am waiting for his response more anxiously than I should. How could his opinion possibly matter, especially when it's bound to be negative? He reluctantly glances up from his newspaper, and I see something on his face I can't quite read—as if he's looking at me and thinking hard at the same time—before he looks down again. "Yes," he says. "Perhaps a little."

Marie grins, turning me back toward her as Henri walks out to start the car. She fixes a bobby pin in my hair and beams at me. "Did you hear that? He said you looked a little like Carole Lombard! He thinks she's the most beautiful woman alive."

I laugh. "Yes, because you specifically asked him if I did. What else was he supposed to say?"

She gives me a look. "Are you seriously under the impression that Henri wouldn't have said *no* to that question if he could have? Have you found him to be a man who minces words?"

Hmmm. I suppose she has a point.



WE LEAVE for Paris down an unpaved road which, I realize with a sudden start, is the same highway that ran alongside the train tracks for much of my trip to Saint Antoine. I struggle not to bounce in my seat, like a child headed to the circus. Here I was, merely hoping to see pre-war Saint Antoine and now I'm getting Paris in its place, with almost no begging or wheedling. I'm still a little shocked by the ease with which it's all happened.

"What would you like to see today?" he asks.

"Everything. I came straight to Saint Antoine from the airport so I still haven't set foot in Paris. And I do need to get a few things."

He snorts. "You get the chance to see the most beautiful city in the world and you want to *shop* while you're there."

"If you had to wear a bra that's several sizes too small, you would too," I reply. The tiniest hint of color grazes the top of his cheekbones. "Oh my God. Have I made the impenetrable Henri Durand blush?"

"In my time, a lady does not discuss her undergarments in mixed company."

I roll my eyes. "You're very hung up on this whole *being a lady* business."

He gives me one of those smirks that makes me want to laugh and punch him at the same time. "You might benefit by becoming acquainted with it."

"Being a lady is just one of many ways you subjugate women," I reply. "It's an unequal paradigm for behavior."

"*Unequal paradigm for behavior?*" he repeats with a small laugh. "Where did you come up with this theory?"

"I learned it in a women's studies class last semester," I admit.

"Women's studies?" he asks incredulously. "It must have been a very short class. Marie Curie, Mary Cassatt, Mary Shelley. There, I've provided you a nearly comprehensive list of women who've made any kind of contribution to the world, if you really want to consider *Frankenstein* a contribution."

I lean my head against the window. "God, you're such a dick."

"Dick?"

I cast him a withering look. "It means penis. And before you start in again about my unladylike mouth, let me ask you: Why should I be held to a different standard of behavior than you? Why is it okay for you to go to a bar and tell dirty jokes with your friends, while the women must stay home, making sure their voices are hushed and all their words are appropriate?"

He shrugs. "Because it's how we were created. A woman's gentler nature is what inspires man to move beyond his basest instincts, makes him want to protect and care for something other than himself. It's an exchange, beneficial for both genders."

There's a certain sweetness to the idea, but mostly it just strikes me as naïve, and I don't love the implication that a woman would also *need* a man to care for her like a child. "In the future, life is safer. A woman no longer needs a cave man to protect her from wild animals and war."

"No?" he asks, smirking again. "Is that not the appeal of your rich boyfriend—the protection he offers?"

"Of course not," I snap.

"I've just never heard you provide a single other reason you're with him," he says.

Before I can react to this, he changes the topic. "What would you like to see first?"

I'm so irritated by his last comment about Mark I can barely focus on his question. All I know is that the things I'm dying to see—the Louvre, the Orsay—I don't want to experience with *him*. Not when he's there nattering on about my relationship and other things about which he knows *absolutely nothing*. I'll wait until I'm back in my own time so I can truly focus on them. I'd rather see them with Mark anyway.

"I don't know. The Eiffel Tower?"

He actually *sneers*. "With all the amazing architecture in this city, it's a monstrosity that excites you?"

"It's kind of...the emblem of Paris. Maybe even the whole country. In my time."

"Dieu," he says with an unhappy laugh. "Keep your television and your microwaves. I don't care to live in any world where the *Eiffel Tower* is the emblem of Paris and women's studies is actually a course at university."

"Fine," I sigh. "You decide."

He weaves through the city while I gawk at pedestrians. Everyone is so nicely dressed, and the roads are not clogged with cars the way they would be

in my time, but it doesn't feel entirely real. I can't shake the sensation that I'm in some kind of 1930's-themed Disney attraction instead of a real place.

Eventually he parks in a neighborhood just off the Seine. "Put on the gloves," he says. "And the hat."

The hat with the small veil in front, pressed into my hands by Marie just before I left. "Is this really necessary?" I ask. "I feel like a widow."

His eyes flicker over my face for the space of a heartbeat. "Yes, *time traveler*. It is."

With a sigh, I open the door, slapping the hat on my head as I do it.

"Amelie, for God's sake," he says, rolling his eyes, jumping from the driver's seat. "Wait. You're not supposed to get your own door."

I ignore him. I'm not going to sit here like a child waiting for her father's permission to exit the car. "Why can't I?" I ask, climbing out and shutting the door with a satisfying *thud*.

He looks appalled, rather than amused. "It's not that you can't. It's that you shouldn't *have to*."

He gets the crutches from the trunk and hands them to me. "You certainly don't treat me like a fragile little flower when you're criticizing me, or when you were watching me sweat my ass off doing laundry last week, so let's not pretend you suddenly believe I need you to open my door."

He releases a small groan. "Do all women where you're from object to everything the way you do? It's quite tedious."

"Not at all," I reply. "I just didn't realize I needed so much protection. I hope this means you'll be escorting me every time I go out to milk the cows?"

His mouth edges up. "I probably should, given how poorly you do it."

Before I can reply, I see the awning on the corner and stumble to a halt. We're standing feet from Les Deux Magots, one of the most famous restaurants in history. "Oh my God." The words emerge wispy and high.

His brow furrows. "You've heard of it?"

"Of course!" I say with an excited little jump on the crutches. He fixes my hat, knocked slightly askew by the jumping. "It's where Hemingway wrote! And Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir! Everyone was here."

He's looking at me blankly.

"You must have heard of them?" I ask. But even as I pose the question, it occurs to me they might not have become famous until later. Maybe these were the glory days they'd only recall with fondness years hence, glossing

over poverty and hunger and nights without heat.

He scratches his neck. "Hemingway. I just read a book by him not long ago. It was garbage."

"He's one of the most famous writers of all time," I reply. "What book did you read?"

"*A Farewell to Arms*. Romantic drivel," he says, his lip turning up into a sneer. "Please tell me you don't associate Hemingway with Paris too. He's not even *French*."

I laugh. "Sorry, *mon ami*. He's one of your most famous former citizens."

"*Dieu*," he mutters. "I've never been so grateful to live in my own time."

We turn a corner and Notre Dame rises in the distance, just a short walk away. Henri nods at it. "I hope our cathedral is at least as well known as the Eiffel Tower," he says.

Something perverse in me demands I provide the answer that will bother him most. "They made the book into an animated children's movie, so that helped get the name out."

"A *children's* movie?" he says. "Everyone dies in the end!"

"Not in our version," I reply. "It's super cute."

He likes my answer about as much as I'd have predicted, but his irritation disappears once we get close. He points to the arching wood at its front. "This was one of the first places in the world to use flying buttresses. They were added after the fact when the upper walls started to crack. The gargoyles and chimeras as well."

I glance up toward the gutters. "I thought the gargoyles were just some medieval bullshit about protection from demons."

He laughs begrudgingly. "There's a little medieval bullshit, as you so charmingly phrase it. I still can't believe they made *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* a children's movie. You know Hugo wrote the entire book to call attention to the cathedral's gothic architecture? He was disturbed by the way it was being destroyed."

"And did it work?"

He turns his head back to the flying buttresses. "Those still stand, so I suppose it did, to some extent."

As we enter the cathedral, Henri begins pointing out things I would not have recognized on my own—all the structural changes they made to free up the space for stained glass, the Romanesque architecture of the tower and nave versus the Gothic elements, the arches and rib vaulting. He is unguarded

and enthralled, two adjectives I'd never have used to describe him until now. But he suddenly stops himself.

"Sorry," he says, with a faltering smile. "I'm telling you far more than you're interested in hearing, I'm sure."

"I'm an art history major," I reply. "Architectural history isn't so different. Why would you think I wouldn't want to hear it?"

He looks at me for a long moment, before he glances away. "I suppose because the women I know aren't like you."

"Right, because I'm unladylike."

"No," he says, shoving his hands in his pockets and starting forward without me, "because you're interesting."



WHEN WE LEAVE NOTRE DAME, we take a circular path through town, cutting through the Luxembourg Gardens on the way. People stroll, children play, and there are painters everywhere I turn.

"You keep staring at those painters like you know them from home," he quips.

"Because they could be anyone!" I whisper. "I know some of the great artists came here to paint—Picasso, Matisse, Monet—and some of them could actually be here. Right this minute. Some of them not even known yet."

He laughs. "They are all quite famous here. And Monet is quite dead."

I groan. "I know that, but you're missing the point," I reply. "Imagine you went back 52 years from now? So..."

"1886," he says, before I can do the subtraction.

"You're better at math than I am. Don't get too cocky. A child of five is better at math than I am."

"And speaks better French," he returns. "But yes, I see your point. I saw it long before you made it. Unlike you, I've always thought the ability to travel back in time would be an amazing gift to possess."

We turn back toward the Seine, and once we find ourselves in the center of everything again, I push to eat at Les Deux Magots and he ignores me, insisting it's not appropriate, and instead takes me to a small restaurant nearby, the kind with silver and white linen and waiters in tuxedos. Even Mark's parents don't dine like this, at least not that I've seen.

"This doesn't seem like the dining establishment of poor farmers," I say once we are seated.

A smile plays at the corners of his mouth. "You're forgetting I don't have to pretend to be a poor farmer when I'm here."

He orders what sounds to me like a stunning amount of food, but it comes out in small courses, each served with tiny glasses of wine. And as the meal winds on, Henri grows warmer, less guarded. We talk about art and architecture and school. He asks what I would do if I were forced to remain in 1938 and I laugh.

"You mean the way I'm being forced right now?"

"Even worse," he says, raising a brow. "I mean permanently. If something happened—if you stayed for so long you couldn't go home again—what would you do?"

I take a sip of my wine, considering the question. "I think I could do here what I hope to do at home anyway—find struggling artists and help promote their work."

He grins. "You mean discover someone who's famous in your day before they are discovered by someone else and *profit* from their work?"

I make a face at him. "Of course not. That would be cheating, first of all. Secondly, it's not about the money, obviously. I could have plenty of that if I needed it. It's just about helping people who deserve to be helped, though I'd have plenty of staff to make my life easier while I did it."

He gazes at me over the rim of his glass. "That sounds almost altruistic, little thief."

"Despite what you think," I retort, "I'm not evil."

He takes a sip of his wine and shakes his head. "I'm not the one of the two of us who believed that anyway."

Our meal continues in this way—some teasing, some arguing, a great deal of laughter—until the bell rings four o'clock and my jaw drops. "We've been here for *two hours*?"

He laughs. "Perhaps my company is not as terrible as you previously believed. But we should go to your shops before they close so you can get your, um, things," he says.

I grin. "You mean the *bra*? For my *breasts*?" I'm not sure why I love baiting him as much as I do.

He closes his eyes as if praying for patience. "My God, you never stop. But yes, that. And get yourself some dresses too," he adds. "Since you'll be

staying a while."

For the first time, he doesn't sound like he's sorry that's the case.



THE RIDE HOME IS QUIET, but it's a companionable silence. I think about the tentative plans Mark and I made for our meeting in Paris—he'd mentioned Saint-Germain-des-Pres specifically. And I'm sure if we do wind up there, it will be great. Just not the same kind of great.

"Thank you," I say, as we pull up to the house. I think back over our day—lunch, Notre Dame, the gardens—and can't pick out a favorite moment. Even bra shopping was fun, particularly the moment when I caught Henri—standing just outside the lingerie department—trying to see what I was buying. "Today was...magical. I never in a million years thought I'd get to see Paris in the 1930s and eat in the same restaurant Picasso dined in the night before."

He considers me for a moment. "You do realize that it was possible because of your gift? That a million other adventures beyond this one are still possible. Even if your ability is not strong enough to go much further back, surely there are things you still want to see?"

"Why are you constantly on me about this?" I sigh. "Why can't you just respect my decision and let it go?"

"Because you seem to willfully ignore all the good it can do. All the good it's done. Your gift made today possible—how can you wish that away?"

I feel emotions spinning inside my chest: confusion and anger and sadness. He isn't wrong, but he also isn't right, and I can't explain that to him.

"Because," I reply, climbing from the car, "there's no amount of good that can make up for the harm it's already done."

So,” Marie says to me over dinner, wincing, “Madame Beauvoir has given you a job.”

My head jerks up. “*Me?*”

Henri glares at his sister. “This had better be a joke. She is not taking a job, I can tell you that much right now.”

Marie ignores him as she turns to me. “Madame Beauvoir heard about your ankle from the doctor. She’s decided you should come read to her mother, Madame Perot, until you’re back on your feet. Her sight is troubling her, and she thinks reading in French will help you learn the language.”

“*Non*,” says Henri. “She couldn’t care less about the reading. She’s just hoping to throw Amelie in the path of her dolt of a son, André.”

Marie’s shoulders sag. “We can’t afford to alienate the Beauvoirs, Henri, especially with a war coming. And reading a book aloud doesn’t typically result in marriage.”

I could assure her it *definitely* won’t result in marriage, but that doesn’t mean I’m not worried. “But what if...I slip up somehow? I’ve done it here, with you, several times.”

“You’re more relaxed with us. It’s not necessary to hide who you are when you are here,” says Marie. “And if you mess up badly, I can always travel back to warn you so it doesn’t occur.”

I groan, letting my head rest against the back of the chair. “So you’d warn me about a misspoken word, but not about an ankle break that will immobilize me for another five weeks?”

“Yes,” she says, unapologetic as ever. “Things having to do with Madame

de Beauvoir are not fate."

I still don't think it's a great idea but at least it will give me an excuse to see Saint Antoine. "I suppose I can just tell him I'm married. It'll be true soon enough."

"So that...that's actually a plan?" Marie asks. "You're really getting married when you get home?"

I shrug. "Not right away, no. Mark wants me to move to New York next year to live with him and finish my degree there. I want to stay where I am, so I'm not sure what's going to happen...but either way, there's no rush. People in my time live together before they get married usually anyway."

"Live together?" gasps Marie. "As a couple?"

I laugh. "Yes. It's not a big deal. Things—everything, really—is much...looser. People don't wait for marriage to have sex. They live together. Sometimes they even have kids together before they marry, or they just choose not to marry at all."

Henri's jaw shifts a little at that. "In my time, there's a name for women who give themselves away before marriage."

I feel irritation inching upward. "But no name for the men, I assume?" I ask. "It's okay for you to sleep with whoever is agreeable and then look down on her afterward for it, yes?"

"Not necessarily, but look at it from an evolutionary perspective," he argues. "Women are driven to find the best provider for their young, and men are driven to procreate. Women must keep the gate closed in order to ensure men hold up their end of the bargain."

I can't believe he's defending this nonsense. I thought he was smarter than that. "Maybe men are just better at keeping promises in my day."

His jaw grinds. "Maybe women just aren't desperate enough to accept any lie in mine."

Marie rubs her temples. "The two of you will find anything to argue about, won't you?"

"She started it," says Henri, flushed and angrier than the situation calls for.

"Me? I don't argue with anyone! Mark and I have never argued once. It's you."

"How could you argue?" he asks, heading for the door. "You're too busy letting him walk all over you."

The door slams behind him and the windows rattle in his wake.

"It's both of you," says Marie. She says something in French as she heads for the stairs, too quickly for me to understand.

"You know I don't speak French."

"It was your Emerson," she says, turning to me from the landing, raising a single brow. "*Thou art to me a delicious torment.*"



THE NEXT DAY, once I've donned the hose and one of the better dresses and Marie has rolled up my hair, Henri walks me to the car, holding the door for me, taking my crutches once I'm in. It's silly, but also kind of sweet. I suppose the 1930's code of chivalry is helpful if your ankle is broken.

The two of us have barely exchanged a word since last night's argument, so I'm not surprised it's what he decides to lead with. "You only have a year left of school," he says abruptly before he's even started the car. "Why would he ask you to move with him?"

My shoulders tighten. "I'm nervous enough about going to the Beauvoirs. Can you not pile on by starting another fight with me right now?"

His tongue darts out, tapping his lip. "I'm not trying to start a fight, I swear it. I'm just trying to understand. If I say the sky is blue, you insist it's green. But this man wants you to drop out of college and you're okay with it?"

I let my head fall back against the seat. Obviously I can't even do a job I don't want to do without first having a discussion I don't want to have. "I didn't say I was going to drop out. I said he asked and I was thinking about it."

"You're missing my point. It's less about whether or not you do it, though that's certainly another issue to discuss. It's about the fact that this man, who in theory cares about you, is asking you to give up the main thing in your life and you don't blink an eye. If what was best for the woman I loved was for her to stay where she was, the one thing I'd *never* do is ask her to give it up. And I'd go to her if it was at all possible."

"Well, he's got a job in New York so he can't come to me," I say, feeling my stomach tense. "Can we please go? I just want to get this over with."

Henri starts the car. "Times must change dramatically, then," he says, pulling onto the road. "Because in my day, there are jobs in Philadelphia as

well as New York.”

I ignore him, leaning my head against the window. I could argue that the jobs in New York are better...but then again, I’m at a much better school in Philly than I would be in New York. He would probably ask me why the quality of my degree matters less than the quality of Mark’s job. And I guess he’d have a point.

When we get to town, I look around in wonder, remembering the day I arrived at the train station. Henri watches my face. "Is it very different in your time?"

"No...no, but also yes. This is the historic section, and the buildings are pretty much the same, but everything is also different." I point to the butcher shop. "That sells macarons now. It's very bright and pretty, and there are these rainbow-colored boxes in the window."

"An entire store that sells only macarons?" he asks. "*Why?*"

"A lot of tourists come here," I tell him, but I stop myself before I go further. How would it feel to learn your entire way of life will, in not so many decades, be a novelty? That people will soon laugh over the idea of buying paper at a *paperie*, of needing a specific shop just to buy cheese? The consolidation of everything won't seem like a good idea to him, it will seem like an uncivilized one. "It's really not so different, though," I conclude.

He looks relieved by that, and continues to drive through town, cutting down several side roads before he arrives at a large, regal home, with a wrought-iron fence and a massive garden off to the side.

"Here we are," he says unhappily.

I search his face. "Is André like your sworn enemy or something?" I ask.

"He’s too inconsequential for me to consider him an enemy." He gets my crutches and then walks me to the front door, looking more and more unhappy with each second that passes.

He rings the bell and a servant answers, blushing and tipping her head at the sight of him. A reminder of the way women must react to him every time he comes to town.

"Hi," I say sharply, with what is probably a somewhat menacing smile. "I’m here to read to Madame Perot."

"*Désolé*," Henri tells her. "*Elle ne parle pas un mot de français.*"

I bristle at that, at the snide way he tells her I don’t speak *a word* of French. Like the meanest guy in high school laughing at the class nerd.

The girl's brow raises. *Not a word?*

She doesn't even know how to say hello, he replies, glancing at me with such a smirk on his face I'd have to be an idiot *not* to realize he was mocking me.

He asks her what the plan is for the afternoon and she tells him I'm to read to *Grandmere* Perot in her room, before I have tea downstairs with Madame and her son.

Henri's teeth grind at that last bit, and he translates for me with a tight jaw, completely failing to mention the way he threw me under the bus about my lack of French. "And they apparently want you to stay for tea," he concludes.

I refuse to act like I think it's the trial he does. Especially since he seems to hate André.

What's the expression? *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*.

"Oh, tea!" I say brightly. "How fun!" I flash him a wide smile over my shoulder as the door shuts behind me.

The house is magnificent. It reminds me of something you'd see on a historic tour, like Mount Vernon or Monticello, a place where whole rooms are cordoned off and you're scared you might accidentally touch something and get yelled at. The girl leads me upstairs, over gleaming, newly polished hardwood, and I struggle to follow her on crutches. Then we head down a long hall with high ceilings and more crown molding than I've seen anywhere outside of a museum. Even Mark's parents' mansion in Westport would look a little slipshod next to this place.

We enter a room where an extremely old woman lies on a canopy bed, snoring. The maid shrugs at my questioning glance.

"*Les livres sont là*," she says, pointing at the books on the nightstand.

I survey the pile. *Ivanhoe*. God, it was boring enough in English. I can't imagine trying to read it in French. Beneath it is *Middlemarch*, also in French. Undoubtedly chock-full of 18th century syntax. My French definitely isn't up to *these* books.

Which leaves, beneath it, Baudelaire. A book of poems similar to the one I saw in Henri's room. I open it and begin to translate, painstakingly. The old woman's eyes fly open. She looks irritated to find me there.

"*Lisez le-moi, si vous devez*," she says. *Read it to me if you must*.

Awesome. The rude maid works for a rude old woman.

With a slow exhale, I begin reading. I was never anywhere near fluent in French, and I'd expected to feel even rustier now that I've been forcing myself

not to use a word of it, but it seems all these weeks of eavesdropping on Henri and Marie have had some benefit. The words flow off my tongue, less stilted than they'd have been before I arrived, but I'd enjoy it more if the old woman didn't sneer at me each time I pronounce something wrong. Toward the end of the hour, she's even begun to slap my hand when I mess up, and I'm worried if it continues much longer I'm going to slap her right back.

She's in the midst of a tirade about *les gitane*, whatever that is, when the girl who answered the door arrives to tell me it's time for tea.

I follow her to a parlor where Madame Beauvoir waits with a man not much older than me. He must be André, who is, at first glance, not quite as odious as Henri made him out to be. Though he lacks Henri's size and looks, he's handsome enough and wearing a very nice suit. He kisses both cheeks.

"A pleasure, Mademoiselle Durand," he says. "André Beauvoir. I believe you've already met my mother?"

Yes, when she burst into Marie's home bitching about the chickens, and then demanded to know who I was. Was that really only five weeks ago? It seems like so much longer. I force myself to smile at her before she leans in to do the customary kiss to the side of my cheek.

We sit at a table covered in heavy damask and laid out with cutlery and fine china. Mark and I once had tea at a table just like this, only at the Ritz Carlton—memorable because I felt the same sort of anxiety I do now, maybe even worse. It was early in our relationship, the days when he still wanted to know everything about me, and I'd had to spend hours and hours pretending I was someone else entirely—a woman who had normal problems, who suffered only the regular amount of parental disapproval. I had to create a new reason for my father's departure, for my avoidance of home. Everything I was and everything I wanted seemed to touch back to my sister's death and the role I played in it—and if I couldn't tell him that, I couldn't tell him anything.

The tea is poured and André proceeds to ask me polite, generic questions: how I'm enjoying Saint Antoine, how long I plan to stay, how I broke my ankle.

I tell him I tripped on uneven ground and he looks at me with utter sympathy, translating for his mother.

Poor girl, says Madame. That farm is a disaster. They live like animals.

I thought it was hard to feign a lack of comprehension around Henri, but this is much worse. My nails dig into my palms as I try to silence myself.

You're being uncharitable, Mother, André responds. I smile at him, though I'm still supposed to be feigning ignorance of what was said.

The servant reappears to tell Madame she has a call and she excuses herself, exchanging a quick, meaningful glance with her son. It feels an awful lot like a set-up, but as far as set-ups go, it's not a bad one.

He watches her leave the room and then smiles at me. "You were very kind to read to my grandmother. And brave. Did she yell at you the whole time?"

I laugh. "She yelled at me a little. Mostly she was yelling about something else. *Les gitane*?"

He laughs low, glancing over his shoulder before he turns back to me with a conspiratorial smile. "The Gypsies. One of my grandmother's many dislikes. They stole her car at the end of the war, or so she claims. The police found it almost immediately, but she's never forgotten it. I'll try to make sure I'm home the next time you read so I can intervene if necessary. I'd have been here sooner today, but work called me away."

It's kind of nice to be around a man who wants to help me, instead of one who's always lecturing me. "What do you do?"

"I manage my family's company," he says. "We own a manufacturing plant on the outside of Reims. It's not what I dreamed of doing when I went to university, but I can't complain, obviously. Times are hard and we're lucky to have the company to fall back on."

I tip my head, wondering how Henri can possibly object to this man. Is it jealousy? It must be. I can't imagine André being anything but pleasant, while I can easily imagine unpleasant behavior from Henri.

"What did you dream of doing when you were at university?"

He gives me a sheepish smile. "I studied engineering. I was always fascinated by airplanes. I don't think they've come as far as they might—if they were streamlined and their engine size increased, I believe they could hold perhaps fifty or sixty people at a time. But Maman disagreed, and of course, she needed someone to manage the company," he concludes with a forced smile, "so it fell to me."

He and Henri have more in common than either of them realize. They both gave up their own dreams to take care of their families. And why is Marie not interested in this guy? He's good looking, he's sweet, he's well-off. Yes, it would involve dealing with Madame Beauvoir, but if she married André, she'd live a much better life than she does now. No more Saturdays

spent doing laundry. No more hours in the kitchen.

"Do you know Henri and Marie well?"

He gives me a cautious smile. "I don't. I went to boarding school as a child, so I never got to know anyone here in town until I finished university two years ago. And right now, I'd rather get to know their beautiful American cousin."

I can understand why he'd rather flirt than become friends with Henri, but Marie is stunning. He should be flirting with her, and I can't imagine why he is not.

"Except I'm leaving in a few weeks," I reply. "And I'm seeing someone back home."

He reaches for my hand, grazing my knuckles with his lips. "Perhaps, with a few weeks' time, I can change your mind about both."



HENRI ARRIVES NOT LONG after that, and André sees me to the door. He is perfectly polite to Henri, who returns his handshake with obvious unwillingness.

"How was it?" Henri asks when we get in the car.

I think of the old woman, yelling at me and hitting my hand. "It would not be my first choice as a job, that's for sure."

He turns to me, his jaw tight. "Did something happen? Was André inappropriate?"

I can't imagine why this is the conclusion he'd jump to. "No, no, of course not," I say, waving him off. "I just don't like reading. The crazy old woman was yelling at me about talking to Gypsies and hitting me when I pronounced poorly and I...I just didn't enjoy it."

"I didn't realize she spoke English," says Henri.

Shit.

"She doesn't," I stammer. "Well, you know, just a few words. Enough to make her point."

"Ah," he says, resting in his seat more easily. "Well if you don't like it, you should not go back."

I didn't mind tea with André at all, and if I could just shift his attention from me to Marie, perhaps some good will have come from my visit. Maybe

this is how I save Marie, by freeing her from a lifetime of domestic servitude.

"I have to go back. What would we tell them?"

"I don't give a shit what we tell them," he says.

I smile. "Henri, you just cursed. How unseemly."

He starts the car and pulls into the road. "Congratulations, little thief. You've stolen my good manners." He looks over at me. A muscle in his jaw flickers. "And you haven't mentioned tea yet. How was that?"

I could downplay it, since he obviously doesn't like André, but then I remember the way he gossiped about me to the girl who answered the door. "It was delicious. I can't imagine why you don't like André. I think he seems very nice."

His frown deepens. "Don't judge a man until you've seen him without an audience," he replies.

Marie begins packing her things to leave almost as soon as I get home, and I sigh heavily. "This is ridiculous," I tell her. "If you are so desperate to avoid me, just fix my damn ankle!"

Her eyes widen. "Avoid you?" she repeats. "No. I'm not. I promise. I suppose it's a little selfish under the circumstances, but with you here, it means I can go do things. Normally, I stay in during the evening so Henri's not here alone. I just thought if he had you for company it would be okay, but if you want me to stay I will."

"It's fine," I sigh. As much as I resent the whole situation, I don't really care whether or not she's home and I do want to see them both move on with their lives. Although the idea of Henri *moving on* bothers me a bit more than it should.



"So IT's bread and cheese for dinner," I tell him when he gets in that night. "It's all I can do with the ankle the way it is." I don't feel particularly bad about this. His bullshit this morning at the Beauvoir's house is still irking me.

His mouth goes up on one side. "I was under the impression it was all you could do anyhow." He looks at the food I've taken out and begins to gather it, throwing everything in one of Marie's baskets hanging from the copper rack overhead, and adding a bottle of wine. "That dinner was meant to be for us both," I say.

"Yes, I know," he replies, heading for the door. "Come with me."

He walks outside with the food and I follow, more slowly and far more unsteadily on the crutches than he is on two good feet. He looks over his shoulder at me. "You're okay?" he asks. "It's not much farther."

I nod and we continue on, past the barn, to a hay bale that sits at the top of a hill, facing west. He spreads a blanket on the ground and helps me sit, before pulling the food from the basket.

"A picnic?" I ask. It seems kind of odd to have a picnic forty yards from the house, but it's not a terrible idea. The view of the valley from here is amazing and at least we can get a bit of a breeze.

"You do this, where you're from?"

I shake my head. "No, not really." We did it once or twice, driving into the Alleghenies, when I was small, but that was before Kit died. Afterward, my mother went out of her way to avoid any time spent as a family if she could help it.

"I suppose you have better things to do, what with your televisions and drive-through restaurants."

Diplomacy requires I assure him a picnic is every bit as satisfying as watching television, but as my mouth opens to say something polite and meaningless, I realize the truth of it: this *is* as satisfying as television. Probably more.

"We don't have better things to do."

He gives me a sidelong glance, a doubting one.

I struggle to explain what I mean. It's nothing I thought about, before I began to spend time here with Marie and Henri, but as the words emerge I know they are unequivocally true. "At home you can watch TV for hours and hours, but when you leave it the time has gone and you have nothing to show for it. You don't even feel rested. You just feel tired, a little empty. And it's not memorable at all. All the hours you spend blend together."

"This will be memorable, at least," he says, nodding at the sun as it begins to set. The light retracts, sinks into itself until it looks like an orange ready for picking, just over the next hill. Sitting here, with the sun almost close enough to touch, a light breeze blowing, is an experience no show or movie could possibly replicate.

"We don't do this at home either," I say quietly, unpacking the basket. "Watching the sun set, I mean."

He glances at me. "For all your inventions, I think I'm glad I'm not from your time."

I might believe he was better off in 1938 too, if I didn't know what lies ahead for him. "It's much safer."

"I think you value safety far too highly," he says. "What use is it, if you have to give up the things you love in exchange?" I'm about to ask what precisely he thinks I'm giving up when he hands me a glass of wine. "Are you going to be okay with this?" he asks, nodding at the wine. "Walking back on the crutches?"

I laugh, holding the red liquid up to the dying light. "As you've stated, I have a hollow leg. I've never been drunk once in my life. And a glass back home is four times this size."

"Perhaps that's why there's so much free love in your day."

I roll my eyes. "Rumor has it sex is enjoyable. Isn't that reason enough?"

"*Rumor has it?*" he repeats. "What does that mean? I thought in your time sex 'wasn't a big deal'?"

I feel my cheeks heat and stare out at the vineyard to avoid his eye. "I was raised in a very religious household. Waiting for marriage...it's just one of those things my mother was very focused on."

He leans back. "For someone raised by a woman as awful as your mother, you certainly seem to care a lot about what she thinks."

I look at the sun without really seeing it. "She's my mother. It's not something I can help."

His arms cross, broad shoulders straining the fabric of his shirt. "I think I'd try, in your case," he says, not unkindly. "I certainly wouldn't allow her to dictate my behavior if I were you."

"She's not," I argue. "Mark and I...this summer when I get back, we're... never mind."

The tendons in his forearms are suddenly visible. "What do you mean?"

I flush. "I mean that part of the deal with me leaving this summer so suddenly was...*that*."

Henri's jaw drops. "You had to agree to sleep with this man solely in order to go on a trip?"

It irks me, the way he always manages to spin Mark's behavior into something evil. "No, of course not. You're twisting what I said. We're getting engaged once I'm back, which is as good as married, for one thing. But also it was shitty, the way I cancelled on him. So I ...promised to make it up to him."

His jaw draws tight. "A good man would not accept that offer. And a woman who knew her own value wouldn't have made it."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not giving away a kidney. It's sex. I assume I'll enjoy it as well."

"*That's* not how you decide to sleep with someone. You choose it when you can no longer stand *not* to choose it, no sooner."

It all sounds good, but I've never felt like that and I don't imagine I ever will. I've sometimes wondered if I'm just missing some hormonal impulse I'm supposed to have, although given how I react to the sight of Henri without a shirt, it certainly seems to be making an appearance now.

"Like I said, in my time, we don't take everything quite so seriously. You're allowed to just enjoy what you enjoy without it having to mean something."

He is watching me again. "You're so busy defending the attitudes of your time, but you agree with me that it should mean something, or you'd have done it already. And if you've been with him for two years, it probably should have meant something by now."

I stare at the wine in my glass, as something rises in my throat, a lump that clogs it and makes me anxious I might cry. He's wrong, of course. I'm certain of it.

I'm just not quite as certain as I was.



"HOW DID IT GO TONIGHT?" Marie asks when she gets home. "Henri was not awful?"

I blink. The truth is that Henri has not been awful in a while, but it feels like something I don't quite want to admit. "No more so than ever."

"How did you keep the kitchen so clean?" she asks. "You can't sweep with the crutches."

A surly voice in my head retorts *yes, the crutches I need because of you*, but I no longer feel quite as much rancor about it. "We ate outside, actually."

Her eyes go wide. "You did?"

"At that hay bale on the far side of the barn, where the sun sets."

She is speechless for a moment. And then, finally, a small smile. "A picnic? Well," she says. "Well."

The following weekend, Marie-Therese and Henri decide there's no way I can avoid mass again, as telling the village I'm not Catholic—my suggestion—would apparently be far worse than skipping mass.

So on Sunday, instead of sleeping in—not that there seems to be much sleeping in here ever—I rise early to don the hose and the blue dress and curl my hair. All the effort—plus wearing garters, gloves and a hat—no longer seems strange to me. I feel frilly and girly, but as long as no one from home can witness it, I don't mind.

When I leave my room, Henri is waiting, lean and handsome in his suit, comfortable in his skin and the fine clothes. He looks like a man who attended Oxford: intelligent and arrogant and confident, certain of his place in the world. I envy him that.

He stands when I enter the room, eyes tripping over the dress to the shoes. He swallows. "I suppose you'll do," he says with half a grin.

I'm beginning to think that the more he approves, the less willing he is to say so. But would it kill him to compliment me just *once*? "You're such an asshole."

A brow raises as he heads toward the door. "I know it's asking a great deal, but if you could perhaps restrain your foul mouth and sharp tongue during mass, I'd greatly appreciate it."

I slowly raise my eyes to his. "Just because you don't curse much doesn't mean your tongue is any less sharp than mine."

His mouth tips up in an arrogant smirk. "Except I've had no complaints about my tongue so far."

I slide my gloves on and flash him a smile. "The only females I've seen you near since I arrived are livestock. Just because you can't understand them doesn't mean they're not complaining."

He walks out the door, choking on a laugh.

Marie comes downstairs just then. "You look like the cat who got the cream," she says with narrowed eyes, observing me.

I exhale. "I'm always a little happier when Henri leaves the room."

"Hmmm," she replies, still narrow-eyed. "So you claim."



HENRI DRIVES into town and parks on the street. When I reach for the door, he casts me a warning glance. "Open that door yourself and I'll break your other ankle too."

He grabs my crutches from the trunk. "What a strange world you live in," I say, when he finally reaches me and performs the *heroic* feat of turning a handle to release me from the car, "where it's not appropriate for me to open a door, but it *is* appropriate for you to threaten me with bodily harm."

"Have I ever touched a hair on your head?" he asks, opening Marie's door next.

"That would be a more convincing argument if you hadn't held me at gunpoint."

Marie groans. "Will you two not even stop on a Sunday?"

She marches ahead of us and Henri comes to my side. "You started that one," he says.

"You know, I'm not argumentative by nature," I reply. "You just bring it out in me."

"Likewise." He glances my way. The sunlight hides his expression. "So you and Mark never fight?"

I sigh, wondering where he's headed with this. I'm sure he can find a way to turn *anything* I say into an anti-Mark rant. "Almost never."

He grins triumphantly. "It means you will have no passion in bed," he says.

I roll my eyes. "Then I guess that means you and I *would*?"

He's so stunned by the question that he stops in his tracks. I feel burned alive by his gaze, by the way his jaw shifts and those eyes of his dip to my

mouth before veering away. As if he allowed himself, for a moment, to consider it. "What a question to ask just before I walk into mass," he mutters. He turns toward the church steps and places a hand on my back. "Prepare yourself," he says.

"For what?"

He nods to the crowd ahead, already turning toward us. "This."

It feels as if every single person here is staring at me, and by the time we reach the first step, we are enveloped. His hand is on the small of my back, friendly to all who approach, but using his shoulders and the occasional menacing smile to make sure I get up the stairs safely, which is easier said than done with so many people stopping us to talk.

Ma cousine Americaine, Henri says again and again. And then he apologizes for the fact that I don't speak French as if it's a serious flaw, as if I'm a child who's spitting everywhere or won't stop hitting people.

Nearly everyone who approaches wants to meet me, aside from the young females, who only use my presence as a ruse to come hit on Henri. It's grown tiresome by the fourth step and by the time we reach the top, I'm tempted to start swinging my crutch.

We are nearly inside the church when we are waylaid by yet another pretty girl named Claudette, all dimples and shiny eyes. Her wide smile is only for Henri, although Henri introduces us anyway, making sure, as always, to mention I don't *speak a word of French*. I see something calculated enter her eyes upon learning this. She rests a gloved hand on his arm and moves in closer, casting a quick, mildly hostile glance at me. *We barely see you anymore*, she says to him in French. *She's stayed a very long time. It must be getting tiresome*.

The bitch is talking shit about me right in front of my face, and I clench every muscle not to react, praying, *praying* that Henri puts her in her place.

She's only here a few more weeks, he says mildly. Hardly the vigorous defense I'd hoped for. Disappointment twists a small knife in my stomach, and I turn away from them and begin heading inside, wishing I'd just refused to come.

Within seconds Henri has caught up with me, his hand once more on the small of my back. "Where are you going?" he asks.

"To sit," I say between clenched teeth. "I don't need your help, so don't let me get in the way of your flirting."

"I wasn't aware that I was flirting," he replies, steering me toward a

particular pew. "And you have no idea what we even said."

"I don't have to speak the language to know flirting when I hear it," I reply coolly. He takes the crutches from me as I slide sideways into the pew.

"Are you dating her?"

He raises a single brow. "What?"

"Dating, courting, wooing...whatever stupid expression you use. Are you doing it with her?"

He gives a low laugh. "How can I, when I spend all my free time bickering with you?"

Heat climbs in my chest and I face forward, knees pressed tight, pretending he is not there. That's when I see Marie, sitting to the left of the altar with the choir. She looks eager. Flushed and happy. Different than she is at home.

Her eyes flicker toward the door of the church and my head turns, wondering who she's looking for. The crowd is pouring in. What was it she said just after I arrived? That there was someone she wanted but he wasn't *suitable*. Is that who she's looking for? I glance back at her and am suddenly certain it is. The longing comes off her in waves.

Her eyes drop to the book in her hand, and then back toward the door. Whoever he is, she likes him a lot more than she's let on. She said he wasn't suitable. Does that mean he'll come in here with a fiancé or a wife? Or perhaps he's a different race, though it seems unlikely—a Klan meeting is more diverse than the membership of this church. I peek around Henri a second time.

"Do you always fidget so much?" he asks.

"I'm just wondering where all the handsome men are."

He raises a brow. "Being so near me all the time has been like staring at the sun, hasn't it?"

"Painful? Ill-advised?"

"Blinding," he corrects. "My looks make it impossible for you to appreciate lesser men."

I roll my eyes. "You may very well have ruined men for me, but not in the way you think."

The choir begins the first hymn and the congregation rises. I can hear Marie's voice, as angelic as her face, which is a quality we do not share. And she is *still* glancing at the door.

Henri holds the hymnal open for me.

“I don’t sing,” I tell him, and he smiles. A somewhat blinding smile, I reluctantly admit.

“Not enough profanity in the hymns for you?” he whispers.

I laugh quietly against my will and glance once more at Marie, who is watching the doors of the church now with something like reverence on her face. Except everyone is seated and she doesn’t seem to be looking at any particular person.

She’s still waiting, I realize.

Two altar boys enter, followed by an old man carrying a bible and a middle-aged woman carrying a chalice.

And behind them, the priest.

He is young, tall and extremely handsome, with the kind of broad shoulders that don’t come from baptizing babies and hearing confession. *Father What-a-Waste*, my friend Rina would have called him back home. Marie’s eyes lower as he passes, as if the whole world will see what’s in her heart if she doesn’t. And maybe they would, because I see it even with her eyes closed.

I wonder what it all means for the future—hers and Henri’s. If she’s truly the *hidden child* of the prophecy, and if the circle of light is related to her giving birth, which is certainly what it seems, how will she ever fulfill her destiny if she’s so hopelessly in love with a *priest*?

And if she doesn’t ever move on with her life, how can her brother move on with his?

I glance up at Henri, who looks sleepy and mildly bored. Completely unaware of the whole thing. I wonder if he’d be so open to Marie spending the time she does here if he realized why she was doing it.



AFTER MASS ENDS, we make our way toward the back of the church where a small refreshment table is being set up—with Marie’s assistance, of course.

André is the first person who steps in our path. He bows his head. “I was hoping I might see you today,” he says.

Henri makes a small noise of disgust, placing his hand on my arm and giving it a small tug. “We can’t stay. We need to find Marie.”

André arches a single brow at this, and I don’t blame him. Henri is

generally not rude to people other than me, but André appears to be the one exception.

"I'd be happy to take Amelie home," Andre offers. "My day is quite empty and I'm sure you have things to attend to on the farm." It's a masterclass in posturing, the subtle reminder that Henri's *peasant* labor is never done, while André is free as a bird. And though I'm annoyed with Henri, I can't say I especially like it.

"We have plans," my unhappy host growls, his hand still on my elbow.

Just then, the girl who accosted Henri before mass comes up to us, wide-eyed and delighted, as if it's so very unexpected to find us here when she *already saw us here*.

I meant to ask earlier, she says, if you'll be at the dance next weekend.

Henri glances at me. *I'm not sure yet*, he tells her.

You should come, the girl replies. *There will be plenty of men to entertain your cousin. Though she's a bit old for a babysitter.*

You obviously don't know my cousin well, he says.

André frowns at them both. "They're talking about the town dance," he says to me. "I hope you plan to come. It's still a week away—I don't suppose you'll be out of the cast by then?"

I glance down. "I have three more weeks, so if I come, I'm not sure how much dancing I'll be doing."

Henri shoots me a hard look. "You won't be doing any dancing. You'll probably fall over and break the other ankle too."

"Do you treat all your cousins as if they're made of glass?" asks André.

Henri straightens. He's several inches taller than Andre and for the first time, I get the sense that he's trying to make a point of it. "Just the ones who tend to break easily. Excuse us," he says abruptly, and with his hand firmly pressing on my back he all but pushes me to the left, toward the refreshment table where Marie is talking to Father Edouard.

Her eyes are shining, her cheeks are flushed. And, I notice, so are his. Father Edouard is looking at Marie with a sort of reverence I did *not* see on his face during mass.

I push back against Henri's hand. "Leave them alone," I say quietly. "Marie can come home later if you're in such a rush."

He glances at me. "*Why?*"

I sigh heavily. Even though I can't begin to imagine how this infatuation could turn out to be a good thing, I can't bring myself to ruin it for her.

“She’s busy.”

He shrugs. “It’s just Father Edouard. And we need to leave.”

He steps forward and shakes the priest’s hand, and then Father Edouard extends a hand to me. *You must be Amelie*, he says in French. *Marie speaks of you often.*

“Not often enough to tell you she only speaks English,” says Henri, and Father Edouard laughs.

“Apologies,” he says. “I forgot. But as Marie will tell you, I enjoy getting a chance to speak something other than French.” His English is as perfect as Henri’s, not even a hint of an accent.

“Are you British?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Just raised by a British mother. And Marie says you’re from Pennsylvania—I studied in Massachusetts for a while. That’s close, I believe?”

I smile. “It depends on your definition of close. Were you in—”

“I’m sorry,” Henri interrupts, “but I do need to get home. I think I may have left the paddock gate unlocked.”

Marie’s head tips, as confused as I am by his behavior. He’s never once left that gate unlocked, and the horses are too docile to run even if he had. “I need to help with the children’s classes,” she says. “I’ll walk home later.”

Henri practically pushes me out the door, his hand heavy on my back even as we reach the stairs.

“Stop pushing me!” I hiss. “You’re going to make me fall!”

His hand leaves my back, but he remains unhappy, some kind of weight on his shoulders that wasn’t there when we arrived. He’s silent on the walk to the car, his mind somewhere else.

He opens the door without even looking at me, grabs my crutches in the same manner.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I demand once he’s in the car.

His jaw flexes and he stares straight ahead. “I told you I was in a hurry to get home.”

“And what was that about anyway?” I ask. “You never leave the gate open.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, a touch of acid in his tone. “If it’s any consolation, you’ll apparently have plenty of time to throw yourself at the men in town during the village dance.”

“*Throw myself?* I didn’t say two words to anyone but you!” I cry. “You

were the one..." *making fun of me in French*. "Flirting," I finish.

His nostrils flare. "I saw the way you smiled at him. Don't deny it."

"The priest?" I ask. "You are *insane*. I was being polite."

"You were more than merely polite, but I was talking about André," corrects Henri. "Is it your goal to win over a rich man for every decade? I suppose that's one way to make sure you have a place to stay during your travels."

I press my palm to my forehead. "Are you serious right now? I wasn't flirting and if I was going to marry someone in another time, it sure as *hell* wouldn't be this one!"

He ignores me. "You are not reading to Madame Perot again. I don't like the way he looks at you."

I have no desire to read to Madame Perot, obviously, but he is not going to be the one who decides that for me. "Sorry, Henri," I reply crisply, "but where I'm from women aren't property that gets commanded around."

"No?" he asks. "Then why is it your boyfriend believes you should drop out of college and give up your dreams to move with him?"

"That's different," I reply. "He's not forbidding me to do anything and he's not commanding me either."

"No, he's just acting like your goals and desires are not equal to his own," Henri replies. "While I'm thinking about your safety."

"Well, I'm thinking about the fact that I'm an adult and can make my own decisions," I retort. "And reading to Madame, or spending time with André, are both decisions I don't need your help with."



MARIE COMES HOME BRIEFLY around lunch. There's been no sign of Henri since we arrived back here this morning. I help her prepare the *coq au vin*, one pan going to the bible study class held at the church this evening and one pan to stay here. I'm browning the onions while she chops vegetables behind me.

"I didn't realize priests were so attractive," I say casually. "I see now why your mass is so well-attended."

"Father Edouard?" she asks, shocked. "That's sacrilege."

I laugh. "You don't actually expect me to believe you haven't noticed?"

Just because he's a priest doesn't mean he's *invisible*."

She flushes. "It's inappropriate to look at him that way. He's chosen his path and we must respect his decision."

She's giving up too easily. I saw the way he looked at her. "I think he'd make a different decision readily if you gave him an opening."

Her beautiful face clouds over. "He's a man of God. He'd view what we do as witchcraft."

Perhaps I'm too willing to give up time travel, but Marie is very much the other extreme. It's as if the idea is impossible to her.

"Is being able to time travel really such a wonderful gift? I see how you use it mostly—to add to a shopping list? To fix a broken chicken coop before the animals get free? I can't believe you'd lose the man you love in order to keep doing it."

Her eyes flash as she glances over her shoulder at me. "It's not a gift. It's what I *am*, and unlike you, I do not plan to deceive the man I will marry. So, even if he were to decide he wanted to leave the church, I would still never choose him."



MARIE IS long gone when Henri finally comes in. He says nothing to me until he's gone into the bath to wash up and change clothes, and then he emerges with damp hair and a contrite expression that has me ready to forgive him before he's said a word.

"Come to the hay bale," he says. "It's almost sunset."

Correction: I'm *almost* ready to forgive him. "Hmm," I muse, holding a finger to my lips, "that didn't sound like an apology."

He gives me a small bow. "I'm deeply sorry I accused you of throwing yourself at André. I'm certain that if you choose to throw yourself at him, you'll at least have the decency to do so in private."

I raise a brow. "That still doesn't sound like an apology."

"It was," he corrects. "I just paired it with an insult. Come on."



MARIE'S COQ-AU-VIN is too difficult to transport to our normal picnic spot, so

we just grab odds and ends for dinner instead. By the time our meal is complete, the sun has set. He pushes our things off to the side and leans back against the hay bale.

"Close your eyes," he says.

I do as he says, leaning back just as he did. It's silent, and suddenly I'm aware of things I wasn't the moment before. Perhaps things I was trying hard to ignore: the heat of Henri beside me, the rise and fall of his chest moving his sleeve against my bare arm with each breath.

"What do you smell?" he asks.

I smell him—soap and freshly cut grass.

"Cow dung," I reply. "Is that not the only possible answer?"

He elbows me. "Keep trying. There are other things too."

"I smell your soap," I admit. I love the smell of his soap. I wonder if it still exists in my time. If it does, I will buy it just to remember him.

"I smell you as well," he answers. "When you arrived it was one of the first things I noticed about you, your smell. Like roses and sage and summer. I thought it was your soap, but I smell it even now."

"Is *that* why you held me at gunpoint?" I tease.

"No," he replies. "But it might be why I failed to shoot you on the spot. Let's pray that when the Germans come they haven't just bathed."

I laugh, but as I take in his perfect face and his broad smile, something cracks inside me at the same time. He is so many things, too many things. He can't die in the war, can he? Thirty million soldiers did, but it feels as if he deserves some special protection they didn't receive. I guess this is how every woman alive feels when her husband or son goes to war, except he's not my husband and he's not my son and I shouldn't care quite as much as I do.

"If your mother had known about the war," I tell him, "she'd have begged you to escape, you know."

He raises a brow. "Shall I leave some sort of welcome basket for the Nazis then, when I hand them my farm?"

"Better than handing them your sister."

"I can't hit her over the head with a club to make her leave," he says. "Despite what you think of me, I have my limits."

I close my eyes, willing myself to stop feeling upset. I can't make them do what they should and it might not make a difference anyway, but I can't stop wishing things were different.

"I'd agree to let you hit her over the head, just this once."

"You worry an awful lot about my sister for someone who never mentions her own," he replies.

I don't want to talk about my sister. At the moment I don't want to talk about anything. "We aren't close," I reply. "And my childhood isn't full of happy memories like yours. So there's not much to say."

His index finger glides, for a single breath, over the back of my hand. "Not everything you tell me needs to be happy, you know. Just give me one good memory, and one bad."

I swallow. I have to reach back pretty far to get to the good memories of Kit, and even those are laced with bad. "When we were little, we used to go swimming. We'd pretend we were mermaids and we'd lay on top of the water and compete to see who had better mermaid hair."

"What's mermaid hair?"

I laugh. "I don't even know. Long, and very wet. You'd get it good and soaked and then just kind of let it splay out over the surface of the water. Kit won," I say, my laugh smaller. "Every time." It's something I haven't let myself think of in years. And it's not a good memory. Telling him now doesn't make me happy. It makes me feel sick to my stomach.

He reaches out to pull a lock of hair free from this morning's updo. "She had more beautiful hair than you?" he asks, brow furrowed. "That's hard to imagine."

It's the closest he's ever come to paying me a compliment. I would like to point that out but hold back. "Our hair was identical, actually. Pale blonde, never got a real haircut."

"If your hair was identical, then how do you know she won?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. She just did. She always won everything." I begin picking up the remnants of our dinner. "We should go. Marie will be home soon."

His hand wraps gently around my wrist. "Now give me a bad memory."

I glance up at him. His face is earnest, but he has no idea what he's asking.

"Let's just leave it at the mermaid hair," I reply. "My bad isn't like other people's bad."

His hand is still on my wrist, keeping us connected when I want nothing more than to pull away and curl up somewhere.

"I don't care how bad it is," he says, sounding irritated. "I just want it to

be something *real*."

My temper finally frays too thin. I'm so tired of the implication that I'm fake somehow simply because I want to keep some things to myself. My mother thinks I'm evil for being what I am, and he thinks I'm evil for trying to pretend I'm anything else, and the fact that I can never win exhausts me.

"Fine, you want real?" I ask. My voice is hard. "Here you go: Kit had to have her tonsils out and my mother stayed in the hospital with her. And when she finally came home, I told her I hated her and wished she had stayed away. She was just a little girl, and I was awful to her. There's your bad memory."

He tips his head. "I doubt you were some kind of demon child who said and did terrible things to the innocent. Something must have prompted it."

I swallow. "I don't have some pretty excuse for it. I was jealous. That's it."

"Why?"

I stare at my lap, at the tiny roses dotting the dress I changed into after mass. In truth, it was a lifetime of slights both great and small that led to my jealousy, but it's too much detail for the question he's asking, so I choose the most relevant.

"When I was seven I got meningitis, which is usually fatal. I was in a hospital about an hour from home for two weeks and my parents didn't come see me once. My mom told me afterward that all she felt when the doctor called to say I'd pulled through was disappointment. Seeing how different things were for Kit..." My voice breaks and I stop talking, shocked that even now, all these years later, I'm still upset. I rise and grab the crutches, desperately needing privacy. I've never told anyone that story and I have no idea why I shared it now, but I just want to be alone.

He's in front of me before I've even raised my head. "Where are you going?"

I glance away, feeling overwrought and humiliated by my disclosure. "Inside."

He pulls my crutches away from me, throwing them behind him. "Hey!" I shout. "What the—"

He pulls me hard against his chest, arms bound around me so tightly I can barely breathe, my nose pressed to his sternum.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm so sorry it was like that for you."

There's a lump in my throat. Something that happened ages ago shouldn't have me so upset, but it does, and I'm torn between wanting to be alone until

this feeling goes away and wanting to stay right where I am, my head to his warm chest, breathing him in, feeling his heart beat against my cheekbone.

"I didn't tell you that story so you'd feel sorry for me."

"You told me because you were mad," he says.

One arm still pulls me close, but the other is on my chin now, forcing me to look him in the eye, and suddenly it feels like I can't get a full breath. I feel too much...and I think it has as much to do with him as it does the sister I lost. Because I am going to lose him too, whether it's because I'm leaving or because of the war that looms. I'm back where I've been too many times in my life, desperately wishing there was a bargain I could strike with God when I know it won't work.

"I'm sorry I pushed you so hard," he says. "I just think you've got secrets that will poison you if you keep holding on to them the way you are."

"What about your secrets?" I ask, my voice cracking. "Marie still has no idea why you came back. And if she did, she wouldn't insist on staying here, which she shouldn't because you—" My voice breaks. "You are going to *die* here if you don't explain to her what's really going on."

He holds my gaze. "I didn't think you cared."

Tears roll down my face. "I don't. I don't care at all."

We hear the sound of bike tires over gravel and step apart. Marie is walking her bike into the barn, but he continues to hold me there, as if he's trying to capture something before it passes.

"Oh," says Marie. He's finally let me go but her eyes are wide, taking the two of us in. "Were you crying? Is everything okay?"

Henri hands me my crutches and I propel myself forward, passing her on my way to the house. "I'm just tired," I reply. "But everything is fine."

I'm lying, again, of course. I'm lying about so many things to so many people I don't even know what the truth is anymore.

K it hits the water with an unimpressively small splash. It's our favorite game these days, swinging on the rope to see who will land farther. I hold my breath, waiting for her golden head to emerge, and when it finally does she is laughing. Her little arms paddle furiously, propelling her back to where the water is shallow enough to stand.

When she's finally near me she flips onto her back and floats, pulling her hair up so it is flat along the water's surface. "Look at my hair," she says. "Do I look like a mermaid?"

Yes. No. There's a small bite of unhappiness inside me as I decide on an answer. Kit is adorable, everyone's favorite. I can't blame them for it, really—she's my favorite too. But at the same time I can't help the small sting of envy I feel toward her. Why couldn't any of it be shared, all the love and attention that gets sent her way?

"Yes," I reply, swallowing down my envy.

She dives under water and heads for the shore again while I paddle listlessly, sulking over thoughts Kit will never understand. She grabs the rope again and begins to swing, pushing herself off the tree again and again, trying to gain momentum.

It isn't her fault. I could be the *only* child and I still wouldn't be the favorite. But sometimes it feels as if she's stolen what she has from me. If Kit and Steven didn't exist, I might be able to convince myself the problem was my mother. But they do, which leaves no doubt that the problem is me. I never saw it more clearly than when my mother stayed with Kit at the

hospital as summer began. Such a small thing, but even now the sadness I felt wells in my throat, clogs it.

Kit continues to swing, going higher and higher, but her joy suddenly makes me mad.

"If you go too far, I'm not coming after you!" I shout and she sticks her tongue out at me, knowing good and well that I'll come for her if she can't swim back on her own.

I cleaned the house top-to-bottom on the day they came home from the hospital. I had visions of my mother smiling, looking pleased, or maybe proud of me, for once, but even an hour after they arrived, she still hadn't noticed. She didn't even seem to notice *me*.

I picked up, I finally whispered, and that's when she looked at me with her flat eyes and her mouth a thin, bitter line.

"You know what would be more helpful?" she asked. "If just once you would not stand there looking like a beaten dog."

Maybe she was right to be irritated. It's not as if I'd cleaned the house out of an honest desire to help. I did it merely hoping for a single crumb of the attention she showered on Kit.

Now, watching Kit swing on the rope, I wonder why I bothered. *Why did I try to make her happy when nothing I do ever makes her happy? I shouldn't have. I should have just asked why she hates me so much, why she never visited me in the hospital.* I picture it hard, hard enough that it feels real.

I hear Kit land in the water but the world has turned dark and air seems to rush around me. I have no idea what's happening, or how to make it stop. I land hard in the kitchen, naked and dripping water. My mother stands there, talking on the phone. Her eyes widen and I panic, as if I've been caught in a terrible lie. I scramble into a ball, waiting for the sting of her hand, for her raised voice, wishing desperately I was back in the lake...

And then I am. I'm back in the lake.

And I'm alone. Kit is gone and I'm completely alone.

The world is silent, empty.

And I begin to scream just to fill it back up with something.



"AMELIE," pleads a voice. "Wake up. You're dreaming."

My eyes open. Henri is sitting on the edge of the bed beside me, his hands gently shaking my shoulders.

My sister is dead. When will I wake and not be surprised by this? My sister is dead and it's still my fault, all of it. And this secret I've kept for nearly a decade suddenly feels too heavy to carry on my own anymore. I don't feel capable of lying about it anyway—not to him.

"My sister is dead," I whisper. "I should have told you." I roll to my side and begin to cry. He sits with me, his hand on my shoulder.

"It was just a dream," he says gently. "Just a nightmare."

What's he going to think of me when he knows the truth? I came here not because I was brave but because I was such a damn coward I couldn't continue to face my sister in dreams. Such a coward I couldn't bring myself to admit to Henri I'm the reason she drowned.

I take a shuddering breath. "No," I whisper. "It wasn't. My sister is dead. She kept coming into my dreams, telling me to find Marie."

He pushes the hair from my face. His jaw is open, confusion and doubt in his eyes. "I don't understand. She died...recently?"

I look away. "No, she died when I was eleven. It was my fault. I was supposed to be watching her, but I time traveled by accident and she drowned."

Instead of pulling away, he sinks to the floor so we are face-to-face. He looks horrified, and sad, and then he pulls me against his chest and holds me there, tightly. I'm frozen, relishing the feel of him and the steady thump-thump-thump of his heart while I wait for the other shoe to drop, for what I'm telling him to sink in: my sister is dead and it's all on my hands.

"If you time traveled by accident, how does that possibly make this your fault?" he asks.

There are ways to spin almost anything to make yourself sound blameless, but I am definitely not that. Just ask anyone in my home town.

"When Kit died, my mother let people think I did it because I was jealous. And she was right. I was. It happened because I was jealous. That's why I time traveled."

He pulls back just enough to see my face. "An accident is an accident," he says. "Regardless of the reason it happened."

"My mother doesn't see it that way," I whisper.

His brow furrows. "Your mother was the adult. And she should have known that at such a young age time travel is out of your control. She made a

poor choice, and continues to make a poor choice, by telling you you're to blame."

I want to believe him. I do. But there's a decade of recrimination behind me, insisting I shouldn't get off so easy. "But if I hadn't time-traveled, it wouldn't have happened."

His face is inches from mine. He gives me a sad smile as he pushes the hair off my face. "My mother blamed herself when my father died," he says quietly. "She went to visit him where he was posted, arranged a weekend pass for him. His regiment deployed while he was there, so he got sent to another one going to Caporetto, which is where he died. Would he have been killed anyway? Probably. But my mother felt as if his death rested on her head...just as I feel her death rests on mine."

I meet his eyes for the first time since the conversation began. "How could your mother's death be your fault? You weren't even *here*."

He stares at his hands, now entwined with mine. "If I hadn't gone away to Oxford, I might have convinced her not to leave. And if I die in this war you claim is coming, Marie will find a way to blame herself. She will be convinced there was something she could have done." His eyes search mine, darker, urging me to understand. "So if some of the guilt must rest on your head, if you refuse to see that you were an innocent little girl given a task that was beyond you, so be it. But you need to know that it doesn't make you evil. It just means you're human. Each of us is presented with infinite choices, and we never know whether they were wrong or right ones until it's too late."

I nod, swallowing around this lump in my throat. What he's said...it doesn't relieve my guilt, but it normalizes it. It gives me a single moment or two in which I can believe it's possible I'm not a monster, not something inherently evil and cursed. Maybe, like his mother, I'm just someone who made the wrong choice.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He rises from the side of the bed and I have to resist the impulse to reach for his arm.

"You'll be okay?" he asks.

I nod, but the dream is still too recent. I don't want to see that empty lake again. He pauses and then goes to the chair across the room.

"Close your eyes," he says. "I'll stay until you fall asleep."

I shouldn't accept this. He rises early and he's going to be exhausted. But I don't want him to go. "Thank you, Henri," I say settling into the pillow. "You

can ridicule me for this in the morning. I won't get mad."

His mouth lifts. "You take all the fun out of it by giving me permission."

"Well since you're going to ridicule me anyway, can you pull the chair closer?"

He laughs but he does it, coming right up beside me and resting his palm on my forehead. "Sleep, little thief. I'll make sure you're kept safe."

"I know," I say quietly. "You've been doing it since I arrived."

And with his hand on my head, I float off into a dreamless sleep.

When I wake in the morning, the sun is pouring through the windows and Henri is gone, though I know he stayed because when I woke just before dawn he was asleep in the chair, his hand still on my head. No one's ever done that for me before, but I guess I've also never been able to bring myself to ask for it either.

There's no sign of the sweet version of Henri when he comes in that day at lunch. He hasn't shaved and there are circles under his eyes. I blame myself for both.

"Amelie needs a dress for the dance," Marie-Therese tells him. "Can you drive us to Reims in the morning?"

I glance up from the peas I'm shelling. Marie hadn't even mentioned the dance to me prior to now, but suddenly it's as if we've spoken of nothing else for days on end. I can't say I particularly share her interest, since I imagine the evening will be spent watching her dance while every other girl within twenty miles throws herself at Henri.

His eyes linger on me for just a moment. "No," he says. "I'm busy this week. And she has dresses."

I shrug. "I don't need a dress. I'll wear the blue. And it's not like *I'm* trying to win anyone over," I remind her with a knowing look.

"Nor I," she replies primly. "But the blue is not good for dancing and nothing else you have is fancy enough."

Henri's fork lands on his plate with a *clang*. "She won't be doing any dancing, Marie."

I frown. I'd come to the same conclusion, but whether I dance or not will

be my decision, not his. And why shouldn't I dance? Is he worried I'll get in his way with *Claudette*?

"I might," I say sharply. "And it would be nice to get a new dress."

"Good luck walking, then," says Henri. "Because as I already told you, I don't have time."

He's not that busy, he's just being an asshole for some reason I can't fathom. Fortunately, I'm pretty good at being an asshole too.

"That's fine," I say with a smile. "I'll see if André can take us instead."



BY SOME MIRACULOUS feat of scheduling, Henri decides he has time to drive us to Reims after all. I try hard not to gloat but he's surly the entire trip anyway, muttering about a wasted morning and making it sound as if the entire fate of the vineyard will be determined by the hour or two our trip will take.

Reims is a true city, busy and vital, not that I'm given much of a chance to see it. Henri pulls up to one clothing store, helps me out of the car and informs Marie-Therese we have thirty minutes or can walk home.

The shop is different from shops back home, or even Le Bon Marché, where Henri took me in Paris. Instead of racks of clothes, a shopgirl brings you dresses to look at, based on your size. Though it's supposedly elegant, I find it irritating, especially when she pushes me to consider a dress that looks like something a toddler would wear on Easter.

Fortunately, Marie is hell bent on finding the right dress and sends each of them back with the dignity of a queen until, just before the thirty-minute mark, one finally meets with her approval—a bright poppy red, with a gathered bodice that cuts low across the chest and tiny cap sleeves. She smiles at me in the mirror. "He won't know what to do with himself," she says.

I raise a brow. "Who won't?"

She schools her features. "André of course," she replies innocently. "Who else?"



THE FRIDAY before the dance is the first evening Marie has been gone all week. Henri asks if I want to come outside, grinning in a way that makes me suspicious. He heads out and I follow on the crutches. After nearly four weeks with a broken ankle, I've almost forgotten there was a time when I could barely manage on them. He spreads a blanket in front of the hay bale and helps me lower myself to the ground. I let him, even though I no longer need help.

The sun is already on its way out, solidifying into a fixed ball of color, far to the west.

"I've brought you a treat—a very large chocolate bar—but you need to earn it."

I glance up at him. "That sounds dirty."

He gets a slow smile on his face. "For a woman who's never been with a man your mind certainly goes in that direction a great deal. Do you want to hear about the very large chocolate bar or not?"

I roll my eyes. "*You're* the one making this dirty. Talking about the *very large* chocolate bar. So how *large* is it?"

He meets my gaze. "Shockingly large. Far more than you can fit in your greedy little mouth."

Your greedy little mouth. My stomach clenches, an unexpected spike of want deep in my gut.

"Anyway," he continues, "do you want to learn how you will earn the chocolate, or do you want to continue to drive this conversation in a very inappropriate direction?"

In truth, I'd like to continue sending this conversation in an inappropriate direction, but I suppose I've already passed into the realm of *unladylike* and shouldn't push it. "Fine, how do I earn the chocolate?"

"By eating it with me down by the lake." He pulls the bar out of a saddlebag and opens it, letting the smell waft my way. I've always had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with chocolate, or did until I arrived in 1938, where sweets have been extremely hard to come by. Now I think I might punch a small child to get my hands on it.

I narrow my eyes at him. "I'm not going to the lake."

He shrugs. "Fine. Then I guess the chocolate is mine." He waves it in front of my face and I breathe it in. I can almost taste its scent on my lips.

"Wave that thing in front of me one more time and I will snatch it right out of your hands."

He breaks off a small piece, relishing it as it melts against his tongue. "Such good chocolate too."

"It's not that big anyhow," I reply. "I've seen much, much larger."

"Next you'll tell me size doesn't matter," he says, laughing as he breaks off another small piece.

He waves it in front of my face and I'm done. I lunge for it, landing atop him, scrambling, without a thought in the world about whether my dress gets filthy or the weight of my cast bruises his shins. It lasts all of two seconds before I find myself flipped onto my back, his weight pinning me down in the dirt.

He grins, triumphant. "Did you really think that would work, little thief? I'm twice your size." We are both laughing, struggling like children. There's nothing sexual about it, but my pulse is racing and I feel set free, abandoned from my normal restraint. Nothing matters more than winning. Even if I wind up shoving that chocolate bar in the dirt.

My hand snakes out and I pinch his side hard, the way I once did with Steven. Somehow I'm certain he's as ticklish as my brother once was—and I'm right. His body jerks sideways in surprise and I use the momentum to flip him on his back straddling him with my hands pressed to his chest.

"Give me the chocolate," I demand.

His expression has changed, eyes glittering with something dark and determined I haven't seen there before, mouth slightly ajar.

"No," he says. His voice is rough.

I reach for the chocolate, my face hovering just over his when I feel it. Only his pants and a bit of my bunched-up dress separate us, but there's no denying the size and the status of the thing directly between my legs. His face, an inch below mine, looks tortured and when I shift he flinches, releasing a small sound that contains so many things—pain and restraint and defeat and hunger, all rolled into one.

He uses my surprise to flip me again, and when I'm under him he holds some of his weight off me, but not all of it. His breathing is heavy as his eyes brush over my face, resting on my mouth. I'm fairly certain my breath has stopped entirely.

I want what will come next so badly that I swear I can feel it happening. My lips swell with that future kiss, my body taut and tormented, skin eager for the rough press of his unshaved jaw. I already know how soft his mouth will feel, what it will be like to slide my hands through his thick hair and pull

him closer. It's all I can do not to arch into him to make it happen faster.

He flinches. "You may have the chocolate," he says, removing himself.

His absence feels like rejection, and it is knife-sharp. It makes me want to lash out at him somehow, or merely have a tantrum I can blame on him.

"Too much excitement for you?" I ask.

His eyes lower to my chest, where my nipples are poking against the thin material of the dress. "Not just for me, it would seem," he says, and then he saunters away, completely at ease with the entire exchange while I am left with some combination of furious and confused and so excited it borders on pain.

And I should be none of these things. I scoot back to the blanket and lean against the bale of hay, looking for any possible way to justify what nearly happened, justify how much I *wanted* it to happen.

Mostly I'm just astonished it happened at all. I've never reacted to Mark in that way. Granted, we've never fought over a chocolate bar before—Mark wouldn't act like Henri did, taunting me with it like a child. But still, I wanted that kiss more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. I wanted it like a drowning man wants something to grab onto—desperately, gaspingly. I still do. I've been so proud of my restraint all this time but now I have to wonder if I've managed to hold onto my virginity simply because no one ever made me want to lose it.

In that moment with Henri just now? I wanted to lose it.

On the night of the dance, after bathing, I slide the dress over my head. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever owned and the color suits me perfectly, a swirling red flame that sets off the pale yellow of my hair and the gold in my skin from these weeks in the sun.

All I can think of is Henri's reaction to it. I picture a repeat of last night—of his hands around my wrists and the feeling of him pressed against me. It shouldn't matter what he thinks, but I've never hoped for a reaction more in my life.

Will he ask me to dance? Will things be different between us? As hard as it is to imagine, it's even harder to imagine that they *won't* have changed after last night.

"*Dieu*," says Marie-Therese when she enters the room to do my hair. "No one will even look at poor Claudette Loison with you in the room."

"And they won't look at me with *you* in the room," I reply as she pushes me into a seat. In an amethyst dress, her eyes look impossibly green and her black hair shines, standing in perfect waves to her shoulders. It seems nearly impossible that André would choose any girl in the country over her.

"Pah," she says. "I'm not interested in anyone there."

"And I am?" I ask in the mirror.

Her eyes meet mine. "Aren't you?" she asks. "Just a little bit?"

I blush. Is it so obvious, my crush on her brother? God, I hope not. "No, I have a boyfriend, remember?"

She raises a brow at that but wisely chooses not to say anything. When she's finished with my hair, she insists on mascara and red lipstick. I've

never worn red lipstick in my life because the last thing I need is to call more attention to my lips, but she insists it's the style and I'll admit that it's a nice effect, the red lips with the red dress. If it weren't for the cast, I'd be feeling pretty elegant right now.

We exit the room just as Henri comes into the kitchen, looking extremely handsome in his freshly pressed shirt. He tells Marie she looks nice and then turns toward me and does a double take—exactly what I'd hoped for, except the surprise of the first glance is followed by unhappiness upon the second.

"I'll be outside," he says, turning on his heel. "Let's get this over with."

Marie hasn't noticed the slight because she's busy gathering things, but I feel it deep in the center of my chest. I walk outside, directly to the trunk of the car, and throw the crutches inside myself, ignoring his hand when he tries to help me. All this effort, I realize with a sinking stomach, was put forth on his account. And for a moment when he first walked in the room, I thought maybe he was going to make it worthwhile. Instead he's acting like it pisses him off.



THE DANCE IS HELD in a mansion which was once, apparently, the palace of some lesser prince. Though the decorations are meager, the place is already so adorned with crown molding and frescoes and gold filigree that adding anything to it would have been overkill.

We enter the ballroom to find the dance floor completely full. Most of the couples are full-on swing dancing, something I doubt I'd be able to manage even without a cast and definitely not with one. In my head I'd pictured 1938 as a dark time in the world, a time in which people began tightening their belts and preparing for war. But it isn't that way at all. These people are my age, for the most part, and they are all so *alive*, so silly and happy and enthusiastic, just like twenty-somethings anywhere. They still believe this year, this time in their lives, is a big, fabulous beginning and they are exuberant about it. It makes what lies ahead for them that much more heartbreaking.

We get five feet into the room and Marie is whisked away by some friendly boy who waves to Henri as they go. Henri remains by my side, looming over me with those broad shoulders as if I'm something highly

fragile, likely to shatter if touched. We move into the room with his hand on the small of my back, his eyes daring anyone to get close to us.

Claudette, however, doesn't heed the warning. The moment she spies him she's moving toward us, and he doesn't seem to mind when *she* gets too close.

You look lovely, Henri tells her, and my heart begins a long slide to the floor.

He couldn't say a single word to me tonight—not when he walked into the house nor on the entire drive here—but two seconds into seeing *Claudette* and he's got a compliment at the ready. It stings more than I can begin to admit.

She grabs his hand, begging him to dance with her, and he demurs with a polite smile, telling her he needs to get me situated first.

"If she wants to dance, go ahead," I tell him, gritting my teeth. *By all means, Henri, if she's so fucking lovely, you should dance with her.* "I'll be fine."

He opens his mouth to argue and I turn to hobble away on my crutches, making the decision for him while I try to persuade myself coming here wasn't a colossal mistake. So what if I wind up alone in a corner all night, watching Henri dance with his future wife? I get a firsthand view of a 1930's dance in pre-war France.

"You're not ditching me that easily," says Henri behind me.

I look back at him, feeling inexplicably upset. "Go ahead. You obviously wanted to dance with her and I'm perfectly capable of finding a chair for myself."

"You don't seriously think I want to swing dance?" he asks with a brow raised. He grabs a chair at an empty table and holds it for me.

"Why not?" I ask. "She's very pretty. I'd think that would induce you to dance whether you wanted to or not."

His brow furrows. "I'll get us cocktails," he says. "Perhaps that will improve your mood."

He walks away, but no sooner has he left than a man I don't recognize drops into his seat.

"Exactly who I was hoping to talk to!" he says. "I thought I'd have to wait until Henri was in the bathroom before I got my chance."

He's young and handsome in a slightly more polished way than Henri. More like Mark, actually. To my surprise I find I don't prefer it.

“Have we met?” I ask.

He smiles. “From what I’ve heard, the Durands only let you leave home to attend mass, and since I try to make sure I’m still *asleep* during mass, meeting you has proved difficult. My name is Luc. What would you like to drink?”

“I think Henri—”

Luc waves his hand. “Henri will come back with something dull. Have you ever had a sidecar?” He grabs someone passing by and pushes some francs in his hand, before clapping him on the back. “There. He’ll be back with our drinks in a moment, but hopefully I’ll have persuaded you to run off to Paris with me before he returns. I doubt your cousin is going to let me linger long enough to see you finish a drink.”

“Paris?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says with a crooked smile. “We’re heading there once they’ve run out of booze here. I promise you a night you’ll never forget.” He gives me such an unapologetically lecherous look that I can’t help but laugh.

“Got Durand away from her already?” says one of two men approaching the table.

Luc leans toward me. “Here come my friends, trying to move in the moment I’ve got you to myself. They’re very bad people. I don’t know why I like them.” He turns to them as they take seats at the table. “Go away. I got to her first.”

They both laugh, introducing themselves to me in English, though they don’t speak it with Luc’s ease.

Henri is near the bar with drinks in hand, surrounded by a half circle of females vying for his attention. I’m sure he’s told all of them they look *lovely* too, though he appears to be trying to get away from them. I accept the drink from Luc when it’s delivered, taking some small amount of consolation from Luc’s conversation in French with Jean and Marc, rude though it is.

No wonder Henri’s been keeping her to himself, says Jean.

Can you marry a cousin? asks Marc.

No, but I bet you can fuck one if you keep it quiet, replies Luc.

Luc turns to me, asking about my trip here and how long I plan to stay and if I’m ready to leave for Paris yet because the dance is already boring him. Suddenly Henri is looming over us both. He sets a drink in front of me with an irritated glance at my half-empty sidecar.

Trying to get my cousin drunk, Barbier? he asks Luc.

I was hoping I might, Luc replies. *No luck thus far, however.*

I've never seen Henri smile in quite such a threatening way before. *If I see you near her again, I'm going to smash your pretty face wide open,* he says quietly, still smiling as if his words are pleasant, *and there won't be enough liquor in the world to get you laid. Now get out of my seat.*

Luc raises a brow and shrugs, leaning over my hand with a broad smile. "Your cousin is telling me I need to leave. But if you want to come to Paris with us, let me know. I'll help you escape." He moves away with a wink, and Henri drops into the chair he vacated.

"Stay away from Luc," he says. "He's not a good person."

I finish my sidecar. "Tell me something, Henri, who *are* the good people in Saint Antoine? Because as yet I've only heard you mention the bad."

He glances over at me. "There aren't any."

"Except for you?"

He picks up his glass and empties it. "Not even me," he replies.

We watch Marie dancing, flushed and happy. I envy her mobility and feel sorry for her at the same time—this is who she could be and should be all the time, if their lives were less closed off.

"She should be at university," I say.

"I know," he says. "She deserves far more than a quiet life on the farm."

I glance at him. "So in spite of all your garbage about a woman's place and being ladylike, you'd be okay with her working, maybe doing something that isn't traditional for females?"

He looks at me incredulously. "I can't believe you feel you need to ask me that. Of course I would. I'd want her to do whatever makes her happy."

"Then you must see that it's not right, keeping her stuck here."

His jaw tightens. "I'm doing it to protect your kind and your way of life. And a lot of things aren't right, but we're all going to have to learn to live with them."

The music changes, and everyone on the dance floor begins doing a particular dance I don't recognize. "What is that they're doing?" I ask him.

"The Lindy Hop," he says, as if it's obvious. "It's named after your compatriot, Charles Lindbergh. I'd think you'd know that."

I lean toward him, still watching the dance floor. "He died not long after I was born. He's only a compatriot to me in the way Joan of Arc is one to you."

He laughs. "You do realize Joan of Arc lived 500 years ago, yes? It's not

as if she and I just graduated a few years apart.”

I don’t laugh, the way I normally might. Disappointment has left me feeling dangerously unstable. If I wasn’t on crutches I’d already have left.

“You seem unhappy tonight,” he says quietly, but the thought goes no further, because another set of girls is approaching the table to talk to Henri. He rises, kissing their cheeks, telling them both in turn how beautiful they look tonight. I must be the only female in the entire damn room he can’t say it to, and I’ve had it. I will walk home on the crutches, or perhaps I’ll even go to Paris with Luc. It’s a feeling I’ve experienced many times at home, this misery so deep that I’ll grasp onto anything to keep myself afloat.

He’s talking to them about some fair in Eperney and I grab my crutches and begin striding away without even excusing myself.

I’ve only made it two table lengths away before he’s at my side again, placing his hand on my forearm to hold me in place.

“Where are you going?” he asks. “Come back to the table before some drunk knocks you over.”

I snatch my arm from his grasp, turning my head to meet his eye. “Fuck off, *Henri*,” I hiss. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

His jaw drops. “What the hell is wrong with you tonight? It’s as if you want—” he cuts himself off mid-sentence, glaring at a boy standing just behind me. *She’s not here for your viewing pleasure*, Henri snaps at him. *Look away if you’d like to keep those eyes the rest of the night.*

“What was that about?” I ask.

“He was about to knock into you. I told him to be careful of your ankle.”

I hold his eye. “Really? And what did you say to Luc?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I told him you are engaged. Was I wrong?”

“Yes,” I reply, getting ready to move again. “You were wrong because I don’t need you speaking for me as if I’m a child.” I set my crutches in another direction but am stopped by Marie, who skips toward us, flushed and smiling.

“I’ve found you at last!”

Henri raises a brow. “We’ve been here over an hour and you were on the dance floor the entire time, so don’t pretend you’ve been looking for us.”

“Who were you dancing with?” I ask.

She waves her hand lazily. “Just Xavier. He was in Henri’s class. But I need to rest. Can we sit?” She turns to Henri. “And Claudette is looking for you. You’d better dance with her or there will be hell to pay.”

He frowns. "You'll keep an eye on Amelie?" he asks.

I roll my eyes and begin moving through the crowd again. I'm twenty-one for God's sake. I can't imagine why Henri's decided to act like I'm some three-year-old he's saddled with for the night.

Marie is by my side a moment later. "Can we sit?" she asks. "I'm exhausted."

I'm tempted to mention that I'd be exhausted from dancing too if my ankle wasn't broken, but I already know what she'll say in response: *you wouldn't be here at all if your ankle wasn't broken.*

We grab two chairs and she fans herself with a program of some kind. "Are you having fun?" she asks.

I force myself to smile, watching Claudette pull Henri onto the dance floor. "Yes," I reply. "It's a very nice dance."

For someone who claimed to have no interest in swing dancing, he does it quite well, and that doesn't surprise me. Henri's one of those men for whom athleticism comes easily, naturally. Even the things he *doesn't* want to do, he does well. And as much as he's hurt my feelings tonight, I wish I were the one out there dancing with him.

"They make a pretty couple, don't they?" asks Marie-Therese, observing them.

I shrug. They do, but I refuse to agree to it. "So who's this Xavier?"

"I told you," she says without interest. "Just someone who went to school with Henri."

"He was cute," I say, waiting for a reaction from her. "Is he nice?"

She nods, barely paying attention to the question. "Very."

"He didn't ask you out?"

She takes a sip of her drink. "He did. I told him I couldn't while we still had company here."

I laugh. "Oh my God. You stick me with a broken ankle and then use me as your excuse? It's one date. Why not go out with him?" *And move on from the priest, since you refuse to act on it. Move on with your life so Henri can move on with his.*

"This town is not so big that you can just go on a single date without repercussions. He's someone I'll have to run into for the rest of my life. And speaking of people we keep running into, André is coming this way."

I sigh. André is perfectly nice, but I'm not interested in him in the least and I'm feeling slightly too tired and disgruntled to be pleasant right now.

He holds his hand out to me. "May I have the next dance?"

I shake my head. "I can't get out there. Not in a cast."

His eyes twinkle. "But you could if they played a *slow* song, couldn't you?" As if on cue, the music changes, and a ballad begins. "Don't tell me I bribed him for no reason," says André with a grin.

He leads me to the dance floor and we pass Henri and Claudette, who are just on the way off. Henri's eyes darken as we pass. "Your cousin doesn't seem to like me too much," says André.

"Don't take it personally," I reply. "He doesn't like me too much either."

He places one hand politely on my waist and clasps the other and we begin to dance the way they mandated in high school, one body width apart. I find myself thinking about last night with Henri and the chocolate bar, the way we were pressed together, that desperation in his eyes when I was on top of him. How was that only yesterday, when today I'm apparently the only unattractive female in the whole town? My God, what a wasted effort this all was.

André asks if I'm having a nice time and I smile at him. "This is my first dance of the evening, so at least I can say it's improving."

The floor crowds quickly and he pulls me closer. "Here," he says, after a moment, "come with me. People are getting too close to your cast."

He pulls me into the hallway and off to a balcony on the other side, and we are suddenly alone. "Oh," I say. "I thought you were taking me to another part of the dance floor."

He pulls me toward him, holding me closer than necessary. "We can still dance," he says, his breath gusting against my ear before he pulls me closer still, throwing me off balance just enough that I land against his chest. "It's better when it's private like this, I think."

I pull back but he doesn't release me. "I think this will look a little inappropriate if anyone comes out here," I say, trying to wriggle from his grasp.

"Who cares?" he asks. "Are you really so worried about what your cousin will say?"

His head lowers as if he plans to kiss me, although I think I've made it amply clear that I'm trying to push him off. I'm saved by Marie-Therese, who throws open the curtains and stands there looking at us with wide eyes.

"Henri is looking for you," she says, nervously. "We're leaving now."

"What a shock," says André drily, slowly releasing me. I stumble in my

haste to get away and hobble back toward the ballroom while Marie *thanks* him for watching me and then runs to my side.

“Are you okay?” she asks, steering us down the side hall instead of the main ballroom.

“I’m fine,” I say between my teeth. “Although I don’t understand why the hell you just *thanked* him for watching me. You treat that family like royalty.”

She looks at me uncertainly. “Henri and I have no family at all. No grandparents, no parents, no aunts or uncles. If something happens, we may need to rely on the people of the town to help us, and because of that, alienating anyone is a bad idea, and alienating the Beauvoirs is an especially bad idea, because they are wealthy and employ a lot of people here, and much of the town will take their cues from them.”

I sigh. I was about to insist I wasn’t going to read to Madame Perot again but I see Marie’s point. She can’t afford to piss people off, and I only have a few more weeks here, so I’m certainly not going to piss anyone off on their behalf. It’s not as if André actually did anything. He just acted like my opinion didn’t matter the first moment he had the option to ignore it. What is it Henri said? *Don’t judge a man until you’ve seen him without an audience*. I suppose now I understand what he meant.

“Where are we going, anyway?” I ask.

“To the front,” she says, worrying her lip. “Henri has your crutches.”

“So he sent you after me like I was a child on the loose,” I reply. “I guess that gave him some extra time with Claudette.”

Her lips twitch. “Actually I was the one who demanded he wait, because I was worried he would wind up killing André if he went out there and saw the wrong thing.”

I groan. “Jesus, Marie! What did you think we were doing out there?”

She lifts a shoulder. “There’s only one reason to go on a balcony with a man alone.”

Henri is pacing in front like a caged tiger, and he rounds on me the second we emerge, “Had fun out there, did you?”

“Fuck you, Henri,” I hiss. “I didn’t even know we were going onto a balcony. He said he was worried about my cast and we were going somewhere with more room.”

His eyes remain narrowed. “Are women really so naïve in your time that you didn’t understand what that meant?”

I move toward the exit. “Maybe men in my time just aren’t so underhanded about their motives.”

His hand wraps around my bicep to stop me. “Did he try something?”

I glance at Marie, who’s looking extremely worried. Her eyes plead with me not to make things worse. “We danced for all of two seconds and he asked me why you don’t like him,” I snap. “Satisfied? You were so determined all night to make sure I didn’t have any fun, and rest assured, I didn’t.”

We don’t say another word to each other the entire way home. He drives, his jaw locked tight, while I sit beside him, my hands clenched in my lap. Only Marie-Therese speaks, chattering on in back about the band and the clothes and the drinks, as if it was the most spectacular night ever, when I know for a fact she didn’t enjoy it as much as she wants to pretend.

“And wasn’t Amelie lovely tonight, Henri?” she asks as we pull up to the house. “Not a man in the room could take his eyes off her.”

I wait. I wait for one kind word and I know he’s not going to give it to me.

“Perhaps if her dress was less bright,” he replies, “it wouldn’t have been an issue.”

It hurts. All I wanted from the night was for him to notice me. I’ve got no business wanting that, but I did want it, badly, and he never gave an inch. Instead, he acted like I was a burden, and it reminds me very much of my childhood. Of feeling desperate for a single word of approval or praise or love and only getting a list of what I’d done wrong instead.

Marie climbs from the car without waiting for him, calling him several choice words in French as she slams her door, and I try to follow, pushing my door open and climbing out less steadily.

“Just wait,” he grumbles, turning off the car.

I ignore him, hobbling slowly toward the house over uneven ground.

“Amelie,” he shouts, “just wait. You’re not supposed to be walking out here without your crutches, especially in the dark.”

I round on him. “Don’t worry. My dress is so *bright* and *garish* and *attention-grabbing* I’m sure it’ll provide sufficient light.”

He walks toward me, contrition replacing some of the anger that’s been on his face since we left the dance. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Your dress wasn’t too bright. I shouldn’t have said it.”

I begin to walk away again. “Come on,” he calls. “I said I was sorry.”

What's the matter?"

I take a deep breath. I refuse to cry over this. I've suffered far worse and I don't need his approval. I'm never even going to see him again in a few weeks anyway.

"When Marie asked you, not once but twice, if you thought I looked nice, all you had to say was yes," I hiss. "Don't worry. I'd never in a million years believe you *meant* it. But you couldn't even do that much. And it wouldn't hurt if you were an asshole to everyone, or maybe it wouldn't hurt as much... but I saw you tonight and you're not. You were only an asshole to me."

He looks uncertain for the first time all night. "Of course you look nice," he offers.

I slowly raise my eyes to his. Every hope I had for the evening is gone, and it leaves me feeling hollowed out inside, emptied. Even replying to him takes energy I no longer seem to have. "It would already have been meaningless if you'd said it the first two times Marie asked. For you to say it now because you think I'm upset means even less. I don't give a shit what you think anyway. It's just time for me to go home."

I take the crutches from him and walk inside the house, certain I'll hear something about my unladylike mouth before I reach my door, but it doesn't come. Instead he walks up behind me in the kitchen, where not a single light flickers, and places a hand on my shoulder.

"You're exquisite," he says quietly. "You're exquisite when you're outside feeding the chickens and when you're in here scrubbing laundry, sweaty and annoyed with me. You took my breath away when I walked in the room tonight...something I assumed you must realize since no one at the dance could look away from you."

I swallow and turn toward him. His dismissal tonight hurt more than I could even admit to myself until now, and my eyes threaten to well over. He places one hand on my waist and I feel like I can scarcely breathe.

"Then why didn't you say so?" I whisper, my voice rough. "You acted like you didn't even want me there."

He glances between us, at his hand on my waist, at the hint of cleavage rising above the bodice of the dress, and takes a deep breath. "I didn't want you there tonight because I knew exactly what would happen."

"What did you think would happen?"

His lips press to the top of my head. "That everyone would discover a secret I wanted to keep to myself," he says quietly, and then he turns and

walks away.

Nothing has changed, and everything has changed.
I was awake for a long time after he left me at the door to my room, facing some facts I probably should have faced far sooner—about how much more I feel for Henri than I should, and how much my feelings for Mark seem to pale in comparison. I don't know what this will mean when I go home, but what it means while I'm here is that I can't look at Henri the way I did before. It's more than a crush or infatuation, and maybe it'll all die away when I leave—it would certainly be for the best if it did—but I know now that a part of me wants it to never end.

I'm sitting with Marie at the kitchen table shelling peas when Henri walks in.

"Good morning," he says.

"Good morning," I reply. I am blushing.

"No jokes about murder today, then?" Marie asks, regarding the two of us with amusement in her eyes.

He glances at me and I flush again. Something has shifted between us. It feels dangerous but also beguiling, like a beautifully wrapped gift I know I shouldn't open. I'm drawn toward this thing knowing full well I should head in the opposite direction.



THERE'S a good breeze and the sun is strong, so when Marie leaves for town I grab the laundry basket full of wet sheets and head outside to hang them on

the line, accustomed enough to the cast that I can manage small distances without crutches.

The sheets billow as I hang them and the air is heavy with their fragrance. My dress whips around my legs in the breeze, a stray lock of hair flying across my face. I wonder what it's like here in the fall, in the spring. I picture the winter hard and cold, yet even that has a certain appeal. *I could make Henri cocoa again*, I find myself thinking. A smile crosses my face at the thought when I see Henri climbing the hill, his eyes fixed on nothing but me. I meet his gaze and he doesn't look away. He keeps walking towards me until we stand only feet apart.

His eyes dip to my mouth. "You shouldn't be doing that," he says. "You could fall." His voice seems to come from far away, but his eyes are right here, *on me*, in a way I swear I can feel.

"I'm okay," I reply. "I've gotten used to the cast."

He considers me for a moment. I see the tiniest hint of vulnerability in his eyes. "It's supposed to storm later in the week," he says. "If you'd like to go riding, we might want to go today."

I feel faint. I'm so consumed with whatever this new thing is between us that it's hard to even understand what he's saying.

"I have to read to Madame Perot this afternoon."

"Afterward, then," he says, pulling one end of the sheet from me and draping it over the line.

I smile. "Okay."

His mouth lifts, just a hint of pleasure. "Okay."



HENRI DRIVES me to Madame Beauvoir's a few hours later, the two of us saying little.

"You don't have to do this," he says, "if you don't want to."

I swallow. I desperately *don't* want to do this, and yet I think of Marie last night with her pleading eyes, silently begging me not to cause problems. "She's expecting me. And who will she have to yell at if I'm not there?"

"Isn't that what they have servants for?" he asks with a small smile.

I struggle to return it. I'm probably being paranoid, but I don't want to be anywhere in that house alone with André. Henri, no matter what words come

out of his mouth, sees me as an equal. André treated me like property out on the balcony. And something about that strikes me as a dangerous, especially in a time when women have so few rights.

Henri walks me to the door. Today, it's Andre who answers. He and Henri exchange a look before André gives him a broad smile, one that is too amiable to be believed. Did I actually think he was attractive the first time we met? Because the sight of him is making my skin crawl now. His lips press to my hand for longer than they should and I hear a low noise, a growl, coming from behind me.

"Your cousin is in good hands," André says to Henri as I walk in. He starts to shut the door and Henri puts one large foot over the threshold. "I will be back in precisely ninety minutes," he says to me, and then he leaves with one lingering, particularly hostile glance at André.

"If you're not in the mood to read to my grandmother today," says Andre, "perhaps we could go have lunch somewhere? It's a bit warm out but fortunately we live in town so things are close."

I smile. "That's kind of you, but I love reading to your grandmother," I lie. "She was so helpful last time, correcting my accent."

"Come to lunch with me. Your accent is already quite good, as is your French," he says. He smiles conspiratorially at my look of surprise. "I heard you with my grandmother the last time—there's no way you could have read as well as you did without knowing the language. Don't worry. I won't tell your cousins."

I tighten my grip on the crutches. I am not interested in sharing secrets with André, and if he thinks this gives him some leverage over me, he's very mistaken. "I made a promise to your grandmother," I say, passing him to reach the stairs. "You don't need to show me the way. I remember the room."

He bows his head. "Your dedication is admirable. I'll come up to check on you in a while."

I scurry up the stairs as fast as a woman on crutches can scurry and tap on the door, which is not fully shut and swings open with little pressure. The old woman gives me another narrowed-eye glance and tells me to get on with it.

"It's so lovely to see you today, Madame Perot," I reply in English.

Stop speaking to me in your gibberish and start reading, she replies.

I open the book where we left off and begin, but within seconds she is yelling at me. *Your American accent is like oil in my ears,* she yells. *It's not guh, it's gah. My God they must teach you nothing over there.*

Fortunately, when I ignore her she dozes off. I continue to read, because Henri won't be back for another hour and I'd rather spend time up here than with André downstairs. I begin to read more slowly, though, finally capable of saying the words and translating them as I go.

Madame Perot wakes, her eyes beady, all pupil, and accuses me of talking to the Gypsies outside.

I decide there's no sense in pretending I don't know what she's said. *I didn't see any Gypsies outside*, I reply, *but they've never caused me any problems*.

They're a dirty people, she says, still glaring at me as if I'm lying. *They stole my husband's car once, at the end of the war. A very, very dirty people. I'll keep that in mind, Madame*, I reply, hiding my smile.

I begin to read again and she soon falls back asleep, which is my preference, as it means I'm being neither hit nor yelled at. Unfortunately, it also means she is snoring loudly when André pokes his head in the door.

"Come have tea with me," he says. "My grandmother won't wake again for hours."

I return the book to her nightstand and reluctantly leave the room. "I don't have time for tea, I'm afraid. Henri will be here to get me soon."

"Then come," he says, "we can sit outside until he arrives."

I follow him to the garden on the side of the yard, which is flourishing in the warm July air. "It must be so dull for you, out on the farm," he says.

My dislike for André intensifies. "Not at all. Henri and Marie-Therese are very pleasant company."

"You're very good to them," he says diplomatically, walking closer than seems reasonable, given that I'm on crutches. His hand extends toward the garden. "So here it is. We've created a little bridge over this pond. A sort of mini Giverny if you will. You've seen Monet's paintings, yes?"

I give him a tight smile. His garden is not Giverny by any stretch of the imagination. "Yes. I study art history, remember?"

"Ah, yes, of course," says André, stepping an inch closer. "We should go visit Giverny together. I know the current owners and it's just a few hours by car. Next Saturday perhaps? We will make a day of it."

I blink. I do not want to be alone with this man even here, a mile from the farm. I certainly don't want to be alone with him in a car, hours away. "I'm not sure my cousins would approve."

He raises a brow. "Henri seems rather proprietary of you, don't you think?"

It's a bit unseemly."

I move forward quickly, toward a small stone bench. "I'm sure you are mistaken," I say firmly.

He stills, as if he will argue, but then nods slowly. "Either way, I have no right to interfere. I just worry about you. So what do you think of our little garden?"

I'm loath to compliment anything about this man. "It's beautiful," I say, forcing out the words.

His palm slides over mine. "Your beauty makes all else fade by contrast."

I pull away with another tight smile when suddenly his hand lands on my thigh, his fingers sinking into my flesh through the thin fabric of the dress. I begin to slide away but his free hand has already snaked out to hold my jaw, and just as suddenly his doughy mouth is on mine, thick tongue pushing between my lips, his hand sliding beneath my dress to the juncture of my thighs.

"What the hell are you doing?" I demand. I shove him and he barely moves, just presses harder, doing his level best to get his fingers inside my panties.

"I'm giving you a better option than having it on with your own cousin," he says. "Everyone knows you're fucking Henri."

I jump to my feet, grabbing the crutches. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Anyone with eyes can put together what's happening."

He stands, reaching for me again and I try to step backward but stumble, thrown off balance by the cast, landing on my ass. He leans down and I don't wait for his next move. I grab one of the crutches, which has fallen with me, and swing it straight at his face. I hear the impact, a *thwack*, and his jaw blossoms into an ugly bright red patch that will undoubtedly be a deep purple within the hour.

He holds a hand to it, dazed and astonished. "*Putain*," he gasps. "You think you can do better than me?"

"It would be hard to do *worse* than you," I hiss.

"Fine," he says. "Continue to fuck your cousin instead, American whore." He walks off and leaves me there, lying in the yard with a dirty dress and bleeding hands.

When he's out of sight, the sob that was locked in my throat releases. I'm not even sure why I'm so upset. I wasn't raped. He called me names every

woman hears at some point in her life. It's the adrenaline and my absolute helplessness, I think. I'm not in my own time, I'm not in my own country, and I can't even trust my legs to keep me upright when they're supposed to.

All I want in this moment, oddly enough, is Henri. Henri with his smirk and those eyes that are angry as often as they are kind. Henri who does nothing but ridicule my clumsiness and ask how soon I'm leaving. He is all I want in the world right now, and as bizarre as my life has been and continues to be, that's the most puzzling fact of all.

I dry my face on the inside of my dress and brush myself off, limping to the front of the house, feeling a little more shaky and off-kilter than I normally do—and given how off-kilter I've been since breaking my ankle, that's saying something. Henri is waiting beside the car.

I try to smile, but it feels as if my whole body trembles with the effort.

"What's wrong?" he asks immediately.

"Nothing."

He looks me over, head to foot, and I see rage settling over him like a cloak as he takes in the dirty dress, the cut hands. He takes three large strides until he's directly in front of me. "What happened?"

I could lie and tell him I fell, but it's not going to add up, especially once I insist I will never again set foot in this house. "André tried to kiss me," I tell him. "It turns out the crutches make a fine weapon. He won't try it again." I give him a tremulous smile, one he doesn't return.

"Tell me exactly what happened," he says. His voice is quiet, and lethal. "Everything he did and every word he said."

I limp past him. "It doesn't matter. I dealt with it."

His hand lands on my shoulder to stop me. It's a firm grip, just as André's was, but different somehow. Perhaps simply because I trust Henri. "It does matter. Tell me."

I turn to him. "Fine," I say roughly. I sound angry but it's only so I won't dissolve into tears. "He insisted on sitting in the garden with me to wait for you. Then he kissed me and put his hand up my dress and when I yelled at him he called me an American whore..." There's more, of course, but it seems like I've probably told him enough.

His face is blank for a moment and then morphs into a rage so fierce and absolute it scares me. I wait for the outburst to come but there is nothing. After a moment of stillness, he takes the crutches from me and gently helps me into the car. I'm relieved by his lack of response but surprised by it too.

The ride home is silent, his hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles pale with the pressure. I stare out the window, arguing with myself about what I *didn't* tell him. Yes, it will be awkward to admit there are rumors about us, but maybe he should know, since he's the one who'll be left to combat them when I'm gone. He hesitates for a moment after we arrive, as if he wants to say something, but then climbs from the car instead, opening my door and offering me a hand, more careful than normal, and also more restrained.

"There's something else," I say, staring at the ground rather than him. "André said everyone in town thinks we're...*together*. Sleeping together, I mean."

"Merde," he hisses under his breath, an expression of disgust on his face. It's the disgust that surprises me. I'd have thought after everything he said last night...I flinch now, wondering if I somehow misunderstood him. Based on the way he looks right now, it certainly seems that way.

He turns on his heel and marches into the house, leaving me to follow. Marie is in the kitchen, but he's heading upstairs without a word. She looks at me. "Are you two fighting again?"

"No," I reply. I can't go through the whole story and it would just worry her if I did. "I don't know what's wrong with him."

We can't go riding since Marie has decided to stay home, but I'm not sure we'd go anyway. He emerges from his room and tells Marie he's not staying for dinner because he's going out *to clear some things up*. Then he leaves the house without even glancing at me once.

She frowns at the door as he walks through it. "You're sure you didn't fight?"

"Yes."

Is he out tonight because of what André said? Will he clear up any illusions about our relationship by sleeping with some slut from town? Or maybe he was just reminded of what he's been missing out on. Either way I find that I am absolutely livid.

"How was reading to Madame Perot today?" Marie asks.

The urge to blame her is strong. She's the one who agreed to have me read there. She's the reason my ankle is still broken. And if none of this had happened, maybe Henri wouldn't be off with someone tonight the way he is.

"I won't go back to that house," I reply, rising from the table. "I don't care what you have to tell them."



IT'S LATE when I hear him pull up outside. Marie has been asleep for hours and I should have been too, but I'm too busy stewing, wondering if he was going to stay out all night and stumble home in the morning with some sheepish grin on his face. I wrap the borrowed robe around me and walk into the kitchen just as he enters, bleary-eyed and unhappy.

"Did I wake you?" he asks. He isn't drunk but he's not quite sober either, and he can't seem to mask his discomfort in my presence, that he wishes he was alone right now.

My lips press tight. "You made enough noise to raise the dead," I reply, though it's not true. "I assume by your level of sobriety that you went out?"

"Can't get anything by you," he says with a smirk I'd like to wipe off his face. Now that I've hit someone with a crutch the desire to do it again is positively calling to me.

"I'd like a night out myself before I leave," I reply, feeling something mean and spiteful rise up inside me. I want to strike out like a cobra and I have no means to, but something keeps my mouth running. "I imagine there must be someone in the town nicer than you and André."

His smirk is gone, replaced by glittering eyes and a mean set to his mouth. "I'm sure there are. But just so you're clear, in *my* time, decent women don't give themselves away to the first rich man who makes them an offer."

"So I guess you were with one of the indecent ones tonight," I hiss. "That shouldn't surprise me."

His mouth turns up at one end. Another of his arrogant smiles. He runs a thumb over his lower lip. "Ah. So you're jealous. Is that what this is?"

I force myself to laugh. "In my world, you're a 72-year old man, remember? And I'm practically engaged."

He crosses the room until he's a foot away, towering over me. He braces himself against the wall behind me, caging me in. "Except you're not in your world. You're in mine."

His gaze falls to my face, to my lips, and my heart feels as if it's dropped into my stomach. I'm shaking but it's not fear. It's as if my entire body is so primed, so reckless and raw, that it refuses to allow me to remain still.

His head dips. Just an inch. There's no longer a hint of a smile on his face. I know exactly what's going to happen and I want it. I don't care about our

respective ages. I don't care that I'm nearly engaged. I just *want*, as if there's no room in my head for any other emotion. The pad of his thumb runs over my lower lip.

And then a door opens upstairs and we jump, separating from each other. Within seconds Marie-Therese stands at the top of the stairs. "Surely the two of you can contain your fighting to daylight hours?" she demands.

I swallow, guilty as a teenager caught in the back of a car with a boy. I can no longer meet Henri's gaze. "Sorry," I mumble, fleeing to my room.

I'm nearly to my door when I hear him. "Amelie?" he asks quietly. I stop and turn toward him. His eyes flicker over my face. "I wasn't with anyone tonight," he says. "I haven't been with anyone since the day you arrived."

He turns to walk up the stairs, leaving me standing there, relieved and with a bizarre desire to cry for the second time in one day.



THE MYSTERY of Henri's disappearance is solved fairly quickly. When Marie returns from the market she drops the bags inside the door and stares at us both.

"Someone put a cloth over André Beauvoir's head last night and beat him within an inch of his life," she says, her lips pressed tight. "I don't suppose the two of you know anything about that?"

I turn to Henri in shock. *That's* where he was?

He avoids my gaze, lifting his eyes to his sister instead, looking bored. "He insulted our family," Henri replies. "I couldn't let him get away with it."

"*He insulted our family?*" she repeats incredulously. "Are we back in the Middle Ages? What could he possibly have said?"

His jaw grinds. "He implied there were some rumors about Amelie that... I won't have anyone thinking of her that way." I misinterpreted his disgust yesterday, and I've never been so relieved to be wrong.

Marie throws out her hands. "So he said a few things about us. We've lived through worse."

Henri's gaze flickers to me. He is being honorable. The story of what happened is mine and he's not going to share it.

"André did more than insult me, Marie," I admit. "I was able to stop him, but it involved hitting him with my crutch."

She blinks twice and presses a hand to her chest. For the first time since this whole ankle debacle began, she looks guilty. "Oh." She glances at my cast and I see the thoughts as they cross her face. I suppose they cycled through mine as well—that I wouldn't even be here if it weren't for her refusal to fix my ankle.

"Yes, Marie," says Henri with acid in his voice, "you've put her in danger with your stupidity about fate."

She swallows. "I'm sorry," she says to me. "Please...forgive me. I know it doesn't make sense."

Henri's arms go wide. He's as angry as he was when it first happened. "She could have been raped!" he shouts. "Don't apologize—fix it!"

He walks out of the house, slamming the door so hard that the windows rattle and the pans hanging from the copper rack clank against each other.

Marie hangs her head. "I can't fix it," she says, near tears. "But I *am* deeply sorry."

I sigh. I don't know why I care that Marie feels guilty, but I do. Aside from this one odd anomaly, she's been unbelievably kind and gracious throughout my stay. "It doesn't matter. My cast comes off in a week. Though I can't imagine what you believe is going to change between now and then."

Her head still hangs as she walks away. "I don't know either. Not what I hoped."

During my final week in the cast Henri spends every afternoon with me, regardless of Marie-Therese's plans. On the last afternoon before we see the doctor, he comes in and tells me the horses are saddled, ignoring his sister entirely. She doesn't seem at all surprised but instead settles into a chair and shrugs.

"Good," she says, "I'll have a quiet afternoon to myself."

He's gentler with me when he lifts me onto the horse, and also when he removes me. I'm not sure if his hands linger at my waist or if I'm just so much more aware of them today. They're so big I think they could span my entire rib cage if he tried.

We are quieter as we sit out on the blanket. He is sitting slightly closer than he usually does. I barely notice the magnificence of the setting sun, the glory of the wildflowers. I'm only aware of the heat of him next to me, the thud of my heart, overloud in my chest.

Is this love? It feels nothing like what I have with Mark. My love for Mark feels like the hours before a big dance, when you are a little giddy with the excitement of it all, when the possibilities for the evening seem fun at the very least and almost infinite.

This feeling for Henri is different. It hurts. It leaves me feeling desperate and reckless and it clouds my brain in a way that makes rational thought difficult. I'm not sure if it's real or just some version of Stockholm Syndrome. I've been with almost no one but him for months. He's the most gorgeous man I've ever seen and we've found ourselves in increasingly heated positions. Maybe any woman in my shoes would feel this way.

I squeeze my eyes shut. *It doesn't matter anyway, I say to myself. You can't stay for good. And he's never once implied that he'd like you to.*



"A VERY EXCITING DAY FOR YOU," says Doctor Nadeau when I arrive at his office.

I struggle to smile as I agree. In truth, the experience is bittersweet. I'm eager to regain my mobility, but regaining it also means I must leave. And it's definitely *time* for me to go—there's a chance if I remain too much longer I won't have enough of a spark to even make it back home at all. But I will miss my life here more than I want to admit.

Henri looks a little unnerved as the doctor prepares to saw open my cast. He hovers nearby as it begins, his hands in his pockets, his jaw clenched tight.

When the cast is split the doctor cracks it open into two even halves, revealing my ankle—pale and atrophied, but otherwise normal.

"You'll be weak and stiff for a few days," the doctor warns. "So use caution."

Henri helps me climb off the table. His protectiveness is ridiculous but also sweet. At last I understand the appeal of being treated like something delicate and precious, just as I'm about to leave it behind for good.

He links his elbow through mine and guides me carefully out to the car. When we reach the door, he stops. "You heard what Doctor Nadeau said. I hope you don't plan to leave until you've got your mobility back completely."

I turn toward him. We are probably standing a little too close for supposed family members, but I don't care. I rest my hands against his chest. I will miss this chest. I will miss the way he looms over me when we stand close. I will miss the way he treats me when his guard is down, as if I am worth more to him than the rest of the world combined.

"No, I think I'll need to stay a bit longer. A week maybe."

His palms fold over my hands for one long moment. "Good," he says. "That's good."

We've entered a new season of Henri, I realize. The one in which he's willing to admit he likes having me here, that he possibly cares. It's probably for the best that he's arrived at this position so late because, with enough

time, I might just be persuaded to stay.



WHEN I RETURN HOME, Marie is waiting. She winces at the sight of my weak, pale ankle. “I hope you won’t try to leave just yet,” she says quietly. “And you might want to test landing on it, just to make sure you’ll be okay?” I’ve rarely seen her look as depressed as she does right now.

I’m sure she’ll miss me, just as I’ll miss her, but her sadness right now is more than that.

I nod. “I’m sorry. I know you wanted me to come with you to 1918.” I suspect she hoped for other things too, but I can’t even bring myself to suggest it or I might be the one to cry instead.

She looks at me blankly for a moment. “1918?” And then she laughs, a mournful, resigned sound. “I never thought I’d persuade you to go anywhere,” she says as she walks away. “It was rather the opposite.”



I SPEND the remainder of the day walking around the farm and helping with chores, waiting for my ankle to lose its stiffness. When it does I’m both relieved and disappointed. A part of me thought I might be stuck here a little longer, but by the time I go to bed my ankle is already feeling close to normal, bringing home the fact that it’s really ending, all of it. The horseback rides, the picnics, the afternoons with Henri reading on the porch, sipping on that Beaujolais I didn’t care for when I first arrived.

I long for time with Henri alone, but it doesn’t come. Marie-Therese, sensing that my departure is imminent, suddenly decides to stick around the house. I spend the day helping her make preserves with my eyes on the window the entire time, hungering for the sight of her brother.

On the third day, though, comes a reprieve. When I walk inside from watering the pumpkins early in the afternoon, Marie is just hanging up the phone and bouncing with excitement over the fact that her friend Jeannette is in labor. She begins hastily packing a basket.

“Her husband is at the Maginot Line so I’ll need to stay and mind her daughter until her mother can get here from Paris. Tomorrow morning at the

earliest.” She looks up at me with the brightest smile on her face. “A baby! Can you imagine?”

I smile back. Ankle ordeal aside, Marie-Therese would make such a good mother, if she would just move on from her crush on Father Edouard. She could settle down with Xavier. Even Luc, as abrasive as he was, could probably give her the things she needs: children, a home of her own, an easier life.

“I think you should go out with Xavier,” I tell her. “Just once.”

Her brow furrows. “How has the conversation gone from the miracle of life to a boy who went to a school with my brother?”

I shrug. “Because a boy who went to school with your brother could lead to the miracle of life.”

She pauses. “Yes, I suppose he could.” But her joy is slightly diminished, and it makes me wish I hadn’t said anything.

She leaves for Jeanette’s with Henri, and when he returns he comes inside rather than heading straight to the fields.

“It might be a nice day for a ride,” he says. He throws it out like a challenge, but his eyes are uncertain. All this time our rides have had an element of charity to them, as if they were a debt he was paying for his role in my immobility. Now I don’t need them, and he no longer needs to offer them.

There’s no denying the slight relief on his face when I agree.



WE RIDE SIDE BY SIDE.

The farm has changed a great deal since I arrived at the end of May. All the colors are more saturated, and everything is full and lush now, the grapes nearly ripe.

"What's it like here, in the fall?" I ask.

He glances over at me for a moment too long. "Beautiful. The sky is a deeper blue. All these trees will look like balls of flame and the air will be crisp. We bring in help for the harvest, but our days are very long. You'd like it, though, I think."

I wish I could stay. I wish for it so much that I have to swallow down the urge to say it aloud.

I've only just realized we aren't heading to the meadow when the lake comes into view. I draw Fleur to a halt. "Why would you bring me here, after what I told you?"

He stops alongside me. "Because I think it's time you faced this fear of yours. Replaced your unhappy memory with a pleasant one. Wouldn't you like to go through your life without shuddering at the sight of every lake? It's no way to live."

I've thought this before myself. Once I have children, the way I've kept myself in a bubble won't be possible. They'll want to swim, and God knows I'll never let them go alone.

What could possibly go wrong if we sit by the lake? Nothing. I'm like Kit as a small child, certain there's a witch in the closet no matter what common sense tells me.

"Fine." I take a quick breath.

He climbs down and then lifts me off my horse, setting me gently on the ground. We walk down the hill, him hovering close in case my ankle gives way. And when we reach the bottom, he untucks his shirt and reaches for the top button.

"What on earth are you doing?" I demand.

His mouth lifts on one side. "Did you think we'd swim fully dressed?"

My jaw drops. A swim is not what I agreed to, by any stretch of the imagination. "I'm not *swimming*! I thought you meant we'd just sit here."

"Come, Amelie. Face your fears. What's the worst that could happen?"

My arms fold across my chest. "Do I really need to detail that for you? My sister *drowned*."

He continues unbuttoning his shirt. "And you think I will drown? I've been swimming in this lake since I was small. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. And nothing will happen to me."

"Absolutely not."

He gives me that shrug of his, so effortlessly Gallic, and pulls his shirt over his head.

For a moment I gape. I've seen him without a shirt from afar, but never like this, standing three feet away. His chest is smooth and perfectly formed, an anatomy lesson of the best possible kind. Every muscle a man can have, he has in spades. He grins, as if he's caught me at something, which he has, and I flush.

"In my time, undressing in front of a woman without her permission is

known as exposure and it's a crime," I say primly.

He laughs. "No one is telling you to watch." He reaches for his belt. There's something so sexual about it, so indecent. It's how he would undress for me in some other circumstance. Eager, unapologetic...

"God," I say, facing away from him. I wait until I've heard him splash before I turn, just catching sight of his perfect, broad back and the most gorgeous male ass I've ever seen in my life before he dives under. I hold my breath, waiting for him to reemerge, and don't release it until he's back above the surface.

"Please don't stay under like that," I ask quietly, my voice desperate. It's probably the first time in our acquaintance I've begged him for something.

His face softens and he wades through the water until he stands only a few feet away. "I'm a grown man," he says gently. "Nothing is going to happen to me. This water is perhaps six feet at its deepest point."

I know he's right. Swimming in this lake is far less risky than half the things he does, but knowing that doesn't lessen my fear. "You might hit your head on something. You can drown in an inch of water."

He grins, pushing his wet hair off his face. "Who will protect me from every inch of water once you're not here?"

The question causes a pain in my heart, because I really do want an answer: who will watch over him and keep him safe once I'm gone? Not that I've ever actually kept him safe. I suppose I just like the illusion that I *could* keep him safe if the situation presented itself.

He reaches out his hand. "Please come in. I won't allow anything to happen to either of us. I swear it on my life. You are no longer a child. You can control your gifts. You were brave to come here, and you are brave to attempt the journey home. Be brave one more time. For me."

My heart pounds in terror, but I know that if this is ever going to happen it has to be now. At least Henri understands that I'm scared, and feels some sympathy for it. Mark won't. How could he, when he has no idea why I'm scared in the first place?

"Turn around," I say quietly. When he does, I slip out of the clothes and take a first tentative step on the slippery, moss-covered rocks that lead into the water.

My breathing is shallow, and every bone in my body wants to retreat to the safety of the shore. I keep my eyes glued to his broad back, as if it's the finish line. He has the sort of build featured in magazines at home: pure

muscle, tapering to a narrow waist. Mark still has the lanky build of a boy, though he and Henri are the same age.

"Can I turn around yet?" he asks.

"No!" I cry. "I'm only up to my calves."

He laughs. "For a woman who has no problem discussing brassieres in mixed company, you are suddenly quite modest."

"There's a big difference between talking about something and brandishing it about."

"You're forgetting I've already seen you naked."

The water swirls around the middle of my thighs, and then my waist. I feel like I'm not quite taking in full breaths. "You said you didn't see anything!"

"I didn't see *much*," he amends. "At the time I was panicked but..."

"But what?" I take one more step and am in up to my collarbone. "You can turn around."

"But I remembered it later." He turns toward me with a small grin. We are far closer than two naked people should be when one of them is practically engaged to someone else. "And I remembered it often."

I laugh, a hint of nerves underlying the sound.

His eyes search mine. "How are you?" he asks.

I swallow. The truth is that talking to him on the way in distracted me a little. I'm surprised by how okay this is, but my heart is still thudding in my chest.

"I'm...alright."

He begins to back away and my pulse quickens. "Can you stay?" I ask, the question whistling out on a single breath. "Right where you are?"

Instead, he moves closer and reaches out his hand. I grab it. "Do you want to go under?" he asks.

"God, no."

He smiles. "Just checking."

The two of us stay like that, standing feet apart, our hands clasped. The world is dreamy and quiet, as the sun begins to lower. A breeze, balmy and apple-scented, rustles the reeds that line the far shore.

I'm happy, I realize. I never thought I'd set foot in a lake again, but I'm actually happy right now. I've been happier over the past month than I've ever been in my life. And all the best moments happened with him.

Happened *because* of him.

When the breeze picks up and the sun begins to set, I climb from the lake, struggling to pull clothes on over my damp skin. Once I'm done, I turn around and he climbs out to do the same. The breeze now whips through the meadow so hard that the trees shake.

He lifts me onto Fleur, though I no longer need the help, his hands large and warm and gentle—and then he urges me along while he climbs on Napoleon.

"It's going to storm," he says. As soon as he speaks, I hear the low growl of distant thunder. "Head straight for the house. I'll get the horses put away on my own."

"What am I supposed to do while you're risking your life out in the storm?" I ask.

He grins. "Get dry and open a bottle of wine? That's what I'd do anyway."



I'VE CHANGED clothes and am sitting on the stone porch with a lamp and an open bottle of wine when he gets to the house. He takes the chair across from mine, accepting the glass I've poured for him and breathing in deeply.

I've come to love the smell of wine as well. It's no longer merely a drink—it's an experience. The scent. That first burst of it against my tongue. I sigh happily.

"It's perfect."

He bites his lip. "You've come around then to wine, at last."

"It's one of those things you learn to love," I explain. "I'm not even sure if it's the taste I love or just the things it brings to mind."

Lightning splashes across the sky, causing the lamplight to flicker over his face as he watches me. "So what does it bring to mind?"

I close my eyes and take another sip, letting the answer come to me as I relish it on my tongue. "Being here, with you. Reading. Playing chess. The smell of the rain."

"You'll replace all those memories when you go home," he says quietly.

I shake my head, trying to picture the experiences that could attempt to replace these. My best memories, aside from my time here, are from the one full summer Mark and I spent together. It seemed like a miracle at the time,

but now I wonder if it was just different, and anything different seemed good. I picture it all now: drinking with Mark's family at the country club, receptions at art galleries, late nights out with his college buddies. That future I chose for myself—the one that seemed so ideal, so glamorous—suddenly seems loud, and empty, and sad. It could never replace these memories.

"I don't think I will," I reply. "Will you?"

"There will never be a time that I don't step on this porch and think of you," he says quietly.

My heart squeezes. It's easy enough to say, but eventually there will be some other female here in my place, warmed by his presence—taking in his beautiful mouth and his bright eyes and the way he rests back in his chair—and she will be thinking of nothing more than when he will kiss her. I'm so jealous of her I feel dizzy.

He glances at me and bites his lip, leaning back in his seat, the glass floating lazily against his palm. He looks sad, though he says nothing.

I picture myself leaning over, brushing my mouth over those full lips of his. Would he be shocked? Would he respond? I think he might. I think he might lean into the kiss, pull the hint of wine from my lower lip. And my hand would go to his cheek, rasping against the beard that's grown in over the course of the day. I'd breathe him in then, trying to capture him inside me somehow. His smell, his taste, his warmth.

"We should eat," I say quickly. "The wine is going to my head."

He leans back in his chair, watching me in that way of his, like he understands what's going on inside me better than I do. "And what do you suggest we eat?" he asks.

We could do bread and cheese and ham, as always. But for some reason I'm thinking of the night I ran away, when we came back here and divided Marie's latest creation between us with two forks.

"I think we should make a pie."

"We?" he asks.

Pie is not something I'd suggest under normal circumstances, particularly as I've only been a part of the pie-making process once in my life. If I'm going to attempt it, I'm not doing it alone.

"You don't expect me to make it all by myself?"

He grins. "Yes, obviously it would be unthinkable, making something all by yourself." He's teasing but he rises, pushing his sleeves above the elbow.

"Put me to work, *ma reine*." *My queen*.

"Is that another word for thief?" I ask.

"Yes," he replies. "But worse."

He follows me to the kitchen and I wrap my braid on top of my head while he pours us both more wine. "That isn't going to improve my baking skills," I warn as I take the glass.

"No," he says, "but it will help dull our senses before we are forced to taste the fruit of your labors."

"*Our* labors."

I push the apples and cutting board toward him, while I take the seat on the other side and try to remember what Marie did that morning. I watch her measure the flour—exactly two and a half cups, watch as she mixes it with baking powder and then takes the butter and chops it into the flour, with small knives and rapid hands.

"You're doing it again," he says softly. "The shimmering."

My eyes open and I settle into my body, with a need to argue that is almost instinctive. Henri's now claimed to have seen it twice and what does it mean if he's correct? It means this is something I might do in front of Mark. *Will* do, if we live together eventually. And how the hell will I explain *that*?

"I wasn't time traveling," I insist, grabbing the flour and the butter.

"Maybe I just lose my place a little when I'm focusing on something."

"There wouldn't be anything wrong with it if you *were* time traveling, you know," he suggests casually, winding the knife with clever hands around the apple's surface.

I measure the flour just as Marie did, and begin to cut the butter into it.

"Did I actually shimmer? Tell me the truth."

"You did," he says. "You looked like a candle in a storm."

"God," I say, cutting the butter into the flour with hands moving even faster than Marie's did, but mostly out of distress. "I sometimes do it during tests. Do you think anyone's seen me?"

He raises a brow. "I don't know, but if you want to convince people you don't time travel, you might want to cut that out first."

I sigh as I grab the rolling pin. "Hard to accomplish when I don't even know I'm doing it."

"Then may I suggest that you don't wind up with someone who has no idea who you are?" he asks.

I flip him off. He doesn't seem to mind. He begins mixing the apples, cinnamon and sugar, but he's watching me more than he is his bowl. He runs

a thumb over his lip, a gesture that makes me feel slightly weak-kneed. I've definitely had too much wine. Too much of something, anyway. I carry my bowl to the counter, needing some distance from him.

"Are you really going to sleep with him when you get home?" he asks abruptly.

I glance up. His eyes are on fire now, angry and...something else...as he waits for my response.

The idea of sleeping with Mark merely made me nervous last spring, but now it twists my stomach in knots—and not the good kind. I shouldn't have spent the entire summer away from him. We haven't even seen each other since March, and five months apart would have anyone nervous. If I feel like this when I get home, I won't be able to go through with it, but maybe I'll feel different by then. Maybe things will go back to normal.

"I'm not sure about anything anymore."

My body feels overheated and liquid. He holds my eyes, and I picture sliding over the table to kiss him. I picture him lifting me on the counter, pressed between my legs the way he was the day we fought over the chocolate.

My chest rises and falls too quickly and his eyes flicker there, and back to my mouth. He is looking at me like something he intends to devour, and I can't catch my breath.

I grab the rolling pin and begin to roll out the dough, trying to get my thoughts in order. I don't know who I am right now—it must be the wine creating these pictures in my head, making me sweat though the room isn't warm.

"You're doing it wrong," he says.

I wipe flour off my forehead with my shoulder. "How typical of you to sit there from your relaxed perch and criticize."

He rises, slowly, and moves around to my side of the counter. I'm about to slide out of his way when suddenly he is behind me, his hands covering mine on the handles of the rolling pin, his mouth near my ear.

"You need to put your body into it," he says, pushing me forward, coming with me. Our weight presses into the dough and it smooths out neatly across the butcher block. "Then back," he says. His voice is low and rough against my ear. I move backward with him, with our hands, and need sharpens in my stomach.

"And again," he says softly. He exhales and every tiny hair along the shell

of my ear rises in response. I look at our hands. His are large, tan, dwarfing my small, paler ones beneath. Our forearms are pressed together, the same contrast: large and hard next to small and soft. His chest leans against my back, pressing firm and hot to the thin fabric of my dress, which sticks to me now. My breathing is shallow, small gasps and quick exhales, my heart beating hard with the desire to just close my eyes and follow him wherever he takes this.

I don't know why I want to arch against him when he presses into my back, why I want to move my head toward the pulse of his breath against my ear. Why, when his hands grip mine hard enough to hurt, I only want him to hold them tighter.

Lightning cracks outside and the room is plunged into darkness.

I can feel his heart hammering against my back, the rasp of his unshaved jaw so close that it catches on my skin. His hands tighten around mine and for a single moment I'm not sure what either of us will do next.

I want him. I want to give him everything I've refused to give Mark, haven't *wanted* to give Mark. Except a week from now, Henri will be an old man. And I might be getting engaged.

"I don't think we can make the pie now," I whisper. I'm breathless and sound terrified, though I'm not sure that's what I am. Even as I say the words, I'm relishing the feel of his skin on mine, and wanting more of it.

"It might keep for morning," he says, his voice gravelly, warm against my ear for only a moment before he backs away. "Let me get a candle."

I hear the sound of a match striking, and then there is a hint of light in the room. Our eyes meet in the semi-darkness, his burning in a way that's quickly becoming familiar to me. I gather up the dough, avoiding his face, and he covers the apples.

What would have happened if the lights hadn't gone out? My heart thuds with the desire to find out.

"I think I've had too much to drink," I stammer, though I know that's not the issue. My eyes fall to his full mouth, to the broad shoulders that enveloped mine just a minute earlier. I want to feel all of it, to feel his weight over me, consuming me. I am weak-kneed, swollen with desire for it. But giving in right now could ruin everything I've planned for myself. "I should go to bed."

He nods, his jaw locked tight with restraint. When I get to the door of my room I turn. If he were to come over here now and kiss me, I would let him.

And then I'd pull him into the room with me and strip him free of those clothes.

He's leaning over the counter, gripping it. Almost as if he's fighting himself not to follow me.

I go through the door before he changes his mind, before he gives into what exists between us.

Because I know in my heart I gave into it a while ago.



MARIE RETURNS at the crack of dawn the next day. I know this because I hear her gasp when she walks in. I throw my dress on and rush out of the room.

I understand why she's gasping. Henri and I managed to destroy the kitchen...there is flour on every surface. "Sorry," I say, rushing in to clean. "Henri and I tried to make a pie and the lights went out."

A slow smile dawns on her face. "You and Henri tried to make a pie? *Together?*"

"Well, we had to eat."

"Interesting."

I want to roll my eyes at her but already I'm remembering the feel of him behind me, so much larger than I am. His hands enclosing mine. His breath against my ear.

It must have been the wine. It must have been temporary insanity.

Henri walks into the room then, looking more tired than usual. "Why are you home so early?" he asks Marie. "It's barely even light out."

She colors. "Jeanette's mother arrived, so I got a ride home."

"A ride?" he asks "Who was available to give you a ride at five in the morning?"

"Father Edouard," she says, blushing fiercely. "Madame LeGrand was worried about the baby and had him come to baptize her just in case, but all was well. And how was it here? If the two of you were making pie together, I assume that means you managed not to be at each other's throats, briefly?"

He was at my throat, I think. Or very near it. I could feel his breath on my skin there. Mark and I have not had sex, but we've done a great many other things. I've been beneath him, practically naked, and not felt a hint of anything. Henri stands behind me and the mere feel of his hands and his

breath on me, both of us fully dressed, had me arching like a cat in heat. I just don't understand. I don't want to understand.

"It was fine," I tell her faintly.

Except it wasn't fine. It was dangerous. Every minute I'm around him seems slightly less controlled than the last. I'm not sure what will happen if I stay another week or two as planned. A smarter girl would probably leave before she found out.

Two days later I decide to test my ankle. There's always the possibility that I will break it, which could very well keep me here so long that I can't jump home anymore, that 1938 becomes my new present. A part of me isn't as horrified by that idea as I once was.

I wait until Henri leaves to drive Marie-Therese to a farm on the other side of town, since it means I won't inadvertently flash anyone when I return.

I decide I'll only go forward a month or two, and though I have a good reason for using my ability, I'm eager to see what the farm will look like. By early fall the apples will be in and the grapes will be nearly ready for harvest. I want to see it all, and why shouldn't I? I usually feel some guilt about using my gift, but I don't right now. I guess watching Marie jump so shamelessly has had an effect.

I cross the yard and go out to the barn, where I close my eyes, memorizing the feel of this exact moment, preserving it like a page turned down in a book so I can find my place easily when I return. And then I picture a time not too far from now, imagining a crispness to the air, the way the summer colors will be on the cusp of shifting from green to gold. I feel the first hints of it beginning—the breeze, the darkness—but am suddenly yanked forward, as if my own time is demanding my return.

I panic and drop out of it, hitting the ground and sliding in the hay before I rise, relieved that my ankle seems to have held up just fine. I glance around me with a happy sigh. I meant to go farther, but it's far enough: there's a soft breeze—not cold, but far more pleasant than the air was a few seconds earlier. Early fall, I assume.

I grab the blanket still hanging in the barn and wrap it around myself before I peek outside. From here I can see the vegetable patch, where my tiny little shoots have blossomed into long, thick vines, with more pumpkins than the two of them could possibly need. Do I dare walk down to the orchard? It's ill advised, yes, but the odds of running into anyone are slim. I begin walking down the lane, surrounded on both sides by grape vines rustling in the same fall breeze that blows my hair around my face and whips the blanket around my legs.

And suddenly Henri is there, twenty feet away, eyes wide at the sight of me. The tool falls from his hand. I suppose I need to explain, and a part of me wonders what kind of reception I'm in for. He's never once indicated he would like me to stay beyond the summer, but if I were to return one day would he be pleased? I guess I'm about to find out.

He moves toward me, stopping only when we are inches apart, eyes on my face in a way I've seen only a few times before. He looks stunned, as if my presence here is some kind of miracle. Before I can ask him what's going on, his hands curve around my jaw, and he kisses me.

It's too much sensation to even process—the feel of his mouth, the firmness of his body against mine, his smell, his desire. I'm still holding the blanket around me but my body sways against his until there's not a whisper of space between us and his arms slide down to my back, gripping me harder, kissing me harder. Kissing me as if he would like to drown in me, as if I'm the only thing he's hungered for in a hundred years. And I am kissing him back. I want to kiss him hard enough to become a part of him, to sear my memory into his skin, sear his into mine.

My arms climb around his neck and the blanket falls to the ground. His hands are on my bare back and I want everything from him, so much I can hardly stand to wait.

Except...

"Oh my God," I whisper, stumbling as I back away from him.

This isn't now. This is fall, when I'm no longer here, and this shouldn't be happening. Even if I didn't have a boyfriend it shouldn't be happening. I don't know what I've just done, but I know I need to escape from it, especially given that I'm now standing in front of him naked. I vanish before I can give myself even a moment to change my mind, returning to the moment I bookmarked so fast that I barely manage to stop as I feel it approaching.

I land and see my clothes resting in a pile, so I scramble back into them just as Henri pulls up. He's climbing out of the truck when I emerge, and the sight of him there makes my breath come short. That kiss was like nothing I'd ever imagined. And I still don't know what happened. He's been restrained with me even at times when *I* would not have shown restraint. What the hell happens in the next week to change that?

We make a mistake.

If I stay another week or two as promised, he and I will make a mistake. We will sleep together or come close to it, changing things for us both. Why else would he kiss me the way he did?

"You're staring at me like you've seen a ghost," he says, his smile fading. "Is something wrong?"

Yes.

"No," I reply, looking away. "I just think it's time for me to head home."



MY LAST FULL day with Henri and Marie is a sober one. Henri spends most of it outside and Marie spends it baking, worrying her lower lip with her teeth until it is raw.

"What if you're not well enough to get home?" she asks. "Don't you think you should stay a few more days, just to be safe?"

I watch Henri walk to the pump, his t-shirt clinging to him, drinking water he's cupped in his hands. "No," I reply, my voice a little faint. "I think it's best that I get back right away."

Marie stays home that afternoon, so there is no evening picnic, no ride to the meadow to watch the setting sun. Somehow I didn't think it would be over so quickly. I thought I'd have a chance to say goodbye to each of the places I loved with him, but I won't.

Dinner is painfully quiet, and before it's even done, Marie tears up and excuses herself for the night. Henri and I clear the table, and every time his arm or hip brush against mine I'm thinking about that kiss in the orchard, and wanting it all over again.

"Come on," he says when we're done, placing his hand at the small of my back.

I let him push me toward the door. "Where are we going?"

He laughs. "Where else?"

We walk to the hay bale, the site of so many picnics and the infamous chocolate incident. I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, wishing I could relive each of them.

He spreads a blanket and we sit side by side, leaning our heads backward to glance at the sliver of moon visible through the clouds. "Tomorrow, that and the sun are going to be the only things we share."

My throat swells to the point of pain. I don't want to live in a world where he is not. "It's not enough."

"No," he says softly. "It's not. So are you glad you wound up staying here?"

I laugh, brushing tears from my face. "Of course. Are you glad I wound up staying here?"

He smiles, but his eyes are sad. "Of course. Although I'm going to be spending the rest of my life fielding questions about my beautiful cousin."

I shrug. "Beautiful? As I recall, you told Madame Beauvoir when I got here that you didn't find me attractive but *not all men could afford to be picky.*"

"That's what you deserved for pretending you didn't understand us. My God," he says, his laughter a low rumble in his chest, "your face when I said that. I was certain you'd crack."

"You knew?! All this time?" I exclaim. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Why tell you? It was so much more fun to say awful things about you in front of your face and watch you try not to explode."

We both laugh and then it fades to silence again.

"I'm sorry about the dance," he finally says.

"Which part?"

"All of it. That I hurt your feelings. That I probably ruined it for you with my jealousy."

I let my head rest on his shoulder for just a moment. "You made up for in the end. I'm just sorry the only person I got to dance with the whole time I was here was André."

He climbs to his feet and holds out his hand to me. "We should fix that then."

My heart flutters, skips several beats. "Oh...okay."

He places a hand on my waist, another holds mine aloft and begins to hum a tune I don't know.

"If anyone comes out here, they'll see you dancing with your cousin."

He gives me a small smile. "I'm sure you realize at this point they all think we're doing a lot more than that."

My breath catches a little at the suggestion of it, but instead of holding myself back, I step closer and let my head rest on his chest, breathing in the smell of him, memorizing the rough feel of his shirt against my skin, his neck against my forehead. His arms tighten.

Tomorrow I will return home to a world in which Henri and Marie may no longer exist. But even if they do, I couldn't bear to see them old and alone. I want them to stay just as they are. And I wish I could stay with them. I wish I could stay with *him* exactly the way we are now. Leaving is going to hurt more than anything has since I lost Kit.

His hands splay across my back, as if trying to cover as much of my skin as possible, and for a moment I feel his fingertips press, pulling me closer.

"I want your name," he says quietly. "Your real name. I want to be the one person in all of the past who knows who you really are."

I smile, blinking back tears. It's been so long I'd nearly forgotten I ever had a name that wasn't Amelie Durand. "Sarah," I whisper. "Sarah Stewart."

"Sarah," he says, resting a palm against my face. "My little thief."

His breath ghosts over my head, and when I glance up at him again, his eyes are fastened on my mouth as if he is hungry, as if he would devour me if he could. And I want him to so badly that I'm strung tight with it.

His head descends, his mouth gently pressing to each cheek, to my forehead and my eyes, and I'm not sure I'm even breathing as I wait for him to find my mouth. I stopped him when he kissed me the last time, but I don't have it in me to stop him again.

But it doesn't come. Instead he releases me as if he's been burned, flinching. "Go," he says, more to himself than to me. "It will have to be enough."

He walks off into the darkness without ever looking back and I watch him go, feeling sick with the loss. I know it makes sense—why start something with a girl who's leaving forever?

I always thought I'd be relieved to get home. Now I think it might break my heart instead.

I lie in bed that night exhausted and unable to sleep. I will miss the crickets. I will miss the silence behind them. I will miss open windows and the smell of heat-pressed grass blowing in to wake me.

I will miss Marie-Therese, who feels like a sister.

And most of all I will miss Henri, who is everything to me. I can only hope it won't still feel like this once I get home, because I'm not sure I can bear it.

I wake feeling exhausted yet jittery, like I've had ten espressos after a night without sleep. My reflection shows that I am pale today beneath the tan I've gained in the summer sun, with blue circles under my eyes. It's not how I want to look when I say goodbye to him.

I don't want to say goodbye to him at all.

If he'd asked me to stay...

I close my eyes. It doesn't matter. I can't stay, and he doesn't care enough to ask anyway.

I begin sweating at the idea of leaving him. My hands shake, and the white dress I've put on for the last time sticks to my skin. I should be conserving every ounce of energy for the trip home but I can't seem to help it. What should I say to Henri? How will I tell him goodbye? Should I warn him that I will appear in a few months? I guess it's not necessary—if I leave now, then whatever would lead him to kiss me the way he did won't happen. I just hope I don't lose the memory. It's one I'd like to keep forever.

I strip the bed and carefully collect all of the items I've acquired or borrowed during my time here—a brush, some books, bobby pins, the hose

and gloves—and place them neatly on the small bureau. I will never be in this house again, in this room again, and even *that* makes me sad, because this place has been more of a home than any I've ever known.

When I get into the kitchen, Marie pushes me to the table where bread and cheese and fruit wait. "You need to eat, for strength," she says.

I nod but I've got little appetite. I should be eager to return home—to television, to comfortable clothes and air conditioning and every food imaginable. I should be eager to return to a life where there are no chores, where nothing is expected of me and life seems to function entirely on its own without any labor on my end. But I'm not. There is nothing inside me that wants to go back.

Marie paces while I pick at a piece of bread. "You've only made a trip of that length once and you're going back weaker than you were," she frets. "What will you do if you don't make it?"

"I'll come find you," I say, forcing a smile, "and you will stuff me full of bread once more and send me on my way."

Her own attempt at a smile falters a little. "Do you think we'll be here then?" she asks quietly. "You think we'll survive this war you say is coming?"

My eyes sting. The truth is I have no idea. Marie might survive, but how will Henri? Whether he remains on this farm or not, I know he'll be fighting. If I were to visit again, even sometime in the next two years, he might already be gone.

"I can't imagine you not surviving just about anything," I tell her. "But I wish you'd consider going to the south of France. The farm will still be here when the war is over, I'm sure."

She smiles sadly. "I need to stay for my mother, and also Henri."

I nod, feeling choked up. "I guess you can always break the Germans' ankles and refuse to go back in time to fix them if they arrive at the farm."

"I owe you an apology for that," she says. "My logic won't make much sense, I suppose, but my mother...she thought you were in love with Henri. She said it was the reason she told you what she did when you visited. So when your ankle broke..."

"You thought it would give us more time together," I conclude. I'd suspected as much already, but I can only admit to myself now that I was grateful for it.

"I see how ridiculous it was now," she says. "Even if things had worked

out, you'd have to give up far too much to stay back here with us."

I swallow. If Henri had ever tried to convince me to stay, he might have changed my mind. I suppose it's for the best that I'm leaving now, before it can happen.

I stare at my lap. "Maybe not as ridiculous as you think. But love requires two people in your time, just like it does in mine. Is he even coming to see me off?"

She swallows and stares at her feet. "He was gone when I woke and there's been no sign of him. Just know that his absence is not due to a lack of feeling."

My heart cracks. He's not coming to say goodbye to me, which means I will never see him again. I don't plan to seek either of them out when I get home. Maybe years from now, when it's all more distant and my life has moved on enough, I'll be able to stand to learn what became of them both. But it won't be anytime soon.

"I guess there's no reason to put it off then."

I rise, taking a look around the small house that feels like mine. I wonder if I will ever have this experience again. Even if things work out with Mark, any home we have won't be this: a place where every real piece of me is allowed to reside.

Since I landed in the barn, I decide I should leave from there too. Marie says she'll come with me, and takes my hand as if I'm a child to walk me there.

"You are the only sister I've ever known. I know things are so much better where you are. But please know if you ever decide you want to come back, whether to visit or to stay for good, no one would be happier than I." She smiles through her tears. "No, that's not true. I suppose Henri might be happier."

I squeeze her hand. "Thank you for everything you've done. Please tell Henri—" my head drops and I clench my jaw to ward off tears. What do I want to say to Henri? Too many things, so I settle for none. I shake my head. "Just tell him I said goodbye."

She nods and releases my hand, taking a step away. I close my eyes and begin to focus on home. The year, the place. But at the last minute I turn to take one last glance at the hillside where Henri and I spent so many nights. I look out over the field and try not to long for the sight of him. I let thoughts of home fill me instead, and at last I can feel myself growing light, the air

around me dimming as if suddenly night is falling.

And in the very last seconds, when the air begins to whip around me and my body feels the overwhelming tug of home, I see Henri running up the hill. And I'm not sure if it's because I'm scared of what he will say, or if it's just too late for me to stop, but the world goes dark and my body heads for home. The sight of his anguished face is the last thing I see before I go.

1987

I land in a strange place, striking a brick wall hard. It's daylight, but beyond that I can't think. I don't recognize anything. And I'm too tired to figure it out.

I know I need to fight the exhaustion, at least hide away somewhere. But all my thoughts and impulses are caving in along with my vision. I'm sucked into a spiral, and the truth is I don't really care. It feels like I left something vital with Henri, or maybe the vital thing I left was him.



I RECOGNIZE the astringent smell of a hospital before I realize I'm in one. I have no idea how long I was asleep, but a doctor is speaking to someone rapidly, and it occurs to me through my half-functioning brain that my French improved dramatically while I was gone. Despite his speed, I understand him. There is no longer that heavy pause while I pick through the words to make sense of them.

We still don't know what she's taken, he says to the nurse. Have the police come up with anything?

They think I'm on drugs. I suppose it makes sense, given how they must have found me.

I try to speak but my throat is so dry it's a struggle to form the words. "I haven't taken anything," I reply, turning my head toward him. "*Je n'ai rien*

pris." He ignores me.

I try to push my hair out of my face as I sit up and discover that I can do neither. I'm tied to the bed, long white bands securing my torso, my forearms, my ankles.

A new fear arises. What if I have not made it back to my own time? What if I'm held captive in some strange middle era between 1938 and 1987 until my ability to leave is gone completely? I'm too weak to jump anywhere at the moment. This I know for certain.

"Let me go!" I demand. My wrists shake against the restraints and go nowhere. My breath comes too fast. I know I should be calm and reasonable right now, but the onset of panic is making it impossible. "*Laissez-moi partir!*"

"Mademoiselle, you need to calm yourself," he says, completely unmoved. He looks bored.

Rage and adrenaline—they entwine together and I gasp with the effort of reining them in. I'm not strong enough to jump so they can do whatever they want to me, but it's his ambivalence that upsets me most—a reminder of what I really lose by refusing to time travel anymore. It just takes one person—an angry cop, a pissed-off ex-boyfriend, a suspicious doctor without a shred of empathy—to strip you of your freedom entirely.

"Why am I restrained?" I demand.

"It's standard protocol for patients who come in high," he replies crisply.

"I'm not high!" I scream, losing any semblance of calm. "Get me out of these things!" My heart begins to thud loudly in my chest.

The doctor asks the nurse to hand him a syringe. They're going to sedate me, and then I won't have a chance of escape. I won't even be able to talk my way out of this. "No," I beg. "Please. Don't."

"You need to calm down," he repeats. The needle presses into my bicep and I start to scream, closing my eyes to jump out of this bed, out of this skin.

The cool liquid is seeping into my blood when a man comes to the room. He's black, so large he seems to take up most of the door.

"*S'arretez-vous!*" he orders. He grabs the doctor but it's too late. I can already feel my eyes growing heavy. *She is the granddaughter of Cecelia Boudon*, he announces, *and if you've hurt a hair on her head, you will be very sorry.*

I'm relieved to have someone, *anyone*, intervening. But I have no idea who Cecelia Boudon is. And I'm definitely not her granddaughter.



WHEN I WAKE, I'm in a sunlit room, one that does not smell or look like a hospital. *General Hospital* is playing on the TV across from me, overdubbed in French. The windowsill and nightstand hold a wealth of flowers.

A nurse stands beside me. *It's just a blood pressure check*, she says testily. At first I assume she's talking to me, but then there's a low grunt from the corner of the room: *D'accord*, someone says.

It's the man from earlier. His jacket has fallen open just enough to reveal the holstered gun at his side. No wonder she sounds so defensive.

Just once I'd like to land in a version of France where I'm not greeted with guns.

"Who are you?" I ask. My voice is hoarse.

He startles a bit at the sound of my voice. "I'm surprised you're awake. They gave you enough sedative to fell a horse for a week," he says. "My name is Philippe. I'm one of your grandmother's bodyguards."

I glance at him warily. I know for a fact that both of my grandmothers are dead, and that neither of them were French, or had bodyguards. Sooner or later, he's going to realize I'm not who he thinks I am. I'm still not strong enough to jump, so my only chance to escape is now, before this *Cecelia Boudon*, whoever she really is, arrives to rat me out.

"When...when is my grandmother coming?" I ask. The nurse is leaving and I'm no longer restrained. Surely there will be a moment when this large man has to step out of the room.

"I'm calling her now," he replies, picking up the phone.

I sit, pulling the blood pressure cuff from my arm, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed and he rises. "I'm just going to—" I begin.

He cuts me off with a low laugh and a wide smile that makes him seem slightly less dangerous. "Slow down, Mademoiselle Besson."

I gasp. "What did you call me?" That's when it occurs to me to lift my wrist.

Amelie Besson, the hospital bracelet says. DOB: 5-8-1966.

My made-up French name. My actual date of birth.

He hangs up the phone. "Madame Boudon has asked me to reassure you she is a friend of the Durand family."

A friend. Does that mean Henri and Marie-Therese asked her to look out for me? But how could they, when they had no idea where and when I'd be

arriving? Does it mean they're alive?

Maybe she is Henri's daughter, or his wife.

My throat tightens at the thought.

Please God, don't let it be either of those. I wanted Henri to be happy after I left, and I do hope he had a family. I'm just not ready to witness it firsthand.



WITHIN THIRTY MINUTES there's a bustle at the door, and a woman strides in with a retinue behind her. She is in her early forties, perhaps, wearing a Chanel suit and subtle but clearly expensive jewelry. There's a diamond on her finger that could easily pay for my last year at Penn. To my relief, she does not look at all like Henri. She's blonde like me, and blue-eyed as well—but they are not the eyes of a time traveler, which is also a relief.

She dismisses Philippe and the men who followed her in with a mere nod of the head, and perches elegantly on the edge of my mattress.

"Hello, Amelie. I'm Cecelia," she says with a fond smile. "You're probably a little confused right now."

I meet her gaze warily. "How...how do you know who I am?"

Her smile grows slightly wistful, sad, and my stomach drops. I pray she's not thinking of Henri and Marie-Therese when she smiles like that.

"You're so young. I hadn't realized how young you were," she says, a hand smoothing over my hair. "But I think it might be best if we exchange very little information. It was brought to my attention that your arrival here would go...poorly. And perhaps I should not have intervened..." her brow furrows. "I hope I've made the right choice. I didn't want you to suffer the way you would have."

She knows I'm a time traveler. I feel a small skittering panic and try to rein it in, running my tongue over my dry, chapped lips.

"So you're friends with Marie-Therese and Henri?" I ask.

Her expression gives nothing away. "Naughty girl. Don't try to trick me into giving you information. Now I've rescued you, but I have a condition. It will probably sound a bit extreme, but I need to know that my rescue will not change what's going to happen from here."

"What is going to happen?"

She laughs to herself and shakes her head. "I'm not telling you that, because telling you would change it. So here is my condition: the next three weeks need to go as they would have, had I not intervened. So you must remain in Paris for that period of time, and you can't see anyone until it's through."

I open my mouth to object and she holds up her palm, very clearly a woman used to getting her way. "Are you glad now that Marie-Therese wouldn't fix your ankle?" she asks abruptly.

My mouth falls open. How she knows what happened is a mystery, but I can't argue with what she's saying, even if a part of me wants to. Denying that I'm happy I stayed also means denying all those afternoons with Henri. It means wishing away our hours on the porch spent reading, the days we went riding, or watching the sun descend. It means there'd be no dancing, there'd be no kiss.

"Yes," I admit. "I'm glad."

"I know for a fact that you want the future you will have if you remain for the next three weeks and do as I say. And I don't know that you'll still have that future if you leave before then."

I want to trust her, but she must have a motive of some kind. "Maybe I'll have a future I like just as much."

She gives me a look—exasperated and amused, as if she already knows what I will decide but is humoring me by continuing to debate this. "You will gamble so many times in the coming years. Please don't gamble with this."

"How do I know you're actually trying to help me? How do I know you're not just trying to keep me here so I *don't* do something I'm supposed to do?"

She smiles. "You don't. I suppose this is the first of your many gambles."

I look at her. She seems nice enough. She did rescue me, and if she wanted to stop me from leaving, she probably has the power to keep me drugged for the next three weeks.

"Okay. So what am I supposed to do here?"

"Recover," she says. "It's what you'd have done anyway, just in much more difficult conditions. I've arranged a hotel room for you, and everything will be taken care of. You won't see me again, but Louis or Philippe will be nearby at all times and can get you whatever you need."

"I don't think I need..."

"A guard? I'm sure you do not," she says with a soft smile. "But I cannot risk any harm coming to you here, and I'm changing the past a bit, simply by

interfering, so let me reassure myself you'll come to no harm."

A bodyguard is better than being locked up for the next three weeks. I nod, reluctantly, and she rises. "Be well, my friend. We will see each other again."

She leaves, and I find myself alone and awake for the first time since I got back. There's a TV on the wall across from me. A menu on the nightstand that probably offers all the foods I missed. I ignore both, closing my eyes, trying to picture what Henri and Marie are doing now. *No, not now*, I correct. In 1938, what are they doing? It's nearly lunch. Marie is probably teaching English or German and Henri is in the fields. In a month or two he will see me again during my attempt to try out my ankle—and what will happen then?

My last memory is of him running up the hillside, perhaps to change my mind, and his last memory of me is yet to come—it'll take place two months ahead, and I pray it isn't a memory of me stumbling away from him after he's kissed me.

God, I wish I'd done things differently. I thought I'd be grateful, *overjoyed*, to get home. Instead I'm so weighed down by regret I don't even want to open my eyes.



I SPEND most of the next three days sleeping in the yellow room, which I'm informed is a private hospital on the outskirts of Paris. I'm too exhausted, for the most part, to give it much thought, but during the time I'm awake I wonder why this is happening. Who Cecelia could be and why she cares enough to rescue me in the first place.

I'm fed at regular intervals, though it turns out that hospital food is still hospital food, even in France and even for the wealthy. I occasionally catch glimpses of Phillipe or a similarly intimidating man in a suit, but they remain outside the room and silent.

As I recover I find I'm missing 1938 more rather than less. I spend my lucid time watching TV, trying to keep my mind off a past that does not belong to me, but it doesn't work.

On the fourth day, when I'm finally recovered enough to get restless, Louis—the other guard—tells me we are going to the hotel, and hands me a small bag from Gucci. Inside I find black heels and a black sheath, very

Breakfast at Tiffany's. Things I could never afford and would have few places to wear.

I glance at it, and back at Louis. "I'm supposed to put this *on*?"

"Unless you'd prefer to wear a hospital gown."

Where the hell are we going that I'd need to wear this stuff? I have sudden visions of some party for the extremely wealthy, where I'm trotted out like a circus freak for viewing and questioning. I set the bag on the bed and fold my arms across my chest.

"I thought we were going to a hotel," I say. "Why is all this so fancy?"

There's a glimmer of amusement in his eyes, but his face betrays nothing. "We *are* going to the hotel, and I believe Madame Boudon would not consider these things fancy. She's merely chosen for you what she herself might wear."

I guess it makes sense, as much as any of this makes sense, except the stuff in this bag is easily worth a thousand dollars, and I'm struggling to understand why Madame Boudon would spend a thousand dollars on a broke girl she doesn't know.



THE LIMOUSINE that picks me up from the hospital reaches the highway quickly, and just as soon is weaving through the streets of Paris. The city itself doesn't look so different than it did when I was here with Henri. The traffic is heavier, and moves faster, but the biggest difference is the people. Their clothes, the speed with which they walk down the street. They don't seem to look at each other quite as much as they did.

We turn just off the Champs Elysees and come to a stop. "We are here," announces Louis.

Here is the Ritz Carlton.

And, as I discover five short minutes later, *here* is also a suite. Two bathrooms, a living area and a bedroom. It's got more square feet than my shared apartment in Philly, along with a plush couch, huge mahogany bed, and a fruit tray on the four-person table. I forget everything else and go straight to it, like a child set free in a chocolate factory, popping a massive piece of pineapple in my mouth. It dissolves on my tongue in an explosion of sweetness. Okay, *pineapple* I have definitely missed.

"Mademoiselle Durand," says Louis quietly, nodding at the bellman who's watching, stupefied, as I shove another piece in my mouth.

"Oh," I say, attempting to swallow. "Um, *c'est tout*?" Louis' mouth curves upward. He tips the bellman and then laughs when the door closes behind him. "It is customary to *tell* the bellman that is all, rather than to *ask* him."

I smile, a bit sheepish. "I haven't spent a lot of time dealing with bellmen."

He grins. "Yes, I gathered as much."

I bite my lip. The fact that Louis is capable of smiling encourages me. Mostly it encourages me to pry a little, because I'm dying to know exactly who Cecelia is, and why she's helping me.

"You know Madame Boudon well?" I ask. "You've worked for her a while?"

His smile fades and he folds his arms across his chest. "Yes. And that is the last question about her I will answer. Phillipe or I will be outside at all times. You have appointments tomorrow also, so please be ready to leave by 10."

My head shoots up. They somehow acquired my passport and credit card from the woods in Saint Antoine, but I'd still rather not spend money I don't have. And the money in my savings account is for tuition, nothing more.

"Appointments?" I ask. "I don't need..."

"It is taken care of," he replies.

I squirm. I can just picture my mother's reaction if she knew I was blithely accepting such largesse from an absolute stranger, especially one I've come to meet because I time traveled. "I don't feel comfortable—"

"Madame Boudon is the wealthiest woman in France, and among the wealthiest in the world. Do not insult her by refusing her generosity," he says, and with that he walks out, shutting the door behind him.

I spend the rest of the day in the room, shaking off the last of my fatigue. The suite has three TVs. I turn each of them on and back off, wondering if it's possible ease and happiness don't have as much overlap as I once believed.

It's been a week since I left 1938. Henri and Marie are probably used to it now, life without my casted ankle knocking about and my ineptly made bread, but I can't get used to being gone. I order a burger and look out the window. Paris waits outside for me, but I don't have the heart for it just yet. Will I hold every future trip to this city against the day spent here with Henri?

I will, and I'm pretty sure they'll all fall short.



THE NEXT MORNING Philippe taps on the door just as I'm finishing my omelet. I'm wearing the black dress and heels because I have nothing else and I feel sort of ridiculous.

"Where are we going, anyway?" I ask.

"First, to get clothes."

I frown. "I need an *appointment* to get clothes?"

"At the stores Madame Boudon frequents you do."

The limousine drives me only three blocks, which seems silly, although I wouldn't have wanted to walk them in these heels anyway. It stops in front of Chanel.

My head swivels to Philippe. "I can't shop here. Even a t-shirt probably costs a thousand dollars. Can't we just go to, like, The Gap? Or whatever the French version of that is?"

"Madame insists," he says.

Cecelia appears to know something about my future—does all this mean I turn into the kind of woman who will only wear couture? Mark's mother is, but that has never been the kind of luxury I was after. I just want to be able to pay for my kids' braces and replace the washing machine when it breaks. I want the luxury of not *needing* to time travel, not needing to risk lives, in order to meet my family's needs.

I follow him inside. The women working there fawn over me as if I'm someone famous, or wealthy, which just makes me feel worse. I've been given the distinct impression from Philippe that I'm not leaving until I pick out something, so eventually I relent and buy one dress and one pair of shoes I might wear at home if I was attending something especially nice.

He relents once we get outside and gives me enough cash to get a pair of sneakers, a pair of jeans and a few t-shirts at a cheap place nearby, all for less than the cost of a scarf at Chanel.

That afternoon I'm taken downstairs to the spa where I undergo the kind of transformation I've only seen in movies. Pedicure, manicure, facial. My brows are plucked, my skin is waxed, my hair trimmed. It's as if Cecelia is trying to get me ready for Mark's proposal. Maybe this is part of the future

she promised I'd want, but all I feel when I imagine it is dread.



I SPEND the next days wandering the streets of Paris. I go to Montmartre, to Trocadero and Les Invalides, the Louvre and yes—the Eiffel Tower, despite how much Henri maligned it. I take day trips to St. Malo and Mont St. Michelle and Omaha Beach. The driver takes me to the Normandy American Cemetery, and I chicken out at the last minute. There are French graves there too. I'm terrified I might see Henri's name.

I go to Giverny, which is now open to the public. I go to Versailles but spend most of my trip there sitting beside a rectangular pool outside its perimeter. I'm not scared of the water so much anymore, and I guess I have Henri to thank for it. That's probably why I spend the entire time thinking only of him.

Eventually I end up back in Saint-Germain-des-Pres. Les Deux Magots and Cafe Flore are still there, but they are now packed with photo-taking tourists. The restaurant where he and I dined is gone. But I continue to wander the streets anyway, trying to find what is missing.

When Mark finally reaches Calcutta, he calls me at the private number Cecelia arranged for me. He sounds so happy to hear my voice that I force myself to act as if I'm happy to hear his too.

"My flight gets into Paris on the 16th," he says. "I can't wait to see you."

I bite my lip. I don't want him to come here to have the *I need some space* conversation, and I don't want to have it by phone. And perhaps it won't even be necessary, because I'll see him and things will finally feel right. But I'd rather not take any chances.

"If you want to fly straight home to New York you can," I suggest. "You've got to be sick of traveling. I can just meet you there instead. My flight gets in on the 22nd."

I want him to agree. I want it desperately. "Are you crazy?" he asks. "It's Paris. And you're there. Of course there's nowhere else I want to be. Where should I pick you up?"

I hesitate. He knows I can't afford the Ritz Carlton. "I'm pretty far outside of the city," I tell him. "Why don't I just meet you somewhere?"

And naturally he suggests the one place I don't want to share with him: Saint-Germain-des-Pres.



ON THE EVENING of the 16th, at the appointed hour, I wear the Gucci dress with the Chanel heels and I insist that Phillipe, my guard for the evening, sit

this one out.

"I'm probably not coming back tonight," I tell him. I wait for him to protest, and when he doesn't, I grow more aware of a sick, swirling feeling in my stomach, one that's been here every time I've considered what tonight entails.

I know what Mark's expecting, but I can't go through with it. When he touches me, I will crave calloused hands on my skin that are not his, Henri's weight and size and smell pressing against me. I'm missing those things more and more with every hour that passes.

I take a cab to the corner of Quai Voltaire and Rue Bonaparte. Mark is already waiting, a wide smile on his face when I emerge from the car.

He looks good, tan and a little thinner from the weeks in Nepal. I smile back, still nervous but also relieved. This isn't some stranger. It's Mark, who I've adored for two full years. And if my adoration is a bit more tempered than it was, perhaps that's for the best. There's always been a piece of me that felt like he could do better, but that piece of me is gone. He's a good man, but if I was enough for Henri, I'm enough for anyone.

I cross the street and his arms band tight around me, his mouth landing on mine. It's the way he's always kissed me, but it feels as if I'm experiencing it all from a distance, like an alien noting all the aspects of some strange human custom, perhaps wondering what possible purpose this joining of the mouths could have: the texture of his tongue against mine. Moisture on my lips. It's not like kissing Henri. It doesn't make my limbs melt, it doesn't make me forget where we are.

I don't want this, I hear a voice in my head saying, and it makes me panic, because *this* is what I have, and it's what I've planned for. I want to become the version of me who thought Mark hung the moon, who truly believed this was the best path I could take, because I'm not sure where we stand if I'm no longer her.

I pull away and he smiles down at me, pushing my hair back, leaving his palms on the sides of my face. "I'd forgotten how beautiful you are," he says softly. "I'll try to behave for the next hour or two but it's not going to be easy."

For the next hour or two. My chest tightens. I'll deal with it when the time comes.

We get a table at Café Flore. A drink or two will calm my nerves, I promise myself. It will put me back, mentally, in the year I belong.

Mark flags down a waiter and orders himself bourbon. He starts to order me a margarita and I stop him and ask for a glass of Beaujolais instead.

“Look at my little sophisticate after a summer in France,” he says. “I thought you’d never come around to drinking wine.” There’s a shade of condescension in the words. I guess there has been before, but it’s never bothered me until now.

For the next hour we talk. I tell him the little I can about my time in France, which isn’t much, but mostly he talks about Nepal. The conversation is interesting, but it lacks something. We don’t banter, and the only time he laughs is when he’s recalling something funny that happened on his trip. No matter what we are discussing—whether it’s art or music or movies or the future—it all feels a little empty, like a conversation you have to pass the time while stuck in line.

My roommate that summer in New York called us Ivy League Barbie and Ken, and I’m sure that’s exactly what we look like right now, a perfectly matched set of blondes in expensive clothes. But I’m not enjoying this, and I don’t know how to fix it. Mark is a lovely man, but Henri is like the cornerstone of a building and Mark is merely a decorative element on its exterior, pretty but ultimately meaningless.

He squeezes my hand. “You seem different tonight. Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lie, smiling at him across the table. “I think I’m still a little under the weather is all.”

He leans forward to take my other hand. “Maybe it’s time we went back to the room?”

My pulse rises. “No,” I reply too quickly. “I’m not tired at all.”

He laughs. “I know you’re nervous about tonight. Don’t be, okay? It’s going to be good. I’ll take care of everything.”

I slowly release a breath. I’d be nervous under the best of circumstances. I’d be nervous if there were no Henri, if I’d never gone back to 1938. But this is different. It’s not nerves. It’s an absolute unwillingness.

“Mark,” I whisper, “I’m sorry. But it’s not happening tonight. I’m just not ready.”

Just then a waiter bumps our table and Mark gives him a dirty look. “Watch it,” he snaps.

It’s a tiny show of irritation, but it reminds me a bit of André, the way his kindness came easily to him when things were going well and abandoned him completely when it didn’t. I’ve never seen Mark when things aren’t going

well for him, I realize. It's probably the kind of thing I should become familiar with before this moves forward.

He forces a smile. "It's fine. Let's just go to the room. Nothing has to happen."



WE WALK along the Seine to his hotel.

I'm in Paris, wearing couture and walking along one of the most famous rivers in the world under a full moon with a man who thinks he wants to marry me. It's my most ridiculous high school fantasy on steroids. And yet I'm longing for a different man and a different place entirely.

"What a perfect night, huh?" he asks, grabbing my hand. "Look at that moon."

I do, and all I think when I see it is that it's the same moon Henri is looking at in another time. I can't bring myself to think of him in the past tense. The moon is as close to infinite as anything can be, neither past nor present, and I choose to believe somewhere Henri exists under its glow still. Will he think of me when he sees it?

"Have you given any more thought to transferring?" Mark asks.

I stumble a little, jolted from my thoughts and surprised by the question. "Mark, I've only got one year left. I want to graduate with my friends. And besides, I can't transfer from Penn this late in the game. It'd take a year just to get in anywhere."

"So take a year off," he says, as if it's the simplest thing in the world. "You don't even have to work, or if you wanted to, I'm sure there's a gallery somewhere that would be all over a super-hot receptionist who majored in art history."

The spark of irritation I felt flares into something else, something far greater than I remember ever feeling with him. "So you're suggesting that instead of graduating from an Ivy League college in one year, *less* than a year actually, I should give it up to become a receptionist somewhere?"

He exhales heavily, pushing a hand through his hair. "I already said you don't *have* to work. You can stay at my place, hang out, and start at Columbia when your transfer comes through. It'll give you a whole year to plan a wedding. Women love that shit."

I pull my hand away and turn to face him. "You could have gotten a job anywhere. If it's so important that we're in the same place, get a job in Philadelphia."

He rolls his eyes. "Get real, Sarah," he says. "I just got hired by JP Morgan. I'm not moving to *Philadelphia*."

I stare at him, thinking *Henri would never ask this of me*. What did he say when I told him Mark had asked me to move? *If what was best for the woman I loved was for her to stay where she was, the one thing I'd never do is ask her to give it up*.

I picture Henri's face on the last night we were together. The longing I saw there, and his refusal to act on it. And again when he kissed me in the field that day...looking at me as if my presence was a miracle, as if I was all he'd ever wanted.

I picture it, and am suddenly struck hard by a thought. What if the reason he kept silent wasn't because he didn't care enough, but because he cared so much that he wanted what was best for me, rather than what was best for him? What if he didn't kiss me because things were going to change between us, but because he thought I'd chosen, on my own, to return to him? That I was there to give him the things he refused to ask for—my heart and a life that could be spent much more safely and comfortably in my own time.

The thought makes my breath stop. God, I want it to be true. And the more I let the possibility crash through my brain, the more likely it seems.

Mark sighs and steps close to me, placing his hands on my waist. "I'm sorry I said it like that. I just love you so much that I don't want to be away from you, okay? But tonight is special. We don't have to figure it all out now."

Exactly, says the old version of me. *Just find a way to make this work*. But there's a new voice now, a louder one, that insists otherwise. I remove his hands and take a step backward.

"I disagree. I think this is definitely a conversation we need to have right now."

I see irritation flicker across his face again. "Jesus, Sarah," he says, pushing a hand through his hair. "Since when are you so argumentative? I want you in New York because I love you and I don't want to be away from you. Why is that suddenly a crime?"

"Pushing me to give up what I want isn't love."

His mouth falls open. "I thought what you wanted was *me*."

I look at him, at his handsome, *incredulous* face. He's right. He's right to think that what I wanted was him, because for our entire relationship, he *did* matter more than anything else. Or maybe not him, but the life I saw with him—one where I could be a different person, a person I didn't hate quite so much.

Except, I realize suddenly: I'm already that person.

I'm not sure when it changed. Maybe it was all those weeks watching Marie use her gifts to help her neighbors, to make all of our lives slightly better ones. Maybe it was finally admitting my role in Kit's death, and seeing for the first time that my guilt is normal, and human, and a burden my mother should have shared.

But mostly I think it was Henri. It was being seen by him as I am, and being loved for it.

Mark doesn't see me as I am, and whatever it is he thinks he cares for...it isn't me.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "I changed this summer. And I think I might be in love with someone else."



MARK ARGUES. He gets mad, and then upset, and after a minute or two of this the limousine pulls up and the driver steps out.

"Madame Boudon thought you might be ready to leave."

Mark stares at him and then glares at me. "Who the fuck is Madame Boudon?"

"Possibly my only living friend in this country," I reply. I throw my arms around him, whispering one last apology in his ear, and then I climb into the back of the car and begin to weep.

How stupid I was. How impossibly stupid I was.

I'm in love with Henri in a way you never find twice.

I don't merely lust for his pretty face and his full mouth and the broad shoulders I used to watch from afar. I adore him, and even if it means I'll do nothing more than sit on the periphery of his life and exist near him, I'd agree. I will gladly milk cows and cook and hang the laundry and all of the other tasks I complained about so vehemently, just for the gift of his sudden smile, his surprised laugh.

I'm still not certain Henri wants me there for good. I could return to 1938 to discover I misinterpreted everything he ever did and said. And even if he does want me, returning will be terrible in more ways than I can name. I won't finish my degree. There will be rationing and hunger. I might die in the process, and he might too. And the next time I come to 1987, I'll be an old woman, if I reach it at all.

But in the end it comes down to a simple truth, one that matters more than all of the other truths: I don't want to exist in a world where he is not.

My mother is stiff when I call, and formal. She tells me how my brother is doing—Steven has long been the only subject we have in common. His wife just miscarried again, she says, adding that it's sometimes for the best. There's no doubt in my mind she's thinking of me when she says it.

"How was your trip to Paris?" she finally asks without interest.

I glance around my suite, thinking how disgusted she would be if she could see me now. My mother thinks time travel is something I should be deeply ashamed of, and the ways I benefit from it sicken her. She'd see this suite as one of those ways.

"I'm still here, actually. Mark and I broke up, so I'm planning to stay a while."

"I can't say I'm surprised," she replies. "No offense, but I never understood why he was with you, aside from your looks, and pretty women are a dime a dozen."

It's amazing to me that a few months ago I'd have *agreed* with her, and I'd have thought Mark dodged a bullet in getting clear of me.

"I was the one who ended it. And it might surprise you to learn that some men don't object to women with magical gifts," I reply, "particularly ones that can fix mistakes and guarantee unlimited wealth."

She doesn't like that. In my mother's silence I hear the sound of a snake as it retracts, preparing to lash out. "So you've found someone new then," she replies. "Try telling him you killed your own sister and see if he's still so enamored of your gift then."

I've heard these words, or some version of them, many times before. Normally they can silence me like nothing else, but today they don't.

"I think you mean *we*," I reply. "*We* killed Kit, the two of us. Me, an innocent 11-year old who had no idea I was going to time travel and you, Kit's mother, who knew I might start time jumping any day but still entrusted her care to me instead of watching her yourself. So *we*, and I'm being generous with that."

"How dare you blame that on me?" she asks. "You were jealous and you allowed it to happen." Her voice wobbles, rasps. I've never heard her cry once since Kit died. Never heard even a second of vulnerability. For a moment I feel guilty: why make her share the burden of Kit's death? If blaming it on me is what allows her to continue living, I should let her have it.

I open my mouth to apologize, to take back what I said. "I'm—" I begin, but she cuts me off.

"If you'd died when you got meningitis, I'd still have my daughter." She's weeping.

I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt, if I said there wasn't a part of me that didn't still wish I had a mother who approved, or at least didn't despise me. But it doesn't hurt the way it once would have.

"Actually, you'd have two," I reply just before I hang up the phone. "And now you have none."



TWO DAYS LATER, three weeks on the dot since I returned to my own time, I'm ready to leave it again. This time, I hope, for good.

Cecelia made yet another spa appointment for me after I broke up with Mark, which made me realize she was never trying to get me ready for a life with him in the first place. She somehow knew, or at least hoped, that my life would end up back with Henri.

I hope she's right.

"I'm not sure what to do with all this stuff," I tell Louis on my last day. When I failed to buy myself a new wardrobe at Chanel, clothes began to arrive. More clothes than I could wear in a year, along with shoes and purses and toiletries.

"It is yours," he tells me. "Madame Boudon says she will keep them until you return to visit us again."

"I'm...I'm not planning to come back."

He bows his head. "We'll keep them just in case you change your mind."

I take one last look around my suite. It's been like a dream, but I have another dream, one that is so much more compelling. Saying goodbye to my own time is far easier than I ever thought it might be.



This time when I jump from the woods near 11 Rue Ste Genevieve, I know exactly what I hope to find on the other side. I picture eyes the color of the forest at dusk and the slow curve of a smile meant only for me. And as everything begins to blacken around me, there is no panic. There is only relief.

I could try to land the day I left, but I choose not to. I have no right to steal days from them that they lived without me, although I suppose this is what I'll be doing from now on. But who knows what might have happened while I was gone? Marie could have won over her priest or discovered the prophecy is about her. She might have decided to move to the south of France like I asked.

Even if what's changed hurts me—if Henri is now with Claudette, for instance—it would be wrong for me to erase those weeks from their existence, rewrite it all with me present for them, just because I wish it was so. So I proceed carefully, skipping through decades and then years and then months and finally counting days until I'm fairly confident I'm exactly where I want to be—August 22, 1938, three weeks after I left.

I land in the hay again, of course, and land badly, but the heaviness of the journey is already settling on me and there's no time to waste. I bolt from the stall, grabbing the blanket that hangs on a peg to the left. I wrap it around me, and though sleep has begun its siren's call, I keep pushing forward. I knew I missed Henri, but I had no idea how much until this moment, until he's so very close and I have a few conscious minutes at most to lay eyes on him.

I rush into the yard just as he is climbing out of the truck. He sees me and

for a moment only stares, as if I'm a ghost. That same longing is there, but uncertainty also. I have no time for his uncertainty, however, so I run, or try to anyway, stumbling over the long blanket at my feet, hair flying.

I throw my arms around his neck and feel his heart thudding beneath my ear. My eyes flutter and the fatigue settles over me like a weight I can no longer push away. I tip my head up toward him. "I'm back," I whisper, as I sink into oblivion. "I made it back."

I wake in the room next to Marie's, which is flooded with morning sun. A chair sits next to the bed, with a blanket tossed over the arm and a dog-eared book on the table beside it.

My limbs are as heavy as ever when I rise, and the simple act of climbing out of bed feels like it requires more strength than I might have, but the breeze coming through the window is refreshing, not sweltering, and I'm motivated to get downstairs in a way I wasn't the first time I arrived. In spite of the journey and the days I've probably spent sleeping, a quick glance in the cracked mirror on the wall confirms I still haven't lost the sheen of my spa day. I'm ready to begin my life here...as long as Henri wants that too.

I hear the sound of feet racing up the stairs just as I've pulled the white dress over my head, and suddenly Marie comes running in. "I thought I heard you moving around!" she cries, throwing her arms around me. "At last! I want to hear everything, but first things first. You'll eat while I draw you a bath, and then—"

I glance out the window. I've craved the sight of Henri's face like a drowning man craves oxygen, and for far too long. "I just...I think I need to talk to Henri first."

She waves my words away. "There's time for that later. You've been asleep for days and you need your energy. Just take a quick bath while I go get him."

She heads toward the door but turns back just as it opens. "I'm so, so happy you're here," she says. "I hope you plan to stay."

That's in your brother's hands, not mine. I think of how uncertain his

face looked when I ran to him and the doubt in my stomach begins to spread through my blood. “I hope it all works out.”

I take the world’s quickest bath and dress again before I hobble downstairs. I’m holding my breath, bracing for Henri, but when I reach the kitchen I find only Marie bustling around, having already placed an obscene amount of food on the table.

“Where’s Henri?” I ask.

“I’m leaving to get him in a second, but first you must eat.” She bites her lip. “And I thought perhaps we should talk.”

My stomach falls to the floor. I take a chair at the table, not sure I can continue to stand. It’s only been a few weeks. I thought he might be dating someone but he couldn’t already be serious with her, could he?

“Talk? About what?”

Her eyes are worried. “I think there are some things you need to understand. When you—”

The door opens, and her words stop short.

Henri stands at the threshold. Our eyes meet, and I start to rise but Marie’s hand presses to my shoulder. “You will stay where you are, and you will eat. And you,” she says, turning to Henri, “will sit politely at the table, and wait until she’s done.”

He looks more worried than pleased to see me here. Did I misunderstand the things he said? “Marie,” he says, his eyes never leaving mine, “get out.”

“Do you not *care* how well she recovers?” Marie asks. “Stop being selfish and take a seat.”

Henri sighs and slides his large frame onto the bench across from me. I watch, wondering how there ever could have been a time when I didn’t know I loved him. When I didn’t want that full, pouting mouth of his on mine, when I didn’t want his calloused hands—currently clasped tight above the table—on my skin. There is so much we need to say to each other, so much I need to know, and the fact that it can’t be said with Marie here makes me feel even more choked, even more desperate, than I already did.

“Tell us what happened,” Marie says breathlessly. “What brought you back?”

“What made her change her mind is none of your concern, Marie,” snaps Henri. “Don’t you have errands to run or children to teach?”

“All in good time. She deserves a chance to tell her side of the story,” she says, shooting Henri a look I can’t quite interpret. She turns to me. “Start at

the beginning.”

I’m not sure what she means by *my side* of the story, as if there was a fight. Henri can’t be mad that I left—he never once asked me to stay. With one last glance at him, I begin to tell the story between bites of bread and cheese and sausage: how I woke, tied to a gurney, under the command of a doctor who was certain I was an addict. And the mysterious Cecelia and how she rescued me from all of it but would never tell me why. The whole time I’m talking, however, all I want to do is drink in the sight of him. I can barely look his way, however, without forgetting what I’ve just said.

"And you still have no idea who she was?" Marie asks.

"None. She said she was a friend of yours," I reply, "but she isn’t even born yet, so that seems unlikely. And she told the hospital my name was Amelie Besson."

Marie looks slightly alarmed. "Could she have been...one of our children? Mine, or Henri’s?"

I shake my head. "I think she would have said so. And she had a different last name and looked nothing like either of you. But anyway, she agreed to take care of me until I recovered. She seemed to know my arrival there would have gone really badly if she didn’t intervene."

"But what happened when you landed that made things go so wrong?" she asks. "I hope you were at least able to get to your clothes before you fell asleep."

I bite my lip. I hate not knowing what could have happened to me during those missing hours between my arrival in 1987 and waking in the hospital. "I’m not sure. I remember landing, but I wasn’t at the farm. I was in an alley somewhere. It was like I fell into the wall and that was it. The next thing I know I was in the hospital."

Henri buries his head in his hands, looking even less happy than he did a moment before. "*Dieu. Anything* could have happened to you."

"But it didn’t," says Marie, grabbing my hand. "And look at her. She’s never looked healthier."

Henri doesn’t look reassured. I came here for him, willing to give up everything, and he seems to wish I hadn’t.

"And Mark?" he asks, his shoulders rigid. "Did you see him?"

I’m not sure what’s happening between us, but the air is thick—with tension and desperation and unanswered questions—and there’s just too much there. Like colliding weather in the heat of summer, there will need to

be a storm before we can have clear air.

“Yes, I saw him. He came into Paris before I left.”

Henri’s eyes darken until they’re nearly the color of night. “Meeting in Paris. I assume that means you called him.”

“Yes,” I snap. “That’s generally how people get in touch with each other.”

Marie’s glance darts between the two of us. “So back to Cecelia,” she says, her voice overly cheerful and loud. “She took care of you?”

I nod, still watching Henri. “She put me up in a suite in the Ritz Carlton.”

Marie sighs dreamily. “So you lived like a queen for three weeks. What did you eat? How did you get clothes?”

I swallow and look away from Henri. “I felt like *The Little Princess*. Anything I could possibly have wanted, I had. She even took me to Chanel and when I didn’t want to buy anything, she began sending designer clothes to the hotel, more clothes than I could have worn in a decade.”

Henri’s eyes have narrowed to slits. “It sounds as if you should have stayed.”

If he’d reached into my chest and ripped my heart in two, it couldn’t hurt more than his words do now. “I’m beginning to wish I had,” I reply, rising with my plate in hand, torn between weeping or throwing something at his head.

He pushes away from the table, grabbing what I left behind and following me to the counter. “Marie,” he hisses as he slams the butter and bread down beside me. “It’s time for you to leave.”

“Please,” she begs, “you both need to—”

“Go,” he growls. “Now.”

The door shuts and neither of us blink an eye. He’s wounded me, but only rage feels safe right now. “Do you have any idea what I gave up to come back here?” I ask. “And what I risked making the trip?”

“Do you have any idea what it was like to be stuck here knowing you were with someone else?” he demands. “For all I knew you’d already married him.”

“Well I’m here now!” I cry. “And it’s like you don’t even care!”

He tugs at his hair with an angry laugh. “Don’t *care*? I’ve spent the past three nights watching you sleep. That’s how much I *don’t care*. And given how horrified you looked when I kissed you last week, and the way you vanished when it happened, I can’t imagine why you’d choose to return.”

“Last week?” I ask. “But...”

The day I jumped ahead. I thought it was fall, but could it have been an unusually pleasant August day instead? Yes, it absolutely could have been. No wonder he’s been so uncertain since I arrived. “That wasn’t last week for me,” I whisper. “It happened back when I was still staying here with you.”

“And you couldn’t have explained that? You left me feeling like I was another André!”

I throw out my hands. “I thought I could prevent it happening if I left early!”

The light in his eyes dies and I realize the error I’ve made immediately. “I’m not saying I wanted to prevent it. I just didn’t know...”

His mouth becomes a flat line. “Didn’t know what?”

I take a deep breath. “I didn’t know I was in love with you. And I didn’t know if you’d want me to stay—”

I don’t finish the sentence. That’s how fast he closes the distance between us, pushing my back to the refrigerator as his mouth crashes on mine. A hard, possessing kiss with his hands tight on my hips. What I’ve longed for all these months.

“All I have ever wanted was for you to stay,” he says, his mouth moving to my jaw.

“You never said that. Not once.”

He huffs a pained laugh against my skin and pulls back, framing my face with his hands. “How could you not have known? Marie knew. The *whole town* knew. I haven’t been capable of wanting anything else since you arrived.”

His mouth moves over mine again, and I melt, arching against him, heedless of anything but this desperate want inside me. Unbound at last after a whole summer of deprivation and restraint, with his arm wrapping around my waist and rib cage, pulling me tighter and tighter, his lips moving over my jaw, my neck. His fingers slide from collarbone to the top of my dress and my breath comes in tiny pants, frantic to feel that first button pop free. But instead, he eases away, his breathing heavy, his forehead pressed to mine.

“I...” he swallows, wincing as if in pain. “I want so much from you right now, but you just arrived. I should...let you rest.”

I grab him by his shirt and pull him back to me. “I want a lot of things right now too. And none of them are rest.”

I see the war raging inside him, the heaviness of need, tempered by doubt.

“Henri,” I whisper against his lips. “I’m not fragile. Remember the guy who pinned me to the dirt over a chocolate bar? That’s the version of you I want right now.”

With a low growl, he lifts me then, wrapping my legs around his waist as he carries me to his room, kicking the door shut behind us. And then I’m in his soft bed and he’s beside me, rolling me to my back. He finds my mouth, his tongue stroking mine, creating a sharp, desperate pulse between my legs, an emptiness that demands a cure. His hands slide down to my ass, sinking in to pull me hard against him.

I wasn’t raised in a convent, but this is all new to me—the way his erection pressed to the juncture of my legs is enough to make my knees spread wide. The way the rasp of his breath and small groan of desire against my skin make my heart rate soar. I spent so many years proud of my self-restraint, proud I hadn’t given in when everyone I knew had, but if Mark had made me feel anything close to the way I do now, I’d have given in within minutes. Seconds. The way I have every intention of giving in to Henri right now.

His hand goes to the top button of my dress and then he stops, with an expression of pure tortured lust on his face. He swallows. “Is this okay?”

When I nod, he unbuttons it to the waist with frenzied hands and pushes it off my shoulders, revealing the lace bra I bought that day in Paris months ago. “*Dieu*,” he says, running his finger over my tight nipple, visible through the sheer lace. “You have no idea how the thought of doing this tortured me.” He lowers his mouth and his warm breath washes over the tight peak of one breast before his mouth lands on it, through the lace, softly clinging with his teeth as he pulls away. I arch, stifling a cry.

“I want to hear you,” he groans. “I want every single one of your sounds because I’ve been imagining them for months. *Tell me* what you want.”

“I have no idea,” I gasp. “Just more.”

His mouth descends to the other breast, repeating the action, while his hand is gliding along the soft skin of my inner thigh, lightly pressing against the outside of my panties. My breath hitches and then stops entirely as his fingers slide beneath the hem, gliding along my core.

“*Merde*,” he groans, his eyes fluttering shut. “Ask me to stop. I’ve wanted this too much, and for too long. Ask me to stop or I won’t.”

I reach for his belt, tugging it free. “I don’t want you to stop,” I whisper,

while I fumble with his buttons. “I don’t care about waiting. I don’t care about marriage. I just want this.”

His eyes blaze, but his mouth tips into an almost-smile as it descends. “I care about marriage,” he says beside my ear, his fingers still moving. “Just maybe not for the next hour.”

My hand slips into his pants. I can barely wrap my fingers around him, but when I attempt it his whole body stiffens.

“God,” he says hoarsely. “Yes.”

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“My readiness was never in question,” he says with a gasp as my hand glides over him. “But yours is. The first time can be...”

“I know and I don’t care,” I breathe, arching into his hand. “I’ll never be more ready than I am now.”

He kneels above me, between my spread knees, still almost completely dressed: shirt in place, pants hanging halfway down his hips, and pushes my skirt around my waist before tugging my panties down. It bears no resemblance to all my fantasies about what a first time would entail—a room lit by candlelight, me in a negligee, nestled in a sea of pillows—but that’s because I never realized before what it meant to truly want something. I don’t need a perfect setting or a pretty story—I can’t imagine being able to notice anything but him.

His eyes have gone hazy, feverish. “If you had any idea what you look like right now,” he says, the words trailing away as he takes in my spread legs, the way I’m bared to him with my dress half off. He flinches. “You’re sure?”

“Yes,” I reply, arching toward him. “Now.”

He pulls his cock free and leans over me, letting the wet tip glide, press to my entrance and then, slowly, he begins to move, entering me in tiny pulses, forcing me to stretch wide enough to accommodate him.

“You’re alright?” he asks, his eyes unfocused. The heavy thickness of him feels like too much, like something that could break me. But I can see the effort it takes for him to restrain himself, teeth sinking into his lower lip, breath coming fast.

“Don’t go slowly,” I tell him. “Just do it.”

He hesitates for only a second and then gives into it, the urge to thrust, to fill, to push until he can’t go any farther. He falls forward with a small cry, bracing himself above me, and by the time he’s opened his eyes to check on

me that initial shock of pain is leaving and in its wake is another feeling—full, stretched. It still hurts, but there’s pleasure there too, some deeper craving that now thrums inside me, wanting.

“More,” I demand, and then his mouth is on my neck, on my breasts, as he withdraws and pushes back in, once, twice, three times. And suddenly all the pleasure, all the craving—it seems to center itself, a circle of flame he hits with every thrust.

Ohhhh. It’s so much more than I realized it could be.

“I don’t ever want this to stop,” I gasp.

His eyes are squeezed shut as if he’s in pain. “I’m afraid that’s not possible,” he says between gritted teeth. He stops moving, but his fingers go to my clitoris and begin to circle there. With him fully inside me, nothing has felt better in my entire life. I tighten around him. “Please,” I beg. “Move.”

He thrusts once, hard, and the sweet sharpness of it has me gasping, digging my fingers into his back. His face is desperate, tight with restraint, groaning low in his chest as I clamp down on him.

“Again,” I demand, my legs wrapping around his back for leverage, meeting his thrusts, demanding they come harder and swifter until that ache inside me tightens, tightens and finally explodes.

I cry out, arching off the bed pulling him against me, greedy and desperate, and his movements grow frenzied—swift, stabbing thrusts that prolong my orgasm, making me feel like I’m suspended in mid-air for seconds, a full minute, before he gives a single hoarse cry and pulls out, gripping himself, spilling across my stomach and chest.

He falls against me, his mouth pressed to my neck. “I’ve wanted that for so long,” he groans against my skin. “From that first day in the barn.”

I laugh, pulling him closer. “When you were holding me at gunpoint?”

“Yes, even then. And nothing from my fervent imagination could match the reality of it.” He presses small, sweet kisses to my brows, my cheekbones, and finally my lips. “You’re...okay? It didn’t hurt too much?”

I pull his lips back to mine. “It was a lot better than okay. They probably heard me clear to the other end of town. Although we shouldn’t make a habit of doing it without protection,” I say. “It doesn’t matter today because my cycle just ended, but it will matter a lot going forward.”

“Protection?” He looks at me blankly for a moment. And then he sighs, realizing what I’m saying. “Contraceptives are illegal—selling them here means six months in jail, so even on the black market they’re hard to come

by. Our version of protection is what I just did. That and watching the calendar.”

My God. If a man back home were to suggest pulling out and the calendar method as ongoing forms of contraception, any female would laugh in his face. “Maybe we shouldn’t—” I begin, just as his lips press to my neck, and I forget my point.

His fingers slide over one breast, which tightens in response. “I love that,” he says with a soft groan, rolling over me to place his mouth at the tip. “This about killed me that day in the field when we fought over the chocolate.”

“If I recall correctly, you walked away like it was no big deal.”

He laughs. “I walked away like it was no big deal so I could...take care of an issue you created.”

A small moan escapes my lips at the thought of him *taking care of an issue*. “I want to watch you do that.” He leans down, fully hard again, sliding his hands behind my neck as he begins to kiss me.

My legs spread and he pushes inside me once more. “It might be a while,” he says, biting his lip, “before I’m willing to do anything but this.”



WHEN I WAKE, Henri is entering the room with a tray. He’s shirtless, wearing only the pants from before, which are half buttoned and hang from his hips.

“You’re not wearing a shirt,” I say, eyeing him as if this is something I haven’t seen before. To be fair, it’s something I’ve mostly seen from a distance, back when sliding my palms over all those hard muscles and smooth skin was something I wouldn’t allow myself to do.

He gives me a half smile. “And you’re wearing nothing at all, beneath that sheet,” he says, placing the tray on the bed. “Which is something I’m going to try not to think about until you’ve been fed.”

It’s only now that I notice the haziness of the light outside. “It’s dusk? I slept all afternoon.”

He laughs. “You exerted a great deal of energy this morning. You needed your rest.” He takes a spoonful of stew and holds it to my lips. “Eat.”

I obey him and then look over his shoulder at the door. “What’s Marie going to think?” I ask. “I should go out there.”

“Marie is gone for the evening,” he says with a small smile. “She left a note saying she was staying with her friend Anna and would return in the morning.”

My cheeks grow hot and I cover my face with my hands. “I never heard her come in. Does that mean...do you think she heard us?”

He pulls my hands away, grinning. “I think most of the town probably heard us, that last time.”

I groan, picking up the tray and setting it off to the side. “We’ll need to be more careful once she gets home.”

“I plan to remain every bit as *careful* as I was earlier.”

Earlier. I think of it, and I want him again—the thick press of him entering me, that dazed, desperate look on his face before he came, the frenzied way he thrust as he did. My stomach tightens with want, in a way I’m barely familiar with, and my fingers go to his thigh.

“I’m sure earlier was an aberration. It won’t be like that with us most of the time.”

There’s a dangerous light in his eyes, which now linger on my mouth. “An *aberration*, you say?”

I struggle not to smile. “An aberration. I’m sure it will be calm...*subdued*, even, from now on.”

In a heartbeat he’s pulled me down beneath him, and his mouth is on mine. He pins my wrists with his hands and sits up just enough that he can see my face. “How calm do I seem to you now, little thief?”

I arch against him. Even through his pants I can feel how hard he is, wedged against my stomach. “Very calm. Nearly asleep.”

He goes to his knees, pulling the sheet back as he tugs down his pants. “Then,” he says softly, “I think it’s time I woke up.”



IT’S EARLY in the morning when I broach the topic of Marie again. “She’ll be here in a few hours,” I sigh. “We probably need some...ground rules.”

He runs a lazy hand over my breast. “We won’t have sex when she’s in the same room. That’s all I’m willing to agree to.”

I laugh, but it fades quickly. “Henri...she’s religious. I can’t imagine she’ll approve of this.”

“What occurs between a man and the woman he’s marrying is not her concern and she knows it,” he says. “She’s probably just relieved we’re both in one piece.”

I swallow. “Marrying?”

He raises a brow. “I said the conversation could wait an hour, not forever.”

“It just seems a little sudden,” I reply, “given that you were telling me I should have stayed in my own time a few hours ago. I must be ridiculously good in bed.”

He laughs. “You are definitely that. And it’s not really sudden for me—I’ve been picturing it for months.”

I lean back against the headboard. “You pictured being *married*? To *me*?”

“I’m trying hard not to be insulted by how astonishing you seem to find that.”

My smile fades a little. “I guess I was so certain it wasn’t possible that I never let my head go in that direction.”

His eyes darken. “Because of Mark.”

I keep forgetting that for him, Mark is still an issue, still *competition*. He doesn’t understand how completely I’ve left the idea behind. “No,” I say with a vehement shake of the head. “Just that it would mean giving up home, and my own time, which seemed impossible. Plus...the coming years are bad. It’s nothing I ever dreamed I’d enter into voluntarily.”

His lips press together. He focuses on the tray, his thoughts unhappy. “I should have the strength to tell you to leave, but I don’t, not yet. But if this war comes like you claim, I want you to go back.”

“Are you insane? You think I’d leave you here during that? It’s going to be years and years.”

“If something happened to you, I’d never be able to live with myself. And you could come back to find me when it’s done...you wouldn’t even need to wait. You could just jump ahead to the war’s end.”

“And I’d never be able to live with myself if something happened to you because I wasn’t here to help. Do you know how many people die during the war? You might not even be alive when I get back.”

He hangs his head. “All the better reason for you to stay safe in your own time.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I reply, my jaw set hard.

His nostrils flare. “What about children? You’d want to raise children

during a war? When there might be rationing or worse?"

"Children?" I ask, startled. "You're getting way ahead of yourself."

"Believe me," he says grimly, "if you remain here, a child or two is almost a certainty. No matter how careful we are, there are going to be many, many times when we are not. And there's something else I need to tell you before this goes any further."

I place a hand over my stomach, waiting once more for pain. "You've been dating that girl from the church," I say quietly. "Claudette?"

His brow furrows. "*Claudette*?" He gives a short, abrupt laugh. "No. I wish that's all it was. I have a feeling it's very different where you're from, but here, in this time, people are less tolerant of differences. You probably wondered why the Beauvoirs didn't even consider Marie for André?"

I nod. I wondered it many times, actually.

He sighs. "It's because of our mother."

My jaw drops. "They knew she was a *time traveler*?"

"No," he says, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. "They knew she was Jewish."

My jaw remains open. Stunned. How, in all the time I was here, could they not have mentioned it? "Not a particularly devout one obviously, as she married a Catholic and raised us as such," he continues. "But the town has a long memory."

My eyes close. Will that matter during the war? Will it be enough to get them sent to a concentration camp? If I'd known, I'd have pushed them so much harder than I did to leave.

"I'm sorry," Henri says formally, rising from the bed. "I didn't realize it would matter to you."

I quickly grab his hand and pull him back to me. "Of course it doesn't. But...it may matter once the war starts, to all of us. I just don't know what the Germans consider Jewish by law."

He rests back against the bed frame and I lay my head on his chest. "Unfortunately I do know the answer to that," he says. "They've already decided it. Something called the Mischling test. If you've got even one Jewish grandparent you're removed from civil service in Germany. If that changes your mind about this, I understand."

I shake my head. "No, of course it doesn't." But it changes other things. It makes the odds that he and Marie-Therese will survive the war that much worse. It means any child we have could end up in a concentration camp too.

When I was warning them about the war, I was so focused on their personal safety I didn't even mention the extermination of the Jews, when it turns out to be the most important piece of information I could give them.

God, this whole thing just got so much worse.

"I need to tell you more about what's coming," I say quietly. "And then we are going to make a plan."

When Marie gets home around lunch, Henri looks nearly as sheepish as I do. I'm fairly certain if there's some kind of record for the number of times two people can have sex in twenty-four hours, we just demolished it.

She looks from one of us to the other. "I assume it's safe to enter?"

Henri's hand slides through mine. "Relatively, yes."

"And I take it you're staying?" she asks with a broad smile.

I exchange a look with Henri. "More or less," I reply with a sigh. "Henri thought I should go home during the war, and I disagreed. So we've decided to compromise."

She looks between the two of us uncertainly. "Compromise?"

Henri runs a hand through his hair. "I want to know that, if nothing else, Amelie has the ability to escape if she needs to. So she'll stay here, but return to her own time as often as necessary, just so she doesn't lose the ability to jump at all."

"And once the war is over," I add, "I will remain here for good."

Henri's hand brushes against mine. We've intentionally left out an important part of our agreement—the most important part: sometime over the next year, the three of us will relocate to the United States. I didn't want to spring this on her upon my arrival, but soon we'll have to tell her. Their safety, with a Jewish mother, depends on it.

But only if they've already made it through the war, a voice whispers in my head.

Henri's fingers twine through mine and I squeeze them hard. I won't lose

him. I won't lose either of them. Somehow.



WITH MARIE-THERESE back in the house, Henri and I reluctantly acknowledge that it's time we return to something akin to normal life. He leaves the house to do the chores he's neglected for days, his gaze lingering on my face before he walks out the door. The moment it shuts, Marie pounces on me.

"So...?" she asks, eyes bright with excitement. "How was it?"

I laugh uncertainly. "You want me to tell you what it was like to have sex with your brother? Because I have a brother myself, and honestly I'd be scarred for life if someone provided me that information."

She flushes and smacks her head. "Ugh. *Dieu*. No. I meant the reunion. I'm going to forget you even said the rest."

I bite my lip, trying to recall the parts of our reunion that *weren't* sex. "It was great," I say vaguely. I think of him pushing me against the refrigerator and want to chase him into the fields for another round. "We argued a bit. He was worried I wouldn't stay and I was worried he didn't want me to stay and then it all worked out."

"Yes, I figured all this," she says, waving her hand. "But what are your *plans*? Have you set a wedding date?"

I glance at her. I don't understand how we went from no talk of marriage whatsoever to *setting a date*. "Um...not yet. I just got here. I'm not even thinking about marriage yet."

She raises a brow. "Well, that makes one of you, then. I'm certain my brother would not say the same."

I throw out my hands. "We haven't even *dated* yet."

"*Dated*?" she asks with an incredulous laugh. "What did you think occurred here all summer? Did you think Henri always takes picnics and goes riding and watches the sunset each night on his own? The two of you courted more than any married couple in this entire province. Possibly more than any couple in this country, if you look at in terms of hours." Her smile fades. "Amelie, I love you and I want nothing more than for you to be with my brother, but if you're not serious about him, you can't do this."

"I just gave up living in my own time!" I cry. "Of course I'm serious

about him. What I did is far more serious than any stupid piece of paper.”

“Except that *stupid piece of paper* is all Henri will have to know you’re bound to him,” she replies. “And you were perfectly ready to agree to that *stupid piece of paper* with a man you *don’t* love just a few weeks ago, so why not with Henri? If you’re still unsure, I think you need to tell him that.”

I know I’m not unsure about him, but she has a point. Why am I so reluctant to go down that path? If Henri and I were living in *my* time and he asked me to marry him, I’d agree with ease. I suppose because I know that world. I know who I am in it. But I don’t have a place in this one yet.

“In spite of my months here, I don’t really know how to function in your time,” I explain. “It’s just...a lot.”

“But I’ll help you,” she says eagerly. “I’ll teach you to cook and show you how everything is done. And when you have children, we’ll figure it out together, I suppose.”

I exhale. When I came back here, I wasn’t picturing much of anything beyond moments with Henri. It seemed so easy to give up my own time because I wanted him. And I still do, enough to suffer in all the ways I will to stay. But I’m not sure that life on the farm is what I want forever. I can learn to cook and clean and do the laundry and rear children in a rural village, but the part of me that wanted to finish college and have a career is still there. And she doesn’t want to spend long afternoons over a copper tub scrubbing laundry or making cassoulet. That future I laid out in Paris, when Henri asked what I’d do if I had to stay—was it a ridiculous fantasy for him? Because it wasn’t for me.

“It’s not that I don’t think I am *capable* of doing these things,” I finally reply. “It’s just that where I’m from, women at least theoretically have the same opportunities that men do. There are fathers who stay home while their wives work, and there are couples who share all that stuff. So I’m willing to live in 1938, but Henri will need to be willing to make our lives a little more modern than he may want. It’s not that I’m worried I’ll change my mind. It’s that I’m worried he’ll change his.”

She glances at me uncertainly. “I know my brother will agree to any condition you lay out, but there’s not much here for a woman to do. You could teach, or work in a shop, I suppose. And you’ve seen how much time the farm takes for Henri. You can’t expect him to come home after that and start making the bread?”

I swallow. “No, of course not.”

I leave the conversation there, because Marie does not understand that Henri isn't exactly wed to this life either. He's doing this for her, but once she's made her choices, once she's no longer his to hide and protect, he'll be free to do anything. And I hope that he will.

I remain inside through the afternoon with Marie, helping her complete all the mind-numbing domestic tasks that are a part of her day. Despite what I told her, she is determined to teach me how to do these things on my own. It's impossible for her to understand how much easier life will be very soon — that machines will replace so much of her labor.

And all afternoon as I make the bread and scrub the floor and help with dinner, I'm looking out the window, longing just for the sight of him.

"Thirty-six," Marie says out of nowhere.

"Excuse me?"

She smiles. "You've looked out the window thirty-six times in the past two hours."

I shrug, trying to pretend I'm not embarrassed to be called out. "I did just travel back five decades to see him, you know."

"You looked out the window back then too," she says. And then she laughs. "Ah. Poor Amelie. So stricken any time he went to the pump for water."

I raise a brow. "I can't believe I'm taking shit from a girl infatuated with a *priest*."

Her mouth purses. "I have no idea what you're talking about. But if you want to tell Henri that dinner is nearly ready, go ahead."

I glance at the stove, where the water isn't even boiling yet. "Dinner's nowhere close to being ready."

She bites her lip, barely hiding her grin. "Yes, but I thought it might take you an hour or more to get the job done."



HE IS WALKING up from the field as I approach, with a smile so sweet I can feel it in my blood. He draws me against him, his hands on my face, his mouth seeking mine. He smells like him—soap and skin and freshly cut grass. God, I've missed that smell and I'm so grateful it's now mine to keep.

"How were things in there?" he asks, nodding at the house.

I tip my head. "You say that as if you expected them to be bad."

He grabs my hand and starts leading me toward the orchard. "If I know my sister at all, she's already rung Father Edouard about dates for our wedding and has begun suggesting names for our children."

I sigh. "Both topics were raised, yes." When we reach the orchard, he sits and begins pulling me to the grass, but I hesitate. "We don't need to worry about snakes?"

He laughs. "Snakes? There are no snakes here. I was just trying to get you on my blanket."

Ah, to have known these things at the time. "But you didn't even like me then. Why would you try to get me on your blanket?"

His back rests against the tree as he regards me, a small smile on his mouth. "I liked you then too, believe me." His hand slides out, and he twines a lock of my hair around his finger. "You looked troubled just now, when I asked about Marie. Did something happen?"

He wraps an arm around me and I rest my head on his shoulder. "Do you remember when we were in Paris and you asked me what I would do if I had to stay in your time?"

A laugh comes from low in his chest. "If I recall correctly, you were going to live in Paris with a legion of staff and find struggling artists to support." That laugh of his does not bode well. He makes it sound like I'd planned to breed unicorns. When I'm quiet he pulls away so he can see my face. "What is it?"

I sigh. "It wasn't a joke for me," I say quietly. "I mean, no, I didn't think at the time it was a serious possibility, but—"

"But you don't think you want to be the wife of a poor farmer," he concludes.

I glance up at him. He's saying what I couldn't bring myself to say, but hearing the words from his mouth, I'm no longer sure they're true. "If I have to choose between being with you and the future I'd planned for myself, I choose you," I tell him. "But in an ideal world, I wouldn't have to choose."

He searches my eyes. "What will it take to keep you, Sarah? Name it, and if it's in my power it's yours."

He is willing to give me anything. Give up anything. For the first time in my life, I realize, I am not alone. He will follow me no matter how far I fall, no matter what I need to do or become. That small part of me that was holding back, scared and uncertain, flutters away. I wrap my arms around his

neck and kiss him, breathing in and out.

“I love you,” I whisper, kissing the corners of his mouth, his jaw. “I love you so much.”

His breathing sharpens as my mouth moves to his neck. “If you keep doing that, this conversation might need to take place at another time.”

I’m not sure who he’s turned me into, but the mere suggestion of sex with him has my entire body primed and ready. My nerve endings seem to rest on the very surface of my skin, a thousand tiny points of need. I climb into his lap, my knees on either side of his hips. My teeth go to the lobe of his ear.

“Oh?” I ask. “Why’s that?”

He inhales. “Because in about thirty seconds you will have me promising to buy Versailles for you.”

I pull my dress out of the way, let my weight rest on his. He’s already swelling against me and I feel stupid, blind with want for it. “It *would* be fun to live in a palace,” I tell him. My hand goes to his belt.

“It’s yours.” His voice is rough and low, wanting. “We’ll leave tonight.”

His hand slips inside my dress, cupping a breast, flicking at it with his thumb in a way that makes me gasp. I reach into his boxers. He is thick and heavy in my hand, my thumb spreading over the tip until he is slick there.

“*Dieu*,” he groans. “You’re not sore?” His eyes are closed and he sounds breathless, desperate.

“I’m fine,” I say, rubbing against him. In truth, I’m sore. But it doesn’t stop the want in any way, shape or form. If anything, it makes it worse.

He reaches between us and pushes my panties aside, lining his cock up with my entrance—swollen with need, and raw. I sink into him, head thrown back. It is pleasure and pain at once, exquisite in a way I can’t begin to explain to him. It hurts like hunger, like something that won’t go away until it’s been sated.

I ride him slowly, drawing it out though I’ve felt close since the moment I grabbed his belt. His mouth is on my neck, fingers flicking open the buttons of my dress to go lower. My nipple draws tight in his mouth while he seems to grow inside me, stretching me further than I imagined possible.

His lids are heavy, eyes dazed beneath them. “You’re going to get tired of me,” he says. His hands go to my waist and he pulls me down on him hard, jerking upward to meet me. “I will want this every day. Every hour. You’ll get tired of it.”

I can no longer keep my eyes open. I wrap my arms around his neck and

bury my face in his shoulder, moving faster. “I’m not ever going to be tired of you,” I say, gasping as he thrusts upward again. “Oh God, I’m close.”

He increases the intensity of the thrusts. His fingers dig into my back. “It’s so hard not to let go,” he hisses. His index finger trails down my ass, brushing lightly against the puckered ring there, and I gasp.

“Did you like that?” he asks.

I ride him harder, blind now, desperate to finish. “I don’t know.”

He laughs. Allows his finger to brush again. Once, twice—as he meets me with another thrust—and I am done for. I clench him tight as I go over the edge, dissolve into nothing beyond the feeling of us joined there. He flips me on my back and drives into me with four sharp jabs and then he’s cursing, pulling out, coming on my chest, my neck.

When his eyes open he looks a little shocked. “Well that escalated quickly,” he says with an uneven laugh.

I glance down at my ruined dress. “When we move to Versailles, I think I’d like some more clothes. And a washing machine.”

“Anything, *ma reine*,” he says, collapsing beside me.



MARIE’S BROWS go to her hairline when I return an hour later, my dress grass-stained, hair a disaster. “Well then. I guess having a baby in this house will liven things up.”

“I’m taking a bath. And you bite your tongue,” I reply. “No children. Not until after the war.”

“If you say so,” she murmurs behind me, sounding as if she is holding in a laugh.

I fill the tub and sink inside it for the second time today, smiling as I lean my head backward against the edge. We did end up talking just a bit in the orchard. I think he would be happy enough to stay on the farm if that’s what I wanted, but I saw that spark in his eye when I talked about moving someday. Living in a city where we can both finish our degrees, where he no longer has to work so hard to make people *not* take notice of his family. Much of that depends on Marie, of course, but by the time the war is over, she will probably have chosen a path for herself. Perhaps found a spouse who isn’t a priest.

Except maybe it's Edouard she's *meant* to end up with. While a priest seems like the least likely candidate to help produce some kind of supernatural being, if the "circle of light" is a child, there's a lovely sort of symmetry to it: my strict, religious family saw time travel as evil, and from my few interactions with her, it seemed my grandmother viewed organized religion in the same way, but this would be a union of those things. Marie already exists in both worlds, and if there was ever a priest capable of rising above his beliefs and his training to accept something new, it would be Father Edouard. He would do it for Marie, I'm certain.

I put on a fresh dress and emerge from the bath to begin helping Marie with dinner.

"So did you and Henri talk?" she asks mildly, shoving vegetables toward me over the butcher's block. "Among other things."

I stifle a laugh. "You're not going to shame me, you know. Where I'm from women talk about sex all the time."

She looks at me warily. "I obviously don't want...specifics, given that it's my brother we're discussing. But, is it not painful? It seems like it would be extremely so."

"I doubt I'd have sought it out if it were," I reply. "No, it's the opposite. It's like a miracle. Or a drug. You'll see some day, if you ever agree to go on a date."

Her smile falters. "Xavier asked me out again last week. I put him off, but perhaps...perhaps I should."

I've never seen a woman look more grief-stricken or reluctant to go on a date with a handsome man.

"When you're in love with someone," I say softly, "no one else appeals to you. You can convince yourself they do, the way I did with Mark, but it won't work. It can't."

She swallows. Her hand clenches around the knife's handle and her head goes down, as if suddenly she's in so much pain she can't unclench herself. "Then what am I supposed to do?" she asks, her voice rough. "How do I make it stop?"

My heart hurts for her. I know better than anyone what it's like to want something so badly and be certain you can't have it. "Before you abandon the idea of Father Edouard entirely, ask yourself what you'd risk by trying. I've seen the way he looks at you. There's not a doubt in my head he'd give up everything with a little encouragement."

Tears drip down her face onto the butcher's block. "What if he finds out what I am, though? Even if I chose to hide it, there are times when it might happen. Or we could have a child...like your parents did. And then what? How do I explain what I hid from him? How do I allow a child to be raised the way you were, as if there's something poisonous inside her? I couldn't."

I shake my head. "Do you think Edouard would be that man? If you do, then perhaps you don't love him like I thought. Or *shouldn't* love him in any case. The person you're describing does not deserve your affection."

She looks up at me, and swallows again. "You really think he'd accept it?"

It shocks me that she could possibly think otherwise. I suppose even people with loving parents doubt themselves occasionally. "I think he'd accept you, exactly as you are. And I think you will never move forward if you don't try."

She bites her lip. "You could perhaps jump ahead," she whispers. "You know I can't. But *you* could go forward a few years and see where things are. If it would all work out the way you say."

My stomach swims at the idea. I'm not sure I want to see the next few years. We will suffer at least a little, and possibly a great deal, and I don't want to know. It would seem like the wrong decision anyway.

"I love you, but I won't do that. Anything the two of you become will happen because you opened yourself up to the uncertainty. He would need to risk a great deal. I'm not sure you'd become everything you should be together if you didn't risk as well."

She laughs through her tears. "You're punishing me for the ankle, aren't you?"

I smile. "No, I've got a different punishment planned for that."

"Oh?"

"A hideous maid of honor dress. Absolutely putrid. Lime green and covered in bows from head to foot."

She smiles at me. "I will gladly wear the putrid lime green dress. There's nothing I want more than the two of you together."

"Perhaps there's *one* thing you'd like more?" I tease.

She flushes. A quiet happiness has come over her face. "Yes. Perhaps."

The next weeks are blissful. A promise of things to come.

Marie is once again absent a great deal, finding ways to spend her afternoons and often her evenings in town. If she's spending them with Father Edouard, she doesn't mention it.

The weather grows crisp. When the grapes are ready we all work together, along with the hired help. Marie and I both wear shirts and trousers since there's so much time in the dirt, and at night when I go to bathe my arms ache so much I can barely remove my clothes—it's something Henri would, no doubt, be willing to help with, but he is gone. Out in the fields before I rise, returning long after I've gone to sleep.

With the hired hands on the farm, our interaction is constrained to lingering glances and a brush of hands as we pass, and on Sunday we don't even get that much: Henri remains in the vineyard while Marie-Therese at last succeeds in dragging me to mass, insisting that no work should be done on Sunday. I'm once more the object of stares, and this time I have to suffer them alone while Marie sits with the choir, watching Father Edouard with lovesick eyes.

The moment mass concludes I am approached by Madame Beauvoir. I assume she still has no idea that Henri is the one who beat André up or she wouldn't be speaking to me.

"I thought you'd gone back to America," she says. I have no idea what people were told so I'm not sure how to respond, but to my vast relief Marie-Therese appears just in time.

"Madame Beauvoir was just saying she thought I'd gone to America," I

tell her with a pleading look.

Her eyes go wide, and then she nods. “Yes. How fortunate for us that storms kept her ship in Le Havre long enough that she changed her mind.”

Madame Beauvoir is looking me over once more like a prize calf. “I will come call today, then,” she says. “I’d like to hear more about your plans.”

I wait for Marie-Therese to make an excuse but she merely gives a small, pained smile. “That sounds lovely,” she says.



“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?” I demand once we’re walking home. “Why in God’s name would you tell that woman it would be *lovely* if she came to see us?”

Marie shrugs. “We live in a small town. We can’t afford to alienate our neighbors.”

“You saw the way she was looking at me,” I reply. “She’s only coming so she can find a way to foist her son on me again.”

“Well this time you’ll be there,” says Marie with a hapless smile, “so I won’t be able to agree to anything on your behalf.”

I shake my head. “I definitely will not be there,” I retort. “This is on you. And let me assure you, if you agree to anything on my behalf this time I will clear it up myself and I won’t be nice about it.”

We get to the house and I continue walking, searching the fields for Henri. I’m tired and irritated and it just feels like I’ve had enough of being away from him, of sharing nothing more than a lingering glance or the vague memory of his arrival in bed well into the night.

I find him at the far end of the vineyard, alone, since the farm hands don’t work on Sunday either.

When our eyes meet, he drops his shears, taking five large strides to wrap his arms around me and press his mouth to my neck. “God I’ve missed you,” he says with a sigh. “You seem...upset?”

I groan. “Madame Beauvoir is coming here to try to set me up with André again. Marie didn’t even try to discourage her.”

His breath ghosts along the shell of my ear and goose bumps rise on the back of my arms in response. “A ring on your finger might cure that,” he suggests.

I laugh. “And how do you propose we explain that I married my own cousin?”

His hands drift upward, cupping my breasts. “No one who’s laid eyes on you would blame me if it were true.”

My head falls to his chest and for a single moment I allow his exploration, sighing as I force myself to stay his hands. “The calendar suggests you’d better stop doing that,” I tell him. “Unless you’ve found black market condoms, that is.” The few he found last month are long gone by now.

But he doesn’t stop. Instead his hand slides inside my bra, teasing me until I rest on that fine line of pleasure and pain. “You’re sure?”

My breath rasps. “We need to be responsible, Henri. At least right now we do.” But he persists, growing hard, his breathing tight as he shifts against me. “You’re torturing both of us for no reason.”

He kisses me with the kind of intensity he does during sex sometimes, when he is on the cusp of losing his last ounce of restraint, and nods at the grass. “Sit down,” he says, his voice rough, his eyes impossibly dark.

The grass will stain my dress and I know that we can’t continue whatever it is he is planning, but I can’t bring myself to stop. I do as he says and he drops to his knees in front of me. His hands slide the dress up slowly, reverently, to mid-thigh, his mouth hanging open a bit as he takes me in.

We’ve done so much more than this. But for some reason his eyes on me, on my pale thighs in daylight, is almost unbearably intimate. His hands splay over the skin there and he takes a deep, steadying breath. He loosens the garters and carefully peels my stockings off, first the right and then the left. His hands slide up the inside of my thighs until his fingers land at my core and slip beneath my underwear. His eyes flicker to mine, obsidian now.

“Lay back.”

I do as he says, feeling a small tug on my underwear just before it slips down my legs. He pushes my knees farther apart, his fingers teasing me again, circling, and then...his tongue flickers over me. I gasp in shock at the sensation—hot and cold at the same time, almost too exquisite to bear. I’ve stopped him when he’s tried this before, because it doesn’t seem like there’s much in it for him, but today, just for a moment, I allow it. A second and third time, but it still feels as if I should stop him.

“Henri—”

“Let me,” he growls, and there’s something so desperate and determined in his voice that I wouldn’t say no if I wanted to, and obviously I don’t.

He resumes the movement, and when he slides his finger back inside me it becomes something else entirely. Sharp, a fire I crave. "I want to do this to you," I plead.

He groans. "You will," he says. "Very soon." I arch against his mouth, wanting more, and with a groan he gives it to me, his fingers pushing harder inside me, that flickering tongue never resting until I gasp, my hands in his hair.

"It's good, Sarah. Let go," he begs. It's the desperation in his voice that undoes me more than anything else. I cry out, arching free of the ground, and the moment I settle, he is over me with his cock in his hand. I reach for him, swirl my tongue over the top before it slides down his length.

His eyes are squeezed tight. "I'm so close already," he gasps.

I take him entirely into my mouth, gagging a little as he thrusts, hitting the back of my throat. There's nothing comfortable about it but I'm unbelievably turned on by this, by his desperation, by the way he's lost control of himself. "I'm going to—" he says. I grab his hips, holding him in place so he knows it's okay, and he explodes with a coarse shout, coating my tongue and my throat. He gives three more slow slides along my tongue, wringing out the last of it, before his eyes open.

"I want to do that again," I tell him.

His answering laughter is slightly breathless. "You are going to make the most perfect wife."

Once the grapes have been harvested, half are sold to a winemaker and half remain for us to process ourselves.

Henri and I begin to talk about a wedding. I will need papers of some kind, so he goes to Paris for the day to check into it and comes back with the name of someone who can forge a passport and birth certificate for me once I've had my picture taken.

And Marie listens, excited for us and also...uncertain. Quieter than normal, keeping something to herself she doesn't want to share. There is a strain to her smile when we discuss the future.

I ask in roundabout ways but get nothing from her until the afternoon she returns from town telling me Jeanette needs to go to Paris to check on her ailing mother.

Marie relays this information, biting her lip. "She's going to Paris to check on her and is wondering if we can watch the children."

I look up from my terrible attempt at knitting with a surprised laugh. "Are you *asking* me? It's your home."

Marie frowns. "It is yours as well, though, and will soon be more yours than mine."

My chest tightens a little. I think of what Henri predicted that night in the orchard: that his marriage would make Marie feel displaced. I suppose I thought I would be the exception. "It will never, ever be more mine than yours," I reply. "I would not have returned if I thought you'd feel that way."

She gives me a small smile, though I'm not sure she's convinced. "So it's okay?"

I swallow. The last small child I was asked to care for was my sister. But I can't live in that shadow forever. "Of course."

On Thursday afternoon, Marie and Henri drive to Jeannette's to pick up the children, while I wait at home feeling slightly ill. I've already told Marie I don't want to be in charge of the baby, but three-year-old Charlotte is scary enough. I keep picturing her seeing through me the way my mother did, spying some hidden evil inside me. Knowing it's ridiculous doesn't seem to help.

Marie walks in the door a short time later, carrying a swaddled bundle that must be Lucien. And behind them, a little girl with huge hazel eyes and curls past her shoulders, her tiny hand tucked into Henri's.

He has the widest smile on his face, so wide my heart twists a little. Whoever this little girl is, she's got him hooked around her finger already.

He walks her toward me and then squats low, so they are nearly the same height. "Charlotte, this is my fiancé, Amelie."

I've never heard him call me that. I can't help but smile as I squat down beside them. "Hello, Charlotte."

She stares at me with her wide, serious eyes for a moment. Long enough for my stomach to begin the inevitable slide to my feet. And then she reaches into the small bag she carries and pulls out a book, pushing it into my arms.

"Do you want me to read it to you?" I ask.

She nods. I cast a last nervous smile at Henri and then take her by the hand out to the porch. I take one seat, expecting her to take the one beside mine. Instead, she scrambles into my lap, puts her thumb in her mouth, and waits eagerly for me to begin.

I look back into the house, where Henri is watching us. He smiles again and I know he's seeing his future, when this is our child out on the porch in her mother's lap. And I smile back, because I finally see how magnificent that future will be.



ALL AFTERNOON and into the evening, Marie tends to Lucien while Charlotte has us at her beck and call. Her initial shyness evaporated quickly, and we've now heard all about her doll and her tea set, her best friend and her papa, who is very brave and will be home soon. I read to her, and Henri is in charge of

games, including a ridiculous one that involves holding each other's chins and slapping the first to laugh, which Charlotte finds unbelievably funny. Dinner is lively, the three adults passing the baby while we take turns eating, all of us marveling aloud at Jeannette, who somehow is handling this all on her own.

At bedtime I take Charlotte to the room upstairs, the one that belonged to me when I first arrived, but minutes after I've tucked her in and said goodnight, she's downstairs again, saying she's scared. I tell her I'll lie down with her for a moment and do so, surprised to discover how much I like having a three-year-old curled up beside me.

It's Henri who wakes me, his hand on my shoulder. "Come to bed," he whispers. I blink and look at Charlotte, her tiny face on the same pillow as mine, her thumb tucked in her mouth.

He smiles softly. "You're spoiling her."

I open my mouth to argue and he stops me. "I like that you spoil her. You're going to be a very good mother." He gently pulls me to my feet. "But right now I'm more interested in seeing how you'll be a very good wife."

"When *will* I be a wife, by the way?" I ask as we walk downstairs. Henri mailed my photo to the forger just a few days ago, but now that it's really underway I'm impatient for it.

"Your papers will be ready next week," he says. "As soon as possible after that."

"Now we just need to plan a honeymoon," I say. "Unless people don't do that in your time?"

He laughs, pulling me close as he shuts the door behind us. "Yes," he says, against my ear, "we definitely honeymoon in my time. Where do you want to go?"

My lips skate over his collarbone and then his neck. "A beach. Somewhere private where we can have sex on every available surface and swim naked."

He groans. "I'm not sure where this magical place you're describing is, but let's definitely find it. We have the money as long as we don't tell anyone where we went."

"The Riviera, maybe?" I suggest as I unbutton his shirt.

His fingers press into my hips. "It's October now and it will be November by the time we're married. We can go but I don't think we'll be doing any swimming."

“Further south then. Italy?” I reach for his belt.
“You’ll have to go further,” he says with a groan.
I drop to my knees. “Greece?” I ask, wrapping my hand around his girth, already hard and beyond ready.
“Yes,” he says with a hiss as I take him in my mouth. “That’s perfect.”



THE NEXT DAY when it’s time to go, Charlotte clings to me, her arms tight around my neck. I feel the pinch of tears. “Perhaps I’ll see you tomorrow at mass,” I reply, trying to reassure myself as much as her.

She looks from me to Marie, not understanding. “Charlotte is Jewish,” Marie says softly. “So she doesn’t go to mass.”

My stomach drops. All this time I was worried about Henri and Marie.

But there are thousands of little girls like Charlotte in France, many of whom will not survive the war. I can’t save them all. I might not be able to save any of them.

They leave and I bury my head in my hands. How am I going to approach the coming years? Because it’s clear this is a situation I’ll find myself in, again and again. I can make things better for Charlotte and her brother by getting involved, but if they died during the war, nothing I can do will change that. Which means I also might be *risking* their lives by getting involved.

Perhaps it would be better to do nothing, but I already know I’m not capable of it. I can’t watch them marched off to a concentration camp while I simply *hope* they survive it.

“You need to make Jeannette leave,” I tell Marie when they return. “It’s not safe for her and the kids.”

Marie shrugs. “If it’s safe enough for us to stay, I’m sure it’s safe for Jeannette too.”

My eyes meet Henri’s and he nods slowly, his hand sliding into mine.

“Marie,” he says, “we need to talk you about something. We’re moving. We have some time, but next spring, next summer at the latest, we need to leave for the United States.”

Her eyes go wide. “The United States? But this is your home.”

“I meant all three of us,” he amends. “*What?*” she gasps. “*Why?*”

“It’s not safe here,” I whisper. “Truly, it isn’t. Especially for you and

Henri. If I'd known about your mother, I'd have been on my hands and knees begging you to leave when I was here before. Hitler doesn't just dislike the Jews. He will do his level best to eradicate them."

"That won't happen *here*, though. And we are practicing Catholics," she insists.

From my perspective her stance seems insane, but I understand it. If someone swore to me back home that all the people in my town or my college were about to be annihilated, I'd have struggled to believe it, regardless of the source.

"I'm not sure it will matter. War brings out the best and the worst in people. And there's always someone who will inform on you just to get a leg up. Always. Do you really think that André Beauvoir won't be the first to tell the Nazis your mother was Jewish if he sees a benefit to it?"

Her jaw sets. "Even if that's true, I can't leave. What if my mother comes back looking for us? She'll have no idea where we went."

Henri's shoulders sag. "Marie...she's not coming back. You know this. She's had two decades to get back to us if she was going to."

"But she might escape!" exclaims Marie. "Perhaps she's been held somewhere and when the war comes she'll escape at last, and return to an empty home."

Henri slumps at the table, running frustrated hands through his hair. "We've gone over this so many times. This obsession with waiting for her to come home...it's just your way of avoiding the truth. If you don't care for your own life, think of mine, and Amelie's, and any children we might have over the next seven years. Are you willing to risk all of us just so you don't have to face facts?"

She lifts her chin. "Then go without me. I'm not asking you to stay behind."

Henri shakes his head. "The one thing that will *not* happen is you remaining here on your own."

Her arms fold. "I've stayed here and led this quiet little life, as you and Maman wanted. I've done everything you've asked. But I'm an adult now, and I won't be pushed into doing something that isn't right for me. So I won't leave, not until I know for certain she's gone."

His eyes meet mine, tight with worry, when even he can't fully realize how bad things might be. Unless I can change Marie's mind, I know one thing for certain: the odds of us surviving the coming years just got

dramatically worse.



MARIE BARELY SPEAKS for the rest of the afternoon. She chops vegetables for the bouillabaisse with a ferocity that scares me.

“You got to decide,” she says out of nowhere. “You decided to come here, to go home, to come back. You decided you wanted to go to college, and you decided you would leave. All I’m asking is for the right to decide for myself to remain in my home. Nothing more.”

I get the feeling her resentment has been brewing for a long time. Not at me, necessarily, but at the lot she’s been dealt. Watching me flit around and do as I please probably hasn’t helped, and now she’s stuck here, lovesick for Father Edouard while Henri and I bask in our relationship. It must seem unbelievably unfair.

“You’re right,” I tell her. “And I’d feel the same way. But this isn’t the only chance you’ll have to make a decision for yourself. You have your entire life ahead to decide whatever you want.”

She shakes her head vehemently. “My entire life has been *ahead*. All of these things that will be possible later—when exactly do they happen? When does Henri decide we don’t need to hide ourselves? When do I get to make my own decisions?”

I don’t know what to tell her, because it won’t be any time in the near future. “Give me the knife,” I say, “before you cut your finger off.”

She sets the knife down entirely and pulls off her apron. “I’m going to town. Which appears to be the only decision I’m allowed to make on my own.”

I watch in silence as she walks out the door. When I was a child I always thought that in any argument someone was right and someone was wrong. As an adult I realize that often isn’t the case, and it certainly isn’t here. Marie deserves to make her own choices, but her brother should be allowed to do what’s necessary to keep his family safe.

I head out in search of Henri once she leaves. I don’t have to wander long—he’s on the far side of the barn, chopping wood as if it’s life or death. For a moment I just watch: his shirt is off, his bare chest rippling with muscle and flecked with sweat and sawdust.

He swings the ax viciously and the wood goes flying, nearly to my feet. His eyes widen at the sight of me, and he carefully leans the ax against the tree stump and turns to me. "Have you been there long?"

I shake my head. "Just briefly admiring the view."

He gives me a small smile. "I'm filthy. You have strange taste." He glances at the house. "Is Marie still mad?"

I close the distance between us. "It was a lot to throw at her. She went into town to cool off a bit."

His hands go to my shoulders, his thumb grazing my collarbone. "You're so small," he says quietly. "I forget sometimes how fragile you are, how vulnerable."

"I'm not *that* vulnerable," I reply with a grin. "I can disappear when necessary, remember?"

He swallows. "That you can disappear is never far from my mind," he says heavily. "But you're far more vulnerable than me in the one way that matters right now: your future isn't already decided. Mine is, and Marie's as well."

I stiffen. I already know where he is going with this. I knew from the moment Marie refused to move that we'd circle back to the point where we began.

"I want you to marry me," he says. "And then I want you to leave. Just until the war ends."

I lay my head against his chest. Sweat, sawdust...I want all of it. I want all of his highs and lows, as long as we can be together through them. "I already promised I'd go home just enough that I can escape if necessary."

His arms tighten around me. His heart is hammering now, just beneath my ear. "It's not enough. Anything can happen. What if you get pregnant and I'm gone? You'll be stuck here."

"Then I won't get pregnant."

He laughs unhappily. "After the past two months are you still under the impression that it's entirely within your control? And don't expect me to believe you'd vanish if trouble came. You won't leave me, just as I would not leave you."

My hands clasp his face. "I'd rather have a few years with you than an entire life without you." Something calm settles over me as I say the words aloud for the first time. Yes, I still want a future with him, but even if I don't get much more than what I've had, it's...enough. If I had to trade every

future autumn in order to keep the one we just spent together, I'd do so without hesitation.

I just hope it's a choice I'm not forced to make.



THE AIR IS thick with tension when Marie gets home that night. I decide I've created enough trouble, and quietly excuse myself, leaving them in the kitchen and going to the room I now share with Henri. As soon as the door shuts, the arguing begins. First, a quiet, hissing sort of anger, followed by shouting on both sides.

"This is ridiculous!" Henri cries. "I don't even know who you are right now."

"How easy for you to say when everything has always gone your way," she snaps. "Our mother left and *your* life didn't change at all, whereas mine completely stopped. If you truly loved her, you'd understand why I'm determined to stay."

"My life went *on*?" he asks with an incredulous laugh. "You have no idea what I've given up. And Amelie has made every one of those sacrifices worthwhile. If I lose her because of your stupidity, I will never forgive you."

"Don't put that on me!" Marie screams. "*I'm* not asking anyone to stay."

She needs to know about the prophecy. In another world, she might have time to choose a course for her life, but this isn't that world. When he goes silent, I'm certain he's thinking the same thing, so I walk into the kitchen and take the seat across from him. He meets my eye—*should I?*—and I nod.

"There's something you should know," he finally says. "You'll be angry that I didn't tell you sooner, but I was doing so at Maman's request."

Her eyes go wide as she looks between the two of us, wondering what's coming.

Henri's shoulders sag. He leans forward, hands clasped above the table. "Maman thought the prophecy was about you. She believed you were the hidden child. And I suspect she was right."

Her face is completely blank for a moment, and then she laughs. "*Me? Why?*"

He exhales. "You meet all the requirements: you were conceived during a great war and born after it. The *day* after it. In France."

“But—” she begins.

“I know,” he says, cutting her off. “You can’t be the only one to meet that description. But Maman didn’t tell you the most important part of the prophecy: the hidden child is a product of one of the first families.”

She slowly drops into a chair, looking shell-shocked. “Why didn’t she tell me?” she finally asks.

“She thought it might be a burden, that it might change things for you. She wanted you to at least choose a direction for your life free of that responsibility.”

Marie nods, staring at the floor. “Is that why she went back to 1918? Because of me?”

Henri’s teeth grind, hating the way this conversation has turned. “I think so, yes.”

Her eyes well over. “And that’s why you’re so insistent on staying here with me, in spite of the danger. Because you promised her you would.”

Henri looks at her. “I stay because you’re my sister and I want you to be safe. I’d stay whether I’d promised her I would or not.”

We are all quiet for a moment. My stomach is clenched tight, praying that she’ll change her mind about leaving, now that she understands what Henri has given up on her behalf.

“I will go with you to the United States,” she says. My head and Henri’s jerk at the words, but she holds up the palm of her hand. “Hear me out. I will go, but only once I know what happened to our mother.”

Henri groans, sinking low in his chair. “So in other words, nothing has changed. You will wait here, decade after decade—if you manage to survive the war at all—on the off-chance she returns.”

“No,” she says softly. “I’m going back to 1918 to find her.”

My gasp is audible. “Marie,” I whisper. “Please...don’t. It’s not safe. Who knows how many of our kind have gone there and not returned? It’s like some kind of Bermuda Triangle for us.”

“I have no idea what a Bermuda Triangle is,” she replies, “but it doesn’t matter. I want to move on with my life as much as you want me to. And I can’t, until I’ve done this one thing.”

I look to Henri, hoping he will slam his hand on the table and forbid it and threaten her with any power he has. But he sits, beaten, knowing she has made her mind up. The same stubbornness that led to her to refuse to fix my ankle is guiding her now.

"I can't stop you," he says quietly. "I realize that. But please don't. If I'm off fighting, you and Amelie will need each other. What if we have a child? Even a child who is one of your kind wouldn't have the ability to jump, not for years. Amelie will need help."

It's shocking to consider I *could* have a child like me. I love Marie, and I liked her mom, but I still don't want to bring another of us into the world.

Marie isn't dissuaded in the least. Her face is, instead, vivid with excitement. "I could leave tomorrow and be back in a week," she says. "I just want to know where she went. I'm not planning to run into a burning building."

Henri raises a brow. "If you saw our mother in a burning building you absolutely would go in after her."

Her mouth purses. She doesn't deny it. And I watch the weight on Henri's shoulders grow, because he knows Marie is not capable of being rational where her mother is concerned. She needs someone older and wiser there to make sure she doesn't do anything stupid, and he's not able to be that person.

But I could be.

I hear Kit's words again. See her desperate face, shivering with cold in the coffin she will never leave: *You have to find them*. And suddenly I know, deep in my heart, that it was always supposed to happen this way. That the *them* I was supposed to help was never Henri and Marie, at least not in the way I hoped.

I meet Henri's eyes across the table, a wordless apology for what I'm about to say, before I turn to Marie. "I'll go with you."

"No," he growls. "Absolutely not."

I lean forward, silently pleading with him to understand. "She needs someone there to watch her back, and there's strength in numbers," I tell him. "Like she said, we're not going there to wage war. She just needs to see how the story ends."

He slams his hand on the table. "If you're going to jump anywhere, you should be jumping home! Dammit, Amelie! Every time a dangerous situation presents itself you seem to be right there, insisting on becoming part of it."

Marie, too, is shaking her head. "I don't want you to do that. You just came back to him. I know I've been awful lately, but the two of you deserve some happiness. Especially if things are about to get as bad as you say."

"If it's no big deal, then it should be no big deal for me to come with you," I reply.

She bites her lip. "I can't stop you, and I suppose it would be helpful to have someone who knows how to drive."

Henri's chair scrapes across the floor. He walks out of the house without a word to either of us, slamming the door behind him.

"He's going to be panicked until you're home safe again," Marie says, watching the door.

My heart twists. I never dreamed that returning here would make his life so much harder. "Then we should probably go right away. Do you have a plan in mind?"

She rubs a finger over her lower lip. "I'm not sure how long we'll need to recover once we arrive."

She's being diplomatic, using the term *we*. Jumping back a few decades won't affect her at all. *I'm* the problem. "It'll take me a day, I think. Two at most."

She nods. "So we should aim for November 11th, since she told you to go on the 12th. We'll jump back and stay in the barn," she says. "We can sleep in the loft until you're strong enough. My mother will be in the process of giving birth, so I doubt we'll be seen."

I stare at her across the table. "Marie, I need to come back to him, okay? We both do."

"Of course," she says. "I just want to watch from a distance. I just need to know for certain...that she's gone."

I think of the hour after Kit drowned. How I dove, looking for her, and screamed, and flailed, long after it was too late. I'm not quite sure Marie understands the way desperation will make you do insane things.

"You've got to promise that no matter what you see, you'll only watch. If you decide to intervene, I'll have to as well."

She reaches for my hands. "I want to know what happened to my mother," she says. "But what matters most is that you come home to Henri. I swear I'll put you first."

I don't want her to put me first. I want her to put herself first. But if protecting me is what will keep her safe, so be it.



I FIND Henri out by our hay bale, staring at the moon.

I sit beside him and pull his hand into my lap as I rest my head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," I tell him. "I hate that I'm making you worry."

His lips brush my hair. "My mother used to tell me when I was younger that I should enjoy my life while I could, because once I fell in love, I'd never know a day that was completely without fear. Now I see what she meant."

Have I made a mistake? Perhaps I should have just left him alone, to marry a normal girl and lead a normal life. "It never occurred to me I'd be making your life harder when I came back here."

"My life was going to be hard whether you were here or not. And if worry is the price to have you, I will gladly pay it."

"It's going to be fine," I promise him. "Marie and I talked it out. We'll watch from a distance. If there's even a hint of trouble, we'll leave. She'll be gone three days at most. It might take me a bit longer, since I have to recover there a day or two, but that's a worst-case scenario."

His hands dig in his hair. "That's hardly the worst-case scenario," he says, his eyes dark as night. "When will you go?"

He isn't going to like my answer, but we definitely need to get it done as soon as possible. Not simply because of the stress this is causing him, but because I suspect that even after Marie knows her mother isn't coming back, she's not going to want to move. Not when Father Edouard remains here. And we've now got less than a year before the war begins.

"Tomorrow. I just want to get it over with."

He flinches. "You said we'd be married before you jumped again."

I rest my head on his shoulder, wishing he truly understood how I feel about him. "A piece of paper isn't what's going to bring me back to you."

"No, but when you're not here it's all I'll have to prove you were mine."

Were. The word sits uneasily in stomach. "You make it sound like I'm not coming back."

He stares at the ground. "I will never know for certain that you are, any time you leave. And..." he stops himself, shaking his head. "I have a bad feeling about this. Perhaps it's because I just got you back, or because I'm so close to having everything I want in the world. But I wish you'd reconsider."

I can't say his words don't give me pause. But what option do we have? "Marie is going whether I'm there or not. And neither of us will be able to live with ourselves if we let her go alone and she doesn't come back."

He rises and begins to pace. Unable to agree, unable to disagree.

I follow him, resting my head on his back, wrapping my arms around his chest. “I swear I’ll return,” I whisper. “Go pick up the papers. I’ll marry you the minute I’m home.”

He remains silent. I slide my hands away, preparing to retreat, and he spins, catching me and pulling me tight against him, finding my mouth. I feel his desperation in the pace of his breath, in the urgency of his hands. In the fingers, making quick work of my buttons, of his belt and his pants. He lifts me to the side of the barn and pushes inside me so fast and so hard that I forget how to breathe. He’s acting as if our time is about to run out.

And suddenly I’m no longer certain it isn’t.

Neither Henri nor I get much sleep. I know he's exhausted, but when I wake with a start in the middle of the night, he's lying there watching me, like it's a deathbed vigil. I pull him on top of me, and it's just as urgent, as desperate, as it was before.

When it's over he presses his mouth to my eyelids and tells me to sleep, but he's still watching me when my eyes open again, just as the first rays of light flicker over the barn. I dress and walk into the kitchen, where Marie sits, flushed with excitement. This is a problem—I want Marie cautiously optimistic at best. *Cautiously* being the key word.

"You look like a kid waiting for Santa to come," I sigh.

She smiles, with an embarrassed shrug. "I'm about to see my mother for the first time in three years. Who wouldn't be excited by that?"

I wouldn't, for one. "Marie..." I begin.

She raises a hand to stop me. "Yes, I know. We're just watching from a distance. I won't go after her. I won't even *speak* to her. Just let me have my happiness, Amelie. There've been too few of these moments since she left."

Henri walks into the room and she bounces up. "Are we ready to go then?"

His jaw grinds. I know he's struggling with his resentment—none of this would be happening if it weren't for her. But none of this would be happening if it weren't for me either.

"You go first," I tell her. There's no point in trying to go together since the jump through time is always a solo enterprise. "I'll be right behind you."

Henri hugs his sister and quietly asks her to be careful. She hugs him

back. "Amelie will be perfectly safe. I promise."

And with a quick, hopeful grin at me, she vanishes.

I swallow. I don't dare jump from the house. With my luck I'd land inside it in 1918. I hold out my hand. "Walk me to the barn?"

His fingers slide through mine, all his worry and fear in the pressure he exerts. We walk slowly, unwillingly. When we reach my jumping point, he turns me toward him. "I would give anything in the world for this to not be happening."

I wrap my arms around his neck, press my lips to his. "A week from now we'll be married and it will all be behind us. Our biggest problem will be finding somewhere warm enough to honeymoon."

He clutches me to him. "Swear to me you'll find your way back. No matter what happens, no matter how long it takes, you'll return."

I press my mouth to his. "Of course I will. You just need to promise you'll wait."

His eyes close. "I will wait for you until my dying breath."



THE TRAVEL IS difficult this time. I pop back evenly through the years, but have to proceed at a painfully slow rate once I reach 1919. From there I count back months and then days until I reach November 11th, 1918.

I land. My head is heavy and my body aches. Sleep calls to me, but not as badly as it has with other jumps. I'm able to stagger up to the barn, but just as I reach it, I hear the small, joyous cry of a child. I slide into a dark corner, and watch a little boy chasing chickens through the yard with their feed, shouting "*Poulet, poulet poulet!*"

Henri, at age three, dark-haired and rosy-cheeked.

I feel a burst of love for him, but there's grief in it too. He's so young and innocent and unburdened. He has no idea that his father is dead, that his mother will disappear on him. Or that the girl he will love might leave him and never return.

It's the fatigue, I'm certain, that has me weeping. I slide down the side of the wall, shivering and watching his small legs recede in the distance.

"Amelie," Marie whispers from the top of the loft. "Can you get up here?"

I force my head in the motion of a nod, though even that seems more

effort than I'm capable of. I crawl to the ladder and cling to the first rail. There are at least fifteen rungs to go and I'm exhausted already. I get to the second and rest my head.

"Think of my brother right now," Marie urges. "He's worried sick for you, and all you need to do is climb a few more rungs to safety."

I nod and grab the next, and the one after that. I'm so weak. So terrible at this. How did I ever think I could help her at all?

"Don't think," she says. "Just move. Now."

So I do, somehow, and when I get close enough she grabs my hand and drags me the rest of the way. She is already clothed, in a dress that sweeps her ankles.

"Come," she says, "I've got you some clothes."

"Sleep," I reply, and plant face first into the hay.



WHEN I WAKE it is dusk, and I'm somehow dressed and bundled under a pile of blankets with Marie snuggled against me. Between her and the hay and blankets, it's almost warm enough. Certainly warm enough for me to fall soundly back to sleep.

When I rise again, it is fully dark—I'm not sure of the hour but it has that heaviness of the middle of the night, when nothing good happens—and Marie is gone.

"Marie," I hiss.

There is no response. My heart rate begins to pick up, imagining worst-case scenarios, but given that I don't see her clothes lying around I can at least rule out the worst of all: that she time traveled somewhere without me.

I convince myself she's just heeding nature's call and fall back into fitful sleep. It feels like only minutes later that Marie is kneeling by my side, trying to wake me. "It's time to go," she whispers. "Do you think you can make it back down the ladder?"

I nod, pushing my hair off my face. "So what's the plan?" I ask. "You said you knew how we'd get to Paris."

"I do," she says. "But it will involve some theft." For a woman who spends so much time at church, Marie has a very loose relationship with a few of the commandments.

"What *kind* of theft?"

"A car," she says, wrapping food she's stolen in a blanket. "Madame and Monsieur Perot have the only car in town. I've heard people complain about how awful she was during the war. She wouldn't lift a finger to help anyone, so I don't feel especially guilty depriving her of it."

I'm less troubled by the ethics of the situation than I am the legality. Spending a night or two in a French prison because I don't have the strength to jump away is not particularly appealing. "Don't you think someone will notice if the *only* car in town is driving away?"

"Well," she says, "they haven't noticed it yet. I've got it parked on the far side of the barn, but we should try to get close to Paris before it's light, I think."

I groan. "My God, Marie. It's like you searched for ways to make everything riskier."

"The term you seek, I believe, is *resourceful*. And you're welcome. I just saved your barely mobile self from walking to Paris."

I follow her down the ladder and out to the road. "How did you even get it here? You don't know how to drive."

She points at the bashed-in front bumper and broken headlight. "I didn't say I stole it *well*."



THE CAR, for all its luxurious finishes, drives more like a tractor, with rudimentary gears and a steering wheel that takes unbelievable strength to turn. Fortunately, I learn how to drive it on mostly empty roads. Aside from a horse and cart I nearly run right into, we see almost no one.

I laugh quietly to myself. "You realize *you* are the reason André's grandmother will have a lifelong hatred of Gypsies, right?"

Marie shrugs, picking at some bread she stole from the Perots along with the car. "You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs."

It takes well over an hour to get to the city, driving as slowly as we must, and when we arrive just after dawn, our progress slows dramatically. I hadn't realized that in 1918 there were still so many horses and carts. They don't operate like carriages in New York City, which remain on paths in Central Park or stay off to the side of the street. They march right down the middle of

the road as if they own it, and all I can do is roll along behind them, which gives me a chance to look around. There are few women out this early, but they definitely look like the product of another time: dresses that hit just above the ankle, and a kind of modesty in attire that will disappear entirely over the next decade.

“Isn’t it amazing,” says Marie-Therese, voicing my thoughts, “how much things will change in just a few years?”

I glance at her. “They change just as much between your time and mine,” I reply.

“Is it entirely for the better?” she asks.

I bite my lip. Life is so much better in my time for women, for minorities. But it’s grown less personal as well. “Mostly, but not entirely.”

We weave through the city toward Sacré-Coeur, as Parc de la Turlure—where Marie’s mother would have headed—sits just behind it. Our plan is to wait there, beginning at sunset, for Madame Durand to arrive, and follow her as best we can. Though we are many hours ahead of schedule, it seems wisest to get the lay of the land before we do anything else.

We park the car a few blocks away, and find Parc de la Turlure easily, just a stone’s throw from the basilica. To my dismay, the square is not nearly as small or uniform as I’d imagined. There are lots of large trees, with nooks and crannies between them, which means Madame Durand could easily disappear somewhere in here without us ever noticing.

“I don’t like this,” I say quietly.

Marie smiles, untroubled. “Look what I found,” she says, pulling a necklace away from her collarbone. “It was my mother’s. I found it in the pocket of my dress. I think it means we’ll have good luck today.”

I hope she’s right. I somehow doubt it, however. “Let’s be cautious anyway.”

Marie shrugs as if the admonition is obvious, but she’s already ahead of me again and walking too quickly for me to keep up with, given how leaden I am from the trip here.

"Marie," I hiss. "Slow down."

She turns back to me with a giddy smile. "I'm sorry," she says, clasping my hand once, quickly. "I'm just so excited. In a few hours from now, I will lay eyes on my mother again."

“Not if we don’t get a better vantage point,” I reply. “There are too many hidden corners here.”

"The rooftops?" she suggests, glancing up to the right.

I smile. "How do you plan to get up there, Spiderman?" Even if we could reach the roof, there are so many trees that no view is perfect.

"*Spiderman*? I don't know this word. But you make a good point." She shrugs. "So when we come back this evening, we will stake out the main entrances. You'll take one and I'll take the other."

Already she is ignoring our agreement to stay together, and I barely have the energy left to argue with her. Why is this so much harder for me than her? She has enough energy for a *village* of time travelers while I can barely keep my eyes open.

"We were supposed to stay together," I reply. "You promised."

Her mouth opens to argue and then closes. "Fine. It will probably be many hours away, anyhow. We'll come back at sunset and remain here. If my mother hasn't shown up by dawn, we'll jump back to a few hours and try another entrance." She cocks her head. "I'm wondering if you'll even be able to stay awake that long, however."

I'm wondering the same, but I'm not sure what option I have. I don't dare sleep in the back of the stolen car. "I'll be fine. Just stop walking so fast."

She pushes me toward a bench. "You sit here while I check out the other entrances. And then I'll steal some money and get us a place to sleep."

I do as she says, yawning. "Since you're continuing your life of crime anyway, can you steal enough money to get food as well?"

She turns to me, her smile thrilled, slightly manic. "Now that's the spirit. I'll be right back."

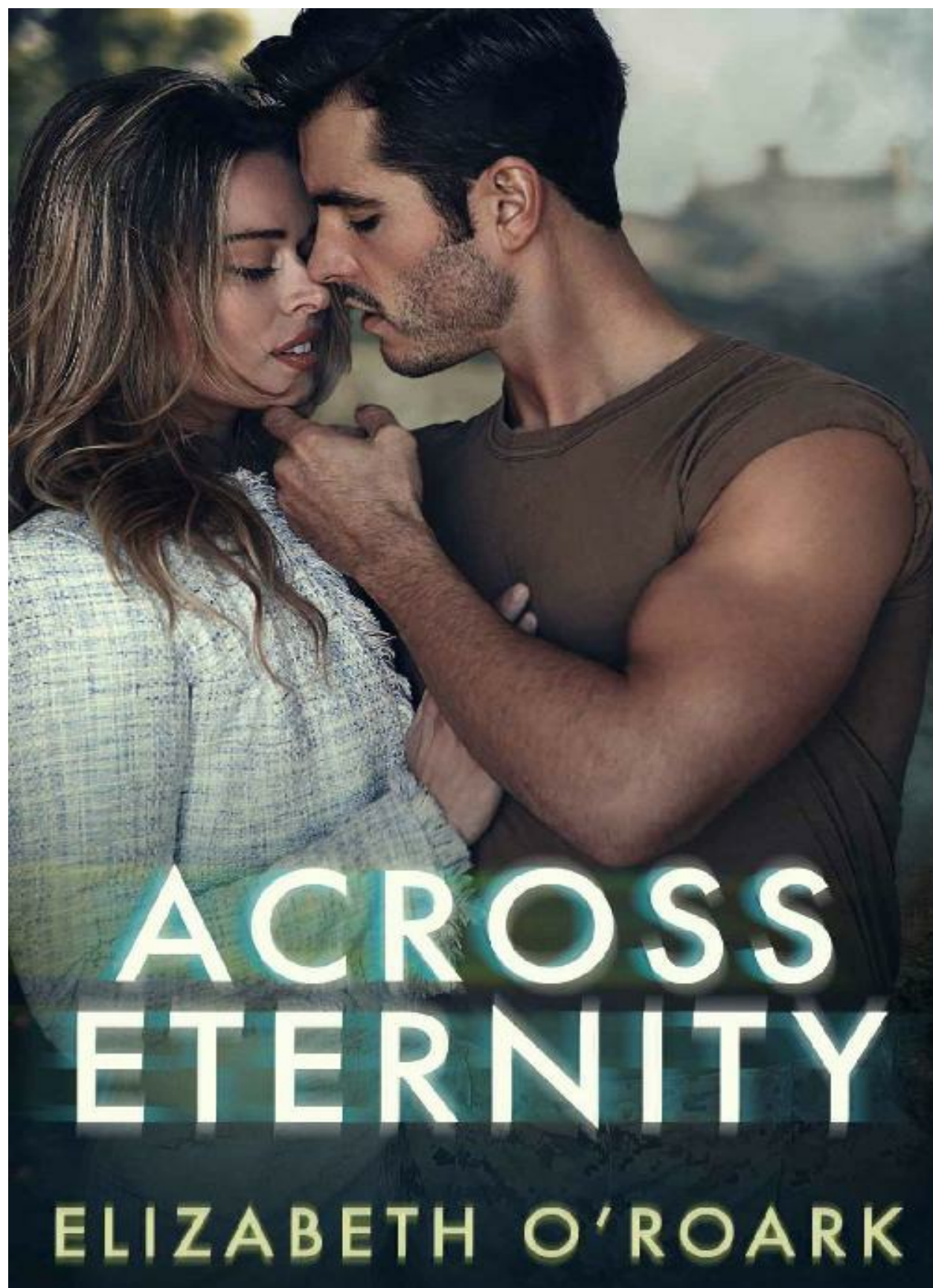
She darts across the square and I let my eyes close just for a moment. I'm so tired I think I could probably sleep right here, but within seconds movement in the brush behind me has my eyes opening wide. The sound was too loud to be an animal and—

Something pierces the skin of my neck. I open my mouth to scream but no sound emerges. I try to turn my head and my body won't move. I flop forward, unable to block my fall as my face flies toward the grass in front of me.

"That's two we've caught," says a voice above me, "and the day's not even begun."



The End



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Her eyes open slowly. In the dim morning light, she sees him, the man she brought home last night, searching the floor for his clothes. *Alexander*. That's what he said his name was. He looks like a movie star, but she can't really explain the depth of her attraction to him. He's at least twice her age but it's there, even now, when he's clearly planning to sneak away.

"You're leaving?" she asks.

He raises a brow. "It seemed best." His accent is slight. Where did he say he was from? Sweden or Norway. She shouldn't have drunk as much as she did when they were talking. "As I recall, you're getting married this afternoon," he adds.

She sits up, pulling the sheet to her chest, suddenly cold. "You knew?" They were together for hours last night and he never hinted at it, just plied her with wine and questions about her family until they wound up here, shedding clothes.

His smile is cruel now, not charming the way it was a few hours ago. "It's how I found you in the first place." He pulls a folded newspaper clipping out of his wallet. Her wedding announcement. "Poor Peter Stewart. Does he think you're a virgin, Vanessa? He'll be in for a bit of a shock tonight, won't he?"

She is speechless, watching him shove the clipping in a pocket.

"Why did you do this?" she asks. "What is it you want?"

"I was here for information and simply partook of what you offered so freely," he says. His eyes flicker over her. "You're lovely but soulless. I can't

explain the attraction...perhaps it's the time traveler in you."

That chill goes straight to her spine. He was dangerous before, but this is a different sort of danger entirely. "Time traveler?" she asks. "I have no idea what you're talking about." She meets his gaze, daring him to challenge her.

"I can see it in your eyes," he says, sitting beside her on the bed and leaning close. She's furious and yet he can feel the way she wants to yield, as if the desire for him is in her DNA. And maybe it is. He understands little about how that gene they share works, but he knows it contains multitudes no one has yet discovered. "You've tried to stop, I'm sure. But it's still there. Do you think not using it makes you better than that sister you hate so much?"

Her fist tightens around the sheet. *Iris*. Ruining everything, even when she's no longer here. Suddenly she remembers all the questions he asked about her family while they were drinking. Probably for reasons less benign than she thought. "What does my sister have to do with anything? She moved to Paris over a year ago."

He pulls something from his jacket pocket and hands it to her. It's a picture of Iris, sepia-tinted and wearing an old-fashioned dress that sweeps the floor. A man stands behind her with his hand on her shoulder. *What was Iris thinking, allowing herself to be photographed like that?*

"That's my father with her," Alexander says, "not that I'd actually call him *father* under the circumstances. It was taken in 1918, just before they held my mother captive and allowed terrible things to happen. Based on your hatred of your sister, I doubt you're surprised by that."

She isn't. Yet Iris was always her mother's favorite. It enrages her even now. "And you decided to punish *me* for it? You could have gotten me pregnant."

He gives her an arrogant smile. "*Punish?* As I recall, you enjoyed it, many times over. You were as drawn to me as I was to you, and believe me, I did not want to be drawn to anyone related to your sister." He rises and walks to the door. "But if it really bothers you, just rewind time and undo the whole thing. Because we both know you can."

She says nothing as he walks out of the room.

She swore two years ago she'd never time travel again, and now God is testing her resolve. So she will endure this memory, and her regret. But she won't get pregnant. It was just one night, and she's going to do the right thing from now on.

God just wouldn't punish her like that.

Henri.
He comes into the house just after Marie has left for town. It's early fall, still warm, and his shirt clings to him from a morning's labor, unbuttoned to mid-chest. Want kicks sharply in my stomach and I swallow, trying to force it away. My hunger for him is excessive, *incessant*—it needs to be kept in its place. "I was about to see if you wanted lunch," I tell him.

His mouth lifts, a hint of a dirty smile. "I think I need a bath, little thief," he says, closing the distance between us. "And I think you need one too."

I start to reply when I hear it—that shrieking noise again, like a hand inside my skull, squeezing and twisting. *Make it stop*, I try to say, but my tongue won't obey my commands. That noise is pulling me back, somewhere else, somewhere I don't want to be.

My eyes open to find that I'm in a windowless room where the noise is worse, louder. I sit at a long table, surrounded by blank-faced women spooning something in their mouths, empty-eyed yet desperate. Stew. It sits in front of me as well, its taste on my tongue though I've no memory of eating it.

I understand their desperation. Something inside me cries out for the contents of the bowl, as if it's oxygen and I'm short of breath. My spoon rises to my lips almost without my consent, my hand shaking with desire.

But why? The question slips forward alongside the craving. *Why do I want this so badly? Why am I even here?*

For a moment I see Henri's face. Picture his eyes, intent on mine,

worried, begging me for something, as if my answer means everything to him. I shudder with relief as the spoon hits my tongue and the tension finally eases. I feel closer to Henri, now, less bothered by that endless shrieking overhead. Even at the worst of times, he looks at me as if I'm something worth fighting for, something precious. That wounded part of me, the one that still hasn't shaken off my mother's hatred, heals a little more with each moment he's near.

I watch as he unbuttons my dress, as his fingers slide down my collarbone, then dip to the base of my breasts. There's the smallest sound from his chest—a quiet groan, full of need.

"What if Marie comes back early?" I ask, but I make no move to stop him.

He laughs. "Then she will learn not to come back early."

A snap of pain between my shoulder blades jars me. The blank-faced women surround me again and something presses hard against my spine.

"Eat," a man grunts behind me. "Been here a month. Shouldn't need to be told."

My pulse jumps at the words. Even hazy and half-asleep, something inside me panics. I've been here a *month*? It's not possible. I don't even remember how I got here in the first place. I pick up the spoon, glancing quickly at the faces nearest me. Beautiful faces, with eyes only time travelers possess. They don't seem to notice me or each other—they only care about the stew. My head is too foggy to make sense of it, but I know something's wrong. I force myself to put the spoon back down, sweating with the effort.

I want this too much.

Thick-fingered and clumsy, fighting every impulse, I exchange my bowl for the empty one beside me. The woman sitting there begins to eat greedily, sending droplets of it flying.

Evil, says my mother's voice in my head. *Whatever's in that bowl might kill her.*

It's not evil, I argue. *If I don't figure this out, it might kill us all.*

Such convenient logic, my mother replies.

And I have no response to that, because this time she's right.



BY THE TIME the meal ends, the pounding in my head is worse and my skin is clammy. We are pushed down a long hall, into another gray, windowless room lined with cots, which the women move toward as if this is home. I know mine too, somehow.

My head hurts so much that my stomach rolls in response. I lie down, waiting for it to pass. When my eyes open, the room is dark, but I can make out the face of the woman on the cot next to mine.

Marie.

I whisper her name. My throat does not seem to work right. The word is garbled, and she doesn't respond. "Marie," I repeat. Nothing.

I close my eyes, sick again, longing to be anywhere else, longing for Henri. And then I am with him, watching as he slides into the bathtub, lean-muscled, still tan from summer. He holds his hands out for me. "Give me the pitcher," he says. "I'll wash your hair."

I climb in and sit between his legs, my back to his. "That's very *Out of Africa* of you."

He raises a brow. "What's African? Washing your hair?"

I laugh. "No. It's this movie with...never mind. You don't know who they are. Anyway, the guy washes the woman's hair. It's very erotic."

His hands slide around me to cup my breasts. "I'm glad you think so."

The water sloshes as my knees fall open. "Do you want more?" he asks, his hand sliding down my torso.

"Yes," I groan, but suddenly I begin to shake. I'm hot. *Sick*. This is not the way this is supposed to go. Not the way it happened the first time.

"Sarah?" he asks, his voice urgent. "What's wrong?"

I flail in the water, sending it spinning over the lip of the tub. My insides are twisting. "Don't know," I murmur. "Make it stop."

This is all wrong. I remember the afternoon vividly. I remember how Henri used his hands on me in the tub until I came, with my head pressed to his chest, and how he carried me to the mattress afterward, too impatient to even let us dry off.

But instead I am curled into a ball against him, hot and shivering at once, and I'm hearing that noise again, that awful noise. "Henri, make it stop," I beg, clutching my hands to my head. "I don't know where I am."

My eyes open and I'm back in the dark room with the shrieking noise, sweating, breathing too fast. My shift clings to me, twists around my legs. No, I think. *I don't want to be here. Please don't let me be here. Let me be*

back with Henri.

And then I am. He's perched beside me on our bed with his hand on my brow. "It came out of nowhere," he's saying. "She was fine and now she's like this. It's been hours."

I don't understand, I want to weep. What's happening to me? Why am I in two places at once and sick in both of them?

"It's just a fever," soothes Marie, leaning over us. "You're as panicked as a new father."

"It's more than that," Henri argues, running his hand through my hair. "She keeps telling me you're with her, saying there's something in the stew."

"Stew," I whisper. "Don't eat. Trap."

She smiles at me over his head as if I'm a sleepy toddler. "We haven't had stew in weeks," she says. "You're dreaming."

My eyes open in the dark room once more. Marie is on the pillow across from mine, unmoving, her lips bleached of color.

"No," I reply, though no one is listening. "I think I'm the only one who's awake."



ALL NIGHT I'M FEVERISH, going from Henri to the room with the cots, uncertain which of them is real. I'm awakened the next day by a guard who slams his gun against a metal pipe to rouse us. I'm shaking so hard it's a struggle to climb from the bed, and I do so too slowly for the guard's liking. I've just pushed myself to standing when he plants his boot in my stomach, sending me flying backward. I go to my hands and knees, certain I will throw up.

"I should put a bullet in her head," he says to the other guard. "She'll be dead by morning anyway."

I push to my feet and nearly fall in my haste to join the other women. I follow them down a long, poorly lit hallway, all metal and concrete block—back to the cafeteria, where we line up like lambs to the slaughter.

They push gruel at us instead of stew this morning, but my mouth waters with desire for it just the same. I pretend to eat, and when the woman next to me empties her bowl, I replace it with my full one.

"Watch them carefully today," says a guard who passes only a moment

later. “They’re decreasing the sedative. The ones we’re looking for will be the first to wake.”

The ones they’re looking for. I know this means I need to be careful, even though it’s not me they’re after, but I can’t. Fighting my desire for the gruel and that noise overhead, that noise that never goes away, has exhausted me. My eyes close, despite my best intentions, and remain so until I feel Henri’s palm on my forehead. My eyes flicker open to find that I’m in our bed, the curtains drawn but sunlight sliding through the cracks around them.

I want to ask him why this is happening. I want to ask him if I’m being punished for my sister’s death. Or perhaps just the hundreds of times I used time travel to get myself ahead—to finish a paper I’d forgotten, to learn something I didn’t know would be on the test, or when I needed tuition money,

All because of time travel, I want to tell him. *My mother was right. Don’t let us make this journey.*

But the words never come. A sentence in my head becomes only a gasp, a single syllable, as it exits my mouth.

Doctor Nadeau leans over me, his brow furrowed. “She’s been poisoned,” he concludes. “I’ll give her castor oil to bring it back up.”

Henri stiffens. “Poisoned? How?”

“Mushrooms, juniper berries, even too many apple cores maybe,” says Doctor Nadeau. “She’s American, yes? Perhaps it’s not common knowledge there.”

I’ve never seen Henri look as desperate as he does right now. He knows something else is going on—he just has no idea what it is.

Help me, I think, and his hands go to the sides of my face.

“Tell me what you need,” he begs, as if he’s heard my words. “Tell me what to do.”

The shrieking catches my attention and pulls me away before I can answer, if I was even capable of answering. My eyes open to find I’m back in the cafeteria and being pushed toward the door. *What just happened?* Was I hallucinating, or was I—*sort of*—in two places at once?

There’s a faint taste of castor oil in my mouth, but it’s not until my stomach starts churning in response to it that I have my answer. I was, somehow, in two places simultaneously. I have no idea how it’s possible, and I don’t know why that shrieking noise doesn’t entirely keep me in place. At this exact moment, I wish it would, though. We enter the hall and the first

wave of nausea hits. I walk faster, but the women shuffle so slowly I can't go anywhere. When we turn a corner I vomit, letting it fall in a trail to my right as I walk.

"Which of you stupid whores threw up?" shouts a guard behind me. I hear a *thwack* and someone falls, suffering a punishment that should have been mine. I continue walking, despite the nausea, despite the guilt, as if my life depends on it—which it probably does.

We are pushed into a large room which holds chairs and nothing more. Some of the women sit, and some wander, muttering to themselves, lost in a dream world. Right now, as I stumble toward a chair as far from the guards as possible, I wish I was in a dream world too. Even if it's only in my head, a dream of Henri is better than this, with my stomach rolling, sweat dripping into my eyes.

I'm going to be sick again. I drag in air, begging myself, begging the universe for help. *Please. Not here. Not now.* It comes up anyway, but the guards aren't looking at me. Instead, they stare intently at a woman closer to them who is fading in and out—the same thing Henri insisted he saw me do.

"Did you see that?" one asks. "Kick her and see if she's awake. Just don't kick her in the stomach."

The other grunts. "I'll kick her wherever I please. There's no hidden child nowhere to be found with this lot."

Hidden child.

The words fall into my brain and doors there begin to open. Marie, the hidden child. I remember walking through Parc de la Turlure with her in 1918, wearing a dress so long it hit my ankles. We were looking for Marie's mother, who disappeared there, just like my aunt did. I remember the pain of a needle plunging into my neck.

The truth comes to me at last, so horrifying that I forget I am ill. I forget the guards and the women around me. Marie and I were taken captive, just like her mother and my aunt must have been.

And Henri—he remains in 1938, waiting for me, assuming the worst. I've got to get back to him.

Sarah.

She's the first thing I think of each morning, the last when I go to sleep. Her space in the bed is cold, untouched. I press my face to her pillow but the scent is fading.

Come back, I think. Please, please come back.

But no matter how hard I wish for it, no matter how many times I beg God for a different outcome...the bed remains empty and the house remains silent. I no longer see how to get through the day.

When she and Marie first left, I forced myself to go on, feigning optimism. I got Sarah's forged passport, discussed honeymoons in Greece with a travel agent. Hours, then days, slipped by without her return, and that optimism became something else, something frenzied and irrational. I focused on ridiculous things, insisting all would be well. I bought her Christmas gifts, lavish items she'd have little use for on a farm. I worried our winters might be too cold for her and dug out enough of the basement to drive pipes beneath the slab—a new way of heating the floors some American architect has been perfecting.

I worked, sun-up to sun-down, as if I could bring her home with the force of my efforts, but still there was nothing.

Now all I can do is beg. My heart is outside of my body, beyond my control, and all I can do is beg the universe to return it to me.

I eat bread and sausage for dinner, with heavy helpings of whiskey, saying a quiet prayer before I begin. *Please God, bring her back to me. It can't end like this. You have to let her return.*

After the third pour of whiskey my mind drifts. I think about the future. Living with Sarah in a flat in Paris, returning to the farm for holidays. I'll take our sons out to the Bousonne Wood to get a Christmas tree. Will our daughters time travel? Will they shimmer, like she does?

My eyes open and I'm alone in the empty house. I'd laugh at my foolishness if I were capable of it. Instead I fill my glass and drink fast, laying my head on the table when it's empty. They've been gone over a month now. How will I stand it if they don't return? Why didn't I stop them?

A memory suddenly pierces the fog in my head. Early in the fall, Sarah was ill, feverishly insisting she and Marie were trapped, telling me the stew was drugged. Is it possible she was traveling to me from 1918 then?

I sit up, jaw open, wondering why I'm only remembering it now.

"No," I say aloud, sick at the thought. "No. It was just a fever."

But only the silence of the house whispers back.

It takes four days. Four days of cold sweats and vomiting until I finally wake one morning feeling well again, or at least more like myself. We sit at the long table and I, like the others, spoon gruel into my mouth, necessary because the guards are watching and that noise is unbearable without it. I switch my bowl with that of the woman beside me as soon as I can and try to think.

I've tried to convey what's happening to Henri, hoping he can warn us, but nothing seems to work. I don't seem able to control what I tell him, and I doubt it would matter if I could. Marie wouldn't listen. Marie would still come here and need someone to save her.

I wish she would wake up so we could talk all this over. She is twitchier now that they are decreasing the drug, though she still won't respond when I whisper her name. And I'm not sure she *should* wake up. They are looking for the hidden child. Maybe it's best that she remains too drugged to give herself up until I figure out how we can escape...*if* I figure out how to escape.

We won't be able to time travel out of here—the noise keeps us all at half-strength and makes that kind of focus impossible—and walking out doesn't look like an option either. I've only seen one door, and it's both guarded and padlocked. Though the windows are blacked out, I can see the shadow of bars on the other side, which rules out jumping.

What would Henri do in my position, surrounded by armed guards? He'd realize fighting back, outmanned like this, would be suicide, so he'd look for another way. He'd survey the information he had and create a new plan.

I squeeze my eyes shut and consider the only thing I know so far: they

hope one of us carries the hidden child of the prophecy. But they must realize by now that few, if any of us, are pregnant, so why haven't they killed us yet? And they will *have* to kill us once they have what they want—you can't set someone free if you've tortured her and she has the ability to go back in time to punish you for it.

So, they want something more. What is it?

I watch as a guard pulls a woman from her seat by her hair. They clearly aren't trying to win us to their side, which means that whatever it is they want won't require our cooperation. It's something they plan to take.



THAT NIGHT, after the lights are out and the guard sleeps soundly in the chair at the end of the room, I allow myself to go, in my mind, to Henri. I want to remember how things were, remember all the things I need to get home to.

He's coming in after the hired help are gone for the day, exhausted, in need of a shave. The harvest is nearly done, thank God. I miss my fiancé. I want him to myself once more.

I smile. "Go bathe," I tell him. "I've made us dinner, and Marie didn't even help. Which means it may be inedible, but that's beside the point."

He pulls me to him, his hands gentle on my face. "You should be resting." His mouth closes on mine. A sweet, chaste kiss. Not the kind I am hoping for. I feel the edge in him, the restraint, but I've never wanted restraint from him, and I especially don't want it now, when we've had so little time alone.

"Rest?" I ask. "Why on earth would I rest? You're the one who's been working night and day."

He pushes my hair back from my face. "You were so ill, Sarah. Your fever just broke this morning." His lips press to my forehead. "Dieu. I've never been so terrified."

I still. What is he talking about? Yesterday I helped him in the fields, and then we sat on the small porch with a bottle of wine, bickering in that way we do—more foreplay than argument.

"Fever?" I ask. "As I recall, last night you were offering me your ill-informed opinions about Matisse and I was soundly proving you wrong."

He steps back, holding a hand to my forehead. "No, love. We've never

discussed Matisse. You've been ill, remember? For days and days. Out of your mind. Telling us someone was drugging you and Marie." He shakes his head. "I wonder if you're still ill."

I stare at him. I remember the past few days. I remember our bath, I remember the day we swam in the lake together, and the way he pulled me into a corner of the barn to kiss me as the hired hands drove away. I remember all of it and yet he does not.

My eyes open. Marie lies beside me, staring at the wall without a glimmer of recognition. And slowly I realize what is happening during these times I go back to visit Henri.

I'm not merely remembering what existed. I'm rewriting it.

Our amazing summer together, our fall. I'm papering over every perfect memory, and soon, he won't remember any of those days as they actually were. He'll instead recall this drugged version of me, spouting nonsense about things he's sure haven't happened.

And perhaps that's a version he won't wait for after all.



I BEGIN, the next day, to listen. Every time the guards walk past, I am cataloguing their words and their worries and their petty resentments, grabbing hold of anything that might one day prove useful, that might help me see a pattern.

They each take shifts digging a hole down the hallway. I've heard the ringing of pickaxes since I regained consciousness, but no one seems to mention what it's for. They're too focused on bickering about whose day it is to dig.

In the common room I no longer hide in the far corner but instead sit nearest the guards' desk, the most dangerous point in the room. I'm bumped, pushed from my chair, hit in the head. The guards seem to resent us for their roles here, as if they're the victims. They take a sick pleasure from the casual harm they wreak, and inside me I discover this small seed of rage in my chest, something that laid dormant until now. Every day it seems to grow a little more. Every day I become a little more like them: I'd take a sick pleasure in harming them if I could too.

Especially Gustave.

He only strikes me occasionally, and sometimes yanks my hair as he passes, but it's more in the way of a mean boy with a crush—I can live with that. But the other times, when he pushes his meaty fingers through my hair, lets them trail over my hip or chest as I pass...those times leave me feeling a type of rage that scares me.

Today he slides his hand inside my neckline to grab my breast. I force myself not to react, but fury seems to radiate out from that place of anger until I can feel it in every limb, in each finger and toe.

"You'd better not let him see you do that," warns the other guard.

He removes his hand, and I feel sick with relief. "Monsieur Coron?" asks Gustave. "He won't be here until the end of the week."

"And when he hears that only one of them has woken, he'll be in a foul mood, so don't make it worse, eh?"

"Do you suppose once he's made his choice, he'll let us make ours?" Gustave asks, lifting my hem with his foot. He laughs. "Unlike him, I require nothing special of the women who bear my children other than the ability to lie still."

All the breath is pushed from my chest. This is why no one is trying to win us over. Monsieur Coron, or whoever he's working for, is not interested in gaining powerful allies. He's interested in creating them—infants he can shape and mold to his liking. It explains why we are all young. I've got no doubt about what happened to the older women who arrived, like Marie's mother. I've got no doubt about what they'll do with us too, eventually.

I've got to get us out of here. *Henri*, I beg silently, *help me. Show me how to escape.* My eyes open and I'm still in the common room, still surrounded by women with dead eyes. Still completely on my own.

That evening, Marie's fingers begin to jerk. When she wakes the next day, for only a moment, there is a startled awareness in her eyes. It fades away to nothing before I can capture it. She's waking, and whether that's a good thing or bad, it's vital that it happens without the guards noticing, and that it happens before this *Monsieur Coron*, whoever he is, arrives.

That night at dinner, when the guards aren't looking, I knock the spoon out of Marie's hand. It falls to the floor, and she blinks before lowering her face to the bowl, to lap up its contents like a cat. "No, Marie," I whisper, pushing a roll in front of her. "Eat this."

She knocks it away and the sound, as it falls to the floor, attracts the notice of a guard.

When he moves past us, I try again. "Marie, it's Amelie," I whisper. "We're trapped in 1918. Remember? You need to wake up. You have to stop eating."

There is still no response. I glance at the guards who stand at the end of the table and then I reach for her tray.

A hand belonging to the woman beside her comes down to stop its movement.

"Are you insane?" she hisses. "Stop before the guards notice you."

I freeze, more startled than scared. It's been so long since I've heard a female voice that I'd almost forgotten it was possible. I allow myself a quick glance at the owner of that hand and voice and find the woman I saw the week before—the one who flickers in and out, the way I do. And she is

absolutely clear-eyed. My heart begins to beat a little faster at the idea that I'm not in this alone. Between the two of us, surely, we can come up with a plan.

My mouth opens and she shakes her head. "Not here."

Only the dormitory offers a chance of being left alone long enough to talk, and it's late when she appears beside my bed. "My name is Katrin," she says. She's speaking French but her accent is strong. Swedish, perhaps. "We don't have long, but you must be careful. They're looking for descendants of the first families—so you can't let them know you're awake."

"I don't plan to," I reply, "but I'm not from one of the first families so maybe it won't matter."

Her brow furrows. "Of course you are. How else do you think you woke early?"

I shrug. "I was sort of in two places at the same time, after we arrived. I think maybe the drug was diluted for me."

She stills. "Two places at once?" she whispers. She leans closer, staring at my face as if she's trying to read something there. "But that's my gift."

Not much of a gift, I think, as she continues.

"You aren't from 1918." Her eyes are wide now, astonished. "If you have my gift, you must be my descendant. A daughter or granddaughter, perhaps."

I'm not sure how she's leapt to what seems, in my estimation, a fantastic conclusion. "Just because we can both sort of be in two places at once doesn't mean we're related. It's just an...aberration."

"It's the gift of all daughters of Adelaide," she says, brow furrowed. "And our gifts aren't meant to be special on their own...we are like puzzle pieces. We only make sense in combination. But surely you know this."

I shake my head. Everything I've learned about time travel came from the blank-faced girl in the cot next to mine. "My mother didn't time travel. I really don't know much about it. But I'm definitely not from a first family," I insist. "And I have no idea who Adelaide is."

She stares at me as if I might be making a joke and seems to finally conclude that I'm not.

"Adelaide was one of the four girls who left the island," she explains. "The start of the first families—four families, four gifts. And your gift could only come from one source. Me."

She's gripping my hand as if this is all very important, but everything she's saying is impossible. Yes, if this is her time, she could conceivably be

my grandmother or great-grandmother...except I know my grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, or at least know of them. "I can trace my family back on both sides to the Civil War."

"What children know of their history is what their parents choose to tell them, and for you to exist must mean that I will have a child."

I want her to be wrong, and yet I feel wheels in my head turning—things I've wondered about my entire life, like the fact that I look somewhat like my mother, but nothing like my father. And while my father was not cruel, he was also never involved, and once he left, I never heard from him again. He continued to call my brother Steven, though, and paid Steven's tuition. I always assumed it was because he blamed me for Kit's death, and perhaps that was true, but maybe it was more than that: maybe it was because he knew, or realized somewhere along the line, that I was not his daughter.

But if Katrin's right, and she doesn't escape, it means the child she'll give birth to will be...Coron's.

My stomach tightens. "Maybe someone else is out there with your gift and you don't know it."

She shakes her head. "There's no other explanation, though we both wish it were true. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking the child I will have is Coron's. But you're wrong. I'm going to escape, so it can't be his."

"Escape how?"

"The infirmary is our only option. Each Sunday night they leave to take the corpses out. It's the only time the door is unlocked, aside from when the cook goes out to shop. If we convince them we're dead, we can time travel from the outside."

My mouth opens to voice a thousand objections: we would not be stiff and cold like corpses, first of all. And what if we get outside and we're too drugged to jump? Or they do something to us before they leave to ensure we *can't* jump?

She speaks before I can suggest a single one.

"If the plan fails in any way," she says, "it means we'll probably be buried alive."

"So, it's the nuclear option."

"Nuclear?" she asks. "I don't know this word."

I wave it away. "I'm just saying...we only do it if all else fails."

"Unless you're able to jump back and warn yourself, all else has already failed," she says. "Have you tried? I have, but it hasn't worked."

“I can’t,” I reply. “I don’t seem able to get the words out, and I doubt it would do any good if I could. I came with my friend and I know she won’t listen no matter how hard I warn her.” There is no warning that could keep Marie from making the journey she did. And the fact that she is here at all is my fault. I’m the one who told her where her mother went, when Henri begged me not to. How might their lives have gone if I hadn’t listened to my sister, if I hadn’t ever ventured back to 1938 in the first place?

“Your loyalty is admirable,” she says. “But I’m worried it might get you killed.”

We hear the echo of a guard’s boots in the hall. “You really think this infirmary plan will work?”

She squeezes my hand. “I’m not sure, but the fact that you exist, and are my descendant, makes me believe it must.”

She bolts to her bed, and I lie awake, thinking too many things to possibly hope for sleep. Is what she’s saying possible? Could I be her granddaughter, a product of a first family?

Or have I given her the kind of false hope that will get us all killed?



I WAKE JUST before the guards come in, craving Henri. I roll to my stomach, wishing I could dull the sharpness of missing him. My heart beats faster. I know I only have a moment, but I need this. I need one bright spot before another long day of pretending and worrying begins.

I squeeze my eyes shut, doing my best to ignore the shrieking of the alarm, and I go to him. It’s early in the morning, those last peaceful days of summer before the harvest began, and the night sky has begun to dull and soften. I press myself to his back, let my hand rest on his broad shoulder.

I bury my nose in the nape of his neck to smell him, a faint hint of soap from last night’s bath and summer air. I want to weep at the feel of his skin under my hand, at the smell of him. I miss him so much that the ache feels impossible to bear.

His hand comes up to close over mine. “Did you just smell me?” he asks with a sleepy laugh. I want to weep at the sound of his voice, husky with disuse. I had all of this—his sweetness, his laughter, his warm skin, his smell. I had all of it and I appreciated it, I did, but I never imagined how badly I

would miss it. How desperate I'd feel, willing to give up everything just for a single piece of him. Just to carry his voice inside me, the smoothness of him beneath my hands. Just to be able to lean against his chest and tell him what is happening to us and have him direct me, or even just promise things will be okay.

I wouldn't demand all of it. Just one of those things would suffice and I can't have any of them.

I can't answer. I press my lips to his neck instead, and he tenses...but it's a good kind of tension. As if he's allowing his brain to shut down while his body picks up the slack.

"Do that again, little thief," he says. His voice huskier.

So I do, and then his hand drags mine down, down, to where he is hard and ready. "That's all it took," he says, squeezing his palm over mine, against him. And then he rolls toward me. I've been so good, lately, only visiting him at night. But, my God, I missed the look I see on his face right now. His eyes taking me in as if he will never want to see anything else as long as he lives.

"Will it always be like this with us?" he asks, his mouth moving over mine, pressing to my jaw.

"Like what?" I ask, arching into him.

"Like nothing but you matters," he says. "Like I'll die if I'm not inside you every minute we're awake."

He nudges my thighs apart with a knee and my legs fall open, more than willingly. Yes, I think. I don't have long but yes. His mouth descends on mine as he starts to push inside me, and then I hear the heavy door scraping the floor as it opens, blinding light in my face as someone flips a switch.

"Hurry," I urge Henri, but already the shrieking is making itself known and the sound of shouting is pulling me out of it.

I stumble to my feet. The women around me are already up and it's only because someone closer to the door is unresponsive that I didn't get caught.

"Fuck!" the guard roars. "We told them there were nineteen left." He kicks the woman in the bed once and again and then a third time, much harder. My blood begins to heat. That rage in my chest has become as familiar as my own hand.

"It's not our fault she's dead," replies the other. "They still have plenty to choose from."

"Try to tell them that," the first guard replies. It's not the first death I've witnessed since I arrived, but that's not the reason I'm unsettled. The guards

are often on edge, and very often enjoy their power over us a bit too much, but this is different. They're scared, and anything that scares them *terrifies* me.

We are shuffled past the corpse and on to the cafeteria, where we get our food and sit. Katrin takes the seat next to mine and we exchange a quick, nervous glance as we feign eating. For once the hunger that has gnawed at me every day, eating only the bread, is absent. I don't think I could eat even if I wanted to. I notice something floating in my gruel. A small white pellet, perhaps what they use to sedate us. When the guards aren't looking, I fish it out of the bowl and tuck it into my sleeve, though I've no idea how it could be useful.

Marie is louder this morning, more vocal. She's coming off the drug and she doesn't want to be. A guard casually hits her in the head with his gun as he passes and tells her to pipe down. And in response to the pain...her hand disappears. Only for a moment. And she moans again.

Stop, I plead silently. Stop before they hurt you. Before they realize who you are.

The cafeteria door opens and Gustave, the guard I hate most, bursts in, his mouth set in a grim line. "They're coming," he barks. "Be ready."

Marie moans again, and my heart begins to slam in my chest. These stupid guards don't realize she's waking, but whoever is coming seems to know more about time travel. They might. Her gruel is nearly gone and I can only think of one solution.

I switch our bowls.

My stomach lurches with guilt as she digs in, content once more. Guilt and also despair. I'd hoped she was weaning herself from the drug, perhaps getting to the point that she could be reasoned with, that we could discuss escape. And now she is calming, growing docile again. I might have saved her from being raped, but if I've just ensured that we're both stuck here forever—is that an improvement?

The cafeteria doors open and the guards jump to attention. A young woman enters. There's a man at her heels, but she's the one I stare at, because hers is a face I recognize instantly. A face so like my mother's, few people could tell them apart.

My aunt is here. And she appears to be...helping them?

I squeeze my eyes shut, wondering if I'm hallucinating, but when I open them she is still there, talking to the man behind her as they approach. I know

she isn't the mastermind of all of this, because the thing that drew us here occurred long before she was born—but she is not drugged, and she doesn't look scared, which means she's not on our side, either. She left Pennsylvania when she was twenty-four, before I was even born. She never returned, which means she doesn't know I exist. Given how much my mother hated her, this is probably a good thing.

"Where's the girl?" she barks at the guard in French. Her accent is terrible, all the vowels flattened. Madame Perot, the old crone I used to read to, would be slapping her hand right now.

He murmurs something and points at Katrin. The man's eyes light up and he approaches—and places his hand on my head. "She's as blonde as you, Iris," he says to my aunt.

My heart races so fast it makes me shake.

"Not her," says Gustave. "The one beside her."

"Pity," the man replies, but his hand leaves my head and goes to Katrin's collar. "And there's no one else? A room full of time travelers and you've only captured *one* from the first family?"

Gustave begins sputtering. "We wanted to decrease the sedative more but were worried they'd get away," he says.

"They can't get away, you fool," replies my aunt. "That godforsaken alarm makes it impossible, even for me. I'll fix this."

She walks to the end of the table and throws a woman sitting there to the floor. "Cut out her eyes," she tells the nearest guard.

His jaw drops. "Mademoiselle?" he asks. "Her eyes?" He motions to his own, as if perhaps she translated the word wrong.

"Yes," she says. "Cut out her eyes, and then her tongue, and then her ears."

The guard swallows and forces himself toward the woman who has begun to sit up. He pulls a knife from a sheath on his belt and grabs her by the hair to hold her steady.

My breath stops. *If you are neutral in times of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.* Words that won't be spoken for many decades, yet they're true even now. But if I give myself up to save her, what does that mean for me? And more importantly, what does it mean for Marie? Who will protect her? Who will get her out of here?

Selfish, I hear my mother saying. Convenient logic once more. But it's in your blood, so I shouldn't be surprised.

The guard pushes the hilt of his knife to her eye socket and a woman near them jumps to her feet.

“Stop!” she cries in English. A fellow American. “Please stop!” The guards’ heads jerk toward her at once, newly alert. She’s a lovely girl, tan and luminous in a sea of pale, blank faces, and she’s just given herself up.

My aunt laughs and grabs her by the hair. “I knew that would work. What’s your name?”

“Luna,” the woman answers, her shoulders sagging. “Luna Reilly.”

“There, darling,” my aunt purrs, turning to the man holding Katrin by the collar, “now I’ve found you two. Two of four. It’s a start.”

My mother always hated time travelers, and I finally see why. I’m beginning to hate them now too.

The house sits empty, waiting for them.
And I am empty. I press my face to my hands. *Come home,*
Sarah, I plead silently. *Come home.*

How could I have let them go? Why didn't I find a way to stop them? My God. I can't stand the possibility that it will stay like this forever. That I'll never learn what happened to them and will go through the rest of my life assuming the worst.

Father Edouard comes to the house, tugging at his collar and uncertain. His eyes widen at the sight of me—unshaven, still wearing yesterday's clothes. Empty whiskey bottles line the counter, but I let him in anyway, beyond caring.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he says as he steps inside.

I push a hand through my hair. I haven't been entirely sober for weeks now. I don't respect the person I've become in Sarah's absence, but at this point I'm just trying to survive. I have only the barest hope that she or my sister will return, and it's on behalf of that tiny flicker that I remain here at all, that I bother trying to make it through each day.

"Can I help you with something?" I ask.

He pushes his hands into his pockets and stares at the ground, shockingly uncertain for a man who speaks in front of hundreds each weekend. "Marie said she'd be gone two weeks," he says. "And it's been six. I was wondering if you'd heard from her?"

It hits me all over again. Six weeks. Is there any chance at all they're coming home if they've been gone that long? Even if Sarah needed to

recover, even if she needed to return to her own time for a while, Marie could easily have been home by now. The journey wouldn't even be hard on her.

"I haven't heard from them," I reply, the words gritty in my mouth.

"Surely there's someone you can call," he urges.

I press my fingers to my temples and his gaze flickers to the empty jug on the table. "It was a spur-of-the-moment trip and I have no idea where they went," I reply.

"We should call the police, then," he says, pacing the length of the room. "Border patrol can at least tell us what country they're in and how long they've been there."

Police. One way to make a bad situation worse. They will come here, find that Sarah and Marie left without luggage, without travel papers, and then I'll be tried for murder. Yet nothing could make me sound more guilty right now than arguing against Edouard's suggestion. "Perhaps," I reply.

He stops his pacing and shoves his hands in his pockets. "You're in love with her, aren't you?" he asks. "Amelie?"

I stare at the table. "She isn't actually my cousin." I take a swig off the bottle of whiskey.

He grabs the bottle and takes a drink himself. "She's different," he says, staring at the floor. "And so is your sister."

Perhaps he only means their looks, because God knows that's one thing they can't disguise. But I get the sense he means more by it. "Yes," I reply, "they are."

"I won't say anything to the police," he says. "I have faith they'll come home."

I glance at him, and recognize something of myself in his bleak, desperate face. But his faith that they'll come home makes no sense. "Why?"

"Because I'd struggle to believe in a God who'd keep them away forever," he says quietly. He takes another gulp of whiskey and walks out the door.

I wish I shared Edouard's faith, but I do not. That God of his already took my mother. I suppose I lost my faith in His benevolence long ago.

For a week, I wait for Katrin's return. A week of listening to the guards laugh and complain while they hit us with the butts of their rifles, trip us, fondle us for their amusement.

You will die, I find myself thinking. *You will die and I'm going to make it slow and painful.*

Katrin returns to our room late at night, lying down in the bed beside mine, which is now free. But she is different, emptier.

I don't know what to say to her. *I'm sorry. I'm a coward. I should have done something.* But it's not enough. Nothing will ever be enough. "Are you okay?" I finally ask.

"No," she says, rolling to face the other way.

Another week passes before she speaks. I'm just drifting off to sleep when her voice floats into my ear.

"Luna..." she finally whispers. "She was from Florida. Is that near you? Did you know her?"

Under other circumstances I'd find the question amusing. Right now, I'm so astonished to hear her voice that I can barely answer. "America is a very large place, and she probably isn't even from my time," I reply.

"She had a little boy," Katrin says, turning her face to the pillow as her shoulders shake. "He's only six. He won't remember her. He won't ever know how badly she wanted to return to him."

"*Had?*" I ask, my heart thudding in my chest.

"He climbed on top of her and she just went crazy," she whispers. "She stabbed him with something she had up her sleeve and he snapped her neck."

Her voice breaks. “Snapped it as if she were a doll.”

Luna Reilly, the woman far braver and more selfless than I, is dead.

I couldn’t have saved her. Speaking up wouldn’t have prevented what happened. The guilt, though—it rests on me just the same, so heavy I struggle to get a full breath.

“He left her corpse beside me the whole time as a warning,” Katrin says quietly. “He says if I’m not pregnant by next month he’ll do the same to me.”

I watch her thin shoulders shake. I can’t begin to imagine what that week was like for her. Even if we get out of here, an experience like that...it will change her. Scar her. “But I can’t get pregnant here. They hold those women in another room, and they’re monitored, night and day. We have a guard who drinks heavily and sleeps soundly each night, but those women have no chance.”

“I didn’t realize there were pregnant women here.”

“I think they were pregnant when they arrived,” she says. “Maybe he thinks one of them carries the hidden child. Maybe he just wants to raise an army of time travelers. I don’t know.”

This is the past, and I’m sure the women all died—there’s nothing I can do for them anyway—but it’s possible their children survived. “Who would a child become, raised by that man?” I ask.

She doesn’t reply. We both know the answer.

“You know, things are supposed to change when the first four families come together at last,” she says. “It’s part of the prophecy. And now there are at least three of the four right here, and things could hardly be worse.”

“Three?” I ask, my pulse beginning to race. “You mean the pregnant women?”

She raises a brow. “No, I mean us.”

“If I’m your descendant, we only count as one family. Luna would have made the second.”

Her eyes meet mine. “You’re clever, Amelie, but not clever as you think,” she says. “I saw your friend waking up. You gave her your gruel so they wouldn’t catch her.”

My heart beats faster. It’s occurred to me that Katrin might give them my name, but I didn’t realize she could give them Marie’s as well. “But you didn’t say anything?”

“No, because then I’d be no better than Iris,” she says. “She’s the woman advising him. I hate him, but I hate her even more—she’s a traitor to her own

kind.”

My gaze flickers away. I haven’t told Katrin that Iris is my aunt, and I’m not sure I should. How could she help but look at me differently if she knew what kind of evil runs in my blood? I even wonder it myself.

“Why is she helping him?” I ask. “What’s in it for her?”

“They’re getting married, I think,” she replies.

“She’s a fool, then,” I say. “He won’t let her live.”

Her head rises for the first time since we began talking. “Why do you think that?”

“He can’t let anyone who was here live, but especially a time traveler. Any one of us, including her, could go back and ruin everything he achieves. He won’t risk it.”

She looks at me, thinking something she does not say. “They’re nearly done with that hole they’re digging. I wonder what it’s for.”

I’ve wondered it too, and the conclusion I keep coming back to is one I haven’t wanted to admit to myself. Now I’m forced to. In Coron’s mind, we are all just things, and most of us are useless things at that, taking up resources. Soon he’ll decide to kill those of us who haven’t woken, so it’s not as if he needs a cellar for food storage, or extra space. There’s only one thing he needs here, now.

“The hole is for us,” I say softly, with a sick kind of certainty. “For all the women they believe haven’t woken. He will kill the rest of us at once and thinks it’s safer to bury everyone here than to risk getting caught. It’s probably the only reason he hasn’t killed us already.”

She looks at me oddly again. “Your mind works like theirs,” she says. “I don’t mean it as an insult. But you think in terms of strategy, as if people are pieces on a chess board.”

I want to argue that it doesn’t make me like them, but suddenly I’m not sure. I think of the rage I feel every time Gustave touches me, every time I watch the guards kick a corpse mercilessly, how endless and cruel and *cold* a piece of me is. Sometimes I feel as if I become more like them than not with each day that passes.

“They’ve been working on that hole for a while,” I tell her, “so they must be nearly done.”

“What are you saying?” she asks.

“That if we’re going to escape, we’d better do it soon.”



KATRIN and I begin to plan. I've found two more of those pellets floating in my oatmeal and have hidden them in my mattress. We'll use them to drug our guard once we know when we're leaving. Katrin tries to persuade me to leave Marie behind, and I refuse.

"She's my friend," I tell her. "I can't."

Katrin looks over at Marie, frowning. "Then you'd better get her off the drugs fast. If she can't time travel when we leave..."

She doesn't continue the thought, but I already know what she was thinking. If Marie can't time travel, she might wind up buried alive. And even if I can wean Marie off the drugs enough to get her to comply, there are so many ways it could fail. What if they can tell we're not dead? What if they bag all the corpses before they take them? We might suffocate before we ever get out. What if even that small amount of the drug in our systems makes it impossible to time travel when we get outside?

The other issue is my aunt. She could, theoretically, travel back in time to stop us. I doubt Monsieur Coron would risk letting her leave the building to do it, but nothing is certain. If we had any other option, I'd be taking it right now.

The next day I don't give Marie any of my food. She is unhappy at breakfast, and by dinner time her hands twist, her body begging for something it's certain it needs.

I tell her not to eat. She looks at me with vacant eyes and picks up her spoon.

"I'm getting you out of here," I whisper. "Do not eat that." For a moment she hesitates, as if there are still gears working inside her head, listening to me. And then she dips the spoon into her bowl. I have no idea what they've given us, but it's something seriously addictive. I've only had a fraction of the dose she's had and it calls to me too, the oblivion of it. The way it would make me forget, stop aching for a future I no longer have.

I'm out of options. I push the stew onto her lap after the guard passes. Her mouth opens, as if to cry out, and I shove my bread in her hand. "Eat this instead. Do not say a word, understand me?"

A guard rushes at us and hits me so hard that I fly off the bench. I remain on the ground, letting him kick me, my eyes still on Marie, praying she remains silent.

Slowly, still fighting herself, she begins to eat the bread, but the victory is short-lived. That night she begins to thrash in bed as her body withdraws from the drug. “Need,” she whispers. “Please.”

“Fight it, for me,” I beg. “Just for one day. I’ll give you all my bread.”

“Need gruel,” she says, too loudly.

“Be quiet or you’ll get us both killed,” I hiss. “Listen to me. Henri is alone, Marie. Think how devastated he must be. We’ve got to get home to him. Do you understand?”

After a moment she nods. “You,” she says. “You go.”

“We both go,” I reply. “Soon. But I need you awake, okay?”

She flinches. “But tomorrow?”

She’s asking me for drugs. I’ll deal with the problem when it arises. “Yes, gruel tomorrow. Just get through the night.”

I give her my bread at both breakfast and dinner. After all these weeks I didn’t have the energy to spare, and by the time the lights go down I’m beginning to worry I might not have the *strength* to time travel home. God knows I won’t have the strength to help her. I pray most of it’s out of her system by the time we leave.

Katrin is ill, too ill to be of much help. But I see the look in her eyes as I struggle with Marie—the one that says *she’s going to get us all killed*. And as Marie becomes increasingly unmanageable, I find I’m beginning to agree.

We’re just finishing up our evening meal when my aunt walks into the cafeteria. I hear Katrin’s quiet gasp on the other side of the table, and I grab Marie’s arm, punitively hard. If she does anything right now, makes a single sound, she could ruin this.

My aunt walks over to where we sit and motions, like a queen, for Katrin to rise. “Come. Your services are needed.”

A guard yanks her from the table and pulls her away. This time, unlike the last, she doesn’t even fight.

If I could, I’d bury my head in my hands. Selfishly, it’s less about what Katrin’s going to suffer than about what it will do to our plan if she isn’t back soon. This may be our last chance, and it’s only going to work once. As soon as the guards figure out how we escaped, they’ll make sure it can’t happen again. But if Katrin hasn’t returned yet, could I really leave her behind? It was her idea in the first place, and if I’m descended from her the way she claims, leaving without her may mean I cease to exist the moment we go.



OVER THE NEXT two days I continue weaning Marie off the drug, but it's far harder for her than it was for me. She twists all night, sweats, retches whenever the guards aren't looking. Over dinner that second night the guard stands over us both, and we've got no choice but to finish what we were served. It takes me a day to pull out of it. Marie starts from scratch, and by the next morning is begging me for the gruel.

I begin the process of keeping her clean once more, and she's still half-drugged when Sunday arrives. The guards are more anxious than normal, and over breakfast I hear them bickering about who will drive tonight. This is it, our chance. If we go, I can save Marie but might be signing Katrin's death warrant, and therefore my own. If we wait, we could *all* die.

I spend the entire day worrying, and there are no words for how relieved I am when Katrin is shoved into our room, just after dinner. She's so pale she's nearly green, and there's a fresh bruise along her jaw.

"Are you okay?" I whisper, as we lie down to sleep.

"No," she says. Her voice is flat, empty.

"We have to leave tonight," I tell her. "I'm not sure we'll get another chance."

She's silent, and for a moment I worry she'll refuse. "Give me the drugs," she says finally.

I reach into the hole in my mattress and pass them to her. She rises, walking straight to the guard, who lounges at the desk with his mug of beer, ready for an evening nap. "I need the bathroom," she says.

He laughs. "I guess your cot will smell like piss then."

She leans toward him, over the desk. "You know he's going to kill all of you before this is done." Her hand passes over his mug.

The guard is one of the short-tempered ones. His hand flies out fast and I can hear it make impact all the way across the room. She falls to the ground. "You think just because you're his whore you can talk to me like that?" the guard roars. She clutches the sides of the desk to stand and pulls herself up.

"No," she says. "I suspected you'd react just as you did."

She returns to her cot and we lie still, waiting until we're certain the guard is passed out.

"It's time," I finally tell Marie as I pull her to her feet.

"I'm going to be sick," she whispers, and she falls to the floor and

retches. Katrin and I exchange a glance. Her nausea won't be improved, lying pressed against rotting corpses for several hours. She's going to give us away.

I hold her hair back. "Get it all out," I whisper. "You can't do this when the guards load us on the truck, okay? They'll know you're alive if you do."

She nods. After a minute, when nothing more has come up, I pull her to her feet, and tell her the plan, which sounds far simpler than it actually is: hide three corpses, pretend to be dead, and time travel as soon as we're outside. "Don't wait for me," I warn. "Just go. Do you understand?"

She nods and I squeeze her hand, allowing myself to truly hope for the first time that this might work. In a few hours I might be back with Henri. I want that moment so badly I can feel it in my bones.

Together, the three of us sneak into the hall. Marie leans on me the entire way, her skin clammy and her hands shaking. Katrin is lagging too, weak and ill from her days with Coron. I can't allow myself to think about what those days entailed, and I can't allow myself to feel sympathy. Sympathy won't get us out of here.

We pass the hole they are digging, the place they will store the bodies soon. I don't want to scare Marie but I feel like I have to. She needs to understand how serious this is and right now, she's too sick and too drug-addled to get it. I point to the hole.

"You see that?" I whisper. "That's where the bodies will go after tonight. Under that big slab. Do you understand what that means?"

She nods and I pray it's enough. Because if we don't get out tonight, I'm not sure we ever will.

I open the infirmary door. The bodies lie in a pile, eyes open, mouths gaping. I wasn't prepared for the sight or the smell. Marie, though—who hasn't been conscious over these last few weeks—is far less prepared than me.

She falls to the floor beside them, dry heaving now that her stomach is empty. Katrin is green as well, but plows forward, grabbing one of the women by the shoulders.

"Are you sick?" I ask.

She gives me a tense nod. "Get the feet," she whispers.

Even with two of us, the task is far harder than I'd anticipated. It's over a hundred pounds of dead weight, and I'm so weak from days without food that even propelling myself forward is a struggle at times. I force myself to keep

moving, and when we finally drop the body beneath a table at the end of the room, I have an odd, floating sensation that makes me wonder if I'll survive the journey home. We return to the corpses and grab another, both of us breathing heavily; we manage it, but just as we return for the third, we hear the heavy tread of boots in the hall. My gaze meets theirs. The guards are here early, and we don't have time to hide the third body.

Which means one of us has to stay behind.

I told Henri I would keep Marie safe, and I will. And if Katrin doesn't survive...odds are I won't ever be born.

"Lie down," I tell them.

Marie shakes her head. "No, you should go. I'm too weak anyway."

"You are not going to be able to time travel in a few weeks. You're losing your spark, and I am not. I'm still fine. Lie down. Go back to your brother. If I can escape I will. Go to America like we planned and swear on your life that you'll never return to 1918."

She presses something into my hand—her mother's necklace, the one she found in a pocket when we arrived here. She was certain it would bring us good luck, though I'm not sure it has.

I turn to Katrin. "Good luck. Hopefully this hasn't changed your future or mine too much."

She gives me the smallest, saddest smile imaginable, and runs her hand over her stomach. "Not to worry," she says. "Your future is now secure."

I blink, not able to understand, at first. And then I do: she is pregnant.

It all begins to make sense—her recent illness, her quiet. She's been pregnant since the first time she slept with him and lying about it so she'd be able to escape.

There's no time for questions and not even time to process my shock. I dive to the back of the room just as the guards walk in and hold my breath as they begin to lift the bodies on the cart, waiting for someone to notice that two of them are still warm. They don't, too busy bickering about who will drive and who gets a weapon.

The bodies are thrown carelessly, as if they are sacks of flour. The door slams as they go.

And then my shoulders shake and I begin to cry. For Marie and Katrin, my only friends here. And because Katrin has just confirmed one of my worst fears: the terrible piece of me is real. I'm a Coron.

I wake to find myself being turned out of my bed. The guards are kicking my stomach, my back, my face, demanding to know where Katrin and Marie are. If I'm still here, Katrin must have survived. I hope that means Marie did too.

I accept the blows, but along with the pain I feel that familiar rage as well—blistering, making my blood heat until it's reached a boiling point. *I'm going to kill you all*, I think as they aim their boots into my stomach and back and face. *I'm going to kill you all and I'm going to make it so long and so painful you'll beg me for a quick death.*

And then I'll say no.

My body is so bruised and broken that I struggle to get back to my feet when they're done. The only thing propelling me forward—limping, unable to stand straight, drooling blood down the front of my shift—is knowing that there will be a bullet in my brain if I don't.

And a bullet in my brain means I can't make them pay.

Outside the room, I discover that Marie and Katrin's disappearance is not the only upheaval. Several guards and kitchen workers are gone, presumably fired, though they all disappeared without a word. I can only think of one reason why they'd be letting staff go: because there will soon be fewer of us here. They are preparing for the next stage—getting rid of all but the pregnant women.

There is now only a single cook and she's furious that she has to do everything on her own. She yells at us, asks the guards why they can't help, why the cattle can't serve themselves. I take my food and limp to the table.

It's too painful to chew the bread and I worry that my jaw is broken. I sip the gruel instead—I will need the drug just to get through the day. I'm not scared of getting addicted this time. Any haze it causes will be burned through by my rage.

Now I finally know why it's there. That thing inside me, first identified by my mother and then Katrin...it's his. Coron's. I can think the way he does—shut off emotion and choose self-interest again and again. And as I look at the guards or at my aunt who storms in to yell at the cook, I hate it and yet I'm glad for it too. I may die here, but I'm taking all of them out with me.

I get through the day and allow myself half the stew at night. I wake so stiff I can barely move and have to use the metal posts of the headboard to pull myself to standing.

"How do you expect me to feed them all by myself?" the cook demands when we enter the cafeteria. "Tell Miss High and Mighty to get in here and help if she's going to fire them all."

"I'd keep a civil tongue if I were you or she'll have it removed," warns the guard. "She's in a mood, Mademoiselle is. She's been made to care for the baby. And not happy about it in the least."

One of the babies has been born, then. No wonder they're getting ready to close up shop.

"I'd trade gladly. Better to watch one babe than to coddle this lot," she grumbles.

"I wouldn't fret if I were you," he says. "The other two are due any day now, so there will be far less work and soon."

I stiffen. There's only one thing that can mean: they're preparing to kill us. Poison or a bullet to the head, perhaps. Maybe they'll just shove us in the hole and let us rot there. And it will happen without warning, the same way the missing staff just disappeared.

Which means I need to act now. I need to tell them I'm awake. I know what the result might be, and it doesn't matter. I want to live.

That night, when we reach the cafeteria, I see my aunt exchanging words with the cook. My chest is tight. Interrupting an argument isn't the ideal way to announce myself, but I'm not sure another time is coming.

"Iris?" I ask. I keep my voice inquisitive, not fearful. The way I might if I ran into her somewhere else—a family reunion, perhaps, or a wedding. "I'm your niece. Vanessa's daughter."

Iris's mouth falls open. "What did you just say?" she asks. It reminds me

of the tone my mother used when I'd said something she didn't like.

A guard grabs me by the hair and I feel it all the way to my jaw.

It was a mistake, but what choice did I have? I want to live. This is the only way to do it.

"I'm Vanessa's daughter. Your niece."

Her eyes narrow. "My sister doesn't have children. And she certainly wouldn't have had any time travelers."

"I came here from 1987," I reply. "And she has—*had*—three children. My sister and I slept in the same room you and my mother did, the one that looks out on the graveyard. My mother refused to tell us anything about you."

She marches out from behind the counter and grabs me by my collar. "Related to me, and yet you are awake. We're not of the first family, so tell me how that's possible?"

"The guards broke my jaw. I haven't been able to eat much." The gruel and stew give my voice a hazy, drugged quality. I *sound* like someone who's only begun to wake up.

She regards me with suspicion, reminding me so much of my mother that I want to shrink from her. "Come with me," she says, pulling me through the cafeteria. "I'm going to enjoy every minute of this."

We go down the hall to what must be her room. I'd pictured her living like a queen, given her role here, but this isn't even as nice as the bedroom she left behind in Pennsylvania.

"Sit," she says, pushing me toward a chair while she stares at my face. "You took quite a risk in speaking to me. What's to stop me from killing you and taking your spark?"

I freeze. I have only the vaguest understanding of the rules of my kind. I've heard about this *spark* she refers to—the thing that keeps us going, and without which we die. I know only three people in a single family can have it—the rule of threes. I know that we can, in theory, take it from each other. But it never occurred to me until this moment that it was worth killing someone for.

"I'm terrible at time traveling," I tell her. "I doubt my spark would be worth taking."

She laughs. "That shows how little you know. If my body was ravaged by cancer right now and I was moments from certain death, I could stab you in the heart and be made new in seconds."

She appears to be considering it, and she has no reason to spare me,

really. All I have going for me is that we have an enemy in common. “My mother hates me, so she didn’t give me a lot of details about anything.”

The smug smile leaves her face. “Why would your mother hate you?”

“Because I’m the reason my sister is dead. Mostly, I think, because she hates time travelers. I guess the gene skipped her.”

She pauses, and then her head tilts. There’s something satisfied in her expression. I suspect she likes hearing that my mother suffered. “Your mother can time travel,” she says. “Did you not realize that?”

I stare at her. It isn’t possible. My mother can’t time travel. And if she could, there’d be no reason for her to hate me the way she does. Unless, perhaps, she thought what made me evil *wasn’t* that I could time travel, but that I was a Coron.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Of course I’m sure,” she snaps. “I grew up with the woman. What I really don’t understand is how you exist at all. When I left, she was dating Peter Stewart.”

I consider telling her I may be related to Coron but think better of it. Letting them know Katrin was pregnant when she left might lead them to search harder for her.

I nod. “Yes, he’s my father.”

She laughs. “Peter Stewart is *not* your father,” she replies. “He was a dumb local boy without a drop of magical blood. There’s no way his DNA produced a time traveler.” She taps her lip. “A mystery to solve, which I rather enjoy. I wonder, though, why you’re telling me all this? Surely you realize I have nothing to gain by allowing you to live?”

“I’m a hard worker and a good cook. I can help out wherever you need me.”

She nods, undoubtedly thinking that she still wants to kill me, but perhaps also thinking it can wait until she’s bled me dry working here first. “And your mother would hate it, desperately hate it, if she knew we were working together, wouldn’t she?”

My eyes dart to hers. “Yes.”

“Then I think I will allow you to live, niece.”

That makes one of us, aunt.



THE NEXT DAY the same guard who grabbed me by the hair takes me to the woman in the kitchen. “Mathilde, here’s your new serving girl,” he says.

Mathilde takes one disdainful glance my way and hands me a bottle. “Place one of these in each bowl.”

The pills are different from the ones I pilfered from the oatmeal, but that may be because they haven’t dissolved. I do everything she says, and when the other women come in, I hand the bowls out and clean up after them without being asked. It’s a long shot, but perhaps if I make her life and Iris’s life easy enough, they will start to trust me.

Mathilde sits comfortably, watching me, and when the women are pushed toward the common room, a guard comes for me. “This one stays,” she barks at him.

He shrugs and leaves us alone. “Finish up that washing,” she says, “and I’ll teach you how to make stew.”

I t's February when it happens. I'm sitting at the table alone with a bottle of whiskey, no glass, when I hear the crash upstairs.

I'm just sober enough to know I'm not imagining things.

I run and arrive in Marie's room only to stumble to a halt. For a moment, my sister is a stranger to me. Covered head to toe in dirt, her hair matted. I take two steps toward her and she collapses against me like a small child, weeping. I want to weep myself. I really thought I'd lost her.

"It's okay," I whisper. "It's okay. You're safe. But where is Amelie?"

"I left her behind," she cries, and I feel my stomach drop. *No, I think, this can't be right. If Marie is still alive and was able to get out, Sarah can still get out too.*

"It was all for nothing," she whispers, as I help her to the bed. "There were no older women there. Our mother was probably dead the day she arrived. They drugged us and Amelie...she forced me not to eat the food. When I wouldn't listen, she—" Marie's head drops and she begins to weep. "She pushed my gruel into my lap, I think, and they beat her."

"So where is she now?" I demand. "Why isn't she with you?"

Marie's eyes shut and she begins to tell me a story so horrible it hardly seems possible—hiding with corpses, how one of them had to remain behind when the guards came too early. "I should have made her go in my place," Marie weeps. "It was the last night to get out."

It's not the time for blame. It's not the time to say *you forced her to risk her life to go there and then she risked it again to get you out*. But I'm thinking it. My God, I'm thinking it.

I bury my head in my hands. “What do you mean it was the last night to get out?”

“Amelie showed me the hole they were digging. To bury the rest of the dead. She said it was our last chance to escape.”

I hear the finality of those words, and my brain seems to empty, go numb, before I shake my head. “No,” I tell her. “No. She isn’t dead. She’d find another way.”

Tears run down her face. “I need the laudanum,” she says. “I can’t face this without the laudanum.”

I shake my head. “Marie, no. Whatever they had you on, you’ve got to break clean of it. I need you to focus so you can show me where you were held.”

She slides to the floor and curls into a ball, weeping and inconsolable. “She won’t be there.”

“You don’t know that!” I argue. “You were the one who was so convinced our mother was trapped somewhere!”

She looks up. “Everyone was dying, Henri. That drug made us sick, something else was making us sick too. There’s no chance someone survived in there twenty years. None.”

I feel the pulse of terror in my chest and push it away. She is wrong. She has to be. “I still need to see, for myself. Please, Marie.”

She presses the base of her palms to her eyes. “Give me the laudanum,” she finally says. “Give me *one*, and I’ll show you where we were held.”



THE DRUGS in Marie’s system made it difficult to jump after she escaped from captivity, she tells me. She had to play dead until they’d shoveled dirt over her, wondering all the while if she’d suffocate before they were done.

It’s a horrible story, one that makes clear how terrible things must have been on the inside. But she remembers the building they left from, near Sacré-Coeur, so that’s where we head the next afternoon.

I wear my best clothes, my father’s expensive watch, and tell Marie to do the same. She’s so pale and thin it’s hard to demand anything of her, but for Sarah’s sake this needs to be done, and done right.

“Dress up?” she asks, her words still slightly slurred. “Whatever for?”

“Because wealthy people breaking down a door can say they are inspecting it. The rest of us are merely intruders.”

“I don’t know what it is you’re hoping to find,” she whispers. “If Amelie is still there, she’d be damaged beyond anything you or I can imagine. And she isn’t there. No one could have survived it that long.”

“I just need to know.”

“Know what?” she asks, staring at the table. “Shall we pull the cement slab aside and look for her corpse?”

I flinch. “Marie, I need to do something. Don’t you understand that? I have to. So yes, if all that is left is to pull the slab aside and look for her, I’ll do it.”

“She’ll be wearing the necklace,” Marie rasps, and then begins to weep again.

“What are you talking about?”

“I found a necklace that belonged to Maman in the pocket of my dress. I thought it would bring me good luck. I gave it to her before I left. Maybe it wasn’t good luck at all. Maybe it was the worst luck and I handed it off to her.”

I don’t believe in luck. I don’t think the necklace changed a thing. But it takes everything in my power not to ask Marie why she couldn’t just have left it all alone. Why she couldn’t have left Sarah alone, left the one good thing in my life with me instead of ripping it away.

Marie is tense beside me as we drive toward Paris, but not as tense as me. What will I do if I find Amelie today? Who will she be after twenty years of captivity?

I suppose the truth is that I pray I do not find her today at all. Because if her bones aren’t there, it might mean that sometime between 1918 and now, she escaped.

It’s just past dusk when we arrive in the city. Marie stares out the window as we pass landmarks I wish I didn’t need to make her face. Sacré-Coeur, Parc de la Turlure. She’s too frail for this right now, mentally and physically. If anything less were at stake, I’d never put her through this.

“She kept asking me not to run ahead that day,” Marie says, still staring blankly outside. “I can’t believe it was three months ago. It seems like a handful of days. She was so tired and I—” Her voice breaks.

I hunger for more information. I want to feed on these memories of hers, poor substitute for Sarah that they are. Except every word out of her mouth

makes it too easy to picture Sarah, forcing her limbs to move despite the fatigue. That edge of worry in her voice as she cautioned Marie. I'm glad my sister has returned. I don't want to blame her for what happened, but it grows more difficult with each story she tells.

We turn left and then right. The area is run-down. Two decades after the war, and parts of Paris are only beginning to recover.

"There," whispers Marie. I stop the car and we both stare at the crumbling building, half of it blackened by fire and caving in.

No one could be alive inside it, but I'm going in anyway, because I have to know. "You don't have to come," I tell Marie.

"I'm going in," she replies. I grab the pickaxe from the trunk and walk to the door. She follows, holding the lantern I brought along, looking so sick I'm not sure how she's staying upright.

The lock breaks easily, worn by time, and we enter. My fist is tight around the axe, ready to fight if necessary, but the building is absent of life aside from the rats scurrying underfoot. Marie's hands shake as she points me toward the room where Amelie showed her the hole.

We both stare at the cement slab on the floor. My stomach spins. *Please God, don't let me find her there.* It takes all my strength to lift the slab and the smell that rises up makes both of us retch.

As terrible as it's been, not knowing what happened to her...knowing could prove worse. I brace myself and look beneath me.

There are bodies. So many bodies, most of their clothes decayed away and what's left looks as if it was burned, probably by the same fire that scarred the building's exterior. Some are skeletons, and some retain skin, though dried and blackened. I tell Marie to hold up the lantern, and I peer more closely.

It's only a moment before a glint of metal catches my eye. I grip the side of the hole. That glint is a knife to the gut, pure terror. A piece of me wants to walk away right now, continue to hope.

I take the lantern from Marie, though, and jump in. My knees give way as I land, and I crawl until I'm beside her, ignoring the crunch of bones beneath me. I raise the lantern.

My mother's necklace glimmers in the light, nestled against the collarbone of a girl who was almost mine.

I work tirelessly over the next few days. Morning til night, I am the new Mathilde. I do all the cooking and cleaning while she lounges, watching me. It's not without its benefits, however—I get undrugged food, snippets of information. I also make one potentially valuable discovery: inside the pantry is a ladder and a trap door. Perhaps it just leads to a tiny loft, but it could be another floor, one with windows that aren't blacked out, where I could call for help.

Toward the end of the week, Mathilde tells me to dish up breakfast for the pregnant woman and take it to her.

“Only one?” I know one of the pregnant women gave birth last week. We were told she died in childbirth, though I have serious doubts. But there should still be two left.

“The other died in childbirth last night,” replies Mathilde, not meeting my eye. “Child died too.”

It was certainly not unheard of to die in childbirth in 1918, but I'm suspicious nonetheless. I'd assume Monsieur Coron would pull out all the stops to save the child...unless it turned out the child couldn't time travel.

“Was it a boy?” I ask quietly.

“Yes,” she says. “Big one too.” I hear a hint of sadness in her voice for the first time, and I file that fact away. She doesn't care what she's doing to the adults, but the infants...that bothers her.

I follow a guard down the long hall to get to the pregnant woman's room. He has to unlock the door to let me in. Katrin was right. If they'd known she was pregnant she'd never have escaped.

I try to meet the woman's eye, to let her know she isn't alone and that I'd help her if I could. She snatches the bowl from my hands and glares at me. She sees me as a traitor to our kind, like my aunt, and for the first time I have to wonder if she's right.



IT'S JUST over a week later when Mathilde gives me a different tablet for everyone's stew. I glance at her when I notice the difference, and she arches a brow, daring me to challenge her. My hand trembles as I continue to drop them in. *It's probably nothing*, I tell myself. But what if it isn't? If I refuse, they'll kill me, and all these women will still receive the tablet—all these women who are going to die anyway. They are *already* dead, in my time. But I don't want to be the one who did it. *It's probably nothing*, I tell myself again.

And then the next morning, the guard bangs on the metal pipe to wake us, and I'm the only one who rises.

He and I both look at each other, wide-eyed, an odd moment of kinship between enemies. Holding my breath, I lean over the woman nearest me. She has a bluish cast, and is ice cold when I touch her.

I poisoned them. I questioned what I was doing and wanted to live so badly that I accepted the situation and moved forward. Coldly. Like Iris and Coron might.

The guard grabs my arm and pulls me from the room without a word.

"Did you know?" I ask Mathilde when I reach the kitchen.

She turns away. I can't tell if she's ashamed or ambivalent. "There was nothing to be done for it," she says. "From now on, you'll help with the meals for the staff and take care of the baby. Her highness feels it's beneath her station."

I hate her for her lack of shame, though I'm hardly better. I knew something was wrong and followed orders to save my skin. But my aunt and Coron actually planned this, and though I'd expected nothing more of them, my hands shake as I finish cleaning and go to the nursery where Iris waits. We haven't spoken since she told me she was giving me a job, but when she sees me she smiles, as if we are friends.

With my jaw broken, it's difficult to return her smile, but I try. Something

comes over me as I do it. I taste metal in my mouth, feel it sliding through my veins, and the lie becomes easier. *I will kill you and I will make sure you know it's happening*, I think as my mouth moves upward.

“You’ll sleep here from now on,” she says, thrusting a swaddled child in my arms. “Keep her healthy and I’ll let you live when this is all done.”

I nod, as if I’m stupid enough to believe that, and she walks out of the room, locking it behind her.

I take the room’s only chair, holding the tiny bundle to my chest. Her eyes are closed, her rosebud mouth pursed in sleep. She may survive being raised by a monster like Coron, but who will she become as a result? What kind of power will that give him, having two time travelers under his command?

I want to save her for her own sake, but that vengefulness inside me wants it for another reason: I want to make sure Coron gets nothing when this is through.

I need to get her out, this baby and the one who is due any day now, and I can think of just one way: Mathilde. She’s the only one who still gets to leave. But what would convince someone who happily killed twelve women to help? It’s a question I can answer with ease, since I too just helped kill twelve people. What would motivate me?

If I was helping myself.

My head rests on a bar. I don't know how I got here. I remember checking Marie into a hotel somewhere, and then I was heading out, looking for anything to dull the pain.

How am I going to continue? How am I going to keep taking care of my sister, when all I want to do is end it?

"Bourbon," I demand. "Give me the entire bottle."

The bartender raises a brow but slides the bottle over to me nonetheless. It's not the first bar I've been to today. I vaguely recall being tossed out of the last.

"Sarah," I whisper, staring at my hands. Hands that held her fragile bones. I rock a little on my stool. I can't stand this. I can't survive it. I grab the bottle and drink straight from the mouth. The patrons must sense the danger leaking from my pores, the recklessness. They give me a wide berth.

When the bottle is empty, time seems to become fluid. There are other bars. There's an alley, where I'm beating the living hell out of a man far less drunk than myself because he said something about Sarah. I can't even recall what he said, but I heard him. Everyone is saying her name, shouting it at me in the streets, taunting me with it.

I catch a flash of her hair and run toward it, but it disappears from view just as I get close.

I find myself in another bar. The room is poorly lit. There are couples half-dressed against doors and on tables. Men boasting loudly and women laughing, their faces barely visible in the haze of smoke. *Sarah*, one of them says. *Sarah is here*. I round on him and catch a flash of golden hair off in the

corner. Hair that could only be hers.

I hear her laughter.

It thrills me.

It enrages me.

Sarah...she lied. She came back. But she didn't come home to me. She's in the darkest corner of the room, made up like a whore, wearing the red dress that drove me mad at the town dance. And she's with someone else.

I can't help what I do next. I stumble through the room, knocking into a man who's got a woman bent over in front of him, ricocheting against the bar. Pushing, swimming through the dark and the smoke and the bare limbs to reach her.

"Sarah," I gasp, grabbing her shoulder. My grip is too rough but I don't care. How could she have done this to me? She turns. I can barely see her face in the darkness but I can make out her red-painted lips tipping up into a coquettish smile.

"Well, hello there, handsome. Care to buy me a drink?"

She's been here all along.

Letting me grieve, go mad waiting for her.

The middle-aged man she's with sneers at me. "Go find your own girl," he says.

My fist slams into his face, and he falls from the chair. The room is so dark few people notice and those who do merely laugh.

This rage is a tornado in my chest, in my brain. I wonder if they'll laugh if I hit her next. I could. I'm angry enough.

It's like lava, bubbling, burning me from the inside, roiling in my veins and demanding release. I want to weep with relief, and I want to wound her for what she's put me through, for the fact that she didn't even care enough to tell me she's alive.

"I could kill you right now," I hiss.

"Slow down there, hot stuff," she says, handing me a glass full of something. "Whatever I've done I'm sure I can make you forgive me."

I drop to my knees and grab her face, pulling her lips to mine hard. She feels different. Her kiss is different. *Because she's been here, with other men,* I think. I kiss her harder, trying to push them away, trying to erase them from her history and get us back to where she was mine and mine alone.

My face is wet. It takes a moment to realize I'm crying, like a child.

"How could you do that to me?" I shout. "Do you have any idea how sick

I've been? How many times I thought about ending it all? And here you were, drinking in Paris, dressed like a whore."

She pulls my mouth back to hers. "Forgive me, baby. I'm sorry. I thought you'd like it. Show me you forgive me."

"I don't," I slur, holding onto her. "I don't think I'll ever forgive you."

Her hands go to my belt. "I can make you forget what I did. Please, baby. Don't you love me? I can feel it in your kiss. Show me again."

She's right. I can't stay angry. I don't know why she did it but she's alive. I can forgive anything she's done simply because she's alive.

I kiss her, and after a moment she is pulling me up the stairs. I follow blindly in the darkness, holding on to her tightly in case she disappears. I stumble again and again, falling against the wall and pulling her with me.

"Careful, baby," she says.

I hate how flippant and careless she sounds. She's never called me that before, and it makes me feel like I'm one of many. How many men has she been with here? "Don't call me that," I slur.

She pulls me into a room and I grab her hard, trying to stay upright, angry all over again. "How many men?" I demand. "How many men here?"

She presses against me. "Only you. You're the first. Kiss me. Show your Sarah you forgive her."

My little thief. My little lying thief. I don't care what she's done. I don't care who she's become. I will love whatever she is now. I bury my face in her hair. "I love you so much. I should never have let you leave."

"I'm here now, darling," she says.

"I thought you were dead," I whisper. "I thought you were dead."

She rubs my back. "I'm here now." She pulls up her dress. "Show me how much you've missed me."



I WAKE in the morning covered in my own vomit, head pounding in a way that makes me long for death, until I remember it. Sarah.

She came to me last night. Though the light makes me feel as if I'll throw up once more, I force myself to sit. Was it a dream? I found her bones yesterday, but last night...it seems every bit as real. The room is empty but my pants are folded neatly on a chair. A woman's brush sits on the chest of

drawers beside it.

Despite my hangover, my heart begins to hammer in my chest. Was she really here all along? Why didn't she come to me? I'd have let her go, if that's what she wanted, but how could she have let me believe—

The door opens. And the disappointment hits me so hard I feel undone by it. The woman who enters is blonde, like Sarah, perhaps shares a passing resemblance to her, but nothing more.

"Awake at last," she says with a cheerful smile. "You had quite a night, didn't you?"

She's not Sarah, but she's also nothing like what I thought last night. She wears no makeup and her dress is modest. She is nothing like the coquettish woman I accused of being a whore. Maybe I dreamed all of it. I hope I did.

"Why am I here?" I ask. "Who are you?"

She gives me a shy smile. "I'd hoped to be more memorable than that."

I press my face to my hands. I'm going to be sick. "I thought you were someone else," I reply, wincing through the pounding in my head.

She perches beside me on the bed. "Your wife? She left you?"

It hits me hard, the truth. Until yesterday, I could hope Sarah would come back. And now that hope is gone.

"Something like that," I reply. I grit my teeth to force the words out.

The girl takes my hand. "I'm sorry that happened," she says. "But I'm here for you now."

The pain of it all makes me long for death. The pain in my head, the desperate need to vomit, the disappointment of discovering it wasn't Sarah with me last night. That less than twenty-four hours after discovering she is gone I've already been untrue to her memory. I push the hand away, cross the room to my clothes.

"I'm sorry," I tell the girl. "I need to get home."

The final child, another girl, is born. Which means there isn't much time.

I continue to care for the babies. I name them A and B. I'm worried if I give them real names, they'll become harder to let go of.

There's a false sense of safety, sitting in the rocking chair alone with these two tiny infants, but I know that it will all end soon. I walk through the plan, all day long, looking for loopholes. There are many, of course, but I've got nothing better, and no more time to waste.

That night, as Mathilde and I prepare dinner, I broach the topic with my heart hammering loud in my chest. "Do you really think all those staff members just left at the same time?" I ask.

She looks at me sharply, nostrils flaring. "They were dismissed. What are you trying to say?"

I meet her eye. "I'm trying to say it's a dangerous place to work. If they don't mind killing us, they won't mind killing you either."

"I've got no choice," she replies. "My husband died in the war and I've got four wee ones who'll starve without this pay."

It's exactly what I hoped she might say. "I might be able to help. For a price."

She laughs. "You? The girl who serves food and does the wash? You'll be in that hole in the ground long before they need to get rid of me."

I don't appreciate her ambivalence about my death, but it hardly matters.

"It's possible I have more resources than you're aware of," I reply.

Her eyes narrow. "I can barely get out of here myself, and even then but

once a week. I can't help you."

"I don't want you to help me," I reply. "I want you to help the babies. I want you to sneak them out."

She gasps. "They'd be on to me in five seconds."

I take a deep breath. This is the risky part of the plan. I'm giving her information she can turn on me. It wouldn't serve her, but I'm not sure she realizes that.

"What if you brought in two dead infants to replace them?" I ask. "Even skeletons would work. Everyone is starving after the war. You must see a child die every day."

Her eyes are wide, and then she laughs. "You've gone mad, girl. You'll get caught and then it will be my head on a platter. I won't help you."

"You might, though, for fifty thousand francs."

Her head jerks upward and she stands, slack-jawed, staring at me. Hemingway once described living quite well in Paris with his family on five hundred francs a year. If that's the case, what might ten times that buy? Her loyalty, perhaps.

"Fifty thousand," she breathes. "You can't possibly have that much."

"You're right," I agree, "but I know someone who does."

"But they'll know they're the wrong infants. Mademoiselle Iris would know."

"Not if I set the whole room on fire, she won't."

She stares at me. "If you start a fire, you'll die with them."

"I'm dying anyway, according to you," I reply. "Maybe I just want to leave the world a hero."



THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND, Mathilde leaves with her empty bags and a letter, addressed to Henri's mother.

And then I wait, with my stomach in knots, wondering if this is going to backfire. Madame Durand, at this moment, is recently widowed and has a newborn and toddler of her own to contend with. If she refuses to help, Mathilde will take my letter straight to the guards and tell them my plans, I'm certain of it.

I'm not even entirely convinced Mathilde will take her the letter at all.

When I told her Madame Durand lives on a farm, she was suspicious.

“Then how does she have so much money?” she asked.

I met her eye. “She lives modestly but she is not to be trifled with, I assure you.”

I’m responsible for cooking dinner on my own that night. I’m just finishing the supper dishes when she returns. Her expression is wary, and there’s extra weight in the bag she carries.

She did what I asked.



FOR THE REST of the week, we continue on. I take care of the babies, a job I actually enjoy, to my surprise. And it’s a relief to steer clear of Mathilde and Iris and the guards, all of whom are snapping with anxiety. Given that Coron arrives next Saturday, I can’t blame them, but Iris is anxious too, which puzzles me. I wonder if she’s finally starting to suspect she’s not as safe as she’d hoped.

On Saturday afternoon, Iris unlocks the door, telling me she’s off to take a nap before her big night and reminding me I’ll need to make dinner in Mathilde’s stead. She locks me in, but a short time later, Mathilde unlocks it again and hands me two bags—one with the dead infants, one for the live ones.

She is pale. “How can you be so calm?” she asks.

I’m hardly calm right now, but admitting it won’t help. So much can go wrong—the possibilities are endless—and I’d prefer she not realize it.

“Because this is going to work,” I reply. “You’re about to be wealthy.”

She gives me a brisk, uncertain nod, and then opens her bag.

I gently place A and B on top of the dirty laundry, both of them so still it gives me qualms. Dosing them with a bit of the drug was necessary, but I pray to God as I kiss their foreheads that I haven’t given them too much. Together we arrange clothes on top of them so they’re mostly covered but can still breathe.

“You’re sure she’ll pay?” Mathilde asks.

The question makes my heart rate increase. She has drugged babies in the bag she carries, their faces covered with dirty laundry, and her worry is the payday. I’m still not convinced she doesn’t have some scheme in mind...take

the babies, tell the guards, give Madame Durand some other children.

“As long as she receives these two babies, she’ll pay,” I caution. “She’ll know if you’ve given her other children, believe me.”

She looks shocked that I’d even imply she might do anything else. “You really take me for someone who’d steal other babies and leave these two to die?”

I would like to point out that her character is hardly unimpeachable, given what she’s done, but I refrain. “Of course not,” I say diplomatically.

She walks out and I listen with my stomach knot-tight, waiting for the sound of some argument, some distress. I hear none, and then there is the creak of the door being opened and the echo as it slams shut. She is out. She’s done most of her part. Now it’s time for mine.

I open the bag Mathilde left, and remove the tiny skeletons. I don’t want to know where she located two dead infants, but I feel nothing as I swaddle them in blankets and place caps over their heads. Who have I become, that I don’t care that these children are dead? Will I recover who I was if I manage to live? Could Henri possibly still want me if I don’t?

I place them in their cribs and go to serve dinner. The whole time I wait for a guard to storm in, crying that the babies are gone, but the night is quiet.

I return to the room and wait for Iris to lock me in for the night. “You don’t appear to be working especially hard,” she says when she opens the door.

“The children are sleeping,” I reply, jumping to my feet. “Are you ready? It must be hard to impress a man like Mr. Coron. He’s probably used to a different standard of living than we are. Fine clothes and jewelry.”

Her eyes narrow a bit. “He likes me just fine,” she says, but her eyes hone in on my necklace, just as I predicted. She’s looked at it many times before.

I follow her gaze, and then I hold it out for her to see. “Would you like to...borrow it? For tonight? The diamonds are real.” I have no idea if this is true, but, obviously, neither does she.

Her mouth turns up in a slight smirk she immediately restrains. “Yes,” she says with the air of a queen, as if she’s done me a favor. I unclasp it and hand it to her, praying she won’t notice my shaking hands.

She takes it and begins to clasp it around the back of her neck, walking to the mirror to survey herself. That’s when I reach for the knife I took from the kitchen, lying under a pile of blankets behind me. Aside from childhood skirmishes with my brother, I’ve never even hit someone before, and now

I'm about to kill. For a moment, watching her smile at her reflection, I'm not sure I can go through with it. She is a pretty girl, a silly girl, besotted with a powerful man, believing she's in love and feeling as if a glorious future is just within reach.

But she is also the one who had those women killed after their children were delivered. She's the one who instructed Mathilde to increase the amount of poison, who didn't just allow but *orchestrated* the rape of Katrin and Luna.

Rage clogs my throat, giving me the adrenaline I need. She turns and I lunge, shoving the knife into her heart so fast her mouth doesn't open until my hand is already covering it. Her eyes go wide and she struggles, but she is no match for me.

With my free hand I hold onto the knife for dear life, and feel the power as it surges through me. Her power. Her spark. Now *mine*. My limbs are gaunt but they sing with life and energy. I've never felt stronger than I do now, energy coiling inside me as I hold onto the knife. I remain like that until I'm certain I will explode with the excess adrenaline, and then I spring from the floor like a wild animal, buoyed by her spark.

That's when I finally look around the room, seeing it through the eyes of someone else. Perhaps through the eyes of the girl I was when I arrived here. There are skeletons in the cribs and Iris's body on the floor. We are both covered in blood.

And it's all my doing. Does that make me like her? I don't know. But there's no time to worry about that now.

I grab her keys and then I set the curtains and crib ablaze. With one last glance, I run from the room, locking the door behind me.

I hide in the closet across the hall and wait for the guards to discover the fire. They're hardly a selfless bunch. They won't try to put out the fire for long before they unlock the door and run, which is when I will follow.

It takes them longer than I expected, though. The room I wait in and the hall outside are full of smoke before I hear them shouting in the distance. Footsteps echo, back and forth, but they don't seem to be leaving.

Why the hell are they still here?

The hall is so full of smoke I can barely see. I open my door, and that's when I finally hear what they're saying.

"Find Grenoir!" someone screams. "He's the only one with the key!"

"He's gone," another coughs. "Fire on the lock instead."

The one guard who possesses the key is missing. Maybe he left when

Mathilde did. Maybe he's just fallen asleep for the night. But when the door of the nursery finally explodes and fire races along the hall, I know I can no longer wait to find out.

I drop to the floor.

Think, I beg of myself, *think*.

I hear them firing on the lock, and then screams as the fire catches them. Despite Iris's spark, I still can't time travel, not with that shrieking overhead. There's only one solution left: to go up through the entrance in the pantry to the second floor. If there's anything up there at all.

I crawl along the floor to the kitchen, desperately trying to focus on that one goal. The smoke fills my brain and my lungs; my head grows light.

Where was I going again? To Henri?

Pantry, whispers some urgent voice.

I finally reach the door. It's locked.

I lie down and close my eyes. *Sarah*, Henri asks, *are you alright?*

He's lying beside me, in our bed. I press my hands to my face, wishing I could explain, though it would make no sense to him. *The door is locked*, my head screams, *and I don't know how to get out*.

But suddenly I know what he'd tell me, if I could reach him. He'd ask me where the keys are. And I have all of Iris's keys in my pocket.

My eyes open. The room is black with smoke but I feel for the smallest of the keys and then my hands slide up the door until I find the lock. After three tries, just as I feel the heat of the fire approaching and I'm about to give up, it slides in and the handle turns. I crawl inside and reach for the ladder.

Henri speaks to me, saying something urgent. I force my hands to grip the wooden rungs, one and then the next, one and then the next. The fire is inside the kitchen now, and licks at the ladder beneath me. The food on the shelves bursts into flame, sending fiery ash flying into my hair and face, singeing my dress. I throw myself onto the second floor just as the hem catches fire and roll to put it out. Flames are already climbing through the opening as I jump to my feet and look frantically for a way to escape.

There is nowhere to go. No door. No one to beg for help.

But there's a window.

I take a deep breath. I don't know if this is going to work. But I have no more options and my aunt's spark is singing inside me, making me feel as if I could fly if I put my mind to it.

I run at the window, hard as I can, but in my mind I'm already thinking of

Henri, of home. I picture the orchard, his lavish promises to buy me Versailles. I go to the night we planned for our honeymoon, and I think of waking beside him in the morning, all his miles of smooth skin, his contented murmur of pleasure at finding me there. The glass shatters and I'm in the air, plummeting toward the sidewalk. I can feel my body going light, but not fast enough.

And then I hit the ground.

H *Heaven is a noisy place.*

There is constant chatter. There are beeping machines and shouting and always the sound of people talking over my head, their voices urgent and unhappy. *Anorexic*, they say. *Attempted suicide*.

I'm feverish, sweaty and then shivering. I can't reply, can't even open my eyes. I know I need to fight to return to Henri, but I'm too empty. I'm below water, and there's not enough energy inside me to climb to the surface. I fight it a little less each day. And then, at last, it stops. I'm empty, silent, my body slowly sinking toward the bottom of the ocean. And it's a relief to land there at last.



MY TIME under water seems to last forever. I wonder if this is the afterlife. I've lived through worse, but it's all just empty.

And then suddenly there is motion again, and light. I hear sounds, feel cool air on my skin, the pressure of a hand on mine. My eyes open, and I find myself in a sunlit yellow room that seems familiar. The woman sitting next to my bed seems familiar as well. My brain, still below the surface of the water a bit, tries to recall how I know her.

Cecelia. It comes at last. The woman who saved me the last time I was in 1989. How am I still in Paris with her? Did I dream it all...leaving here, going to Henri?

My mouth opens. My lips are dry, my tongue heavy. "What happened to

me?” I ask. “Why am I here?”

Her hand wraps around mine. “You jumped out of a window,” she says. She looks over her shoulder before leaning closer to whisper. “In 1918. Do you remember it?”

I think about the fall from the window. My body going light, and the horrible, all-encompassing pain as I hit the sidewalk. I must have been jerked back to my own time, rather than Henri’s.

“I don’t understand how I survived,” I whisper.

“Nor I,” she says. “You’ll decide later on that you must have begun to time travel before your body fully took the impact of the fall, and that you had some extra energy to help you heal.” My aunt’s spark is what she’s referring to. I wonder if I ever shared with her how I acquired it. “As it was, though, you were found in very bad shape. You broke more bones than you *didn’t* break, including your skull.”

“Marie,” I whisper. “Did she get home?”

Cecelia nods, with a small smile. “Thanks to you, yes. Katrin did as well.”

“How do you—” I begin to ask, and then I realize she knows about Katrin because, as always, at some point in *her* past I told her about it.

And in the past, Henri waits. I’ve got to get home to him.

I start trying to sit up and she presses her hand to my shoulder. “Not yet,” she says. “You’ve been in a medically induced coma for quite a while now. Let the doctors assess you before you try to move. Please.”

“A *coma*? How long have I been out?”

She hesitates. “You were found on March first,” she says gently. “Today is September fifth.”

September.

I’ve been gone, then, for ten *months*. Poor Henri must be worried sick. So worried I can hardly stand to imagine it. *I don’t have to return to September of 1939, I think, my heart beating harder. I could go to March instead. The babies would be safe, and I could spare him some of the pain.*

Except it goes against everything I believe in. No matter how bad those months were for him, they’re his, not mine, and they’re behind us now. But I’ve got to get to him as soon as I can. I sit up, ignoring her hand, ignoring the way my body protests the movement. “I’ve got to get back to Henri.”

“Stop,” she commands. “Please...stop. Just listen to me.”

I stare at her, and my eyes well with frustrated tears. I want Henri. I crave

him. “I miss him so much I feel physically ill from it,” I whisper. “So, say what you need to say and let me go.”

“He’s not there,” she blurts out.

I suck in a breath. In all these months I spent trying to live, trying to get back home to him, it never occurred to me that it was *his* survival I might need to worry about. “What do you mean, he’s not there? Is Henri... Did something happen to him while I was gone?”

She shakes her head. “He will be whole and healthy when you return. He’s fighting right now. The Saar Offensive, a brief battle that will end badly for the French.”

I press my hands to my face. “He’s fighting? They were supposed to go to the United States. I made Marie promise. I—” I can’t believe how wrong it’s all gone.

“Life got in the way,” she says softly, her face sad for a moment before she blinks it away. “He’ll be home soon, but you’re in no shape to go anywhere at the moment, and besides that...I’ve intervened again,” she says. “You really shouldn’t go back until October twelfth, which is when you originally went.”

My eyes well once more. I can’t believe I’m finally capable of returning to him and she expects me to wait. “How could it matter?” I ask, wrenching the IV from my arm. “I can’t just sit here for five weeks. Surely you understand that.”

There’s worry in her face, and her mouth opens to argue, then closes. “He won’t return from the front until September twenty-fifth. Stay here that long at least. You need physical therapy anyway. In your current condition, anything could happen when you jump.”

I can’t argue with her logic, and perhaps I should be grateful for what she’s done, or for the mere fact that I survived when so many did not. But right now, I need to see Henri.

For so many reasons, but this one most of all: it feels like there’s something she’s not telling me.



THE DOCTOR PRONOUNCES my recovery a miracle. “You’re very lucky to be alive,” he says. Cecelia sits on the other side of me, holding my hand. “You

healed beyond anything I imagined possible, given the extent of your injuries,” he adds, yet I hear a *but* coming. A warning of some kind.

“Yes,” I say, sick with worry as I wait.

“I regret to say that we couldn’t fix everything,” he says. “You suffered a great deal of internal damage. The scar tissue...makes it unlikely that you will ever have children.”

It’s not what I thought he was going to say and I wish, somehow, I’d been prepared for it. I fall back against the pillows. I think of last fall, when Henri and I watched Charlotte and Lucien...how I’d been able to see us as parents. How badly I hungered for it, out of nowhere.

I want Henri to be a father. And it’s something he wants for himself. Now I’m going to return after nearly a year’s disappearance, gaunt, not entirely myself, and tell him I can never give that to him.

“You can always adopt,” the doctor says. He begins describing some new process that involves a donor egg and an implanted embryo. Except in 1939, everything he’s saying will sound like science fiction.

I know Henri would never complain. But it’s one more way I’m returning to him damaged. When I left, I could give him a family and now I can’t. When I left, I was optimistic, hopeful, a little naïve, but now I’ve seen too many things. People have died because of me.

I wonder if he’ll feel the same when he learns.



THAT AFTERNOON I’m taken by wheelchair to a gym just down the hall. My therapist’s name is Guy. I force myself to smile as we are introduced, but there’s a piece of me that feels unsettled, something I don’t quite understand.

“You rich Americans are keeping us in business,” he says, nodding behind him at a man using a walker to cross the room. “Rob,” he calls over his shoulder, “come meet our new guest.”

My jaw drops. The American to whom he referred is Rob Chapman, a singer whose poster still probably hangs beside my bed back home. He’s even better looking in real life than I realized, but there it is again—that slightly unsettled feeling—as he hobbles over to us.

I glance over my shoulder, unnerved to be in such a large, open room. No one has threatened me, but I don’t feel safe here.

“You’re the other American, huh?” he asks. “The girl who fell off a building—that’s you—and the guy whose motorcycle hit a brick wall—that’s me. The two of us are giving our countrymen a bad name, but it will make a nice story for our grandchildren.”

I smile, but it’s rusty and uncertain. What I really want to do is roll back to my room and lock the door. “I’m engaged, but feel free to tell *your* grandchildren.”

“Engaged?” he asks. He gives me his most charming smile. “*How* engaged exactly?”

I’ve spent so long looking over my shoulder that I can’t seem to stop. He’s flirting but I only perceive a threat, and I want Henri. I want to be home. I swallow. “Very engaged,” I reply. “Excuse me.”

I try to maneuver the chair but I can’t get away. “Hey, hang on there,” says Guy. “We haven’t even worked out yet.”

I can’t breathe. He’s holding my chair and I’m not sure what will happen if I try to walk. Even in captivity, I don’t think I ever felt quite this powerless, which is illogical. But that familiar rage pulses in my chest, and if I had a knife I’d make him very sorry. “Let go of my chair!” I snap. “Let go of the fucking chair!”

His eyes widen and he steps backward, holding both hands up as if surrendering.

I suck in air, feel the pinch of tears. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I...just got out of a really bad place.”

Rob gives me a tiny, tense nod. “Is there someone I can call for you?” he asks gently. “Your boyfriend? Who will make you feel safe right now?”

I try to control my breathing. *Henri*, I think, *but he’s not here*. “Cecelia,” I whisper. “Or one of her bodyguards.”

In under a minute, Philippe stands in the room, with his stern, impassive, wonderfully familiar face. “I’m here, Mademoiselle Durand,” he says calmly. “No one will get near you without your permission.”

After a moment, I’m collected enough to begin. Guy treats me as if I might shatter at any moment, and I realize he might be right, when suddenly Cecelia rushes through the doors looking frantic.

She comes to where I stand, supporting my weight on parallel bars, and her hand goes to my face. “You never told me how bad it was,” she says. Her eyes fill. “But it must have been quite bad.”

I nod, and tears begin to run down my face. “Yes,” I finally reply. My

head falls to her shoulder. "It was."

She takes me back to my room and sits with me, distressed about what happened in the gym. I'm distressed too, but for other reasons. Something is wrong with me. I've got so much fear, and anger, I don't even know what to do with myself. Yet I suffered so much less than Katrin did...I wonder how she managed.

"You told me Katrin escaped successfully and got home," I say. That knot in my gut tightens. "But was she...okay?"

Cecelia's eyes focus on my hand, still in her grip. "She never quite recovered, it seems. She stayed alive for her son, nothing more."

I hesitate. In the back of my mind, I've hoped that perhaps I'm descended from other children Katrin had later on. "She only had the one child?" I ask, my voice a whisper.

"Yes," she says gently. "His name was Alexander."

Which means Coron is my grandfather, a quarter of my DNA. The man responsible for Henri's mother's death. The reason he had to leave Oxford and give up his entire life.

She squeezes my hand. "I know what you're thinking right now, but don't," she says. "Your genetics only tell a small part of your story."

Except I'm seeing what's inside me and that rage, that cruelty...it's not small. I thought, once I escaped captivity, that I could leave that rage behind, but it's as if Coron and Iris are still inside me somewhere, begging to be set free. I wanted to kill that therapist today. The desire pulsed in my chest, so overwhelming it was all I could feel until the dust settled. I need to know why. I need to know how it could have happened, and why my family has lied about it my entire life.

After Cecelia leaves, I place the call. I haven't spoken to my mother in over a year—not since that ugly phone call a summer ago when she told me she wished I'd never been born. I have no expectation that she will want to hear from me, but I don't really care.

"Mom? It's Sarah."

The other end of the line is silent. "Oh," she finally says, with a weary, disappointed sigh—the same kind she gave every time I called, every time I asked for something. Whether it was permission to sit at the table or permission to leave it, a suggestion I might come home to visit or a suggestion it was time I should go, her reaction was always this—disgust and exhaustion, as if I was once again asking too much.

In that weary, disappointed sigh, I'm reminded all over again why I chose to cut her off, and I don't feel the need to slowly build up to the purpose of this call. "I met your sister."

I hear a muted gasp on the other end of the line. "Iris?" she asks after a moment, her voice barely audible. For once, I've managed to surprise her. "She's alive?"

"No," I reply. "But I learned some interesting things before I killed her."

She laughs—a short, dismissive bark. "As if I'd believe that. Are you under the impression that would upset me even if I did?"

"I couldn't care less if you're upset," I reply. "But I now know that Peter Stewart wasn't my father, and I'd like the truth."

The other end of the line is silent. Angry silence, I'm sure. It's the only kind my mother knows. "I don't know what you're talking about," she finally says, her voice imperious once more, "but I'm hanging up."

I anticipated this part. She thinks she's immune to the consequences of her actions, and that I've got nothing to hold over her. But I know her Achilles heel: my brother. She'd rather die than let him know what she truly is.

"I'll tell Steven. And I'll take a paternity test to prove it to him, so don't think you can lie to him the way you have been to me my entire life."

"You wouldn't do that."

I laugh. "Wouldn't I? I stabbed your sister in the chest. You think telling Steven the truth would be hard for me?"

Air hisses through her teeth. "You really want to know what you are?" she asks. "Fine. I'll tell you. You are how God punished me for being a part of that family. Your father...he took advantage of me, the night before my wedding. All because of what Iris did to his mother. And I've had to endure you and the pain you've brought into my life ever since. You're just as evil as he is. So now you know. Never call this number again."

She hangs up, and I hold the phone to my chest, feeling worse than I did before. So much ugliness had to exist to create me. How could anything but ugliness result?

We are three miles over the German border when my commander asks for volunteers to scout ahead.

The battle has been brutal already. Venturing forward is a risk only an insane man would take. Or one with nothing to lose. These days, I often believe I'm both.

I start to rise and Maurice—a friend from Saint Antoine—grabs my sleeve. “What the hell are you doing?” he hisses. “You have people who need you back home.”

He's right, but my responsibilities are now a burden that feels unimaginably heavy. “We're all going to die in this war anyway,” I reply as I stand. “Now or next year.”

The men still seated look at me as if I'm a hero, when in truth it's cowardice. God help me, but I'd welcome the end.



I MAKE it nearly a mile through the woods, close enough to spy the enemy's location, before a bullet tears into my side. I fall to the ground and slide along the forest floor, hoping I can somehow get back to my unit and tell them what I know.

Soon, though, the world seems to tilt and shift. I hear words in the wind, and night comes when it was only daylight a moment before.

“Henri,” whispers Sarah, her hand on my back, “you need to wake up.”

I open my eyes to find her there. Not the skeleton in burned clothing, but

whole and perfect, smiling at me as if I've nodded off under an apple tree and she's come to bring me inside.

"You're not real," I tell her. "You died. I found you."

Her palm presses to my skin. "Does that not feel real to you?" she asks. "Wake up. Madame Beauvoir is here and I'm not facing her alone."

I pull her against me. "Then stay with me here instead," I tell her. "We'll sleep until she's gone."

Her lips press to mine. "It's not the time for rest," she says.

I hear voices nearby speaking French, and the moment I notice them, she's gone. That sorrow hits me all over again and my hand digs into the dirt.

Come back, Sarah. Please come back.

The voices grow closer. I'm tempted to let them pass and leave me here to die. But then I think of Sarah, who sacrificed herself for my sister. Sarah, who would never have gone down without a fight.

For her, and her alone, I call out for help.

Over the next few days I become accustomed to life in the hospital, but I'm still anxious and wary everywhere I go, and I'm unable to escape it. When I sleep there are nightmares. I dream that Gustave has me cornered, that the bed is on fire, that Iris has me trapped. Sometimes I dream that Mathilde forgot about the babies, and I watch as she pulls them, still and cold, from that laundry bag where they were hidden.

It's not much better when I'm awake. Using a walker, I'm allowed to take strolls around the building and down to the park, which I do several times a day, but everywhere I look I see threats of one kind or another. There is a bodyguard with me at all times, but it's not enough.

I read everything I can about the war in my free time, and that doesn't reassure me either. I wish I knew how to fight, how to keep us safe, and I don't. Killing the guards was easy. Protecting our family from nonspecific threats for five years straight is another matter entirely.

It all makes me wonder if I'm ever going to feel safe again.

Rob comes to the treadmill beside mine three days after *the incident*, as I like to refer to it.

"I'm sorry about the other day," he says. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I shake my head. "You didn't...I just—"

He hesitates and then turns off his treadmill, which was already going so slowly it was barely moving. "Don't apologize. I don't know what you've been through, but I know it was bad, and I get how you must feel."

"You do?"

"My sister was raped in college," he says. "Walking home from class in

the middle of the fucking afternoon. It took her years to feel safe again.”

I swallow. “But she’s okay now?”

He lifts a single shoulder. “She married a really great guy and I think most of the time now it’s behind her. She never did go back to school, though. I’m sorry. Maybe that wasn’t the best example to provide. I just wanted you to know I get it.”

In other words, she did not recover, but she can *pretend* she’s alright for the most part. I don’t want to pretend when I get home to Henri. I don’t want to have a panic attack any time we’re around strangers.

I don’t want to be this person I’m discovering inside me. The one who can rationalize away the things she’s done. The one who even takes pleasure in some of it. Because sometimes, when I picture the shock on my aunt’s face as I plunged the knife into her chest or remember the guards’ screams as they burned alive, I feel *warmed* by it. That vicious place inside me sated, momentarily. There are times when it seems to be the only thing that brings me joy.

Henri deserves better, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to provide it.



THAT AFTERNOON, Cecelia joins me on one of my walks, her bodyguards walking discreetly behind us. Just as we reach the park I feel a prickle between my shoulder blades and glance around us. I see the same things I do every day—old men sitting on benches, toddlers running clumsily over the grass, women smoking with a book in hand.

“What’s the matter?” she asks. “Are you too tired?”

I bite my lip. I’m sure I already seem crazy, given my freak-out the other day, and what I’m about to say won’t help. “I feel like we’re being watched.”

Cecelia pats my arm. “Louis and Philippe are here,” she says. “You’re in good hands.”

“They won’t always be,” I whisper. “I need to be able to defend myself. Do you think you could get me a gun?”

She laughs. “Fragility, trauma and weapons don’t mix well. My goal is to get you back to 1939, just as you arrived before, not turn you into a murder suspect.”

We make a circle of the park, and just before we turn back to the hospital,

I spin toward the woods...just in time to see a woman standing there disappear into thin air. My knees buckle at the sight and it's Cecelia who grabs me before I fall.

"Time traveler," I whisper. The words are barely audible. I point toward the woods. "There was a time traveler there."

"You're sure?" Cecelia asks, lifting her sunglasses to look in the direction I'm pointing. Even from here we can see the woman's clothes, lying in a heap on the ground.

"I'm sure," I reply. *Why was she here? What does she want?* I'm never going to feel safe until I'm certain I can defend myself.

"Even if I can't have a gun in the hospital," I say to Cecelia, leaning on my walker and trying to catch my breath, "that doesn't mean I can't be taught how to use one, does it?"

She glances from me to that pile of clothes by the woods. "No, I don't suppose it does."



REHABILITATION OF MY WEAK, broken body becomes secondary from then on. From sun-up to sundown, my focus is on learning to fight. Cecelia hires two different specialists: a Navy SEAL who teaches me how to shoot and use a knife, and an Israeli soldier who teaches me hand-to-hand combat.

What I appreciate about both men is that neither act like I'm a silly, scared girl. They both treat me as if I'm someone going to war, which is truer than they can even imagine. I'm taught to throw a dagger from thirty feet away, and when I can finally hit a bullseye with my right hand, I'm forced to train with my left. Using dummies, I'm taught how to immobilize my opponent, how to break a neck, where to punch to kill someone immediately—corner of the jaw or nasal cavity. Where to stab someone in the back to puncture a lung, useful because it prevents them from screaming. How to slit a throat, useful for the same reason. When Paul, the SEAL, starts showing me how to stab someone in the chest, I wave him off. "I already know that one."

Holding a knife in my hands makes me feel calm, and also powerful. It makes me wish I could go back to 1918 with my new knowledge, solely to watch Gustave die. At night I think about how I will punish Coron—how I can manage to trap him and kill him slowly. It's the lullaby that sings me to

sleep on the nights when rage leaves me unable to find Henri, when I'm worried he'll find me so changed he won't want me.

But given it's the rage itself that's changed me, and that the more I allow it, the more of it I feel, I sometimes wonder if I've escaped captivity only to poison myself instead. Killing comes as naturally to me as walking must have, once upon a time, and I'm not sure that's a good thing.

Henri will fix it, I promise myself. Everything that's broken inside me won't stay this way once I'm with him again. It can't.

"So, tell me about this fiancé of yours," says Rob, on the treadmill beside mine, where I find him most days now. He has a bit of a crush—perhaps because I'm the first female who's ever shot him down. "Is he famous? He must be famous."

I smile. "No, not in the least."

"Well then, can you tell me why he isn't here?" Rob asks, arching a brow. "No offense, but under the circumstances, the guy should be here."

"He's...fighting. He's in the military," I reply. "He'll be home soon."

"Well, if something changes," Rob says, "let me know."

"Nothing's going to change," I reply.

Inside I say a silent prayer that it's actually true.



AT THE END of the second week, Louis comes to collect me, as Cecelia promised he would. Though I'm not ready to run a marathon, I can walk a mile on the treadmill at a relatively normal pace, which is more than I can say for Rob.

I pop my head in the gym as I'm leaving, clad in the jeans and a t-shirt I purchased here the summer before. Rob sees me and comes over, still using his walker.

"That's just cruel," he says, "walking in here in those jeans just to say goodbye."

I smile, choosing to ignore that. "It's been fun. Good luck with everything."

He nods at Anna, his assistant, who hands something to Louis. "Anna just gave your bodyguard all my numbers. If things don't work out with Henri, give me a call. I've got another month here before I start my European tour.

You can be my plus one, no strings attached.” He grins. “I mean, I’d *prefer* it if there were strings, but I’ll live if there aren’t.”

I laugh and lean forward to kiss him on the cheek. “Good luck, Rob.”

“Henri’s a lucky man,” he says. “I hope he realizes it.”

I force a smile. The truth is that I’m the lucky one. I just hope my luck continues to hold.



I’M TAKEN from the hospital to another of Cecelia’s beloved spa appointments, where I’m waxed and scrubbed until I shine, where my hair is cut and my nails are done and my brows are plucked. From there, I’m taken to a gorgeous flat, just off the Champs-Élysées, with all my belongings waiting for me in the master suite. I know I should relish it all, but in a day’s time, I’ll be back with Henri, and I hunger for it so much I can barely notice anything else.

On the day of my departure, I rise early and find myself pacing, too excited to sit still. When Cecelia arrives with a bagful of croissants, I take one and sit with her in the parlor, though I’m too nervous to eat.

She pours coffee for us while I bounce on the edge of the couch like a little girl who needs a bathroom badly.

“I have a favor to ask,” she says carefully, handing me a cup of coffee, “and it matters a great deal to me.”

I take the cup she proffers, nodding, ready to agree to anything as long as it gets me home to Henri. “You originally did not arrive until October twelfth,” she says. “And because you were very unwell that time, you had to recover, so you remained there.”

My stomach tightens into a knot. “I’m going to remain there anyway.”

She doesn’t meet my eye. “I know. But I’d like you to promise me...that you’ll stay. To go sooner could be disastrous. I wanted to help you and make sure you got better medical care this time, though to be honest I can’t remember why I wanted it—I suppose because whatever went wrong the first time has been corrected. But the *date*. The date is important. And you could destroy everything by arriving too soon.”

“I’m planning to stay forever,” I reply. “I don’t understand why we’re even discussing this.”

She averts her gaze, but not before I see that worried thing in her face.

“Cecelia,” I say, forcing a calm to my voice I don’t feel. “Why *wouldn’t* I want to stay?”

She hesitates. “Things...may not be exactly the way you want them to be, at first. You’ll need to be patient. I don’t want to tell you too much, because knowing might change it all. Just please promise you’ll stay.”

I don’t like the sound of any of this. I know Henri waited for me. What more could I possibly want? “If Marie-Therese refuses to go to America after everything we just went through, I’m probably going to kill her myself.”

She doesn’t laugh. She doesn’t even smile. “Promise you’ll stay. It means a great deal to me, personally.”

I close my eyes, shutting out the concern on her face. She has no idea what’s in my heart. Even if the war is encroaching and food is low, there’s nothing that could make me leave Henri’s side after everything we’ve been through. “I promise I’ll stay. If he’s alive, that’s all I need.”

She squeezes my hand. “Remember you said that.”

I land in the barn, as always. This time, however, I land in the loft, and send an entire bale of hay crashing into the stalls below me, nearly falling right over the edge with it.

The horses panic at the falling hay and begin to bray inside their stalls. For a moment, I just laugh, with tears in my eyes. I've made it. What kind of miracle is it that I've survived so much and finally made my way back to him? I climb down the ladder, still a bit stiff after so many months of immobility. The blanket hangs just inside the barn door, waiting for me still.

I throw it around myself and walk into the yard, under the light of a newly rising sun, just as Marie opens the door.

"My God," she grouses loudly. "What is it now?"

And then our eyes meet, and the color drains from her face. "No," she whispers. She blinks hard. "It isn't possible."

Henri appears in the door at just that moment and the two of them stare at me.

"Amelie?" he rasps, half question...half something else.

I nod and then he is crossing the yard to me, pulling me against him so hard I can barely breathe. Marie runs and throws her arms around us both, sobbing. "It's not possible," she says again and again. "We found your bones. It's not possible."

"Thank God," whispers Henri gruffly, his mouth pressed to my hair. "Oh, thank God."

He's gripping me so hard that it hurts, my body still tender and bruised from those months in the hospital, and I never want it to stop. I dreamed

about him, I visited him, and yet his heat, his smell, his size...all of it was never *this*. Never entirely real.

“Henri?” A woman’s voice, coming from behind them. “What’s going on?”

He stiffens.

And my stomach drops. I know, even in my confusion, even as my brain begins to deny the truth, that in the woman’s voice I hear possession. I hear someone who believes she owns the rights to Henri’s thoughts. And his embrace.

His grip on me loosens. I look up and see dawning horror in his face, his and Marie’s both.

The woman crosses the yard. She looks quite like me: my height, hair the palest blonde. But with one key difference. She is very, very pregnant.

I stumble backward, my head shaking, denying what I clearly see in front of me. I wait for Henri to explain, to deny it, but I only see apology in his eyes. Such apology.

The pain of it makes me sway, and Marie seems to realize it. Her hand goes to my back to keep me upright, while Henri stands still, pale and frozen. I was only gone for ten months. It would be bad enough if he hadn’t waited that long but...from the looks of it, he didn’t wait at all.

My mouth opens. I want him to tell me this is not what it looks like. That he didn’t move on right after I left, while I spent month after month doing anything I could to get back to him. *Tell me she’s carrying someone else’s child. Tell me you did the honorable thing because I wasn’t coming home.* My brain whirs with the possibilities, but no...she crosses the yard to us and he steps away from me. She takes his hand.

And he allows her to do it.

“What in God’s name is happening?” she asks.

Henri’s mouth opens as if to speak and then closes. It’s Marie who recovers first. “Our cousin Amelie has come for a visit,” she says through a dry throat. She flinches hard. “Amelie, this is Yvette, Henri’s wife.”

Henri’s wife.

I knew, somehow, but the words...the words still take all the air from my chest.

My knees wobble and the weight of the journey descends, as I knew it would. For the first time ever, I’m glad to go unconscious.



WHEN I WAKE it's dusk. For a single moment I hear the sounds of the farm, feel the pulse of country air through the window, and I am happy.

Then I remember, and the pain of it turns me inside out. There's nothing left to me but this ache, a single sharp wound I feel in every nerve ending. I turn face down and cry, stifling my sobs with my pillow.

It doesn't feel real. It *can't* be real. Yet it is.

After everything I lived through, everything I endured to get back to him, I never dreamed the most painful moment would be arriving here. I am stripped down to nothing, empty. I should never have jumped out of the window to escape. Dying there would have been easier than this, painful but brief. Over already.

That I have returned to discover I've lost him is too much to bear. But the betrayal—*that* is the part that cuts knife-sharp. I loved him with my entire heart. I thought what we had was inviolable and perfect. Worth any sacrifice. But he didn't wait. He didn't wait a year. He didn't even wait months.

I start doing the math, wanting an answer that won't hurt, though I know I won't find it. She looks like she's almost due, which means she's been pregnant since last winter, and surely there was some courting beforehand? A month or two at the very minimum, which means he waited weeks, or perhaps days.

I cling to the rage that thought inspires. Because rage is the only thing that's going to get me out of this bed and the fuck out of here. I'm tired, but not the way I was before I gained my aunt's spark. I could survive a trip home now, I'm guessing.

I could leave. I could tour Europe with Rob Chapman. Let Henri explain to his wife how I've disappeared. It's not my problem.

I throw off the blankets. I feel a twinge of guilt at the idea of leaving without telling Marie goodbye, but surely she will understand. I can't be expected to sit downstairs making nice with Henri and his glowing wife.

Except...Cecelia. I promised her.

A part of me is tempted to ignore it. I've sacrificed enough. I've given these people a year of my life and my heart and I doubt I'm getting either of them back. I've done enough. But then I think of the way Cecelia protected me when I first arrived, how she was willing to let me cling to her when I was scared of everyone else. She was more of a mother to me than my own

mother has ever been, and this is the only thing she's ever asked in return. And she wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important.

I put on the dress Marie has left. My favorite one. It was thoughtful of her, sweet to remember, except it was my favorite because of Henri. Because of the way he looked at me when I wore it, the way his eyes dipped to that small hint of cleavage like it was the Holy Land or water to a man dying of thirst. Well, let him look again. Let him get a good look at all the things he will never have again, all the things I will give away to...Rob Chapman? I want the idea of it to appeal to me but it doesn't.

And why would Henri care? He has a wife now. He chose someone else.

I go down the stairs, fueled by my anger. They are putting food on the table, and Henri is standing there when I reach the bottom step. Our eyes hold, and lock. For a moment my anger disappears and I'm nothing but bottomless sorrow, a well of grief that has no end.

"Awake at last, cousin!" Marie says with forced heartiness, looking between us like a deer in headlights. She rushes over to usher me to the table. "You must eat."

Yvette walks in, yawning, a hand pressed to her stomach as she stretches. "I thought I could nap, but you take the cake, Amelie."

I hate her. She's done nothing to me whatsoever, aside from unwittingly stealing the worthless piece of shit I fell in love with, but I hate her nonetheless.

I glance at Henri and Marie. Has Henri uttered a single word since I arrived? I'm not sure he has. "You've slept most of the day," Marie says. Her smile is so feigned it looks painful. "Your journey from *America* must have been a tiring one."

Yvette takes a seat, reaching for the bread. "What a way to arrive. I can't believe they even stole the clothes off your back."

I suppose this is how Henri and Marie explained the fact that I arrived naked, but I get the feeling she relishes the idea of my hard journey, my stolen clothes.

The tension in the room is palpable. I see it in Henri's hands on the table, holding the edge hard, in his tight jaw. The urgency in Marie's eyes. We have so much to discuss and not a word can be said with Yvette here.

"Can I help?" I ask, turning toward Marie.

She clicks her tongue. "Of course not. You need food and more rest." So *you can go where you belong*. She hasn't said it, hasn't even implied it, but

they must want me gone, mustn't they? I'm just a painful, awkward thing to work around now. Another mouth to feed. My presence something they'll have to create lie after lie about because of Yvette.

Marie places bread and cheese and milk in front of me, along with a slab of ham. Yvette's eyes dip to my plate. "I thought we were saving the pig for after the baby was born."

"We'll have other foods to celebrate with then," says Henri tightly, looking at neither of us. Apparently, he *does* still have a voice, though I've rarely heard it sound as strained as it does right now. "Today we celebrate the return of our cousin."

Something inside me softens, begins to ache for him and I fight it, search myself instead for that spark of anger. Anger is all that will keep this from being the saddest day of my entire life. *He began dating her weeks after you left, I remind myself. He married her.*

"So much has changed since your last visit, Amelie," says Marie, joining us at the table. "We have ration cards but not much is available. It's all going to the front."

"Yes," I reply, raising cold eyes to Henri, who sits across from me, beside his wife. "I never dreamed so much would have changed." All of his promises about marrying me after I came back...did he mean any of them? Was he really that fickle or was I really that stupid? I turn from him to his wife. "When is the baby due?"

She pats her stomach with a condescending smile. She couldn't possibly know about us, but something in her expression says *I have what you want*. And the Coron in me surges. *I could take it back from you, I think.*

"Two more months," she says, smiling up at Henri.

My fork falls to my plate. If she is seven months along right now, she got pregnant in February. Which means he waited less than three months after I was gone to marry someone else. Three *months*. While I spent all that time trying to get back to him. Plotting, conspiring, starving, forcing myself to keep going. I held on, comforted only by the memory of him, the feel of him against me at night, and all along he was with someone else.

I jumped out of a window to get back to you, I want to say. I nearly died. I will never again feel completely safe, or worthwhile, because of what I went through. But all you had to do was wait and you couldn't even do that.

Yvette is waiting for some kind of predictable response from me about how wonderful it is that they'll be parents and I just can't bring myself to

offer it.

“Eat,” whispers Marie. Her hand squeezes mine for a moment.

My lips are dry and my tongue darts out to wet them. “I’m not feeling very well,” I reply. I cannot look at Henri, or Yvette. The sight of them both makes me sick.

“You’re too thin,” she says. “You need to try.”

Yvette shifts across from me. “Oh, leave her alone, Marie. She’s skin and bones but she’ll fatten up once she gets home, I’m sure. Americans are all fat. So yes, the baby is due at the end of November. Henri will make a very good father, don’t you think?” she prompts.

I search myself for that anger before I answer. It’s all that will keep me from bursting into tears. “Who knows?” I finally reply, raising my gaze to meet Henri’s. “A man can seem perfect until he’s tested. And then the whole charade falls apart.”

Henri’s fist grabs his mug so hard its contents slosh over the sides, while beside me, Marie makes a choked noise of admonishment. “You’ll find, Yvette, that Amelie is full of jokes. She’s teasing you now. She knows Henri will prove a good father.”

Her hand rests heavily on my shoulder, as if warning me not to take this any further. For her sake, I won’t.

“We thought you were dead,” Henri says suddenly. He sounds as angry as I feel. “We were certain of it. Why did you wait so long to let us know you were alive?”

My body jerks as if he’s struck me. Is he actually trying to deflect blame for this? Does he think I don’t know how long it takes a human baby to grow? “I couldn’t get away,” I say between my teeth. “And then, when I finally did, I fell two stories from a window. I broke fifteen different bones, fractured my skull, and spent nearly six months in a coma.” *And you were supposed to be at war*, I long to add. How exactly is he here now? Did something change or did Cecelia lie to me, knowing there’s no way I’d stay until the end of October if I came any sooner? I swallow hard and look Henri dead in the eye. “I left as soon as I could. I’m sorry if that wasn’t *fast* enough for you, but you certainly seem to have kept yourself occupied.”

Yvette looks between the two of us. “I don’t understand what the fuss is all about, Henri. You’ve never mentioned this cousin of yours once and now you act as if the world is caving in because she didn’t write?”

All the accusations have left him. His head hangs. “You’re right,” he

says, his voice muted, low with guilt and shame. “I have no right to complain, especially after what she’s been through.”

My glance flickers to his wife. “It’s funny. I was only here last November, and Henri never mentioned you either. It must have been quite the whirlwind courtship. Or perhaps he just had a few special friends back then he chose not to introduce me to.”

Henri’s jaw grinds. “It happened very quickly,” he says, staring at his plate.

“It was so romantic,” says Yvette, putting a proprietary hand on his arm. “I was living in Paris when we met—I was an actress—and then he came one night and asked me to give it all up and come live with him in the countryside. You’d think I’d say no, wouldn’t you? Giving up Paris for this rural life? But I knew a love like ours is a rare thing. He was worth the sacrifice.”

Henri stands abruptly, clutching his side, pale beneath his tan. “Excuse me,” he says, and then he turns and walks out, letting the door slam shut behind him.

The silence in the wake of his departure is so awkward Marie actually winces. But Yvette recovers quickly, giving us both a trained actress’s smile. “He’s just come back from the front, you know, and he was shot in the side. He was so worried he might not live to meet his child. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“I’ll go check on him,” Marie says faintly, beginning to rise.

I place a hand on her forearm. “I’ll go.”

This seems to send Yvette spinning into motion for the first time all night. “He’s *my* husband. I’ll go.”



IT’S ONLY when the door shuts behind her that Marie turns to me with tears in her eyes. “My God, Amelie, what happened to you? We were so certain you were dead.”

With Henri gone the fight has left me. I bury my head in my hands. “I wish I was. I should have just died there.”

Marie’s arm wraps around me. “I know this is a shock. But don’t say that. You have no idea how sick we’ve been, thinking you’d died. I had so much

guilt about leaving you. But...I don't understand. We found your body. We went to Paris and Henri climbed into that hole and found you, wearing the necklace."

"Found me?" I repeat, before realizing he must have found Iris. Coron probably buried any remaining skeletons under the floor, after that fire. Fewer questions asked that way. *And Henri found one and assumed it was me.* I shudder at the idea, until I remember how quickly he seemed to have recovered. There's so much I could tell her—about my aunt, about the babies, about all the women who died after they left. I don't have the heart. Maybe this, here, is my punishment for it all.

"I lent it to someone," I say simply. "There was a fire and I was able to climb upstairs and jump out the window. I'd hoped to time travel while I was in the air, but it didn't happen fast enough."

"I'm so sorry," she whispers. "For what you've suffered and for what I put you through when it was...all for nothing. When my mother must have been killed right away."

I've had the same thought, at times, and yet I can't blame her for wanting to know. "You'd never have been sure about her if you hadn't seen it for yourself."

"Thank God you survived," she replies. "To see you here now, in perfect health. I can't tell you what a miracle it is."

"Not perfect. I can't have children now, because of the fall." I laugh and it turns into a sob. "I guess Henri dodged a bullet, didn't he?"

She squeezes me tight. "God...this situation...I'm sorry. Henri would never, ever say he dodged a bullet, but I'm sorry. It must be such a shock for you."

"Cecelia—the woman who helped me the last time I went back—she warned me," I whisper. "She tried to warn me that things would not be as I hoped when I arrived here. She made me swear I'd stay until the end of October. I should have refused."

Marie places a palm on my face. "A piece of Henri died, thinking you were gone. You need to know...it was not the way Yvette made it out to be. Henri grieved for you. I watched him hold your skeleton. He wept like a child. I've never seen him, the way he was that day."

I feel sick at the thought. I can't imagine Henri crying. But I can no longer afford to feel sympathy for him, over anything. His words and his actions toward me were meaningless when I was here before, easily

discarded. Why should anything else he does be judged differently?

Humans lie, I think. Humans do whatever makes them feel good in the moment, without loyalty, without a thought for others. Perhaps having some of Coron and Iris is a good thing. If I'd had their chilly self-interest a year ago, none of this would have happened.

"Do not expect me to feel sorry for him," I reply, my voice low and gritty with the need to cry. "If the situations had been reversed, I'd have mourned him for years, Marie. *Years.*"

"It's not what you think," she pleads, clasping my hands.

"How? How is there possibly an alternate explanation?"

She hangs her head. "It's not my story to tell. But this is hard for him too. You could, if you wanted..." She stops, and her voice drops to a whisper.

"You could undo it."

I blink. "What?"

"You could go back in time and warn yourself, refuse to go."

The whole stupid trip to 1918. I could go back to the previous fall and tell Marie the truth: *Your mother died immediately. You and I go, and we suffer terribly, so let's just stay here.*

"I thought of doing it a thousand times," she says, staring at her hands. "But I assumed you were dead so it would do no good."

I'm surprised she's even suggesting it, under the circumstances. That's her niece Yvette carries. "I can't," I reply, my teeth grinding. "There were two infants there. Girls. I helped get them out. At least I hope I did. Did your mother ever say anything about them?"

"Infants? Why would my mother know?" she asks, and my heart sinks. Marie was a newborn herself at the time. Of course she wouldn't know.

"Your mother is the one I wrote to. I asked her to find them homes." I shrug. "It doesn't matter. I wouldn't go back and change it all anyway."

Her head tilts. "No? Why not?"

"Because it's better this way," I reply, anger steeling my heart, making all of this bearable for a moment. "If it hadn't happened, I'd never have realized how little Henri actually cared. I'd never have realized he didn't deserve me in the first place."



I SPEND much of the next day sleeping. I don't *need* it, not the way I did before I took my aunt's spark. I just don't have the heart to do anything else.

When Henri comes in that afternoon, his eyes go to me. I see misery there, and hunger too, but I no longer trust my ability to read what's in his heart. Look how wrong I must have been the first time around.

He sits stiffly beside a yammering Yvette, pale beneath his summer tan. The two of them make a lovely couple. Perhaps this is how it was always supposed to be, and I am the intruder. Watching them, I don't see how I can possibly keep my promise to Cecelia. Remain here a full month? I'm not even sure I'll make it through the next twenty-four hours.

Marie begins to put dinner on the table. I rise but she presses a hand to my shoulder and tells me to sit. Yvette, I notice, hasn't lifted a finger once since I arrived. I push the food on my plate around, wishing I had an appetite. When I look up, Henri's eyes are on me again.

"So how long do you plan to stay, Amelie?" asks Yvette. She's smiling but it's strained, unfriendly at the edges.

Henri stills, listening. "Until the end of October," I reply. "I'm meeting a friend then."

A muscle feathers in Henri's jaw at the word *friend*. Does he want to ask who I'm meeting? Does a hint of his old jealousy still exist? Good. It can only be a fraction of my own, and he deserves it.

"We love that you're here," says Marie, raising a brow at Yvette. "We want you to stay as long as possible."

"I'm sure Amelie is eager to see something of Europe other than our little farm," says Yvette. *Our* farm. I bristle at her use of the word. *It's not yours, bitch*. But as soon as the thought flits through my head I'm reminded: she's been here longer than I have. I thought of the farm as mine in a much shorter period of time. I guess she was smart to lock Henri into marriage as fast as she did, since he is obviously a man prone to quick changes of heart. "You should go see things while you're in Europe. Come back to meet your friend afterward."

"This is her home too," says Henri, hand clenched tight around his fork.

I laugh. The sound is unrepentantly bitter. "This was never my home."

Yvette looks between the two of us. She's a smart girl, a crafty one. She may not know who I really am, but she knows a threat when it's presented to her. "You shouldn't force her to stay when there's so much to see. Who's this friend you'll meet, Amelie?"

The desire to hurt Henri for this entire experience pulses inside me, swelling and growing. I know it's juvenile. I know I should be better than this.

I simply am not.

"He's a musician, beginning a European tour next month. He asked me to travel with him."

"A musician!?" squeals Yvette. "How very scandalous of you. Musicians have no money, but I'm sure you'll have a lovely time."

Resist, resist. I can't. "This one has money. A lot of money. He's got his own plane. I kept a photo of him on my wall at home, in fact, as an adolescent."

Yvette's face goes from shock to suspicion. The idea, I suppose, of some girl in borrowed shoes having a lover wealthy enough to own a plane is beyond her comprehension.

Henri rises, gripping his side, and walks straight out the door. It's only been two days, but it seems to be becoming a habit.

Marie watches him go, flinching, and then she grabs a pail off the counter and hands it to me. "I forgot to milk the cows," she says. "Can you?"

I reach for the pail but she doesn't release it until I meet her eye. I know what the look says. *Hash it out. Have your fight so you can stop bringing it under my roof.*

I give her a tight, barely visible nod and walk out of the house to find Henri.



HE IS PACING, out by his bale of hay. Our bale of hay. I will never look at it without thinking of the last time I was here, of all the promise that lay ahead. His life is still full of promise, though, isn't it? Brand new promises he made some other woman the moment my back was turned.

He watches me approach with his hands in his hair, tugging at it viciously. "Did you mean what you said? You're going to leave here and go off with some musician?"

I laugh. "I already gave up my entire life for you. I dropped out of college for you. I gave up my chance of escaping that hellhole so your sister could get home instead. Perhaps I deserve a few months of touring Europe with a

famous musician as a consolation prize.”

He looks gutted, which would be laughable were it not so outrageous. He presses the base of his palms to his forehead. “Don’t do this,” he pleads.

“Oh, I’m *sorry*,” I reply. “It would be better for you if I’d died, wouldn’t it? That way, no one would get a sample of the things you *chose* not to wait for.”

In two lunging steps he’s in front of me with his hands gripping my arms. “Stop this. Stop. You’re—” His lips press together tightly.

“I’m what?”

He closes his eyes and gives me the smallest shake of his head. “Nothing. I know how this looks. You just need to believe that I was in a bad place when you and my sister were gone. And I did wait. I did. Marie was certain you’d died and I insisted you hadn’t. I hunted for you. I dragged her back to Paris to find that house. And then I found your body. I held your skeleton in my hands. I—” His voice breaks and he stops talking entirely.

My heart gives an unfortunate lurch of sympathy. I’m incapable of seeing the bad in him even when I’m the victim of it. I’m angry at us both for that fact.

“Do not ask me to feel sorry for you,” I say between my teeth. “You waited less than three months after I left to fuck someone else, Henri.” My voice trembles. “Do not expect me to believe for a single moment that you were *devastated* by my loss.”

“I was,” he says. His hold on my arms tightens. “I still am. Look at me. Do I look well to you? Happy and healthy?”

I shake free of him, swiping an angry hand over the tears that are in my eyes. “I will not feel sorry for you!” I cry. “I won’t. You’ve been sitting here married and planning for your new family, while I—do you even have any idea what it was like, where we were held? Or did Marie spare you all that?”

He stiffens, bracing himself. “She didn’t remember, mostly.”

I look him in the eye. “We were drugged and beaten. I had to pretend for months that I was asleep so I wouldn’t be raped. I had to let the guards hit me and put their hands down my dress and maul me as I passed, without ever reacting once. And I had to watch all the other women die off, one by one. You know what they were doing there?”

The cords of his neck stand out with tension. “Marie thought they were raising children who time travel.”

“No,” I correct. “They were hoping to *breed* children who time travel.

They assumed those of us able to fight off the drug were more powerful, and the rest were expendable. I finally had to give myself up simply so they didn't kill me off."

He staggers backward and leans against the wall, holding his side. "God," he groans, dragging a hand through his hair. "Please tell me they didn't..." He can't even say the word.

"No. But how could it possibly matter at this point?" I reply. "You have a new, unsullied wife."

His shoulders slump, and a kinder person would stop right now, but I can't. That anger inside me isn't abated at all by what I've said. It's like a fire, finding more things to burn, taking on new life.

"They were drugging the food, so I starved myself to keep a clear head. I was so weak from hunger toward the end, but do you know what kept me going, Henri? You know what kept me from eating, kept my feet moving each day no matter how hard it got? It was *you*. It was the idea of getting back to you. And I could visit you in part, but not without changing your memories of our time together, so I came while you slept. I would lie down, half this past version of me and half the present one, and weep at how much I missed you. So don't tell me how *hard* and *sad* it was for you here on the farm for a few months before you forgot me. Because I never forgot you. Not for a single day."

His hand goes to my shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen, Sarah."

His apology is a slap in the face. *I never meant for any of this to happen*. How many weak, worthless men have used that phrase before, and how *dare* he offer it to me now?

"Don't use my name."

"You already gave it to me," he says.

I stand up straighter, buoyed by my rage. "I gave you a lot of things," I snap. "And now I'm taking every one of them back, and I'm giving them to someone else. Don't ever use my name again. You didn't deserve it after all."

I walk away and he lets me. Everything I said was perfectly cutting. It made me feel no better at all.

The next day, Henri is absent. Yvette stays in with us, knitting baby booties while Marie-Therese and I cut and chop and can. She spends the entire afternoon musing aloud about baby names for the child she's convinced is a boy, until I think I can't stand it anymore.

"Shall I name him Henri?" she asks us. "Would my husband like a junior around the house?" I picture Henri as a toddler—that adorable, rosy-cheeked boy I once saw chasing chickens through the yard, plump-legged and gleeful—and suppress a shudder of pain. That little boy should be mine, not hers. *That child wouldn't be mine regardless*, I remind myself.

I don't answer the question so Marie-Therese replies for me. "As long as he's healthy, I doubt Henri will care what you name him."

"And you, Amelie?" asks Yvette. "What do you think Henri would like?"

My eyes raise to hers. "I'd have to care what Henri likes in order to form an opinion."

She smiles then. It's so obvious that I'm wounded by this situation and she enjoys that fact. She feeds on my unhappiness like a monster. I can't hold it against her, entirely, because I'd happily feed on hers as well.

In the afternoon, when we're done with the canning, Yvette enlists me to help her sew small, adorable little baby gowns in white linen. I think of refusing her, and yet a piece of me now seeks out the pain, as if something might break inside me once there's been too much of it.

So, I sit with her while she muses aloud about Henri and the baby and their blissful future. My needle jabs into the fabric haphazardly, and jabs into my own thumb more than once. I almost enjoy that pain too. I like feeling

something other than the wound she and Henri have created.

“Your stitching is atrocious,” she says, clicking her tongue at my handiwork as I bring my bleeding thumb to my mouth. She pulls it from my lap and rips the seams out. “Try again.”

She hands it back to me, regarding me with those cat eyes of hers. We’ve fooled her not at all with our pretense of being cousins. She knows Henri and I were more. How could she not? Some piece of us exists in every glance he and I exchange.

“What do you think of the name Andre?” she asks, watching me carefully for a reaction. “Or Pierre? Pierre Durand. He sounds like a politician, does he not?”

I look up from the gown, wondering what, exactly, she wants from me. Does she want me to weep and beg her to give him back? Does she want me to lash out in a jealous frenzy? If she knew what I was capable of, what I’m tempted to do, she’d stop pushing me.

“I like Ted Bundy for a boy,” I reply, focusing once more on my stitches.

“Tedbundy?” she asks, as if it’s all one word. “It’s an American name?”

“Yes.” I’m not completely evil. I’d stop them if she actually considered it. Probably. “It’s really popular.”

“What an odd name,” she replies. “I think I prefer Pierre.”



I’M in the barn when Henri finds me. He pauses before walking in. “Dinner is ready,” he says.

I don’t glance up from the cow I’m milking. The mere sight of him hurts. I will stay until the end of October, as I promised, but if I avoid him, avoid looking at him, maybe I can stop wanting him too. “I’ll be in when I’m done.”

He goes nowhere, however, and I’m finally forced to glance up. His brow is arched, and he’s looking at me in the old way, not as if I’m a victim or a torturer, but as if I’m a naughty child in need of a spanking, one he’s too amused by to deliver. “Who is Ted Bundy?” he asks.

“A serial killer. He murders a bunch of women in the 1970s and has sex with their corpses.”

His mouth twitches. “Yes, I suspected as much. Please stop offering my

wife input.”

That word—*wife*—siphons every ounce of joy from this conversation. “Then tell her to stop asking for it,” I reply.

He still stands there. “You shouldn’t be doing so much,” he says quietly. “You’re still too thin.” I rise—not because I’m done but because I have to get away from him.

“Do me a favor,” I reply, handing him the half-full pail. “Don’t try to pretend you care. I think you’ve proven quite conclusively you don’t.”

I enter the kitchen with Henri on my heels. He hands the pail to Marie, mumbling something about how I shouldn’t be working as hard as I am. He looks as if he should be working less hard himself. Exhaustion is etched into the corners of his face and he walks away with his hand pressed, as always to his side.

Yvette looks at me as I take a seat, her eyes raising slowly, cunning as always. “He’s right, of course. You do work too hard, but I understand it. We are just scraping by here. It must be awful to feel like you’re another mouth to feed at a time like this, when our family is growing.”

She wants to hurt me. The smartest thing I could do right now is not give her the satisfaction of knowing she’s succeeded. But I lash out instead. “If times are so hard and you’re barely scraping by, perhaps you shouldn’t have decided to grow a family right now. That seems like a far larger problem than my temporary visit.”

Her cheeks suck in and her eyes narrow, just for a moment, before she stretches like a cat and looks at me from beneath her long lashes. “Henri does not give me a moment’s rest, even now, in *that* regard. Pregnancy is unavoidable with a man like him.”

She wanted to hurt me and she has. *My God*, she has.

I realize only now the lies I’ve still been telling myself to dull the pain. I wanted to believe he’d used her to drown his sorrows, but that wasn’t it at all. I close my eyes and push away from the table. I can’t sit here. I can’t remain across from them for another meal, watching Yvette’s eyes dancing across his broad shoulders, counting the moments until she gets him alone.

“I think I’ll go for a walk,” I tell Marie. “I’m not really hungry.”

I ignore Yvette’s Cheshire-cat smile and walk out the door. Marie finds me a short time later, sitting by the hay bale, and places bread and cheese and ham on a plate in front of me. “Eat,” she says. “You still look as if you’re a moment from death’s door.”

I brush the tears off my face. “Unlike the luscious Yvette, who is blooming.”

She laughs. “Even as starved as you are, Yvette’s face can’t hold a candle to yours, which you must realize. If it could, she wouldn’t be so tediously jealous.”

“Jealous?” I scoff. “What’s she got to be jealous of? She’s married to Henri and having his child. He apparently rushed off to Paris to beg her to marry him and can’t keep his hands off her now.”

Her smile fades. “Surely you realize that Yvette stretches the truth a bit?” she asks. “Does Henri strike you as being unable to keep his hands off her? They’re rarely even in the same place.”

“Because the grapes are coming in and he’s busy.” I think about the day he undressed me in the middle of the vineyard, during Madame Beauvoir’s visit. How desperate he was, how reckless. Yvette was right. Pregnancy is unavoidable with a man like him. “Believe me, he finds a way to work around *that*.”

Her hand covers mine. “No matter what Yvette says, he does not share with her what he did with you. I shouldn’t tell you this, but theirs was no great romance, the way she made it sound. He got her pregnant by accident and she showed up on our doorstep two months later. He did the right thing.”

I wrap my arms around myself, blinking away tears. “He told me he’d wait forever, Marie. Instead he got her pregnant three months after I left. So, no matter how you spin this story, he’s not the innocent one in it, is he?”

“No,” she says. “I suppose he’s not.”



I LIE DOWN THAT NIGHT, realizing something that is equal parts pathetic and terrible: I miss the days of captivity. Not all of it, but just these moments at night, when my head first hits the pillow. Because at least then I had something to dream about, something to want and to return to. There was hope, and now there’s none. Even if I’d died, I could have died knowing I was deeply loved by someone—all a lie, of course, but I didn’t know that then.

It’s weakness on my part, but I allow myself to travel to Henri’s bed the summer before, back when I was still wanted there. I nestle beside him,

breathing in his scent of soap and fresh linen and whiskey. He's naked under the sheets. My hand slides over his arm, his back, his hip. Already he is growing hard, and in a moment it will wake him, and he will roll me on my back, still half-asleep. He'll wake slowly, his thrusts increasing in tempo, a hand gripping the headboard and his jaw tight as he tries not to come, waiting on me.

And maybe I should do it. Maybe I should lie here with my eyes open at last, quietly taking something from Yvette the way she now takes from me.

I shudder away from him instead, and return to myself, this pathetic husk of who I was, now sleeping in the guest bedroom upstairs while below me, he fucks his wife.

I help Marie with the morning's chores. When Yvette finally rises, she sits at the table and waits to be served. I ignore her but Marie is far too nice and asks if she can get her something. Yvette only wants coffee. She pats her stomach and says she doesn't want to get too fat with the baby. "Though God knows his father doesn't seem to mind my new curves," she says with one of those smiles I hate.

I ignore her, continuing to pound the bread on the counter with unnecessary violence. Why do I have to stay until the end of October? As far as the war is concerned, the next months are calm. *Drole de Guerre*, they call it. *The phony war*. Yvette will be eight months pregnant at that point, so I'm sure they won't want to travel to the United States yet. There is absolutely nothing I can do for them that Marie cannot. My teeth grind at the thought of remaining here, suffering the sight of Yvette's hand on Henri's, her head on his shoulder, night after night. It's not even fair to ask it of me—after the way I suffered to get back to Henri, to get his sister home to him, have I not done enough?

And yet...what if I'm wrong? Cecelia wouldn't have given me a specific date without a reason. As angry as I am, I don't want any harm to come to Henri or Marie-Therese, though I can't say the same for Yvette.

"I'm sorry he's had so little time to spend with you, Amelie," she muses, looking at me over her coffee mug. "I hope you won't take it personally. This is just a very busy time for us on the farm."

I stop what I'm doing. I haven't seen her do a goddamn thing since I arrived. "Is it a very busy time for you?" I ask pointedly.

If she understands my implication, she pretends she doesn't. "Very. Though I told Henri he must hire more men next year. It's crazy that he's working so many hours. Especially wounded the way he is."

My work stops again. Wounded? I think of the way he holds his side every time he sits and rises. I've wondered about it but didn't want to ask—it's no longer my place and he's no longer my concern. "You said he'd been shot." My voice cracks as I say the words. "Hasn't it healed?"

She waves her hand, dismissing it. "It's fine. A scratch at this point."

Relieved, I focus on the other part of what she said. "You mentioned hiring people *next* year?" I look from her to Marie. "I assumed you'd go to the United States once the baby was born."

I don't know why they haven't gone already, to be honest. There were months and months where Yvette could have traveled safely, and they must have realized the window was narrowing. Why the hell didn't they go?

Marie shifts uncomfortably, cutting a quick glance at Yvette and away. "I'm not sure what the plans are. We can't do anything at the moment."

Yvette's jaw has dropped. "Moving? From France?" She laughs. "But of course we'd never move. Whatever gave you that idea?"

I ignore her and stare at Marie. After everything we went through, solely so I could get them to safety...they're *staying*? Tears sting my eyes, and I'm not sure if they're from rage or sadness. I whip the apron over my head and march straight out the door.

I go to the fields to look for Henri. I find him, sweat on his brow though the weather is on the cool side this morning. He looks older than his age right now.

He stops working when he sees me approach. There is a moment—there is always a moment—when a certain light enters his eyes at the sight of me. As if he's forgotten about our time apart, forgotten what he's done. And I understand it because there's a moment, when I first see him, that I forget too. And then I have to live through the hurt all over again as I remember.

"Why didn't you leave?" I demand. "You should already be in the US."

His tongue darts out to tap his lip, the way it does when he's thinking through an answer...or concealing one. "I just wasn't sure about some things, and I doubt Yvette wants to go to the United States."

"Does she want to *die*? Does she want your kid to die? Does she even know you're half-Jewish?"

His jaw tightens. "Of course she knows. You think I'd conceal something

like that—"...*from my wife*. He doesn't say it, but the unspoken words ring in the air between us, and God, I hate him for them. "It was my decision, and what's done is done."

I squeeze my eyes shut. I'm so angry at him, but that's not what matters here. In four weeks, I'll be back in my own time and I can deal with my anger and sorrow then. "So, what, exactly, is your plan?" I demand.

"We can't do anything until the baby is born," he says. "And no infant should be on a crowded ship with God knows what being transmitted. Besides, I can't just abandon my country. I need to stay and fight."

I dig my hands in my hair. It's all still make-believe to them. They see the future as survivable because it's human nature to assume you'll be the exception...but World War II held far fewer exceptions than any of them can dream.

"Henri, I read about this when I was home. It's so much worse than even I knew. There will be internment camps for the Jews in France. Two big ones right outside Paris, and all those people will get deported to the concentration camps I told you about in Germany."

His eyes close. "Is there anywhere safe aside from America?"

"Switzerland, if you can get there. At least get yourself south, to what will be the free zone, and figure things out from there. It'll buy you some time."

He nods, sighing heavily. "How long do we have, before it starts?"

"The Germans will cross the Meuse on May thirteenth. After that, nothing is safe. They don't just bomb Paris. They fly low over the civilians trying to escape and shoot them as well. And then they take over and you're trapped."

"I will be eligible to take leave again in the spring," he says. "I wouldn't want to go before then anyway. I have no idea how hard it will be to find lodging, and I can't risk it with a newborn."

It's all about the baby for him. No crowded ships because of the baby. No risking a trip south because of the baby. I'm sure I'd make the same decisions in his place, but that doesn't lessen my bitterness. It's on the tip of my tongue to remind him of his carelessness, that he has created a situation that might get them all killed. His sagging shoulders and pallor hold me back. He already knows this is his fault.

Then he does something I've never seen him do: he sags against the trellis, as if he's struggling to stay upright. The color bleeds from his face.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

“Nothing,” he says, eyes closed and teeth clenched. He is holding his side.

“Is it your wound?”

“It’s fine. I’m just recovering slowly.”

“Bullshit,” I reply. I reach out and pull up his shirt before he can argue. The bandages covering his wound are soaked through—yellow, plus fresh blood as well. “Henri,” I breathe. “You realize your bandages shouldn’t look like that, don’t you?”

He shrugs and starts to pull away but I hang tight to his shirt and begin to pry the gauze loose. His wound is red and swollen, oozing. “It’s infected, you idiot,” I hiss. “How long did you let it go like this?”

“There’s work to be done,” he says.

“And who will do this work for your family next year when you’ve gone septic and died?” I demand. “Get back in bed.”

He ignores me. “I can’t. The harvest is in. This has to get done.”

My arms fold. It reminds me of last summer, when I had no leverage here, no control over the situation. Except this is serious...and I do have some control. I’m glad right now to have this anger in my heart. It makes it easier to use cruelty and threats to get what I want. No, not just easier. It makes it *enjoyable*.

“Get back in bed or I’ll tell Yvette about us.”

His head jerks toward me. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me,” I reply. “If you think things are tense now, just wait until I give her enough details about the two of us to make her stomach turn.”

He heaves a sigh and wipes at his brow again. No wonder he’s sweating, with the fever he must have from that infection. “She’s pregnant. Please... just don’t. It’ll be bad for the baby.”

As if I care about your stupid baby. I turn on my heel. “Then you’d better beat me back to the house.”

Within seconds Henri is beside me. “I have a farm to maintain,” he spits. “You can’t just blackmail me to get your way.”

I stop and laugh unhappily. “This farm will not be yours in a year, Henri!” I cry. “Don’t you get it? The Germans are coming, and they are going to take everything, and then they are going to kill you and Marie and probably this kid you’re being so precious about, and where will any of this have gotten you?”

His jaw drops, and he looks at me as if I’m a stranger. “This isn’t like

you,” he says quietly. “You’ve changed.”

“No shit,” I reply, walking again. “Try discovering that the love of your life gave up on you, three months in. See how much of yourself remains when it’s done.”

I continue inside and he follows. Marie and Yvette glance at us in shock. I’m sure we both look mutinous enough to scare almost anyone.

“Henri’s wound is infected. He has a fever.” I glare at Yvette. She slept beside him. In theory he can’t keep his hands off her. *How* could she fail to notice it? How fucking stupid is she? “I need gauze and tape and some kind of alcohol,” I tell Marie. “And we need an antibiotic, so call Dr. Nadeau.”

I push Henri toward the room. “Lie down,” I demand.

His mouth opens to object but then he glances at Yvette, standing in the doorway, and complies. I begin to unbutton his shirt.

“I’m his wife—” she begins, but when she sees the gauze soaked through, her words fall away and she turns slightly green. “It might be best for the baby if I, um, wait outside.”

I take the alcohol Marie’s handed me and soak a fresh piece of gauze with it before applying it to the wound. He stiffens, but his eyes never leave my face.

“I wasn’t trying to say you were worse,” he says through gritted teeth. “Just that you’ve changed.”

I prefer the angry Henri. The kind one makes tears spring to my eyes and I have to keep my head down so he won’t notice. “I know I’ve changed,” I reply. “And I’m definitely worse.”

Marie returns to the room. “Dr. Nadeau says there’s nothing he can do,” she tells me. “They made him send all his penicillin to the front.”

“And you believe him?”

She’s as wide-eyed as a schoolgirl. “Why would he lie?”

I shake my head. How she can have such faith in human nature after what we went through? Perhaps because she wasn’t conscious for it. I envy her that.

“He has children, and grandchildren,” I answer. “Do you really believe for a moment that he didn’t set something aside for his family?”

She blinks. “But then it’s for his family.”

“No,” I reply. “Anything he has is mine, if I want it to be. And right now, I want his goddamn antibiotics.”

If they’re unsettled by my harsh answer, neither of them say so. Marie

walks out and I continue to bandage Henri's stomach. "How do you know so much about this?" he asks.

"I don't," I reply. *But I apparently know more than your useless wife.*

I smooth the gauze down and tape it, thinking of the last time he lay in bed like this, shirtless, in daylight. I'd been making scones when he called out to me. I came to the room to see what he needed and found him much like he is right now, naked from the waist up, pants unbuttoned.

"You made it sound like you were injured," I'd said, perching beside him.

"I'm in a great deal of pain, which is similar," he replied with a grin, his hand moving between my thighs. "Let's discuss a cure."

"Perhaps you're dehydrated."

His fingers slid beneath my panties, sliding in small, torturous circles. "How fortunate for us both that you're not."

It was like that with us. He just had to touch me, and I'd abandon every other plan.

Now he is someone else's, but I want him just the same, and he's looking at me with the same expression he had that day. His eyes hungry, desperate. He is gravely ill from a gunshot wound, yet looking at me like all of this—his wound, his marriage—is as meaningless as the scones that burned that day and stunk up the house until nightfall.

"You shouldn't be looking at me like that," I tell him, rising.

"I know," he says, flinching. "I'm sorry."

I feel his eyes on me, though, until I've walked out of the room and shut the door behind me.

In the kitchen, Yvette's gaze sweeps over me, head to foot, and she gives me a tight smile. "Already done?" she asks. "Such a treat. My husband never takes a day off. I'll go see if he has need of me."

My jaw grinds. There's absolutely no question in my head what kind of *need* she means. And yet I resume my place at the table, because a part of me wants to hear it. Wants to hear his noises, wants the pain of accepting that he loves her and enjoys her as much as he did me. I want to scrape myself raw with his sounds until I finally accept that it is over with him and meant as little as it must have for him to have moved on the way he did.

But within a few seconds, Yvette returns. "You could have told me he was asleep," she says with pursed lips.

Henri couldn't possibly be asleep yet. Which means he's pretending to sleep to avoid his wife.

I feel hope begin to stir in my stomach, though I wish it would not.



LATE THAT NIGHT I walk to Dr. Nadeau's house. I could have driven but I know petrol is rationed now, so I imagine Henri wants to save it for his wife and the baby. I try to ignore the surge of irritation I feel at that thought.

Dr. Nadeau's office is in the back of his home, so I climb the fence and then peek in the window. I could time travel inside, but I'd rather not get caught in here naked if I don't have to.

I push at the window and it slides open. The mere idea of breaking into a home like this would have terrified me before. Now I just feel relieved that it's an option. It takes me no time at all to find some penicillin—the idiot didn't even take it out of his medical bag. How ill might Henri have gotten if I hadn't come for this? Would Nadeau have let him die, simply so he could hoard the drug for himself? I feel a small throb at my temples. Nadeau deserves to be punished for that lie, for his selfishness. My hand closes hard around the two bottles and syringe I'm taking. He's lucky I have other places to be right now, and he's lucky I'm leaving soon. I have a feeling that, if I stayed in 1939, this wouldn't be the last time he pissed me off.

When I return to the farm, Henri is sitting on the front steps, waiting in the moonlight. He rises when I walk up, his jaw clenched tight. "Where did you go?" he demands. "I was worried sick."

"Worried about what?" I snap. "That I might go fuck someone else the moment your back was turned? No, Henri. Only you do that."

He reaches for me and I find myself spun, pressed tight to his chest. He's holding my arms tighter than he should and I see that thing in his eyes again—pain and hunger and a touch of madness, as if he no longer cares what happens. I understand all of it. It's how I feel most of my day.

"I thought you might have left."

We're so close, closer than we've been since I arrived. His eyes flicker to my mouth and I feel that glance all the way to my bones. I want him. And I've missed him so much. Why can't I just have a little of what I came here for?

He swallows, everything in him taut and desperate, the cords of his neck straining as if he's lifting an impossible weight. And then he releases me.

“I got you penicillin,” I say, stifling a disappointment so vast it feels like it could knock me off my feet. I pull the vials from my pocket, along with a syringe.

His mouth falls open. “You stole it?”

“Well, yes, since Dr. Nadeau wasn’t offering another method, the lying bastard. Come inside so I can get this over with.”

He takes a chair at the table and I draw up the medicine. I have no idea what size dose he needs, but for tonight I decide one small syringe will be a good start. He watches me the whole time, and I’m reminded of the way he used look at me that first summer together, when we pretended to hate each other—as if I was passing by too quickly, but he was trying hard to see me anyway.

I inject the penicillin into his arm, and then drop the bottle and syringe into my pocket. “I’ll call someone in Reims tomorrow and find out the correct dosage,” I tell him.

Before I can pull away, he grabs my hand, and presses his lips to my knuckles, holding them there longer than he should. My pulse skitters in my throat at the contact, at the way it makes me long for more. It’s unfair of him to do it to me, to keep me here on this fine edge of pain and desire all the time. It would be kinder if he’d just tell me he didn’t want me. Kindest of all if he’d told me, right from the start, that he just didn’t care enough.

I pull my hand from his grasp and walk up to my room. And then, just for a moment, I let my lips rest where his did, on my knuckles. It’s almost as if I can still feel him there.

The next time I see Henri, walking into the kitchen mid-day to tell us the hired hands have arrived, he looks like his old self again. I feel an odd sort of joy at the sight of him healthy once more, and when his eyes find mine across the room it's a struggle not to smile.

"When, exactly, do you meet your musician?" asks Yvette suddenly. I'd forgotten she was even in the room and my gaze returns to the apples I'm peeling.

"A few weeks."

Her mouth pinches. "I only ask because you're sleeping in the baby's room, you know."

"We'd never discussed having him sleep in there," says Henri sharply.

Yvette's laughter is forced. "Well, where else would he sleep, Henri? Would you have him stay in the barn all winter instead?"

"I assumed he'd be in with us at night," Henri argues, "so we can hear him."

Yvette waves her hand. "No, no. I'm going to need to rest. Babies should learn to get through the night on their own anyway."

"*Babies*, perhaps," says Henri. "Newborns, no."

I don't enjoy their minor squabble as much as I'd have expected. If anything, it only makes them seem more married than they already did.

"I'll be gone by then," I tell her. "You don't need to worry."

Henri's jaw is tight and even Marie looks unhappy. "We want you to stay," she says softly, casting a small, scolding glance at Yvette, who seems to neither notice nor care.

I don't reply. Instead I rise, set the peeled apples on the counter and go outside to help with the harvest. It seems kinder than reminding them all that I am desperate to leave.

All afternoon I work alongside Marie and Henri and the help. I try to focus on filling my basket, try to forget that this is the last time I will do this with them. It would probably be the last time anyway. There's no chance they'll still be here this time next year; not like this, anyway.

"You should be resting."

My head jerks up to find Henri standing there, casting a long shadow over me. His voice is gentle but firm.

"I like being outside," I tell him.

"You're pushing yourself too hard," he says. "Sit on the porch if you want to be outside. Not this."

He crouches beside me and reaches for the shears I hold in my hand. I cling to them. "Don't worry," I tell him. "I'll be out of your hair as soon as I'm able."

His face falls. "You can't possibly think that's what I want," he says, his eyes searching mine.

I avert my gaze. "If it's not, it should be. You're starting a family, remember?"

He sighs and after a moment, he rises. "Yes, I remember," he says. "It's a little hard to forget."



WE EAT a dinner of cheese and bread and fruit from the orchard, plus the last of the ham, because Yvette did nothing useful while we were working.

"It was so dull here all day," says Yvette. The three of us are so bone-tired it's hard to dredge up a response. Or perhaps it's just that all the responses that fly to my lips involve ways she could have entertained herself, while perhaps relieving Marie and me of some work.

"It's apt to be like this the rest of the week," says Marie. "I picked up some books at the library. Perhaps one of them will appeal to you."

Yvette sighs. "Poor Marie. Your life here has been so quiet you hardly know what people do for fun." She reaches for Henri's hand. "You know what we should do this weekend? Go to Paris. We could stay in a hotel, take

a mini honeymoon at last. Amelie and Marie don't mind, do you girls?"

Henri's eyes glance up for the first time through the entire meal. They flicker to me before they return to his plate. "No," he says flatly.

"But why?" she pouts.

"Because it's the harvest and I'll be working all weekend," he says between his teeth, sliding his hand away from hers. "This is what life on a farm is like."

I see her eyes flash before she pins her anger beneath a strained smile. "Well, at least there's the dance on the twelfth."

The date catches my attention. Cecelia made such a big deal out of October 12th, the day I was supposed to arrive. As if something monumental occurs on that date. Is it something the dance will set in motion, perhaps?

Henri's gaze returns to me before it goes back to his plate. "I doubt we'll attend that either."

"Not attend?" she gasps. "But we have to! And it's sponsored by the church, so there's that. Let poor Marie and Amelie find some nice young men while I have one last hurrah."

I glance at Marie, poor Marie. Still so in love with Father Edouard and still so unwilling to admit it. Her face has been alight since the word *church* was uttered. If she'd bend an inch the poor man would give up his collar and take up farming in the blink of an eye.

"Yes, let's go," I say firmly.

"You see?" cries Yvette. "Amelie is the guest and it's what she wants, so it's settled."

I don't want to be on the same side as Yvette for anything. It makes me wish I'd disagreed. Yvette, however, smiles at me as if we are now friends. And as soon as Marie and Henri go outside, she corners me in the kitchen and gives me a hug.

"Thank you for making Henri see reason," she says. "I'm going crazy here."

I shrug, turning away from her. Thinking *I didn't do it for you*.

"You have so much influence over him," she continues. "But I guess you've known the family a long time. Did you ever meet Henri's mother?"

I'm slow to answer. I don't know what Marie and Henri have told her and it feels like a trap of some kind, but captivity has left me suspicious of everyone.

"Yes," I reply cautiously.

“What was she like?” she asks. “Henri gets distressed when I ask about her. Her death is such a sore subject with him, even now.”

“I’m not sure anyone fully recovers from the death of a parent,” I reply mildly, hoping she drops it.

“I want him to give me her wedding band and he will not,” she says. “He says it’s an heirloom and should go to Marie.”

Ah, this is what she’s after. “I doubt the ring was anything to write home about,” I reply. “They married in the early 1900s and had no money.”

“His father had a Cartier watch. Henri wore it the night we met. You know how much a Cartier watch costs? Besides, you don’t keep trinkets in a safe deposit box,” she argues, her voice laced with irritation.

My head jerks up as a sudden memory sweeps over me.

Just days before I left for 1918, Henri went to Paris. I’d asked if I could come and he’d said no, that it would be a dull trip and also a dangerous one, since part of the day involved being around the unseemly sort of men who forge documents and procure things—by which I’d assumed he meant condoms—from the black market.

Marie asked him, grinning, if he’d be going by the safe deposit box, and his face lit up with a sweet, boyish smile, quickly suppressed.

“Yes,” he’d told her. “I thought I might.”

It could have meant anything, but even at the time it felt odd. Even at the time I’d asked what was in the safe deposit box and ...what was it he said to me?

That’s for me to know and you to find out.

Was Henri going to give me the ring? And if so, why is he refusing to give it to his wife?



YVETTE IS ALREADY IN BED, after a long day of doing nothing, when Marie comes into the kitchen with the red dress in hand.

“That won’t fit,” I tell her. I’ve gained weight since I arrived and was glad to see the return of my cleavage, but I’m still much thinner than I was the last time. “And I don’t think I’m going anyway.” I’m not spending the whole damn night watching Henri care for his pregnant wife, watching Yvette with her proprietary hands all over him.

“Oh, but you must,” urges Marie. “It won’t be the same without you. The dress can be taken in.”

“I’m just not in the mood to—”

“Henri won’t feel comfortable leaving you here alone,” she says, wincing. “If you don’t go, none of us go.”

“Why would he care if I’m here alone?” I ask.

Her smile is brief, and sad. “Because he’s scared you’ll leave.”

It makes little sense, but I don’t push her on it. I try on the dress and she pins it along the sides and the hips so that it skims the curve of my waist rather than obscuring it entirely. I’m standing on a chair while she touches up the hem when Henri walks in.

He stands in the threshold of the door with a look of pain and want on his face, and I wonder if he’s remembering the last time I wore it. That night when he came up behind me in this dress, his breath along the shell of my ear, and told me I was exquisite. When he told me he’d been worried about what would happen that night.

What did you think would happen? I’d asked him.

That everyone would discover a secret I wanted to keep for myself, he replied.

Our gaze locks and the memories of it swirl between us, and then I jump from the chair without a word and go to my room, where I weep into my pillow, still wearing the dress, the pins digging into my skin.

I cry for all the moments in our past that meant nothing. How deeply I felt them all and how badly I wish I had never left. I suppose I should consider myself lucky to learn just how shallow his feelings for me actually were, but I’m not. If someone would allow me to go back to those days, to return to my ignorance, I’d accept the offer gladly.

On the morning of the dance, Yvette and even Marie are aflutter, girlish and giggling.

I am not. What could possibly change in the next few hours? I admit to myself, reluctantly, that I'd hoped the change might have to do with Yvette. People died in childbirth in 1939, still. Especially women in the country. I've tried not to actively wish for it, though there's part of me that would like to. But I did, at the very least, wonder if it might fall in my lap.

But Yvette is the very picture of health. Still not due for six weeks, and ready to dance. So, what exactly is coming tonight that somehow requires me to be here?

Preparing for it seems to eat up the bulk of the day. Marie does my hair and I let her apply cosmetics before I start work on hers. She's glowing tonight. Perhaps what *should* happen is that I tell Father Edouard to open his eyes. But even that wouldn't require that I stay another two weeks.

I descend the stairs when we're finally ready, and my eyes go to Henri, so beautiful in his suit—the shirt crisp and white, the jacket straining around his broad shoulders. And he is looking at me too, as if he's helpless to do otherwise, as if there is no one else in the room. It's not until Yvette coughs politely that I realize she's here as well, also in red, and looking none too pleased to see me.

"Poor Amelie," she says. "You're truly skin and bones, aren't you? And tan as a day laborer. But don't worry. Someone will still dance with you, I'm sure. Henri, who's that friend of yours always going on about wanting a wife? Gerard? Will he be there?"

Henri's jaw sets. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he says, walking out of the house.

I sigh, internally. As bad as the last dance was, this one is shaping up to be worse.



THE DANCE IS HELD in the same mansion where, once upon a time, I watched Henri flirt with Claudette Loison. It's still daylight when we arrive, and it seems as if the entire town is walking there. I raise a brow at Marie. "Are we the only ones who drove?" I ask.

She cuts a quick glance at Yvette. "Most people are saving their rations in case they need to flee."

Henri parks right in front of the mansion, and together the group of us enter the ballroom, where there's no sign of war or deprivation. The mood is festive, and there's a glass in every hand.

"I can't wait to dance," squeals Yvette, squeezing Henri's hand.

Henri and I have only danced once, really. In the moonlight, while he hummed a tune next to my ear. *If anyone comes out here, they'll see you dancing with your cousin*, I'd said.

He'd smiled at me then, a smile I'd come to know well, once we became intimate. *I'm sure you realize they think we're doing a lot more than that*, he'd replied.

The memory steals the breath from my chest and I turn, pushing through the crowd to escape them, only to find myself face-to-face with Andre Beauvoir.

"I would like to apologize," he says.

I stiffen. I'm not interested in Andre's apologies. A man who was completely sober when he shoved his hand up my skirt and then called me a whore has not *suddenly realized* he behaved unbecomingly. He's just realized he should have been smarter about it.

As much as I'd like to offer him a few choice words, though, and as much as I'd like to tell him that I'm now capable of far worse than swinging a crutch at him to defend myself—I can't make things worse for Henri and Marie. Andre's family employs much of the town, and with the Germans coming, he'll have even more to hold over the Durands' heads than he did

before.

“What I did was unforgivable,” he adds. “I was misinformed about you and your cousin, but that’s no excuse. I just don’t want there to be any ill will between us, as I understand you’ve decided to stay.”

You’re so full of shit, Andre. It’s only for the Durands that I offer him a tight smile. “No harm done,” I reply. “I appreciate the apology. But I’m definitely not staying.”

His gaze flickers to Henri and Yvette—who both watch us. Henri’s eyes are so dark they look black from where I stand.

“Not everything was as you thought it would be?” he asks.

Yvette’s hand rests on her stomach and she smiles up at Henri. It’s a full-wattage smile, but it strikes me, suddenly, how normal she is. A pretty girl, certainly, but without the advantages Marie and I share. She doesn’t glow when she smiles. A man wouldn’t slow to look at her or whip his head back as she passed. It should make me feel better, but instead does the opposite. After all of Henri’s assurances that normalcy was overrated and that there was nothing wrong with my gift, she’s the one he chose. Not me.

“It’s exactly as I thought it would be.” I can hear the sound of my teeth sliding against each other. It’s exactly what I should have expected. My mother taught me countless times that no one could truly love me as I am, and it turns out she was right.

With another forced smile I go to the bar. The gift that saved my life, the one that keeps me from getting drunk—it’s not absolute. I was still drugged in 1918, just not as much as the others. So perhaps drunkenness isn’t an impossibility for me.

I’ll just need to work a little harder at it than anyone else.

“Four shots of whiskey, please,” I tell the bartender.

“Make it eight,” says a voice behind me.

Luc Barbier stands there. I met him at the last town dance, where he flirted and bought me a drink and tried to convince me to run away to Paris with him. He hasn’t changed much in the past year but he looks older—in a good way. His boyish charm is still there, but it’s a bit more roguish now, and weary.

His hair is shorter and there’s a grim determination behind his smile that wasn’t present back when we met. “You’ve changed,” I comment.

He holds my eye for only a moment. “I enlisted. I’m home on leave after six months defending the Maginot Line.” He pulls one of the shots off the bar

and raises it. "What are we drinking to? The reunion of old friends? Or the blessings of fertility?" he adds with a nod toward Henri and Yvette.

"All of the above," I reply, slamming the first shot and proceeding to the second.

"I won't even have to try to get you drunk," he says. "You're doing my work for me."

I look at Luc, who was handsome before and is extremely handsome now. I gave myself to Henri without a second thought, under the impression that it was special somehow, and he only waited three months to replace me. So, perhaps I shouldn't wait another year to replace him. Perhaps *special* is a myth that serves no purpose.

"Who says you'd have to get me drunk?" I reply.

His eyes sweep over my face, slowly. His lashes are long, and his smile is languid and sad all at once. As if he knows, like I do, that the end is coming, and recognizes the only thing to be done for it is to live while you still can. His hand goes to my hip, something slightly possessive in the press of his fingertips.

"I don't actually take advantage of drunk women," he says. "And I don't take advantage of heartbroken ones, either."

I shrug. I like him better for how unexpectedly honorable he's being right now, even if it's not exactly part of my plan. "Your loss," I reply, throwing back the third shot.

"Not so fast," he says. "Give me a chance to fix your heart first. Let's go to Paris."

"How is Paris going to fix my heart?"

He grins. "Drinking and dancing in the world's most beautiful city can cure more problems than you might think."

Luc's friends Jean and Marc slap him on the back. "You know he only enlisted because beautiful American girls love soldiers," says Jean. "Don't let him fool you with his idealistic nonsense."

"You're talking to my future wife, Jean," Luc replies. "Let me keep the magic alive through our honeymoon." He winks at me. "Paris?"

The whiskey is beginning to work its magic. I don't feel like I've had three shots, but I feel like I had one and it's a good start. And no one said I had to remain in Saint Antoine for whatever Cecelia is so worried about. Except Henri has been watching from across the room the entire time, and right now his jaw is clenched tight. I've got no doubt he'll try to stop me, and

I'm not in the mood for his paternalistic bullshit tonight. I glance behind me at a door that is painted so that it appears to be part of the room.

"Why not?" I reply. "But I might need some help getting out of here without an argument from my family. You three go out the front and I'll meet you."

"You're going to make a perfect wife," he says with a grin, and my heart folds in on itself. Because Henri said those words once too, and he apparently meant them no more than Luc does now. Perhaps it's time I came around to this way people have of saying things they don't mean. If I'd realized sooner that this is how the world works, I'd be so much better off right now.



I FIND Luc and his friends within two minutes of exiting the hidden door and am quickly shuffled into his car. "How do you have the petrol for this?" I ask. "I thought everyone had to save it."

He gives me another of those smiles of his. "I have my methods."

Jean leans between us from the back seat. "He means he has his father's checkbook and can buy whatever he wants on the black market."

Luc merely laughs. "Yes. That's the bulk of my method."

Jean and Marc try to open a bottle of champagne out the window and I glance at Luc. What kind of man is wealthy enough to afford things no one else can and decides to enlist in the military anyway? Shouldn't he be like Andre, coasting on the family's success and assuming it puts him above the rest of us?

"How did your family feel about you enlisting?" I ask.

I see a hint of that sorrow in his eyes again. "My father passed away last fall," he says. "He was never especially proud of me in this world. I can only hope he'll become proud of me in the next."

I sigh. Luc joined up out of guilt, but that's the kind of guilt that will get him killed, and I'd like to see him survive what's coming.

"There will be lots of chances to prove you deserved his esteem," I say. "Don't blow it all on this."

He glances at me. "I feel I should say the same to you," he says. "I can't imagine why Henri chose Yvette. If it's any consolation, I feel certain he's regretting it now."

I'm inclined to agree with him, but it doesn't change anything. "He's not regretting it enough for my liking."

His mouth tips up at the corner. "Keep spending time with me." His palm spreads over the back of my hand for only a moment. "I can assure you we'll make him regret it more."



WE ARRIVE AT LE TIGRE, a bar deep in Montparnasse a little over an hour later. It's a relief. Twenty years may have passed, but the idea of being anywhere near Montmartre, where I was taken captive, terrifies me.

Looking around, you'd never know there was a war going on. Women are dressed more flamboyantly than ever, and most of them carry strange satin bags or boxes with them. "What are those things?" I ask Luc as we walk to the table. "I was here only a year ago. Handbags that large can't have suddenly become fashionable."

He looks at them and shakes his head. "Those are gas masks. It's become all the rage among rich women to carry them in matching bags for exorbitant amounts of money."

I sigh. "They should be saving every penny for what's coming."

"What do you mean?" he asks. "This phony war won't continue much longer."

"Your country just lost a decisive battle and went running home with its tail between its legs. You can't still be under the impression the Germans aren't a threat?"

"We were trying to punish them for what they did to Poland and we lost. But they'll never get into France. The Maginot Line is well defended, and they can't possibly get through Ardenne. The terrain is too difficult."

It's the very philosophy that will allow the Germans to invade without obstacle next spring. I'd like to tell him that, but I can't, and it's a reminder that there is a vital piece of me he can never know, much as my last boyfriend could not. That was the beauty of being with Henri, or at least part of it—I didn't have to hide from him.

He hands me a glass of champagne and I drink it to the bottom and place it on the counter.

"I think you should teach me to dance," I say.

“I’m happy to teach you anything you want to learn,” he says with an intentionally lecherous grin, which makes me laugh. Luc may not be everything I ever wanted, but he makes me happy, and it’s been so long since I felt happy that I barely remember the experience.

We each finish another flute of champagne and then he pulls me to the dance floor, painstakingly teaching me how to do the Lindy Hop. Henri once suggested I should know the dance because it was named after Charles Lindbergh, and the memory—even though we were fighting at the time—saddens me. It led to what followed, when he came up behind me, his breath at my ear, and finally let me know what was in his heart.

Did it mean anything? Did he say the same sort of thing to Yvette a few months later? Somehow, even after what he’s done, I’m incapable of believing it.

Luc lifts my chin. “Where’d you go, Amelie?” he asks. I see pity in his eyes.

I smile too broadly. “Sorry. I’m easily distracted. Show me again?”

We dance, and it feels as though if I can keep moving, I can stave off my sadness. But once we sit, it returns. Despite all the champagne and the shots, I am painfully sober again, and desperate for some new answer. Could Luc be it? He’d sleep with me tonight if I asked it of him, I’m sure. Why shouldn’t I? I saved myself all those years for nothing, for a man who didn’t wait three months for me.

“The next time we come I’ll teach you to tango,” Luc says.

I shake my head. “I leave in two weeks.”

His hand covers mine. “Stay. Give me a chance. I can make you forget him.”

My eyes flutter closed. It’s late. Something Cecelia wants badly is on the cusp of happening.

Is it this? I can’t have children, so she isn’t my daughter...but do I raise her with Luc? None of it makes sense, but maybe it doesn’t need to. Everything seems meaningless at this point. Maybe I should give into it and have some meaningless fun with a man who isn’t lying to me about it to make it happen.

The words *why don’t we go somewhere private* rest on the tip of my tongue...and fall silent when my eyes open again. Henri looms over the table, glowering at the two of us as if we’ve been caught naked together.

“I came to bring you home,” he says, his jaw stiff as steel, his mouth flat.

I've been through too much to be treated like a child with a curfew by anyone, but especially by him. "You came all the way here for that?" I ask incredulously. "I'll ride home with Luc."

A muscle twitches just beneath his cheekbone. "Amelie," he says softly. "Please."

I thought there was nothing he could say to sway me, and yet he's found it. That single word, *please*, is imbued with so much desperation, so much pain, that I'm unable to deny him.

I'm probably not the *meaningless fun* kind of girl anyway. I turn to Luc. "I'm sorry. I should go."

He grabs my hand. "I'm here when you've figured this out."

I lean down and brush my lips against his cheek. "Thank you," I whisper, and then I turn and follow Henri outside the bar.

The car sits just down the street. He holds the door for me and I scold him as I climb in. "I can't believe you wasted the petrol on this trip. After the baby comes, God only knows where you might need to drive, and drive quickly. Why are you even here?"

He slides into the driver's seat. "That's a fast crowd," he says. "I'm sure it seems innocent now, but they do things I don't want you exposed to."

My fists clench. His overprotective bullshit was bad enough back before he'd ever hurt me. Now, it's unbearable.

"What kind of things?" I ask. "Will one of them take my virginity, talk about marrying me and then knock someone else up instead? No. Only you sink that low. I'm going back."

My hand goes to the door but he catches my arm. "Sarah," he whispers. "Please."

I jerk away from him. "I told you not to use my name again, and I don't need your help. Have you forgotten what I lived through over the past year? A situation like this is laughable by contrast. And I'm capable of disappearing at will, remember?"

His eyes narrow. "Yes, turning invisible in front of the men from my town is just the kind of attention my family needs."

"Is that why you're here?" I demand. "Because you're worried I'll *embarrass* you?!"

His shoulders sag. "No." He sighs heavily, staring at his lap. "I'm here because the idea of you with one of them tortures me. And I know how unfair that it is, under the circumstances. Marie told me so, a hundred times before I

left. But I've never claimed to be a saint."

"Tortures you? How could that be true? You're married, for God's sake."

He glares at me. "Do you really think this marriage of mine could possibly change how I feel about you?"

"If you felt *enough*," I reply, my voice choked, "you'd never have married her in the first place."

"You're wrong," he says. "What I told you was true, about finding your skeleton, how it destroyed me. What I didn't tell you is what happened afterward."

I wait, and my heart begins to thunder in my chest. The shame of whatever it was weighs so heavily on him I can see it like a visible scar.

"I put Marie up in a hotel," he says. "And then proceeded to get so drunk that I don't know what bar I was in or when I left. But I thought I'd found you. I remember that. I remember believing I'd found you—out having a drink in Paris. I was enraged. I couldn't believe you'd been in Paris all along, hadn't even told us you were safe. But you apologized and I was so happy that I couldn't stay mad. And you kept begging me to forgive you. I remember that. You kept saying, 'show me you forgive me.'"

My pulse is in my ears now and I stop breathing entirely.

"And then I woke up beside Yvette. She's never admitted to trying to trick me that night, and I was so drunk that I can't be sure enough to accuse her of it. But two months later, she came to the farm and told me she was pregnant."

The image of it hurts so much I press my hands to my heart. "So you married her," I whisper.

He reaches out and slips his fingers through mine. "What else could I have done?"

I can think of several alternatives, but they are nothing he'd have ever considered because he's honorable, and because he will always do the right thing, no matter how much it hurts him. I love that about him.

"Are you even sure the child is yours?"

He stares straight ahead. "Only time will tell. But I didn't even know her last name until we filled out the marriage certificate. We'd never even shared a meal. I knew nothing."

I wish I'd known. I've been so broken up over this, and I'll remain broken, but knowing he cared might have made it bearable, at least. "Why didn't you tell me this when I first came here?" I ask. "I've spent *weeks*

believing you just moved on.”

His tongue darts out to his upper lip. “Because she is still my wife. It seemed...disloyal...to admit that I don’t love her, and that this marriage is not what I’d have chosen.”

And yet, he’s never going to leave her. He’s never going to abandon this child that may or may not be his, and all I’m doing here is causing trouble. And making my own situation worse. Was I seriously considering sleeping with Luc just moments before? Sleeping with him and *remaining* in this time instead of my own? It was insanity.

“I’m going to go home,” I tell him. “This situation...it’s only going to cause us both pain.”

“I thought you were staying until the end of the month,” he says. His voice rasps, a quiet plea.

I shake my head. “There’s no point. I don’t know why Cecelia insisted I stay, but nothing good can come of it.”

He closes his eyes. “Will you ever come back?”

There’s a fiction we tell ourselves when we’re saying goodbye to someone we love. We always pretend there will be another time, because it would be too painful to acknowledge it’s the last. But I want to feel the pain of my answer, because I think it might haunt me less to get it out of the way right now. “No,” I tell him. “I won’t be coming back.”

The ride home is mostly silent, beautiful and also painful. One last chance to be with him, knowing what we had before wasn’t all a lie, and knowing it’s going to end. “What are you thinking?” he asks as we turn onto the side road that leads to the farm.

I lean my face against the window. It’s surprisingly cool. “I wasn’t thinking, really. I was just pretending this is how it would always be.” His hand reaches for mine before he realizes what he’s doing and pulls it back.

“It’s what I’ve done every time we’re alone,” he says.

He turns toward the farm and we both see it at the same time. It’s late, but every light in the house is on. We exchange a shocked glance. Something is very wrong.

Marie-Therese is out the door the moment we climb from the car, tugging at her hair the same way Henri does when he’s beyond upset. “Mon Dieu! I *told* you not to go after her!” she screams. “The baby is coming. Go get the doctor!”

He takes one last glance at me, and then he is gone.



INSIDE YVETTE IS SCREAMING. Not that she ever struck me as the stoic type, but her face is lined with agony right now. “Make it stop,” she begs, again and again. She hardly seems to notice us, but when her eyes fall on me she flails in the bed. “Get her out! I don’t want her in here.”

I walk from the room, pacing in front of the windows, waiting for the sight of Henri’s car. I’m torn. I can’t wish ill upon a child, especially not a child of Henri’s. But the baby is early, and I’m not sure how he’ll fare here, without an incubator and oxygen and whatever else preemies need, and if the baby doesn’t survive...would Henri stay married?

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to think it, trying not to allow that secret hopeful piece of me to exist. I need to be better than that.

“Shouldn’t we take her to a hospital?” I ask Marie when she steps out of the room. “The baby is six weeks early. You’re not equipped for that here.”

“A hospital?” Marie asks with an unhappy laugh. “The nearest one is in Reims. Even if we had enough petrol to get there, I doubt we’d make it in time.”

My jaw tightens. “I didn’t ask him to come after me, if that’s what you’re trying to imply.”

She sighs. “Of course not. You’ve done so much for us. And you’re doing so much by remaining under these circumstances. It’s him. Henri. He’s about to be a father. He can’t go running off to Paris after a girl like a schoolboy.”

Which he did because of me. The birth must be why Cecelia insisted I stay...but why? As far as I can tell, I’ve only made things worse.

Henri arrives moments later with the doctor, who goes into Yvette’s room with Marie and shuts the door behind them. Henri turns to me, with the weight of the world on his shoulders. “It’s too soon,” he says, slumping into the chair beside mine and placing his head in his hands. “The child won’t live.”

“He might,” I reply. But all I can think of is JFK’s first son, who will be born more than a decade from now, six weeks early, and will not survive because his lungs aren’t developed.

“I’ve made such a mess of things,” he whispers. “I’m not sure how it’s possible for one man to make as many mistakes as I have, and to potentially ruin as many lives without trying.”

My heart twists. Only a few years ago, he was at Oxford with a

magnificent future ahead of him. He's tried to do the right thing, again and again, even with Yvette, and his life has detonated instead. I live in a time where every teenager and college kid expects good things, and even expects the bad to be followed by good. But how can I promise Henri it will all work out when I know what lies ahead?

My hands reach out to surround his. "Don't lose hope just yet," I tell him. It's the best I can do.

It seems only a few minutes later that Yvette's cries stop, and, after a half-second of silence, we hear it: a tiny, fledging wail, warbling and pathetic. Henri jumps to his feet, and rushes to the door. When it opens, Marie is smiling. "You have a daughter," she says with tears in her eyes. Henri's eyes hold mine for a moment, scared and hopeful and apologetic before he follows her into the room.

I breathe deep, brushing a hand over my dress as I rise and go to the family room. This is a time for family, and I'm not family. Now, especially. Marie and Henri share a blood link to Yvette. Their loyalties will be to her and the baby. It's how it should be, and maybe that makes this the perfect time to leave. No drama, no weeping goodbyes. A chapter that ends just as a far more exciting one opens.

My chest hurts at the thought of it, but I wanted to know what it was like to love someone so deeply that it felt like I couldn't breathe when he walked into the room, and I got it. I will never have this again, I know. But I had it once—how many people can say that?

I'm writing them a note when Dr. Nadeau and Henri exit the room, Henri carrying a tiny white bundle so small it hardly seems possible there might be a baby inside. I walk toward them gingerly.

"A girl," he says to me with awed eyes, so full of love already for this tiny thing. His life has moved on, as it should. And if I care about him at all, I need to let him have this moment, not ruin it with my bitterness.

I force myself to smile, though all I really want to do is weep. "Congratulations. Do you have a name?"

He shakes his head. "Perhaps Rose, after our mother, but I have to discuss it with Yvette when she wakes."

Doctor Nadeau hoists his bag and frowns. "She is very early, and very small. You'll need to be extremely careful with her if she's to survive the next few months. Constant tiny meals. Her stomach is too small to hold enough yet. And if she stops breathing, use the pump I gave Marie-Therese.

She'll show you how to use it."

The possibility that she might stop breathing is enough to make me take a step backward. In spite of all the death I witnessed in 1918, it's not those women I picture...it's my sister, being carried out of the lake. And I don't want to live through that again. I don't want to be at fault if it all goes wrong.

Henri holds the bundle out to me and I take another step back. "I'd better not."

"Nonsense," he replies. "She's barely two kilos. I think you'll manage." He pushes her at me again so I really have no choice. I curve my arms beneath her inconsequential little body, holding her gingerly as a grenade I might drop, and as desperate to get rid of her as I would a grenade as well. I bounce her in my arms for a second or two and try to hand her back but he doesn't take her. "I have to drive the doctor home. Can you watch her just until Marie is done getting Yvette cleaned up?"

My mouth opens to refuse but I can't think of an excuse. They leave and I take a chair in the living room. Reluctantly, I pull back the blankets from her face, though I'd rather not see her. She has dark hair like Henri's but otherwise I can't tell which of them she resembles. Her mouth purses and makes a sucking motion. I find my eyes stinging as I watch her. I loathe Yvette, and I strongly suspect that this pregnancy was not an accident, on her end—but this baby is innocent and when she opens her tiny slits of eyes to look up at me, I see faith there. This baby trusts me to care for her, to keep her safe. In spite of all the evil things I've done, and wanted and thought, she believes I will keep her warm and safe and fed. And she is right—I would. Holding her reminds me that there is good inside of me along with the bad. That the good is capable of winning, and I want it to. That rage inside me has been satisfying at times, but ultimately, I'd rather feel peaceful. I'd rather be a person worth this tiny human's faith.

When Henri returns, he takes the chair beside mine. "I'm sorry. I thought Marie would be out by now."

I shake my head. "It's fine." I hand her back to him and the two of us stare at her. "She is what will make this all worthwhile, you know."

He swallows, glancing from me to her. "I hope I'm able to believe that one day."

"Can you hire a nurse to help you, for the next few weeks?" I ask. "Since she's so small? If people in town ask where you got the money you can tell them I left it for you."

He stills. “You’re not going to stay? I thought maybe this...I thought you might change your mind.”

I stare at my lap. “You have a family now. You *are* a family. My presence just makes things worse. But I’ll check on your daughter throughout her life, and make sure she has what she needs.”

His head hangs but he doesn’t argue with me. When he yawns a few minutes later, I take the baby from him and cradle her. It feels natural to me already.

“I want to keep this in my head forever,” he says, watching us. Our eyes hold. I want to hold it in my head too. *This is what it would have been like to have a child with him.*

Marie stumbles out of the bedroom just then, her clothes painted with blood and yawning. “How is my niece?” she asks, smiling down at the little face.

“Excellent,” I reply. “But getting hungry I think.”

Marie swoops her up with graceful efficiency. “Let’s go see your maman, lovely Cecelia.”

Henri’s brow shoots up. “What did you call her?” he asks.

Marie smiles knowingly. “Oh, the baby? Yes. Yvette has named her Cecelia.”

He and I stare at each other, dumbfounded as it all comes together. This tiny beautiful thing in Marie’s arms, this child who isn’t yet five pounds, is the woman who has saved me twice. And someday she’ll be the richest woman in France.

“Is it the same person?” Henri asks incredulously.

I never, in a million years, would have put it together before, but I know that it is. “She knew you. She knew me as Amelie. She knew about Marie and what we could do. Except I—I don’t understand. She knew where to look for me based on my stories. Like the hospital...she came to save me from it.”

“She wouldn’t have heard them from me,” he says quietly, placing his hand on my knee. “Which means you told them to her yourself.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible,” I whisper. “I’m leaving. I’ll be gone in a few hours.”

Marie stands, holding Cecelia, and her eyes go to Henri’s hand, which still rests on my knee. “Henri,” she says, “you should probably go see your wife. Take her the baby, will you?”

He looks at her blankly for a moment, as if he’d forgotten she was there,

or forgotten, perhaps, that there was a wife in all this. And then he rises, gently fixing Cecelia's blankets before he carries her away.

Marie takes his place on the couch. I expect to be chastised—I shouldn't have left for Paris tonight, and Henri and I shouldn't have been sitting the way we were. But instead, she squeezes my hand. "Don't you see?" she asks. "Something must occur in the next two weeks that changes your relationship with Cecelia. Something that changes the course of your life and hers."

"How is that possible?" I ask. "In two weeks she still won't be talking. I'll look out for her, Marie. You know I will. But from a distance. There's nothing I'll be willing to do for her in two weeks that I won't be willing to do now."

"Obviously there is, because two weeks somehow turns her into a person you *know*. A person you tell your stories to, who knows you loved her father and he loved you. And she's not that to you yet."

Marie has no idea what she's asking. That staying here means feeling like an outsider while waiting on Yvette hand and foot, means watching as Henri becomes a family with someone other than me. "I can live without telling these stories, believe me."

"You might live, but will she?" Marie asks. "Tell me something: if you return to your time, and there is no more Cecelia Boudon...if she is poor, or broken, or worse? If she's dead, you can't fix it. What then?"

I can't imagine what difference two weeks could make. It's not as if Cecelia and I will be having any life-changing heart-to-hearts during that time. But can I guarantee it won't change things? No.

I sigh. "Fine. I'll stay."

She squeezes my hand once more. "Thank you. For everything. You saved my life, and now perhaps you'll save my niece's life too. I think there was a reason God brought you to us. Maybe this is it."

God didn't bring me, I think. I brought myself. And I'd be better off if I hadn't.

Cecelia is a sweet baby. Taking care of her is lovely and painful at the same time. No matter what Marie believes, I'm not going to be a permanent part of this child's life. She's another thing I will love and let go of, like the infants in 1918, like my sister, like Henri.

She eats and sleeps and does little else her first day of life, but she wants to be held. Always. The second we lay her in the crib Henri built she wails, and none of us—not Henri, not Marie, not myself—has the stomach for it. Yvette, similarly, also sleeps all day, and when she's awake and not being showered with attention, she too wails. She wants praise and coddling. She wants food and wet washcloths. She does not seem to want much to do with her daughter, as far as I can tell, but who am I to judge? I'm not the one who just shoved an entire human out of a small hole.

The next afternoon I get the apple and cheese Yvette has requested, and force myself to say the polite words that feel like grit in my mouth as they exit. "Congratulations. She's beautiful."

She smiles at me with eyes that remain cruel and distant. "That's kind of you to say. It must be so hard for you."

I plant my feet to the floor, bracing myself. "What must be hard for me?"

"Seeing how Henri has moved on."

My stomach sours. I grab the door frame for dear life. *I could end you in moments, I think. Just give me a reason.*

But then I think of Cecelia. Of how she looks at me and how I feel when I hold her, as if all that is good and right exists in her, and also in me. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

“Of course you do. It’s obvious you were in love with him. Do you think I missed those calf eyes you make each time he walks through the room? And your visit here was all for nothing, wasn’t it? Because he chose his child over you.”

“What you’re saying,” I reply, my voice deceptively soft, like the hiss of a snake, “is that *you* aren’t even a part of the equation. He didn’t choose me. But he didn’t choose *you* either.”

Her smug smile grows more strained. “Well, he’s mine either way, and you’re alone and pathetic.”

I laugh. “That may be true, but when a man marries me, it won’t be out of pity and obligation. So don’t assume you’re any less pathetic than I am.”

I turn and walk out the door, certain my words hurt. We both know they’re true.

“I won’t wait on her again,” I tell Marie as I walk through the kitchen and return to Cecelia’s crib.

Every day with Cece makes it harder to leave. I change her diaper, thinking I'd be so much better off if I'd left before she was born—before I realized what it was like to care for Henri's child—when I'm suddenly pulled from my selfish thoughts. Cece's chest rises and falls in a way I don't think it did before. Is she breathing faster than she was? Why am I noticing it so much more now?

I continue to change the diaper, distracted now. My thumb stings as the safety pin jabs into my skin, but better me than her. And the more I watch, the more certain I am that something is wrong. I call for Marie and she comes, looking as exhausted as I feel. Neither of us has had more than a few hours of sleep in days.

"Look at her," I say, my jaw set hard.

Marie glances at Cecelia, then me. She is gray with fatigue and her face doesn't change. "I don't understand," says Marie. "She looks fine."

"No," I breathe. In the span of five seconds I've gone from uncertain to convinced. "Her chest is sinking in when she breathes. It's concave. It wasn't concave before."

Marie bites her lip. "Perhaps it's just that she's taking bigger breaths as she gets stronger?"

The hair on my arms goes on end. No. It's not right. I know nothing about babies but this isn't right. "Think of the strongest person you know. Henri, for instance. Does his chest sink in when he breathes?"

She looks at me, her green eyes pale and frightened. "I'll get the pump."

She runs from the room and returns seconds later, but it seems to make no

difference. Cecelia still struggles. “We’ll need to take her to Reims. One of us should go with Henri...” She hesitates. “It should probably be you. Yvette...”

Hates me and won’t want me here to help. She also won’t want me with Henri, but her preferences matter little to me.

I leave Marie and run into the field, where Henri is cutting back vines. He takes one look at my face and then stands straight, bracing himself. “What is it?”

“We need to take Cecelia to a hospital,” I tell him. “I think she’s struggling.”

His mouth opens. “Doctor Nadeau...”

“Acted ambivalent as hell about whether or not she survives, and probably should have known this was a possibility. And he’s the same man who lied to us about penicillin for you. Is that really who you want to trust with your daughter’s life?”

He looks lost for a moment, then gives me a small nod. “Get the baby. I’ll start the car.”

Five minutes later I sit in the back seat holding Cece in my arms, using the useless little pump to no avail.

His eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. “How is she?” he asks.

My stomach tightens. “Alive. But pale. Drive faster.”

He flinches. “I’m already driving as fast as the car will go.”

Her eyelids have a bluish cast now, reminding me of Kit, when they pulled her from the lake. “You’re going to be okay,” I whisper, my pinky sliding into her tiny, clenched fist. It sounds more like a plea than a promise.

I don’t know if I’ve done enough. Yes, Cecelia was alive in 1989 just a short time ago. But that doesn’t mean I’ve done everything I was *supposed* to do. Perhaps I should have been more adamant. Perhaps I should have jumped back to earlier in the morning or even the day before to warn them.

And now it’s too late. If I time travel from this car, I won’t land back at the farm. I’ll land naked and alone on the side of the road.

The fact that Cecelia was alive the last time I saw her as an adult doesn’t reassure me at all. It just means that if she isn’t alive the next time I go, the fault for that will rest on my shoulders alone.



CECELIA IS TAKEN from us at the hospital, and Henri and I stand there in the hallway, shell-shocked, watching her go.

It feels wrong, handing her off to a complete stranger. Henri's hand slides through mine and I don't pull away. I need the grip of his fingers every bit as much as he needs mine.

We wait, sitting side by side, for hours. It's a chaotic place, a mixture of mothers scolding children over something minor, and mothers weeping as if they'll never recover.

Every time a nurse enters the waiting room, we both hold ourselves still, bracing for bad news. After what feels like a very long time, a doctor walks out and asks us to come with him.

Henri's hand is so tight in mine that it hurts.

We are led to his office and take seats across from him.

"You must be very worried, Madame Durand," he begins.

"I'm not Cecelia's mother—she's still too ill from the birth to travel."

His eyes flicker to our hands again. Despite that, Henri's grip does not loosen.

"She is very ill," he says. "Her lungs aren't fully developed yet and she's caught a virus of some kind."

I flinch. I could have brought her in sooner and maybe I still should. We could call Marie and tell her to jump back a few days to warn us all. Except that might be the wrong decision as well.

"I imagine her country doctor didn't know any better," he continues, "but a child of her gestation...has little chance of survival under the circumstances, without assistance."

"Is she going to be okay?" Henri asks.

The doctor leans forward. "The next twenty-four hours will tell us much. If we can keep her alive for the next week then she is likely to survive."

"What do we do now?" Henri asks.

"Go home to your wife," he says, a gentle admonishment. "I'll call you if anything changes."

Henri goes pale. I understand why...I can't imagine leaving this tiny infant here among a hundred others with only a hope that she will be okay. Knowing she might not even live through the night.

We drive home, the two of us too panicked about Cecelia to think of any other topic we could possibly discuss. When we arrive, Henri goes straight to the barn, and Marie is in the garden, which leaves me alone with Yvette when

I walk in.

“Did you enjoy that?” she asks with a miserable little smirk. “Creating some drama about my daughter to get time alone with my spouse?”

“You know what’s interesting?” I ask. “Your daughter nearly died today, and she may not live through the night, and the only person who doesn’t seem to care about that is you.”



I’M unable to sleep that night. I lie awake and eventually dress and go downstairs, where Henri sits, staring at the fire. I take the seat beside him on the couch.

“Is she going to be alright?” he asks.

I squeeze his hand, briefly. “Yes,” I say firmly, because it’s what he needs to hear. And what I need to hear.

He gives me a small smile. “If that’s so, then why are you awake?”

“I just miss her,” I tell him, and it’s true.

“Me too,” he replies.

Behind us, the bedroom door opens, and we both turn guiltily though we’ve done nothing wrong.

Yvette stands at the threshold, her eyes narrowed on me. “Isn’t this cozy?” she asks. “I hate to disturb you, but I need my husband’s assistance.”

He rises and leaves, while I remain behind. Is it wrong that we were sitting together? Is it wrong that I squeezed his hand, that I wanted to comfort him? No. But that doesn’t mean it was innocent either. Nothing about the two of us is.

I wake early, on little sleep, and dress to go to the hospital, only to find Yvette waiting downstairs when I arrive. “Your help won’t be necessary today,” she says.

Henri looks at me with apology in his eyes. “Get some rest, Amelie,” he says softly. “I’ll call the minute there’s news.”

Marie and I wait near the phone but it does not ring. Instead, not three hours after they took the one-hour journey to Reims, they return. My hand goes to my throat. “Cecelia, is she...”

Henri shakes his head. “She’s alive. Still on a ventilator.”

“Then why are you here?”

Henri looks straight ahead, and I realize for the first time that he's holding himself apart from Yvette, painfully stiff.

She shrugs. "It was so dull there and I *did* just have a baby," she says. "I suppose you'll never understand since you can't have children, but sitting for long periods like that is hell after childbirth."

I stiffen, shocked that Marie told them. Has Henri been pitying me this whole time? Has he been thinking he's lucky things turned out the way they did?

Henri is staring at Yvette as if he finally sees her for the monster she is. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" he asks her.

Her eyes go wide. "What? All I said was that—"

"Everyone in this room heard what you said," he replies, opening the door to walk away. "Please have the decency not to repeat it."

I walk out to the hay bale, sick over the whole thing. I know I'm a bad person and maybe I deserve my losses. But Yvette's no better. Why should she get everything I want? Henri, Cecelia, his future children?

Footsteps approach and I recognize that heavy tread before I've even looked up. "I'm sorry," Henri says. "It was thoughtless of her to have brought it up."

It was far worse than thoughtless. It was intentionally cruel. I wonder if Henri sees how bad she really is.

"Marie shouldn't have told you," I reply.

"She was trying to help," he says. "She wanted Yvette to be more sensitive."

I rise to face him. "So you've all been quietly pitying me this whole time. Poor, barren Amelie? And thinking you're lucky to end up with a child after all."

I start to walk off and his hand lands heavily on my arm, holding me in place. "Don't presume to know what is in my heart," he snaps. "It's a terrible situation, but if you think for a moment I could be capable of finding a silver lining in all this, you do not give me enough credit."

I blow out a breath. He's right. My capacity for self-pity has been endless, but there's no reason to look at everything in the worst possible light. "I'm sorry."

He looks at his hand, still gripping my arm. "No one could be more sorry than I am," he replies, letting me go.



THAT'S the first night I hear Yvette and Henri fight. Mostly, it is she who fights. Her words are hissed, inaudible but for their intent.

The next morning, I wake just after sunrise and dress for the hospital. He's waiting downstairs, looking as if he hasn't had much sleep.

We ride to Reims and then wait side by side in the pediatric ward. Henri asks if we might be able to see Cecelia today, and the nurse frowns and tells him it's unlikely, but that she'll check.

He grips my hand, and he's still holding it hours later when the doctor we met three days prior finally walks into the hall. The two of us spring to our feet as he approaches. "She's been off the ventilator for nearly twenty-four hours," he says, his face breaking into a smile. "I think she can safely go home."

I burst into tears. Henri's arms wrap around me. Neither of us care, a single bit, about the fact that we shouldn't be holding each other so tight or so long.



THE WHOLE RIDE home I hold her in the back seat, marveling at her perfect fingers, her darling mouth, her steady breaths. Marveling at the fact that there ever could have been a time when I didn't want her to exist.

Yvette makes a show of being relieved that Cecelia is home, but it's not long before she's complained of fatigue and retires to her room. I take the baby and feed her in the parlor while Henri looks on—worried, hopeful. I place her on my shoulder and she gives the loud, satisfied burp of a much older and larger child. Henri and I both grin at each other. When I lay her down in the crib, now deeply asleep, the two of us just stand there, watching her.

"She's the most beautiful thing," I whisper.

He turns and his eyes go from my hair to my eyes to my nose to my mouth. "She's one of them."

He looks at me as if I'm the world's only source of light, and it hurts. It hurts so much that I can't have this. I feel my eyes sting and avert my gaze. I cannot stand here like this with him. I can't.

“I should—”

He moves toward me and his palm curves along the side of my face as he leans in, pulling me closer. There’s the gust of his breath and then his mouth is on mine. Soft and hungry and desperate and careful all at once.

I should stop him but the part of me that has waited long, long months for this, that spent one night after the next in captivity *dreaming* of this, does not care. That part of me says *take. She hasn’t earned him and you have, so take this while you can.*

My mouth opens under his and we tangle, mouths and tongues and hands, and he moves me until I’m pressed to the wall, pinned like a butterfly under his weight. If I’d ever doubted that he might have missed me the way I missed him, I no longer do. It’s in the urgency of his mouth, the pained sounds he makes. His bones, like mine, are hollowed out waiting for this, waiting to be filled again.

When he finally pulls back, his body still pressed to mine, I can feel the restraint it takes. I feel it in the rigidity of his arms, in the bulge that presses hard against my abdomen.

“You can’t—” I begin.

“I know. But I’m not sorry,” he says, stepping away. “God help me but I’m not sorry.”

Things are different with us in the morning. All along I've existed on this raw edge of pain and want and restraint and heartbreak, but now...I can feel him pressed against me. I feel his desire in my cells and hear the pain of his groan no matter what else is going on around me. And each time I look up, his eyes are on me, with a hunger like I've never seen in him before. Not even last fall, not even at our most reckless and desperate, did he look at me the way he does now, like he wants me so much he's sick, mad, with it.

They fight again that night. Yvette's screaming wakes Cecelia, who still sleeps in the parlor. I creep down the stairs to the crib and bring her to bed with me. She falls back into a contented slumber, and I stare at her in the moonlight, this little girl who feels like mine though she is not, listening to the sound of things being thrown in the room below. "That's enough," Henri finally says. The front door slams, but things continue to be thrown.



THE NEXT NIGHT, when it starts all over again, I go downstairs to get Cecelia before she wakes. I hear Yvette's words clearly this time. She tells him she wants me to leave, and that she doesn't want me around the baby. *Whore*, she says of me when all her other words get her nowhere. *She's a whore and a witch and you look at her as if she just made the sun rise*.

I carry Cecelia upstairs, and wonder if it's truly time for me to go. I'm the thing making Henri's life harder right now, creating friction between

Cecelia's parents. How could it possibly be a good thing?

On the third day, all of us are hollow-eyed from the fighting. I'm so tired I can barely remain awake through dinner, and Henri hardly looks better. Only Yvette, who continues to rest most of the day, appears refreshed.

I'm just drifting off that night, my thoughts scattering like ash, when, from downstairs, Yvette's voice wakes me.

"You stared at her all night!" she cries. "You stare at her every night, just as you did at the dance! Does it torture you, the thought of her with Luc?" Cecelia begins to cry and I go downstairs and scoop her up. I can't hear his words but I hear the anger in them, the inherent threat.

"Did she spread her legs for you like she does the rest of the town?" Yvette screams. "She did, didn't she? Did she spread her legs like the whore that she is?"

Their door opens and he stands at the threshold, unaware of my presence, so I hear every word he says in reply. "No, she didn't. But you did, and the child that resulted is the only reason I allow you to stay."

It's only when he turns that he sees me there, with Cecelia. His face falls.

"I have her," I tell him.

He tugs at his hair with those hands of his, tortured and desperate. "I'm so sorry you heard that."

"It's fine," I tell him, though as I say it the weight of this whole thing seems to press down on me. Loving Henri and his daughter when I can't keep either of them, watching Yvette take everything I want in the world when she's not even grateful for it...it's too much. I feel like marsh grass in high wind, barely able to stay upright, sustaining one blow after the next and feeling as if it will never end. "But I'm leaving in the morning."



I TAKE CECELIA UPSTAIRS AND, tucking her into the crook of my arm, the two of us fall asleep. I hear more shouting, later, but I'm so exhausted it doesn't matter and Cecelia will sleep through anything as long as she's being held. At some point, Marie comes in and takes her from me, and the next time my eyes open the house is blissfully quiet at last and flooded with sunlight.

I walk down the stairs to find Marie sitting at the table. Her hands are idle for the first time ever, and she stares out the window.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

She blinks, as if surprised to find me here. "Yvette is gone."

"*Gone*?" I ask.

"She left early this morning. She says she's going back to Paris."

My head swivels. The crib is empty, and it feels as if everything inside my chest is sucked out by a vacuum all at once. "Cecelia?" I gasp.

Marie gives me a small smile. "Yvette left her. Said the baby was our problem, not hers. Henri is walking her. He thought we should let you rest."

I collapse into a chair, leaning forward. My limbs are still shaking from that single moment of terror. "Thank God."

When I look up there are tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she whispers.

"For what?"

"For all of this. It's because of me that you went to 1918 in the first place. It's because of me you got stuck there. Because of me that Henri thought you were dead and wound up with her at all. You've suffered so much and it's entirely my fault."

I shake my head. "All of those things had to occur for Cecelia to exist. How can we regret any of them?"

Her eyes close. "I know. But now Yvette's gone and I hope—" She trails off.

"You hope what?"

"I hope you'll stay," she says. "I wouldn't blame you if you didn't want to. And with the baby...all our lives are in jeopardy in a way they weren't before. Whether Henri remains here or goes off to fight, Cecelia will need a woman's care, and she can't jump with us, which means one of us will always have to stay behind. What I'm trying to say is that I hope you will stay, but I'm asking far more of you with that request than I once was."

I'm not sure how to respond. The truth is that I am still so in love with Henri I feel like I can barely breathe at the thought of leaving him. But I am also hurt, even if I shouldn't be. I know that I will probably stay—how can I not, under the circumstances: with his whole family in danger, with a new baby more defenseless than the rest of us?—but I'm not sure how it will be with us. Or if it will ever be the same.

The door opens. Henri stands there with Cecelia on his shoulder, so impossibly tiny by contrast with her father. His eyes hold mine and I freeze, without a clue what to say. It is Marie who swoops in, brushing her hands against her dress and walking briskly toward him. She pulls Cece from his

arms and begins cooing to her as she walks outside, shutting the door firmly behind her.

“You heard?” he asks. He hasn’t moved an inch.

My eyes slowly lift to his. I suppose I should tell him I’m sorry, but the words don’t come. Cecelia has lost her mother, but Yvette was already proving not to be much of one. “Yes,” I reply. “I heard.”

My tongue goes to my lips. I’m not sure what he wants of me now. I’m not sure if he wants to pick up where we left off, not that it’s really an option, or if he’s actually grieving the loss of his wife. Based on his silence, I guess maybe it’s the latter.

If he can’t even bring himself to ask me to stay, then it’s the surest sign I shouldn’t. “The two weeks I promised are nearly up,” I say quietly.

For a moment I’m greeted with another of his silences, and it feels like agreement. My chest begins to cave in on itself.

But then he takes three large strides to where I sit, and he drops to his knees in front of me. His head falls to my lap, like a child’s might. His voice is strangled when he finally speaks. “Please don’t leave me. I will find a way to earn your forgiveness. Please, just give me a chance.”

My eyes burn, and all that pain I felt in my chest a moment ago is still there, but it’s different. It’s pain mixed with relief. He still wants me. He will do what is necessary to fix what’s gone wrong. Tears slip down my face and I bury my hands in his hair, rest my face on the back of his head.

“I can’t just...it’s going to take me some time,” I finally say.

He raises his head. “I will give you all the time in the world,” he pleads. “Just stay.”

I nod, feeling heartbroken and ecstatic at once. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”



MARIE COMES IN, not much later, and we all move somewhat awkwardly around each other for the rest of the day. Henri takes care of the chores and Marie cooks and I take care of the baby and not a single one of us mentions how things are going to be from now on.

I watch Henri walking toward the house at dusk, and it’s the first time, in all these long weeks since I arrived, that I truly allow myself to appreciate him. To take in the sheer masculinity of those shoulders and his unshaved

jaw and that swagger as he walks, and allow myself to want him again, want him in the way of something I might actually have.

When he comes inside, his smile for me is almost bashful. “How was she today?” he asks, nodding at Cecelia.

“Happy,” I reply. “I think she actually tried to hum when I sang to her. And she smiled. A real smile. Not just gas.”

He nods, biting his lip. “Thank you...for watching her.”

He’s never thanked me for this before. It makes things between us feel oddly formal, *transactional*, even. I don’t know what to make of it. “Of course.”

I’d hoped things might improve over dinner, but they do not. During the past weeks with Yvette here, we’ve gotten out of the habit of casually discussing things related to my time, or traveling, or anything beyond the mundane conversations you might hold with a stranger. We talk about the weather and the farm, and Cece most of all. Which is wonderful—there is plenty to discuss—but it doesn’t make me feel closer to him.

Henri still looks at me the way he has now for weeks. Hungrily. And as if the sight of me causes him pain. But I can’t go from a long discussion of Cecelia’s eating and pooping habits to ripping off his clothes.

“I’ll take her tonight,” says Marie with an awkward look between me and her brother.

Internally, I quail at the idea. There is not a chance I’m sleeping with him when his wife hasn’t even been gone twenty-four hours. I guess I still haven’t quite forgiven him after all, not entirely.

I shake my head. “You both barely slept last night and I’m used to having her with me. I’ll take her tonight.”

Henri’s shoulders, hunched over the table, grow still as I speak. His head remains facing down when I’m done. “Thank you,” he says formally. “I appreciate how much you’ve done for us these past few weeks.”

I smile politely in response, feeling as if, somehow, we just took a large step backward.

Another day passes. Another night where I make excuses about Cecelia and sleep in my own room, longing for him yet unsettled by it all as well, though I don't understand why.

On the third morning, Marie stops me. "What exactly is happening with you and my brother?" she asks.

I flush, moving Cece to my left shoulder. "I don't know. I guess we're getting to know each other again."

"And how do you think that will happen when he's so scared you're going to leave that he's treating you with kid gloves, and the only topic you're willing to discuss with him is his two-week-old?"

"I don't know what you want me to say. Do you think I want things to be like this?"

She pulls Cece out of my arms. "I'm taking her for a walk into town," she says. "Please find my brother and solve this before I get home."

"It's not that easy," I object, but she continues walking. I watch as she puts Cece into the pram on the porch and heads for the road, and then I look toward the fields, steeling myself. What am I supposed to say to him? What would I have said to him before? I can't even recall who we were, and the discomfort isn't entirely one-sided. The truth is that before I left, if I walked into the fields to find him, he'd have wrapped his arms around me before I could say a word. Now, most likely, he'll wait with a pained look on his face, or ask me how Cecelia is.

I take a quick glance in the mirror and then walk out the door and head through the fields. It's unusually warm, as far into the fall as it is, and when I

finally spy him in the last row, I find him stripped down to a t-shirt, which clings to his chest and shoulders and abs in a way that would make any female stare. His head raises and when our gaze locks, he has that look on his face once more—hungry, desperate, restrained.

He begins to move toward me and I toward him, so scared and so needy I feel sick with it.

I mentally comb through all the mundane topics to discuss with him—the weather, how much Cecelia ate this morning—anything to put us in a normal place, a place where he isn't looking at me the way he is right now. My brain is empty today.

“It's a nice—” I begin, and the words are stopped short as he grasps my face in his hands and kisses me. Kisses me hard, with a low moan of need.

That *sound*. My God. When he makes that noise it's all I can do to stay on two feet. I cling to him, under the sway of my desire, hands clawing at his shirt, desperate for purchase, desperate for the feel of his skin after these months apart. His mouth is on my jaw as I untuck his shirt and slide my hands beneath it. My palms press flat, wanting to savor him, but I can't hold still long enough. I want more, everything, as fast as possible and when his lips move to my neck, every nerve ending seems to light up. I arch against him as I gasp, wordlessly begging for more.

“I can't wait another moment,” he says, tugging at my dress, too reckless and needy to stop for buttons. “My God I've wanted this for so long.” I hear the back tear and it matters not at all.

We pull each other to the ground, his mouth on my breasts as I reach for his belt. My fumbling hands are too slow. He shoves the pants down on his own and lays me back in the dirt, kneeling between my parted thighs. My panties still separate us. He tears them in half and pushes inside me.

My God.

I'd remembered it, and yet I hadn't. The feeling of being stretched by him, being so impossibly full.

If either of us had hoped to go slow, I realize now we're not capable of it. The moment he slides out I'm jerking my hips to meet his again. We are gasping and senseless, teeth and tongues, swallowing the other's sounds greedily. He's too desperate to be gentle with this. His belt hits my thighs with each thrust, the rough canvas of his pants abrading my skin. I'm not gentle with him either. I rut against him, hard and frenzied, wanting to somehow drive out the agony of the last year.

My back sinks farther into the lumpy ground beneath me, my legs wrap around him tighter and tighter and his murmurs, entirely in French, grow frantic and barely intelligible. He tells me he's missed me and that he loves me. I feel a sharp pang in my gut, as if my body is opening, preparing for flight. His words change, grow filthy and desperate, things I never dreamed I'd hear him say. I clamp down around him and cry out. He jerks inside me once, and again, and a final time, but slower.

My eyes open. I'm a little shocked to find us in the dirt, with the sun overhead. To find my dress in ruins and most of his clothes still on. He blinks, and his eyes are wide, alarmed, when they meet mine.

He slides out of me, averting his gaze. He's still hard, and the old version of Henri would have stayed where he was, would have told me he'd be ready again in a moment, but this one is uncertain. He looks at me like someone he just fucked by mistake.

"Are you...okay?" he asks haltingly. My thighs are sticky now and the bottom of the dress is wet with us, which hardly matters since it's too ripped to be salvageable.

"Yes," I say, sitting up, staring at my hands. "I'm fine."

His fingers trail along a point just above my collarbone. "I bruised you. I'm sorry."

He sits back, pulling up his pants. I pull my knees together and try to hold the dress around myself. "I didn't notice. It was fine."

How can it be so gruelingly awkward between us now? I want to fix it, but the girl I was before everything happened would have launched herself in his arms—would have demanded he tell her every thought in his head no matter what it was—and I'm not her anymore. That girl didn't have to ask if he was comparing her to his wife, didn't have to wonder if she had, by comparison, failed.

He runs a hand over his face. "I—" he begins.

"I need to get back to the house," I cut in, terrified of whatever is about to come out of his mouth. "Marie will be back soon. I don't want her to see my dress."

He nods, shoulders hunched as if defeated somehow, and no wonder. I'm sure he never thought sleeping with me could possibly make things worse, but it definitely has.



FOR THE REST of the afternoon I stay inside with Cecelia. It's unnecessary since Marie is home, but the truth is I'm scared to run into Henri again. I'm scared of how uncomfortable things are between us. I'm scared of the weight of my desire, which even as I sit here burping Cece, has me feeling like I might come out of my skin with wanting him again. I think of it every time my bruised back hits the chair, every time my thighs—abraded by friction—rub together. I'm a disaster and I only want more and more, with someone who could barely look at me when it was over.

Yvette. Does he miss her? She was a conniving little bitch, but men are stupid about things like that. She certainly didn't enter into a relationship with him quite as innocently as I did, and maybe I'm just not...enough. I don't have *tricks*. The little I know about sex I learned from Henri. Maybe he's come to appreciate the value of an experienced partner.

I think of the things he said to me just before he came, filthy things that shocked me and probably could have made me come even if he were just whispering them over the phone, and wonder if he said them to her as well. Did he get carried away at the end and forget who he was with?

My stomach drops. "Of course he did," I whisper aloud, horrified. "Of course, of course, of course." I'm embarrassed for myself, for the way I reacted...thinking I'd somehow *elicited* that reaction from him. Mostly, I'm just sickened by the fact that he had that kind of relationship with her. That they were so open with each other, so filthy. So *unlike* us.

When he comes in, I busy myself with Cecelia, and after dinner is cleaned up, I fake a big yawn and announce I'm turning in for the night, Cece pressed to my chest like a shield.

He follows me to the bottom of the stairs, while Marie busies herself in the kitchen as if she doesn't notice. "I'm sorry," he says tentatively, "if I was too...rough. I got carried away."

It all feels like a euphemism now. Like he's really saying *I'm sorry I confused you with my wife*.

"It was fine," I reply.

The next day things are more uncomfortable than ever. It's unbearable that it's gotten this way. I love him, I love his daughter, and I want to stay. But how can we continue like this?

When he comes in at lunch he barely looks at me.

"I need to go into town," I say, rising.

"I'll give you my list and the two of you can go," says Marie. "I'll watch the baby."

I want to be alone with him, and yet I also don't. I'm scared that he'll apologize again, or even worse...that he'll imply there's something about Yvette he misses.

We walk in silence. It's not until we've reached the town that he turns to me.

"Can we talk about yesterday?" he asks suddenly.

I tense. "What about it?"

He closes his eyes and exhales heavily. "It's not how I'd have wanted our first time to be, and I feel as if it ended badly, but when I try to discuss it with you, you end the conversation."

"I don't know what you want from me," I mutter. "I told you it was fine."

His laughter is short and bitter. "Yes, that's what every man wants to hear. *It was fine.*"

Tears spring to my eyes. "I'm sorry," I snap. "I'm sure Yvette was much better at demonstrating her appreciation." I start crossing the street toward the general store.

"Amelie, wait," he says.

“Just leave me alone,” I hiss over my shoulder. “I’ll meet you at the butcher shop.”

I walk into the store, trying to compose myself. This is a small town and it’ll just take one person seeing tears in my eyes to get the rumor mill running.

And who am I fooling? It’s already running full speed, I’m sure. A year ago, the whole town was gossiping about Henri’s possessiveness of his cousin, and as soon as the cousin returns his wife runs off. It’s easy enough to imagine what they are all thinking.

I grab a package of pins and then ask Madame Fournier for ten yards of cotton for diapers. She tells me to give her a moment, so I turn to walk down the aisle and run right into Luc.

He looks startled to see me, and then glances at the pins in my hand and gives me a small smile. “And?” he asks. “Are the rumors true?”

“What rumors?”

“That Yvette left. She told Claudette Loison that you and Henri were lovers and she caught you together.”

“No,” I gasp. “Of course not. Yvette was...unhinged. She was constantly making accusations and had no interest in being a mother. Her departure had nothing to do with me.”

He steps closer. “My leave is nearly over. I haven’t seen you in town once, though.”

“I’ve been taking care of the baby,” I argue. “She’s still fragile. None of us have been around.”

He nods and then his hand slides out to grab mine. “Just be careful,” he says. “Please. His wife is gone and I’m sure he’s ready to take you back with open arms, but he’s hurt you once and that situation is a landmine. The woman just had a baby. Her emotions are all over the place but she’s going to come back. Surely you realize this.” As he says the words, I realize I’ve been saying them to myself as well. Asking what will happen if Yvette changes her mind. Cecelia is her daughter and Henri will go where she goes. “You’re beautiful, and I’m not saying he doesn’t care, but if he has to decide between taking her back or losing his daughter, what will he—”

Luc’s words die off suddenly, and before I can ask him what’s wrong, I feel Henri move behind me, standing too close.

“Drop her hand,” he growls.

Luc’s eyes darken. “I’m getting tired of these little interruptions, Henri,”

he replies, his hand still on mine. “Perhaps if you took better care of your things, you wouldn’t need to guard them so zealously.”

Henri’s hands go to my shoulders and he starts pulling me behind him, which means, no doubt, that he’s anticipating a fight. Madame Fournier and her assistant peek around the corner at us.

“Stop,” I hiss, locking myself tight so Henri can’t move me easily. “Both of you. We’re making a scene.”

Their gazes flicker toward Madame Fournier, but I get the feeling neither of them cares all that much at this precise moment.

“I should go,” I say to Luc, slipping my hand from his. “Thank you for your concern.” I turn away, all but shoving Henri in the opposite direction. We haven’t bought anything we needed, but I sense an explosion coming—his or mine, I’m not sure—and it can’t happen here.

I march back toward the farm and he’s on my heels.

“Is that why you were so eager to shop?” he asks, the words hissed more than spoken. “Your secret meeting with Luc?”

“*Secret meeting?*” I demand. “Are you kidding me?”

I walk ahead as fast as I can and don’t say another word until we’re just outside of the village and on the quiet road to the farm. “I spoke to him for all of a minute before you steamrolled over us both.”

“He held your hand!” he shouts. “Don’t pretend for a moment you were merely talking!”

“Did I *fuck* him?” I demand. “Because until I *have*, I still won’t have caught up with you.”

He pulls me off the side of the road, into the grass. “Is that what it’s going to come down to?” he asks, gripping my shoulders. “Will you need to punish me for it before we can move forward? Do you need to go be with Luc so things are *even*? Fine. Do it. Just stop throwing it in my face again and again when there’s absolutely nothing I can do to fix it!”

“So, you *want* me to sleep with Luc.”

“Of course I don’t want you to sleep with him!” he cries. “I want you *back*. I want you to stop hating me for what I did, and if this is what it will take, then I’ll learn to live with it. You’re mad, and you have every right to be. But I’m mad too, Sarah.”

My jaw drops. “*You’re* mad? About what?”

“I begged you not to go. My God, I begged, and you didn’t listen. What I wanted was meaningless, and you will always be able to disregard my

opinion, won't you? You will always be able to leave for a year and return, buffed to perfection after a trip to your own time, talking about some musician you were with."

"I didn't leave you," I tell him, and now the tears are rolling down my face whether I want them to or not. "You left me and you'll leave me again if she comes back." My chest aches as I say the words. This fear has been knife-sharp all along, the thing I can't get past, the reason I don't want to trust him.

His arms come around me. "Is that really what you think?" he asks. His voice breaks. He sounds devastated. His lips press to the top of my head, to my temples, to my eyes. "Sarah, I could barely make myself stay when she *hadn't* left. There's not a chance I'd take her back now."

"What if she threatens to take Cecelia?"

His lips move over my cheeks, slick with tears. "She won't take you, or my daughter, and God help her if she tries to do either one."

I stare at his chest, tucking my chin to keep the wobble out of my voice. "I don't want you comparing me to her...not with *that*."

He looks truly dumbfounded. "Are you talking about sex? How could I possibly compare the two of you when I can't remember ever being with her in the first place?"

"She said you couldn't keep your hands off her."

He sighs. "And you believed her? She was petty and cruel and jealous. Why would you believe a word that came out of her mouth?"

"When we were together," I say, finally glancing up at him. "The things you said at the end..." I shake my head.

He raises a brow. "You seemed to like the things I was saying well enough at the time."

"Yes," I cry, "until I realized you weren't even thinking of me when you said them! That was nothing you *ever* did with me. And if you're going to be pretending I'm her, I'd rather just leave."

He pulls my face to his. "The way I was with you last time, Sarah...it's because I was desperate. It's because I'd thought of nothing but you for a year, and because I'd fantasized, and because I hadn't had sex I was sober enough to remember *once* since you left."

He holds my face in his hands as if nothing has ever been more precious to him and he kisses me. An apology, a plea. His mouth moving slowly over mine as if relearning its every dip and curve. My mouth opens and he steps in

closer, his tongue gently making me forget where we are and what we were discussing. My coin purse falls to the ground and his palm slides to my ass as he pulls me toward the trees on the side of the road.

I arch against him, seeking friction, and his mouth moves over my neck. He undoes my first two buttons and, when it's still not enough to reach my bra, he leans over and pulls at my nipple with his teeth through the fabric of the dress. I reach for his belt.

"Please," I beg him. "I need more."

His hands are up my dress, sliding up my bare thighs. In a moment he'll discover that I'm so wet it embarrasses me. My legs spread in anticipation as I undo his pants.

But he stops, his chest rising and falling quickly. "No."

"No?" I ask. I'm humiliated by how distraught I sound right now.

"It won't be just like last time," he says. "I won't let this be rough and frantic and perfect only to end with you unable to look me in the eye."

"Fine," I say, reaching for him. "It won't be."

"No," he insists. "No more sleeping in another room. No more awkwardness. No more using Cece as an excuse to avoid me. The next time we do this, we do this in *our* bed, in *our* room."

"Have you even changed the sheets yet?" I ask, bitterness in my tone.

"Marie did the day she left."

I frown. "I still hate that she was in there, but fine. I'll sleep in your room."

I reach for his pants a third time, let my hand splay over his cock, jutting against the material. He hisses air between his teeth, but then his fingers twine with mine and he pulls my hand away. "I want it even more than you do, little thief, I assure you. But if this is what I have to do to have you back in my bed, begging for it, I will."

I arch toward him. "I'm begging right here."

He laughs. "Not good enough."



WHEN WE RETURN to the house, Marie looks at us askance. "You've been gone nearly two hours and you return empty-handed? Dieu. You're both absolutely worthless." Henri ignores her, grabbing the key to the truck off the

peg by the door.

“Where are you going now?” I ask.

A hint of a smile graces his mouth. He leans over and presses a kiss to his daughter’s forehead, and then a kiss to mine, before reaching for the door.

“Just a little insurance policy.”

“Were you fighting?” asks Marie after he leaves.

“No,” I say, lifting Cece from her crib. She burps loudly and I grin at her as if she just got into Harvard. “Such a good girl,” I coo.

“He didn’t say anything? You don’t think he—” Her question trails off as she looks away, and I know what she was going to ask.

“No, he didn’t go to bring her home. *That* I am certain of.”

Hours pass. Marie continues to fret, and it’s time to put Cece to bed but... well, I promised. And more to the point I *want* what he promised me if I stayed in his room. The truck pulls up at last and he comes in, moving past us but flashing me a quick grin. Seconds later, he’s pulling the mattress from the room. He dumps it outside, without ceremony, and then drags in a new one, wrapped in plastic sheeting.

“Henri,” breathes Marie, “what on earth?”

He ignores her, going to the linen cabinet just off the hallway and grabbing clean sheets. And then holds out a hand for me, formally, as if he’s a foreign prince meeting his new bride. “Marie, do you mind very much taking Cecelia tonight?” he asks, never looking away from me once as he pulls me into his room.

When the door shuts behind us, he begins pulling a fresh sheet over the mattress. “I was already going to sleep in here, you know,” I tell him. “You didn’t have to take it quite this far.”

He meets my eye with a single brow raised. “Just so we’re clear, you’ll be lucky if you do *any* sleeping.”

I blush, feeling suddenly shy and uncertain. Somehow, we never went through this awkward stage the first time around, but I’m going through it now. I reach for the door. “I should check on—”

He comes to where I stand and presses his left palm flat against the door so it stays shut. With his right, he begins unbuttoning my dress. “Stop avoiding me, Sarah,” he says. His voice is a low growl, one that unsettles me as much as it makes me want everything he’s promised.

“We still haven’t finished making up the—”

“Close enough,” he says, pulling the dress over my head and swinging me

onto the mattress. He tugs my panties down, then slides down until his head is between my thighs, letting his tongue dart out to taste me while his fingers push inside.

“Henri,” I groan. “Oh my God. It’s too much. Just come up here.”

He laughs. I feel the pulse of his exhale against me, just where his tongue is still flickering so, so perfectly. “All in good time, little thief. But first I’m going to taste your tight, wet-”

“*Henri*,” I warn.

“I know you like it,” he says. “And I want to make sure you know whose tight, wet, delicious-”

“*Henri*. Stop.”

He laughs again. “Why?”

“Because,” I reply, pulling him toward me. At last he complies. “You’re going to end it before it starts.” I tug his pants down and pull him on top of me before they’re even mid-thigh. He pushes inside me and the two of us groan at the feel of it. I lean toward his ear. “*Now*,” I whisper, arching upward to meet his thrust. “*Now* tell me.”



WE ARE EXHAUSTED but unwilling to sleep. I doze off, and when I wake in his moonlit room, I’m certain I am dreaming, convinced I’m still a captive and have time traveled to him the way I used to.

He rolls toward me and holds my face in his hands. “You have no idea how many times I’ve prayed I’d open my eyes to find you here,” he whispers, and it comes to me—Yvette and the pain of finding her here, Cecelia’s birth and the way it healed me. A small burst of anger and pain and forgiveness, emotions I run through so fast it’s hard to tell them apart. I can’t wish it away, not when Cecelia couldn’t exist without it, and while a part of me wishes things were still pure and unsullied between us, the way they were a year ago, I know that we are stronger like this. Even the best foundations have some dirt mixed in. That’s what makes them harden into something solid and unshakeable.

He was sure of me back then, yet worried I would someday choose to leave, and now he knows better. I was sure of him back then, yet a piece of me still wondered if he wouldn’t be better off and happier with some normal

girl he could count on. But now I know a part of him belongs to me, craves me, in a way that wouldn't be satisfied by someone else.

I press my mouth to his. In a moment this will lead to other things—to me, rolled on my back and him pushing inside me. But for right now, just in this moment, our kiss is something else. A seal, a promise. The start of a new, and better, version of us. Coron and Iris may be a part of me, but I will never allow them to take over. With Henri and Cecelia by my side, I can close the door on that side of myself. Forever, I hope.

For the next month, the war seems so far away it would be easy to forget about it entirely. The Germans don't advance. The French don't attack. There is rationing, yes, but it affects us little on the farm—between the canned goods and the livestock we have plenty. Henri and most of the young men in town are considered active duty, forbidden to leave the vicinity, but there's not much to it at the moment—daily drills out in the fields on the far side of the village and some target practice, nothing more. Henri still can't quite believe that Marshall Petain, a decorated war hero himself, will just surrender to Hitler with nary a fight after becoming president, but I shudder when I think about what lies ahead. If Henri died during World War II, that means he'll die again no matter what I do. I comb my memory for the conversations Cecelia and I had during the visits to my own time—*will have*, in her case—about her father. She was so careful not to give me a single detail. But did she ever speak of him as if he was someone she knew? Did she ever tell me a single thing implying that they'd been together, shared a meal or a conversation?

I don't think she did.

I try to content myself with the days I have right now and, for the most part, I'm happy, but I still bear scars from my time in captivity that might never depart. I still wake at night with my heart pounding, certain Gustave's hand is on my ankle, that Mathilde let the babies die.

Henri quietly soothes me on those nights, running a hand down my back until my heart settles again. "What happened to you there?" he always asks, his voice tight.

“Nothing,” I reply each time. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

One night he asks whose body he pulled out of the hole, wearing his mother’s necklace. I lie and tell him I don’t know, because in spite of everything, our lives are good and I’m not that person now, the one who killed with glee. *I refuse to feel guilty about it*, I will say to myself sometimes. But what troubles me isn’t that I feel guilt—it’s that I feel nothing but a quiet, simmering pleasure when I remember most of the deaths I was responsible for.

And I’m not the only one who bears scars from our time apart. On those afternoons when he walks into a silent home—when Cece is napping and Marie is in town—I get a glimpse of something haunted in his eyes, the ghost of last winter when the house was empty and threatened to remain so. Then he finds me and it’s gone, replaced by his staggering relief, and quickly followed by the suggestion that we should go to the bedroom while we have a few moments to ourselves.

On one of those afternoons though, after he’s silently undressed me and pushed me back to the bed and we’re lying together with my head on his chest, he brings up a topic we haven’t discussed in a long while. “I want you to marry me,” he says.

I lean up on my forearms. “I hate to ruin an otherwise perfect moment by pointing out the obvious, but you’re already married.”

“I filed to have it annulled,” he says. “I’m not sure how long it will take to come through, but when it does, on the *day* it does, I want you to marry me.”

“Are you going to try to claim it wasn’t consummated?” My laughter is meant to sound lighthearted but comes out bitter instead. The truth is that even the most oblique references to Yvette bother me. “There’s some obvious proof it was.”

“We never once had relations after our wedding. And therefore, the *marriage* was not consummated.”

I study his face. They were married from March to October, sleeping in the same bed. It’s obvious Yvette was more than willing. “Not *once*?” I repeat. I want it to be true. The thought of them together is something that never stops eating at me.

“I told her I wasn’t comfortable with the idea of it because of the baby. Thank God she left before I had to come up with a new excuse,” he says with a relieved exhale. “So? Yes or no?”

Once upon a time it seemed too soon. Now it seems like I've waited forever for it. I smile and place my head back against his chest. "Yes," I reply. "There's nothing I want more."



ON THE LAST weekend of November, all of us head to town dressed to the nines for the baptism of the newest Durand. Since Cece's birth, Marie's been attending mass alone. Cece is too fragile to be taken into crowds just yet, but that's not the only reason Henri and I have been avoiding mass: in the aftermath of Yvette's departure, Henri has become *the man who threw over his pregnant wife for his own cousin*, and I'm now *the American who seduced her own cousin away from his pregnant wife*. I could live with it, but I'm glad we're leaving so I won't have to.

Father Edouard, unlike the rest of the town, doesn't appear to hold it against us. His main source of trouble this day, it seems, is Gerard—a friend of Henri's from grade school who will serve as a godparent alongside Marie. Every time Gerard makes Marie laugh, offers her assistance or even stands beside her, Edouard's square jaw flexes until I'm certain he's going to crack teeth. At one point, most unpriestly of all, I catch him rolling his eyes.

The service begins and, after a few prayers, he asks who the parents are. Henri grips my hand and we step forward. "We are," the two of us say in unison. Henri squeezes my hand and I truly feel, in this moment, that I don't have a single regret. I'm a mother because of what happened. Might I have had my own children if it hadn't? Perhaps, but it no longer matters to me. I couldn't love Cecelia more than I do, and I wouldn't trade her for a hundred children I might have had otherwise. The sun floats in through the stained-glass windows, and Cecelia, happy in my arms, smiles at me, as if she knew long before I did that this was exactly what was meant to be.

After the service we invite everyone back to the farm for a small party. Marie goes to the vestibule to get Cecelia's pram, and Gerard follows, complimenting her smallest actions—*you're so good with the baby, so careful, I wonder if she'll be as lovely as her aunt*.

"He's making a fool of himself," Henri groans as we exit the church.

Edouard's face has been strained for some time. He cuts a quick glance toward Marie and Gerard. "Yes," he growls. "He is."

“Well, he’ll need to work fast,” I reply, smiling to myself, “given how soon we move.” We are due to travel by ship from Calais to England in April, when Henri will next have leave and Cecelia will be big enough to withstand the trip. Once Henri gets us settled—a friend from Oxford has already found us something to let in the British countryside—he will join General de Gaulle’s London-based forces, though I wish I could dissuade him.

Edouard’s face jerks toward mine. “Move? Move where?”

“England,” I reply. I’m surprised Marie hasn’t mentioned it. “The countryside is safer there, until the war concludes.”

He looks at me with a hint of confusion and then—worry. “Most say the war won’t affect us,” he comments, watching my face. “But you feel otherwise.”

I hesitate. “People are putting an awful lot of stock in the Maginot Line and ignoring the many other ways the Germans could break into France. They’ve already taken over Poland. They beat us conclusively at Saar. It would be naïve to assume they won’t make every effort to take France. They need our ports if nothing else.”

“But surely moving so far...” He glances back at Marie, that worry in his eyes deepening. “Moving so far is extreme. Even if the Germans want the coastline, and take it, they’d have little use for a small town like ours.”

“Saint Antoine rests just between Germany and Paris, and just between Germany and the Normandy coast. And if the Germans do come, there are... other concerns.”

His brows come together for a moment, in confusion, and then he nods. “Because Madame Durand was Jewish?” he asks.

Henri stiffens beside me. “I’m surprised my sister chose to share that with you.”

Edouard frowns. “She didn’t. It’s been mentioned to me by others in town.” We all walk together in silence, letting that sink in. People in town are already discussing it, this meaningless piece of Henri and Marie’s past, though it nets them nothing. Which means that once Saint Antoine is occupied and those words have value—and can be exchanged to curry favor—people in this town will be lining up to share them.

Marie’s friend Jeannette waits at the house when we arrive with Lucien and Charlotte in tow. A widow since the Saar Offensive, she looks much thinner and older than she did when I left a year ago. Worry lines crease her lovely face and her smile flickers out now as soon as it’s begun. The children,

thank God, are unaffected as yet by the change of circumstances, and have both grown so much—Luc now an adorable, rosy-cheeked toddler, walking on unsteady legs through the house, knocking things over. Charlotte, age five, is as graceful as a princess when she holds Cecelia for the first time, but her face breaks into a wide grin, one that's missing several teeth, when Cecelia burps.

The sight of it squeezes my heart so tight it hurts. We've found ways to help them with money and food, but we cannot convince Jeannette to leave. She, like everyone else, believes this war will come to nothing, and refuses on the most ridiculous bases: she can't leave her mother and grandmother, though she only sees them once every few months, and she wants to stay close to people she knows—even though we are the only people here with whom she's friendly; and being a practicing Jew, most of this town will turn on her the minute the Germans arrive.

Today I try to convince her to get the children passports, which she insists is unnecessary. I suggest she could bring her mother and grandmother with her to England, and she laughs.

"They'd never go. The English don't practice good hygiene, you know," she argues. "Covered with lice during the war."

I sigh. "Don't you think, maybe, they were covered with lice *because* they were in the middle of a war?"

"No," she says very seriously. "My mother still talks about it. They just refused to bathe."

I feel despair as I watch Lucien and Charlotte run around the room. No one, *no one*, is taking the threat of Hitler as seriously as they should.

Gerard emerges from the bathroom, asking us all where Marie went. Jeannette and I exchange a quick glance—both Marie and Father Edouard are absent, suddenly, and there's no good reason for either of them to have snuck outside alone on a bitterly cold November afternoon.

Gerard goes in search of them. Henri, playing with the children on the floor, notices nothing, which is for the best since Marie and Edouard both look dazed and unsteady when they return a moment later with Gerard. Edouard takes his leave, but the whole time he's congratulating Henri and myself, his eyes are on her...different than they've ever been before.

"So, where did you and Edouard go this afternoon?" I ask later in the day, when the guests are gone and Henri isn't listening.

She blinks and a flush colors her cheeks. "He just wanted to see the

orchard.”

I raise a brow. “In November?”

Her gaze rests on her hands rather than on me. “Yes, that’s what I said too,” she murmurs.

I hesitate, torn between pushing and letting her have her secrets. I finally decide to let her keep them for now. If something did happen, she has a lot to think about. As much as I did that first time Henri kissed me, certainly, and I wasn’t ready then to mull it over aloud.

The truth, I figure, will come out in time. I just hope she doesn’t make a mistake she can’t undo before then.

Early in December, Henri and I take the truck out to the woods and chop down a fir. In truth, he deals with the tree and I stand by, worried it will fall on him. He laughs at me. “Is that what people worry about in your time?” he asks with a crooked smile.

No, it’s what *I* worry about. Now that I have him again, I can’t help but think about the ways I might one day lose him. But it’s not the time for my depressing thoughts, my anxiety. I return his grin. “Now I *hope* the tree falls on you just to teach you a lesson.”

“And if the tree breaks my back, how will you carry me to the truck?”

“What makes you think I’d bother?” I reply. “I’ll just take your keys and drive into town to see if Luc is free.”

He rises, pacing toward me with a light in his eyes, amused and dangerous at the same time. He pulls me against him. “Say that again,” he growls, his mouth an inch from mine. He takes my lower lip between his teeth and gives it a small nip.

It’s a dare, a challenge, and my heart thuds hard in my chest. “I said that I will drive into town,” I reply, meeting his gaze, “and go find Luc.”

His fingers go beneath my coat, to the button of my trousers. My mouth falls open. “You wouldn’t,” I say.

He pops the button, and his hand—cold, calloused—slides down the soft skin of my torso. “Tell me again how you’d seek out Luc,” he hisses against my mouth. His long fingers slide between my legs. “You’re so wet and warm here. For him or for me?”

I gasp as his fingers push inside me. “You.”

His mouth lands on mine. I arch toward him, toward his flickering fingers, wanting more and more from him, as excited by the unexpectedness of it as I am the ferocity of him right now, the way jealousy and possessiveness strip him of his normal civility. I come with a sudden, sharp gasp and he turns me around, pinning my hands to the trunk of the tree as he shoves my trousers down to my knees.

The air is so cold it bites into my skin, and I don't care. With one arm he hooks my waist, pushing my ass toward him. With the other he frees himself from his pants and then he is there, pressing between my legs.

"This is mine," he says against my ear as he shoves inside me. "Mine and no one else's."

His thrusts come sharp and fast, and my face is pressed to the trunk of the tree but I hardly notice it with him inside me, slick and hot and pulsing. He's barely started and I can already feel that cord in my abdomen, the one that seems to pull tight just before I come.

"I dreamed of this when we were apart," he rasps against my ears. "Every place I set foot that year, I pictured you. Bent over or on your back."

"I'm coming," I gasp, and he thrusts faster, the tendons of his arm pressed hard to the tree, taut with the strain, and the moment my shoulders settle he pushes me to my knees and I open my mouth for him.

"This," he hisses. "I dreamt of this too."

He flinches as he comes, crying out, holding my head in his hands. After a moment, his shoulders settle and his eyes open again, but at half-mast, as if drugged or in need of sleep. Slowly, his fingers unwind from my scalp and he helps me to my feet.

I have no regrets whatsoever, but something in the way he's avoiding my eye makes me think he does. His fingers brush my cheek. "You've got a scrape there. Did I do that?"

I smile at him. "I think my cheek was pressed against the tree—it was well worth it."

His shoulders sag. "I'm sorry," he says, his voice earnest, as if we're discussing a broken bone or stab wound instead of something so minor I didn't notice it until he brought it up. "I should have been more careful."

"Stop," I command. "You *should* have. Don't ruin it by taking it all back." I can tell he's still troubled, however. "What's wrong?"

His hands palm my face. "I was too rough, Sarah," he says. "There are times when it hits me, how much I've missed you and how desperate I was,

thinking I would never see you again and..."

"And what?"

"And that you're keeping secrets from me, and I don't know what those secrets mean. I don't know if they mean I'll lose you again."

I grow still. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll need to go back to your own time again soon," he says, averting his gaze. We haven't discussed it much, but I know he's right. If I want to maintain my ability to travel to the future, I'll need to return sometime in the next year. "And when you're keeping things from me, I have to wonder if the secret is something there. Something that might mean you don't come back."

"Of course not," I reply. "When I go, it will be for as short a time as possible, and I'll come right back."

"That's not all," he says quietly. "It bothers me...that you've never told me what happened when you were gone."

I look away, wishing he would just let it go once and for all. Why does he insist on revisiting this topic? "They're ugly stories I don't care to remember, and how could they possibly matter now anyway? It's in the past."

He pushes my hair back from my face. "It changed you," he says. "In small ways, things I barely see now, but I know they're there. And no matter what they are, I will love you. I will love you just the same, I swear it. But until you know that, it will always be between us."

I meet his gaze, so open and full of love, and feel the ugliness of everything that lies inside me. He would never look at me the same way again, if he knew. He thinks he would, but only because he has no idea how dark this piece of me really is.

"I love you," I tell him, "and there's nothing more to say."

He is still for a moment and then nods. I try to pretend I don't see disappointment in the gesture.



CHRISTMAS IN SAINT Antoine is a quieter affair than I'm used to at home. Not that my mother ever made the holiday particularly festive, but there were always ample decorations in town, carols playing in the stores and a flurry of parties leading up to the event itself. I don't miss any of it, however. It's the first time I've ever been part of a family that actually wants me, and that

alone makes this holiday the happiest I've ever experienced.

On Christmas Eve, Marie goes into town for mass and Henri, Cece and I remain behind. There's been something fragile about Marie since the baptism that I can't put my finger on, as if happiness has stretched her too thin, turned her into something that might shatter with the smallest provocation. Edouard has always struck me as a good man, a decent person. I was sure that if he made his feelings known to Marie, he'd offer some kind of commitment, yet nothing has changed. When I see her high color and the feverish glaze in her eyes now, I worry he's going to break her heart, but I can hardly caution her about what she's doing if she won't admit she's doing it. She practically skips from the house, and as soon as she's gone, Henri pulls me by the hand over to the tree we decorated simply with some fine glass ornaments that have been in the family for decades and popcorn and cranberries strung together.

"Perhaps this is a good time to exchange gifts," Henri says, with a smile that strikes me as slightly mischievous. We agreed to exchange handmade gifts, a rule I broke in small ways and, based on the pile of presents Henri has unearthed from a secret hiding place, he broke in vast ones. First, he gives me things he purchased the winter before, a fact which makes my heart ping with a tiny ache. There's a beautiful dress I will have few places to wear until the war ends, and lingerie I'll wear a great deal. There's a mink stole and muff, a hat from Givenchy.

For him, I've purchased a warm winter coat, heavy boots, the most recent book Evelyn Waugh.

I kiss him once our gifts are opened. "This has been my best Christmas ever."

"It's not over yet," he says, producing a small black velvet box.

My eyes meet his. Jewelry, under the circumstances, would not be wise. We have a long voyage to another country and a war to get through.

"Open it," he urges.

Slowly, I pop the box open to find a diamond ring that makes my breath stop, and I know, before I've even asked, that it's the very one Yvette wanted so badly—his mother's. It is no trinket, as I suggested to Yvette when she brought it up, but a large emerald-cut diamond set among smaller ones.

"But—" I stare at it. A ring like this will attract notice anywhere, but in Saint Antoine it will be the talk of the town. "I thought we wanted everyone to think we're poor."

“In four months, it won’t matter as much,” he says. “And if anyone asks in the meantime, we’ll just tell them you were forced to buy your own ring with your obscene American wealth.” He grins at this. Most of the town is now asking why I haven’t used my money to help the Durands fix up the farm, never dreaming that in truth I’m the one who’s got nothing.

I slide it on my finger and it fits perfectly—as if it was meant to be mine all along. “But...wasn’t it in Paris? You haven’t been to Paris once since I returned, aside from the night you came when I was out with Luc.”

“I got it last year, before you left,” he says. “And then, when I thought you were dead...I buried it. Under the hay bale. Stupid perhaps, if this farm will no longer be ours soon as you say, but I couldn’t stand the thought of anyone else wearing it.”

I press my mouth to his. “Now we just need the annulment,” I tell him.

“Wear it now anyway,” he says. “I dare anyone alive to tell me you are not my wife, wedding or no.”

1940 arrives. Everyone toasts to a new decade and, in town, people have already begun to move on with their lives, as if the uneasiness with Germany was a brief moment of ugliness that has nearly passed. We continue preparing to leave, however, and offer Jeannette the farm in our absence. It means she'll have fresh milk, fruit and eggs for the children, but it still feels like we haven't done enough to keep them safe.

Marie spends so much time at the church that I worry she will balk at leaving too, but when I press the topic, she changes it entirely. It seems only fair to leave her alone when I'm so immeasurably blessed. Cecelia, who now sleeps in my old room upstairs, smiles all day long and makes every waking hour a happy one for me. Each day, I see a little more of who she will become, and a little more of who Henri will be as a husband and father. When I watch him give Cece her evening bottle I marvel that I ever believed I could marry someone else.

I want to relish every moment we have together, yet my approaching return to 1989 weighs on us both. I need to maintain the ability to travel forward because there may be times when we want to know what's coming down the road or when the ability to skip ahead could help or even save a life. And it's best that I do it before the war begins in earnest and it's just me and Marie, alone in the British countryside.

As much as I hate the idea of leaving, it bothers Henri far more. It's a small source of friction between us, just like those nightmares I won't discuss, and I wish I could fix it.

"What will you do there?" he asks one night, though I am not leaving

until the end of March, still a month away. His face is grave, as if we're discussing something far more serious than a two-week trip.

I shrug. "I really don't know. Why?"

His glance flickers away. "I was just wondering."

"It was more than that," I reply. "What aren't you telling me?"

He holds my gaze. "What aren't you telling *me*?" he asks in turn. I see hurt in his eyes and look away. I wish, so badly, that I could answer.



IN THE MIDDLE OF MARCH, a letter arrives for Marie. She tears it open right there in the doorway, and then staggers backward, holding onto the small table in the entryway for support.

"Marie?" I ask. "What is it?"

Her eyes fill. "Edouard's been sent away," she whispers.

Henri's head jerks toward her. "Sent away where?"

"They wouldn't tell him," she says, staring at the words on the paper as tears fall freely. "He says a priest from Reims arrived this morning to take him to see the monsignor in Paris, and he was told to pack his things."

Henri rises, flinching as he pinches the bridge of his nose. Slowly, his eyes go to hers. "Why," he asks, with something unhappy and dangerous in his voice, "would he write you personally about this? Because Edouard must have done something wrong to be sent away like that, and it seems very suspect that he found time to write *you*, of all people."

She raises her head from her hands. "You're still married and living in sin with another woman! How dare you judge *anything* he does?"

"I'm not a priest," he says, nostrils flaring. "And your overreaction right now leads me to think he wasn't acting like much of a priest himself."

She raises her chin. "He loves me," she says. "He asked the church to replace him here so we could be together. There's no shame in it."

Henri holds a hand to his forehead, appalled. "God, Marie," he says softly. "He's a grown man. He didn't need to ask anyone's permission to be with you if that's what he wanted. Did he...take liberties?"

Tears stream down her face. "You just don't understand! I knew you wouldn't!"

"Answer the question," he demands between his teeth. "Did he, or did he

not, take liberties?” He makes no effort to disguise the violence underlying the question.

“No,” she says, and then she runs from the room and up the stairs, weeping and heartbroken.

“Dieu,” says Henri, collapsing onto the couch. He glances up at me. “Did you have any idea?”

I bite my lip. “I suspected. She’s been in love with him for a long time.”

His jaw falls open. “And you didn’t tell me? If I’d had even a hint I’d have put a stop to it, believe me. And if I discover he laid a finger on her I’ll see that he regrets it.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, it’s truly astonishing that I didn’t run right to you with my suspicions. You’re handling it so well.”

“How am I supposed to handle it?” he exclaims. “I’ve dedicated most of my adult life to keeping my sister safe and hidden so she can fulfill the prophecy, only to discover the parish priest has been wooing her and making false promises before he left town! What if they’d run off together? What happens to your precious circle of light then?”

I know he’s just frustrated, and worried, but none of that will help the situation. “First of all, it’s not *my* circle of light. If you’ll recall, I’m not even interested in time travel. Second, what you and your mother wanted was for her to be able to make her decisions without influence or pressure or baggage, and that’s what she did, didn’t she? Or did you only want her to make decisions influenced by you?”

“He’s a priest,” he mutters, running a hand through his hair. “If she’s been carrying on with a priest then perhaps she *needs* me to influence her decisions. But you just expect me to say nothing?”

“What good would it do at this point anyway? Edouard is gone.”

He leans forward, his forearms to his knees, and stares at his clasped hands. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it,” he admits. “We’ve been in this little bubble, you and me and Cece. Marie’s been a ghost here for months and I’ve been so focused on my own happiness I didn’t notice.”

I squeeze his hand. “She didn’t need you to notice, nor would she have wanted you to. She isn’t as fragile as you believe, and she deserved a chance to lead a life of her own design for once. She still does.”

He sighs. “Fine. But if I find out they had relations, Edouard is a dead man.”

I restrain a smile. “Yes, relations before marriage would be appalling.

Something you would *never* do.”

He narrows his eyes. “It’s different with us. I’m not a priest. And I would marry you tomorrow if I could.”

“It sounds as if Edouard would marry Marie as well.”

“But I’m not a priest!” he says again, irritated and amused at once.

“I’m well aware,” I reply, scooting beside him. “No priest would say the things you do in bed.”

His eyes slant toward mine, his mouth tipping into a reluctant half-smile. “And you love every one of them.”

“I do,” I reply, pressing my mouth to his jaw. “So have no fear. I will never take up with a priest.”

“I never realized it was something I had to worry about prior to today,” he says, pulling me toward him. “But thank you for letting me know.”



FOR THE NEXT WEEK, we see little of Marie. She continues her duties at the church but spends most of her hours at home on the cusp of tears, and every time the post arrives she dives for it, only to retreat, small and broken and disappointed when there is no letter from Edouard. It’s a terrible time to go to 1989, given the way my trip has Henri’s nerves frayed, but I can’t cut it any closer to the day we leave for England than I already have.

The night before I go, Henri and I lie in bed, unable to sleep. He makes love to me with a desperation that borders on violence, again and again. Yet early in the morning I can sense something that remains dissatisfied in him.

“What is it?” I ask, lifting up on my forearms to see his face.

He stares at the ceiling, thinking hard before he finally voices what’s in his head. “Whatever it is, whatever it is you won’t tell me—does it have to do with someone in your own time?” he asks. “Is it the musician?”

My stomach sinks. I hate that he’d even think it. I hate that I can’t tell him the truth. “No,” I tell him. “Nothing ever happened with that musician and I only brought him up to make you mad.”

“Then why won’t you tell me what it is?”

I could. I could risk it. But how would he respond, if he knew what I did? If he learned that the people responsible for his mother’s death and his sister’s captivity share my blood? It would change things. A piece of him,

even if it was a small piece, would start to distrust me, just like my mother did.

“Because I like the way you look at me now, and I’m not sure you still would if you knew.”

His lips press to the top of my head. “I will love you no matter what you tell me, Sarah, I swear it.”

I wish I could believe that. I just don’t.

Just a few hours later, it’s time to go. I feed Cece, memorizing the solid weight of her in my arms, still heavy with sleep. She smiles around her bottle and reaches for my face. My eyes sting. How am I going to leave her? How am I going to leave Henri?

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I tell her, my voice rasping.

Henri walks me to the barn and I say the same thing again, this time crying in earnest.

Time travel is so much easier for me now that I have my aunt’s spark, but we both know, after my time in 1918, that there are no guarantees. That anything could go wrong in my absence, on his side or mine. “I love you and I *will* wait as long as it takes,” he says, begging once more to be forgiven for something I forgave long ago.

“I know,” I reply, kissing him once before I let my body go light. The impulse to return to my own time hits me as hard as ever, but it’s tempered by my sadness at leaving him. Even when I’ve completely disappeared, I can see him standing there, staring at the space I just vacated, his face bleak, and I have to force myself to go.

When I reach 1989, I land with ease for the first time. I'm still in the barn, though it's now quite modern, and once I've confirmed that no one is around I scurry to the woods for the clothes I buried there years before.

It's technically spring but still feels like winter, and I'm thrilled to find warm clothes in place of the ones I left—including a Burberry coat, hanging from a branch. No sooner am I dressed than a limousine pulls up and Cecelia climbs out, shielding her eyes from the sun, looking for me.

She's dressed impeccably, as always, in a coat and dress that match—designer, I'm sure—and stiletto heels. That she is the same baby who pressed her tiny palm to my face only a few hours ago absolutely stuns me, but I can see it, in the set of her mouth and her eyes, even in the way she glances around.

"Cecelia," I whisper from behind a tree and she smiles and hurries forward, wrapping a big coat around me.

"You have teeth now," I say, and my eyes fill with tears.

Her eyes well over too. "You have no idea how wonderful it is that you finally know who I am."

I shake my head. "You shouldn't have saved me the last time," I tell her. "It could have gone so, so wrong."

"You've already saved my life once," she says, "and not for the last time. Don't ask me not to keep you from harm when I can."

We both climb into the back and I smile again. "I can't get over the fact that it's you. I just fed you a bottle. Your father says hello."

She swallows and then she smiles. A brief smile, a flicker. “Does he?” she asks.

She changes the subject. Maybe she does so because her father is alive and she speaks to him daily. Or maybe she does so because the subject is painful and she doesn’t want to give too much away.

I lean back against the plush leather, tired but not exhausted the way I’ve been in the past. I couldn’t time travel right now, but it feels like I won’t need ages to recover, either. “Do you know how long I’ll need to stay?” I ask. “How long it takes me to get all my ability back?”

She smiles at me fondly, and it’s as if our roles are reversed. “A little over a week,” she says. “But try to make the most of your time here. You’ve never gotten to enjoy Paris when you were completely healthy.”

We’re entering the city now, bright and pristine, old and modern simultaneously. And it’s perfect, but I don’t want to be here. I want to be home with Henri and our daughter. “I just want to get back,” I tell her. “Once we leave for England everything’s going to change and—” I shrug. “Our lives are very peaceful now. I’m not sure they’ll stay that way.”

She continues to smile pleasantly. Am I imagining the strain I see behind it?

We pull up in front of the flat where I stayed the last time, and Philippe comes out to open the door. “I’ll see you again before you leave,” she says.

“You’re not coming in?”

She squeezes my hand. “As much as I’d like to, I think it’s best I don’t. I see you trying to read the future in every word I say, like a child who says she doesn’t want to know what’s in the box but keeps peeking inside anyway.”

I hesitate. “Do I want to know? Will I regret not asking later?”

She shakes her head. “There is not a single thing about your life you would change, Sarah,” she says. “Your life will be filled with more magic than you can possibly realize.”



THE NEXT MORNING, I am shepherded out of Cecelia’s flat early in the day for another of her beloved spa appointments. My skin is waxed and scrubbed and steamed until it shines, and then I’m led back to the car and taken to yet

another spa to get my brows done and my hair cut. I know Cecelia well enough by now not to argue. She's so used to her modern-day life that she doesn't realize a hot shower and some tropical fruit alone seem like the height of luxury to me.

After my haircut, I ask Philippe if I can walk back to the flat and he agrees, though I know he'll be following at a distance. The brisk air whips the coat around my legs, and I breathe deep, happy and sad at once. I want to be here, but I miss Henri. I miss our daughter. And time spent without them can only be bittersweet.

I turn the corner to Rue Courtalon. The limo is in front of the flat already, and as I step off the sidewalk to cross the street, I stumble to a sudden halt. There's a woman beside the building, staring intensely at the limo...and I recognize her. Even though I only saw her once, very briefly, I recognize her face.

I recognize the malevolence that seems to radiate from her, just like the last time.

She's the time traveler who followed Cecelia and me in the park, the last time I was here. I remain frozen a moment too long, and then I dart across the street. I have no plan in mind. I just know she'd better have a damn good explanation for why she's following me. She was watching the limousine, but when the car I jump in front of lays on its horn, her head jerks in my direction.

Her nostrils flare in disgust, her eyes narrow, and then she begins to run.

She's already turned into an alley by the time I reach her side of the street, and I know it's a lost cause. If we go to that alley we'll only find a pile of clothes once more. Philippe is by my side within seconds. "It would make my job easier if you wouldn't throw yourself in front of cars for the remainder of your stay," he suggests.

"I'm sorry." I hug my arms to my chest. "I don't suppose Cecelia would allow me a gun during this visit?"

He laughs. "Not if you intend to start shooting women who just happen to look on when a limo pulls up to the building."

It's nothing I can explain to him, but she didn't just *happen* to be here. She's watching us. And I want to know why.

At my request the next morning, Cecelia comes to the flat once more.

"I understand you've been using my pillows for target practice since yesterday," she comments, trying not to smile.

It would be hard to deny since there's currently a knife sticking out of one. "Just the bedroom pillow. It's not expensive, right?"

She laughs. "I wouldn't care if it were. My issue is more with the fact that you are suddenly feeling like you need to defend yourself. I fear you've hurt Philippe's feelings."

I take the seat across from her. "I saw that time traveler again yesterday," I admit, twisting my hands. "She was watching the limo. I guess she was waiting for me to get out. And I know this will sound paranoid, but she's bad. I can feel it. She needs to be stopped."

I see a hint of knowledge in her eyes. And concern.

"Did I tell you about her?" I whisper. "During my visits as you were growing up, did I ever mention this girl? Or have you seen her lurking around?"

She gives me a single terse nod. "I've noticed her once before. And yes, you've mentioned a time traveler following you in the past."

"Is there anything you want to warn me about?" I ask.

She meets my gaze. It's only a moment before she smiles and tells me there's nothing. But I saw it.

She hesitated first.

For the rest of my time in Paris, there is no sign of the time traveler. But I never leave the flat without a knife in my pocket and Philippe or Louis by my side, and it's a relief to say goodbye to Cecelia and climb into a limo for Saint Antoine once my abilities are finally restored.

When I arrive in 1940, to a warm April day and a cloudless sky, I want to weep with relief. I run to the house and find Henri in the living room pacing. "Thank God," he says, crossing the room to hold me tight.

I laugh against his chest. "I was only gone a little over a week."

"I know," he says. "And Marie reminded me a thousand times that nothing had gone wrong. I just—"

He trails off, but he doesn't need to complete the sentence. He's already lived through a time when our plans failed and I didn't return. His mouth presses to mine and I inhale him, wishing I could stay just like this with him for hours and days, until I finally feel full. "How's our daughter?" I ask when he lets me go.

"Napping at the moment," he says. We creep up the stairs to her room and peer in on her. She sleeps flat on her back, arms overhead, fists curled, mouth open and sated. My heart lurches with love for her. She seems happy in 1989. I just pray the years until then will be happy for her too.

We quietly slide from the room and go back downstairs. I fully expect him to pull me to the bedroom—he seemed ready enough for it before when he was kissing me, but instead he takes my hand and leads me to the parlor.

He runs a hand over his face, as if weary. "There has been a small change to our plan," he says.

My stomach drops. “Is it Marie? Is she refusing to go?”

He bites his lip and leans toward me, pressing his forehead to mine. “No. The Germans have attacked Norway and sent troops toward the Maginot Line. Petain is ordering half of us there, and the rest to Norway. I leave Sunday.”

I freeze. “No,” I argue. “I read everything about this. The Germans don’t attack until May twelfth. Until then, the French assume nothing will happen.”

“Perhaps it changed,” he says. “Or perhaps history books have it wrong.”

I try to breathe but can’t seem to manage it. Even with all the reading I did, even knowing the goddamn *future*, I messed up somehow. But I wasn’t wrong—I know there is no battle yet, not for another month. So why is this happening? “It’s a diversion,” I whisper. “Hitler’s making you all think he’s going to attack at the Maginot Line and then he’s going to push through the Ardennes.”

“I still have to go,” he says. “Which means you and Marie and Cecelia will need to travel to England on your own.”

I flinch. If it were just me, I’d refuse. But now there’s Cecelia, who can’t blink and disappear into another time at the first sign of danger. Henri is an adult and I have to let him make his own decisions, even if I disagree. But Cecelia can still be saved.

Which means these two days I now have left with Henri may very well be the last ones we share.



HENRI’S MILITARY-ISSUE backpack is carefully packed for a long, cold winter. I pray it’s not that long until we see him again, knowing even as I pray that seeing him *after* the winter would be a best-case scenario, a stroke of incredible luck. The early battles are vicious and there are so, so many casualties. All who survive are taken prisoner, sent to work camps in Germany.

Henri tries to persuade me that all will be well, but when I wake at night to find him watching me, or catch him leaning over Cece’s crib with a lost look on his face, I know what he’s doing. He’s trying to memorize us, as if this is the end. I’m devastated, but also angry. Angry at myself for not researching more thoroughly, irrationally angry at Henri for his refusal to

disobey orders. Angry, most of all, because it keeps me from bursting into tears.

We rise early on Sunday, before dawn. Anger abandons me and I weep like a child, pressing my face to his chest. “Don’t let them send you to Dunkirk,” I whisper, frantically trying to remember what I read. “It’s a massacre.”

He pushes my hair back from my face and kisses me. “I have no control over that,” he replies. “All I can promise you is that one day it will all be over, and I will come to England to bring you home. No one will fight harder than I to make that happen.”

I want to ask him to promise, but I don’t. Everything that’s happening now is beyond our control. Everything that’s happening now has *already happened*. I can only pray that it all turned out well.

The first day without Henri feels endless. Marie is upset too, and we avoid each other's eyes as we get through the day. All our valuables—the money, the jewelry, my wedding ring—are packed, leaving us little to do. In a few days, we will watch Jeannette's children while she goes to Paris to say goodbye to her dying grandmother, and I wish the children were already here—it would be good to have something to fill my head right now other than thoughts of Henri.

That night, as I sit down to dinner and begin feeding Cecelia a bit of mashed apple and ham, Marie's eyes fill. I've spent the entire day trying not to cry, but if she starts now, I won't be able to stop. "Please don't cry," I rasp, my voice beginning to wobble. "I'm keeping myself together right now for Cece's sake, but barely."

She presses her hands to her face. "I'm not crying over Henri," she says.

I grip the spoon in my hand with unnecessary force. Henri may die, while Edouard is ensconced safely behind the walls of a church. It seems as if, just this once, Marie could think of someone else. "Edouard again?" I ask, struggling to keep the acid from my voice.

Her tongue darts to her lips and then her eyes close. "I'm pregnant," she whispers.

The spoon in my hand clatters to the floor. I stare at Marie, unable to even process what she's said.

"I didn't want Henri to know," she says, putting her forehead in her hands. "He'd blame Edouard."

I shake my head, so dumbfounded it's hard to find my voice. I thought

they might have exchanged sweet words and perhaps a kiss. Never, ever, did I think Edouard would allow it to go this far. *He shouldn't have.* He shouldn't have slept with her, and should have been careful if he did and...I have so many criticisms, so much judgement, I don't even know where to start.

"How could he have slept with you and then just left?"

"It wasn't his fault," she says. "He tried to stop it and I wouldn't let him."

Edouard is a grown man, and a priest. Marie *was* a twenty-two-year-old virgin who, as far as I know, had never even been kissed. I'm hard-pressed to imagine she's solely at fault here. "There's no possible way he doesn't bear some responsibility."

"He asked the church to relieve him of his duties and find him another position. They said no. All his training is in theology and he's not qualified to do anything else. He's been looking for teaching positions, but with the war, no one is hiring, and he won't marry me until he can support me. He thought I would be safer in England with you until he found something."

You'd also be safer if he hadn't knocked you up. "Does he know?"

She shakes her head. "He's only been able to get me one very short note because they're punishing him for breaking his vows, but he's still looking for a way out."

Edouard and Marie were careless only in the same ways Henri and I have been—but this changes everything. Now there will be two babies to care for in the British countryside, where food will be scarce, and doctors even more so. Perhaps some of the bitterness is more selfish: I want nothing more than to have Henri's child one day, something that will never happen, while everyone around me seems to get pregnant unintentionally.

I force myself to take one calming breath and then another, because Marie is not at her most rational and there's no place for my unhappiness in this conversation. What now? It's possible that this is the prophecy unfolding—that Marie is the hidden child and will now produce the circle of light. But even if she isn't, Edouard deserves to know about his child.

"You need to let Edouard know before we leave," I sigh. "Maybe he refuses to let a woman support him, but when he realizes it means his child will be raised fatherless, he might relent a little."

"I don't know how to find him," she whispers. "I suppose I could ask Monsignor DuPree in Paris, but I'm worried I'll get Edouard in trouble."

I couldn't care less if Edouard gets in trouble, I want to snap. *Edouard deserves to get into trouble.* But it's not a response Marie will listen to.

“Then lie,” I tell her. “Tell him Edouard is your cousin and you fled from Germany hoping to find him in Saint Antoine.”

“You want me to lie to Monsignor DuPree?” she gasps, wide-eyed.

“Oh, so lying to a priest is a greater sin than sleeping with one?” I snap. “I love you like a sister, Marie, and I’ll support whatever decision you make, but this isn’t the time to be quibbling over minor ethical dilemmas.”

She stares at her hands for a long time, saying nothing. And then she rises with tears in her eyes. She kisses Cece on the forehead, and then me, in turn. “I’m sorry,” she says, heading for the stairs.

It seemed odd, Marie's tearful apology.
But it all made sense when I found the letter she'd left the next morning. She wasn't apologizing. She was saying goodbye.

Dearest Amelie,

I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me. I would not be doing this, but you and Cece no longer need me, and my place is here, or wherever Edouard is. I know he will find a way to be with me and take care of his child no matter what the circumstances, and even if it means I'm stuck in France during the war—even if it means I don't survive the war— that's preferable to an entire life without him. I'll write you in England once I'm settled.

*All my love,
Marie*

I stare at her neatly formed words for several long minutes, jolted from them only when I hear the sound of my joyful daughter babbling in her crib. The house already feels quieter without Marie, and the truth is I'm terrified to be doing this alone, even though it's me, not Marie, who cares for Cece, and there's little to be done on the farm in the week before we leave the country. Instead of three adults with one baby, it will be just me and Cecelia. Now that the troops have been mobilized, I won't be the only person fleeing the country, which means the ship may be crowded and porters may be scarce. I don't want to undertake it alone.

Mostly I'm frightened for Marie. In a few weeks, bombing will begin and there will be a mass exodus from Paris. People will wind up abandoning their cars and their belongings, sleeping by the side of the road and dying there too, from hunger and thirst and German attacks. Marie will either be a part of that, or worse—she'll be a Jew trapped within the Occupied Zone when the war begins, unable to get away.

As far as I can tell, she left everything behind—all the cash we took from the accounts, everything of value. She's floated by her entire life with someone there to catch her when she fell. Her mother and Henri and, during captivity, me. I doubt it even occurred to her how badly things might go.

She isn't a child, but in some ways she's as ill-prepared as one. How am I going to leave without knowing she's okay?



THREE DAYS PASS WITHOUT WORD. I call the monsignor's office and they refuse to tell me Edouard's whereabouts, which means they probably refused to tell her too. So why isn't she home?

The next morning, I meet Jeannette at the train station in Saint Antoine to take Lucien and Charlotte. The station is far more chaotic than normal. "What's going on?" I ask when I find her, as people push past us, carting trunks and hatboxes.

"Everyone is fleeing Paris for the countryside," she whispers over the children's heads. "They think the Germans will punish us for assisting Norway. But where's Marie? She didn't come to help you get the children home?"

I hesitate. It's still possible Marie will return with her tail between her legs, either unable to find Edouard or having discovered he wasn't as honorable as we thought. She won't want the whole town knowing she's pregnant with the priest's child. But Jeannette is a friend, and not a parishioner. It might seem slightly less risqué to her than it would to others.

"Marie has left," I admit with a sigh. "She's in love with Father Edouard and has gone to Paris to find him. She says she's not coming on the trip."

Jeannette's mouth forms a small, shocked circle. "Does he reciprocate her feelings?"

Does he? I'd have sworn to it, once upon a time. But now he's slept with

her and left, and perhaps his excuses make sense, or perhaps they are merely excuses. Though I don't have much experience with men, Marie has far less, and her love for Edouard is so unshakeable I don't think she'd be capable of doubting him regardless of the situation. I shake my head. "I don't know. But there's nothing to be done," I tell her. "The monsignor won't give me any information, and she's an adult. I can't force her to come with us."

"I'll go to the monsignor's office myself once I've seen my grandmother," Jeannette offers. "Have no fear, my friend. Unlike you and Marie, I'm not scared of priests. Nor am I attracted to them."

I sigh. "I'm no longer finding Edouard so handsome myself."

She pulls Lucien and Charlotte close, pressing her lips to their foreheads in turn. "Behave for Amelie, my angels, and I will be back to put you to bed." Lucien's eyes tear up and he clings to her leg, refusing to let her go. It makes me wonder how I will ever be able to leave Cecelia the next time I return to modern days, when she's older and aware of what is happening.

I drop to the ground. "She'll be back tonight," I say, pulling him against me. "Shall we make a pie to celebrate her return?"

He's too young yet to understand the concept of pie, or to be bought off by it, but when he sees how excited Charlotte is, he dries his eyes.

I walk home, pushing Cece in her pram while Lucien and Charlotte hold hands beside me. The walk is peaceful, but once Lucien is at home, I realize just how much my life will change once Cece is his age. He's a human missile, endangering himself constantly, and I soon give up on the idea of pie and devote myself mostly to keeping Charlotte entertained and Lucien alive.

Late in the afternoon, I begin to anticipate Jeannette's return and collect their things, but dusk comes and goes with no sign of her. I serve the children a cold dinner of tinned ham and milk and bread, the best I can do given the situation.

Soon, it's Cece's bedtime, but I can't allow Lucien to run wild while I put her to bed, so all three children are awake—and cranky—as the hours pass.

By nine PM, the last train from Paris has arrived and moved on, and there is still no sign of Jeannette. That's when the small, niggling fear in my chest that began this afternoon and seemed paranoid at the time begins to bloom and grow.

Jeannette is a good mother, a *careful* mother. She wouldn't have failed to return, and she wouldn't have failed to call...but she did.

We have forty-eight hours until we must leave for Calais. I sit in silence,

watching Lucien pull books from the bookcase, finally allowing myself to ask the question I've been avoiding all night. *What happens if she's not back in time?*



THE NEXT MORNING, Charlotte is waiting by the door for her mother, and Lucien climbs into my lap. "Maman home soon?" he asks. His hopeful little face makes my heart twist in my chest.

"I'm not sure," I tell him. "Sometimes the trains are slow."

I long for Henri, or even Marie. I don't want to be the only adult in this house, the only person to make the decisions I must. If we don't leave for Calais tomorrow, we will miss our boat, and once the war begins in earnest in a few weeks, we may not get another chance to go. But who can I possibly leave Charlotte and Lucien with? Jeannette had no other friends in town, and right now, thanks to the war, anti-Jewish sentiment is running high. I doubt anyone would even be willing to take them in. Finding her mother in Paris and delivering the children there is really the only reasonable option, though I shudder at the idea of the children in Paris a few weeks from now.

I find Jeannette's address book in one of the boxes she brought over. Her mother is listed simply as *Maman*, no last name, no address. I dial the phone number listed there. It rings and rings but no one picks up—I can only assume because she's at the hospital with Jeannette's dying grandmother. And I can't exactly call the hospitals in Paris asking for *Maman*, a woman whose first and last names I don't know.

As night falls, I finally admit the truth to myself. Jeannette is gone, and all my careful plans will need to be abandoned. Until something changes, I remain one hour from the enemy, with three children considered Jewish under German law.

On the morning of May 20th, I'm the only man smiling as I line up for morning rations. It's the day Sarah, Marie and Cecelia are due in the Cotswolds, after several weeks in Cambridge with friends of mine. And though we've not received any mail here yet, when Sarah arrives at the house we've let, my hope is that she'll find a stack of letters waiting from me. I've written each day since I left.

"What's with the smile?" asks my commanding officer. "You're aware we're at war, Durand?"

It would be hard to miss. The sound of artillery fire is ever present, and growing louder by the minute. The Germans will take Norway any day now. "My fiancée arrives safely at the house we let in England today," I tell him. "I'm just relieved."

"Well, soon you'll be able to wave to her from the other shore."

I glance at him. "What shore?"

"Haven't you heard? Germans have our boys trapped on the Normandy coast. We're sailing out tomorrow to reinforce them."

I think of Sarah's warning. I feel a prickle of unease at the base of my spine. "Where in Normandy?"

He shrugs. "Place called Dunkirk," he replies. "We leave at first light." Dunkirk. The one place she begged me not to go.



IT TAKES a little over a week for us to reach the channel. The trip is relatively

peaceful, and I spend it picturing my girls. I imagine Cece taking her first steps in the long grass, Sarah hovering, waiting for her to fall. I see them unaffected by rationing, though it's unlikely, and not too worried about me, though I suppose that's unlikely too. I picture coming home to them most of all. How long will it be? Will Cece be walking then? Will she remember me? *It doesn't matter*, I remind myself, *as long as they're safe*.

When we reach the channel, I stand portside, looking north. With a looking glass, I might see England's shores. My family is so close I can almost feel them, and it's harder than being far away.

Within an hour of entering the channel, we begin to hear the sounds of war, sharp after a week away from it. Soon, there are German bombers swooping low in the distance, and plumes of smoke over the water, indicating that they've hit their target.

I think of everyone trapped below decks on that boat in the distance, underwater and panicking, no exit in sight. Soon, their target will be us. *Please God*, I beg, *let me return to my family*.

The men crowd the top deck as the sound of bombing grows louder, and the rowboats are lowered, though we are far from shore and the water is rough. For some reason, I think of the story my mother told us as children, about a rickety old boat that survived an impossible storm. Of all the fantastic parts of that story—and there were many—the boat was always the bit I found most implausible.

Over the loudspeaker, we are told to man the boats. There aren't enough for all of us, however, which means the men push forward toward the ladder in a desperate mob, throwing elbows.

Only four boats are filled when a bomber swings low. I hear its whine long before it reaches us and I can see the future unfold as surely as Sarah once did. I watch as the bomber's hatch opens and two missiles are dropped in quick succession. *Everyone* watches—horrified, spellbound, praying for some act of God to save us. The water will be ice cold, and we are too far from shore to swim.

Sarah warned us about the war. She warned me how Germany would break into France, and she was right. She warned me about Dunkirk, and she was right once more. She seemed convinced I would die. I pray that just this once, she was wrong.

I dive off the boat because there's no other option. I do it praying I'll survive. Praying Sarah will forgive me if I don't.

It's August, a rare moment of quiet in this house. Cecelia has cried all day, victim of one of those mysterious crying jags parents always blame on teething until the real culprit presents itself. Lucien and Charlotte helped me pick fruit all morning and are now drawing at the kitchen table, a level of contentment that won't last long. They are sweet children—but they are still children, constantly in motion.

I peek out the window. This is how I spend my days now: looking after children, watching the road. And waiting. Waiting for the Germans to arrive and discover Lucien and Charlotte hidden here, waiting for them to take the last of our meager resources or ask for Cece's papers. And the thing I most dread, because it's the one I can't defend myself against—waiting for a courier to tell me Henri is dead.

There's been no word, though I wrote to tell him we weren't able to leave. I try to reassure myself that he hasn't received my letters and is healthy and whole, still writing to us in England. But as the days drag on it's harder to believe it.

They'd have told me if he was dead, wouldn't they? I ask myself this question ten times a day. Yes, I always reply. *And at least he wasn't at Dunkirk.*

The tragedy at Dunkirk was in all the papers. The French and British forces were pushed to the shore and forced to evacuate while German bombers circled, taking out one ship after another. I'd read about it in my own time, of course, but it's different now that I can picture the men. Luc Barbier and his friend Marc were there, and no one has heard from them.

They were just boys. Too young to die. They'd barely even lived yet.

I watch the road all day long, in a constant state of readiness, but my mind often drifts the way it does right now, and I picture Henri coming home. In the distance, I'll see a tall man with dark hair. It could be almost anyone, but something inside me will say *it's him*. I can feel it, the way my breath will still, the way I'll try so hard not to let myself hope while my heart beats harder and faster. I picture him cutting through the field and then that flash of his smile, the one he saves only for me.

I picture it so hard that for a moment it seems possible I can *will* him here. But the road remains empty, and my stomach drops, back to that pit of dread and fear that almost seems permanent at this point.

How could it all have gone so wrong?

I think back to April, when Jeannette left. Lucien and Charlotte didn't have passports, so I couldn't have gotten them to England, but we could at least have headed south to the free zone before the bombing started, back before there were zones at all, back before travel papers were required—travel papers denied to Jews. Except I was so certain that if I called Jeannette's mother enough times, someone would pick up. I even considered going back a few months to get the address from Jeannette, so I could leave the children there. And then, one day, I found the address on a letter tucked in a book, and discovered the entire block was now rubble. Which meant that, had I time traveled to get the address, the children would be dead. Because of me.

If the Germans come for them in Saint Antoine, that will be because of me too.

What I might do, and what I might do wrong. The topic consumes me. I could go back to the days when Jeannette first disappeared, and tell my previous self to take the children to the free zone—but now fear holds me in place. Anything could go awry on the way and I wouldn't be able to fix it, not if it meant leaving three young children out in the open, without supervision. We are alive now, and I'm terrified I might change that, the way I nearly did once already. I could travel back to the day before Marie ran off and explain to her why she shouldn't leave—tell her I need her to take Cecelia to England so at least one of the children is safe—but if I do, I may be stripping her of a life with Edouard. And who knows what might go wrong instead?

The questions make my gift feel more like a curse, and I'm angry about

all of it. We shouldn't be trapped. Lucien and Charlotte, children who've just lost their mother, shouldn't have to live like fugitives. Charlotte shouldn't have to stare out the window each day, hoping her mother might come back. I shouldn't need to sleep with an ear open each night—waiting for the Germans or the constant threat of intruders, those who escaped Paris on foot and come through the farm now stealing chickens and fruit.

I shouldn't have to fight off this black-heartedness all over again. I don't want to let the ugly piece of me back into the light, and I worry with every day that passes I'll eventually have no choice.



EARLY IN SEPTEMBER, Charlotte stops staring out the window. For days she is quiet, her small face unreadable. I try to draw her out, bribe her with bits of rationed chocolate or a game, but nothing quite works. Then one afternoon, while Cecelia is pulling herself up on the bench, and Lucien marches around the room chanting some nonsense rhyme he's made up, Charlotte climbs into my lap and presses her head to my chest. "Are you going to be my mother now?" she asks.

I hesitate. In a way it feels like a bigger promise than I should make—if a relative appears I might be forced to give the children up, and I don't want her to count on me if she can't. But what does she need most? Does she need some tenuous promise of care until a better option arrives, or does she need to believe there is someone in the world who will always love her? Agreeing means far more than she could ever realize: it's an unholy alliance with that dark piece of me. The one that will kill what stands in my way, including anyone who tries to take her from me, even if their right to her is greater than my own.

"Would you like me to be?" I ask. Charlotte will be eleven when the war ends, and Lucien will be seven. He won't even remember another mother but me. I picture some hapless, well-intentioned relative finding us and trying to take them from me and taste metal in my mouth, blood pumping heavy and fast in my veins, surging with that desperate need to destroy.

She nods, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Then yes," I say, pulling her close. It feels like the right decision, and the worst choice I've ever made, all at the same time.



A WEEK later the Germans come. There isn't enough time to hide Charlotte and Lucien in the barn, and Lucien is still too young to stay quiet when asked. As the Germans are pulling up in front of the house, I rush the two of them to my room and lower them out the window closest to the woods.

"Run to the end of the vineyard and wait for me," I tell them. "Hold hands, and don't make a sound."

I climb back in and head toward the door, placing the gun under a dish towel on the table. That dark piece of me doesn't want to hide the gun at all. It wants to hurt them for doing this to us, for scaring me, for forcing me to tell a two-year-old and a five-year-old to run for their lives.

I open the door and find two soldiers there, boys themselves. They both look embarrassed.

"Good day, madame," one of them says politely. "I apologize, but I've been sent to retrieve your cow and your chickens."

I swallow hard. I'm not a citizen, and no one knows Lucien and Charlotte are here, which means Cece is the only person in this house who receives a ration card, and it's a half-ration at that. Without the cow and chickens, we will lose our eggs and milk and cheese. The vines and trees will soon be bare, so we'll be left to subsist on tinned food and nothing more.

I could kill them both in a heartbeat and be done with it, I think. Except they are barely children themselves, doing a job they don't want to do. And killing them will only bring questions that will cause more trouble.

"I need eggs and milk for my daughter," I reply. I want to wince at the sound of begging in my voice.

He frowns. "I'm sorry, madame." He flushes and looks at the soldier beside him. "Perhaps you might be allowed to keep one of the chickens?"

He's asking the other soldier more than he's asking me, and taking a risk. His compatriot's eyes widen and then he gives a small, terse nod.

I watch as they load the chickens into a cage, leaving me one, and then drive away at a snail's pace, the cow tied behind them.

Once they're out of sight I place Cece in her crib and run as hard as I can to Lucien and Charlotte. I fall to the ground when I find them, pulling them against me tighter than I should.

I can't lose them. I can't lose Cece. The thought terrifies me.

And the terror makes me angrier than I've ever been. Angrier than is

probably safe.

N ovember.

Not even officially winter, and already it's unbearably cold. Our heated floors and fireplace offer me little comfort. I can only think of Henri. Where does he sleep now? Was he taken prisoner? Is he floating at the bottom of the sea?

At night, after the children are asleep, I weep for him, asking one question again and again: *Why can't they just tell me what happened?*

Our lives have tightened and narrowed until it feels like there's almost nothing left. Because I anticipated that Jeannette wouldn't plan sufficiently, I'd already stocked the cellar with non-perishables last spring, and we live off of that and almost nothing else. I rarely get into town to buy anything more since it means leaving Charlotte and Lucien here alone, and when I do go, I only see resentment—*Why should a homewrecking American be getting rations?* they wonder.

It's not that all, or even most, of the townspeople are bad, but it only takes one of them to feel their own lot might be improved by lessening ours. And that one will give our names to the authorities, if they haven't already. It's inevitable. The revolver now sits on a high shelf near the table, waiting for the moment it will all come to a head. The girl I once was believes murder is wrong. But I still plan to kill anyone who enters our home and beg her forgiveness later.

I set dinner on the table, and Charlotte's small face falls when she sees another bit of tinned ham with powdered milk. I don't blame her—I understand how lucky we are to have it, but I'm sick of it too.

She picks at her food and then helps me clear the table. “What will it be like when we get to England?” she asks.

I smile at her. It’s one of our favorite topics these days. “We will live in the country, like this,” I tell her. “You will go to school, and while you’re there, I’ll take Lucien and Cecelia to the market and we’ll buy lots of food and when you come home each day, I’ll have a big supper waiting.”

“Will there be pie?” she asks.

“More pie and cake than you could ever want to eat. With fresh cream.”

“But no tinned ham,” she says firmly, wiping her hands against each other in a perfect imitation of me.

I tuck in my smile. “If anyone suggests we eat tinned ham, I’ll kill them myself with my bare hands.”

She laughs. “What about powdered—”

There’s a sound outside. Boots on the front step.

And the door is still unlocked.

The plate in Charlotte’s hand falls to the ground and shatters. I stand frozen before I remember my plan and spring into action, darting across the kitchen for the revolver.

Kill whoever is at the door, the first part of the plan. It doesn’t feel real now, even as I repeat the words.

The door opens. I point the gun just past it, ready to fire. “Halt!” I yell.

In spite of my fear, the desire to punish our intruder throbs in my veins. If he sets one more foot inside this house, I will put a bullet in his head, and some part of me will enjoy it.

“As you wish, little thief,” comes a low voice in reply.

My hands shake. It’s too much. It’s too good to possibly be real. I’m scared to believe it.

“Henri?” I breathe.

He steps into the light. Thinner, and tired, but him. As beautiful as ever. “Is there another man who calls you little thief?” he asks, with a smile I’ve missed more than I even knew. “I thought in that one way, I might have been original.”

I set the gun on the counter behind me and run to him from the kitchen, throwing myself into his arms, weeping like a child. He seems impossibly tall now, perhaps because he’s so thin, but he’s still my Henri. His clothes are in tatters and stiff with dirt, but beneath it is the same skin, the same smell, the same broad hands against my back, holding me as if I’m all that’s keeping

him from falling overboard into a stormy sea.

“Don’t leave us again,” I whisper.

“My poor little thief,” he says. “Has it been awful here?”

“It’s been awful wondering if you were alive or dead for the better part of six months,” I reply.

“I’m home now, though I wish to God I hadn’t found you here,” he says.

“When Marc told me you’d stayed behind I—”

Cece begins to cry too, unsettled by all the excitement, or perhaps just feeling left out. I release her father and his face lights up at the sight of her before he takes in our other guests and turns to me with a raised brow.

“Our family grew while you were gone,” I tell him quietly.

He blinks once, putting it all together, and then smiles, twining his fingers through mine. “I always wanted three children,” he says.

I lead him to the table and he sits with Cece in his lap, chatting with Lucien and Charlotte, while I get him a plate.

He glances up at me as I place the food in front of him. “It’s late. I’m surprised Marie isn’t home.”

My teeth sink into my lip. Marie’s been gone so long I’d almost forgotten he would expect her to be here. There’s a lot he doesn’t know, and he will definitely not be pleased. “She’s...gone. She went to Paris right after you left. I—”

“She *left*?” he repeats incredulously. “She left you here in this situation *alone*?”

I shoot a quick glance at the children. “The situation here didn’t change until she was gone, and it’s...complicated.”

He looks sick. “But she’s alright?” he asks. “She survived the bombings?”

I bite my lip. “I assume so. I think we might have heard from Edouard if she didn’t.”

He raises a brow. “Edouard?” he asks. “Why would we hear from *Edouard*?”

“You’re going to be an uncle,” I tell him, and his jaw falls open as he puts it together. I can see his thoughts even before he voices them: in his mind, his sister is painfully sheltered and innocent, still fragile from the ordeal in 1918. If she’s pregnant, it’s because she was forced, or manipulated. “I know you want to blame Edouard, but Marie played a heavy role. She admitted it herself. And the fact that she never came back means they’re probably

married by now,” I reply.

His nostrils flare. “If he hasn’t married her, I’ll—”

My hand folds over his. “I know. But right now, you need to focus. The child she carries might be...what everyone has waited for. You’re home and safe, and hopefully she is too. Under the circumstances, it’s more than we could hope for.”

We both take a quick glance at the children: Cecelia, who could easily have been swept away by Yvette, and Lucien and Charlotte, who’d lost both their parents before the war had even begun in earnest. “You’re right,” he says softly. “There were many times when I thought I’d never have a moment like this again. Thank God I was wrong.”

He digs into his food, eating like a starving man, which is likely not far from the truth. He tells us he dove from his ship just before it was sunk, swam in icy water for hours before he was rescued by three British soldiers, and then was taken captive. He managed to escape in late September, and has been traveling by night ever since.

“How did you eat?” I ask, grinding my teeth not to cry. Now that he’s here, and safe, I’m finally able to picture how awful it must have been.

His eyes—the softest green—meet mine. “I managed, little thief. But I’m so glad to be home.”



I DRAW him a bath and then take the children upstairs to bed. When I return he’s still in the tub. “You have no idea what a luxury clean water is,” he says with a laugh, “and *warm* water, no less.”

My eyes fill at the sight of him there and I go to the tub’s edge. “I’m shocked the water’s so clean.”

“I’ve had to empty and refill the tub twice,” he admits, and then his crooked grin fades. “What happened to Jeannette? If you stayed back because of the children, she must have died before the bombings even began.”

I sigh. “I’m not sure we’ll ever know. She went to Paris two days before we were due to leave. There was a stampede at the train station and many people died, but I have no idea. And by the time I knew where her mother lived, the whole block had been destroyed. But someone could come for them after the war. There might be aunts and uncles,” I tell him, before taking a

deep breath. “I won’t give them back if that happens.”

His tongue darts to his lip, considering what I’m saying. “Legally, I’m not sure you’ll have a choice.”

“I don’t care what the law says. Anyone who would take children from the family that’s raised them for more than half their lives doesn’t deserve them.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead. “You’re my wife in spirit, if not in name, and I trust your decisions,” he says.

My eyes sting. I’m not sure I deserve his faith. In fact, I know I don’t. But I feel so unspeakably lucky to have it. I kiss him, unable to say all the things I’d like to say. “Give me the pitcher and I’ll wash your hair,” I tell him.

He hands it to me, and I fill it with clean water, trying not to look at his naked lower half. He’s exhausted and half-starved from his journey, so certain things may need to wait.

I tip the pitcher over his head and fill it again, before lathering the soap in my hands. He groans as my fingers press to his scalp.

I still. “Am I hurting you?”

“Just the opposite,” he says. His hands rise to clasp my face and pull my mouth to his. He holds me there, exploring me with his lips and his tongue, dragging his teeth over my lower lip on his way to my neck. “Christ, I’ve missed you. Night and day, for months, I’ve missed you. And now you’re here and it seems almost too perfect to be real.”

“Henri,” I gasp, as his lips pull at the skin of my neck, “I have to rinse your hair.”

He slides under the water and then emerges, climbing to his feet and towering above me—leaner than before, bruised and glorious. I want to eat him whole.

It must show in my face.

He grins at me. “I can work with this position, but I sort of pictured us starting off in bed.”



I WAKE NESTLED AGAINST HIM. He is too warm and too perfect to be a dream, yet it still doesn’t feel quite real. Will there ever come a time when I don’t wake grateful to find him here? It’s hard to imagine.

Lucien rises and comes into the room before our clothes are on. “This will be an adjustment,” says Henri with a raise of his brow, holding the blanket to cover himself as he searches for clean clothes.

By the time I’ve dressed, Henri has a fire roaring on the hearth, and sits at the table with Lucien in his lap while Cecelia is being helped down the stairs by her adoring big sister.

“We don’t have coffee anymore,” I tell him. “Or sugar, I’m afraid.”

He smiles at me. “I have my family,” he replies. “That’s all I need.”

I feed him eggs and bread and the last of the canned ham and watch him eat with the same sort of delight I once felt when Cecelia was finally taking a full bottle. When he’s done, he plays with the children: chasing Lucien around the room on all fours, growling, swinging Cece up in the air and catching her in his arms, and teaching Charlotte to play *jeu de barbichette*, a horrible game that involves reciting a rhyme—and hitting the first person to laugh.

I frown. “What kind of game encourages children to hit each other?”

“French games,” he replies with a grin, “and this one was always my favorite.”

“And what happens when she plays that at school and gets expelled for slapping someone?”

He laughs. “Are all people in your time so soft?”

“Yes,” I tell him, but it feels like a lie as soon as I say it, and my smile falters. People in my time are soft, but I no longer am, not the way he thinks.



“YOU’RE HAPPY AGAIN,” says Charlotte when I put her to bed that night.

I smile. “Wasn’t I always happy?”

She shakes her head. “No,” she says. “You were waiting to be happy.”

A chill runs up my spine. She’s right. I had moments of happiness here with them, but they were brief. I was waiting for Henri to come home until I took a full breath, and once we’re settled in England and he leaves to fight, I’ll wait once more. If he dies, I’ll wait forever because there’ll be no other option.

“I don’t want you to fight,” I whisper to him much later, as we both lie awake in the dark, unwilling to be separated by sleep. “Once we are settled in

England, I want you to stay with us.”

He rolls to face me. “I can’t hide like a coward and let others fight for my country. But I’d never have gone if I’d known you would remain here, so defenseless.”

I laugh unhappily. “Defenseless? You know what I can do. There isn’t a woman in France better defended than me.”

“Except you’re no longer interested in defending yourself,” he replies. “You’re defending them, and in that you are as vulnerable as the rest of us.”

I want to argue but a part of me can’t deny what he’s saying. “There’s not much to be done for it now,” I tell him. “We’re here and we’ll have to deal with it as it comes.”

“Yes, but you can be prepared if nothing else,” he argues. “You need to know how to defend yourself. And how to kill.”

I freeze. Henri can’t conceive of the version of me who stabbed her own aunt in the chest or allowed people to burn alive, who wanted Yvette to die and even considered killing Dr. Nadeau when I discovered he’d lied to us about the penicillin, and I hope he never does. That part of me was successfully locked down when Cece was born, and I’m not letting her back into the light.

“I don’t want to learn how to kill,” I reply.

“And I don’t *want* to have to teach you how, but now it’s necessary,” he says. “We’ll start small. I’ll go hunting and you can come with me.”

My heart pounds in my chest. How would he look at me if he knew? Would he forgive me? He might. He’d excuse it as self-defense. But what if he really understood where it came from? My grandfather and aunt are the reason his mother is dead. They’re people who wanted to hurt others, who enjoyed it. And there is a part of me, a part I sometimes feel pulsing just under my skin, that wants that too.

“No,” I reply. “I can’t leave the children to go, and I’m not interested anyway. That’s just not who I want to be.”

“You realize I’ve killed men, yes?” he asks softly. “Do you judge me for it?”

“Of course not. You were at war.”

His hand glides through my hair. “And, if someone comes here to take the children, will you not be at war too? You had a gun in your hands the night I came home.”

I squeeze my eyes tight. If the children were hurt or threatened, there

would be no end to my rage, to my need for revenge. But until that time, I want to remain who I am: a person who went to a dark place and came back from it. A person capable of evil but refusing to give in. “That’s different,” I whisper.

“Only because it’s hypothetical,” he replies. “Once it happens it won’t be different at all.”

I stretch alongside him, allowing my hand to splay across the flat plane of his stomach. “Is this really what you want to discuss with me right now?” I ask, as my hand begins to slide lower.

“Yes,” he says with a groan, “but I suppose it can wait.”

Our lives don't change dramatically with Henri home. He will be arrested if the Germans know he's here, so he and Lucien and Charlotte still can't be seen and we still need to listen, always, for the sound of approaching cars. But he fills us, as if our family was a slightly deflated balloon and he's a huge burst of air. He sets traps in the woods to augment our paltry staples, and because he's here, I can finally go into town, using our pathetic ration cards and a little bit of our money to buy food on the black market. His presence also means the world to the children, Lucien in particular, who never even met his father. For the first time in his life there's someone around to wrestle on the floor and carry him on his shoulders.

I love having him home, and I love that, with him back, I'm no longer in this alone. Regardless of what skills I've acquired over the past year, I'm still only twenty-three. I need opinions other my own, and there's no one alive whose opinions I trust more than Henri's.

We go over the situation at night, once the children are in bed, and agree that we need to get out of the country. The "free zone" is hardly that—there are Germans in every town, and Jews are losing their jobs and their businesses everywhere. As no ships can sail out of Calais now, we will either need to get on a ship from Marseilles—more difficult, as the Germans are unlikely to let Henri board—or we can go through Spain to Lisbon and leave from there. But in order for that to happen, we need travel papers, ones that claim no one in the house is Jewish.

"I'll ask around," he says. "My Paris contacts will probably have gone underground. But there's always Monsieur Roche in town."

My teeth sink into my lip. I've only met Roche a few times, but he's never struck me as either helpful or trustworthy. "Are you sure it's safe to let him know Charlotte and Lucien are here? Is it safe to let him know *you're* here?"

"For enough money, Roche will keep anything quiet," he replies. It's a struggle to accept that answer. Not when the children's lives—and his—are at stake.

"People can be so much worse than you think," I tell him, looking at my hands. Iris wasn't merely the sister my mom disliked. She was evil, almost inhuman. My mother was a liar. Mathilde and the guards all looked perfectly normal but were willing to kill innocent women and newborns for a paycheck. And he has no idea how bad I am either. "You can't trust anyone."

He comes to where I stand. "Of course you can," he says. "I trust you."

I'm not sure you should. I keep the thought to myself as I rest my head on his chest, but something in the way he stiffens makes me feel like I said it aloud.



AT THE END of our first contented week together, I sit in the chair near the fire to give Cece her evening bottle, and Henri sits on the couch across from me, with Charlotte beside him and Lucien in his lap, telling them a bedtime story. His stories are normally about three children named Charlotte, Lucien and Cece, who go on amazing voyages and wind up living somewhere made of candy.

Tonight's story, however, is different. He tells them about a distant island, lost in the middle of a stormy sea, with waves so huge that no ship's captain dared approach for fear his boat would be dashed upon the high cliffs. "But one day a boat did arrive," he tells them. "It was a rickety boat, and no one understood how it had survived the water, much less the waves, but it had. Aboard the boat were four girls. They were dressed strangely and claimed to remember nothing of the journey or their life before it, aside from their names."

"What were their names?" Charlotte asks excitedly.

He grins. "No Charlottes in this bunch, I'm afraid," he tells her. "Their names were Lea, Scylla, Aisling and Adelaide."

My head jerks up. *Adelaide*. The woman Katrin told me we were descended from. *The start of the first families—four families, four gifts*. Could it be the same story? It must.

“The four girls,” he continues, unaware of my surprise, “were taken in by families in the village. Eventually, each fell in love, and married. But no children came, and one by one they each went to the priest seeking answers, and he told them no children would come until they left the island, because they’d each been given a gift, one that was meant to be shared.”

Charlotte’s small face falls. “But were they able to come back?”

“That’s what the girls asked too, because they were sad about leaving. And the priest told them, ‘You will all return home when the circle is complete.’”

“So, did they?” asks Charlotte. “Did the girls ever come back?”

“Pieces of them exist all around you,” Henri replies, “waiting to be called home. I feel certain they’ll get back eventually.”

“But where did they come *from*?” she persists. “They had to have parents.”

“No one really knows,” Henri says. “No one knows how that boat could have survived the storm, either. Perhaps it was magic.”

“I don’t believe in magic,” she replies. “If magic was real, someone would stop the bad things from happening.”

“Personally,” he tells her, “I believe that when the circle is complete, there will be enough magic in the world to do just that. Maybe that’s the reason it exists at all.”

Charlotte continues to ask questions and then complains bitterly at how unfair the priest was as we take the children upstairs. I lay Cece, now heavily asleep, in her crib and then, after pressing a kiss to Charlotte and Lucien’s foreheads, follow Henri to our room.

“Is that where the first four families came from?” I ask. “The woman who escaped with Marie—Katrin—she told me she was a daughter of Adelaide.”

And that I was too. I wish I could tell him.

He shrugs, unbuttoning his shirt. “It’s the story our mother always told us, growing up. And maybe it’s a fabrication, but most origin stories seem to contain an element of the truth. I hope so, anyway.”

I do too, except if it’s right, I’m not sure how the pieces will ever come together. Luna Reilly, who was brave when I was not, may have been the last of her line. And since I can’t have children, Adelaide’s line may end with me.

I perch on the end of the bed, feeling as if there is something important in what he said, something I'm missing. "What did you mean when you told Charlotte the girls could go home when the circle is complete?"

The shirt comes off and the undershirt follows. For the first time in the years I've known him, even the sight of his perfect, bare chest isn't enough to distract me. "There are time travelers who believe that being a part of the prophecy confers some kind of immortality," he says. "That they will all go to the island in the end."

"I wonder if that's what Coron was after," I say. "I thought maybe he wanted to produce an army of time travelers, but maybe he just wanted to assure his place in their afterlife."

Henri's mouth tips into a sad smile. "If that's true, then many people died over a fairy tale."

"So you don't think it's possible?"

He crosses the room and pulls me to stand. "I don't need to believe in any kind of afterlife. I'm happy with what I have right here and now."

His hand weaves through my hair, pulling me forward so that his mouth can press to the top of my head. I'm happy with what we have right here and now too. But that doesn't stop me from wishing I could keep it forever.

December comes. Henri speaks to the few people he trusts in town about getting travel papers, but comes up empty-handed, which leaves us stuck with only one option: Monsieur Roche. Henri heads to the woods to meet him one afternoon. The danger for him is much greater than it is for any of us—he's as likely to be shot as arrested if he's caught.

I wait for his return, feeling sick to my stomach, and rush toward him when he walks through the door, only to freeze at the sight of the bloody bag he holds. "Rabbits, for stew," he says, but his smile is strained.

"What happened? Is he going to get us papers?"

He closes his eyes. "It seems Roche has got himself into some trouble with the British. He doesn't want money in exchange anymore."

I stiffen. I don't trust Roche. "Then what does he want?"

"He doesn't have all the details, but the Brits need some airmen escorted to the Pyrenees."

My anger bubbles. I close my eyes, trying to rein it in. "Why can't Roche take them himself if he's created this problem?"

"Because it's dangerous," Henri says with a sigh, "and he's banking on the fact that someone will be desperate enough to do it for him."

"Which you're not," I reply.

He rubs a hand over his eyes. "I know, little thief," he replies. "I'll look for another way. But we can't hide in the open forever. It may be our only option."

"If that happens, then I'll take them. I can do things you can't. I can escape."

Henri shakes his head. “Absolutely not,” he says. He gives me a small smile. “You weren’t even willing to hunt rabbits. Larger prey might prove quite a struggle for you. We’ll find another way.”



THE WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS, the children are all struck down with some mysterious ailment that involves a sore throat and fatigue. It may be strep throat, but it lingers and all three of them have flushed cheeks and glassy eyes that don’t seem to improve. I call Dr. Nadeau, asking if I can bring Cecelia in.

“I cannot see you,” he replies. “Don’t call my home again.”

Coward, I think, fury bleeding from my pores. He would let an infant he personally delivered die simply because she’s a quarter Jewish. And yet I can’t say a word to him about it because, like the rest of this town, he holds us in the palm of his hand. Eventually, he, or someone else, will suggest to the Germans that they look more closely at us than they have been.

“He refused?” asks Henri, his voice quiet but livid as he walks in behind me. I nod, so angry that I don’t dare speak.

“When he stands before God,” he hisses, “he will regret the decisions he made during this war.”

Not soon enough, I think. It would be so easy to make Nadeau pay for this now. And why shouldn’t I? The man doesn’t deserve the comfortable life he has, and he’ll clearly never be of use to *us* again.

Henri is watching my face. “What are you not telling me?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I lie.

He grabs his coat. “You know what I miss?” he asks softly, heading for the door. “The days when I was certain you were telling me the truth.”

What he said bothers me, and the tension between us that lingers afterward, even more so. It’s as if a part of him has closed off to me. And yet, I suppose, he feels as if a part of me has closed to him as well. It’s there when we go to sleep at night, and the next day, even though nothing seems to have changed.

It’s just the stress, I tell myself. *It’s just that the children are sick*. But I’m not sure it’s true, and when he leaves the next day to get a Christmas tree, hoping to buoy everyone’s spirits, my stomach sinks as I watch him walk

away. I don't want to lose him to the war, but I don't want to lose him to *me* either, to this piece of me I'd rather he not know.

When Cecelia and Lucien go down for a nap, I pull my coat on and cross the yard to feed the single chicken now in the coop. I've just reached for the feed when I hear the low purr of a vehicle approaching and freeze, fear flooding my system.

Henri is gone. The gun is inside, on the high shelf. I could time travel to warn us, but what if something goes wrong and by the time I fix things, one of them is dead?

I take a single step out of the coop just as the jeep pulls up to the front door. Three German soldiers, in crisp new uniforms, medals gleaming. Their eyes lock on me, and I panic. I want to race inside for the gun, but I would be leading them straight to my family.

I need to get them out of here before Henri returns. Alerting them to his presence is as good as signing his death warrant.

"Bonjour, mademoiselle," says the one who climbs from the back of the car. He's older than the others, clearly in charge. "You're alone here on this farm?"

"No, my daughter is inside sleeping," I tell them. "But she's quite ill."

"Perhaps a visit from the doctor is required," he says. I glance at him, wondering if he's toying with me, if he's already aware the doctor won't come. My anger begins to coalesce, sharpen.

Even if I were able to get the gun, I could only kill two before the third killed me. So, whatever I do, I can't let them into the house.

"Perhaps," I reply. "Is there something I can help you with?"

He looks at me as if it's an invitation, his eyes roaming from my mouth to my chest to my legs, capping it all off with a small smirk. I grow colder inside, watching it. He'll die first.

"We are surveying the properties here," he says. "How many rooms have you?"

"Three rooms," I reply crisply. "All taken, I'm afraid."

He laughs. "My math skills are failing me, madame. Explain to me how a child and a woman require three rooms?"

"My sister-in-law will return soon from Paris. The third room is hers."

He raises a brow and begins to approach. "In these difficult times, I'm sure two women and a child could share a room." He circles me. "Or my men would be happy to share with you if you'd rather." His baton lowers, slides

just beneath the hem of my skirt. It reminds me of Gustave, and my hands begin to shake with fear and rage at once. That coldness inside me grows—the part that hates them for making me scared. I picture how they will die when this is over, the same way I used to picture the guards' deaths. It makes me feel powerful, except attacking them could bring more problems than it solves, and the driver is just a boy, unable to meet my eye. Nearly as much a victim here as me.

The commander's baton goes to my palm, pushing my right hand in the air. "No ring, I see, but you claim to have a daughter. Are you married?"

The ring is still packed, waiting for the trip it appears we will never take. The soldiers behind him shift uncomfortably. Obviously, they've dealt with him before. They're well aware that no answer I can provide will satisfy him.

"Yes," I reply. "I lost the ring."

"Let's go inside and have a look around, madame," he says with a smirk. "Perhaps together we'll find it."

I brace myself, ready to spring for the door if necessary. "No."

"No?" he repeats. His hand flies out, striking the side of my head, and then he pushes me to the ground. "Do you really think you can just tell me *no*?"

He plants one boot on my chest and shouts something in German to the others that makes them both freeze in place. It's not until he withdraws his gun that the youngest comes forward, with absolute dread on his face, and drops to his knees between my legs, pushing my skirt around my waist. With eyes shut, he whispers something in German that sounds like an apology. He is a child following orders. His pants fall to my bare thighs, and then two things happen so close together it's hard for me to determine which is first: the blast of a gun, and the spray of something solid and damp across my face. The soldier's eyes go wide and he falls on me—his eyes now sightless—as the gun blasts again and again.

Suddenly, Henri is there, pulling the soldier off me, his eyes as wide and shocked as my own. The three Germans lie dead on the ground around me. "Are you alright?"

The rage is still so strong inside me I shake with it. I nod, wrapping my arms around myself.

His hands go to the top of his head and he tugs at his hair. He's furious, but not only with the soldiers. "You didn't even jump!" he explodes. "You told me you'd leave if something went wrong and you didn't move a

muscle!”

I close my eyes and try to hold myself together. “I panicked,” I reply, grinding my jaw. “And I couldn’t just leave the children inside, undefended. I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to say that you won’t panic next time!” he shouts. “That you’ll use your head!”

My arms fold around me again, but when I feel the dampness of the blood on my sleeves I jerk them away. It’s smeared now, all over my coat. There’s a vicious piece of me that likes it. That likes that they’re all dead, even the innocent one.

Henri goes to the German soldiers on the ground and lifts one up by his hair. The man’s eyes are still open, his jacket so soaked with blood it appears to be black. He’s the one who was polite, initially. Just following orders. I can’t look at his face.

“Grab his knife,” he says. “If you’re going to survive this war, you’ve got to stop being so precious about death and the idea of harming anyone. He’d have raped you and killed all of us, given the chance, but you panicked and now you’re standing there, unable even to look at his corpse.”

I press my hands to my face. “You don’t understand,” I hiss. “Just leave this alone. I’ll be fine when the time comes.”

He drops the German and grabs the knife himself, pushing it into my hands. “The time just came and you failed!” he cries. “Stop making promises you won’t keep. If you’ll be *fine*, then prove it. Show me how you’ll kill him the next time.”

The adrenaline and rage inside me gather to a head, then explode. I grab the knife from him and slice the soldier’s jugular vein. Blood pours from the wound and I feel absolutely nothing. I grip the knife harder and bury it in the soldier’s back, hearing the slight hiss of air as his lung punctures. I pull it out and send it whistling ten feet away, where it buries into the base of the commander’s neck.

Henri’s jaw hangs open.

“What just happened?” he asks.

“I did what you wanted,” I reply. My voice doesn’t sound like my own. “Put them in the jeep. I’ll be right back.”

I go inside and get the keys to the truck. When I return, he’s loaded all three bodies into the jeep and waits for me, still astonished, still wanting answers to questions I wish he wouldn’t ask. *I’m made of the ugliest things,*

Henri. Please don't make me say it aloud.

I push away my self-pity. I don't deserve his forgiveness and there's not time for it anyway. If this isn't executed perfectly, it will blow up in our faces, and it needs to be done before the children wake. I throw him the keys to the truck. "Follow me," I tell him, climbing into the jeep.

"What are you doing?" he demands. "If anyone sees you..."

"I can time travel away and the jeep will crash." I don't wait for him to continue questioning me but push down the clutch and take off, heading for an embankment about a mile down the road.

I'm terrified, my heart beating too fast, but that feeling is pushed down hard as the jeep picks up speed. Something cold and methodical comes over me—maybe it's the Coron blood. Maybe it's simply that a part of me thinks it might be easier to die right now than tell Henri the truth. Either way, it's a relief to feel something other than fear. I drive toward the sharp turn at the top of the hill and focus hard on the embankment. The car slows as my feet disappear but has enough momentum to continue without me. I fade entirely just as the jeep tips over the side of the hill and land, naked, twenty feet away.

Henri's brakes screech to a stop nearby. "Sarah!" he cries as the jeep rolls into the ravine and lands upside down at its base.

I ignore him, scrambling toward my clothes, which flew out of the jeep before it rolled over, thank God. I clutch them to my chest and reach into my coat pocket for the matches I placed there. The match is struck and thrown toward the brush near the jeep. There's a risk that it will die out before it reaches the gas tank, but I'm hoping to give myself some time to get away. I run hard up the hill, feeling the heat of the fire behind me. For a moment, I'm back in 1918, climbing a ladder in the pantry that may or may not lead to safety. Henri pulls me over the edge just as the jeep explodes, staring at me like I'm someone he doesn't know, a demon who's possessed the girl he thought he loved.

"What in God's name were you thinking?" he shouts. "If that jeep had caught fire a moment sooner you'd have been blown to bits!"

Now that it's over, my hands are shaking. I cut it close—ridiculously close. I lean over, certain I'm going to vomit but simply shake instead, cold sweat dripping from my forehead. "There will be an investigation into the deaths," I reply, forcing myself to pull it together. I grab the dress and tug it over my head. "If they found bullet holes, they'd be looking for culprits. Now

they might believe it was just a dangerous turn taken too fast.”

“I thought you were dead!” he shouts, grabbing my arm. “I watched the jeep go over the edge and I was certain—”

“Yell at me later,” I say, jerking away from his grip. “The smoke will attract eyes. We’ve got to get out of here.”

He follows me to the truck and drives home in silence, but once we arrive, he slams his hands against the steering wheel. “I want answers,” he says, his jaw tight. “I’ve known you for two years. You stay awake all night worrying when our daughter has a cough. You can’t watch me break a chicken’s neck, and gag at the sight of dead rabbits, but suddenly you know how to kill, and how to *disguise* a killing, with ruthless efficiency. How is that possible?”

Finally, I feel something. *Despair*. Because the truth is vast and ugly and he’s making it unavoidable.

“I don’t have time for this,” I reply. I channel my mother, using that haughty, imperious tone she intimidated me with a thousand times as a child. “The children are going to wake soon and I’m covered in blood.”

He’s out of the truck and blocking my path before I can reach the door. “Enough evasions!” he shouts, gripping my arm. “Talk to me! Tell me what this is!”

A choked laugh escapes my throat. After everything we’ve been through, after fighting so hard to get back to him and so much time spent hiding what I am, he’s going to force me to ruin it.

“Let me ask you something,” I say, brushing angry tears away with my free hand. “Those people who held us captive, who killed your mother—what if I told you I was like them? What if I told you I was *one* of them?”

He shakes his head. “Why are you asking me this? You’re neither of those things!”

“I’m both of those things,” I reply. “The man in charge was my grandfather. The woman helping him was my aunt.”

There is horror on his face. I’d held out the tiniest shred of hope that he might look past it, might be able to forgive me. Now I know, looking at him, how naïve that was.

His hand releases me. I turn and walk into the house before he sees me cry.



BY THE TIME I emerge from the room in clean clothes, Henri's got Cecelia in his arms, and Lucien and Charlotte are both sitting at the table with mugs of powdered milk. He looks at me for a long moment when I walk in. I can't tell if it's disgust or despair I see in his face. I suppose it doesn't matter. Neither is good.

I throw my clothes into the fire and then, without saying a word, he hands me Cecelia and goes outside. A few minutes later he brings in the fir he cut down, which I'd forgotten about entirely. The children, still so ill, rouse a little at the sight, and we feed them dinner and help them string popcorn and cranberries for the tree, saying not a single unnecessary word to each other.

Perhaps I should be grateful for the silence, but I'm not. It feels like the lull before the storm. Does he hate me now? Does the revelation make me someone he won't want around his daughter? I swallow hard at the thought. I have no idea what I'll do if he asks me to leave.

Cecelia falls asleep in my arms. "I'll put Lucien and Charlotte to bed," he says, without looking at me.

I lay Cece in her crib and then go to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I wait for the tub to fill, my heart beating hard. What will I do if he tells me to leave? How will I keep all of them safe through the war if he won't let me near them? If he were anyone else, threatening to separate me from him and the children, I'd be planning his death. But my Coron blood is nowhere to be found at the moment.

I wash my hair, listening for the sound of his heavy tread all the while. I never dreamed the day would come when I'd be more frightened by the sound of Henri's footsteps than a stranger's, but I am right now. He holds everything I care about in the palm of his hands.

When I finally hear him coming down the stairs, my forehead presses to my knees. *Don't cry*, I tell myself. *Use your head*. But the part of me that was so sharp and certain earlier has abandoned me. I feel like the child I once was—small, alone, despised, defenseless.

The door opens. His eyes are cold and hard. "Is your bath done?" he asks. *He's going to throw me out*. It seemed possible before. Now it feels certain. Inside, I am scrambling, wondering how I can prevent this from happening. But the voice that comes out is my mother's again. Cold and careless. "I'll let you know when I'm done."

"You're done," he snaps, striding across the room. He lifts me from the tub as if I'm a child, while I fight, slippery and desperate, pounding at his

chest but getting nowhere. His grip tightens.

Tears run down my face. “You can’t make me leave!” I scream. “You can’t!”

His body jerks and stills, suddenly. “*Leave?*” he asks. He places me on my feet, holding onto me with one arm. “You think I want you to *leave?*”

“Why else are you pulling me out of the tub?” I cry, still tense and braced for a fight.

To my utter shock, he laughs. A small, slight sound, but a laugh nonetheless. He wraps a towel around me. “I’m tempted to question your sanity right now. How could you possibly think that?”

“I told you everything and you—” my anger gives way and my voice breaks – “you couldn’t even look at me afterward. You didn’t even speak to me all night. What else was I supposed to think?”

He pulls me to him with the towel, which he holds tight around me. “I didn’t speak tonight because sometimes, in anger, it’s best to say nothing. And I’m *still* angry. First, because you didn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth about all this. Most of all, though, because I had to watch today as you were very nearly raped and then very nearly incinerated, and both were entirely your fault. You took unnecessary risks, and I’m furious at you for it, but that’s the opposite of wanting you to leave, isn’t it?”

“I did what I had to do to keep us all safe,” I reply. “But it’s as if you haven’t even heard what I said. You saw what I’m capable of today and you know who I’m descended from. How can you still want to be anywhere near me? How can you still care what happens to me?”

“You stabbed a man who was already dead,” he replies. “That hardly makes you Hitler.”

I stare at his chest, no longer able to meet his eye. “I’ve killed before this. It was my aunt you found in the pit, wearing your mother’s necklace. I probably didn’t even have to kill her, but I wasn’t sure I’d have the strength to time travel home without her spark. I set the fire that killed all the guards. And I helped them. I started working in the kitchen, and I was the one who poisoned the other women. I didn’t know it was poison, but I knew something was wrong and I did it anyway.”

He listens to my words with his grave face, but when I finish I see no judgement there. “If it’s because you did those things that you managed to come home to me,” he says softly, “then I’m glad for every one of them.”

He takes the towel and crouches, drying my legs, between my toes. As if

I'm still something he treasures. Tears run down my face, watching him, and then he rises and wraps his arms around me.

"My mind works the way theirs did, Henri," I whisper. "It's cold and methodical, and killing made me feel...powerful."

His lips press to my temple, and then my cheek. "You're not going to scare me away, Sarah," he says. "I know you. Killing might make you feel powerful, but it's not your driving force, and even if it were, God help me, but I'd love you all the same. If you are soft and sweet and need protection, I will love you. And if you are a weapon capable of destroying people in ways I haven't even dreamed of, I will love that version of you as well. Whatever it is you are, I want you and I wouldn't change it."

He holds me there, with the towel wrapped around me, until my tears have slowed.

"You're shivering," he says. "Come." He pulls me to our room and tucks me into bed, wrapping the blankets around me, before undressing to slide in beside me.

He finds my hand and lifts my palm to his lips. "Tell me everything."

Haltingly, with my head pressed to his chest, I do. I tell him about Katrin, and her suspicions that I was her descendant. About Luna Reilly, who tried to stop the guards while I just sat there in silence. I tell him about Mathilde and the babies, and how I swaddled dead infants and felt absolutely nothing as I did it.

I tell him that I thought of killing Yvette and Dr. Nadeau, that there was a time, before Cece was born, that I hoped she wouldn't survive. And he listens, running a hand over my back the entire time, soothing me, even as I tell him things he should hate me for.

"But how does any of this make you related to Coron?" he finally asks when I'm done.

"Katrin... I think she knew what I was even before I did. She said something about it, the way I was able to think the way Coron did. She was one of the women he raped and she was pregnant when she left. I confronted my mother about everything when I got home and she admitted that Peter Stewart wasn't my father."

"Sharing Coron's blood doesn't make you what he is," Henri says.

"In my case, it does. It felt like it went away, when Cecelia was born, but it's back. I feel it every time we're threatened. That ugly side of me wants to be set free."

“That side of you might just turn out to be what saves the children’s lives if I’m not here,” he says, pushing my hair back. “Perhaps everything you’ve lived through was necessary to survive what’s to come. And I need you to survive. So please, never do what you did today. Don’t risk yourself like that.”

His lips brush mine, once and then twice, and his hand rests on my hip, pulling me closer. My mouth opens beneath his and I feel him respond to it, groaning as I arch against him, before he pulls back.

“I should let you rest,” he says, flinching. “After what happened today—”

I pull him on top of me. “Nothing happened today,” I reply. “And I’m not fragile.”

With a small shudder he pushes inside me, leaning over to find my mouth. I feel split open, mentally and physically. He knows the ugliest things in my soul and he loves me in spite of them. It is more than I could have hoped for, and it changes something between us.

Being with him tonight is more than love or lust.

For the first time ever, it feels holy.

I wake the next day feeling sore, but in the best possible way. With the secrets between us finally gone, something that seemed impossible to improve upon is even better.

But our situation remains the same, possibly worse. Did that commander who visited yesterday tell anyone where he was going? Surely, the fact that they died two miles down the road will force someone to at least look at the farm. All day long my eyes flicker to the revolver on the high shelf in the kitchen, to the knives on the counter. Lucien knocks over a broom behind me and I jump.

“We can’t continue like this,” Henri says.

I shrug, as if my heart didn’t nearly shoot out of my chest from the sound of a broom falling. “I’m not sure we have a choice.”

“Unfortunately,” he sighs, “we do. I’ll stay through Christmas, and then I’m going to run Roche’s little errand.”

I shake my head. “No,” I whisper. “Please. Don’t.”

“I’ll be gone two weeks, perhaps three, and then we’ll have everything we need. We’ll take the train to Marseilles and be on the next boat to England. Think of it, all of us together, where the children can run outside without fear.”

There’s a part of me that wants to believe him, that wants to fall into this pretty picture he’s creating. Already, I can imagine summer nights when the children catch fireflies in jars and swim, Henri and I watching them with our hands clasped, the worst behind us. I hunger for it in a way I can hardly even express.

But nothing that's happened over the course of my life leads me to believe our happy ending could be so close at hand, or acquired so simply. If it were easy, Roche would be doing it himself.



BY CHRISTMAS, Lucien and Charlotte are better. Cece is still sick, but she's younger and more fragile, so it stands to reason she'd heal more slowly.

Though the holiday is not Charlotte's and Lucien's, they are part of our family now, so we get them a few gifts we managed to scrounge up, resolving to teach them about their own traditions when the war has passed and it's safe again.

It's a struggle to remain cheerful all day, however. Tomorrow, Henri will leave for this mission of Roche's. I can't stop wondering if this might be the last Christmas we share, but I don't want to ruin our time together with my sad thoughts.

Once the children are in bed, I curl up against him. *Don't talk about tomorrow. Don't ruin this.* "Tell me about our honeymoon," I say.

"We'll go to Greece," he says. "After the war, when the world is finally safe again."

"Will we take the children?" I ask.

He smirks. "Is that a serious question? Absolutely not. Think how awkward that would be, with you in bed the whole time."

"The *whole* time?"

"Don't worry," he says, twisting a strand of my hair around his finger. "I'll make sure you still have a lovely view of the sea from our room."

"Ah, so only *I* will remain in bed?"

He laughs low. "I plan to exhaust you to the point that you won't be able to leave. I'll venture out to get you food and perhaps take a quick dip in the water, but nothing more."

I grin. "Maybe I want to be the one to venture out for the food while you remain in bed."

He pulls me above him. "Are you offering to do all the work, little thief?" he asks, his voice dropping an octave, smooth as silk. "I'm happy to agree. But first, perhaps, you should show me what that entails."

I try to smile but it falters. "Please don't do anything stupid on this

mission.”

“Everything I do is brilliant,” he says with a cheeky grin, trying to make me laugh.

His ploy works but the laugh catches in my throat and becomes a sob. I am already thinking of last summer, of those months when I didn’t know if he was alive, the terror of them. We got lucky once. Will we get lucky again?

His lips press to my head. “Don’t cry. In two months, we’ll be sitting at our cottage in the British countryside and this will all be behind us. Have faith, little thief. I have a feeling our story isn’t over just yet.”

I head to Paris on foot, through the woods. I'm provided directions to the safe houses along the way by Roche's contact before I'm led to the airmen I'll be guiding.

Any optimism I felt diminishes once we meet. One of the two Brits, Reginald Price, is shifty-eyed and sullen. Nothing about him engenders trust. The other, Thomas Stevens, is quite ill, struggling with a foot he thinks he may have broken upon landing. He's not willing to remain behind, but a journey like this is taxing on even the strongest of men, and I don't see him making it through Pyrenees without assistance. The American, Michael Quinn, is neither ill nor untrustworthy, but he's brash and loud and behaves as if this is some kind of lark, which leaves him, in my estimation, the most likely to get us all killed.

We sneak out of Paris by the skin of our teeth, one block at a time, hiding in the shadows the whole way. We walk all night and most of the day, making our way through the woods instead of using main roads. Our progress is slowed significantly by Stevens, who is dragging his foot like a heavy bag behind him.

"He's slowing us down," Price says under his breath. "We need to leave him behind."

My lip curls. They're not just countrymen—they flew together and were the only two of their crew to survive. I don't trust any man with so little loyalty to a soldier he's fought beside. "No one's getting left behind."

"It's your funeral," Price mutters.

Our funeral, I long to correct, but say nothing. Fighting will only delay

getting them to the final safe house, which will delay the one thing I want right now: to get home.

“You got a girl, Durand?” asks Quinn as we settle into the first safe house, which is little more than a shack and provides no protection from the elements.

My eyes are closed. I don’t want to talk right now. I want to picture Sarah waiting in bed for me or the smile on her face when I walk through the door. I want to think of the way she looks as she sits with Cece in the rocking chair or brushes Charlotte’s hair. I still don’t understand how she could have thought I’d want her to leave, but I suppose being raised by a woman who hates you is hard to shake.

“Yes,” I reply. “Amelie. You?”

He shrugs. “I did have one, before the war started. When I volunteered, she found herself some college boy who didn’t enlist. You got a photo?”

Reluctantly, I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out a copy of her passport photo, taken just before she was held captive. She’s in the blue dress, though it simply looks gray in the picture, and she smiles at the camera with a certain look in her eyes—the kind that promises all sorts of delights once I’ve put the camera away. Only a few days have passed, but I miss her badly.

Quinn lets out a low whistle. “Sweet Jesus. She have a sister?”

I laugh unwillingly. “No.”

“Hope you stashed her somewhere safe.”

I fight the uneasy feeling in my stomach, closing my eyes to remember how fierce Sarah was that day the Germans came. When she threw that last knife with nary a glance, but still managed to sever the commander’s brainstem. If anyone can protect herself and our children until I get back, it’s her.

The next morning begins several very long days, as we make our way to the free zone. Once we finally arrive, Quinn starts to cheer and I silence him. “Don’t let the name fool you,” I warn. “Vichy isn’t as free as you might hope. And we have a long walk to the Pyrenees ahead.”

He quiets down, but his unfailing optimism remains firmly in place, which is still far preferable to Price’s weasel eyes, constantly shifting between the group of us. He suggests more than once, under his breath, that Stevens should be put out of his misery. “It would be the kindest thing to do,” he says.

If the situation weren't so grim, I'd laugh. Sarah killed bad people in order to save her own life and thinks she's evil and violent because of it. But true evil is surrounding us right now in men like Price, men who kill for selfish reasons and tell themselves it's heroism. I can't even judge him too harshly for it. Every day I spend in his company has me justifying reasons to put a knife in his back too.

On the ninth day of our journey—four days behind schedule—we finally see the Pyrenees rising in the distance. This time, I'm able to share Quinn's broad grin.

"Nearly there," he says.

I laugh. "We're still two days from the base."

"Don't ruin this for me, Frenchy," he replies. "I'm picturing a big steak dinner and a pretty girl waiting at the bottom of that mountain and you won't persuade me otherwise."

Stevens, his bad foot now dragging audibly behind him, does not share our happiness. Climbing those peaks seems a daunting task even to me, and in his current state I can't imagine what it will take to get through it. I argue with myself for the next two days, but when we reach the safe house in Carcassonne, I finally pull him aside.

"The journey so far has been easy, compared to what it will be," I tell him. I flinch, thinking of what it will mean if he accepts the offer I'm about to make. It will add a week or more to the time I'm gone, at the very least. "If you'd like to rest here and gather your strength, I'll come back for you."

He scrubs a hand over his face. "My son turns three next week, and my wife's due at the end of the month. I suppose I won't be there for either of them, but it'd be a hell of a surprise if I were, wouldn't it? I've got to try."

I give him a brief nod. I disagree with his decision, but it's not mine to make. "It would," I agree. "I'll do my best to get you there."

We sleep all day by the fire and set out at nightfall with fresh bread and tinned ham in our packs, skirting the main road so we don't miss the trail that will lead us into the mountains. As sunrise approaches, the terrain grows steep and the air thins. Stevens struggles to keep up, his breathing harsh and irregular.

"Come on, mate," I urge quietly. "I see the trail ahead, which means we'll be stopping soon."

"Not at the rate he's moving," snarls Price. "And the Krauts are all over this damn place, so if we're still out at daylight we're good as dead."

“Fuck off, Price, you selfish bastard,” says Quinn. “Where’s your fucking loyalty?”

Price rounds on him as I turn onto the trail. “You shouldn’t even be here. The British government is trying to get *us* home, not—”

A floodlight blinds us and I jerk to a stop, squinting into the glare. Five Germans stand there, blocking the path ahead, their rifles trained on us.

And then they tell us to drop to the ground.

January is the coldest month I've ever endured. So cold that I can feel it in my teeth if I stand near the window, and so gray it's hard to imagine there was ever a time when it was otherwise.

I wake each morning feeling as if I'm holding my breath, waiting for Henri's return. How could anyone survive in this weather for four weeks? Lucien climbs up to the window several times a day with those sad brown eyes of his, ever hopeful that Henri will be walking around the corner. I can hardly fault him—I keep hoping for it too.

Cecelia, my poor sweet baby, is sicker by the day. I really thought she was turning a corner, around the time Henri left. But then the crying began, a heartbreaking wail I can't seem to fix. She needs real milk, real meat, real fruit. All three of them do. They haven't had food that wasn't from a tin for weeks. When the last day of the month comes and goes with no sign of Henri, I know I can't keep waiting on his return to get us something in town.

And I can't keep waiting to find out what happened to him.

Before sunrise the next day, I grab every ration card we possess, along with an obscene amount of money, and leave Charlotte in charge of Lucien. I know I should put them in the cellar in case we have visitors, but it's so cold I can't stand the thought of it. I promise Lucien chocolate if he is very good while I'm gone, and then bundle Cecelia into her pram. A month ago, she'd have been far too restless to lie down in the stroller the way she does now. A week ago, she'd have wailed until the entire town was staring at us. Now, she doesn't fight and she doesn't cry. My stomach clenches into a knot so tight that it hurts as I look at her.

I walk through town in the darkness until I arrive at Roche's home, on the less savory side of Saint Antoine. I lift Cece from her pram and knock on the door. He looks me over with interest for a moment, and then his eyes narrow and he grasps me by the arm so hard and so suddenly I nearly drop Cece as I'm yanked over his threshold.

"I know you," he says. "You're Durand's whore. And if you mean to threaten me by showing up like this, let me assure you I don't take threats kindly."

I pull Cece closer to my chest, my heart hammering hard. With her here, I can't do any of the things I'd like to right now. "I'm not threatening you. I want to know where my husband is."

He looks me over again, head-to-toe. "He's not your husband, as I recall. He's someone else's. He didn't even try to get papers for you, you know."

Anger makes my vision begin to cut in around the edges. "Answer the question," I reply between gritted teeth. "Where is he?"

"There's been no word," he replies. "I'm assuming that means he failed and got them all killed, but you'd need to ask my contact in Paris to be certain."

Killed. I restrain my desire to shudder. He's not dead. Maybe he's captured, but he's not dead. He can't be.

"Well, in order to speak to anyone in Paris, I'll need those travel papers you promised."

He arches a brow. "I agreed to create those papers in exchange for a job he has not yet done. When the airmen reach England, then he shall have his papers." His eyes roam over me. "Unless you'd like to strike another sort of deal."

Rage boils in my blood. This man is risking Henri's life but won't hold up his side of the bargain, though it will cost him nothing. "I'm not striking another sort of deal with a man who still hasn't honored the first one."

He grasps my elbow and pulls me to the door. "Then we have nothing to discuss. Come here again and I'll see that you regret it."

The door slams behind me and I stand for a moment, feeling the pulse of fury in my brain, the desire to destroy. Cece is heavy in my arms, reminding me how ill she is—not since she was a newborn could she have slept through an exchange like that one. I place her in the pram and force myself onward, to the queue at the grocer's.

If Roche knew who he was dealing with, I think, he wouldn't have been so

high-handed. And God knows I'm tempted to show him.

I reach the grocer's just as the sun is rising. The women in line eye me with suspicion. In better times, they were friendly enough, but now I'm the worst of all possible things—a homewrecker, an American, and tainted by association with the Durands. The only way I could make it worse at this point is if I were also a Nazi, and then at least they wouldn't be openly rude. Claudette Loison, the girl who fancied Henri so much back in the day, is among them. She whispers to the woman behind her and then turns back toward me. "Whore," she mouths, so I can see.

I'm not someone you want to trifle with, I think, and then force my gaze to Cecelia—a visible reminder that I must be level-headed right now, my best self. I get our things and proceed to the butcher's. His wife offers me canned sardines and I lean toward her so I won't be overheard. "Is there anything else you might be able to spare for fifteen francs?"

Her eyebrows go up. "Since when do the Durands have fifteen francs to spend?" she asks.

I'd almost forgotten Henri's charade of being poor. "They still don't," I reply. "But I do."

She gives me an almost imperceptible nod. "I can give you a ham. My husband will meet you in the back."

Within a few minutes, I'm on my way with a ham wrapped in paper beneath my arm. The basket is heavy but when I picture how delighted Lucien and Charlotte will be with my haul it all seems worthwhile.

I walk along the main road, ignoring the eyes on me as I pass, and breathe a sigh of relief as I turn toward the farm. Finally out of sight, I set the basket down, rubbing the welt it's left on my inner arm.

"Nearly there," I tell Cecelia, who looks up at me with pale eyes, more listless than she was even when we left. I slide my finger against her palm, and her hand tightens around it, a reflex. "When we get home, I'll mash you up an apple and some ham and you'll be right as rain." My voice cracks on the last word. I no longer believe my promises to her.

I reach for the basket, and straighten, but just as I do, something slams into the back of my head. The pain makes the world go black, and I fall. It's impossible to think, to understand what's happened. For a moment I don't remember where I am.

Cecelia.

Panic has me struggling to push my face up from the ground. My sight

returns but I'm so dizzy that my stomach rolls as I climb to my feet. Cecelia is still in her pram, thank God, but my basket and the ham are gone.

I sway, trying to make sense of it. Until this moment, I thought it must be an accident. A falling branch, perhaps. But it was intentional. A hit hard enough to kill me. Whoever ran off didn't care that he was leaving an infant here to freeze while her mother bled to death on the ground.

That rage—simmering for weeks—boils over, staining everything, spilling poison in my brain. Not just for my assailant, but for all of them: the Nazis, the French police doing their dirty work, the women in town whispering slights as I walked past. Monsieur Roche and this job he's made Henri do. Jeannette and Marie for leaving. Doctor Nadeau for refusing to help us.

Right now, my capacity for harm may exceed anything my grandfather or aunt ever dreamed of. I want to kill everyone who has ever hurt us, though I'd settle for jumping back in time a few minutes and teaching whoever struck me the most painful lesson he's ever endured.

Except the children are at home unattended and Cecelia needs to get inside. *Focus*, I tell myself. *You have to put them first.*

My hands shake as they wrap around the handles of the pram and I begin to limp home. My ears still ring from the hit and my vision remains slightly blurred. I haven't touched the back of my head but it feels wet.

I get to the farm and walk in the door to find the bookcase on its side and broken. Charlotte and Lucien are both crying but unharmed, and I want to cry too.

What am I going to do? How am I going to get us out of this mess?

"Your head is bleeding," Charlotte says through her tears.

I know she's talking about the cut, but it feels like so much more than that.



I DON'T NORMALLY PRAY and I'm not even sure what I believe in, at this point, but once the children are in bed that night I fall to my bruised knees and beg anyone listening for help. "Please help Cece get better. Show me what to do for her. Please bring Henri home and help us find a way to get out of here." I ask and ask, but when I'm done the house is silent. Absolutely

nothing has changed, and I know it's not going to. And that feels like an answer, in and of itself.

No one is going to help. No reinforcements are coming. But God left us a weapon, one it's high time I used.

Me.

I get off the floor.

My tears have dried and I feel empty now, and calm. My blood slows and my sight sharpens. Fear is replaced by cool certainty, and I welcome it.

Nadeau *will* cure Cecelia. Roche *will* tell me how to find Henri and provide me the documents he owes us.

I just went about it all wrong. And time travel will allow me to do it again, the right way.

Normally, when I time travel, I do so from the barn. Tonight, though, I just go into the kitchen. I close my eyes and go back to the evening before. Some previous version of me sleeps nearby and I freeze for a moment, worried I'll wake her. But there isn't a sound. She continues to dream, blissfully unaware of how terribly her day is about to go.

I dress in trousers and a sweater that hang by the fire and I sneak out of the house, sliding through the shadows in town to Roche's home. When I reach his locked door, I know I should be terrified, and perhaps some distant part of my brain still is, but anger is like an ice-cold drink on the hottest day. It makes me feel new again, and capable of anything.

I consider my options—knocking on his door or time traveling inside on my own. I go for the latter. He's stronger than I am and may be armed, so I want the element of surprise on my side. I focus on the interior of his house, and fade, landing inside perhaps a second earlier. He's a sound sleeper, which is unwise given his profession, and unwise given the enemy he's made in me, though he's not aware of it yet. His snores continue unabated while I open his

door to get my clothes from his front stoop, and don't stop until I'm standing beside him, pressing my blade to his neck. He gasps as it punctures the skin. "I'd be very careful, were I you," I tell him. "I'm barely a millimeter from a very important artery. And before you do something stupid, know this: you won't be the first person I've killed, and I sort of enjoy the experience when warranted. Now tell me where Henri Durand is."

It sounds believable. Perhaps because every word of it is true. His nostrils flare but, to his credit, he doesn't try to attack me. "He met the people in Paris. That's all I know."

"So how do *I* reach the people in Paris?"

"I don't know," he says. "They contact me, not the reverse."

I press the blade against his neck more firmly and allow it to nick his skin. "How sad for you, then."

His teeth grind together before he concedes. "Go to the Café de la Mairie. Tell them you're tired of chicory and long for a single sip of real coffee, then ask for Robert. Now get that blade off my neck."

"Not so fast," I say, leaning closer. "There is still the matter of the papers you owe Henri."

"I don't have your papers!" he shouts. "And Durand didn't get the job done, so you won't be getting them."

"Sit up," I hiss. "I'd like you to watch something."

Still holding the blade to his neck, I pull another knife from my jacket with my left hand and throw it at the rosary hanging from his bookcase. My gaze remains on him as the chain breaks and the beads spill to the floor, and then I lean in close. "I am capable of doing things you can't even dream of, and I want my fucking papers."

I've spent years asking nicely and pleading for what I need.

As he unwillingly moves to his desk to get what I've demanded, I realize I should have done it this way all along.



JUST AFTER SUNRISE, a few hours after I've left Roche's house with our papers, I go to the site of the attack. Whoever threw that brick at my head is about to pay dearly for what he did. I hide in the bushes, longing to warn myself as Cecelia's pram comes into view. That brick comes sailing through

the air, striking with a force that makes me wince as I watch it happen.

Someone rushes up to grab my basket. It's only when she turns to flee that I see her face.

Claudette Loison.

Claudette left me on the ground bleeding and perhaps dead, left my sick daughter out in the cold to freeze. Somehow the fact that I *know* her only makes my fury greater. If I'd planned to let her off the hook—though I really hadn't—this discovery would have put an end to it.

I spring from the bushes, felling her with the same brick she used on me. She's knocked unconscious by it—which is probably for the best—and I pull out my knife.

It would be so easy to kill her right now. My blood hums with desire for it, and she *deserves* just that for leaving Cece so vulnerable. It takes all my restraint to hold back.

It's not her life I need right now, though—it's her finger.

I cut off her pinky and place it carefully in my pocket. And then I leave her on the ground, to die or not die, just like she left me.



FOR THE LAST stage of the plan, I return to regular time. Dr. Nadeau doesn't sleep as soundly as Roche and is fumbling for his glasses when I walk into his room—holding Cece on my left side and a gun in my right hand.

He winces at me and turns on the lamp beside him, flooding the room with low, flickering light. "What the hell are you doing?" he sputters. "Put that thing away."

"I'd be happy to," I reply. "As soon as you treat my daughter."

"You really think you can threaten me?" he asks. "I could destroy your entire family with a single word."

"I could destroy yours as well. And if my daughter isn't cured tonight, I will. I know where your son lives. He's a dentist in Reims, correct? I met him and your sweet little grandson at mass once."

For the first time I see fear in his eyes, and I relish it. I've been terrified for a month because he refused to help Cece. It's about time he discovered what it's like. "You wouldn't," he says, though he doesn't sound certain. "He's just a child."

I laugh. “The little girl I hold in front of you is just a child, yet you were willing to let her die.”

He snorts. “That wasn’t *murder*. You could have found another doctor. I would never hurt someone intentionally.”

“Well, you and I are different in that regard,” I reply, pulling Claudette’s finger from my pocket and placing it on the nightstand. He’ll know who it belongs to by now. I’m sure the whole town has heard about this morning’s attack on Claudette, and I’m sure she made herself sound absolutely blameless.

His jaw drops. “Claudette—” he says with a gasp as he puts it together. “How could you?”

He was willing to let a one-year-old die simply because she’s a quarter Jewish, yet Claudette’s loss of a *pinky* is the true crime? “Because *you* have placed me in a desperate situation.” I bring Cece forward. “Figure out what’s wrong with my daughter and fix it. *Now*.”

He barely even looks at her. “Rash and listlessness following a case of strep throat,” he says. “It’s rheumatic fever.”

Which happened because you refused to treat her. He is responsible for this and he doesn’t care—feels no guilt at all, even with her sweet little face staring up at him. “Fix it,” I hiss.

He raises his hands. “You need penicillin for that. I’ve had none since the war began.”

This stupid man still believes he’s in charge.

“Would you like to see something interesting?” I ask with a smile. “Something you can’t even imagine possible?” I walk to the far end of the room, place the gun on the desk, and lay Cece on top of my coat.

And then I disappear. I hear his gasp as it happens and he’s still sitting there, thunderstruck, when I reappear beside him. I’m naked now, of course, but he’s so stunned he hardly seems to notice.

“How did you—” he begins.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, returning to my clothes, which sit on a pile on the floor next to Cece. “You’re under the impression that you can warn your son and grandson before I get there, but guess what? If I don’t walk out of here with enough penicillin to cure her, I can go back to the previous day and do what I want to do. I can go back a year. I can go back *thirty years* and make sure your son never even exists.” I finish dressing and pick Cece up, holding her close. “So, I suggest you figure something out.”

He shuffles across the room to a drawer and hands me a vial of penicillin.
“More,” I demand.

He raises a brow. “I know some of your secrets too, you know. I saw you walking home with Jeannette Olatz’s children that day she disappeared. I know they’re at your house.”

I still. This man who now hates me, and hates my daughter, knows about Charlotte and Lucien. And he thinks he can threaten me with that information.

It makes what might have been a difficult decision quite easy.

I pick up the gun and fire.

Stevens is dead. They shot him only an hour after we were caught, and the rest of us had no choice but to keep moving, bound together as we are with a German rifle at our backs. By the time we stop for the night, we've been marching for twenty-four hours straight. If I were to guess I'd say we're heading northeast. Probably toward the labor camps in Germany.

"We're moving fast now," Quinn says to Price as we're led out of town. "Is it everything you hoped it would be?"

We stop in Mirepoix and are handed over to a commander there, who has a much larger group of prisoners under his command. We're held there nearly a week, unfed, huddling in a ditch for warmth, as more prisoners arrive. Occasionally, someone is dragged into the square, seemingly at random, and shot. It's how the Germans remind the townspeople that even here in the free zone, they are not actually free.

At the end of the week, we are led onto a road heading east. We walk in silence all day. It's only when the soldiers are off cooking their evening meal and setting up their tents that we dare speak.

"You're looking unhappy these days," Quinn says.

I glance at him. It's sometimes hard to tell if he's mentally defective or just endlessly optimistic. "I imagine we're all looking pretty unhappy these days."

"Don't worry," he says. "Your girl will wait."

"That's not what I'm worried about," I reply. In truth, though, what scares me most does relate back to Sarah. He'd just never believe it if I told

him.

I'm worried she'll come get me herself.

We arrive at the first checkpoint outside Saint Antoine just after sunrise. I never dreamed I'd set out for Paris with a suitcase that holds mostly food, leaving the children's things behind, but we can't drive once we reach the city—it'll invite too much suspicion—and with Cece in my arms, I won't be able to carry much else.

Though it's February, I'm sweating as if it's the height of summer. Nerves, possibly, or perhaps just the fact that I have wads of cash stuffed between my skin and the dress.

All my confidence from the night before is gone. The desire to kill is still there, and still strong, but when I faced down Roche and Claudette, I only had to worry about myself. Even with Cece there, I was confident I could take on Dr. Nadeau. Now, though, there are three children to protect, and at any one of these stops it could all go awry. I have two knives on me and a gun hidden under the seat, but I'm still human. I can only kill so many people at once and will be assuring my own death if I attempt it. What happens to the children then?

The whole plan feels increasingly uncertain. Though I managed to get Edouard's location from the monsignor's office—violent threats once again saving the day—there's no guarantee Marie is there, since Edouard is apparently still a priest. But whether she's there or not, Edouard owes my family a debt. He'll find a place for us to stay or pay heavily for his failure.

The line is backed up. My gut tightens as I watch a soldier force the couple ahead of me to get out of their car and walk to the side of the road. Their luggage is removed from the trunk, and I begin to panic.

What if they do the same to us? Time travel would be useless here. Yes, I could jump back a day or a week, but I'd still land *here*, an hour from Saint Antoine. Who would I even warn?

The soldier off to the side gestures me around the car being searched.

"Destination?" he asks, taking my papers.

I swallow. "Paris," I say. "To see my brother."

He looks over the first pass, mine, and then someone begins yelling behind him. Both our heads jerk at the sound. The man who was pulled from his car is down on his knees and the woman is weeping. Already that same fury is coming over me. If I didn't have to protect these three children, I'd grab my gun and fire as many shots as I could.

The soldier's eyes return to my papers, and then he frowns. "There's an error," he says, in heavily accented French. "You will need to pull off the road."

My heart beats so hard I feel sick from it. "An error?" I ask.

"There is no stamp on this," he says, holding my travel papers in the air.

The whole world seems to still in this moment. Roche screwed us over. Intentionally. He had to have known that stamp was important. And there are no good options available to me. If my travel papers are bad, the children's are as well. If he intentionally messed up the travel passes, then their passports are probably no good either.

My hand slides beneath my seat, feeling for the cool metal of the gun. "Oh, the magistrate's office must have made a mistake. I'll just go back to get it fixed."

He starts to shake his head when the sound of gunfire draws our attention. The male of the couple, maybe forty at most, lies on the ground bleeding, and the woman weeps and falls to her knees beside him.

The soldier looks behind us, at the line of cars now backing up down the road. "Go," he barks. "Make sure you've got a stamp before you return."

I'm shaking so hard I can barely push the accelerator down, but I manage to drive another twenty minutes, trembling all the while. We need to get out of this car, but I don't know how we'll make the journey to Paris on foot. The cash against my skin is soaked with sweat when I finally drive off the road and cut the engine.

"Are we in Paris?" asks Charlotte.

I open the door and throw up in the grass. "No," I reply. "I think we'll walk through the woods the rest of the way."



IT TAKES us most of the day to travel that remaining few miles. Our suitcase is gone, left behind when it became necessary to carry Lucien in one arm and Cece in the other. “Not too much farther,” I tell Charlotte. “I wonder if there’s anywhere in Paris that still has pastry.”

Her excitement at the idea breaks my heart a little. These children who’ve lost their parents, who’ve spent nearly a year in hiding...they are still children. They still light up at the smallest pleasures and *my God* what I wouldn’t give to get them to a place where those pleasures were possible.

We stop in the woods to eat, and I tear a bit of bread to feed Cece. The penicillin is already doing its job. She smiles for the first time in weeks when I place a piece in her mouth.

Charlotte rests her head on my chest. “I wish we were home,” she says quietly. She’s had the hardest day of the three children, and I imagine her feet are as blistered as mine by now.

“Not too much farther,” I reply, praying it’s true.



THE CITY, when we reach it, is greatly changed. Massive swastikas hang from the buildings, and German soldiers patrol the streets, fill the cafes, sometimes strolling arm-in-arm with girls, as if the city is now a luxurious resort destination open only to them.

We pass through Saint-Germain-des-Pres, where Henri and I once spent a lovely day together, bickering and pretending not to enjoy each other’s company. It’s overrun with soldiers now, but for a single moment longing fills me. I want another day like the one Henri and I had. I want to do the things I refused to do with him at the time—a walk through the Orsay, the Louvre, the sculpture garden at the Musee Rodin. I thought at the time that I wanted to save those experiences for Mark. I realize only now that I was scared: I didn’t want to share anything special with a man I already liked more than I should.

It’s another mile to Edouard’s church, which is in an undesirable part of the city. People won’t meet my gaze as we walk toward the doors, and inside, the church is ice-cold and in grave need of repair. Edouard is clearly being

punished with this assignment, and I can't say I'm sad about it. I knock on a door to the right of the altar, hoping I might find someone who can lead us to him, and the nun who answers gasps at the sight of us.

"Amelie," she says. "My God."

Marie. Marie is here and she's now...a nun?

"What on earth are you doing here?" she asks, ushering us in. She looks as shocked to find me as I am to find her.

I feel relieved tears stinging my eyes. I didn't realize until just now how scared I was that we wouldn't find her alive.

"You're a *nun*?"

She flushes. "It's a long story." She looks over my shoulder and panic flickers in her eyes. "Henri...he's still fighting? Or captured?"

I sigh. "He's been captured, I think, but that's a long story too."

As she leads us to a set of rooms in back, my relief at finding her alive is quickly tempered by anger. The past ten months would have been so much easier with her there, or if she'd gotten Cece to England. She is not married, and there appears to be no child—so what was it all for?

"We've walked all day and the children need to be fed," I say stiffly.

"Can you help us?"

"Of course," she says. She removes her headpiece and takes Cece from me. "She's so big."

"It's been ten months," I reply coolly. "That's what happens."

Her shoulders sag. "I had no idea—" She glances at Charlotte and Lucien. "I thought you were in England."

I'm too tired to stay angry and it's as much my fault as hers. "Where's Edouard?" I ask.

She blushes. "He's giving last rites. He won't be home until late."

Home? I understood her fascination with Edouard and even the affair, though Henri did not. But living together like this, while he's a priest...is a tough sell even for me.

"And Henri?" she asks. "What makes you think he's been captured?"

I tell her about his journey south and the fact that he never returned. Saying it aloud forces me to see just how bleak the situation is. He didn't come home, which means he was caught somewhere, and being caught in his position is more likely to end in death than imprisonment. I shake my head, unable to face the idea of it. "I'll know more tomorrow when I speak to his contact," I conclude.

Marie sighs and nods her head. “If that fails,” she says, “Edouard may be able to make some inquiries.”

“So, apparently he’s still a priest?”

She flushes again. “He was going to leave the priesthood. But once the shelling started, people began depositing orphaned children here. Most could be sent safely to other parts of the country, but the Jewish ones could not, and had to remain.”

“They’re here?” I whisper. “Inside the church?”

She nods. “But we all leave in two weeks. Someone has found us a safe place outside the city.”

“And when that happens, Edouard will leave the priesthood?” I ask. I don’t really care whether or not they’re married—how could I, when Henri and I aren’t either? Living with someone isn’t considered risqué in my time, the way it is in hers. But I dislike the fact that he’s still a priest. Until I’ve seen him put Marie first—before priesthood, before God even—I will doubt him.

“He would already have left,” she says. “When I told him about the baby, the decision was made for him. But then the war started in earnest and I lost the baby and—” She stops, pressing her face into her hands. “It was my fault. The baby. It was all my fault.”

“That can’t be true.”

“It is,” she says. “I time traveled. I didn’t even think about it...you know how often I do it, and the baby was just gone when I landed. I suppose because he or she couldn’t travel with me.” She bends her face to her hands and begins to cry again.

It’s an aspect of pregnancy that never occurred to me until now: if males can’t time travel, what happens if you do it while you’re pregnant with one? But if that’s the case, how did Katrin escape while pregnant with my father?

“You couldn’t have known,” I whisper.

She nods, drying her eyes. “Once we leave here and are safe, we will try again.”

I sigh. “Marie...no place in France is safe. Not until the war is over. Where, exactly, are you going?”

“Chateau de Nanterre. To the west of Paris. We have someone working on getting the children forged papers, but until then I believe we’ll be well hidden.”

“Could your contact help get us papers as well?”

She shakes her head. "It's a lengthy process. You might be better off asking Yvette. She's the companion of a German colonel now. Very well-positioned. She could probably help you."

"Why would Yvette help *me*?"

"She wants to see Cecelia. She's helped Edouard get medical supplies and food when we were under attack. She isn't entirely bad."

I seriously doubt that, and allowing Yvette to see Cecelia seems like a bad idea. "You think she'd really help Lucien and Charlotte?" I ask.

Marie nods. "I know she is lazy and selfish, but she isn't a monster. She liked Jeannette and she liked the children."

"What if she tries to take Cece?"

Marie smiles. "The benefit of time travel is that we can undo what goes wrong, yes?"

I nod. But something about it just doesn't sit well. I'd say the odds here are not in our favor.

The next morning, I find Roche's contact in a small room behind the café he directed me to, a room from another time. They use candles for light, a fireplace for heat.

Three men sit inside, all staring me down as I enter. One keeps his hand on his gun.

"I'm looking for my husband," I say. "Henri Durand. You sent him off in early January to get three airmen to Spain. He should be home by now."

The man closest to me sighs. "I'm sorry to tell you, madame, but they were taken near the base of the Pyrenees. They were last seen being held in Mirepoix."

He says it as if he's delivering the weather or informing me that a sale has ended. *Too bad, so sad*, he might say in my time. I want to lash out, but I force my anger down.

"Taken," I repeat. "But not dead."

He shrugs. "Good as dead—they'll be marched to the work camps over the border, and those who survive the journey rarely survive the camp as well."

It's not his words that enrage me—it's his apathy. The only man I have ever loved may die because of this stupid mission, and he couldn't care less. I feel it again, that fury and fire, and the way it takes everything terrified and weak inside me and makes it hard, and certain. I lean forward, placing my hands on his desk. "*He* will survive."

He frowns. "I don't think you understand the severity of the situation."

"No," I reply. "You don't understand. You're going to show me where

he's headed, and I'm going to bring him home."

His jaw swings open. "You?"

"Yes. Me. Now show me the route."

He is reluctant, but fortunately for us both, he's too apathetic to fight me. He pulls out a map—there is only one major road leading northeast from Mirepoix, so they're undoubtedly somewhere along it. The road forks at Valence, and though they will probably continue north, toward Lyon, there's no guarantee.

"So you see," he concludes, "there's really nothing you can do."

"I can wait for them off the side of the road, south of Valence."

He laughs. "And then do *what*, madame? Will you fight the German soldiers with your bare hands?"

I stand to leave. "You have no idea what I'm capable of."

My confidence, however, is failing. He's right. How the hell am I going to fight off several German soldiers single-handedly in order to free Henri? I walk with brisk steps down the Champs-Élysées, trying to come up with a plan that won't get us both killed. My head remains empty.

When I glance up, I realize I'm standing beside the shop Henri took me to so long ago. The store is closed now, but I press my face to the window as if I can still see him just as he was that day—so handsome in his suit as he leaned against the wall. Sneaking glances across the aisle at me, his mouth curving upward when I caught him looking.

It hits me in the center of my chest, a vacuum that makes me want to fall to my knees. *He can't be dead. He can't be. I won't survive it if he is. I have to free him.*

A policeman barks at me to move along. I glance at him and swallow down the urge to challenge him, to fight, to punish. Killing Nadeau didn't cure that urge. It fed it. *Focus*, I say to myself. *Get Henri first. And then you can make everyone pay for what they've put you all through.*



EDOUARD is home when I return. He greets me, equal parts wary and unrepentant. He shouldn't have slept with Marie in the first place, but what's done is done and he didn't judge me when Yvette left, so I suppose I should extend the same courtesy to him.

I lay out my plan to save Henri: I will take a train south. Once I've found him, we'll escape on foot. Of course, it requires a substantial contribution from Marie and Edouard as well. "While I'm gone, I would need you to watch the children. We'll get to Nanterre as fast as possible, but there's no way I can do this with them there."

"There's no way you can do this regardless of whether they're there," Edouard says softly. "How can you take on an entire unit of soldiers singlehandedly? And what if Henri is injured? You can't carry him home, even with the abilities you have."

My eyes widen. Marie was pregnant with his child so she could tell him about *her* ability. I just didn't realize she was going to tell him about mine too.

Marie doesn't seem to notice my surprise, however. She's too busy agreeing with Edouard. "It's a suicide mission."

"Can't you just jump back in time to warn him what's going to happen?" asks Edouard.

Marie and I exchange a look and she answers for me. "No. Because there's a chance he's alive right now. Any change we make will lead Henri to different decisions, ones that could be fatal."

It's the part of our gift I hate the most, that potential to make things worse. He nods, though I get the feeling he doesn't really understand. "At least speak to Yvette before you go," he says. "See if she'll get the children papers."

I hesitate. If I die on this suicide mission, as Marie calls it, talking to Yvette could at least ensure the children are safe from the concentration camps. But Cece is back to her old self—currently toddling around the room on chubby legs, smiling her gap-toothed smile. I'm not sure how any woman who saw her wouldn't want to take her from me. And Yvette would have the right to.



THE BUILDING YVETTE is staying in is crawling with soldiers and seems like more of a headquarters than a home. I walk with my head down and covered, fully prepared for this meeting to go poorly. I don't see how it won't. Yvette hates me, and more importantly, I hate her. The desire to kill still hums in my

blood like a song I'm singing to myself. With each step I take, the sense of foreboding grows.

Her door is guarded by two German soldiers who take their jobs very seriously. Yvette's companion must be important—another reason not to act on my rage while here. I'm ushered inside a large parlor, with stiff velvet chairs and walnut tables. She makes us wait, of course, but when she finally swans into the room in expensive clothes and silk hose, the smug look on her face falls away.

"Cecelia?" she whispers to my daughter, appearing stunned that the infant she left fifteen months ago could have turned into a little girl. She reaches out. "Come to mama, darling."

Cece tucks her head into my shoulder and tightens her arms around me. Did Yvette really think her daughter would remember her? She was barely involved in childcare even when she was around. "She's been sick, and she's also a little shy," I tell her. "Give her a minute to warm up."

Yvette frowns and looks as if she plans to argue before reluctantly taking the seat across from mine. "I'm surprised you dared come here," she says, opening a small case and withdrawing a cigarette.

"Edouard said you wanted to see her."

She lights her cigarette and takes a long drag, observing me. "Have you enjoyed it? Playing mother to my child when you can't have your own?"

My elbow brushes against the pocket of my coat, where a knife rests.

"She's a very good baby," I reply.

She takes another drag off her cigarette and exhales. The smell of the smoke makes me gag, and I hate that Cece is breathing it all in when she's still recovering.

"And Henri?" Yvette asks. "I suppose you got your claws in him too, didn't you? As you can probably tell, I don't care. I'm far better off without him." The lie is obvious. Her bitterness and jealousy show in every line of her face, which leaves me with no good way to answer. She'll know I'm lying if I deny it, and she'll be livid if I confirm it.

"I know you don't like me—" I begin, and she cuts me off.

"Don't like you?" she repeats. "You cannot begin to imagine the depths of my hatred for you, because if you did, you'd never have dared come here in the first place. Do you know who my benefactor is?"

Benefactor...what a pretty word to describe what you're doing, and with whom. She sees the disdain on my face.

“Ah, of course you do. Do you think you’re so much better than me, Amelie? That’s rich. It’s *I* who look down on *you*. I could send you off to the concentration camps with a single word. And what’s to stop me from doing it? It’s more than you deserve.”

She blows a plume of smoke from the corner of her mouth. “You may think he loves you, but it wasn’t you he wanted any more than it was me.”

I still. “What makes you say that?”

Her eyes flicker toward Cece. “The night she was conceived he was so drunk I was surprised he was able to...you know. Oh, but the whole time it was about Sarah. Him crying for Sarah, shouting her name at the end. I don’t even think he knew I was there. You and I, we are the same. Just poor substitutes for her.”

It only makes me love him more, hearing this version of events. My throat tightens, and Yvette laughs. “How does it feel, cousin?”

I would like to shatter her moment of misplaced triumph, but that’s not why I’m here. “Cecelia will need help to get out of Paris. She needs travel papers that don’t identify her as a Jew.”

She stubs out her cigarette. “You don’t need to worry about my daughter anymore. Hand her to me.”

I freeze. If I refuse, she’ll call the guards and have them take me away. If I time travel, I’ll probably *still* land in her apartment, and there will *still* be guards outside. My best bet is to go along with it, and reverse things once I reach the church. I shudder at the idea of leaving Cece in her care for even a few minutes, but I’m not sure what choice I have.

Yvette makes the decision for me, yanking her away. Cece begins struggling to get free, and when her flailing hand strikes Yvette’s face, Yvette drops her. For just a heartbeat, we both stare in horror at Cece on the ground, and then she begins crying and scrambles to her feet, running back to me.

“Guards!” Yvette cries. “Hurry!”

For a moment I’m frozen. Boots approach quickly from the hall and the door flies open.

Yvette looks at her daughter the same way she looks at me—with disgust. “The child is a Jew and the woman is a conspirator,” she says. “Take them away.”

There is no time for finesse or escape. I close my eyes and give in to the urge I’ve felt since today’s journey began. I picture the moment Yvette opened the cigarette case and I jump, and then land...naked, in front of her.

That earlier version of me looks as shocked as Yvette does, pulling Cece close, as if I might be another enemy. I lunge forward, grabbing the knife from the coat pocket.

"I'm Sarah," I tell Yvette, and then my arm swings in a wide arc, slashing through her jugular vein.

The fully dressed version of me watches all this with Cece's face pressed to her chest, staring at me in horror. That's when I realize the biggest problem with what I've done: once the guards find Yvette's body, they'll be looking for me. If I hope to leave the city at all, I need to get out today.

Lyon is 300 miles from Paris. The ride there feels much longer than it is, waiting as I am for Germans to board and take me away. I was panicked as I snuck onto the train at Gare du Nord. Now, between the rocking motion of the car and the smell of the people on board, I'm almost too sick to care if I'm caught.

Could I have handled the situation with Yvette better? Undoubtedly. I didn't have to kill her, but I can't bring myself to regret it. She fueled that fire inside me, and she deserved to die. I just wish I hadn't added so much danger to an already tenuous situation. And I wish I'd had more time with the children before I left. Instead, I shoved what I could into a bag, kissed them each on the head, and ran. If this all goes wrong, that careless, panicked goodbye will be their last memory of me, if they remember me at all.

I arrive in Lyon late in the afternoon, and take another train from there to Valence, a hundred miles to the south. It's dark when we finally pull into the station. No place in this country is safe for a female traveling alone, especially at night, but I'm just glad to be off the train. Soldiers patrol the platform, but I keep my head down and walk away as if I don't notice them, clutching my bag to my chest.

"Mademoiselle!" a voice calls behind me.

I stiffen—mentally searching for the weight of the knife in my pocket though I force myself not to grab it. He's done nothing yet, but that bloodthirst inside me suggests I stab him anyway.

I turn. He's holding out a gray wool glove. His smile is almost apologetic. "Yours?" he asks.

I shake my head. “No. But thank you.”

“You have somewhere to stay in town?” he inquires, flushing. He’s a boy with a crush, and one who probably did not want to fight, yet a part of me wants him to die anyway. It’s as if I’ve let the lid off something that refuses to lay dormant again.

“My aunt is right around the corner,” I reply.

He tips his hat. “I hope I will see you again.”

I scurry away, my breath coming fast, and head out of the city, looking for a place to sleep—with the trip behind me, I’m so exhausted it’s a struggle to even push forward. About a mile outside of town I find a barn and sneak in, burrowing into the hay for warmth. It still feels as if I’m on the rocking train and my stomach revolts. I try to put my mind on other things, better things, and as always, I think of Henri, remembering those early days with him, after he’d caught me trying to steal an apple from his barn. How I loathed his nickname for me back then.

I’m not a thief, I once said.

Not a good one, anyway, he’d replied with one of his arrogant grins.

My smile at the memory fades quickly. What would he make of the things I’ve done this past week? As forgiving as he is, I can’t picture him accepting that I’ve killed two people he knew well.



I’M UP BEFORE SUNRISE, crouched in the woods just off the main road, shivering despite my wool coat and the tights I wear beneath my trousers. There is little traffic these days aside from military vehicles, and Henri is not with them, but none are safe from me. That rage, that urge to destroy, leaves me both fearless and bloodthirsty. I fight against the desire all day long, and retreat to the barn after nightfall, dissatisfied, hungry for it.

I wake with my stomach in knots, too tense to eat, and spend another long day shivering by the side of the road. Snow begins to fall. It will make us easier to trace when we escape, and increasingly this feels like a fool’s errand.

That day passes, and then another. The snow melts, and finally something happens. A distant sound shatters the silence of the woods—a vibration at first. Boots, hitting the ground. Many of them.

The rumble of it grows, and the ground seems to tremble as they approach, until they are walking right by me—ten German soldiers and around fifty prisoners, tied together in groups of three or four. They are a ragged bunch, many limping and wounded. One of them is Henri if I'm lucky, and if he's as bad off as some, he might not survive the escape. Am I saving him or dooming him? If he died during the war, I can't change that. But if he survives...I could ruin it.

I creep through the brush alongside them, unable to distinguish one from the other through the haze of trees. A few minutes down the road, a soldier stumbles, and the men on each side—already struggling themselves—try to hold him up. It only takes a moment before a German soldier sees what's going on and shouts at them to stop. The prisoner is cut loose and my breath holds, hoping for a miracle, until he is tossed on the ground. Casually, as if lighting a cigarette or waving to a friend, the German pulls a revolver from its holster and shoots the man in the head.

My hand reaches for the gun in my pocket. *He deserves to die*, I think.

Except there are only five bullets in the chamber of my gun and there won't be time to reload before I'm caught. I should at least go to the man after the prisoners disappear. I could hold his hand, look for the name of a loved one to inform. But instead I leave him there, wondering if that makes me as empty as the soldier who shot him in the first place.



I REMAIN behind the prisoners for the rest of the day. They take only one break, during which the German soldiers mostly laze about, smoking and laughing, while the prisoners sit, dazed and thirsty, saying nothing. When the break ends, they begin again. My legs are in agony, and I have blisters I didn't notice until we stopped. How long have they gone like this? How long have they marched with their shoes falling apart, deprived of water and food? I feel like I'll barely survive a single day of it.

It's dark when they stop for the night. The prisoners are huddled together in a ditch, in groups of three or four, while the Germans cook something over a fire. The smell of it turns my stomach—tension has made it difficult to keep food down this week—but it must be torture for Henri and the others.

Eventually, half the soldiers retire, while the other five patrol the road,

pointing their shotguns toward the ditch. I wait until it's late, until I'm certain all but the patrols are sound asleep, and then I creep forward, trying to get close enough that I can see the prisoners' faces in each small group. My coat catches on a bush and a soldier's head swivels, looks right toward where I stand before he resumes his watch.

How the hell am I going to save Henri when I can't move a foot without being overheard? I wait for the wind to gust before I move on to the next group, and soon a light rain begins, making it easier.

I spot someone with Henri's dark hair, his size. Hope rises in me as I creep closer, and closer. And then the hope vanishes. The man has Henri's build but not the full lips I love, not the cheekbones that rise so sharply from that square jaw, the aristocratic nose.

I begin again, angry at myself for not planning better. I have no idea what I'll do when I find him, *if* I find him. Pulling him out of the trough will wake everyone for miles.

I spy another dark head and crawl on hands and knees to get a better view.

Henri.

My heart swells at the sight of him until it feels as if my chest can hardly contain it. He's sound asleep, almost boyish at rest, despite the beard that's come in after these weeks in captivity. I can picture, looking at him, the child he was. The son we might have had.

He's in a group of three, with about four feet between them and the next group of prisoners. Three German soldiers patrol this end of the road and they'll notice someone climbing free of the ditch. I could risk it, but the days of doing things the *proper* way are long over. I'd rather kill them anyhow.

I throw my knife into a tree on the other side of the road. The nearest soldier's head gives a half turn toward the sound but ignores it. Thank God for the rain.

I close my eyes and time travel, aiming for the tree, so certain it will go poorly that I'm a little surprised when my bare feet strike the mud at its base. I grab the knife and spring toward the closest soldier. He gives only the smallest gasp as the blade slides into the back of his neck, and then he falls forward.

I've retrieved my knife and am grabbing his gun when another soldier calls out to him. I freeze for a moment, and then begin crawling toward the sound. I'm ten feet away when his flashlight sweeps over me.

There's no time for finesse or even forethought. There isn't even time for panic. I throw the knife the way I was trained, so fast it's more instinct than strategy. It lodges between his eyes, but as he falls backward into the ditch with the prisoners, he makes far more noise than I'd like.

I leap in after him, retrieving my knife and scrambling toward Henri, who is awake now and wide-eyed.

I cut through the ropes that bind him to the others and am about to speak when he pushes me down and lunges over me, tackling a third soldier I hadn't even heard coming and snapping his neck. I climb from the ditch with him on my heels, snatching up my bag and clothes as we run into the woods.

"My God, little thief," Henri says behind me. "What have you done?"

I don't answer, focused on moving as fast as possible without leaving a trail. It's only when the woods grow dense, blocking the moon and making it hard to see, that I stop to search for the flashlight.

I reach for the bag but instead he pulls me against him and his lips find mine.

He isn't gentle. He holds onto me like I might vanish at any moment, and his kiss is hard and urgent, telling me more about his anxiety and what the last weeks have been like for him than any words ever could. It's the way he kisses when he's inside me and his restraint is at its breaking point, senseless and desperate. I should stop him but I don't. I've missed this. I've missed *him*. Even now, in the panic and chaos, he fills that emptiness inside me in a way no one else ever could.

A twig snaps and we both swivel. The two prisoners he was with are coming our way, making far too much noise and breaking too many branches. They've made it easy for the Germans to follow us. And I don't want them along anyway. They mean more mouths to feed, more noise, more potential for failure. I could give them a bit of bread and tell them to go elsewhere, but they might ignore me. Or I could kill them...that would be the easiest.

Henri steps in front of me. "Put on some clothes, Sarah."

"It's pitch black. I hardly think my nudity is our biggest issue."

He looks at me over his shoulder. "It's an issue for me. Please."

I ignore the undergarments and scramble into my pants, sweater and shoes while weighing our options. I don't have enough food for the interlopers, and they'll only cause problems. The coldness that hardened me as I killed the Germans comes upon me once more. I step out from behind

Henri, reaching for my knife, but there is shouting in the distance and no time for what must be done.

“Come,” I command in English, turning north though I have no idea where I’m going. “And stop breaking every fucking branch.”

For fifteen minutes we run, but Henri’s breathing is labored and he’s moving more slowly than he should. We reach a stream and I stop him.

“Are you hurt?” I ask.

I get a small, tense nod. “Just go,” Henri says, in a hoarse whisper. “Please. Jump out of here.”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” I demand.

His mouth pinches hard and he opens up his shirt. A slash along the side of his rib cage bleeds freely. “I was stabbed a few days ago. It’s broken open again, but it was already infected.” I stare in horror while the crashing of the underbrush grows louder.

I grab the tights I didn’t put on earlier and wrap them around his rib cage as snugly as I can. It’s not perfect, but it’s the best I can do.

“We should walk through the stream so they lose our trail,” Henri says to the other two prisoners. He turns to me. “And you need to leave. Please. If something happened to you...just please.”

He looks so desperate and panicked as he asks that it would be nearly impossible to deny him. And I nod, though I have no intention of letting him do this on his own.

“Head to your left and walk as far as you can stand it,” I tell him. “I’ll cross into the woods on the other side and leave a trail for them to follow.”

“No,” he says. “You need to go.”

“I will,” I reply. “I’ll time travel once I’ve gone into the woods.”

I hand him the bag and with one last hard kiss, he wades into the water, the prisoners following. I step into the stream and stand in the icy water, watching him go before I climb up the muddy bank on the other side and begin crashing through the brush, swinging a flashlight so the Germans will follow.

As I run, a plan begins to form. I will lead them as far from Henri as I can and then attempt to time travel back to the stream and find him. The problem is that I’ve never jumped particularly far. I’m just as likely to land in the middle of the woods, naked and lost, as I am to land at the place where we separated.

When I’ve gone as far as I dare, I stop and wait for the Germans to close

in.

Their shouts grow louder, and when the distant glow of a flashlight hits my face, I take a deep breath and picture the stream. The branches around me shake as they close in and begin to fire, but at last I fade, landing on my ass in the freezing water only a moment later. Naked and shivering, I push myself up and begin to run. The rocks are ice beneath my feet, moss covered and slick. I fall again and again, but my shins and feet are soon so numb I barely feel it.

By the time I find muddy boot prints on the bank, I'm so cold I can barely stand it. I do my best to erase the trail they've left as I follow it, branches whipping against my skin the whole way.

Fortunately, it doesn't take long to find them. They're so exhausted, and trampling so loudly, they don't even hear me approach.

"Henri," I whisper. In the moonlight I see three astonished faces turn. None more astonished and distressed than Henri's. "Can you give me the clothes and boots inside the bag?"

He marches toward me. "You promised to go," he snaps. "You *promised*."

"I lied."

His hands land on my shoulders. "Please, Sarah," he begs. "Go. I don't want you here for this. You've done all you can."

I know he's trying to save me. I know my presence here scares him more than the threat of death. But he needs me and if he was being honest, he'd admit it. "You know I have skills that can help you."

He exhales sharply and tugs at his hair. "You won't listen no matter what I say, will you?"

His companions shuffle impatiently and I ignore them. "You can't claim you didn't know what you were in for."

His mouth twitches. "I suppose I did."

"Can you two banter later on?" asks the Brit, his words clipped. "We need to get going."

My blood heats and I smile, *hoping* he wants a fight. Hoping he plans to keep annoying me. *Give me an excuse to kill you.* "You saw how easily I took care of that soldier guarding you? Don't imagine for a moment I can't dispose of you just as easily."

His mouth closes and he turns north.

I'm disappointed that he gave in.

Soon, the sky begins to lighten, but we continue to move. I haven't seen anywhere for us to stop, and I'm not sure how long the Germans will search for us before they give up. But I'm troubled by Henri's labored breathing. He barely reacted to the news that Marie is living with Edouard and pretending to be a nun, a testament to his exhaustion if I've ever seen one. My makeshift bandage isn't doing much for him, and his wound may be the part of this that is out of my hands.

At midday we stop. I pull out the bread and cheese and divide it in sixths, handing one portion to each of them and saving the remainder for tomorrow. I'm feeling too sick to eat right now and they need the food more than I do, but eventually it's going to be an issue, trying to feed four people on what I brought for two.

"I assume the *rest* of that food is just for you?" Price asks.

Henri's eyes were growing heavy, but they flicker with fire suddenly. "Watch yourself," he growls. "She saved your miserable life, but I'd be happy to end it if your attitude doesn't improve."



IT'S NEARLY DUSK when we finally come upon a deserted homestead. Whether we can afford to stop or not, we have to. I'm worried Henri will collapse soon if we don't. He is stumbling now, his skin almost ashen.

"We'll stay here for the night," I tell them.

Henri looks at me with heavy eyes and nods. "We should sleep in the

barn, though. If the Germans come, they'll search the house first. It will give us a small advantage."

"You *killed* people," says Price. As if I killed *good* people. As if we aren't in the middle of a fucking war and I didn't save him from a work camp and certain death. "They aren't going to just ignore it. We need to keep moving."

"Feel free to keep moving," I reply. "I'd prefer it if you did." That goes for both of them. Quinn's unwarranted self-confidence is nearly as annoying as Price's sense of entitlement. The only *smart* thing I've seen him do yet is steal the German's canteen.

Henri and I walk into the barn and when he lowers himself into the hay, his whole body seems to sag, his eyes sunken with fatigue. He needs so many things I'm not sure where to start. I turn to Price and Quinn. "Can you see what's in the house? I need alcohol to clean the wound."

"Or you need a head start to get away from us," says Price.

I'm about to reply when Quinn grabs him. "Even *I*'ve had about enough of your mouth. Come on."

They leave and I start to pull off Henri's boots but he reaches for me. "Come here."

I go to him. "What is it? Are you in pain?"

He tugs me toward him and presses his lips to the top of my head as he pulls me to his chest. "My sweet, insane girl," he murmurs. "You could have died."

His eyes close, as if the act of talking is too much for him. I pull away and grab the penicillin from the bag. Henri doesn't even seem to notice the needle as it enters his skin.

Quinn walks in and throws me a dress. "To bandage the wound," he says, taking a heavy drink from the bottle in his hand.

"I'll take the alcohol too," I tell him, reaching up for it.

He hands it over, nearly emptied. Henri is obviously in pain and the selfish bastard only saved enough for me to clean his wounds, nothing more. "You worthless piece of shit," I mutter. "You could have left some."

"Henri, I pictured you with a refined little lady," Quinn says. "This one has quite the mouth on her."

Henri gives a quiet laugh, and then flinches. "Yes," he says, "that was my first impression as well."

Quinn and Price retreat to the loft and I make Henri lie down on a

makeshift bed of hay and the single blanket. Using the dregs of the alcohol, I do my best to clean the wound and dress it with strips of fabric.

“How do you feel?” I whisper.

“Lucky,” he says. “And scared.”

“Scared of what?”

He forces his eyes open and pushes the hair back from my face. “If I die—”

I shake my head. “You’re not going to die. Once the antibiotic kicks in—”

His eyes close. “Sarah,” he says quietly, “you know how this works. If this is when I’m supposed to die, nothing you’re doing will matter. If that happens, swear to me you’ll go with the children and stay gone. A promise you actually keep.”

I curl up beside him and press my nose to his neck. He smells of soap and hay and sweat and the combination reminds me of a thousand other times I spent with him in the barn. “I swear.”

And this time I mean it. Except if he dies, I’m not sure how I will possibly go on.



THE NEXT TIME my eyes open, it’s daylight, and our bag is gone. So are Quinn and Price.

They have everything we need aside from my knife—our food, Henri’s penicillin, our money. Everything.

They fucked with the wrong girl.

“What is it?” asks Henri, groggy, struggling to open his eyes. Do I dare leave him here while I go back in time to take care of this? What if he’s found while I’m gone? I flinch at the idea, but then again, I can’t defend him here without that bag.

“Nothing,” I reply. “I have to go take care of something.”

Just then I hear whistling. Obnoxious, *brash* whistling. Quinn walks into the barn and sets the bag down beside me

“Where did you go?” I ask.

“I caught him with your stuff about a quarter mile from here. Bastard offered to split it with me.”

My hands are shaking. Price deserves to die, and it would be so easy. So unbelievably easy, if I time traveled to earlier in the morning.

“What is it?” asks Henri, sitting up and wrapping his arm around me.

“He deserves to die,” I reply between my teeth. “He should die for taking that bag.”

Henri looks at me for a long moment, studying my face. “He’ll likely die anyway,” he says. “He’s got no food, no weapon, no money.”

I pull my knees to my chest, taking deep breaths. “He deserves to die *painfully*.”

“Little thief,” Henri says against my ear. “We need to go. Killing him doesn’t move us forward.”

And I know he’s right. But the desire still burns in my chest. The Coron in me is getting stronger. It feels like it’s overtaking everything I am.



AFTER ANOTHER NEAR-SILENT day of travel, we find shelter, though the home is in such disrepair it’s hardly better than sleeping in the open. Henri cleans up at the pump, already much better than he was yesterday, and returns without his shirt. Despite his wound, the sight of him like that is as appealing as it ever was—miles of smooth, tan skin, all muscle. My core clenches in response, but right now, he needs a good night’s rest.

“Lie down,” I say. I give him the shot of penicillin and then start putting a clean dressing on his wound. While I work, he asks the questions he was too tired to ask the night before, and I finally tell him about the worthless forgeries Roche provided.

“He’ll pay for that,” Henri says. “As soon as I’m back home.”

Home. My hands still before they resume their work. I’m not sure we *can* go back to Saint Antoine after what I’ve done. Claudette will never know for certain that I cut off her finger, but she might guess at it, and my sudden disappearance on the heels of Nadeau’s death will be suspicious. At the time it all seemed so necessary, so well-deserved, and it still does, but in both Saint Antoine and Paris, people may now be looking for me. Every bad thing I do seems to have a ripple effect.

“What’s the matter?” he asks.

I swallow. “Nothing. I tear one last strip. “I’m nearly done. I think your

wound is looking better.”

“Do you remember when you did this before?”

I laugh. “Last night? Yes, I remember it well.”

He presses my hand to his chest and holds it there. “No, not then. In Saint Antoine. When you bandaged my gunshot wound. Do you remember? I wanted you so badly it felt like a fever.”

“You *did* have a fever,” I reply with a small laugh, tying the last strip around his rib cage.

“That might be,” he says, “but I was hard the whole time.” He wraps a hand around my neck and pulls his lips to mine. A kiss that is clearly meant to lead to more. And God knows I’d like it to, except I don’t want him to tear his wound open again, and Quinn is across the room.

I pull away, wanting him so much it’s painful, and go to the pump to wash up. *He’s injured*, I say to myself on repeat. *He needs to rest*. When I return to the house, Henri appears to be asleep. I sneak in quietly and lie down beside him, relieved and disappointed at once. His arm urges me closer. “I need you,” he whispers.

“You should rest,” I argue, but he’s already tugging at my pants.

“I’ll rest when I’m dead,” he says.

He pulls me on top of him. Even wounded and starved as he’s been, his strength amazes me. His hands go to the button of his trousers and he pops it open. “Please, little thief. I’ve dreamed of you every night since I left.”

I pull the trousers down low enough for him to spring clear of them, while his hand slides between my legs. When he finds me bare there, free of my undergarments and ready for him so soon, he groans. “My God, I’ve missed this.”

He lines himself up and grabs my hips. I try to resist, to go slowly and he makes a noise of exasperation.

“Don’t be gentle, Sarah,” he says. His fingers dig into my hips, lifting me, pushing me back down, doing the work for me. “Please. I’ve dreamed of this for too long.”

I take over, trying to maintain some sense of sanity despite the desperate press of his fingers and the fullness inside me. It’s only been two months, but it feels like a lifetime.

“Faster,” he grunts, the boards beneath us squeaking loudly.

“Quinn will know,” I whisper.

“And he’ll know several times more tonight,” he says with a sound that is

half laughter and half groan. “Come closer. I want to see your face when you let go.” He pulls me down, pressing his teeth into my shoulder, buried to the hilt, and I stop trying to be gentle. I ride him as if he is here only for my pleasure, to use as I wish, and in seconds I feel it coming, my stomach tightening, my heart hammering.

“Yes,” he hisses. “That’s it.”

I gasp, my head going backward, eyes squeezed shut. His hips lift, chasing mine, and then his hands pull me hard against him as he comes with a low, sustained groan. I collapse on top of him, resting just for a moment before I start to pull away.

He grabs my hips once more. “Stay. Just for a moment. Stay.”

I lean over him, careful to avoid his side, and he presses his lips to my forehead. “My beautiful, insane girl,” he whispers. “Of everything I’ve suffered and witnessed over the past two months, being apart from you was the hardest.”

I listen to his steadily beating heart, torn between two contradictory emotions: so full of love for him I could weep, and so terrified of losing him that I feel violent and desperate in response. I need to tell him what I did. *But not now, I think. Just let me enjoy this while I can.*

I don’t realize I’ve fallen asleep until many hours later, when Henri shifts against me, hard as stone. “We’ll perhaps need to find you undergarments tomorrow,” he whispers. “It might help.”

I laugh. “Yes, our first job, before we find food.”

He rolls on top of me, pushing the sweater around my waist. “If you’re awake enough to make jokes,” he says, sliding inside me, “you’re awake enough for this.”



WE RISE at first light and begin moving north once more, following the road at a distance. My spine prickles and I look over my shoulder.

“What is it?” Henri asks.

“I...do you think someone could be following us?”

He gives a short laugh. “I think many someones are following us.”

“No,” I whisper. “One person, on foot. Watching us.”

He frowns. “It’s natural to feel that way, under the circumstances. But an

armed person would already have acted. An *unarmed* person would die if he attempted anything.”

I know he’s right, but I still feel it for hours—that unsettling nudge at my back. It reminds me of the time traveler I encountered during those last visits to my own time, her eyes on me as if she was just waiting to strike.

The sensation abates after a few hours, and by the tail end of dusk, when we find another abandoned farm, I’ve almost forgotten it entirely.

We eat another insufficient meal, and then Henri goes to the woods to set traps while I enter the house, scouting for things we can take with us. The closet is full of dresses, but what I want most is the mattress—a week of sleeping on hay and the bare ground has taken its toll. I tug it down the stairs and drag it outside.

“That’s for the best,” says Quinn. He’s leaning against a wall, whittling. A useless endeavor if I’ve ever seen one. “If I have to spend one more night listening to the squeaking boards while you and Henri make whoopie I’m going to put a gun to my head.”

“Now there’s a thought,” I grunt, struggling with the weight. It’s filled with goose down and spectacularly heavy, but he doesn’t offer to help, naturally.

“You really don’t like me, do you?”

I let the mattress fall, suddenly exhausted. Within a day, we’ll have parted ways. Once we reach Clermont-Ferrand, Henri and I head north for Nanterre while Quinn will turn toward the Pyrenees. It can’t come soon enough. “I have no feelings about you either way, aside from the fact that you are one more mouth to feed and one more person to defend while I try to save my husband.”

He raises a brow. “You make me sound like a child who can’t take care of himself. Has it ever occurred to you I might be of some help if there’s a fight?”

“No,” I reply. “I can honestly say that’s never occurred to me. Which reminds me: Henri and I are staying here to rest an extra day, so if you want to head out on your own, feel free.”

We’re near the Occupied Zone, and once inside it, we will need to move fast. I want to be certain Henri is sufficiently recovered before we go, though if his stamina last night was any indication, he’ll be just fine.

Quinn shrugs. “Sure, I can rest,” he says. I roll my eyes as I turn away. I was really hoping we’d get a day here without him.

Henri is just returning from the woods, so I cross the yard to him. He nods at the mattress. “Are we moving in, then?”

“We could use a good night’s sleep.”

His eyes rake over me. “I’d like a soft mattress as much as you, though for very different reasons.”

I shake my head, hiding a smile. We are in a terrible situation—walking across the country, in danger, separated from our family—and yet simply because he’s here, I’m happy.

“What reasons would those be?” I ask.

He pulls me toward him. “Let’s go get the mattress,” he says, “and I’ll show you every one of them.”



I WAKE in the middle of the night and stare at the moon through the open beams of the roof. Between the blanket and Henri’s warmth, it’s cozy here. But it eats at me, the things I haven’t told him.

I don’t realize he’s awake until his mouth brushes my temple. “What’s troubling you, Sarah?” he asks. “I can sense it, you know, when you’re keeping things to yourself.”

I roll toward him. He’s going to learn it all eventually. It may as well be now. “Marie wanted me to go see Yvette when I was in Paris, so I did.”

“Yvette?” he asks. “Why?” There is incredulity in his tone, and I don’t blame him. When I say it aloud, it sounds insane to me too.

“She...was sleeping with some high-ranking German and Marie thought she might help us get papers, at least for Cecelia. But she wouldn’t. She got mad when Cece wouldn’t stay with her and called the guards on us both.”

“You killed her?” he asks softly.

I nod, my breath holding as I wait for some sign of disgust or condemnation. Instead he pushes my hair from my face and his palm rests there, against my jaw. “You didn’t think I’d blame you for that, did you?”

“She’s not the only person I killed,” I whisper.

He tugs me even closer. “It won’t matter. There is nothing you can say that will change how I feel. So tell me.”

My hand curls into a fist against his chest as I begin. I tell him about Cece’s illness, Nadeau’s threat, Claudette’s attack...and what I did in

response.

Slowly, as I speak, he unfurls my fingers and rests his own hand over mine.

“I should never have left you alone,” he says when I conclude. “I put you in that position, leaving you the way I did.”

I shake my head. “It’s something inside me, Henri. It grows a little more every time I hurt someone, like a weed. I’m worried it’s going to take over.”

I want him to tell me that’s not the case. I want him to tell me what I feel is normal and will go away. But for the first time, he doesn’t try to reassure me.

“Can you stop?” he asks. It’s an honest question—not a suggestion, not a reprimand. “Can you just let me defend you instead?”

“I’ll try,” I tell him. I wonder if he doubts me as much as I doubt myself.



I RISE in the morning and walk into the house, hoping to get clean clothes before I wash off. And hear a single footstep somewhere behind the kitchen.

“Show yourself,” I announce, reaching for the gun tucked in my waistband. “Or die.”

The steps are light, unhurried, as they approach, and then a child walks into the room. She’s young—maybe eleven or twelve—and wearing clothes I recognize from the room upstairs. Her eyes lift to mine...and I take a shocked step backward. She has the eyes of a time traveler—green eyes, like Henri’s—and then a brilliant, sweet smile lights up her whole face.

“Who are you?” I demand.

Her mouth opens and then closes, uncertain. “I’m not sure I’m supposed to tell you. *Am I* supposed to tell you?”

I lower the gun. “You must be...Marie’s child?”

She laughs. “Mom, it’s *me*,” she says in English, without a trace of an accent. “Quinn.”

I blink several times, wondering if I’ve heard her correctly. So much is wrong here. She called me *mom*. And she is definitely not Cecelia or Charlotte. And if I did have a child, why the hell would I name her Quinn?

“*What?*” I ask, but already I’m seeing it: I see Henri in her, and also myself. She has his thick hair, his olive skin, his green eyes, but with my

bone structure and build. She's as much a product of the two of us as any child could be.

"How is this possible?" I whisper.

"Well, you showed me all these places when we came last summer and I wanted to see what happened so..." she trails off, and her eyes grow wary.

"Are you mad?"

I shake my head, still trying to understand how she could possibly exist. And then I begin to put things together: the way certain smells have been making me gag, the constant rolling of my stomach. The fatigue. How have I not realized until now?

I'm pregnant.

I've been pregnant since Henri left Saint Antoine, and the girl who stands before me is the result.

She's still waiting, wondering if I'm mad, when I don't understand how she possibly managed to arrive in the first place.

"But how did you get *here*?" I ask.

She shrugs. "I jumped. Last summer you showed me some of the places you stayed. I jumped to one of them, but you were leaving."

"My God," I whisper, pressing my hands to my face. "You've been following us all this time?"

She shakes her head vigorously. "Just a little while yesterday but I had to go home."

"Home? You live here? Outside Lyon?"

Her head tips to the side, as if she doesn't understand what I'm asking. "No, we live in Virginia."

"Virginia," I repeat. To go back to a specific date, to a specific place on the other side of the world with almost no landmarks to guide you...the skill it would take to orchestrate it is almost unthinkable. "Are you saying you time traveled all the way from Virginia and managed to land *here*?"

She nods, looking a little uncertain. "You always tell me the story about the soldier and I wanted to see him."

I feel the air whistling through my lungs. "What soldier?" I whisper.

"Henri, the one who fights off all the Nazis." Her face grows wary. "I always thought maybe he was...my dad? I just wanted to see him. I wasn't going to talk to him."

The shock nearly sends me to my knees. She's saying she's never met her father. And I can only think of one reason why that would be the case.

I take a deep breath, trying to focus, trying not to fall apart in front of this girl who says she's mine. Who *must* be mine. Even standing here I feel a connection to her, as if something has us tethered. I want to ask her so many questions—*What happened to Henri? Are the rest of the children okay?* But she is too young for all that, too young even to realize how her simple visit could thrill me and break my heart all at the same time, and that she's endangered herself by coming at all. Only moments ago, I was ready to kill her myself.

I grab her hand. "It's not safe here, so I need you to swear to me you'll go home and that you will never come here without telling me again. Do you swear it?"

She nods. "But...my dad is the tall one, isn't he? The one with eyes like mine?"

I feel the sting of tears and nod quickly. "Go now, okay?"

She throws her arms around me. "See you at dinner," she says, pulling away with a wide, fearless grin, so like her father's. She closes her eyes, and just as quickly, she's gone. Leaving me so stunned I can't even remember why I came into the house.

She time traveled over an *ocean*. How is that possible? Marie has a talent, like I do, but nothing along the lines of what I just witnessed.

Suddenly I recall Madame Durand, reciting the prophecy to me so long ago: *In France there will be a hidden child, born of the first family, conceived during a great war and born on the other side of it.*

This will be a child born of two first families, conceived during a great war, but not born on the other side, unless...

Unless I chose to go to my own time to have her. If she's the hidden child, nothing could be safer than hiding her five decades into the future, could it?

But no. I would never leave Henri and the children. Let someone else be the hidden child. It does not have to be her.

I walk back to the barn and lie down next to Henri, who is still sound asleep. I curl up against him as if I can somehow cement us together. I wish I'd asked if he was alive when she was born. Because if he wasn't, it means we have less than six months left.

He rouses. "Well, hello there," he says. I start to pull away, but he holds onto me. "Not so fast."

"I need to check your wound."

“And I need to enjoy the feeling of you wrapped around me like a blanket.”

“Fine, but no more sex.”

He laughs. “Not even married yet and you’re already denying me.”

It hits me all over again: I am *pregnant*. I want to tell Henri, but...it would also mean telling him he will not know his daughter. It means telling him he might die in the next few months.

“I’m not feeling well,” I whisper, and then I press my face to his chest and begin to cry. I don’t want to be part of the prophecy. I don’t want to be the mother of the hidden child. I just want Henri and our life, and even now—as he swears to me everything will be fine—I suspect I’m not going to get it.



IN THE AFTERNOON, Henri goes out to check the traps. “Perhaps you’ll eat if I can find you something other than meat in a tin,” he says.

I bite down hard on my lip, watching him walk away. Going off into the woods is a risk, and so is building a fire to cook the meat. I should tell him about the baby, but this is a perfect example of why I’m reluctant to do so. He’ll take risks he shouldn’t, and he’ll coddle me in ways that are unnecessary. Most of all, I’m worried he’ll ask me to leave, because this is a terrible time and place to give birth. Even finding a doctor will be an issue, and what if she comes early like Cecelia did?

I return to the house, looking for anything that might prove useful for the last leg of our trip, and find myself facing a mirror in the bedroom upstairs. Now that I know I’m pregnant, I’m not sure how I could have failed to see it. My face has changed, and so has my body. I turn to the side and pull up my shirt just enough to see that the perfectly flat plane of my stomach, the one I’ve had all my life, has disappeared. It won’t be long until Henri sees it too.

“Well, well, well,” says a voice. I let the shirt drop and round on Quinn. Why the hell I would name any child after *him* is beyond me.

“I didn’t think you were *capable* of sneaking up on people,” I snap.

“When the occasion calls for it, I manage.” He glances at my stomach, his mouth set in a grim line. “So whose is it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“A woman doesn’t stare at her stomach in the mirror the way you just did unless she’s looking for one particular thing. Is it his or not?”

I glare at him. “Don’t be an idiot. Of course it is. You really think I’d risk my life trying to save someone I’d been cheating on?”

His arms fold. “Then why doesn’t he know?”

“Because I just found out myself,” I snap. “And because it will complicate things. I’ll tell him when we get to—”

The purr of vehicles approaching silences me. Quinn and I stare at each other, our constant animosity gone for once, and rush down the stairs.

“Two vehicles,” he says, peering out the window. “Six soldiers. With at least one machine gun.”

I pull my gun out of my waistband, a quiet, ugly thrill in my veins. I know I told Henri I’d try to stop, but this is different. “I’ll go around the back of the house and shoot from the side. You go to the window.”

He grabs my arm. “Are you nuts? They turn that machine gun on you and it’s over. Do you not even care about the baby?”

I should, but the desire for revenge is humming in my blood, louder than any other sound. “We can do this,” I hiss. “I can get the three in back, you take the three in front.”

He shakes his head. “No. Just run. I’ll surrender and tell them I’m alone. Maybe it’ll give you enough time.”

I blink. Since we met, I’ve seen him do little that isn’t selfish or boorish. But here he is, unexpectedly noble. I don’t understand. “Why would you do that for us?”

“Henri is a good man,” he says, and for the first time he seems like the adult he might be one day—decent and responsible. “He deserves to know his child.”

He walks out before I can stop him. His hands are up. *I can reverse this*, I think. *I can still save him*. And then the soldier with the machine gun rises and begins to fire. I watch as Quinn falls to the ground.

It feels as if it lasts a very long time, but in truth it’s probably only a second before my shock morphs into dark rage. I should care that I’m pregnant, that what I’m doing is suicidal, but making them pay...it surpasses everything else.

I run out the door behind the kitchen with one gun, hoping to kill the three in back before they realize where the bullets came from.

I slide along the wall, and once I’m close enough, I take aim. I’m almost

calm, empty, as I open fire. The first soldier falls, and then the second. The third swings toward me and falls...but the bullet isn't mine.

Henri, just on the periphery of the woods, has begun to fire. And it feels as if the world is falling apart as they turn toward him, rather than me. It was different when it was just my life at stake, or even mine and Quinn's. But now it's Henri's, and all my confidence and rage abandons me in a sudden rush of panic.

The soldier who holds off the Nazis, our daughter said.

Is it *this*? Is it because of me? The questions and the fear flood my brain and it's impossible to think clearly. Had I listened to Quinn, had I not given into my hideous anger, this wouldn't be happening.

The machine gun is directed at Henri, and even the tree he stands behind won't protect him for long. Somehow I manage to shake off my terror and jump to the house, grabbing the weapon Quinn left behind. I aim at the soldier with the machine gun and strike him in the head, but his gun swings wildly as he falls, and a bullet comes through the window a foot from me. I dive, and when I stand again, I see Henri, coming at the remaining soldier at a run.

Once again I'm paralyzed, unable to think, unable to fire. I watch as the soldier turns toward him, takes aim.

Henri lands in the jeep, on top of him. The gun explodes and then they are both still.

I freeze. *I can't stand it if he's dead*, I think. *I won't be able to survive it*.

Another shot is fired, and then...a miracle. Henri lifts himself off the soldier, and his eyes go to me, standing in the doorway, naked and stiff with shock. He climbs from the jeep and crosses the yard, pulling me tight. My knees buckle with relief.

He pulls away just enough that I can see the fury in his face, and the fear behind it. "You could have died. Why didn't you leave?"

Why didn't I? I could have stopped Quinn and time traveled back a few hours to warn us what was coming. Quinn is dead because I made the wrong choice. Because I wanted to kill more than I wanted us all to live.

I lean my head against his chest. "I wanted to kill them," I admit. "And now Quinn is dead. He surrendered and I just watched him go. I should have stopped him."

"This makes no sense," he whispers. "Why didn't he fight? It isn't like him just to give up."

My chest tightens with regret and sorrow. Henri's right. It wasn't like Quinn to just give up, but he was willing to make sacrifices for my family even I wasn't willing to make.

"He did it for you," I whisper. "You and our child. He thought he was buying us time to get away."

He stills. "Child?" he asks. "I never told anyone about Cecelia."

"Not Cecelia," I say gently, looking up at him. "*Our* child. I'm pregnant. I figured it out this morning and he figured it out right after I did."

"Pregnant," he repeats, his eyes alight, but wary at the same time. "You're certain? Because I thought the doctors said it wasn't possible."

"They said it was unlikely," I amend. "And I'm very sure, because I met her."

He blinks. "What? You mean, in the future?"

I shake my head. "Here. *Today*. Henri, she crossed an ocean to get here and her powers were...extraordinary. I think she may be the child mentioned in the prophecy."

His jaw falls open. "*Conceived during a great war and born in its shadow*," he recites. "But it's not possible. This war will continue for years."

"For some reason, I must jump forward," I reply, and then my head hangs. I don't want to tell him the rest.

He uses his index finger to tip my chin up, and then he studies my face. "What is it?" he asks.

"She was here to see you," I tell him, looking at the ground once more. "She said you'd never met."

I feel him stiffen, and then, slowly, his hand cups my jaw, forcing me to meet his eye. "And that's why you wept this morning?" he asks. When I nod, he presses his lips to my forehead. "Nothing is set in stone, little thief. Maybe there's another way."

I nod, swallowing hard to keep from crying and praying he's right.

"But this changes everything, Sarah," he continues. "You've *got* to protect our child and leave the rest to me until she's born. You've got to escape dangerous situations instead of staying behind to fight."

Quinn's body rests twenty feet ahead. He lies at an awkward angle, impossibly still for a man who was so very alive a few minutes before. I cross the distance and pull his dog tags up to the light.

Michael Robert Quinn. Waco, Texas.

He had no reason to sacrifice himself for us, but he did, and it's time for

me to give things up too. That ugly part of me has to be set aside so I can bring this child into the world and keep her safe.

I understand now why I named her after him. Not just because he sacrificed himself for us, but so I'll always be reminded of what happens when I give in to the dark.

Over the next week, as we head to Nanterre, we come to terms with our news. We have to stay quiet during the day, but at night we discuss the future—what it means that this child is the product of two first families. I tell him about the time traveler I saw lurking during my last visit to 1989, and we come to the same conclusion—there’s no assurance that our child will be safe, regardless of the decades she’s raised in.

He insists on taking more breaks than I need and coddles me as if I’m fragile, but I don’t really mind. Our time together feels more precious than it ever has. No matter what we tell ourselves, we both know it may end soon.

On our final night together, there is no shelter to be found—not a safe one anyway. We make a bed of leaves and then lie down with the blanket pulled around us and his arm beneath my head. It’s still cold out, but growing warmer now, with the barest hint of spring on the way. And all I can think is that by the time it gets cold again, I may be gone.

“I’m probably due in October,” I whisper.

“I can’t imagine a life without you, little thief,” he says, reading into my words and my sudden melancholy. “I refuse to believe that’s what’s in store for us.”

“You once said something about the island.” I glance away, as tears threaten. “About being reunited there. Do you think there’s a chance it’s true?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I’m a practical man,” he finally replies. “I struggle to believe in the concept of heaven, and the island sounds, to me, like another version of that.”

I suppose I mostly feel the same way. I just wanted him to convince me otherwise. I wanted him to convince me there was time.



It's afternoon when we finally crest the hill and see Chateau de Nanterre. My stomach drops at the sight—it's mostly rubble, destroyed either by time or German bombs.

Henri, who's been tense all day and trying to restrain his fury about Marie and Edouard's predicament, stiffens in a way that does not bode well.

"They can't be living here," I whisper, squeezing his hand. "There must be an explanation."

"I hope for my sister's sake it's a very good one," Henri growls.

We proceed down the hill. The grounds are surrounded by a twenty-foot wrought iron fence with spiked posts and the gate is locked.

"I'll just time travel to unlock it," I suggest.

His eyes flicker with anxiety. "What about the baby? What happened to Marie—"

"Won't happen here," I say softly, squeezing his hand. "I've been time traveling throughout this pregnancy, and this child's abilities surpass all of ours, remember?"

Before he can argue further, I fade and land on the other side.

He raises a brow at me. "Just keep in mind that you're supposed to avoid time travel for the next six months."

I grab the bars of the fence and smile at him. "I thought I'd mostly agreed to stop killing people."

I unlock the gate and, once I'm dressed, he takes my hand and we proceed down the long gravel path. The grounds are overgrown but flourishing in the March air—rose bushes budding, tulips already springing up in the beds along the exterior.

The remains of the chateau hardly look stable, so we head to the back. Crawling through a break in the eight-foot hedge, we emerge to a wonderland on the other side—a reflecting pool and long yard with cottages along its periphery and woods behind them. In the grass, at least twenty children stand frozen, staring at us in shock.

One small figure breaks from the group and barrels toward us—Charlotte,

brown curls flying around her joyful little face. “Mama!” she cries, throwing herself into my arms. I kneel in the gravel and pull her close, breathing in her smell of soap and grass and sunshine.

Tears spring to my eyes. It’s only now, now that we’ve finally gotten home to them, that I recognize the empty space that’s been inside me since I left. Lucien runs next and then the four of us are on the ground, entwined.

“Please don’t go away again,” whispers Charlotte against my ear. My chest squeezes tight at her solemn, tear-stained face. She already lost one mother and spent the last several weeks worried she’d lost another. I wish I hadn’t put her through that.

“I hope I never have to,” I tell her, turning my head to see Cecelia toddling forward, led by Marie.

“Mamamamama,” she cries when she’s close enough to see my face, releasing Marie’s hand and running on chubby little legs, her arms outstretched. She lands with a thud against me, wrapping her arms around my neck and scrambling into my lap with such force that she knocks me flat on my back. I lie on the ground, laughing while her arms squeeze me tight, until Henri lifts her up and turns to face his sister for the first time since he left to go fight.

Marie no longer wears a nun’s habit and is flourishing in the early-spring air. Her eyes glow, her cheeks are rosy, and she is smiling widely.

And he looks torn. He loves his sister and a part of him is clearly relieved to find her safe here. But there’s something else going on with him, a tension I’ve seen in him ever since last winter, whenever her name has come up.

I rise and nod toward the children playing in the grass. “None of them would be here were it not for what Edouard and Marie did,” I remind him softly.

“It’s true,” says Marie. “You can’t blame me, under the circumstances? And we’ll be married as soon as he’s defrocked.”

His jaw grinds. “You think this is about the fact that you’re not married?” he asks incredulously. “What about the fact that Amelie nearly died for your sake and you repaid her by abandoning her in Saint Antoine? She and Cecelia could be safely away in England right now if it weren’t for you.”

And there it is, the real source of his distress. He just wishes a few of us were safe.

Marie’s smile fades. “You left her alone in Saint Antoine too, did you not? Don’t hold what I did against me when you *also* did it twice.”

I see Edouard approaching, out of his priest attire, and for once it's me who keeps a level head. "No one knew what was coming," I say quickly, "and it all worked out for the best." This child that grows inside me is there because I stayed. If we'd made it to England, none of this would have happened.

I feel his urge to argue, and then it releases as his lips brush over my hair. "You're right. Our family is perfect just as it is."

He and Edouard shake hands, both of them tense. I think they'll be friends in time, which is good, because they have more in common than they know. I've been piecing it together—that glow to Marie, the flush of her cheeks.

I'm not the only one here who's pregnant.



THE CHATEAU BELONGS to Genevieve Lepin, one of the country's wealthiest women and—ostensibly—a Nazi sympathizer. Her mansion in Paris is at the heart of wartime society, a salon for German officers to mingle with the city's prettiest girls while drinking its best liquor and dining on foie gras, which gives Genevieve many privileges most French citizens don't have. One of those privileges is that her property is left alone, and I'll admit that a bombed-out, gated off home makes a good hiding place for the time being. While the ten cottages that sit on the periphery of the rolling green lawn are a bit rudimentary, they provide room enough for everyone—twenty children, plus Marta and Rachel, two Jews who fled from Germany to France—and in the one section of the house that remains standing there are two baths and part of a kitchen. Genevieve is still trying to help them get papers for all the children, but in the meantime it seems as good a solution as any.

Marie shows me to the cottage Henri and I will share with Charlotte, Lucien and Cecelia—it's a single large room with a curtain used to partition off the beds—a double for me and Henri, and another large bed for the three children.

"So it seems we're both pregnant," I say, turning to face her.

Her eyes go wide. "But I thought—" she begins.

I shrug. "I thought so too. I don't understand it. But...I've met her. She visited us when we were on our way here."

Marie sinks onto a bed. “A time traveler then,” she says.

I hesitate. For the past two years, Marie has believed—as we did—that she was the hidden child of the prophecy. I never got the feeling that it mattered to her, but I can’t swear that it *didn’t* matter either.

“I think it’s more than that,” I reply. I explain about learning that I’m from one of the first families, and then witnessing our daughter’s powers firsthand. “I think she may be the hidden child,” I conclude.

Her jaw falls open as I speak, and when I’m done, she buries her face in her hands and begins to cry. I’d thought she might be disappointed, at most, but I never expected this. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, placing my hand on her shoulder. “Nothing is certain...I had no idea you’d be so upset.”

She raises her tearstained face to mine and laughs. “I’m not upset,” she says. “I’m relieved. All this time I’ve been thinking the child I lost might have been the circle of light or whatever it is, and that I ruined it. The prophecy my mother died for, that we nearly died for.” She wipes her eyes. “What you’re telling me means I haven’t ruined anything at all.”

Poor Marie, carrying so much guilt for no reason. “I’m sorry you ever thought it,” I tell her.

She steps back, frowning again. “But if the war isn’t ending for years still, does it mean you’ll go forward in time to have her?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “We haven’t decided.”

Her hand grasps mine. “I’m sorry the responsibility has been placed on your shoulders,” she says. “But so many people have lost their lives or their loved ones in order for this to happen. If you’re truly having the hidden child and you’re supposed to go forward, I hope you’ll think it through.”



THAT NIGHT, we put the children to bed and then retreat to our own.

“I told Marie about the baby,” I whisper, pressing close to him. “She seems to think it’s my duty to go home to have her.”

He stiffens. “How convenient for her to suddenly preach to you about duty while she sleeps with a priest.”

“Henri,” I chide, “she was just being honest.”

“If she wants honesty,” he growls, “I’ll have plenty for her and Edouard in turn.”

I shouldn't have brought it up. He's mostly made up with Marie, but if he thinks she's pressuring me to leave, his anger will ignite once more.

My palm presses to the side of his face and I tip my head just enough to press my lips to his.

"If you're trying to use sex to distract me," he says, pulling me closer, "you'll probably succeed."

I laugh. "We can't have sex here," I whisper. "Until the war ends, we may never have sex again."

"Of course we will," he says, sliding down the bed. "You'll just need to learn to be quiet." He lifts my nightgown up and spreads my legs.

"Oh, I'm the one who makes too much noise?" I ask drily, pushing up on my forearms.

He grins. "Shall I prove it to you?" His tongue darts between my legs, over me and then in me and I gasp, holding the pillow over my face.

"Fine," I whisper. "It's me. Keep going. I'll learn to be quiet."

Spring arrives. We fall into a routine, and our days are busy but happy. Food is scarce—mostly tinned food sent by Genevieve, augmented by what Henri and Edouard manage to trap in the woods—but there are luxuries that come our way occasionally. Flour, sugar, chocolate, fresh fruit. It certainly doesn't feel as if we're suffering.

All the adults take turns teaching, though our cumulative knowledge is less useful than we'd like, and nights are spent sitting at the long table Henri and Edouard built. The children eat with us and then play until it's dark, making our time here feel, in some ways, like an extended vacation, albeit it one with terrible food and cramped accommodations.

Tonight, before dinner is even over, Cecelia grows tired and climbs over Charlotte's lap to reach me, yawning as she rests her head against my chest.

Charlotte plugs her nose. "She needs a diaper change."

I start to rise, but Henri takes her from me. "I'll get it," he says. "You sit. You've been on your feet all day."

Rachel's eldest, a twelve-year old named Daniel, frowns. "I'm never going to change a diaper."

"When we get married," Charlotte informs him, "you will need to help."

Henri makes a sound that is either laughter or choking, perhaps a little of both.

"You're six years younger than me," says Daniel, flushing. "I can't marry you."

"When I'm eighteen, you will be twenty-four," she informs him. "And it won't seem like so great a difference."

“Charlotte will be a beauty one day,” Marie says later, after the children are in bed, “and Daniel will wish he hadn’t been quite so dismissive.”

I squeeze Henri’s hand. “You’ll have to beat back so many boys who come for Charlotte and Cecelia both.”

“So you’ve decided to go forward after the war to have your child?” asks Marie. Her voice is so hopeful and grateful it makes me wince.

“No, she hasn’t,” Henri snaps. “We don’t even know that this is the hidden child she carries.”

“Of course it is!” cries Marie. “What are the odds that two of the four first families would come together to produce a child?”

“If Sarah can get pregnant once, she can get pregnant again,” Henri says, staring hard at the table, apparently ignoring the fact that it was our daughter herself who told me she’d never met him. “And we don’t owe it to anyone to keep the child in another time.”

Marie’s jaw drops. “Henri, be reasonable. This is about more than the two of you. It’s about more than any of us. Have we not seen firsthand how much harm a powerful time traveler can do?”

Henri’s nostrils flare. “Who, Coron? He wasn’t a time traveler.”

“You’re right,” she snaps. “But imagine how much worse it could have been if he were. Imagine a powerful time traveler with bad intentions—or even a *family* of time travelers. They would be undefeatable if they wanted something. If they fail, they can just keep going back.”

“You’re speaking in hypotheticals,” says Henri. “I’m talking about the flesh-and-blood woman I love.” He’s so resistant to the idea he can’t think clearly, and I suppose I am too. Even if it was only four more years, that’s four years without Henri. Cece would be six when she caught up with me, Lucien, seven, Charlotte, ten. And if I have to return to my own time, it would be so much longer. I’d need to wait until our child was eighteen before I returned to them. They’d all be adults by then. Adults who barely remember me.

“I’m sorry,” Marie says. “I’m not trying to ruin these months for you. I hate that this may mean Amelie is leaving. But...what’s being asked of her is a gift. Don’t you see? Anyone, anywhere in the future could appear and take this away from us. They could go back to kill us as children and even remove the times we’ve already had. With this child coming, I understand now why our mother hated that so much. I wouldn’t want to be in Amelie’s position, but if I were, I know what I would do.”

“The prophecy is a *prediction*,” Henri says. “If the child is supposed to be hidden, it should happen naturally, because circumstances dictate it. Not because we followed what it said like a play book.”

He’s right. And yet, when I think of all the people who died or suffered, hoping to bring this to fruition...a part of me thinks I owe it to all of them to do this the right way.

Henri and I retreat to the cottage a few minutes later, both of us worn down by worry and guilt. Maybe Marie is right, but when I picture raising this baby alone, away from Henri and the children, I can feel how painful it will be, how lonely. My heart would break a little more every single day.

We are quiet as we get ready for bed. It’s only after we’ve lied down that he raises up on his forearm to meet my gaze.

“I’d like to marry you before she’s born,” he says. “I know it won’t be official until the state can sanction it, but I still want to do it.”

I smile for the first time since our discussion with Marie began. “Fortunately,” I reply, “we happen to know a priest.”



ON A SUNDRENCHED JUNE MORNING, I walk with Charlotte to the small chapel in the woods, part of the estate dating back to the 1600s. I wear a dress recovered from the ruins of the chateau and altered to fit my growing stomach—what was once a diaphanous ballgown has been turned into a maternity wedding dress that goes down to my ankles, tied under the bust with a white satin sash. Charlotte beams beside me, swinging the basket of flowers she and Lucien spent the morning picking.

“Can I wear that dress when I marry Daniel?” she asks.

I laugh. “Yes, though I hope you’ll give it a few years.” *And won’t be pregnant.* We’ve reached the top of the church steps. “Are we ready, my loveliest flower girl?”

She nods and we enter. Henri waits at the end of the aisle, resplendent in a suit borrowed from Edouard. His eyes meet mine, and despite the situation I feel nothing but joy. This moment is happening because of all the things we went through, all the ways we suffered. I’d have fought so many things tooth and nail, had I known ahead of time—the broken ankle that stranded me with Henri the first summer we met, being held captive, Cecelia’s birth, remaining

behind with Charlotte and Lucien when the Germans invaded, letting Henri know who I really was—but they’ve brought us here, and because of that I would change none of them.

He pulls me against him when I reach the altar. “You’re so lovely,” he says, low enough that only I can hear. “I can’t believe you’re finally going to be mine.”

I smile. “I was yours all along. Even back when I insisted I wasn’t.”

His mouth finds mine and I sigh happily. At last, at last, at last...I feel like I’ve waited my entire life to get here.

“Papa,” scolds Charlotte. “You’re supposed to do that at the end.”

Everyone laughs and Edouard, smiling, begins to read.

Our vows are simple and said quickly, given that the church is full of restless children. But as Henri kisses me for the first time as his wife, I feel new again. As if God has, once more, decided to forgive me for what I became.



THAT NIGHT, Marie takes the children and we have the cottage to ourselves.

We retire early, and Henri carries me over the threshold, tugging the sash of my dress loose before he’s even set me down. He crosses the room to light a lamp and I object.

“What do we need light for?” I ask. “I sort of assumed we’d be...going to bed.”

He laughs. “Oh, we definitely will be.” He removes his jacket as he crosses the room to me, then turns me away so he can unbutton my dress. “But for the last two months, I’ve made love to you furtively.” His mouth presses to my neck, and then my ear, making me shiver. “Tonight, I want all of you—the sight of you, the sounds you make. All of it.”

He pulls the dress down my shoulders and to the floor before holding out a hand so I can step out of it. I turn toward him, and his hands go to either side of my belly. “I never dreamed that in the middle of a war, my life could be so perfect,” he says.

I reach up and begin to unbutton his shirt. “Not perfect yet,” I reply, going on my toes to find his mouth as I pull the shirt off. “But it’s about to be.”

June gives way to July.
I'm six months pregnant, and I've never longed for a respite from the heat the way I do now. I want air conditioning and ice. I want a shower.

But I refuse to wish these days of summer away. Because once they're gone, it will be time for us to make a decision.

We've been avoiding that conversation of late, perhaps because we both feel time slipping away. I'm nowhere near ready to be separated from him or the children. If I were to go into labor today, I know I would not be able to leave, and three months from now, I'm sure I'll feel the same.

I wake with the sun each day, my nightgown sticking to me. Toward the month's end, it's not even light out when I'm putting my head out the window, hoping to catch a bit of a breeze.

"My God, the heat is going to be unbearable today, isn't it?" I whisper to Henri.

"Take off your nightgown and I'll run a cool cloth over you."

I raise a brow. "I know where taking off my nightgown will lead."

He laughs. "If the children weren't going to wake any moment now, you'd be right. But just this once, I promise you're safe."

I pull the nightgown off and sit, relishing the feel of air on my bare skin. "I would kill for a Coke Slurpee," I tell Henri. I've explained Slurpees to him on many occasions. The name never fails to make him laugh, as it does now.

"Such a disgusting concept," he says, dabbing a cloth into the pitcher of water on the nightstand and running it over my back and then my neck, "but I

promise to find you one once the war ends.”

“I’m not sure you ever get 7-Elevens in France.”

His smile falters for half a second. Perhaps remembering, as I am, that our daughter said we live in Virginia. There’s rustling on the other side of the curtain—one restless child about to wake the others—but his hand goes to my hip and holds there for a moment. “Then I’ll make you one,” he says. “Because you’re staying here.”

I let my forehead fall to his chest, and that’s when we hear it—the distant rumble of a car on the road. I know it’s probably just food coming from Genevieve, or perhaps even the forged papers she’s promised—she’s already come through for Marta and her children, who left a week earlier for the south of France. But it never gets easier, this uncertainty. Henri meets my eye and I nod. We both know the drill by now.

We dress quickly, then I rush out with Cece in my arms, waking everyone, while he grabs a gun and climbs through the hedge to get to the front gate with Edouard right behind him. Marie, Rachel and I walk through the woods with the children between us until we reach the old church and hustle everyone inside. Then we wait, holding our breath to listen.

After a few minutes I hear someone coming through the woods and then Henri’s whistle, the sign that it’s safe. I throw the door open, but my smile fades. Edouard and Henri both look grim as they climb the steps.

“What is it?” Marie asks, rushing to Edouard.

He flinches. “The Germans are coming here today to repair the house. Genevieve couldn’t put them off. She’s got papers for Rachel and her two, plus a few of the others. She wants me to take them by foot to Versailles and catch a train to Limoges.”

Her hand slides into his. “You? Why?”

“Amelie and I are the only adults here who can be in the open safely,” he says, his head hanging. “But she’s nearly seven months pregnant. She can’t be asked to make that kind of journey on foot, and she could go into labor at any point—she can’t be left alone with five children.”

“And the rest of us?” I ask.

As Henri’s tongue darts out to tap his lip, I already know I’m going to dislike the answer. “She’s found another place for us. The driver is waiting. He’ll take you and Marie and the youngest of the children, then come back for the rest of us.”

I think of our daughter saying Henri was the one who *fought all the Nazis*.

“I think we should stay together.”

He frowns, stepping closer to twine his fingers through mine. “It’s not possible. There’s not enough space. I promise you I’ll be there tonight.” He laughs, almost to himself. “That wasn’t the part I thought you’d object to.”

“What did you think I’d object to?”

“We’re staying in her home. In Paris.”

I freeze, searching his face for some sign this is a joke. It doesn’t appear to be. “She wants us to stay in the house next door to a German officer—a house where she entertains Nazis day and night?” I ask. “That’s insane.”

He sighs. “Perhaps. But her home is unlikely to be searched, if nothing else. Once the rest of us have papers, we’ll join Edouard in Limoges.”

It sounds farfetched, impossible. I worry I’ll look back one day and realize it was.



AFTER AN EMOTIONAL GOODBYE, Marie and I set out for Paris, along with Charlotte, Lucien, Cecelia and Jacques, a near-silent five-year-old.

The journey is tense—only I can ride safely in the front of the truck while the others hide behind boxes in back—but our arrival is scarier. Though we pull into the alley behind the house—the servants’ entrance—I can see at least six German soldiers patrolling next door. I’m sent inside and up the back stairs to the attic with Cecelia in my arms. The room is full of old furniture and paintings and covered in a one-inch thick layer of dust.

The driver and another staff member follow, carrying the children—and Marie—inside boxes. Lucien laughs as he emerges. “That was fun,” he tells me, wrapping his arms around my neck as I lift him out. No one else laughs, not even Charlotte, who clings to me afterward. She’s old enough, now, to understand the danger we’re in.

I spend the next few hours trying to keep the children occupied and relatively quiet, waiting for Henri to come. He arrives just after dinner, pulling me against his chest and holding me tight.

“Ahem,” says a voice behind him and we both turn to find a woman who must be Genevieve.

She’s middle-aged and pretty, wearing a midnight-blue ballgown that looks like lingerie, her hair perfectly coiffed. “Sorry to break up the reunion,”

she says, “but I’m about to entertain fifty German soldiers so this is the time. I’m working on getting papers for you but they won’t be ready until the end of the week. I understand you,” she says, turning to me, “have a good passport. I’ll need you to run to the forger’s location to check on the papers in a few days.”

Henri’s mouth opens to object and I step on his foot. Pregnant or not, I’m the one who’s best positioned to take on a dangerous job right now.

“I know it’s not ideal,” Genevieve concludes, “but you’re safe here. Just try not to make too much noise.”

And with that, she’s gone, and we set about learning how to keep eight children quiet.



THE HOURS in the attic pass slowly. The tension is constant, given the steady stream of German soldiers through the rooms below. The heat would be brutal were it not for the fans and the flow of air through the dormer windows. Food is brought up the back staircase once or twice a day by a maid who seems scared to even look at us, as if our tenuous situation might catch. On the third day she signals to me to follow her, and then downstairs gives me a scrap of paper with an address only a few blocks away.

“Tell them you’re there to pick up the cigars for Herman Gunter. Do not return directly to the house, but wander through the city a bit and go into other shops until you’re certain you weren’t followed.”

I find the building with relative ease—it really is a cigar shop, and I wonder if perhaps I’m just running errands for Genevieve instead of picking up papers.

“I’m here for the cigars ordered by Herman Gunter,” I tell the man behind the counter.

He looks at me and nods, going to the back and returning with a cigar box in a bag. I take it from him, and walk to a bookseller’s at the street’s end, standing outside in the heat while I ensure I haven’t been followed. I thumb through *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Charles Baudelaire. I remember finding it on Henri’s nightstand that day, so long ago, when I snuck into his room. I called it curiosity back then, my desire to sneak through his things, but it was lust...something I’d had no experience with until him. Now, of course, there’s

love as well, but at seven months pregnant I'm finding that lust has taken top billing, oddly enough. I pray our papers come through soon. We could use some privacy.

I close the book and am about to put it back when I sense I'm being watched. I raise my head slowly as the book falls from my hands.

She's here.

The time traveler from 1989. She is standing just across the street and looks different in clothes from this era and with her hair pinned back, but I'm certain it's her. There's that same malevolence on her face as she watches me.

She blends into the crowd and I turn on my heel, fleeing toward Genevieve's, toward safety. I've run three blocks before I realize that if she can time travel, she can follow me on foot. All she'd need to do is return to the bookstore and follow my tracks—which means the only way I can prevent her from finding us is if I time travel myself, except if I do so, I'll lose everything I'm wearing and everything I'm carrying...namely, the documents in the cigar box. I turn, rushing back to the bookseller's, and shove the papers into a copy of *Madame Bovary*. Once they're secure, I head toward Genevieve's, stopping in the alley closest to her house.

Despite my aunt's spark, I'm still not good at landing in different places. I very well might arrive back in this alley, which opens me up to a wealth of other problems. There's no time in which a naked, pregnant female can walk about without attraction attention. I take a deep breath and then focus hard on the Genevieve's attic, on the dust motes floating in sunlight and Henri's worried face as he awaits my return. I land gracelessly on the floor, relieved to see my family's shocked heads jerk toward the sound.

Henri grabs a blanket and rushes over to cover me. "Are you alright?"

"I saw her," I gasp. "The time traveler who was watching me in 1989. I saw her just now."

"Are you sure she's bad?" he asks. "Maybe she's just a family member? Another granddaughter of Katrin's?"

I glance from him to Marie, my heart beating hard. The fear in her eyes reflects my own. It will sound paranoid, voicing my thoughts, but I know what's happening is precisely the worst-case scenario Marie once suggested could occur: this woman is working her way backward, looking for the right time to strike.

And I'm worried she's found it.

“I’m sure she was bad, Henri,” I whisper. “I’m sure.”

Genevieve sends a maid to retrieve the papers from *Madame Bovary*. She's angry at me for leaving them behind, and since I can't tell her that I time travel, I have to let her remain so. "Don't ask my staff to save your hide if you won't save your own," she says to me. "From now on, you get those papers yourself or you don't get them at all."

The next day, four of the children leave for Limoges, where Edouard waits. Marie watches them longingly, wishing she were going with them. "It'll happen eventually," I tell her.

"I hope so," she says. She turns her worried eyes to me. "I don't think you understand how bad this is."

I laugh. "Our situation? I assure you I do." I'm now farther along than Yvette was when she gave birth to Cece and trapped in a swelteringly hot attic.

"Not that. The time traveler," she says. "It's exactly as my mother described. If someone wants to stop you, she can just keep going backward. What if she sees the next set of forged passports? She won't even need to try to find you here. She'll just need to find out where Henri once lived. She could kill him back before the two of you ever met and none of your time with him would exist."

"Enough, Marie," barks Henri. "She's worried enough as it is. And if the time traveler wanted Amelie dead, she'd have done it already."

"Maybe she doesn't want Amelie at all," she argues. "Maybe she's just waiting for the child to be born. And if she fails to steal her the first time, then she'll just keep following us, or going back to do things differently."

Henri leans forward, nostrils flaring, jaw set hard. “You think I don’t see through this? You’re trying to scare her into going forward with the baby. It won’t work.”

Tears spring to her eyes. “I’m not trying to scare her,” she says. “Or maybe I am, because I’m scared. Don’t you understand how much danger we’re all in? Not just us and our children, not just time travelers. Anyone *alive* is at risk.”

“Easy for you to say when you lose absolutely nothing by having her leave,” Henri says, sliding his hand through mine as he rises from the table.

“I’d be willing to lose everything in order to make it happen,” she whispers. “Just like our mother did.”

“Another easy thing to say,” he replies, turning for the other side of the room with his arm wrapped around me tight, “since you’ll never be asked to do it.”

That night, with the windows open, there’s just enough airflow to make the room bearable. I lie next to Henri, listening to the steady beat of his heart beneath my head. Memorizing it. Marie’s words from earlier today are still with me. As much as I want to resist them, I can’t deny what she’s saying. It isn’t about this single time traveler who’s potentially a threat—it’s about the threat inherent in our gift, how any of us could wreak havoc. I sense this evil in myself, but it’s kept in check by my love for Henri and the children. What if it wasn’t? How far would my desire to harm carry me? An innocent man has already died because of it. I’m certain there would be others.

Henri’s lips press to the top of my head. “It’s going to be fine,” he says. “Marie is being paranoid. There’s no way this time traveler can trace us.”

“She found me in 1941, when you’re the only person alive who knows my name here,” I whisper. “She may have resources we know nothing about.”

“We’ve been through too much, survived too much,” he says. “I won’t give you up simply because my sister is panicking.”

I think of all our time together—that blissful summer and fall before I was held captive, and all the time since. Marie is right...any time traveler could wipe it from existence if she wanted. I don’t want to die, but more than that, I don’t want what exists in the past to be stolen too. I don’t want it to happen to *anyone*.

He tips my chin up to kiss me, his mouth firm, demanding. I respond, my need matching his and I can feel the vibration of his groan under my palm,

now pressed to his chest. His hand slides from the curve of my waist, down to my hip, and as our kisses grow reckless and desperate, his inhales sharpen. He crushes the fabric of my nightgown in his fist, struggling to restrain himself.

My thighs squeeze tight, as if it will dull the pain of wanting him like this. I allow my hand to graze over the front of his pants, relishing the hard outline of him there.

“You’re soaked right now, aren’t you?” he whispers with a quiet groan. “Open your legs. I need to feel it.”

I shouldn’t—it will only make the need worse—but my legs part and when his fingers slip between them, air hisses through my teeth.

He rolls me to my back, pushing the nightgown around my waist. “I can’t wait anymore, Sarah.”

I glance over at the children and Marie. “They could wake—we can’t.”

“We can,” he says, climbing from the bed, “and we will.”

He moves through the darkness, stacking chairs along the side of our bed, and then draping a blanket over them—creating a partition from the rest of the room, though one that could easily topple and wake the entire household.

“If that falls, we’ll have an entire platoon of drunk Germans up here investigating,” I whisper.

“Then,” he says, lying on the bed and pulling me above him, “let’s make sure it’s worthwhile.”



GENEVIEVE APPEARS in our rooms early the next day. I blush, grateful that Henri deconstructed the chair and blanket wall before anyone woke this morning. “I’m told the rest of the papers will be ready soon,” she says. “Two more days and you will all be free to go to Limoges.”

Marie and I hug, as best we can with our burgeoning stomachs, and Henri presses his lips to my forehead. “Thank God,” he says. “It’s almost behind us.”

I sit with a still-drowsy Cece in my lap while Henri plays jeu de barbichette—the slapping game—with Charlotte and Lucien.

“You’re terrible,” I sigh. “They’ll get expelled if they try to play that in school.”

Henri's eyes crinkle at the corners. "Not in France they won't. You're too soft."

I laugh. "I think we both know that's not true."

Marie is lying on her side, her feet next to my hip. "What do you think the home in Limoges is like?" she asks.

Henri's smile tips up at the corners. "I don't care, as long as my wife and I no longer need to share a room with you all."

Marie laughs. "She's over seven months pregnant, Henri. You'll have no need for privacy for quite some time, believe me."

His eyes meet mine and hold. I bite down on a smile, just before a *thud* from the corner of the room draws my attention.

A naked woman is on our floor, on her hands and knees.

I freeze, some piece of me realizing what must be happening before I've put it all together.

Me. The woman on the floor is me. And I'd only be jumping backward like this to give us a warning.

"Go," she says, her chest heaving. "Go now."

Henri rushes over and kneels in front of her. "What happened?"

"Two days from now," she says, looking at me. "You will go to the cigar shop and they'll tell you your sister was already there, a girl with eyes just like yours."

All the breath leaves my chest and I lean forward, holding tight to Cecelia. "Eyes like mine means a time traveler," I whisper.

She nods. "She was demanding to know when the papers would be ready. She insisted that you were leaving the next morning—which means she knows *ahead of you* the day you will go."

The bedspread twists beneath my hand. "So we have to get out now, ahead of her."

She nods. "Even that may not be enough. There are a thousand ways she can find us."

Henri and I stare at each other. "We'll just have to go without the papers," he says.

"But how?" I ask. "It's daylight. You can't be seen at all, and *someone* is going to ask for identification, whether we walk or take the train."

He drags a hand through his hair. "I'll ask Genevieve for the truck," he says. "Get the children ready."

He runs for the stairs and already the naked me on the floor is vanishing,

which means we've changed how things go two days from now. I just hope we're changing them for the better.

Marie and I exchange a worried glance. "There's something we're missing," she says. I've never seen her so pale and worried.

"What do you mean?"

"She can time travel, but we're acting as if she's human. It can't be this easy to escape her."

I tug at my hair. "I know," I whisper. Whatever is wrong with this plan, I'm too panicked right now to figure out what it is.

I help the children with their shoes, while Marie stares sightlessly out the dormer windows. "Marie, can you pack our things?" I ask, but she doesn't even seem to hear me. Genevieve and Henri come in just as we're done. "The truck isn't here," he says. "It won't return from Limoges until tomorrow."

I stare at him. "I don't know what to do."

"Just wait," says Genevieve. "I'm sure this—"

That's when we hear it—the pounding at the front door. Henri and I look at each other, and I see it then, the failure in our plan. "She's always going to know when we leave," I tell him, feeling faint suddenly and leaning against the wall for support. "She got her information from some point in the future, and each time we change the plan, the information she received, the dates that led her here...they change too. She knows it as soon as we do."

The pounding on the door increases.

"I don't know what you're talking about but they're about to break down the door," says Genevieve. "You need to get out of here. Leave through the basement. In the closet you'll see what looks like an air vent. Behind it is a tunnel which will lead you across the street."

"And from there?" I ask.

She meets my gaze, her face bleak. "From there you run."

She heads for the stairs, but Henri, Marie and I remain absolutely still, stunned speechless. Asking us to crawl out a manhole and run with the children in the middle of the day is tantamount to suicide. We need a car or we'll never make it. Marie presses her hands to her stomach and swallows hard.

"I can do it," she whispers with tears in her eyes. "I'll get us the truck. Meet me at the Pont de l'Alma in five minutes."

Before I can ask what she means, her clothes fall to the ground and she is gone.

“No,” I whisper after her. I’m too late. I doubted her, all those times she insisted she would give up everything on behalf of the prophecy, but she may have done just that. If she isn’t carrying a time traveler, she won’t be pregnant when we see her next.

“Sarah,” Henri says, putting two guns in his waistband. “We need to go.”

He sweeps Lucien up in one arm and Cece in the other and heads for the stairs. Charlotte and I are at his heels.

We reach the basement just as the door upstairs opens and the floor above us echoes with the sound of stomping boots. I stand frozen, listening.

We cannot beat her. If there was time, I could go find out how she knows about us and perhaps stop her. But there’s no way I can do that now.

And this is why the prophecy matters, why so many people were willing to die for it—because no matter what we do here and now, she can keep going back, tracing us through previous weeks and years to catch us unaware. We escape today and eventually she’ll show up somewhere in our past—Nanterre or even Saint Antoine, that first blissful summer with Henri—and destroy us.

This is why my daughter needs to exist. So she can bring into the world something with the power to stop all of it. Until it happens, we are endlessly vulnerable.

“I have to kill her,” I tell him.

He shakes his head. “No, just go. Get into the tunnel. I’ll hold them off until you’re gone.”

“It won’t matter, Henri!” I cry. “Listen to me! Until she’s dead she’ll just keep going backward to find us.”

He holds my face. “There’s not time for that right now,” he says. “Just get ahead of her. And if that fails, save yourself. Save our daughter.” His lips press to mine. “This isn’t the time for weakness, little thief. You were chosen to bring her into the world for a reason. Show the universe it hasn’t made a bad choice.”

“Henri—” I cry, wanting to beg him to consider any other way.

He stops me, kissing me hard, one last time. “I love you,” he says. “Wherever the other side is, I’ll be waiting for you there.” He lifts me into the tunnel and hands me Cece.

I allow myself a single, final moment to take in his face, and he holds my gaze until I go, scooting backward through the tunnel as fast as I can. I push up the manhole cover and climb out, hearing the sound of gunfire as I lean

down to pull the children to me. Henri, alone, is facing whatever is behind us, and I have no way to help him—no weapon, no time. I could jump back a day and try to kill the time traveler responsible for all this, but the children would be dead before I'd succeeded.

"Take Lucien's hand," I tell Charlotte, with tears running down my face. I lift Cece in my arms and we begin to run, cutting through alleyways toward the Seine.

It's all futile, though. I don't know what the time traveler is after, but if she doesn't get it, she will just go back and do things differently. She's been tracing me, or us, for years, waiting for the right moment to strike, and now that she's found it she isn't going to give up. She'll just send the police to Genevieve's sooner. She can go back endlessly, and one of those times, she'll succeed.

It's still early, and only one truck sits down at Pont de l'Alma—a fish truck. I'm not sure if it's the truck Marie promised or some fisherman loading up his daily catch, but I run toward it anyway.

Edouard and Marie step out, and my stomach drops.

Marie is no longer pregnant.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. She shakes her head, trying not to cry, and takes Cece from me, while Edouard lifts Lucien into the back of the truck and climbs in after him.

I hug Charlotte tight and bury my head in her hair. "I have to go back to take care of some things. I'll be with you as soon as I can."

"Please, Mama," she begs, clinging to me. "You said you wouldn't leave. Let me stay with you!"

"I know," I say, choking on a sob. "But first I need to make sure things are safe for us, and I need you to be brave."

She clings harder. "I don't want you to go," she weeps. "I don't want you to go back there."

It all feels wrong. It feels wrong that I'm breaking my promise. It feels wrong that I am asking so much of her when she's so small. "Charlotte, I—"

Suddenly, a shot is fired. It pings off the back of the truck and ricochets into the grass. My head jerks upward. Soldiers are firing on us from the bridge, and the time traveler stands on the hillside, watching it unfold. I swing my back to them, protecting Charlotte. "Get in the truck!" I scream, trying to pull her hands off me. She is crying, clinging hard as if she can protect me. I feel fire in my shoulder, a pain so searing I nearly drop her.

Her grip loosens and I thrust her toward the back of the truck, into Edouard's arms. That's when I realize she's no longer fighting, no longer moving. Her eyes are open, sightless, her dress soaked in blood. A small hole in the center of her chest where the bullet entered, the same bullet that went through my shoulder.

No.

I stare at the hole, at her empty eyes.

I understand in a second's time and yet I understand nothing. It's Edouard who recovers first, who yanks me into the truck before I'm shot again. There's a sharp pain in my abdomen but I ignore it.

"No," I whisper to him, looking at Charlotte. "No, no. We can fix it!"

Edouard lifts my face. "You can't fix this, Amelie. I'm sorry."

Cece and Lucien are weeping, bullets are flying at the truck, and Charlotte—my sweet Charlotte who wanted to marry Daniel and live in Nanterre forever—is dead.

Shock and grief seem to empty me. Marie begins driving and I can only stare at my little girl, desperately trying to come up with a way to undo this. I begin shaking her, as if it's a sleepy morning in Nanterre and she is refusing to wake. Edouard grabs my shoulders. "Amelie, she's gone," he says. "You need to pull it together."

I look at him and hear his words, finally. And my grief is replaced by rage. Not clear and cold and rational the way it's been in the past. This time I want to burn the world down. I want to kill those soldiers and the time traveler and everyone they've ever loved.

Henri wanted so much for me to put this behind us. But suddenly I know, in a way I never did before, that I am meant to feel this way. That I am meant to be ruthless, and to stop at nothing to keep the child inside me safe.

And I will start with the time traveler who made all this happen.

I picture her, standing on the hillside, and I land behind her.

There's nothing dramatic about it. I don't give her a speech about how she needs to pay for what she's done, and I don't ask her what she was after—warning her of my presence in any way will just provide her time to escape.

My arm goes around her neck and then, with the other hand, I snap it, just the way I was trained. She crumples to the ground. There's no victory in it. She's just another casualty, one of many who will die to bring the prophecy to fruition.

The soldiers firing at the truck turn their guns on me, but I'm already time traveling away, picturing the manhole cover by Genevieve's as hard as I can.

I land, but another of those pains seizes my stomach and sends me to my knees, gasping. It makes the bullet wound in my shoulder seem minimal by contrast. A contraction, I suddenly realize. I should jump to my own time now, but there's a chance Henri's not dead. If he still lives, I can fix this. I can jump back to kill the time traveler sooner, before she put this plan in motion.

I begin to climb through the tunnel. My eyes adjust to the dim light—and I see a body at the other end. I crawl to it, knowing what I will find.

Henri.

His eyes are closed, and he looks boyish with those long lashes sweeping his cheeks, like a child who snuck off somewhere and fell asleep along the way. I press my lips to his cheek. His skin is cold, and I know that he is gone. I know it, and yet I remain beside him, trying to find an answer.

"Henri," I cry. "Come back. Just come back."

Another contraction hits, and my body jerks in response. I'm fading, being pulled to my own time whether I want to go or not.

I fight it for only a moment. It's what Henri wanted. It's what I already knew I had to do. I press my lips to Henri's, one last time.

And then I'm gone.

I land not in the tunnel, but on Genevieve's basement floor, mid-contraction and in too much pain to push myself up, though I know this home must belong to someone else by now. I hear footsteps, running, and in a moment there's a hand in mine.

Cecelia—*adult* Cecelia—is beside me. "I'm here," she says. "You won't have to do it alone this time."

The contraction ends and I sit up, pressing my hands to my face, weeping. "Henri and Charlotte—"

Her hand is on my back. "I know."

I only want to go back to him and yet I'd be refusing to give him the one thing he asked of me. My breaths are huge and gasping and painful, wrenched from my lungs. Another contraction comes and I can barely tell one kind of pain from the other.

"You need to focus now," Cecelia whispers. "You're about to bring my sister into the world."

She's right. I know she's right, but I don't think I can go through life without him and without my children. I just want to return to Nanterre, to a time when we were happy, and stay as long as I can.

And if that's not possible, I just want it all to end.

I look toward the tunnel, to the place where I just left Henri.

"He isn't there, Sarah," she says softly.

A sob wracks my chest. "Where is he? Where was he buried?"

She squeezes my hand. "All is not lost, and all is not as it seems. There are things that lie ahead which even you can't imagine, and I think your story

with my father isn't over. You will come to believe this yourself, in time."

"What do you mean?" I ask. "Is he not dead? If he's not dead I can just go back. I can kill the time traveler before she did all this and—"

"It's too late for that," she says. "But I think it best that you discover the rest as it unfolds. You want the future ahead of you, I promise, and it's time for it to begin. Are you ready?"

I think of Henri. *This isn't the time for weakness, little thief*, he said. *You were chosen to bring her into the world for a reason. Show the universe it hasn't made a bad choice.*

Our wedding day seems like so long ago, but I remember the moment when I entered the church. I was glad then for all the ways we'd suffered because it brought us to where we were. Perhaps, one day, I'll be glad for this too.



HENRI'S DAUGHTER is born an hour after I arrive in 1991.

She is tiny and perfectly formed, long fingers and a tiny pursed mouth that reminds me so much of her father that I burst into tears at the sight of her. I miss him. It's only been minutes and I miss him, and I don't know how anyone can expect me to go through the rest of my life feeling this way.

"Was it true?" I ask Cecelia, gazing at my daughter. "That things aren't what they seem? That my story with Henri isn't over?"

She smiles. "Do you think I'd lie about something like that?"

"What about Charlotte?" I hate it, that pathetic, hopeful note in my voice.

Cecelia's smile fades. "She's buried in the Loire Valley. A beautiful spot on a hillside, beneath a large oak, near where Lucien and I grew up."

I pull the baby closer to my chest as the tears stream down my face. I've lost so much. Charlotte. Henri. Even Cece and Lucien. I can visit them, but they will no longer be mine. All I have left is this little girl in my arms, and something surges in my blood, a new kind of protectiveness, the sort that borders on insanity.

Anything that threatens her, anything that stands in her way...I will destroy it without a moment's thought. From now on, there is nothing to live for but her, and I will exist only to keep her safe.

1995

Quinn sits on the floor of Cecelia's library, the very image of her father, with a book spread open in front of her. She's only five but has been reading for over a year, one of many ways she stands out. There will be more of them soon, once she comes into her power.

I know the time traveler responsible for Henri's and Charlotte's deaths is gone, but I still picture her on every corner, waiting to steal Quinn from me. I saw her here once, watching Quinn and me as we walked down to the Seine from Cecelia's home. She posed no threat—the visit must have occurred before she died. My life is moving forward, but she seems to be working backward from some point in the future, and the fact that she never attacked Quinn or myself tells me it was someone else she was after, that day in 1941. I can't ask her since it might change the past, not that she'd tell me anyway. I suppose it's a mystery for my daughter or her children to solve in the future. One of many.

I tap on the frame of the door to get Quinn's attention. "I heard my little girl was in here," I say as she looks up, "but I guess I'll keep looking. I only see a big girl in this room."

Her face breaks into a wide smile and she runs to me, circling my legs with her small arms. "I *missed* you," she says earnestly, and my heart squeezes tight with pain and joy at once. I was gone for three weeks this time, visiting Edouard, Marie, Lucien and Cece back in the 1940s as I do each

summer. Marie and Edouard are their parents now. I'm glad for it, as they had no more children, yet it hurts all the same. Cecelia and I remain close, and she is thrilled by my visits to her childhood, but Lucien is already changing from a rambunctious boy to the serious young man he'll become, and he has little time for a doting American aunt.

My entire beautiful past—it's like a splinter in my heart that won't budge.

"You've gotten taller," I say, lifting her into my arms. "Stop growing so fast."

Her arms tighten around my neck into the fiercest hug, and then she is scrambling back to the floor to show me the book she's been reading. She holds up a picture of a home—no, not a picture: an architectural rendering. That ever-present sorrow climbs into my throat. I wish Henri was here. I wish he could see how like him she is.

"It's Monticello," she says. "Thomas Jefferson designed it himself. Can we go?"

I blink back tears. "You want to go all the way to the states to see a house? We live in a city full of magnificent architecture."

Her gaze drops down to the book as if she's confused. "I...do," she says. "I don't know why. We're just supposed to go."

There's something in the way she says those words—*we're just supposed to go*—that makes the hair on my arms stand on end. There are moments when it seems as if she's being directed by a force outside herself, and this is one of them. I'm terrified of the direction that force is sending her, even when I know I should yield to it.

I swallow and force a smile. "Then I guess I'd better start planning a trip."

That night I tell Cecelia about Quinn's request, searching her face. She knows where my life is headed, through the tidbits I shared going back to visit her as she grew up. "Quinn wants to go to Virginia," I say. "We're going to stay, aren't we? Something happens there that convinces us to stay."

She gives a small laugh. "No matter how many years you know me, you still try to get me to reveal your future."

"My own personal palm reader," I reply with a smile of my own, "but one who refuses to tell me anything of import."

"When it matters, I'll tell you," she replies.

"So you're saying this doesn't matter?"

She shakes her head. "No. I think it probably matters most. But I already

know you're going to do the right thing."



TWO WEEKS later we are driving into the mountains of Virginia, heading to Monticello. It's August, searingly hot, but Quinn wants the windows down and rides with her eyes glued to the landscape, quiet and intense. She reminds me of an animal in the wild—the way it goes alert the moment it senses something nearby.

She nods when I ask if she's okay but doesn't even look at me as she continues to stare, hands clasped tightly in her lap.

My heart beats harder, scared of what it is she's sensing. Cecelia told me, once upon a time, that I wouldn't change this future that lies ahead of me if I could, but I still long for the husband and children I left behind. I pray that future she's referencing isn't any sadder than it already is.

"There's something—" Quinn says, suddenly, pointing at an exit. "I want to go there."

It's just a generic country road that appears to lead to nothing, and we've got a full agenda of gallery visits before we head to Pennsylvania to see my brother Steven and his wife. *Exploring country roads in the middle of nowhere* is not on the list.

"Honey, we'll miss our tour if we stop now. Maybe we can stop on the way back to D.C."

"Please," she begs. There's a desperate note to her voice I've never heard before.

Reluctantly, I turn off the highway, driving through a podunk town with no signs of life aside from a gas station that isn't even open. But she is sitting up straight, as if sensing something spectacular up ahead, her gaze intent on the small houses we pass.

We continue on until we hit a different small town—the type with a Main Street and tall white houses from early in the century.

"Can you turn?" she asks, pointing up ahead, and when I do, we reach a quiet, well-heeled subdivision where the houses back to trees. "Here," she whispers. "It's here."

There's a certainty to her voice that brings goose bumps to the surface of my skin.

“There isn’t anything to see here, honey,” I tell her, pulling over to the curb. “These are private homes.”

Just then, two shirtless little boys about her age come running around the side of the house, chasing each other. Quinn watches them intently for a moment and then takes off her seat belt. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch, dumbfounded, as she climbs from the car and walks to them. She’s a quiet child, normally. Reserved. I’ve never seen her do anything like this before. The boys—twins, nearly identical but not quite—suddenly stop whatever they’re doing and stare as she approaches.

Through the open window, I hear her speak to them for the first time.

“Hi,” she says. “I’m going to be your neighbor.”

I open my mouth to correct her, and then...I don’t. There’s something happening here and I’m not at the heart of it—she and these two boys are.

They both stare at her for a moment and then one of them frowns. “Well, you can’t come in our treehouse,” he says. “No girls allowed.”

But the other one watches her, his head tilted as if considering what she’s said, weighing it, and then shrugs. “I’ll let you in,” he says.

She looks at him for a long moment, so long that it’s awkward, but he’s watching her too. I get a chill up my spine. “I have to go now,” she says. She sounds wistful. “But my name is Quinn.”

“I’m Nick,” the boy replies.

I glance at the mailbox. *Reilly*, it says.

Like Luna Reilly, the time traveler who tried to fight off Coron in 1918 and died for it.

My hands grip the steering wheel. I want to tell myself it isn’t possible. But as I look at the two of them there, my daughter and this little boy, so spellbound by each other, I know what I’m seeing. Two of the first families in my daughter, and—I am guessing—the other two in him.

Four pieces of the puzzle, in the same place at last.

There were no homes for sale, but with enough money almost anything can be purchased, and we move into a house a few doors down from the Reillys one month later.

Our lives change immediately—Quinn’s life, most of all. Until now, she was a tiny city dweller, and our days were spent in galleries and parks, with Cecelia’s bodyguards lurking discreetly behind. Now, she is a small wild thing with bruised shins and dirty feet, gone from sunup to dusk. Always off with the Reilly boys. She likes them both, but it’s Nick she’s drawn to, Nick she prattles on about as we eat dinner.

“Nick’s dad is a doctor,” she says one night, climbing into the tub. I’ve avoided the parents as much as possible, and I do my best to avoid the boys as well. It’s easier not to get close to people.

“Hmmm,” I say absent-mindedly, filling a cup with clean water to wash her thick, unruly hair. Henri’s hair, though long and lit with gold from these days out in the sun.

“What was my dad?” she asks.

My heart clenches. It’s been five years. Is there ever going to be a time when the mention of him, the memory of him, doesn’t ache the way it does? “He was a soldier,” I reply. “He died in the war. I told you that.”

“But what *else* was he?” she persists.

“He wanted to be an architect. And he was someone who loved you long before you were born.”

“I wish I could see him,” she says. “I wouldn’t even talk to him. I just want to see him.”

I close my eyes. The mother in me wants to forbid that trip she'll take in a few years, but doing so could change things. And aside from the day I lost him, I wouldn't give up a single piece of what we had, exactly as it was.

"Yes," I say simply. "I wish you could too."



QUINN'S GIFTS begin to unfold, as I knew they would. She has Marie's ability to travel anywhere, anytime, with ease, and she has my ability to be in two places at once. At first, I'm constantly having to cover her tracks, changing the past so no one remembers the many times she accidentally disappeared in public. Eventually, I pull her out of school and teach her myself, waiting until she can control her gift on her own.

One afternoon she comes home and tells me she accidentally disappeared in front of Nick. I fix it, as I often do, after she goes to sleep. Changing her past means it no longer exists. Nick isn't supposed to recall anything about it, and neither is she. The problem is...they do.

"Nick doesn't remember seeing me time travel yesterday," she says the next night over dinner. "But he says he *dreamed* he saw me disappear."

The fork falls from my hand.

"Do *you* remember it?" I ask.

She nods. "I remember it both ways," she says. "I always do, if Nick was there."

I slowly breathe out. Some piece of her is holding on to a piece of him, even when it no longer exists. I don't understand the import of it, however, until a few months later.

It's a Saturday, and Quinn's just run off to the treehouse. I watch as she goes and walk back inside to find two naked little girls sitting on my kitchen floor. One blonde, one brunette. Time travelers, both of them.

For a moment I'm so astonished I can only stare. They are far too young to have that kind of ability—younger even than Quinn when she followed me and Henri.

"Who are you?" There's something familiar about them both, though I can't place it.

They glance at each other, suddenly uncertain. "We wanted to see our mom," the brunette says. "And to meet you."

I am obviously not their mom, so they must mean...Quinn. And I can see her in their faces. For a moment I am thrilled, and then I remember something else...one of those things about my kind I'd nearly forgotten, something I never dreamed would be an issue: the rule of threes, which ensures that only three time travelers can exist in one family line.

It means one of us must die.

And I'm the one they're here to meet, so I suppose I know who that is.

I press my hand to my heart, feeling an ache that is now familiar. Usually, it's over the losses in my past. This time, it's over the loss in my future. I wanted to be there for Quinn as her future unfolds and I won't be. I won't live to see her have these two little girls, or to become a part of their lives. I won't be around to protect them all.

I force a smile. "I suppose we haven't met before. What are your names?"

"I'm Amelie Rose Reilly," says the brunette carefully, in that formal way small children sometimes do.

"We call her Milly," adds the blonde. "And I'm Luna."

I stare at them for a moment. It should have been obvious to me from the start, what I've been seeing in their faces, the thing I couldn't identify. It's Nick. In their smiles, in the blonde's coloring. Three of the first families are accounted for—Reilly, Durand and Eber—and I'm sure the fourth is there too.

These two girls are the circle of light, from the prophecy. I don't know what it means, but I know I'm in the presence of it.

Tears sting my eyes. "And how did you manage to land here together like this?"

They both shrug. "We can always find each other," explains Luna.

Like Quinn and Nick's ability to remember each other, no matter what I erase, I think.

I ask them about their lives, and they detail a perfectly normal childhood, aside from the time travel. They go to school and they play. There's a pool in their yard and their father has taught them to swim. They tell me their favorite subjects, the teachers they like and the teachers they hate.

"And grandpa taught us jeu de barbichette," offers Milly. "But he said you wouldn't like that so we shouldn't tell you."

My mouth falls open. "Your *grandfather*?" I ask, my voice cracking. They must mean Henri. Who else would have taught them the game? Who else would have told them I hated it?

For a moment I merely envy them—what I wouldn't give to spend an hour in his company, something I never do since it could rewrite our past. Then I realize the danger they could be placing all of us in with those visits. Not simply because of the time they're going to, but because any information they give him could change everything that takes place afterward. "Girls, does your mother know you're going back that far? It could be very, very dangerous."

"We don't go backward to see grandpa," says Milly. "Well, maybe we do?"

She turns to Luna, who shrugs. "We see him on the island. Time is different there."

"You'll see him there too," adds Milly. "He told us you would."

My skin feels stretched so tight over my bones that I'm worried I will split open entirely. "That's not possible," I whisper. "Your grandfather died in 1941."

They look at each other again. "We should go," says Luna.

Milly opens her mouth to argue and Luna yanks on her hand. They disappear before I can even open my mouth and I remain behind, staring in shock at the space where they just sat.

Is it possible? Could Henri actually still exist somewhere in the world, somewhere I could go without rewriting the past? It must be what Cecelia meant when she said our story wasn't over.

I curl up on the floor, wanting it to be true so much I feel sick with hope, wanting it so much I think I'll die a little if it winds up being false.

It's late afternoon in France, Cecelia's busiest time of the day, but she answers my call immediately.

"I met the twins," I tell her. "You knew, right? This is what you meant when you said our story wasn't over?"

"Yes," she says. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you more. I just thought it should all happen as it was meant to."

It was probably the right decision, but now that I know I can't help but push for more. "Do you know anything else?" I ask, gripping the phone tight. "Do you know where the island is?" I could go there. I'll go tonight and bring Quinn. I don't care where we have to go or what we need to do to get there.

"I've spent a small fortune trying to find the island, to no avail," she admits. "Which isn't to say it doesn't exist. There are thousands of undiscovered islands on the planet. It seems as if it's a place you can only

reach in their time. That's what you'll come to believe, after the twins visit you again."

"But why only in *their* time? Why not now?"

"You tell me," she says. "These are your people and your legends. You tell me."

I think about the story, the very little I know about the island and what lies ahead for it. *The four families can't come home*, the legend says, *until they are united once more*. United once more in the twins, who don't yet exist.

"Maybe the island can't exist, at least for us, until the twins do," I venture. My eyes close and I sink into a seat, burying my head in my hands. "But if the island won't exist until they're born, and I'm going to die *when* they're born...how am I going to see him?"

"Maybe you don't actually die," Cecelia suggests softly. "Maybe you just go there instead."

The possibility of it makes my heart soar—I miss Henri every minute of every day, and there's an emptiness inside me that no one else could fill—but it breaks me at the same time. "I'll die when they're born. I'm okay with that but..." My voice rasps. I always thought I'd be there to protect my daughter, that she'd always be able to lean on me. "Do you know how long I'll have with Quinn? Did I stop going back to see you at a certain point?"

She hesitates. For a moment I think she's not going to tell me, and then she does. "Yes, your visits stopped," she says. "She and Nick...you've already seen it yourself. They'll be young when they fall in love, and they'll be young when the twins are born."

"I don't have that long with her, then," I whisper.

"No parent ever has long enough," she replies. "You just have to treasure each moment as it's handed to you."

I'm not the only one who will suffer over this, though. Quinn's going to have to live with the knowledge that the twins' births killed me. "I wish there were another way. It's so much to put on her when she's already got the entire prophecy on her shoulders."

"She's a strong girl and she'll be a strong woman, just like her mother. I think you were chosen for a reason—because you'll do whatever is required to make the world a safer place, through the twins."

I close my eyes, knowing she's right. Until the end comes, I will be happy for each moment I get. And I'll do everything I must, no matter how much it

pains me, to make the prophecy come to fruition. For everyone who's died trying to make it come true. Henri, most of all.



QUINN RETURNS from another day with Nick, lit through with a small, wild joy, a bright light only he brings out in her. She climbs into my lap, her head resting against my chest, and my throat squeezes tight. This time with her is more fleeting than either of us can realize, but I'm only losing what every mother does, eventually. There will always come a day when your child is too big to be held in your arms, when she no longer wants to sit in your lap or curl up against you at night. A day when she leaves home, when she creates her own family, when you are separated by death.

We all, in the end, have to give up the things we love, and I am no exception.

Even so, I would not change a thing.

1941

The Germans who rushed into Genevieve's basement are dead, but I know I don't have long either. I'm weak, not thinking clearly, but if there's any way to reach Sarah, I have to try. I crawl into the tunnel, hoping to follow her and the children to the Pont de l'Alma, but the effort takes the last of my strength. My eyes close and I picture her—my sweet little thief. She became a lion, in the end. She'll do whatever is necessary to keep our daughter safe.

Time passes. I'm sweating and feverish. I dream that I'm in the vineyard, and Sarah is walking toward me, lush and smiling, wearing the white dress with the small roses. The world is green and new, and in my wife I see everything good, everything I want in the world. "Take off the dress, Sarah," I whisper when I reach her, and she laughs, batting my hands away.

"Madame Beauvoir is here," she says. "She'll see us."

"Good," I reply, pulling the dress off her shoulders, "maybe she'll stop visiting so often."

She begins pulling me, farther into the fields where we won't be seen. The pain I felt before is ebbing and in its place is a drowsy sort of contentment. If she is leading me to heaven, I'm ready to follow.



A HAND on my shoulder rouses me from the dream, and when my eyes blink

open, Sarah is beside me. The pain in my back and chest has spread, has begun to fill me, and I don't think I have long. "You need to go," I whisper. "You can't be here now." I'm having a hard time gritting out the words.

"It's fine," she says, laying her head on my chest. She's shivering with cold, and her voice is faint. "More than twenty years have passed, Henri. The children are grown, and happy. It will all happen as it's supposed to now."

She feels the same and in the dim light she looks the same, but slowly, I begin to understand. "You came back to die with me."

"I came back to go on to the next place with you," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "But even if there isn't one, it's enough, the time we had. You and our family—they were worth all of it."

My lips press to her head. She releases a single, long breath, and then she is still. I hold her against me. "Take me with you, Sarah," I whisper. "Wherever it is you've gone."

My eyes shut and the pain leaves as I sink somewhere heavy and dreamless. But Sarah is tucked against my chest. Our children are safe and we are together.

She's right. It's enough.



I WAKE SLOWLY, eyes blinking against the bright sun. I see a small stone house and a barn, similar to ours but not quite the same, surrounded by a vineyard, one that's flourishing in the summer air. For a moment I think I'm back in Saint Antoine—that I've fallen asleep in the orchard as I occasionally did—until I look in the distance, where I see a tall white steeple and the bright, clear blue of the sea.

I'm on an island. And I think of it then, my mother's stories about the mythical island where we'd all be reunited one day. I mostly thought it was a fairy tale...but was it?

Wherever I am, though, I don't want to be here without my wife.

I push off the ground, realizing the pain in my back, in my chest...is gone, as if it never was. I lift my shirt. There are no wounds from the bullets that entered my chest, no scar from the knife that cut me when I was held captive, but the marks of my childhood remain—a small white line on my thumb from an accident with a saw, a burn mark on my inner wrist.

It's not as if I've died and been made perfect. It's as if I've simply returned to some earlier time.

"Sarah?" I call, starting toward the small stone house. Something crashes inside the barn. A sound much like the one Sarah made when she first came to us.

I run toward it this time, and enter to find Sarah standing before me, naked and confused. She looks exactly as she did that first day, but when her eyes raise to mine, I see everything I'd hoped to in her face. Love and the start of a joy she's terrified to let herself feel.

"Is this real?" she asks, her voice barely a whisper. "Is it really you?"

I take three long steps to pull her into my arms. I just saw her, and yet it feels as if we've been apart a very long time. "Yes."

She begins crying, face pressed tight to my chest. "I've missed you so much. Every day and night for more years than you can imagine."

And even though it seems to me no time has passed, I feel something coming together inside me, a hole that is finally closed. Nothing in my life has ever felt warmer or sweeter than this, her pressed against me, solid and real.

"Are we—" She looks around, at the untidy barn and the roof that sorely needs repair above us. "Are we in heaven?"

I smile. "I don't think so. There's a church down the way and surely in heaven, church is beside the point. I think we're on the island. The one from my mother's stories."

"I wasn't sure," she weeps. "I didn't know if it would work out like the twins said."

I freeze. "The twins?" I ask. "Did we have twins?"

She laughs through her tears. "No, our daughter did, or is about to anyway. Quinn's the product of two first families, and Nick—her husband—is the product of the other two, I'm certain. And the twins are the circle of light. From the prophecy."

"And it all happened because of you," I say, my hands framing her face.

"It happened because of *us*," she replies.

I lean down and kiss her. I don't want to stop. My mouth presses to her jaw, to her temples, to her cheeks. She is too warm and real to be a dream. "Please tell me this isn't going to end."

"I don't think so," she replies. "I think maybe we're in a place where time works differently, a time that existed before our deaths. And now we're

waiting for our granddaughters to set the world right.”

“But I can’t time travel,” I argue. “You might be able to go back in time, but how did I?”

“I don’t know. That’s a mystery for Quinn and her daughters to solve,” she says. “But you can always ask the twins yourself when they come visit us.”

“*Visit? Here?*” I ask, kissing her again. “Nothing you’re saying is making sense.”

Her smile is so joyful it makes me ache. “I suspect we have a very long time to go over the details.”

I push her hair back from her face. “Yes. But my wife is naked, and we appear to have this entire place to ourselves. That’s enough for me right now.”

She goes on her toes and presses her lips to mine. “Then take me inside, and let’s begin our next chapter.”

THE END

Want a free novella about the sweet, steamy beginning of Marie and Edouard’s relationship? Subscribe to my newsletter [here](#).

THE ISLAND

AN ACROSS ETERNITY EPILOGUE

Henri and I once dreamed of a Mediterranean honeymoon: endless blue sea, lush mountains, each day balmier and more beautiful than the one before it. Now it's our life. I'd have thought we'd tire of it, eventually, but we show no signs of it yet.

We are blissfully alone here, in this place where every tree seems to hang heavy with fruit, where lobsters crawl into a net as if resigned to their fate. While the island appears entirely uninhabited, I doubt it can be so. There's that church in the distance, after all—and an island with a church of its size must have residents.

The truth is that neither of us have investigated much, more my doing than Henri's. Henri wants badly to explore. He's still a man raised to be self-sufficient, intent on protecting and caring for me, whatever the cost. He says we need to know what we're up against. He wants to know if there's a hard winter coming, if all the bounty of the land around us will dry up, if there are things to defend against.

But me? I don't want to know, not yet. I'm scared of what we might learn. What if this is temporary? What if crossing a certain line means we leave forever? I spent decades dreaming of him. I spent years weeping for him, believing he was gone. I just want to stay where we are for as long as we can.

The twins will come, I have promised him. We can ask them what else is on the island, and if there are rules we must follow or boundaries to obey. He's gone along with this so far, but I know the first sign of bad weather or dwindling food will end that compliance. It's just a matter of time. He's

worried about the house, in particular. The farmhouse we sleep in each night is ancient and in bad shape—there are holes in the roof and the floorboards are weak with age. Henri estimates it's at least three hundred years old, based on the architecture. We've spent time trying to shore it up, but it's still in poor shape.

He worries too that someone will come along one day and kick us out, while I suspect the house is meant to be ours. I felt it from the moment we arrived—perhaps because it reminded me of our home in Saint Antoine. But then we found the book—a weathered copy of *Macbeth*, hidden beneath a floorboard—and I knew it for sure. It was so old that the paper tore at the touch, but the name written inside its cover was clear as day: *Adelaide*.

I think of it now, the way the fine hairs on my forearms stood on end at the sight of it. It couldn't be a coincidence that I, a daughter of Adelaide, found myself in her home. But if I am here, does that mean Katrin—from whom I inherited the title—is not? Or did I replace her here, as our daughter will one day replace me? I didn't mention these fears to Henri because it would just make him want the answers more.

Despite this, our concerns are few. The joy of being reunited trumps all, and my worries give way the moment he flashes his crooked smile or trails his hand over my arm.

Today has been typical for us, so far. I spend the morning gathering fruit and nuts while he works on the roof. After lunch we walk hand-in-hand down to the sea and dive into the clear blue water. We are naked, as always, both of us seal-sleek and golden from the sun. When I emerge, he pulls me against him. My hands slip over his broad shoulders, brush over the curve of his abdomen, as hard as the stone cliffs that jut out to our left. In our weeks here—weeks of ample food, ample sex, hard work and play, he's put on muscle. I don't think I've ever seen him quite like he is now.

My fingers slide down the trail of dark hair below his belly button, and air hisses through his teeth at my touch. My hand slides lower, to grip him.

"God, Sarah," he groans. His forehead falls to my shoulder. "I will never tire of this. Never."

In moments he's grown too impatient for my hand. I find myself lifted and he pushes inside me. Air hitches in my throat at the feel of him. I will never tire of this either. How could I, when I spent so many decades waiting for him to be exactly where he is right now?

Afterward, we lie together in the sun on a blanket. I'm dozing off, nearly

asleep, when a sound like thunder cracks the air. I sit up and Henri does as well. We both glance at those dark clouds to the east of the island. They seem to rest there permanently, though it rarely rains. The roof of our farmhouse won't be able to handle a major storm. I know he's thinking it, and thinking we should have made provisions for this already, when we hear another crack and then we gasp at once.

A plane breaks through the clouds and begins to circle.

"My God," Henri whispers. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

Yes, I have, but long after he was gone. It looks like a Gulf Stream, plane of celebrities and CEOs in my day, but not his...which I guess finally provides a clue about what time period we are in.

What it doesn't tell me is whether or not we're safe.

That night, Henri lights a fire and the two of us lie on a blanket before it. One of several mysteries is that, as long-uninhabited as this house is, a box on the table was full of money, and the cellar was full of wine, the vintages all from the 1900s. Tonight I open a bottle of red.

“It’s so strange that a house with no electricity or indoor plumbing has wine from the 1900s,” I say, handing him a glass.

He frowns. “It will run out eventually. I think it’s time, Sarah. That plane today...it could mean anything. And at the very least we need a better mattress. I can’t have you continue to sleep on hay each night when you’re used to the Ritz.”

My hand folds over his. “The mattress doesn’t bother me. You have no idea what a pleasure it is to be in my twenty-two-year old body again. Nothing aches. I hope I never take it for granted.”

“We still need to understand how this all works,” he argues. “And what happens when the twins are born? Will something change here?” He shakes his head. “I still can’t believe I’m going to be a grandfather. It’s impossible.”

“From what I recall of the twins,” I reply with a laugh, “they’re very naughty and will age us quickly once they arrive.”

“I’m eager to meet them,” he says, running fingers through my hair. “Tell me, again, about the children.”

My heart aches for him. He is trying to live out a past he didn’t actually get. He misses *all* the children—in his mind, Charlotte’s death is still new, and Cecelia and Lucien are only toddlers. But it’s Quinn he wants to meet. Quinn, who is equally a part of us both.

So I tell him, once more, about all of them, aside from Charlotte, whose death is still too hard to discuss more than once. Lucien, now a professor. Cecelia, who married an amazing, brilliant boy she met at the Sorbonne, and now owns one of those planes we saw this afternoon. Mostly I tell him about Quinn—about the buildings she drew as a small child, about the way she seemed to come alive when Nick was near.

“And the twins?” he says. “What are they like?”

“I don’t know them well,” I reply. “But Millie is wild and irreverent and has your coloring. Luna is sweet and earnest, more like her father.”

“And you really don’t know what it is about them that will save the world?” he asks.

“I don’t even know that they’re *supposed* to save the world,” I reply. “Who knows what the prophecy really meant? But no—aside from the fact that they can travel together, and their abilities began so young, I have no idea.”

We are quiet for a moment, both of us thinking about that circling plane, and what it could mean. We know it landed somewhere on the island. I’m not ready for our happiness here to end.

I take a sip of the wine and smile at him. We need to put this behind us for now—the worry and the fear.

“So much better than the wine you made in Saint Antoine,” I tease.

“You bait me when you want something from me,” he purrs, his voice so suggestive that my body responds before he’s finished speaking. “What is it you want, Little Thief?”

“Me? Nothing at all. It’s you who has no self-control.”

He runs a hand through my hair. “I’d argue,” he says with a small grin, rolling me onto my back, “but it can wait for tomorrow. We have things to do at the moment.”

Two days later, we are awoken by the sound of giggling. I know I haven't imagined it, because Henri's eyes open as well. "The twins," I say, bolting from the bed and reaching for my dress. Henri is slower to move. He sits up and the sheet falls to his waist. Beneath it, I know, he is gloriously naked. My eyes flicker over his chest. "You might want to put some clothes on, Grandpa."

He runs a hand through his hair. "Grandpa," he repeats blankly. "*Dieu.*"

Once his pants are on, I open the door to find the twins sitting on the floor, throwing blueberries into each other's mouths. They appear to be about seven years old.

"Hi!" calls Luna casually, as if she just saw us a few hours before.

"We won't make a mess with the berries this time, we swear," adds Millie.

They seem completely relaxed, as if they know us well. I feel my throat swell with happy tears, *relieved* tears.

"They know us," I whisper to Henri. There's no wariness between them, the way there would be if they were visiting us after we were no longer around—which means we must have some years ahead of us yet.

We sit beside them on the floor and they grin at us, while Henri stares at them in wonder. Millie looks so much like Quinn, and Marie, aside from her eye color.

"I haven't met you before," he says. "I suppose I'm your...grandfather?"

"You haven't spoken to us in English since we were little," says Luna, tilting her head thoughtfully.

“I didn’t know you spoke anything else,” he says with a small smile.

“*Mais oui*,” she replies. *And you always say my accent is perfect*, she finishes in French.

I have so many questions in my head I hardly know where to start. “That plane we saw the other day...is that how you got here?”

They look at each other and grin. “It’s only 2019. We’re not even *born* yet.”

Henri pinches the bridge of his nose. “I still don’t see how it’s possible that I can exist this far into the future. I was shot in 1942.”

Luna tilts her head. “At *home*, it’s 2019. There’s no time on the island.”

I struggle to understand how there can be no time on the island, but it at least explains how Henri and I can be here at all. If there’s no time, I can be twenty-two and he can be twenty-seven, because 1938 and 1988 can exist simultaneously, right alongside 2019. And even, perhaps, 2027, when these two little girls should be in the middle of second grade.

“But how did you get here?” I ask. “How did you find the island at all?”

They glance at each other again. “We’re here every summer,” Millie replies. “With our parents. And we’re here now for their anniversary.”

Henri swallows, and I feel tears threaten once more. Perhaps this means he and Quinn will meet. Something I long ago gave up hoping for.

“So you came...*back*...to 2019,” Henri says hesitantly, “to see us?”

Millie laughs. “We’ve already met you, silly! We’re here for Mommy and Daddy’s wedding. It’s today and you said you’d take us.”

The plane we saw two days before, I suddenly realize, was Nick and Quinn. But how did they possibly know how to find this place? How could they, when all Cecelia’s money wasn’t able to accomplish it?

Unless the island suddenly allowed itself to be found after the twins were conceived.

“We said we’d take you?” Henri asks. “It seems like that would be a bit of a shock for your parents on their wedding day.”

Luna averts her gaze, guiltily, but Millie shrugs. “You said you *would* have taken us if you’d known it was happening. So now you know.”

Henri and I exchange a look. We don’t have clothes for a wedding. Plus this probably isn’t the best way to let our daughter know that neither myself nor her father are entirely dead.

“I don’t think—”

“We’ll just look in from the door,” argues Millie. “They’ll never know.”

It seems too extreme a risk. My mouth opens to argue, and then I see Henri's face. I see the longing there, the wonder. He's never laid eyes on his own daughter. Not even a photo. He doesn't know this man she's marrying. And here the twins are, offering him what might be his only chance.

And knowing Millie, she'll probably convince Luna to go without us, and that would be far worse. Poor Nick might die of shock if he saw his own unborn daughters prancing down the aisle, and god only knows what the girls might say.

I sigh. "Well, I suppose as long as we aren't seen, although...wait. Where did you two get clothes if you time traveled?"

"Oh," Millie says, as nonchalant as a teen. "We stopped by town on the way. Grandma Luna gave us clothes."

My jaw falls open. The fact that there's a town would be enough to shock me, if the follow-up hadn't shocked me more. "Grandma *Luna*?" I whisper.

Luna nods. "I'm named after her. She said she thought you'd come visit but that you and grandpa were probably busy with adult things."

"I asked *what* adult things and she said I wouldn't understand," says Millie with a smirk. "But I *do*. Our babysitter in DC let us watch all four *Twilight* movies this summer."



MILLIE AND LUNA lead us through the woods, away from the ocean. Henri asks what their parents think they're doing at the moment, which is when we learn that Nick and Quinn are at the hotel celebrating their anniversary and we are actually babysitting them right now. Henri looks slightly appalled. In his day, children didn't rush off time traveling without informing someone first.

"And what do we think you're doing at the moment?" I ask.

"Homework," says Millie. "But we shouldn't have to do homework here because it's a special occasion and we're the circle of light."

"Millie told Daddy that," says Luna. "But Daddy said this weekend we're the *circle of completed math packets* instead."

"So then Luna told them we shouldn't have to do homework *ever*," adds Millie.

Henri hides a smile behind his hand. "And how did they respond to that?"

Millie rolls her eyes. “Mommy said, ‘*Luna, it’s two AM. Go back to bed.*’”

We emerge from the woods at last and see the first sign of life—a well-worn gravel road—and I hesitate once more. Henri catches my eye over the girls’ heads and smiles. *It will be fine*, that smile says, *but if it’s not, we’ve had these months together and that’s enough.*

I force a smile back. I don’t want it to be over, but he’s right. It’s enough. This time with him has been far more than I ever hoped for.

The girls know the island well, it seems. They slide through the trees and skip down a path that leads to the beach, one so narrow I’m not sure we’d have ever seen it on our own. It makes me wonder why they asked us to take them at all, when they seem to make their own rules otherwise.

When we reach the last of the trees and the church comes into view, Millie glances at the sun and holds up a hand. “We’ll hide here. They’ll come down those stairs in a minute.”

I raise a brow. “You’ve come to watch this wedding before, haven’t you?”

The twins glance at each other and Luna bites her lip. “We heard Mommy say on the way here that her only regret was that you weren’t there,” she says. “Now you will be.”

I feel that familiar ache in my heart. We gave up so much for Quinn and her daughters, but Quinn gave up a lot too. I wish she’d known her father. And my brother did his best, but I wish she’d only been raised by me. Perhaps, though, this island will give us back some of what we lost. Maybe Quinn will get to know Henri, and in time, I’ll help her recall her abilities. It certainly looks like she’s going to need them, dealing with the two girls beside me.

“They’re here!” Millie says, jumping up and down, pointing at two small figures that have emerged at the top of the steep staircase. She grins at Luna. “She’s carrying the flowers we left!”

I watch as they descend the stairs and then stand not thirty feet away, staring at the ocean. Our daughter is breathtaking in a simple white dress, her skin golden from a few days on the island. Nick, behind her, is as handsome as I suspected he’d be, even back when he was a skinny little boy with a quick grin and bruised knees.

Henri wraps his arm around me, swallowing hard at the sight of his daughter. “She looks like Marie, and my mother,” he says quietly. His voice

is rough.

I smile up at him. “She looks like *you*.”

His hand tightens on my hip. “But with your features. She has your cheekbones, doesn’t she? And your nose?”

I lean against him. “And my good taste in husbands.”

“He’s kind to her, then?” Henri asks uncertainly. “He looks very serious at the moment.”

“He’s marrying a time traveler who nearly died and is now pregnant with magical twins,” I whisper. “You’d look pretty serious too.”

“I suppose,” he says.

We watch as they go inside the church and wait a few minutes to walk across the sand to get a better view. I know we should keep our distance, but just the sound of Quinn’s voice has me creeping closer and closer. She’s older, but the sound still recalls all the happy days of her childhood, of her teen years. Of the days she’d come in laughing about something Nick said, or complaining about Ryan, or asking me questions—about time travel and her father and what the future might hold.

A part of me will always miss those days, but I know too that I’m so lucky that I had those days to miss at all. Henri, beside me, did not. He watches Quinn as if he’s watching a ghost, and I suppose, in a way, he is. He’s watching the ghost of something he should have had but lost. And probably she is reminding him too of the mother and sister he may have left behind. But if Luna is here, then perhaps Madame Durand and Marie are as well?

I was wrong to keep Henri from exploring the island, out of my fear. His family might be somewhere here waiting. Our lives will change dramatically after today, I imagine, and as I watch Henri’s hopeful, aching face, I’m certain it’s for the best.

The ceremony concludes. Quinn and Nick kiss, which causes Luna to sigh and Millie to mutter *gross* under her breath. It’s only now that I realize that we’ve actually *entered* the church, far closer than we intended.

We move to leave. I know now that I will see our daughter again, and often, but at the last moment I turn back for one last look at her.

She is looking right at us. Her eyes are wide and astonished, but the moment I smile, I see something change in her face. As if, in a moment’s time, she’s been stitched back together. Her eyes flicker to the little girls by my side, to her father standing just beyond the door.

I'll see you again soon, beautiful girl.

The words are only in my head, but when she smiles at me, I swear I can hear her response. She sounds just like she did as a teenager.

Yes, Mom, I know, she replies.

We walk across the sand, back to the trees. Millie tells us that we also promised to take them for ice cream after the wedding, apparently forgetting that we never really told her we'd go to the wedding at all. "We should take them," I say quietly to Henri as we reach the woods and they scamper ahead. "Maybe we'll find Marie and your mother there."

He pulls me against him. "That would be wonderful, but I need you to know that it doesn't matter what we find there, as long as we're together. There are things we've both lost, but seeing my daughter, and the twins...I know it was all for the best."

"But finding your family might help you really feel as if you've come home."

"I already knew I'd come home," he replies, "the moment I found you here."

His mouth presses to mine. Ahead of us, Luna sighs dreamily, and Millie says *gross*.

And laughing, we follow our granddaughters into this whole new life. I suspect it will be a good one.

WANT MORE?



Yes, there will eventually be a book about the twins! In the meantime, if you'd like a place to discuss the book and figure out what it all meant, I hope you'll join us on Facebook in the [Across Eternity Spoiler Room](#).

ALSO BY ELIZABETH O'ROARK

Waking Olivia

Drowning Erin

Undertow