



DROWNING ERIN

Elizabeth
O'Roark

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ELIZABETH O'ROARK

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I

Erin
Present

When things are going poorly, I dream about tidal waves. I'm told it's a sign of feeling powerless, those walls of water surging toward the sky. I wake gasping, too upset to fall back asleep.

I hate that dream, but there's one I hate even more—the one I have when things are going well.

In it, I'm back at my best friend's wedding. The air is balmy but not hot, the sun dropping low over Grace Bay in the distance while a cellist plays Pachelbel's Canon in D.

The wedding coordinator taps my shoulder. I give Olivia a quick hug, careful not to crush her veil, and walk into view. Every head turns toward me. I don't love being the center of attention, but that has nothing to do with the tight knot in my stomach right now.

Don't look at him.

How many times have I pled with myself in this way? *Ignore him, forget him.* I don't know why I bother—it's never worked once. Even now, with my boyfriend sitting somewhere in the crowd, I can't seem to stop myself. I'm not five feet down the aisle before my gaze goes straight to the one person it shouldn't go to: the best man.

He stands to his brother's right, watching me the way he's done often over the past few months—as if he'd eat me alive if I'd allow it. His eyes, as

blue as the sea behind him, meet mine, and my heart doesn't seem to beat but *bounce* inside my chest. There's one long bounce where five or six beats should have occurred. Inside my head I begin pleading with him: *It's not too late. You can still fix this. Please, please fix this.*



I HATE WAKING FROM THAT DREAM. I HATE THE WAY I WAKE HUNGERING FOR the sight of him, someone who never deserved a moment of my time in the first place.

I open my eyes this morning with my ears still straining to hear the cellist, surprised for a moment to find only normal sounds—running water, the whir of an electric razor. My heart is still bouncing in my chest as I roll toward the nightstand and slip on my engagement ring. I can't believe I'm still having that dream after so many years have passed.

I know what a shrink would say, because I've already seen one. *Cold feet*, she assured me. *It happens to everyone.* God I hope she was right.

Rob emerges from the bathroom clad only in a towel. "Sorry," he says, frowning. "I was trying to be quiet."

He got stuck at a client thing and didn't get in until after midnight, yet here it is barely 5 AM, and he's already leaving for the day. This has been his life for months now, thanks to a merger he's overseeing. I wound up scraping last night's dinner into the trash. I don't blame him for it, and the merger itself is nearly done, but I sometimes wonder if the frantic pace will *ever* end. Rob seems to enjoy it a little more than he should.

"There's no reason both of us should be running on fumes today," he says. "Go back to sleep."

He grabs boxers and drops the towel, revealing a perfect body, honed by long hours in the gym and a commitment to healthy eating I wish I shared. It's a pleasure to watch him dress, even this early in the day.

"You know," I say, attempting to sound seductive, "if we're both awake and in the same place at the same time, I can think of something I'd rather do than sleep."

I'm not sure if I'm motivated by desire or guilt—I really hate that I had that dream again. Thank God he can't see inside my head.

He flinches. "They're eight hours ahead in Amsterdam, hon. I've really

got to get going. But I'll be home early."

"Don't remind me," I groan.

Brendan, Rob's best friend, has just returned to Colorado after several years overseas, and he's coming over tonight. This is only happy news for one of us.

Rob arches a brow. "You promised you'd be nice."

"Just to be clear, I only promised to be civil. Which is more than I'll get from him in return, I'm sure."

He sighs, pulling on his jacket. "I don't understand why you hate him so much."

It's nothing I've ever been able to explain. Hatred for Brendan is like some underground water source—you think you've got it all out in the open, but it just keeps coming.

Except when I'm dreaming about him. I don't seem to hate him much then.

Erin
Present

I am stewing. I've stared at my computer for so long without action that it's gone into sleep mode twice.

I know that Olivia—the only member of our college track team who was able to make running a career—is out training right now in the mountains north of Seattle. I'm tempted to call anyway, as if asking questions of her will somehow lessen my anxiety: *Why is Brendan here when his entire family has moved away? Why can't he move to Seattle instead?*

I'm not going to call, of course. Brendan is her brother-in-law, and she's his biggest fan. She finds my belligerence toward him mystifying, the same way Rob does. Everyone in the freaking world seems to think he's impossible to dislike. I know better.

A file floats gently through the air, landing in front of me. I glance up to the top of my shared cubicle wall to find my officemate, Harper, staring down at me. "I just added something new to your Pinterest board," she says. "The bouquet is calla lilies, tied with this orange ribbon that matches the sash on the bridesmaids' dresses."

Harper's obsession with my future wedding never fails to amuse me, given her own disdain for commitment. "The sash on *what* bridesmaids' dresses?" I ask. "We haven't even set a date yet."

She jumps down and comes around to my desk, moving several files to the floor before she sits on it. "Rob proposed over a year ago."

I shrug. “He’s been busy, and I’ve got the faculty catalogue coming out. There just hasn’t been time.”

This all sounds so reasonable to me, but Harper groans loudly and bangs the back of her head against the carpeted cubicle wall.

“The faculty catalogue? Do you *hear* yourself? This isn’t Doctors Without Borders, Erin. You work in a college PR department at a job you hate.”

“I don’t hate my job.”

“Of *course* you do,” she says, rolling her eyes at our boss’s closed office door. “We *all* hate our jobs.”

She’s right, of course. Working for Timothy could ruin any job. He’s the worst combination of arrogance and stupidity, substituting marketing buzzwords for any actual knowledge. East Colorado University isn’t merely my employer—it’s also my alma mater, and the years I ran here with Olivia are some of my best memories, so putting out the right image of the university matters to me. What matters to Timothy, however, is Timothy. He can listen to himself talk for hours about nothing that will make us better at our jobs.

“I’ll look at the Pinterest board later,” I promise, rocking back in my chair and closing my eyes. Thinking about the wedding makes me feel overwhelmed, and I feel overwhelmed enough right now as it is. “I’m just a little stressed out today.”

“What’s up?”

I hesitate, reluctant to even admit it aloud. “Brendan’s coming over for dinner tonight.” I guess I still feel guilty. The guilt lasts for days when I have one of those dreams.

“Brendan? Insanely *hot* Brendan? I thought he lived in Europe or something.”

“He did,” I sigh. “Italy, then Spain, then somewhere else. And now I guess he’s home.”

Brendan moved away right after his brother and Olivia’s wedding, and it was a relief. Since then my life has been normal, devoid of all the highs and lows and drama. All I want, in the entire world, is for it to stay that way.

“Let me see his picture,” she says. Her eyes take on that distant look they get whenever she’s thinking about sex. Which is like 90 percent of the day.

I scowl. “Why would I have a picture of *Brendan*?”

“Come on. You must have a picture somewhere online. On Facebook?”

Look at Olivia's page. I bet there are pics on there from the wedding."

I'm guessing there are not. Olivia wasn't even sure she wanted to get married in the first place. And posting photos of herself for the world to see is definitely not her style.

Reluctantly I open my computer, but I don't go to Olivia's page, I go to Dorothy's. She—mother of the groom, and also mother of Brendan—is one of my favorite people. No one was happier to see Will and Olivia get married than she was, and I guarantee she's posted every picture taken at that wedding somewhere.

I find them, buried under one million photos of her two grandchildren, and click on a picture of the four of us: Will and Olivia, me and Brendan. Harper makes this little groaning noise when she sees him, and even I swallow a little. Brendan has an impossibly perfect face: square jaw, straight nose, full lips, the palest blue eyes. I may hate him now, but I really can't fault myself for the depth of the crush I once had.

"Holy shit," she breathes. "If he's home, you've definitely got to set me up."

"Harper, I love you too much to expose you to that many STDs. Do you have any idea how many women he's slept with?"

"What I hear you telling me is that he's hot and *experienced*. Which isn't a con in my book." She peers more closely at the screen, looking at an old picture of me and Olivia during our college track days. "Look at you back then! I'd barely recognize you now."

By the time I got to the wedding, I'd already broken my cheeseburger habit and started going to Pilates, but under Harper's guidance, I've reluctantly undertaken all the other girl shit, like getting highlights and wearing makeup. "All the credit is yours."

"And that," she says, tapping Brendan's form on my screen, "is how you can say thanks."



I DON'T SEE BRENDAN'S CAR OUT FRONT, BUT THE MOMENT I WALK IN THE house after work, I know he's here. It's confirmed when I hear his laugh, a sound I'd know anywhere—deeper than Rob's, a husky, low chuckle that resides somewhere toward the bottom of his chest. I'm pretty sure he could

get laid on the basis of that laugh alone, sight unseen.

My stomach swims, the way it would preceding any unpleasant event, as I step out into the backyard. I realize the two of us should be able to act like adults by now. I also realize neither of us is likely to.

Our eyes lock, and my heart stutters despite all its good intentions. I don't know how it's possible, but he's actually gotten better looking. His skin is still golden, and his mouth still makes me think bad thoughts, but the boyish side of him is gone. He's no longer lanky but ripped, and his hair is now shaved close, highlighting the angles of his face. That he somehow managed to *improve* sort of pisses me off.

He sits in a chair across from Rob beside the fireplace, looking more relaxed on my fucking porch than I ever have, but that's just vintage Brendan. He's always been too self-assured and attractive for his own good.

He stands, and we exchange a brief and impersonal hug. Even that feels like too much. Rob is hardly a small guy, but I feel dwarfed by Brendan, as if he could crush me by accident were he not careful enough. Given the look on his face when I walked outside, I would not be at all surprised to learn that he's *imagining* crushing me as we hug. I've lost count of the number of times he's tried to convince Rob to dump me, to not move in with me, not propose.

Yes, I kissed another guy very early in my relationship with Rob. But how big a hypocrite must you be to hold that against someone when *you're* the one she did it with?

"I guess congratulations are in order," Brendan says, returning to his seat as Rob pulls me into his lap. "When's the big day?"

"We haven't gotten that far," Rob says, "because *one* of us won't set a date." He tries to sound as if he's joking, but I hear displeasure there too.

Brendan eases back in his chair. There's something effortlessly masculine about everything he does, including this. He sits back in the chair like a guy who's about to get his third blow job of the day. Knowing him, it might not be that far from the truth.

"You know, in Europe it's pretty common to just get engaged and leave it at that," he says.

"Exactly!" I cry, turning to Rob. I should probably be more chagrined than I am to discover Brendan and I are arguing on the same side of anything. "Did you hear that, babe? I'm just being European about it."

"Except I don't want a European girl. I want my Irish girl from New Jersey," Rob says, pushing my hair behind my ear with an affectionate smile.

“And I *do* want a wedding.”

Brendan watches us with a look I can't quite name. It's disdainful, yet distant, as if we're animals in a cage he's forced to observe. I guess it makes sense. He's only had one relationship that I know of—some girl in Italy—and it didn't last.

“So what about you?” Rob asks him. “What brings you home?”

He shrugs. “Just felt like it was time. I'm planning to open my own tour company here in June, but before I do anything I need to meet my new niece. I'm going up to Seattle this weekend.”

I light up inside at the very thought of Caroline, Olivia and Will's newest, who is soon to be my goddaughter—and Brendan's. She's the most beautiful baby I've ever laid eyes on, with eyes exactly like her uncle's. He may be a menace to about 50 percent of the population, but no man alive has eyes like Brendan's—a pale, translucent blue, the color of beach glass.

I *used* to love beach glass. Not anymore.

“Wait,” says Rob. “You're opening a tour company here, but you're staying with your mom and Peter out in Boulder?”

Brendan shrugs. “It's just until I know where the office will be. Then I'll get a place closer in.”

“You can't make that drive every day,” Rob says. “Just stay with us. We've got the whole pool house sitting empty.”

Somehow I manage not to let my jaw drop entirely, but there's no doubt I look mutinous. Brendan is the last person I want staying in this state, much less my home, a fact that Rob is well aware of.

Rob doesn't seem to notice my reaction but Brendan certainly does. He's smirking as he accepts Rob's offer. I suspect he's agreeing solely to piss me off.



“I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU DID THAT,” I HISS AT ROB ONCE I HEAR BRENDAN'S car pulling away.

“Come on, hon. We have this huge place, and the pool house is detached. It's not like he'll even be living here. It'll be more like having a neighbor.”

“Which is great if I wanted Brendan as a neighbor,” I reply. “As I'm sure you can imagine, I *don't*.”

“He’s nice enough to you.” Rob sighs. “I just don’t get why you have such a problem with him.”

“My *problem* is that I’m 26 years old, and I have a full-time job, and I don’t feel like coming home every night to discover he’s turned our house into the Playboy Mansion. You’d better make sure he knows I’m not dealing with him having threesomes in the hot tub—or whatever else it is he’ll inevitably do.”

“I’ll warn him about the hot tub,” Rob says with a weary smile. “You know, when Harper has a threesome, you can’t wait to tell me about it. You think it’s funny that she sleeps around. But Brendan does it, and you’re ready to perform an exorcism.”

Yes. Because it’s totally different when it’s Brendan. “He’s just...a bad influence, Rob.”

“A bad influence on whom, Erin?” he asks. “I’m not even home half the time.”

That’s probably a good question.

Brendan
Four Years Earlier

I don't understand why anyone buys a fucking bread maker. You know how much good bread you could buy for \$150? A lot. A lot of really, really amazing bread. Bread of every color and taste and variety, without lifting a fucking finger.

Bread makers are like relationships. I don't know why anyone would give up all that freedom, all that variety, to be with only one girl, and for a far heavier price than any bread maker—remembering holidays, visiting her family, listening to some long-winded story about what Friend A said to Friend B. And you can't even bank on getting laid once you've put in all the work. I've seen it play out with my friends again and again: the amazing high of those first few weeks, followed by months and months of lame shit like farmer's markets and playing Pictionary, the sex getting a little duller, a little more infrequent with each week that passes.

My buddies all express dismay when this happens, as if it's somehow *surprising* that it's gone down that way. That's when they laud me for my ability to stay single, which also makes little sense. Relationships are remarkably easy to avoid if you know what you're doing: don't take a girl out who isn't going to sleep with you, and don't sleep with girls who will expect a call the next day. It's that simple.

Everyone knows these are my rules, so I laugh when my brother tells me to stay away from Erin Doyle, his fiancée's best friend. In fact, he goes so far

as to make it a condition of getting me a job with his old tour company.

“Erin?” I scoff. “You really think you have to warn me to stay away from *Erin*?”

Erin is exactly the kind of girl I avoid—the sort who will want to hold hands for six months first, who gets a subscription to *Brides* magazine right after your first date. I’ve only met her a few times, but I know the type.

“Do us both a favor,” Will says, “and stop pretending you’re not attracted to her.”

“You couldn’t pay me to go out with that girl,” I tell him. Just contemplating it makes me feel suffocated. “Not if she were the last woman alive.”

Erin
Present

Olivia can't stop cackling. "I hear you're getting a new roommate!" she says. Then she starts laughing again.

"I should have known you'd enjoy this situation a little too much."

"You want to know what *I* would do if Will invited someone to live with us without asking me first?" she asks.

No, not really. Although she's now married and a mother of two, Olivia's still the girl who broke one teammate's nose and took a baseball bat to another. Her solutions always involve objects I should threaten to shove up my boss's ass, and any time Rob upsets me, her helpful suggestion is that I "cut him loose."

"You talk a good game, but we both know you wouldn't do anything," I tell her. "You can't stay mad at Will for two seconds."

"Okay, maybe. But I sure as shit wouldn't have *agreed*. I thought you hated Brendan."

"I don't *hate* him," I say. *Okay, yes, I totally hate him.* But I'm adult enough to lie about it. "I just don't need him smoking pot or having threesomes in my hot tub."

Her voice softens. "He's changed a lot, Erin. That girl in Italy really messed him up. I don't think you have to worry about it."

"I thought Brendan never wanted anything serious with anyone," I

mutter. I feel inexplicably bitter, although I shouldn't after all this time.

"I guess she was the exception," Olivia says. "And I have no idea what went wrong, but it definitely changed him."

A piece of me is glad someone broke his heart. He deserves it after all the damage he's wrought. But mostly I'm just wondering what this girl had that I didn't.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON, TIMOTHY LEAVES THE OFFICE FOR HIS WEEKLY meeting with the chancellor—another person on my shit list, given his constant last-minute demands—and I call my brother. I try to check on Sean each week, the way a parent might, just to make sure he's happy and staying clean and caught up on rent, and it's easiest to do it from work. Rob has strong opinions about my brother. I can't even mention Sean's name without seeing a look of disdain on his face. I suspect he might look at me that way too if he knew everything.

Sean asks if Rob and I have set a date yet, and when I tell him we haven't he offers—just as my father did—to come beat a little sense into Rob. Everyone assumes it *must* be Rob dragging his heels because women are supposed to be giddy over the prospect of a wedding, as if we've just won the lottery. No wonder my reluctance bothers Rob so much.

I ask him if he's registered for class, and when he sighs heavily, my heart sinks. Sean has more bad news than anyone I've ever met, most of it entirely his own fault. But when he emerged from rehab last month determined to become an addiction counselor, I really believed he was turning things around.

"I don't think it's going to work out," he says. "It was too late to apply for financial aid. And I probably wouldn't qualify anyway. No one's gonna bank on a convicted felon paying them back."

I hate that defeated quality to his voice, especially because it always seems to precede the manic quality his voice gets when he starts using again.

"There must be a way," I urge. "Did you talk to Mom and Dad?" It's only desperation that makes me ask. I know for a fact that my parents don't have the money. I've had to help them with their mortgage twice in the past year.

"Right," he laughs. "They can't even help themselves. It's okay. I'm

waiting tables, and they said I can move up to tending bar at the end of the month.”

I feel panic rising in my chest. “You must know that’s a bad idea.”

“I’m not an alcoholic, Erin,” he says testily.

I press my palm to my face, trying to rein in all the things I want to say. Spending time around people drinking inevitably leads to spending time around people who are doing coke and meth and every other thing he’ll wind up doing. He knows this. But reminding him of his failures will get me nowhere. In many ways, he’s a lot closer to 13 than 29.

“How much do you need?” I ask, desperation leaking into my voice. “For tuition?”

“Like 20 grand or something,” he says. “It was a crazy idea. You know how long it would take me to pay it back?”

“I’ll pay it,” I say impulsively. I’ve been saving ever since graduation. It’s money that’s given me a feeling of safety I never had growing up. But I guess I can learn to live without that feeling for a while.

He asks if I’m sure Rob will be okay with it, and I feel slightly queasy. No, Rob will not be okay with it. If it were up to Rob, I’d have written Sean off entirely by now. But Rob has no siblings, and he certainly doesn’t get to determine how I treat mine.

“It’ll be fine,” I tell him.

The second I hang up the phone, Harper is leaning over my cubicle wall. “Did you just give away all your money to your brother?”

“I know we can hear each other’s conversations,” I reply primly, “but we’re supposed to at least pretend we aren’t actively listening.”

“Shouldn’t you have spoken to Rob first?”

Shit. Yes. Probably. “If he can invite someone to live with us without asking me, I guess I can give away 20 grand without asking him.”

“To a recovering addict,” she reminds me.

“I’m not an idiot. I’m not going to give him the money directly. I’ll just pay his tuition.” I sense, based on the look she gives me, that it doesn’t help my case.

We both hear Timothy’s tuneless whistling in the hallway, which means today’s meeting with the chancellor was woefully brief or didn’t happen at all. He appears at my cubicle a moment later with his standard look: dour and suspicious, with a dollop of resentment on top.

“Erin’s cubicle isn’t a water cooler, Harper,” he says. “Don’t you have

someplace to be?”

She shrugs, because unlike the rest of us, Harper does not give a flying fuck about Timothy’s opinion. Sometimes I think she *wants* to get fired.

“It’s after 4:30, Tim-O. I’m off the clock.”

“There *is* no clock, because you are salaried,” he says. “So if you are truly done for the day, which I *doubt*, please move along and let the rest of my employees get their jobs done.”

She, naturally, doesn’t move a muscle, just stares at him until he walks away.

“You know what I dream about sometimes?” she asks. “Working in a factory.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Huh?”

“Think about it.” She pushes away from the wall and comes around to my desk. “Some job where you just push a button or something every three minutes—without Tim coming around to suggest ways you could push the button better, or waxing poetic about what it *means* to push the button, and where there’s a union telling him he’s not allowed to *let* you push the button even a minute after you’re off.”

“That still sounds sort of tedious.”

“Okay, how about if I add in a hot factory guy who spends the entire day saying dirty shit in your ear? And so you push the button and get your paycheck and go home and do unspeakable things for hours with the hot factory guy.”

I laugh but feel a stab of envy. Sex, for Harper, is like some kind of ultimate amusement park—a ride that just keeps getting better every time she hops on.

“If I had that factory job, I’d probably just spend more time asleep.”

“Then Rob’s doing something wrong,” she counters. “You haven’t been with him *that* long. It should still be exciting.”

I don’t expect her to understand because she didn’t grow up like I did. But I’m not looking for excitement. I simply aspire to the absence of pain. And therefore, I have exactly what I want.

Brendan
Four Years Earlier

I walk in for my first day of work at the tour company and find none other than Erin standing there. She looks different. Will could have at least mentioned how fucking pretty she'd gotten. And I also forgot about those lips of hers—I'm not sure how—but it makes no difference. She smiles at me with her heart in her eyes, and I know immediately that she's still the same girl, the type who wants a relationship straight out of 1955, complete with promise rings and corsages and chastity. Worse yet, she's also the kind of girl who'll develop a crush, who'll create all kinds of fantasies in her head about spring weddings and what our children will look like, without me saying a word to encourage her.

And when I don't make all of her dreams come true, she'll get upset, and my brother will blame *me*.

She grins as she hops on the sign-up desk, swinging legs that are much longer and leaner than I remember. "Hello, fellow summer hire. You want a tour?"

I shake my head. "I've seen it before. Where's Mike?"

Her smile falters a little. I know I'm being a dick, but something about her brings it out in me.

"He's in the back office working on next week's schedule. I think he meant for you to just use today to get oriented. You want me to call him?"

I walk past her. "I'm a big boy. I can find him all by myself."

I sidle through the rows of bikes and get to Mike's office. I know him fairly well through Will, who worked here almost two years before moving to Seattle.

Mike raises a brow. "Surprised to see you back here," he says. "I thought Erin would give you a tour."

"She offered," I say. "I've been here enough. Don't really need it. You want me to get started on something?"

"So I just gave you the chance to hang out with one of the hottest girls who's ever set foot in this building, and you want to work instead? I thought I was hooking you up."

I shrug. "She's not my type."

He gets this strange look on his face. It takes me a sec to figure it out.

"No, Mike, I'm not gay."

It looks like he doesn't believe me, and that makes me like Erin even less.

Erin
Present

My father is slurring, but that's nothing new. And he sounds desperate, distraught, but that's nothing new either. Thank God Rob is a sound sleeper. I don't think these calls have ever woken him, and that's a godsend because there's a whole lot about me and my life I don't want him to know.

"Hi, Daddy," I whisper, walking out of the bedroom and curling up on the living room sofa. "Where are you?"

He mumbles something that sounds like Anson Street, and I ask him if he's called a cab.

"Don't need a cab," he slurs. "M' fine. But I can't find my car."

"Dad, I need you to promise you won't drive, okay? Give me the name of the bar."

He argues, of course, but he doesn't argue for long. He's too exhausted and drunk for that. So I put him on speaker while I look up the address and call him a ride. We stay on the phone while we wait for the car to come, and as always, his anger at the cards he's been dealt in life turns to tears. He says the things he always says: that he never got a break, that he failed, that he should have been a better father.

"You were a great dad," I tell him. "You still are."

We both know it's a far cry from the truth, but my father has enough unhappiness in his life without adding mine to his.

He's still crying, still apologizing when the car arrives to take him home. I'm 26, but right now it's as if I'm back in high school, juggling all the unhappiness afloat in my household to keep it from crashing down on us. And just like I did back then, I wait until he's safely in bed before I let myself cry too.



I MAKE IT THROUGH THE NEXT DAY ON FOUR HOURS OF SLEEP, WHICH IS LESS than ideal as—at Rob's insistence—we are meeting Brendan out for dinner. In theory, tonight will be a double date, though I'm not sure if *date* is really an accurate way to describe Brendan's relationship with any female.

Brendan and his exploits are the reason I no longer believe in things like soul mates and love at first sight. Because those were the things that went through my head the first time I ever saw him, climbing out of his brother's truck over winter break our junior year at ECU to help Olivia move. He was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and every ridiculous romantic ideal became real to me the second our eyes met. Discovering what an epic douche he was—taking a different girl home every night, each of them stupider than the one before—cured me of it...eventually.

"I can't believe we're doing this," I say as Rob parks the car outside the restaurant. "You've only had two nights off in weeks, and we're spending both of them with Brendan."

His fingers slide through mine. "We don't have to stay out all night," he says. "Just a quick dinner. Give him a chance."

"And is he actually bringing someone he knows, or is this is some girl he slept with last night and can't shake off?"

"Erin," Rob says with a raised brow.

"I bet her name is Bambi and she works as a spokesmodel. Or one of those girls at the auto show in a bikini."

"Erin."

I could go on like this for hours, but we're entering the restaurant. Inside, Brendan waits with a lovely, vacuous redhead, and I change my prognosis: Bambi isn't smart enough to be a spokesmodel, although I imagine she performs pretty well with her mouth.

I realize it's not fair to hate her just because she's dating Brendan. If

anything, that should make her an object of pity. But I resent women like her, the ones who trade on their looks and never bother to develop any other quality.

We are introduced. Her name is instantly forgettable, so I don't attempt to remember it. How could it matter anyway? She's with Brendan. It's not like we're ever going to ever see her again.

"So how long will you be in Amsterdam?" Brendan asks Rob.

"A week," Rob says. "But possibly longer."

The "possibly longer" part is new information to me, but before I can ask him about it, the waiter comes to take our order. Bambi, predictably, orders a salad with no dressing. A hundred bucks says she won't finish it.

"Oh my God," Bambi says to me after the waiter walks away. "I can't believe you ordered steak frites. Do you realize how toxic that is?"

"The toxins make it extra delicious," I reply.

"There's literally nothing worse you could have ordered," she says, proceeding to detail all the ways I just made the worst decision in the history of decisions—the fat grams, the omega-6s, the calories.

Brendan and Rob are oblivious to the exchange as they recount the same adolescent stories they always tell when they get together. They met on the first day of middle school—Brendan, who had yet to undergo his staggering growth spurt, mouthed off to some 18-year-old walking by and was about to get his ass handed to him. Every single kid scattered except for Rob. They've been best friends ever since.

I'm not sure they would ever have become friends at all if it hadn't happened, because they are very different people: Rob, conservative and pragmatic; Brendan, all about seizing the day. They've maintained their friendship in spite of it, but when the conversation turns to Brendan's new tour company, I begin to question whether they'll continue to do so.

"You sure you want to blow all your savings on a business, Brendan?" Rob asks. "A huge percentage of new businesses fold in their first year."

"I'm investing in something that will make me happy every day. What else am I going to do with it?"

"You could sock it away," Rob counters. There's a hint of condescension in his tone that sets my teeth on edge. "Every penny you save will have grown exponentially between now and retirement. Worry about what makes you happy after you know you have what you need to survive."

Brendan's eyes darken slightly. As I recall, this isn't so different from the

arguments he had with Will back in the day. I doubt it's any easier to hear coming from Rob.

"Look," he says, "there are guys who want to do the same bland shit every day when they go into work. They're the same guys too scared to ski black diamonds or surf a decent wave. They like a nice, hummable tune during their 45-minute commute home, but they never jump in the mosh pit. That's not living. That's watching life from a distance, like it's a television show. And to me, that sounds like a death sentence."

"My 'death sentence'," Rob replies evenly, "might be looking pretty good to you in 30 years."

Brendan grins. "I knew I should have left your ass in that ditch behind the school." Yet another obscure high school reference. A part of me wishes I could see Rob from those days—based on their stories it sounds like he was actually easygoing once upon a time, and that's an adjective no one would use to describe him now.

Rob laughs and the tension abates. I'm not sure if I'm relieved or disappointed. I'd be sad for Rob if he lost this friendship—he's so focused on work that there's little else outside of it in his life, and Brendan is one of very people he still counts as a friend—but I think it'd make life easier for all of us if it just faded away. Although, to be honest, maybe it'd just make life easier for me.

Rob turns to Bambi and asks her what she does for a living. I'm guessing it's not much, but I manage to stifle the urge to roll my eyes. She takes a sip of her cosmo, which I consider to be a drink of girls who've just acquired their first fake ID. "I'm a doctor."

"A *doctor*?" I ask, choking on my drink.

Rob kicks my foot. I guess it's wrong that I sound so incredulous but...a doctor? Really? Brendan's smile is so smug right now. He knows I thought she'd be an idiot, and he's thrilled to prove me wrong.

"What *kind* of doctor?" I ask, and Rob kicks my foot again.

"I'm a doctor of energy medicine."

Brendan's smug, gloating, punchable face dims slightly. Apparently this is news to him too.

"Fascinating," I say, catching Brendan's eye. "I don't think I've heard of that."

Brendan glares at me, and I'm about 90 percent certain he's imagining stabbing me right now. Something giddy bubbles in my chest.

“Illness is just the result of the loss of our soul parts,” she says. “I commune with beings from other realms, and they guide me to those lost parts.”

Rob’s foot lands on mine but it’s too late. I can’t stop myself.

“Ohhhhh,” I say, directing my widest smile at Brendan. “How interesting. I thought you meant you were a *real* doctor.”

“I’ve cured things no one with a medical degree would touch.”

I nod eagerly. “Amazing,” I reply. “Like what?”

She begins to detail all the cases of cancer she’s sure she’s cured, presumably via the collection of lost soul parts, and I feel a gurgle of semi-hysterical laughter welling up in my throat.

Rob’s foot is on mine, and his hand clamps down on my thigh. I don’t know what he wants me to do. I’m not *trying* to laugh.

“Excuse me,” I murmur, sliding out of my seat and almost running to the bathroom. Laughter explodes from my throat just as I get inside the door. I shoot a quick text to Olivia, letting her know her future sister-in-law can cure cancer. It’s certainly a handy skill to have in the family.

I reapply my lipstick and resolve to be better behaved when I go out. It’s not her fault she’s an idiot, and the truth is that she’s not the one I have a problem with. It’s Brendan, with his consistent preference for looks over substance, who irks me.

When I’ve finally collected myself, I push the door open. Standing partly in shadow, his face lit by the neon exit sign, Brendan waits. He looks almost sculptural, chiseled, his hard jaw leading to the perfection of his soft mouth.

Ugh. Why can’t I even notice him without sounding like I’m narrating porn?

“That wasn’t very nice, Erin,” he says.

“I’m no *doctor*,” I reply, “but I’m guessing it went over her head.”

“Are you going to be like this every time I have someone over?”

“I don’t know. Will they all be ‘doctors’ or do you think you’ll branch out a little? Maybe an astrologist? A psychic?”

He steps into the light. There’s this weird little gleam to his eyes that wasn’t there earlier. A charge. I’m not sure if I’m excited or terrified.

“No, but I might try to find one who can pull that stick out of your ass.”

“If that’s your way of suggesting a threesome, I’m gonna pass.”

That charge grows. His eyes fall, so fast I almost miss it, to my mouth.

And suddenly I’m remembering another time like this. Where one minute

we were bickering, just as we are now, and the next his mouth was on mine and his hands were inside my shirt.

I'm not scared, I realize. I'm *excited*.

I hate, as always, that Brendan is capable of eliciting any feeling from me. Especially that one.



THE NIGHT FINALLY ENDS. WE SAY OUR GOODBYES AND ARE ALMOST TO OUR car when Rob runs into Brad, a colleague of his, in the parking lot. I'm exhausted and in a pissy mood, but I try not to let it show as he approaches. There are certain roles we all play on behalf of our significant others, and this is mine—the pleasant fiancé/wife, who smiles at the correct times and dresses appropriately and is otherwise irrelevant. I've known most of these guys for years and I'm guessing not a single one of them knows what I do for a living.

He hugs me and then punches Rob's shoulder. "That was a crazy night last week, huh?"

Rob laughs, but it's a little forced, and his eyes flicker to me for a moment. "Yeah. Insane."

"How late did you guys stay?" Brad asks.

"Not long," Rob replies. Under normal circumstances I probably would have tuned this conversation out by now, but there is something about Rob that has me on alert. His posture, his voice—they strive for normalcy but don't quite achieve it.

"Seriously? Because I left around 10 and it looked like you were going strong. I just can't stay out like that anymore."

Rob smiles. "The key is to order club soda with lime most of the night so it just *looks* like you're drinking."

Brad laughs. "Someone ought to clue Christina into that trick, because she was plastered."

Mic drop.

Christina? He was out with *Christina* last week?

I am not, by nature, jealous. But Christina was the cause of the biggest fight we've ever had, and given that we almost never fight, that makes it especially memorable. I've seen her hit on Rob before, but it was at last year's holiday party that I finally lost it. I was standing unseen a few feet

away when she unbuttoned her shirt and asked if he was ready for a change of scenery. He didn't pursue it, but the words *no* and *I'm engaged* never left his mouth either. Instead he'd laughed and told her he was sure the view was magnificent. We had a major fight over it on the way home that night, and I suspect we may be about to have another right now.

I walk into the parking lot as fast as is possible in a pencil skirt and heels, my heart drumming fast in my chest.

"Erin," Rob says from behind me.

I round on him. "*When?*" I demand. "When exactly did this magical night with Christina take place?"

He groans. "She's the head of M&A, hon. It's not like it was a date."

"*When?*"

"Last week," he says. "The client thing."

My head is spinning. He told me he was going to cut out early that night. I made him braised short ribs and mashed potatoes and I'd actually felt *sorry* for him when he said he was stuck with clients. "So Christina was the reason," I hiss, "that I wasted two hours cooking a dinner you didn't bother to come home for."

"Of course she wasn't!" He doesn't shout, but his voice is raised, something that rarely happens with Rob. "There were like 10 people there, half of them clients, and there was no way I could extract myself."

My laugh is bitter. "Just like there was no way you could tell her you were engaged when she hit on you last winter."

He digs his hands through his hair. "She already knows I'm engaged. We've gone over this. She says crazy shit that she doesn't mean when she's drinking and the best way to handle it is to laugh and move on. I have to work with her. Do you understand how awkward it would be for everyone if I made a big deal of it every time she said something inappropriate?"

"No. What I understand is that you blew me off last week and instead stayed out until after midnight with a woman we've already had one major fight over."

"I don't always get to decide when I'm going out or who it's with," he argues. "And I'm very well-compensated for that fact. You have to live with the downside sometimes if you want the upside too."

We ride home in silence. I know there's a point to what he said, but I'm still angry, and it's so unusual for me to be angry at Rob that neither of us is even sure how to proceed. Olivia thinks the fact that we rarely argue is a bad

thing. She says it means we never dive below the surface with each other. Perhaps she's right, but I'm okay with that. Things under my surface are dark, much darker than Rob—with his storybook childhood and perfect parents—could ever understand. I like the fact that when Rob sees me, he sees the girl I might have been instead of the one I actually am.

“I don't want to fight with you,” he says with a sigh as we walk in the house. “We finally have some time to ourselves. Can we please put it behind us?”

His arms go around me, and I press my face to his chest, though all I can smell is the starch of his shirt. His hands slide from my waist to my ass. “Let's go to bed.”

I agree in part because I hate arguing, but mostly because we've only had sex once in the past month, which may have as much to do with my foul mood right now as anything else.

I tell him to give me two minutes and take the world's fastest shower—the water still isn't quite hot by the time I'm done. I don't bother wasting time on lingerie. Rob would barely notice anyhow.

And then I walk into our bedroom to find the lights off and him on his back, snoring loudly. My disappointment turns to resignation as I climb in beside him. It's not his fault. I doubt he got more than four hours of sleep last night. The past month isn't his fault either.

But as I settle into bed, I'm still thinking about sex, and when I fall asleep I dream about it. That makes sense, under the circumstances.

What doesn't make sense is that it's Brendan I dream about.

Brendan
Four Years Earlier

I'm on the floor fixing a broken bike chain during my second week at work when Erin walks up. I expend a lot of effort avoiding her, so it's annoying when she seeks me out. For just a moment, all I see are bare legs, long and starting to tan though summer hasn't quite begun. She's got her hair down, wearing no makeup. There's something about that bare, full mouth that I'd like to look at one moment longer, and it bothers me that I'd want to.

"Yeah?" I ask irritably.

"You don't have to be a dick," she says. "You don't even know what I'm going to ask."

"No, but I'm anticipating that it'll piss me off," I reply.

Hurt flashes over her face for a moment, and I feel bad about it, but not for long. It's best that we get clear right now that I don't want her around. Her presence is a constant irritant, like a pebble in my shoe or an itch I can't reach.

She huffs in irritation and then continues in her professional voice. "AJ called in sick. Can you lead an extra tour this afternoon?"

"Sure," I say, returning my gaze to the bike as I answer.

"There. Was that so hard?" she asks.

Yeah. It sort of was. That one tiny interaction is enough to ruin my afternoon.



“ARE YOU BEING NICE TO ERIN?” OLIVIA ASKS.

“Of course,” I say, though it isn’t true. I’ve been surly more than anything else.

“You’re leaving Erin alone, right?” Will asks when he takes the phone.

“Of course,” I say again, and this time it’s absolutely true. “You have nothing to worry about. She annoys the living shit out of me.”

“*Erin?*” he says, as if my words are too impossible to be believed. “Why?”

“She just does.” I can’t put my finger on precisely what I find annoying. It’s just everything. Each day when I walk into the tour office and find her there, I feel my irritation ticking upward like a thermometer on a hot day.

“Name one thing she does that’s annoying. I dare you.”

“The baking,” I reply. “Every day she’s bringing some homemade shit into the office.”

“Yeah, wow, she sounds terrible,” Will says.

“And she’s so fucking cheerful. Morning to night with that big smile on her face.”

Will is laughing now. “What a nightmare. I don’t know how you stand it.”

I’m not sure either. But every day she bothers me more.

Erin
Present

Wednesday, Rob's last full day in the States, comes too fast. It really isn't a big deal that he's leaving, so it's hard for me to explain the sense of impending doom I feel whenever I think about it. Maybe it's just that his trip has been extended at the last minute—instead of a week he'll be gone nearly a month. I'm not even sure he'd have remembered to tell me if I hadn't overheard him discussing it with Brendan.

He calls just after lunch. This in and of itself is unusual, because Rob never calls while I'm at work. But it's his voice I find most alarming—flat, without inflection or apology, telling me he thinks he might work late.

"Rob," I sigh. "This is the last time I'm seeing you for a month. I'd think that just this once you could tell your boss no."

"Yes, and I'd think that just once you might be able to tell your brother no, but apparently you decided to give him all of your money instead," he shoots back.

Oh. Fuck. "Did Sean call you?" I ask.

"Yeah," Rob says with a bitter laugh. "He wanted to thank me for being so 'cool' about it."

There's nothing I can say to defend myself. I *should* have discussed it with him. There's only one reason I didn't: because I knew I'd pay Sean's tuition whether Rob agreed or not.

"I meant to tell you," I say weakly.

“Don’t you think you should have discussed it with me *first*? I thought we were a team, Erin.”

“Sean was going to work at a bar,” I reply. “It would have been a disaster.”

“That’s not the point,” he snaps. “We’re supposed to discuss these things. We’re *engaged*. Or have you forgotten?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means we’ve been engaged for 18 months, and you haven’t moved one millimeter toward picking a date or anything else,” he says. “You keep claiming you’re too busy, but when you do something like this, I have to wonder if that’s all it is.”



HE DOESN’T GET HOME UNTIL AFTER EIGHT. DINNER IS COLD. I’M MAD, BUT my grounds for anger are so minimal compared to his that I push it down deep.

“There’s food on the stove if you’re hungry,” I say quietly. “You’ll just need to heat it up.”

“I met Brendan and got something at the bar,” he replies, throwing his jacket on the chair.

I close my eyes to keep from rolling them. Being late is bad enough. Being late because he was hanging out with *Brendan*, however, is really doubling down.

“Let me guess,” I say. “He told you to dump me for the hundredth time?”

“No.” Rob sighs. “He said I should get clear on what bothers me before we have a conversation because you’re a fixer, and you can’t fix this until you know what the problem is.”

“Has the world stopped spinning on its axis? *Brendan* actually paid me a compliment?”

Rob laughs. “Not exactly. He said he hates fixers. But anyway, he meant well.”

“Any other sage advice from the guy who’s never had a relationship?”

“Yeah, he said I should go home and get laid.”

That sounds more like Brendan.

Rob leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Look, I’m not happy

about it, Erin, but I don't want to fight with you tonight. So can we just table all this for a time when it's not my last few hours with my beautiful girlfriend?"

I agree with relief, and he throws his tie next to his jacket. "Then it seems to me you're wearing too many clothes."

"I'm only wearing a tank top and shorts."

He grins. "Like I said. Too many clothes."

We walk into the bedroom. I don't think we've ever once had sex anywhere else. Harper calls it boring, but there are far worse things than a boyfriend who's a tiny bit predictable. His shirt comes off, his pants follow, and he slides into bed, pulling me against him.

"I can't believe I'm going to have to go without for a whole month," he says against my mouth.

I nod in agreement, although we've only slept together a few times since he started work on this merger, so I'm not sure a month apart is really going to feel all that different.

He rolls me on my back. "Jesus," he groans, already hard, pressed against my stomach. "It's been so long. This is going to be over before it starts."

I tell myself I don't mind, but my thoughts flicker briefly to the idea of Harper's imaginary hot factory guy before I can stop myself. I bet sometimes it's over with the hot factory guy before it starts too.

Erin
Present

Rob calls dutifully after he arrives in Amsterdam, and each day after that, but the eight-hour time difference makes it hard—one of us is always just getting up, just going to bed, or at work. I wish he would do a video call, so I could see his face, but he says it’s “off-putting.”

The days without him drag on interminably, as I knew they would. It’s not that my life is so different with Rob gone...it’s just that it feels a little pointless. The house has been empty when I get home for months, but now it feels different, more vacant and mocking. When Rob was here, that feeling was temporary. Now it is not. There’s just me, with no one to talk to all weekend, and five weekdays spent at a job that makes me miserable. I come home each night wanting something, and I have no clue what it is. I go to sleep, knowing there’ll be no warm body beside me in the morning. And I’m not sure when, exactly, my life turned so empty that a warm body would be the only thing to look forward to in the first place.



I’M STILL AT THE OFFICE WHEN ROB CALLS TOWARD THE END OF THE WEEK. It’s two in the morning in Amsterdam, and he’s just getting in, which has been the case most of the nights he’s been there. He tells me first about

dinner with the team in an old pirate radio station, and then he details the bar crawl that ensued afterward.

I shouldn't be jealous, but I've been at work for nine hours and have big plans for a night in with Mr. Tibbles, Rob's cat, and possibly a delicious bowl of cereal for dinner. My unhappiness isn't Rob's fault, but knowing that intellectually doesn't seem to puncture the small bubble of resentment in my chest, a bubble that swells every time we talk and he tells me yet another story about fancy dinners and wild nights he's enjoying without me.

I make appropriate sounds of interest about the the meal and the bars and the shots he did. I agree that Benchley, a guy they hired last year, is super funny. When the conversation lags, he asks if I got a chance to look at reception sites over the weekend, and I make weak excuses that we both know aren't true.

"I meant to," I tell him. "But this weekend was so busy."

"Okay," he says, the affection in his tone now absent. "Well, I should probably get to sleep. Love you."

I start to tell him I love him too, and that I'm sorry I haven't done more work on the wedding, but he's already hung up the phone.



ON SATURDAY MORNING, SOME YARD EQUIPMENT IS DELIVERED TO THE HOUSE. I'd forgotten we even rented it, back before Rob's trip was extended. I'm sure he forgot as well, but I'm still annoyed that I'm the one stuck with the job. This is my first yard, and I have never even used a lawn mower, much less something designed to pull clods of earth from the ground and spread seed.

So I'm already in a sub-par mood when Brendan strolls into the yard, wearing khaki shorts and a T-shirt just fitted enough to assure you he is all muscle beneath it. I've seen signs of his presence over the past few days, but no evidence of the man himself until now. I wish it had stayed that way.

"Aerating the yard?" he asks with that ever-present smirk. "What an amazing way to spend a Saturday. Marriage looks so awesome."

"We're not married." My voice is clipped, tense, precise. I promised Rob I'd be nice, but already it's taking all of my effort just to be civil.

"Oh, right. It's *after* you've said your vows that it gets really exciting."

Ignore him, Erin. Ignore him. Pretend he's not there long enough, and

eventually he won't be. I crouch down to look at the engine, hoping he'll be gone when I stand.

"Staring at that thing isn't going to make it turn on."

I roll my eyes. "Thanks, farmer boy. I knew you'd prove helpful."

"Go sit in the shade and look pretty," he says, pulling the handle away from me. "I'll do it."

"I'll have you know that I am perfectly capable of—"

He places a finger over my lips. "Shhhhh," he says, still smirking.

I hate being silenced like a child, which is probably why he's doing it.

"You know I grew up on a farm, right?" he continues. "And you grew up in an apartment in New Jersey?"

"Yes, but—"

The finger rests on my lips again. "Go sit, sweetheart."

Part of me feels like I should tell him to fuck off. The bigger part of me doesn't want to aerate a lawn.

"Fine, smart guy. I'll go relax, and you can show me how it's done. There's a bunch of laundry inside. Maybe you can show me how good you are at that next."

I have no intention of sitting on the steps, however. I have other things to do, first of all. More importantly, I suspect nothing good comes of watching Brendan. It's irritating, how pretty he is. It's irritating that he does everything so confidently, that he's managing to make aerating a yard look sexy. Ridiculous. Harper would pay for footage of this.

He pulls his shirt up to wipe his face, and I hustle. When you've only had sex once in the past month, and it only lasted 30 seconds, being anywhere near Brendan Langstrom's perfect, exposed abs is just inviting trouble.

Brendan
Four Years Earlier

I am out drinking with everyone from work. Everyone but Erin, that is. She normally comes out, though I wish she wouldn't—it seems like asking her not to ruin my free time as well as my work hours is a reasonable request. Because I've discovered that being stuck in the office with Erin isn't merely irritating, it's my private, existential hell—from the moment she breezes in the door until the moment she leaves at night.

First, there's the humming. When she's in the back sorting helmets, counting oars, she's humming the entire fucking time, if not outright singing to whatever comes up on the playlist.

If it was merely that, I could hold it together, but the humming is just one of a thousand irritating habits—the way she sits, for instance, with her legs all tangled as if she's made of Silly Putty, as if there's too much of her to possibly go straight. Or the way her teeth sink into her lower lip when she's uncertain, like a rodent with cheese, or the fact that she doesn't realize her old high school track team T-shirt is now way too small through the chest. And then there's the little groan she makes when she smells Thai food, the way she bounces out of her seat when her favorite song comes on. The way her hips sway when she's wearing heels, and the way every guy in the office is riveted by them when she does.

But tonight she's blissfully absent, which means for once I can escape the judgmental little smirk she gets on her face whenever the girl I'm with says

something stupid. I'll admit *that* happens more than I'd like it to.

The guys are all talking about this huge rafting trip we led over the weekend during a thunderstorm. I hear my name, but I'm not really listening because—though I'm happy that Erin is absent—I keep wondering why that is. Yes, I've gone out of my way to be a dick so she won't want to come out with us, but until tonight, I was failing miserably. So where the fuck is she?

I finish my first beer and start on my second, while this pressure builds in my head.

“What's the matter, babe?” asks the girl I brought.

Her name is Anya, I think, but I'm not entirely certain. All I know is she's wearing the shortest shorts I've ever seen, and in about an hour, I plan to remove them.

I open my mouth to suggest we leave, and something entirely different emerges.

“Where's Erin?” I ask Pierce, and Anya shifts unhappily beside me.

“What do you care?” he asks. “You act like you hate her most of the time.”

I shrug. I'm not willing to say I hate her, necessarily. Hate seems like something that should be confined to the truly awful, like Hitler, or smooth jazz. But I'm not going to deny it either.

“I don't get you,” he says. “Everyone loves Erin.”

Maybe that's the problem—everyone loves Erin. It's tedious the way she charms people, with the big smile and the eagerness to help. It's as if she never got the memo that she's smart and good-looking and doesn't need to work so hard for everyone's approval.

“Some of us love her a little too much,” I say, meeting his eye.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means if I catch you looking down her shirt again, you and I are going to have issues.”

“If you hate her so much, why do you care if I look down her shirt?”

I really have no idea. I don't want to know.

“Well, she's walking in the door right now,” he says, “and until you have a good reason, I'm going to keep on doing it.”

My head swivels to see her moving toward us, wearing sky-high heels and a little skirt with a pristine white button-down. This is the outfit she wears on Mondays and Thursdays, when she goes to her internship, except she should have been done hours ago.

“The naughty librarian look,” Pierce says under his breath, grinning at me. I don’t smile back.

He jumps up when she gets to the table, while I pretend not to notice she’s even arrived. To my chagrin, he pulls out the chair between him and my date—my date who looked just fine sitting here on her own, but now, next to Erin, looks like she’s trying way too hard. Only now do I notice that Anya’s clothes are too small, and she’s wearing an assload of makeup.

“Well, well, well, look at Miss Corporate America,” I say to Erin snidely. “How was a day spent selling your soul to the man?”

I see a flash of anger in her eyes and feel a little surge of victory. She largely ignores me now; sometimes that flash of anger is all I can get.

“Laugh all you want,” she says. “When you’re 50 and living in Will’s basement, I’ll be laughing too.”

“Maybe you can visit me there when you’re finally ready to lose your virginity,” I reply.

To my unhappy surprise, she laughs. “Unless you’ve devised a time machine—and let’s face it, you’re unlikely to exert the effort even if you were capable of it—that ship has sailed.”

I spend the rest of the night feeling bitter. I don’t even like her, so why I am pissed off that I’ll never be her first?

Erin
Present

We're only five minutes into Friday's staff meeting, and Timothy has already used the word *synergy* 15 times by my count. I have trouble staying awake during these meetings under the best of circumstances, but after last night's long call with my dad, it feels almost impossible. He's called twice this week, which means he's on another downward spiral. I'm sure my mother hoped—though she would never say it—that the move here, away from his friends and past, would give him a clean start. Instead he's lonely, and my father's solution to every unhappy feeling is to make it go away with booze.

I feel my cell buzzing in my lap and surreptitiously check it, only to discover that I am missing a call from Rob. Timothy says *synergy* again, and I picture winging the phone at his head. I imagine the clunk it would make on impact, the shock on his face. It's small consolation for being stuck here.

When the meeting's over, I go outside to call Rob back, positioning myself in a patch of sunlight to stay warm. I love Harper, but she won't hesitate to shout commentary over our shared cubicle wall if I'm there.

He answers, and I hear rustling in the background, which forewarns me that he's busy and about to rush me off the phone for another of his super-fun nights out. I'm annoyed before he's even said a word.

"I've got to run here because people are waiting," he says. "But I wanted to let you know, it looks like we're not getting out of here until the end of

July.”

“July,” I repeat blankly.

It’s April. He was supposed to be home the first week of May, and that was bad enough, but *July*?

“They’re bringing in new staff to replace some of the people here, and we can’t even begin the transition until that’s done. None of us are happy about it but...”

He continues to speak, but I have stopped listening. I don’t want him to justify this to me. Does he really think I care deeply whether or not the transition is a success? I don’t. All I’m thinking is this: July is three months away. The end of July means two-thirds of the summer will be over.

“What about Olivia’s race?” I ask, my voice devoid of inflection, barely a whisper.

We already have our plane tickets. We were going to fly into Reno and spend a day in Tahoe before we drove up.

“I think the tickets are refundable, but you should still go,” he says. His tone is encouraging, as if he’s being *kind* somehow when he’s actually bailing on our first trip together in a year. “It’ll still be fun.”

Yeah, nothing like a trip to Tahoe alone, Rob.

I tell him I wish he’d spoken to me first, and he simply continues to justify the decision, telling me what a big deal this is for the company. I dig my nails into my hands to silence my reply. To avoid saying “I don’t give a flying fuck about the transition, Rob, and this isn’t fair.”

I hold all of it in. It’s easy enough to do because I’ve done it my entire life. But as he continues to speak I only hear the words *three months*. Three months. Only two weeks have passed, and I’m already going crazy. How the hell am I going to stomach three *months*?

I stew about it all day, and I’m still not over it that evening as I finish up an op-ed demanded last-minute by the chancellor’s office. It’s after 7 PM, and I’m scrounging through my desk for something to approximate dinner—which will apparently consist of Tic Tacs and one mangled cereal bar—when Harper emerges from the bathroom, clad in five-inch black heels and a *tiny* black dress.

“Wow, Harper. I don’t know who this guy is, but I guarantee he’s going to like that outfit.”

She grins wickedly, winking at me. “As long as he doesn’t make me wear it for long.”

I laugh, but feel a squeeze of envy. I miss that—the excitement, the anticipation, the way just getting ready felt like foreplay. But Rob doesn't notice what I wear, and sometimes it hardly seems like he notices *me*. He just finds enough bare skin somewhere under the sheets to make things work. Sex with us is now like a shortcut through the woods, everything trampled down by repetition to make it easy, straight to the point. I guess that's a good thing. It's just that sometimes, when I see Harper heading toward a destination she can't begin to predict, I feel like I'm missing out on something I shouldn't be.



WHEN I GET HOME, THERE'S A FEDEX ENVELOPE ON THE FRONT STEP WAITING for Brendan. If it weren't about to rain, I'd be tempted to leave it. Instead, with vast reluctance, I go out back and tap on his door. Three crisp knocks: my civic duty and not a shred more.

He has 30 seconds to answer before I throw it and walk. I've counted to 25 when he opens the door.

"This was at my place for you," I say, thrusting the envelope toward him.

He takes it from my hand, studying me a little too carefully, and steps aside for me to enter. I really don't want to go in, given that I suspect he's made our pool house smell like sex and bad decisions, but I can't come up with a reason to demur.

My eyes are drawn to the center of the room. "You hung a *hammock* in the living room?" I ask incredulously.

"I checked with Rob first."

"But...*why*? You already have a bed."

He shrugs. "I like to mix things up."

"Are you talking about sleeping in the hammock or something else?"

He gets this secretive smile on his face. "Hammocks are good for a lot of things, Erin."

"Oh my God. You can't have sex in a hammock. You'll fall out and crush the poor girl to death. I'm almost positive our liability insurance doesn't cover that."

He gives me a crooked grin, a little light in his eyes that wasn't there a moment earlier. "Haven't had an accident yet. Maybe I'm a little more agile than the guys you know."

I make some noise that sounds an awful lot like “harrumph,” which is something only portly old men in Dickens’ novels make. But this information sits poorly, right on the heels of Rob’s announcement that he’s not coming home. I’m not asking for that much. I don’t need some stranger eagerly removing my little black dress. I don’t need hours of sex in hammocks with men whose agility is almost unfathomable to me. But I need something more than I have, which is nothing at the moment.

He frowns. “I can take the hammock down if it really bothers you.”

I bite my lip and feel an unexpected urge to cry, though I have no idea why, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to do it in front of Brendan. He’d enjoy it too much.

“It’s fine. The hammock’s fine.”

He steps closer, and his proximity makes me feel fluttery and unsettled. “You talked to Rob?”

“Yes.” I swallow. The urge to cry grows. Maybe Brendan knew about Rob’s trip getting extended before I did, and that bothers me too. “I guess you heard he’s staying longer.”

He nods as his eyes roam over my face, and for once there’s no smirk. It’s possible I even see concern there, as unlikely as that is. Olivia was right; Brendan has changed since he left. He’s grown more serious these past few years. The old Brendan would have made a joke, no matter how inappropriate the circumstances. The new version of Brendan seems to understand grief a little better.

“You’re upset.”

“It’s fine,” I say, but my voice catches a little. “I have no reason to be upset.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be upset? He’s your fiancé.”

“I just...” I don’t know why I’m discussing this with him. We aren’t friends. It’s going to turn into something he uses against me later. “It’s not like I see that much of him when he’s home.”

Something flickers over Brendan’s face—a sort of displeasure, distaste—and I wonder if he thinks that was a complaint.

“So what’s different then?” he asks.

It’s the question I’ve asked myself a hundred times. “He filled just enough of my hours when he was home that I felt like I had a point or a purpose,” I reply. “And I’ve suddenly discovered I have neither.”

A muscle ticks in Brendan’s jaw, and for a millisecond he seems angry,

making me regret every word I just said. I'm sure he's somehow turning this into one more piece of evidence that Rob should have dumped me long ago.

"Never mind." I sigh, heading for the door.

"Erin." His voice stops me just as my hand reaches the doorknob. "You should figure that out before Rob gets back."

I shoot him the nastiest look I can muster. "Yes, Brendan, thank you. I'm well aware of all the ways you think I'm not good enough for Rob. I'll add this to the list."

"Who ever said I thought you weren't good enough for him?" he asks.

"You did, every time you ever tried to talk him out of dating me."

"Sometimes people just aren't a good fit," he says. "It doesn't mean one of you isn't good enough."

I roll my eyes and reach for the door. "Give me a break, Brendan. You told him he was making a mistake a thousand times. It's pretty clear why you said it."

He starts to argue, but then his jaw snaps shut. "You understand a lot less than you think you do."

I open the door and let it slam. I've heard enough of Brendan's bullshit to last me the rest of my life.

Brendan
Four Years Earlier

It begins with a mosquito bite.

A bite on Erin's ankle, one she bends over to scratch approximately once a minute, her shorts riding perilously high as she does it. There isn't a tour leader or male client in this room who hasn't noticed. If Mike were a better manager, he'd realize how unproductive this is and stop her. He doesn't say a word, of course. Probably because he's too busy enjoying the show. And I know, as I watch, that I'm going to be thinking about her bending over like that tonight, and the next night too.

"Leave that bite alone," I finally snarl.

She looks up at me, wide-eyed with surprise and hurt. I feel like I've just slapped a young child, and for a moment I am desperate to fix it. It's a relief when her hurt turns to anger. Anger is something I can handle.

"You need Prozac," she says, glaring at me. "A bucket of it."

"No can do," I reply. "It causes sexual dysfunction."

She smirks. "And you've already got enough sexual dysfunction."

"I assure you, all my parts work just fine. I can prove it, if you'd like."

"I'll pass," she replies. "If I'm going to have hate sex, it'll be with someone less likely to carry disease."

The moment she says it, I can see it—hate sex, not disease. I can imagine the thousand ways I'd like to punish her for being such a pain in the ass, for my making my summer so fucking endless in the worst possible way. I feel a

shot of excitement that begins in my stomach and seems to pulse through my limbs, as if I'm suddenly electrified.

That night, with someone else, I picture it again and finish seconds later. There are no words for how much I hate that I'm thinking of Erin during sex now. And the fact that it seems like I always might.

Erin
Present

The phone calls from my dad are bad, but they're not the worst calls I get. No, the worst are the ones from my mom, telling me my father never came home from work and won't answer his phone. Those are the nights I spend driving to Denver, with every car accident I pass sending my heart rate into the red zone. It hasn't been him yet, but one day it will be. It's only a matter of time.

Tonight the call comes just after 2 AM. My mother, crying so hard she's almost unintelligible.

"I don't know what to do," she says, again and again.

I'm already out of bed, looking for clothes. There's no point in ever suggesting she go look for him herself. My mother only has two modes where my father is concerned: defensive outrage on his behalf or disabling despair.

When I was small and my dad wouldn't come home, she'd cry and say, "He always said he didn't want to settle down. I should have listened."

Even as a small child, I resolved not to repeat her mistakes. If someone says they don't want a relationship, you take them at their word.

Sleep dazed, I have just opened the garage door when Brendan appears, so unexpected that I gasp in fear.

"Where you going, blondie?" he asks.

The person in the world I most do not want to know about these trips is

Rob. The person right *after* him is Brendan, as he won't hesitate to run and tell Rob everything.

I swallow. "Nowhere."

"You're going *nowhere* at 2 AM?"

Every bone in my body wants to lie to him, yet my brain is blank, without a single plausible excuse. Maybe I'm just too tired to lie, exhausted not just from tonight but from all of the past years, all the lies I've told and the effort it takes.

Standing under Brendan's penetrating gaze, I just don't feel capable of lying even one more time. "My dad had a little too much to drink. He needs a ride home."

"Isn't he in Denver?" Brendan asks. "Can't he just take a cab?"

"We don't actually know where he is," I mumble.

I see understanding dawn on his face. "Does he do this a lot?"

"No, of course not. I think he just had a bad day." My answer is too hasty and too defensive. I sound like I'm lying. Which, obviously, I am. "But can you...can you not mention this to Rob?"

I can't imagine why I'm throwing myself at his mercy here. Brendan doesn't like me. He has no reason to show me any kindness, and I've never gotten so much as a hint that he'd be willing to.

"Okay," he says, putting a hand on the small of my back. "But I'm driving. You're half asleep, and my face is way too pretty to wind up smashed into a tree."

"You don't need to come with me."

"You're not going alone." Something in his tone tells me this is non-negotiable. He's coming, or he's telling Rob.

"You're not going to get any sleep."

"My dad used to drink a lot too," he says quietly.

I finally meet his eyes, wondering if he's making this up, if this is all some elaborate ruse to pry my secrets from me so he can offer them on a platter to Rob, in a file titled *See? I told you I was right about her*. But his face is open and honest and serious in a way it isn't normally.

He leads me to his car. I don't resist.



WE ARE SILENT AS HE TAKES BACK ROADS TO THE INTERSTATE. I DON'T KNOW how to be around him anymore unless I'm being spiteful or guarded, which I don't entirely understand. It's not like I'm cruel by nature. Why is it so hard with him?

He yawns. "Okay, blondie, you've got to keep me awake here. Tell me something."

"Like what?"

"Tell me something no one knows about you, not even Rob. Other than this."

I wouldn't normally engage in this kind of game with him—or any game, really—but I've already handed him one of my worst secrets. The rest seem minor by contrast.

"Every time I go to Denver to visit my parents, I stop by the Ducati dealership and test drive one."

He laughs. "Bullshit."

I shrug and stare out the window. I'm not sure if I'm insulted or just relieved that he doesn't believe me. Both, perhaps.

"You were *serious*?" he asks.

"Whatever."

"You? You, Erin Doyle, ride motorcycles?"

"Is it really that unthinkable? You're making it sound like I'm Queen Elizabeth."

"Come on, Erin... I mean, you're not exactly the type."

Okay. Now I'm offended. "In what way am I not the type?"

"Perky little blondes in marketing don't drive Ducatis. They drive something sensible, like a Prius."

"Yeah, well, Rob agrees with you, so please don't say anything."

Rob's like a grandmother about a lot of things. If he knew about this, I'd never hear the end of it. He'd come home with a report about the dangers of motorcycles, peppering every conversation with crash statistics.

"There's nothing wrong with driving a motorcycle."

"There's nothing wrong with lots of stuff," I reply. "It doesn't mean you want the whole world knowing."

"Except Rob's not the whole world. He's your fiancé. And that isn't something you should feel you have to hide."

I say nothing, but the truth is this: Rob is a big part of my world, and he would not accept this or so many other things if he knew.



THANKS TO BRENDAN'S TENDENCY TO DRIVE AT LEAST 20 MILES OVER THE speed limit, we are in Denver in less than an hour. With shame rising in my chest, I direct him to a particularly rough section of the city, a section neither of us would choose to enter under normal circumstances.

"Let's try Slaney's first," I say, sounding, unfortunately, like someone who's made this desperate search before. "You can wait here, and I'll run in."

"Are you high?" He scowls. "I'm not letting you go in there at this hour alone."

"I'll be fine."

He ignores me. And when we walk in and the bartender clearly knows who I am and who my father is, yet another lie is exposed. I'm so fucked. *Of course* Brendan's going to tell. Since the moment we kissed at Will and Olivia's wedding, he's been gunning for me, the hypocritical bastard.

After three bars and 20 minutes of searching, we find my dad, slumped in the corner of a booth while the staff cleans up around him.

"It's Erin, right?" the manager asks.

I avoid Brendan's eye. "Yeah. I'm sorry about this."

"We'd have called you, but I didn't have your number. You want to write it down so we have it the next time?"

I continue to avoid looking at Brendan. "Yes. Thank you."

Sometimes I feel like a sandbag with a pinhole leak. I've spent my entire life trying to erase the small trail of debris, evidence, I've left behind. Tonight that leak has become a full-fledged tear, and it's as if I'm hemorrhaging now. I wonder how much more I'll prove unable to contain.

We load my father into the passenger's seat with some difficulty, and I direct Brendan to my parents' neighborhood. Their standard of living dropped a fair amount after my dad lost his job in New Jersey. It's not as if Brendan grew up with a ton of money, but I'm embarrassed anyway—by how they live, by my mother's tears and by the way she reacts when she realizes I'm not alone.

"I didn't know you were bringing company," she says, as if this is a social call. She wipes her face on the inside of her robe. "You could have warned me. I'm not even dressed."

I've broken the cardinal Doyle family rule: don't let outsiders see the ugly underbelly. People who've met my parents generally come back raving

about them. Back when my dad was still doing okay, my parents would fly out for track meets, take me and my friends to dinner. My dad was the life of the party. “*You’re so lucky,*” people would tell me when it was time to go. “Your dad is so much *fun.*” They never realized that my mother or I had cut the night short at the precise moment we saw my dad teetering on the edge, about to descend from fun and irreverent to sloppy and irresponsible.

“He’s not company, Mom. We’re not staying.”

Brendan helps my dad to his bed and then gracefully departs, telling me he’ll wait outside.

“What an awful thing to let a stranger see,” my mother says after he leaves. “What’s he going to think of us?”

She wants me to apologize, to agree that tonight is all my fault. It *has* to be my fault, the whole evening, because if it’s not mine, it’s my father’s, and we can’t have that. But I don’t have it in me to apologize or play this game right now. I pretend too much. I lie too much. I’ve been caught at it tonight, again and again, and I’m just too damn tired to keep going, to lie and pretend for her sake or my own.

“He’s probably going to think Dad’s sick, Mom. And he’s going to think you and I are pathetic and broken. And I’m not going to apologize, because it’s all true.”

I’ll pay for that comment, but right now I don’t care. I walk out, shutting the door behind me.

“Everything okay?” Brendan asks.

I nod, too choked up to speak. It’s not unusual to feel this way. When one of my familial crises ends, I often find I’ve been holding my grief at bay until there is room for it, but I don’t think that’s what this is. Not entirely. I think what’s making me tear up now is kindness. Because Brendan—beautiful, reckless, irresponsible, hateful Brendan, who I’ve loathed for so long—has been kinder to me tonight than anyone I can think of, ever.

I want to continue hating him, and I know I can’t anymore, not entirely. I handed him my secrets tonight—things I’ve never trusted to anyone—and I look at him and know with a certainty I have about almost nothing in this life that he will guard them as if they are his own. Brendan, who I wanted to believe was cruel, is actually kind. And Brendan, who I thought could not be trusted, is someone I trust implicitly.



BRENDAN PARKS ON THE STREET, AND WE WALK TOWARD THE HOUSE together. “I won’t tell Rob, but I have one condition,” he says. “I want you to call me any time you have to go deal with your dad.”

“I’ve been making some version of that trip for a long time, Brendan.” No sense pretending at this point that tonight was a one-off. “I’ll be fine.”

“You know who says things will be *fine*?” he demands. “Every person who insisted they weren’t too tired to drive and then wrapped a car around a tree. Every woman who has ever been raped after figuring it was safe to walk home. Your belief that you will be *fine* is meaningless.”

A day ago I’d have expressed some surprise over the fact that he cares whether I’m injured, that he actually seems *angry* at the possibility. It shocks me less now, but it’s disconcerting, once again, to think I may have misjudged him.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask. “You’re barely ever home.”

“Just text me. By 1 or 2 AM, I’m usually in.”

“No, you’re sleeping at some girl’s place. You’re really going to leave that to come with me to Denver?”

“Yes.”

“No,” I reply. “No way. The whole thing is embarrassing enough without that.”

“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” he says, his eyes darkening. “You *will* text me the next time you make that trip, or I will tell Rob.”

“You’re blackmailing me.”

“If you want to call it that.”

“Only you would somehow turn an offer of assistance into blackmail,” I fume.

He opens the door to the house and shoos me inside.

“I’m gonna take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t!” I shout, but he’s already closed the door.

Erin
Present

I call Olivia the next afternoon on the way home from work. Despite my lack of sleep, the pressing matter of Brendan is my first priority. I don't know what all that was last night, but I know I don't like feeling indebted to him.

"I need to get Brendan a thank-you gift," I tell her. "What would he want?"

"Thank him for what?" she asks.

Fuck. I'm so tired it didn't even occur to me that she'd ask.

Tell her, says a voice in my head. *Brendan will tell her eventually anyway.*

I'm not sure where that voice comes from, but I know it's wrong. Brendan won't tell her. He won't tell anyone, and I'm struck once more by the odd discomfort of knowing I've been maligning someone for years, perhaps without cause, and a big piece of me wants to keep doing it.

"Just stuff around the house."

"You know what he'd love? Those coconut almond bars you make. Every time you ever made them for me, he decimated them. The last time he visited us, he took the entire container, the bastard."

"He must not have known I made them."

She clucks her tongue. "Of course he did. I know you don't believe me, Erin, but he doesn't hate you."

“Oh yeah? Then why has he gone out of his way to convince Rob to break up with me? He thinks I’m not good enough for him.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe he thinks Rob’s not good enough for you?”

“No.”

“Well, maybe it should.”

I ignore her. Olivia thinks this way because she doesn’t care for Rob. Because *she* thinks he’s not good enough. What she doesn’t know is that Brendan has irrefutable proof that the opposite is true. And he seems to be getting more proof every day.

I make the bars for Brendan, struggling to remember why I ever stopped baking as I do it. Even as sleep-deprived as I am, baking fills me with a sort of contentment I haven’t felt in a long time. I leave them in a box outside Brendan’s door, feeling oddly satisfied—a sensation that lasts only until I tell Rob about it.

“Why’d you do that?” he asks.

“O-oh,” I stammer. “I made them for Brendan. He’s...been helping out.”

“Sugar, fat, and flour. The white menace,” says Rob. “You’re sure you aren’t just trying to kill him?”

I’ve heard Rob’s spiel about this before. I’d like to say it’s never annoyed me until now, but I think it has. This gnawing irritation with him feels far too familiar. I think it might be why I stopped baking.

“You just dismantled a company and laid off 30 percent of its work force, but I’m the bad guy for making someone dessert?” I snap.

“Jesus, Erin. It was just a joke.”

Except it’s not really a joke if he meant it, and he sort of meant it.

I fall asleep wondering why I gave up what I loved so easily. In order to keep the peace, I think I gave up a lot of things. I’m pretty sure Rob cannot claim to have done the same.

Erin
Present

“I’m worried about you,” says Harper, hopping onto my file cabinet. “When’s the last time you got laid?”

I laugh and shake my head. “That’s not as big a deal for everyone as it is for you.”

“Come out with me this weekend,” she says.

She’s suggested this many times in the past, but I’ve almost always said no. I love Harper, but Harper loves lots of people, and she will choose one to love about ten minutes after we’ve paid our cover and bought our first beers.

And I’d say no this time too, except I feel like I’m not capable of staying in to watch any more TV. I can’t stay in, period. I’m pretty sure I’m one step away from dressing Mr. Tibbles up in a miniature North Face pullover and taking him out to dinner with me.

She retreats to her desk after I’ve agreed. “And do me a favor,” she calls from the other side of the wall. “Try not to dress like we’re heading to tea or an American Girl doll party, okay?”

I flip her off.

“And stop flipping me off,” she adds.



I MEET HER ON FRIDAY NIGHT AT A BAR WHERE SOME BAND SHE LOVES IS playing. I'm wearing a tank and skinny jeans, which is probably far less slutty than she'd prefer but appears to suffice.

While we wait for our drinks, Harper tells me about the guy she met out the night before, who kept insisting they go to her place—something she has a strict rule against—and finally admitted after she consistently refused that he was homeless. I don't ask if she still slept with him because I think there's a significant possibility she did.

We get our drinks, and Harper drags me back to the pool tables, her eyes already assessing the situation, deciding who she'll take home.

"How many minutes do I have before you're pulling some guy into the bathroom?" I ask.

"I'm not that bad," she replies.

"You pulled someone into the bathroom the last time we went out."

"Well, I'm not doing it tonight, but... Wow..." She stops midstream, and my eyes follow hers to the guy at the far end of the room: 6'3", broad shoulders, nice ass. "Unless it's him. I don't care what his face looks like."

He isn't facing us, but I'd know those shoulders anywhere.

And though he's too far away to have heard us, he turns, his gaze breezing past Harper and landing directly on me.

"Wait," says Harper, "Isn't that..."

"Brendan," I say.

"I'm gonna do things to that man you don't even know can be done," she says under her breath.

I feel an odd sort of panic, something fluttering and desperate. I want to distract her from him like a child, offer her candy or a balloon in his place. "You don't want to do that," I tell her.

"Why? Because you want him for yourself?"

"No! Of course not."

He puts down his pool stick and moves toward us while Harper gives me a knowing look.

"You sure about that, Erin? Last chance to admit it before I make my move."

I'm engaged. I don't want him for myself. I just don't want her to have him either, which she definitely will, because all men love Harper. And right now she's wearing a micro-mini and thigh-high boots, so they'll super love her.

Except Brendan doesn't even seem to notice. "What are you doing here?" he demands, looking only at me. "You never go out."

I'm more than a little irritated by his tone, which is undeniably displeased. "I'm not *stalking* you, asshole. We came to see the band."

He eyes my tank top. "And why are you dressed like that?"

I roll my eyes. "Why? Does this not meet your high standards?"

He shakes his head, the action so minute I get the feeling it wasn't intended for me. "You just...normally you're all covered up. With sweaters and shit."

"Brendan, it's the first warm night in nine months. I'm not wearing a sweater."

"Yeah," he says, flinching, running a hand over his shorn scalp. "I noticed. It's fine. Just...be careful."

"Be careful of what?"

His eyes meet mine for a moment. I feel certain there's something he wants to say, but instead he clenches his jaw and sets his empty glass on the bar with a thud.

"Never mind," he says. "Do whatever you want."

He walks away without even glancing at Harper, which I'm fairly certain hasn't happened to her since she hit puberty.

Even she is surprised. "Are you sleeping with him?" she asks. There's no judgment in her voice, just curiosity.

"What?! No! I'm engaged, remember?"

She watches his retreating form and glances back at me.

"Sure, I remember," she says. "Not sure he does, though."



I'D FORGOTTEN HOW MUCH I USED TO LOVE GOING TO SHOWS. ALL IN ALL, it's a very fun night, aside from the weird fact that Brendan is always within 20 feet of me, like some kind of combination stalker/bodyguard. I only speak to two people other than him and Harper all night, one of them the bartender, and both times he appears beside me and remains there, glowering, until the guy walks away.

I'm just walking into the house when Rob calls, and for the first time in a while I finally have something worth reporting.

“I’m glad I caught you,” he says. “I was worried you might be in bed.”

I tell him I’m just walking in, and he’s surprised, which I don’t fault him for, and displeased, which I do. He asks where we went with a hint of accusation in his voice, as if I’d promised to stay home and pine for him but broke our deal.

He’s silent when I finish telling him about my night. And though I didn’t expect him to get it—Rob isn’t a live music guy—I did expect that he’d be happy for me. That he’d express some degree of pleasure that I’m not alone every night while he’s gone.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

He says no in a tone that implies otherwise, and I’m not sure how to get around it, or if I even want to get around it, because I’m pissed. I’ve spent three weeks hearing about the restaurants and clubs he’s gone to, but when I finally go out and find something I enjoy, he can’t bring himself to even pretend to be interested?

He tells me, halfheartedly, some story about work, and I listen just as halfheartedly, putting the phone on speaker and walking into the closet to get my pajamas at one point. More and more, our calls are like this: one or both of us irritated, forced to maintain a conversation neither of us cares to have.

“So if you’re going out with Harper,” he finally says, “I suppose you haven’t had time to look at reception sites.” The words are flat, utterly emotionless. Yet there’s acid beneath them.

I knew he’d come out with it eventually.

“Seriously, Rob?” I explode. “I go out *one* night and you’re on me about this?”

“Just don’t bother telling me you’re too busy anymore, okay?” he snaps. “Let’s at least be honest about it. You’ve got no interest in getting married.”

“And you apparently have no interest in any part of my life that doesn’t involve you. Good to know.”

I’m not sure who hangs up first. I only know that we aren’t people who fight, and we aren’t people who hang up on each other, and lately it seems that’s all we do.

Brendan
Four Years Earlier

By midsummer everything about Erin has turned gold—her hair, her skin. Her mouth is pink like a rose in bloom. Sometimes I catch myself just staring at her face.

This metamorphosis of hers is a complete pain in the ass for me. It means every time she walks through a bar, she's getting checked out, and every time she walks away from our table at night, some guy will stop her with the world's lamest excuse to strike up a conversation. My need to get involved in these situations hasn't escaped anyone's notice either.

As someone accosts her at the bar and I jump to my feet, a few guys at my end of the table start laughing.

"Let me guess," says Kirk with a smug little smile. "You really hate Erin, yet you're going to go over there and tell that guy to beat it."

I narrow my eyes. "Someone has to. I don't see any of you assholes taking care of it."

"Yeah," he says, "because that's not something normal people do. She's 22, not 12. She's allowed to talk to boys. Why don't you just admit you like her?"

"I don't *like* her," I say with disgust. "She's practically family."

"Cool," he says, eyeing me. "Then you don't mind if I ask her out?"

"You're not allowed to ask her out," I tell him. "Company policy."

"That only applies if I'm her boss."

Everyone privy to this conversation is watching the two of us like it's a tennis match. I swallow. Why do I care if she goes out with Kirk? I don't. And anyway, he's harmless, because I know she won't say yes. For some bizarre reason, Erin still likes me. Even though she acts like she hates me, I see it in her face. Every time she walks in the room it's like she forgets, for just a moment, what a dick I've been each minute of this summer.

When she leaves the bar, I walk out after her. I do this each time she meets us out. People still think of Colorado Springs as a small town, but bad shit happens everywhere, and it happens disproportionately to women. She's standing by her piece-of-shit car, fumbling around in her purse for keys. That's when I notice the guy who spoke to her earlier crossing the parking lot and heading her way. She doesn't even see him, and if I have anything to say about it, it'll stay that way. I step in his path.

"Hey, buddy," I say, folding my arms across my chest.

"I'm not your buddy," he says. "Get out of my way."

"What's your rush?" I smirk.

He glances beyond my shoulder at Erin, who I assume has found her keys by now, and tries to sidestep me. I step in his path again and he takes a swing, which makes my night. Because I was dying to punch this motherfucker from the moment he spoke to her, and he just made it legal.

Erin
Present

Ten-mile runs suck. Running intervals sucks. Combining them, though? That's a whole new level of suck.

Were it not for Olivia asking me to run a small portion of her 100-mile race with her, now only weeks away, there's not a chance I'd be doing this. Even when we ran college cross-country together, enduring grueling two-a-day workouts, she was so much faster than me that it looked like I was walking. And in the years since we graduated, her training has only increased, whereas mine has dwindled to a few casual runs each week. But it's impossible to tell a woman who has just given birth that you don't think you can run one-tenth of a race with her. My pride won't allow it.

By the time I get home it's dark, and I'm so drained I barely have the energy to climb the stairs to my door. I shower quickly and slide into the hot tub, already so stiff I'm wondering how I'll climb back out.

I close my eyes and lean back against the headrest. Rob and I practically lived in the hot tub when we first moved in, but I don't think he's been out here once in the past year. I understood it, because he had so little free time, but he sure seems to have plenty of free time *now*. Just this past weekend, he and a few colleagues went to Brussels, while I can't remember the last time he didn't work a weekend while he was home. That shouldn't annoy me as much as it does.

I shut him out of my mind and begin to drift off. I might hate long runs,

but this is one of my favorite things—the way exhaustion plus hot water lulls you to sleep.

“Hello, roomie.” My eyes fly open, catching on the tattoo on Brendan’s right shoulder, the definition of his chest, before I drag them away.

“Shouldn’t you be out?” My voice is clipped and barely civil.

“It’s 9 PM. That’s early for most people in our demographic. Not you, obviously. I didn’t know you were such a hot tub super-fan.”

“I’m not. I’m training to run part of Olivia’s race, and I’m stiff.”

He looks like he’s considering something, and then sighs. “I rented a car if you need a ride to Squaw Valley,” he says, “since we’re on the same flight.”

“We *are*?” My chagrin borders on despair. I didn’t realize Brendan was going at all, much less a day early like me. Even in another freaking *state* we need to be stuck in the same house?

He raises a brow. “Rob gave me his ticket to Reno. I thought he told you.”

My molars grind so hard I can hear them over the sound of the Jacuzzi jets. How could Rob not have mentioned this? As if it’s not bad enough that I have to live with this guy, I now have to sit right next to him for an entire flight?

“He didn’t mention that,” I reply between my teeth.

I’m no longer enjoying the hot tub. I only remain because I don’t want to give Brendan the satisfaction of knowing he’s driven me off. He barely restrains a smile, leaning his head back and stretching out his arms. “This is one hell of a set-up you’ve landed,” he says. “Big house, pool, hot tub. Rob’s quite the provider. I can’t believe you didn’t get all this shit locked down the minute he proposed.”

I’m no longer exhausted. I now have just enough strength to lunge across the hot tub and pummel him, and God knows I’d like to. “Fuck you, Brendan. You’ve known me for way too long to sit there and pretend you think I’m a gold digger.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “You’re right,” he admits. “I’m sorry.” His eyes close, as if this sudden burst of honesty has exhausted him. “Why are you dragging your feet, Erin?”

“Who says I’m dragging my feet?”

“Everyone. Everyone alive thinks you’re dragging your feet. I’m not judging you. I just want to know why.”

I shouldn't answer. He just accused me of being a gold digger, and he's definitely not on my side here. It's insane to hand him more information about anything. But I appreciate his apology, and he's also the only person who knows about my dad outside of my family. I guess I just want one other person alive know how I feel.

"It's mostly my dad. He'll drink at the ceremony, even if I ask him not to, and my mother will make an ass of herself trying to cover it up. And he'll drink at everything leading up to it—any party, the rehearsal dinner. There are so many things that can go wrong, and I'm just...tired." My voice catches a little, as if grief accompanies the realization.

I *am* tired. I'm so tired of those calls at night and the worry and the sense that I have to be on my guard every moment of the day to keep the world from falling in on us all.

I clear my throat. "It feels like too much right now."

He gives me that careful, assessing look I've seen far too often. I sometimes get the sense that he hears ten extra words for every one I speak, drawing my secrets from me without my consent.

"And you've never told Rob any of this."

I sigh. "No. He won't understand. He won't respect it. He won't respect that my father has so little self-control. He won't understand why I coddle him by going to Denver."

"You spend so much time hiding shit from him," Brendan says. "Wouldn't it just be better to let him know who you are?"

His voice is gentle. It doesn't sound like an accusation, yet it is one, and I can't even blame him for it. His best friend is about to marry the biggest liar who ever lived.

"If I don't like who I am and what my family is, Brendan, how can I expect Rob to like those things?"

"You've got nothing to be ashamed of," he insists. "And you shouldn't be with someone who doesn't feel the same way."

It almost sounds like he's defending me, as if he thinks Rob's the one in error, when obviously Rob can't be because he knows none of this. I don't get it.

"Olivia thinks that's why you haven't planned the wedding—because you know something's wrong," he adds.

"I can't believe Olivia is discussing this with *you*," I say.

"She's worried."

“Yeah, so worried that she told the guy who doesn’t want Rob to marry me all about it. That’s extremely helpful.”

The corner of his mouth tips upward. “She hates me slightly less than you do, so she’s not inclined to think the worst.”

“I don’t hate you.”

“You just pretend to,” he says softly, holding my eye.

He’s being serious, and there’s something in his tone that draws goose bumps to the surface of my skin. The moment he says it, I know he’s right. I am pretending. I have been forever.

“It’s too warm. I’m done,” I say, jumping to my feet. I glance up to find that he is not smirking, but staring at me as the water slides over my skin.

He looks away, and I’m out of the tub when I hear him speak.

“Don’t worry, Erin. I’m just pretending to hate you too.”

Brendan
Four Years Earlier

Although I'm staying on to lead tours in the fall, most of the staff takes off at the end of the summer—either because they're returning to school or because they've acquired a real job. Erin, who got a full-time offer out of her internship, is among them.

Mike hosts an end-of-summer party, and some girl from high school is in my lap when Erin shows. Ponytail, work T-shirt, and no makeup, but she's tan, and her hair looks like spun gold, and I wish the world would freeze so I could stare at her prissy, annoying face.

She flushes as our eyes meet, as she takes a quick glance at the girl in my lap and turns the other direction. I watch her walk away. And then I watch every single person she talks to while the girl in my lap drones on about some *Real Housewives* bullshit I can't begin to be interested in.

When Erin heads inside, out of view, Kirk gets this big, shit-eating grin on his face and cocks a brow at me. "You know who else is inside?" he asks.

"Who?"

"Taz," he says.

We hate Taz. The guy thinks he's a fucking celebrity because he was on the pro cycling circuit for a few years and ostensibly is friends with Lance Armstrong. He's also the kind of guy who will be all over Erin like a rash.

"Who the fuck invited him anyway?" I ask. "He's not on staff."

Kirk laughs. "Dude, Erin's a big girl. She can walk away if she wants to."

Less gracefully than I should, I remove the girl from my lap and march inside. Sure enough, Taz has Erin cornered in the kitchen. She appears to be fascinated by what he's saying, which annoys me even further. The last thing that guy needs is encouragement.

I go over to them. "Can I speak to you for a minute?" I ask her.

Taz looks at me. "We're in the middle of a conversation."

"Go tell someone else about the time you met Lance Armstrong, douchebag," I say, walking her away with my hand at the small of her back. I've got four inches on the guy—he knows better than to complain.

"What do you want?" Erin asks with a weary sigh. "Were you worried I might be experiencing a moment of happiness?"

"That guy's a jackass. Why are you even here? Shouldn't you be out doing whatever people in marketing do? Which I guess is sleep."

She taps her lips with her index finger, and for a moment I'm unable to look away from her mouth.

"Hmmm," she says. "I'm trying to figure out what's going on here. Because it sounds like you're jealous, and I don't know if you're jealous of that guy because *you* never got to hang with Lance Armstrong, or if you're jealous of me because I've acquired this mystical thing known as *full-time employment*—which, by the way, I realize is a foreign concept, but one you should investigate at some point in your life."

I take a step closer, drawn to that flash of anger in her eyes, and then I take another one, until I can feel the heat of her skin.

"One day," I tell her, "I'm going to bend you over my knee and spank that smirk off your face."

"I think you're just looking for an excuse to get your hand on my ass," she replies, meeting my gaze. She isn't being snide. She's calling my bluff.

"I don't hear you arguing against it." We're so close now. I can feel the uneven huff of her breath against my chest as I speak. "I'd spank you so hard you wouldn't be able to walk the next day."

"Promises, promises," she says as if bored. "We both know you don't have it in you."

I press her to the wall. Something inside of me, something taut and tense that I've barely controlled has finally snapped, and I'm not sure if I want to kill her or fuck her—I'll figure it out later on. I capture her mouth—that sweet, willing mouth that's driven me crazy all summer long. She tastes like sugar and vanilla, the way I knew she would, and to my surprise I am not in

this alone. She meets me move for move, her tongue sliding against mine as my hands wrap tight in her hair.

I want so many things from her in this moment that it feels impossible to pick just one. It will take me all night, possibly all year, before I'm sated. I move farther into the darkness, slide my hand into her shirt, teasing her through the lace of her bra with my fingers, and when she groans in my mouth, I'm done for. I lift her up and wrap her legs around me, pressing against her, but it's not enough. I need all of her, spread out in front of me. I need time.

I pull back just enough to tell her we're going to my apartment. Her eyes are closed, her mouth swollen. I don't think I've ever wanted to be inside someone so badly in my entire life.

But then her eyes open. And I see lust there, but I also see hope—and hope is the exact fucking thing I never want to see on any girl's face. That's when I become furious with myself. What did I think was going to happen here? She's not a one-night-stand girl, and I've known this all along. Maybe I could talk her into it, but I don't want to be the guy who does that. Not to her.

I set her down abruptly. "We shouldn't be doing this."

She looks hurt, which I hate, but also tells me I've absolutely made the right decision.

"You started it," she whispers, her voice raspy.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "I shouldn't have."

Erin
Present

There are two more calls from my father during the week, which means he's getting worse.

I know this pattern: he will continue his downward slide until something big happens—a DUI, a fight in a bar, a lost job—and then he will straighten up, sort of, briefly. Of course no one ever refers to the event as a “wake-up call.” In our family lore it's just another piece of bad luck handed to him.

I love my dad in spite of his flaws. Sober, he is a wonderful human being—funny and wise and kind and caring. He just can't stay sober long enough for me to get much time with that side of him. My ability to take the good with the bad is something Rob would never understand. His disgust whenever my brother relapses has made that clear—one of many reasons I've made most of my visits home without him.

I drive to Denver on Saturday to have breakfast with my parents. My dad is hung over, but he rallies because I'm there, with help from that disgusting instant coffee he prefers and a Bloody Mary that is way too pale an orange to contain the correct ratio of tomato juice to vodka.

He asks how work is going and how things are with Rob, and I tell him everything's great. My dad gets a glossy, soft-focus version of my life, always, because I'm never sure which of my life's bumps and bruises will require a tequila chaser for him.

“So when are you two setting a date?” he asks.

“Soon,” I reply, as always. “When he gets back from Europe.”

“There’s a nice Catholic church down the street,” my mother suggests.

“I don’t know if we’re planning to have a church wedding,” I tell her. By which I mean there’s no way Rob’s agreeing to a church wedding, much less a one-hour nuptial mass.

“If you’re not married in the church, you’re not married in the eyes of God,” my dad thunders. “It won’t count otherwise.”

If any other person alive were to say this to me, I would roll my eyes. But I don’t rock the boat in my parents’ house. “Rob’s not Catholic,” I remind him, and it’s not until I see the shock on my parents’ faces that I realize this is new information.

“Well, you’re both supposed to be Catholic to get married in the church,” my mother says, her voice growing high and thin, the way it does when she’s worried. “But we’ll talk to Father Duncan this afternoon. He’ll make an exception. He might even let us do the reception in the parish hall.”

I groan internally. God, I wish this topic had never come up. I wish I’d just lied, right from the start. Or maybe my lies are the issue. How is it that I haven’t mentioned Rob’s lack of religion in four years? How is it that they’re still under the impression we’d drive to *Denver* to hold our wedding? I don’t want to, but this needs to be corrected right now before it goes any further.

“Mom, we live near Colorado Springs. That’s where our friends are. We’ll probably just do the whole thing someplace like the Broadmoor.”

“The *Broadmoor*?” my mother asks. “That’d cost a fortune!”

“Rob and I will pay for it,” I assure her. “He does really well. You guys don’t need to worry about a thing.”

There’s a shadow over my father’s face, and then my mother’s. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*. My father just lost his job. He’s going to take this personally, as some kind of slight against his ability to provide. I look at him, and then my mother, and I feel lost. I feel the way I always felt as a child, as if we stand on a sinking ship in the middle of an empty sea. We’re always doomed, no matter what I do. It’s just a matter of time.



IT’S WELL AFTER 2 AM WHEN MY PHONE RINGS, AS I EXPECTED IT WOULD.

Except it's not my dad on the phone but my mom, which means I have a decision to make.

Brendan told me to call him. Well, actually he *threatened* me, *blackmailed* me. But I do not want to involve him again. Not because he wasn't a godsend the last time—he was, in a thousand ways. But this is my family's problem, my family's secret, and I resent that he's forcing me to share it. I peer out to the street and don't see his car. After a moment of internal debate, I dress quickly and then text him:

Going to Denver. I'll be fine. Don't need help but thanks.

I'm not even down the stairs when he texts back to say he's on his way.



“KEEP ME AWAKE, BLONDIE.”

These are the first words either of us has spoken since he pulled up in front of the house. I'm not sure why he's been quiet, but I know I'm so mired in resentment and shame that I have no idea what to say. How do you approach someone who's being kind to you and making you miserable simultaneously?

“You really didn't need to do this. I've done it on my own for a long time.”

He exhales unhappily. His untucked shirt makes me suspect my text interrupted something, so I understand his irritation, but I'm not the one blackmailing people.

“Look, it's bad enough that I had to tell you about this without you acting annoyed that you're here,” I say.

“That's not why I'm annoyed,” he replies. “Lots of people have a parent who drinks too much. I did. But it's completely fucked up that your mother is asking *you* to drive to Denver when she's right there.”

“She isn't making me do it. She's just...sort of childlike. She falls apart and is completely helpless when anything goes wrong.”

“So you've got a helpless mother, an alcoholic dad, and a brother who's a coke addict. And every fucking one of them turns to you when they need help.”

I can't imagine why he cares about any of this, unless he's bothered by the baggage I'm bringing into Rob's life. “This doesn't have to impact Rob,”

I tell him. "I'd never expect him to deal with this or help pull their weight."

"Of course you wouldn't! He doesn't even fucking know it's happening."

Maybe he's right to be mad. All of this shit is going to catch up with me eventually, isn't it? In a few short weeks Brendan's already learned way too much. Surely, over the course of a lifetime, Rob will too.

We arrive in Denver and repeat our adventure from a few weeks prior. My father is again at the third bar we visit, and my mother is again livid that I've exposed our family in this way. This time, she chooses not to speak to me at all, not a single word.

I walk out of their condo feeling exhausted and hopeless. There are times, like right now, when I sort of wish it would all end. Not just the drinking, or Sean's problems, but all of it. I can't abandon them, but sometimes I wish I could shut my eyes and have all four of us cease to exist.

I turn my head toward the window so Brendan won't see me crying. He figures it out anyway.

"Is this about your dad or something else?" he asks quietly.

I dry my eyes on the inside my T-shirt and clear my throat. "I feel," I begin, my voice rasping, "like everything is falling apart."

"Why?"

"I hate my job. I hate my life. I don't even know what I want to do in my *leisure* time. I'm not sure I like anything, which is the most depressing thought of all."

"You used to like plenty of things," he says. "You loved to bake. And bike. Or kayak. Or go on road trips. Remember when you drove to Portland to see that band because you liked *one* of their songs?"

I'm a little surprised he remembers anything about me, much less all this. Even Rob would have struggled to come up with that list.

"I've got no one to bake for, and everything else—those were college things. I mean, who am I going to bike or kayak with? Who's going to roadtrip to Portland now? We all have jobs."

"All I'm saying is that you used to like plenty of shit. I'm not sure why you're not doing any of it, but the problem isn't that there's nothing you enjoy."

When we arrive home, he stops the car, but neither of us gets out.

"So, are we, like, friends now or something?" I ask. If this is only a temporary cease-fire I'd like to know.

He hesitates, glancing at me and looking away. His jaw is knife-sharp,

silhouetted by moonlight. “We can try,” he says.

I sigh. “I didn’t ask you to climb Everest. I just asked if we could be friends.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says. “I know.”

I get the feeling he’d rather climb Everest.

Erin
Present

The next evening I'm struggling to keep my eyes open after work—I think I only got about three hours of sleep before and after the Denver trip—when Brendan taps on the door and walks in. He's golden from a day in the sun, and wearing a navy blue fleece that makes his eyes look unreal. I'm so tired I can barely see my hands in front of my face, but I can't stop noticing him.

He thrusts a Diet Coke and a pint of Cherry Garcia into my hands. "As I recall, you like Diet Coke with your ice cream, which is completely illogical, by the way. Why the fuck would you drink diet soda with ice cream?"

It's so weird that he's here, and that he remembers yet another obscure thing about me. "What's this for?"

He shrugs. "You wanted to be friends. I'm attempting it. No promises though."

"If it lasts for 30 minutes I'll be shocked," I assure him.

He suggests ordering Thai. I'm not sure if I agree because I'm craving it or if I'm simply stunned by Brendan's 180-degree turn. I'd forgotten he could even be like this—pleasant, sweet, thoughtful. I'd forgotten he was like this most of the time, to everyone but me. And that on one occasion—many years ago—he was like this with me too.

When the food arrives, he spreads it all out on the coffee table, sliding the red curry chicken over to me.

“It’s so good,” I groan as I take my first bite.

For a fraction of a moment, something shifts in his face—his gaze hazy, his lips parting. And then it’s gone.

For lack of any other neutral topic, I ask him about his tour business. Because his friend Caleb invested, he tells me, he now has enough capital to run heli-skiing tours over the winter to keep the business afloat. He has an actual business plan, cost and profit projections. He certainly doesn’t sound like the lovable ne’er-do-well Rob always made him out to be. No wonder he was so defensive when Rob criticized his approach.

“So that’s me,” Brendan says. “But what about you?”

“What about me?” I ask, pushing the chicken around on my plate.

“You need a life, Erin.”

“I have a life.” I sigh. “It’s just on hold.”

“Having Rob’s life isn’t the same as having your own,” he says, his face earnest. “And you seemed to be doing pretty well before he ever came into the picture. Where’d that girl go?”

I shrug. “People grow up, Brendan. Was I going to keep mountain biking and snowboarding into my 70s?”

“Possibly. I see people older than that doing both. But more to the point, you’re not 70. You’re 26. And you’ve given up everything you used to love. I’d be depressed as fuck too if I was coming home to some big, empty house every night with nothing to look forward to but more of a job I hate.”

For some reason the words make my eyes pinch. It’s one thing to think you’re in a temporary bad spot; it’s another thing entirely to have someone sum up for you just how bleak every waking moment of your day is. I don’t want to cry in front of him again, but I think it’s inevitable. I close my eyes and bury my face in my hands.

“Aw, babe.” He sighs. “I didn’t mean to make you cry. Come here.”

When I don’t move, I find myself pulled into his chest, my body half lying on the couch and half lying on him.

“Erin,” he whispers, his breath against my hair. “Don’t cry, hon. I’m sorry. I was being a dick.”

“No,” I whisper. “You were just being honest. And you’re right.”

For a single moment further I allow myself this—Brendan’s warmth and his firm chest beneath my head and the smell of him, like soap and sand and clean air—before I pull away.

I laugh. “I think I’ve cried more in front of you than I’ve ever cried in

front of Rob.”

“Yeah,” he grouses, “because he has no idea what makes you sad. He doesn’t even know you *are* sad.”

“Blah, blah, blah. Yes, you’ve made your thoughts on that known.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

I shrug. “Just wait it out, I guess. I mean, I could throw myself into stuff now, but I’d just have to give it all up when he comes home. Nothing I like is going to fit with our life. Rob works long hours. If we don’t have to go to dinner with clients, he wants to stay in.”

“So let Rob stay in by himself,” says Brendan. “Let him go to the client dinners by himself. ‘Let there be spaces in your togetherness’. Isn’t that the quote?”

“Holy shit, did Brendan Langstrom, the biggest whore in the state, the man who hates relationships, just quote Kahlil Gibran to me?”

“Those who can’t do, teach,” he says with a sheepish smile. “But seriously. You’re allowed to have things you love. You’re allowed to have space for yourself in this thing. You need it. Otherwise, you lose who you were in the first place. Come biking with me this weekend. Let’s figure out what you love.”

I contemplate this while Brendan goes to grab the Cherry Garcia and a spoon. As he returns, he shovels an enormous amount into his mouth.

"That's so classy." I laugh.

He grins, eyes crinkling at the sides, and hands the container to me. He pulls his fleece off over his head, and I catch a glimpse of tan stomach, abs that curve in perfectly symmetrical hills and valleys.

"I know, right?" he teases. "Why can't they all be as charming as me?"

I laugh. But I’m kind of wondering that too.

Erin
Present

I am flying.
Almost.

Or it's at least the closest I've ever come to it without being seated inside a plane.

I don't know how Brendan convinced me to bike down the Encinitas Trail with him, when I haven't been on a bike in years. But I imagine there are a whole lot of women in the world wondering how Brendan convinced them to do one thing or another, so I probably should have expected I'd get my turn.

The Encinitas Trail is not for neophytes or people who haven't biked in ages. It's steep and dangerous, with hairpin turns and insane descents. It's positively deadly, and as I fly down at breakneck speed, I don't think I've ever been happier. Brendan isn't a cautious biker, and neither am I. We don't talk—trying to hold a conversation during a ride like this would be like trying to hold a thoughtful conversation during sex: if it's possible, you're not doing it right.

"I'd forgotten how much I love this," I tell him when we reach our turnaround point. "It's been ages since I was on a bike."

"Let me guess; because Rob doesn't bike?"

He grabs his water bottle and chugs, and I can't help but watch. There's something so unequivocally *male* about him, his throat, as he swallows.

I make a face. “That’s just how relationships are. It’s a process of attrition. You look for common ground, and sometimes that means shaving away at the hard edges.”

“Seems to me,” he says, “that you shaved down too much.”

I’d like to argue, but I can’t. I’ve spent so much time trying to make sure Rob is happy that maybe I forgot to ask if I am too.



BRENDAN’S DOWNSTAIRS AT THE STOVE WHEN I GET OUT OF THE SHOWER after our ride. I didn’t realize he’d still be here, didn’t brace myself for it. And I really needed to brace for this: he’s removed his shirt and stands there in nothing but bike shorts, his broad shoulders tapering to narrow hips. My stomach tightens.

“I’m making breakfast burritos,” he says. “Are you hungry?”

“Sure,” I say weakly. “Want me to take over so you can shower?”

He turns, and his eyes flicker downward, almost unconsciously, from my wet hair to my bare legs. He swallows. “Okay.” He hands me the spatula as he leaves, his bare chest brushing my arm. There’s a millisecond in which I’m only aware of his skin, of the precise point where we meet. It seems as if the entire world stops moving forward and there is only this, a thing that is happening and should not be. Images flood my mind and leave me momentarily rooted in place, feeling robbed of air.

I crumble sausage in the pan, trying to use the most mundane actions to settle my mind. I’m not a cheater. In four years with Rob it’s never occurred to me, even in times when he was barely home, times when we hadn’t sex in so long I’d lost track. I don’t know if Brendan’s presence or Rob’s absence is at the root of this issue, but it sort of doesn’t matter: I’m engaged, and it shouldn’t be happening in either case.

“How’s it coming?” he asks when he returns, peeking over my shoulder.

I can feel his whole body pressed against my back, solid in ways the average male is not. I could bounce a quarter off that chest. I allow myself a heady moment to breathe him in, imagine how this might proceed if we were very different people.

“Almost done,” I reply. I sound breathless, and he hears it. I can tell by the way he grows absolutely still for a moment before moving away.

He starts coffee. "So if you hate your job so much, why do you stay?"

I shrug. "I'd love my job if it weren't for my boss. But it's not really the time to be switching jobs anyway. I gave Sean all of my savings, and if I left now, I'd have nothing to fall back on."

He glances around the house, from the six-burner Wolff range to the custom light fixtures in the foyer. "No offense, but it doesn't look like money is an issue around here."

I should just agree and let the conversation end. I'm not sure why I don't, except the truth feels like a balloon expanding inside me, and it's such a relief to let some of the air out.

"Sean's been to rehab too many times to count. It costs a lot, and my parents don't have the money. My father is on his third job in five years. I've had to cover their mortgage twice since last August. Rob's not going to put his income toward that, and I'd never ask him to even if he would. So I'm always going to need something of my own."

"I don't understand why you're with someone who doesn't even know you," Brendan mutters.

"There are lots of good things about relationships. Being *known* doesn't have to be one of them."

"Are you serious right now?" he demands. "Name one thing that makes having to lie all the time worthwhile."

I think about the aspects of a relationship that would appeal to Brendan. Sex is the big one, and I guarantee he's getting a lot more of it outside a relationship than I am in one. He hands me a cup of coffee, and I hand him the first burrito.

"Teamwork," I reply. "Like this. Working as a team makes everything easier, makes it more enjoyable."

"How can that possibly be worth everything you're giving up?"

"I don't get you, Brendan." I shake my head. "Your mom and Peter are blissfully happy. So are Will and Olivia. Why are you so convinced a relationship is a terrible thing? Because you can't imagine only wanting one girl?"

"No," he says, glancing at me before he turns away. "I can imagine only wanting one girl."

Brendan
Three and a Half Years Earlier

Fall arrives, and the tour office is almost empty. I expected Erin's absence to feel like a relief, but it's sort of like that mosquito bite she wouldn't leave alone. I'd gotten used to scratching it. I'm not sure what to do in her absence, and everything feels empty.

I know I did the right thing ending that kiss, but it doesn't stop me from thinking about it. Every fucking night I think about it. I see Erin's face anytime I'm with someone now.

"It's so quiet with everyone gone," Mike says.

I agree, but in truth it's only her sounds I want to hear.

It takes me most of the week to come to the most shocking realization of my life: I miss her.

I miss the smell of her hair when she walks by. I miss the way she rubs her bottom lip when she's listening to someone, the way her fingers tap any available surface when she's annoyed. It feels like I'm homesick, with this longing for a girl I never wanted around. But I won't do anything differently. I don't want a girlfriend, I don't want a wife.

Still, I find myself counting the days until Will and Olivia's engagement party, when I'll see her next. I want to spend the entire night by her side. Pretending to ignore her.



THE PARTY IS HELD ON A RARE WARM NIGHT AT THE END OF SEPTEMBER, OUT at the farm where I was raised. My mother and her husband have put the place on the market, which means this will probably be the last event held here. I'd expected that to make me a little nostalgic, but as it turns out, I really don't care. I just want to see Erin.

My mother positions me behind the grill with way more steak than I'm interested in being responsible for. My closest childhood friend, Rob, stands beside me, fresh out of his MBA program and a summer internship at Lehman Brothers.

Anyone who knows both of us might struggle to understand how we became friends. We no longer have a whole lot in common, but we've always had each other's backs, and he's a part of almost every memory I have of high school. There's a certain degree of loyalty you develop under those circumstances no matter how different you become. I'm glad he's done so well for himself. He worked his ass off in school, and I hope he gets everything he wants out of life.

Well, almost everything.

I'm handing him a plate when he lets out a low whistle under his breath.

"Holy shit," he says, forgetting the grill entirely. "Who's *that*?"

I look up to see Erin walking toward my mom. She's wearing a pale fitted dress and heels. For a moment all I can see are legs and hair, and I feel my stomach bottoming out. I think about kissing her, about the smooth skin under her shirt, the sounds she made when my hands slid over her for the first time.

"That's Erin," I mutter.

"The one you hate?" he asks in astonishment.

"I never said I hated her."

"That is absolutely what you said," he replies, his eyes still glued to her as she traipses across the yard.

"I said she was annoying. She's the most annoying girl I've ever known in my life." But my eyes are glued to her too. I smell burning steak, but I'm unable to look away.

"A girl who looks like that can be as annoying as she wants," says Rob. "Introduce me."

"Not a chance. That's not how I want to spend my afternoon." More to the point, that's not how I want Rob to spend *his* afternoon.

“Fine,” he says. “I’ll introduce myself.”

And with that he walks away, and my stomach drops again. Rob, unlike every other guy I scared off this summer, is not a douchebag. In truth, he’s far better for her than I could ever be. And now he’s got his Harvard MBA and his brand-new job with a salary so high I thought he was joking when he told me.

It feels as if my life is still coming together, as if I have all the time in the world to go after the things I want. But as I watch Rob introduce himself to Erin, it occurs to me for the first time that maybe she’s one of those things. And maybe it’s already too late.

Erin
Present

It's been only four days since my bike ride with Brendan, but it feels as if something has shifted inside me. Like hearing a song from high school and being catapulted back in time, I'm beginning to remember who I once was, the person I left behind in the process of becoming the person Rob wanted me to be. I'm angry at myself for letting that version of me slip away.

Harper is sitting on my desk, eating the cookies I brought in and offering a far-too-detailed description of her date last night with a guy who hadn't shaved ("He went down on me, and it was like someone was scrubbing my vagina with fucking *sandpaper*.") when Brendan texts, asking if I want to bike this weekend. Harper reads over my shoulder as I reply, having no concerns with privacy—her own or anyone else's.

"Texting the new boyfriend, huh?" she asks with a smirk.

"He is *not* my boyfriend. As you know."

"Oops. I meant to say 'texting the guy who you've masturbated to thoughts of for the past month'. Oh, wait, maybe that was just me."

I bury my face in my hands. "I went to Catholic school, Harper. I'm still not ready for 90 percent of what comes out of your mouth."

"Speaking of groups of people who need to get laid, you're still coming out with me Saturday, right?" Harper has somehow scored an invite to a private party for a bunch of the Broncos, which I honestly have no desire to

attend.

“I’m not going out with you to get laid.”

“Obviously,” she says, as if offended. “I was referring to myself.”

“Since when do you like football, anyway?”

“I don’t have to like football to enjoy a guy with a perfect ass and a big dick,” she replies.

So it’s going to be that kind of night. At least I know it’ll be a short one.



ON SATURDAY MORNING I BIKE WITH BRENDAN AGAIN. WE STOP AT A restaurant for brunch on the way back. I’m not sure which of us suggests it, but I know I’m relieved. I’m fine with Brendan in public. It’s in private that my mind starts to go haywire.

“So what’s the plan for tonight?” he asks. “Romantic dinner, just you and Mr. Tibbles?”

“I’m going out, I’ll have you know.”

“Cool,” he says, spearing a home fry off my plate. “I didn’t know the library had extended its hours.”

“To a *bar*, asshole. A bar with men in it. *Football players*, to be more precise.”

His cocky smile dims. “*What* football players?”

“Broncos. It’s some party at a club Harper got us an invite to.”

He looks at me warily. “It’s good that you’re going out but, you know... baby steps.”

“Brendan, I’m not bringing one of them *home*. I’m just attending something.”

“I just...” he trails off, frowning. “There are a lot of guys out there who have a way of getting what they want.”

I roll my eyes. “You’d know, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t mean getting what they want by *persuasion*, Erin. I mean they get a girl into a situation where it’s hard to say no or where it won’t matter if she says no.”

“I’m not stupid. It’s not like I’m going to go up to someone’s apartment ‘for a drink’ or whatever.”

“Just...be careful, okay? Don’t drink anything you don’t watch being

made by the bartender. And don't leave by yourself. Make your friend walk you to your car. Or a bouncer. Or call me."

"You're going to drive down there in the middle of the night and walk me to my car?" I ask.

"A, it had better not be the middle of the night when you're going home, and B, yes, without a single snide comment, I will drive down there. Promise me, Erin."

"Brendan, I promise that if I feel unsafe in any way, I'll do something about it."

"That's not what I asked."

"Yes, but that's all I'm willing to agree to."

He groans. "Thank God I'm never having kids. If one of them was as big a pain in the ass as you I don't know how I'd cope."

"Why do you care all of a sudden?" I ask with an exasperated laugh. "You didn't even like me until a few weeks ago."

He looks at me, eyes wide and serious. He looks upset, and his mouth opens as if he plans to argue before he stops himself. "Maybe you won me over with the coconut bars," he says, and anything earnest in his face is buried beneath his standard cocky grin.

It's not what he was going to say, and I really wish, just this once, he'd have told me the truth.

Brendan
Three and a Half Years Earlier

I'm standing at the end of a long deck with Will beside me. He's nervous as fuck, but I would be too if my fiancée had gotten cold feet as many times as Olivia has. There's a 25-percent chance she's catching a cab to the airport right now.

I'm nervous too, sick with it. I haven't seen Erin since the engagement party, nearly a month ago, and there's this hunger for the sight of her that I never dreamed possible. I know she and Rob have gone out. I didn't ask for details, and I've cut him off each time he's tried to share them anyway, but based on the expectant, excited look on his face as he waits for her to come down the aisle, I assume it went well.

It's not until she finally appears that this itchy, desperate feeling in my chest goes away. I could stare at her all day, every day. I want to. I want to hear her hum as she works; I want to watch her face light up when she gets that first bite of Cherry Garcia. I want to hear her groan in my mouth when I kiss her, the way she did at Mike's house, and I want to hear it every fucking night.

The prospect of unlimited girls no longer appeals to me—why would it, when I'm just going to be picturing her face each time? I want only her, and I'll visit her family and go to farmer's markets every fucking day if that's what she wants. It feels like a stunningly small price to pay for what I'd get in exchange.

I can't believe it's taken me this long to get it: it was never Erin that annoyed me. I was annoyed by myself, by the constant internal battle between what I want and what I merely thought I wanted. It's a shitty thing to do to Rob, and odds are if he likes her as much as I think he does, it's going to ruin our friendship, but I'm telling her tonight. Maybe I'm too late, but I won't be able to live with myself if I don't at least try.

Except it's easier said than done.

All night long, Rob won't leave her side. No matter what is occurring, he's within five feet of her. So all I can do is wait, standing in the corner, staring at her in a manner I'm sure anyone would find creepy, wondering if she'll even hear me out if I get her alone, given that I was such a dick to her all summer. I'm not sure I'd listen in her place. And in the meantime, the hotel's clueless wedding coordinator stands beside me, suggesting we go check out the penthouse and refusing to move on, no matter what I do to discourage her.

When Rob finally walks away, I make my move, asking Erin to dance with so much urgency in my voice that I sound almost angry. She looks up at me with a wariness I can hardly fault her for.

"I'm only agreeing for one reason," she says.

"Because this is your favorite song?" I reply.

"Did you know that?" she asks. "Or are you guessing?"

"I knew," I tell her. Of course I knew—that's why I requested it. That's why I've had it on repeat in my car for months.

I trace the bare skin of her back, press the pads of my fingers tighter. She looks up as if she knows what I'm doing, as if she wants me to do more, and I can no longer stand to wait.

"Come here," I say, grabbing her hand, pulling her through the crowd to the darkness at the building's side.

"Why are we here?" she asks.

"For this," I say. I press her to the wall, placing my palms on either side of her face, and I kiss her. For a moment she softens beneath me, her body pliant, her mouth opening in response to mine. It is right, and perfect. It's what we should have been doing all along.

And then she jerks away. "Stop."

"Why?" I demand. "Because of *Rob*?"

"No," she says. "Because you don't get to treat me like shit the whole time we work together and then suddenly decide you're interested the minute

your friend asks me out.”

Her voice is raspy, as if she’s on the cusp of tears. It makes me hate myself. How could I have realized everything so late? I’ve completely fucked this up.

“That’s not what this is…” I begin, just as the deejay announces that Will and Olivia are getting ready to leave.

“I have to go,” she says, pulling away. “I need to help Olivia get ready.”

“Erin, you’ve got to give me a chance to explain,” I plead. “Meet me back here after Will and Olivia take off.” I pull her to me before she can object and kiss her once more—hard, a silent plea: *please give me a chance; please believe me.*

I take her stunned silence for agreement. It’s only later, when she never returns, when I receive a text from Rob saying he’s finally gotten Erin into his room, that I realize she wasn’t agreeing at all. She was walking away for good.

Erin
Present

I've done my hair and makeup by the time Harper arrives on Saturday night. I don't really have a lot of "going out" clothes, however. Rob and I eat out somewhere nice a few times a month, but my work clothes suffice for that. I settle for the same tank and skinny jeans I wore the last time we went out, but her loud groan tells me she does not approve.

"No," she says, taking one look at me before heading straight for my closet.

"No to what?" I ask.

"All of it. You're 26, Erin. Stop dressing like the only stores you know of are Ann Taylor and Lady Footlocker. And you're wearing *daytime* makeup."

"There's a difference between daytime and nighttime makeup?" I ask.

"Oh, my sad little butterfly," she says, patting my head. "You still have so much to learn."

When we arrive at the club an hour later, I'm wearing more makeup than I've ever worn in my life, along with the inside layer of a black dress, which Harper is making me wear alone with my highest heels. I'm not sure if I feel pretty or like I'm for sale. Perhaps a little of both.

It's my first VIP line, and the club itself is the kind of place with which I have little experience: low lighting, club music, bass reverberating off the walls. The moment we're inside, Harper starts dragging me toward the cordoned-off section of the room, where the men stand a foot taller and a

foot wider than normal human beings.

“Not ready for that,” I object. “I haven’t spoken to a guy who isn’t Rob or a client in four years.”

“You seem to talk to Brendan all the time,” she says with a brow raised. Ever since she saw us together at that show a while back, she’s been like a dog with a bone.

“He doesn’t count.” I sigh. “I need a drink first, at least.”

“How does Brendan not count?” she asks, waving a \$20 at the bartender.

“It’s just not like that.”

“You’re sure?” she asks.

I think about Brendan, about his sharp cheekbones and the way that hollow beneath them seems to throb sometimes when he’s thinking. About his miles of smooth skin, his broad back in those bike shorts, everything I noticed contained *within* those bike shorts when he turned around.

I swallow. “Of course I’m sure.”

She slides a shot in front of me. “Keep telling yourself that. It doesn’t make it true.”



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I’M HOLDING A DRINK I DIDN’T ASK FOR—ONE THAT *didn’t* come straight from the bartender as Brendan required, because you can’t go through life assuming everyone is a rapist—and I’m talking to some guy named Jason. I assume he’s a football player, based on his size, but it hasn’t come up, and so far I’ve been pleasantly surprised. My only experiences with football players, prior to this, were with the dicks at ECU who fought us constantly for space on the track, and whose conversation at any party focused on how amazing they were.

But Jason is nice enough, telling me all about the house he’s trying to renovate in Beaver Creek. This is something I can discuss at length, since I directed most of the rehab of Rob’s place too, though I wonder, sporadically, if I should tell this guy I’m not single. I suppose I should have worn my engagement ring, but it’s been sitting on my nightstand since Rob left town. I’ve just never felt comfortable with it on. Three karats are for Kardashians, not girls who save mascara for a special occasion.

Jason and I are debating the merits of a glass-front refrigerator when a

proprietary hand wraps tight around my hip, and a voice I'd know anywhere brushes my ear, followed by his lips. "Sorry I'm late, babe."

Brendan. Who is warm and familiar and smells amazing, and when I turn is smiling at Jason in a way almost anyone would find scary—calm, self-possessed, friendly, and itching for a fight.

Jason looks at Brendan and the hand on my hip before politely excusing himself. Which I suppose means I would eventually have had to tell him I'm not single, so Brendan has spared me that awkwardness, but I'm still annoyed.

"I'm 26, Brendan. Which means I'm a little old to still require a babysitter."

"That guy was bad news."

"Yeah, it was *super* threatening the way he quietly walked off when you showed up—I really dodged a bullet," I reply. "Why are you here? And how'd you get into the VIP area?"

"Friends in high places," he says. "And I'm here because you didn't answer my texts. I thought I'd better come check on you."

I sigh and smile at the same time. Good lord, Brendan can be sweet. And also a pain in the ass. "I wasn't checking my phone because I was getting ready, and then because I was here, doing what you've been telling me to do for weeks."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't tell you to dress like you want to get laid and go nestle up to the first football player you find," he says, his words bitten off and unhappy.

I remove myself from his hand and take a step away from him. "I can't believe you just said that."

For a moment I still see anger on his face, as if he plans to defend himself. But then he pinches the bridge of his nose—the same thing his brother does every time Olivia's frustrating him—and the anger recedes.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

I feel tears closing in and turn, walking rapidly down the stairs and toward the exit. But before I can get there, his hands are on my hips, and he's pulling me against his chest.

"Please, Erin. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. It came out worse than I meant it to."

I shrug him off. "Whatever, Brendan. It's fine. I'm going home, though, so you've done what you came to do."

“No,” he says. “Don’t do that. You look really good, okay? You sort of look too good. And it pissed me off because I’d been worrying about you already, and then I show up here and you look like that and that guy was looking at you like... Whatever. I just got pissed off. And I’m sorry.”

A small thrill shoots up my spine. Brendan’s opinion shouldn’t matter to me, but it always has, and I think it always will.

“Come on,” he says, pulling me toward the bar.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m buying you a drink.”

“If we’re staying, we should probably go back up to the VIP section with Harper.”

He sighs, his eyes pinching shut. “You look hot, Erin. I don’t mind throwing a few elbows, but I’m not in the mood to fight off an entire professional football team.” He orders my drink, knowing what I want without asking, and surveys my dress. “Jesus. Don’t let Harper dress you anymore.”

“I’m right on the cusp of being offended again, just so you know.”

“I’m not saying you’re doing anything wrong. I just don’t like worrying about people, and if you’re out dressed like that, I’m gonna worry.”

Stupid overprotective alpha male, acting like I’m fragile somehow and in need of his care. I don’t know why I like it so much, why it makes me feel like my heart is swelling in my chest. I guess because for most of my life it’s been me worrying about everyone else.

He nods at my drink. “Slam it and we’ll dance.”

Rob isn’t merely a guy who’d prefer not to dance. He’s a guy who’s horrified by the idea. I haven’t been able to persuade him to get on the dance floor anywhere since we first started dating.

“It’s been so long I don’t remember how.”

“I’ve seen you dance,” he says, cutting me off. “You dance like someone who does it for a living.”

“Are you saying I dance like a stripper?”

“I’m saying you dance like a dancer. One who’d potentially be a fucking awesome stripper.” And with that he pulls me into the crowd.

For the first few seconds I feel awkward, my limbs stiff and unnatural, as if this is something I’m no longer supposed to do. But the crowd pushes us close, and under the throb of the bass, his hips guiding mine, it all comes back to me. I find myself moving—so in sync with him you’d think we’d

been doing it all of our lives. It's fun, but it's also something so much more than that. It reminds me of another time, a time when things still felt possible. It's not a specific memory, just a general sense of well-being, excitement, a sense that all was right with the world and only getting better.

Dancing is another of the many things I loved, and gave up—live music, biking, baking, watching *Grey's Anatomy*. It's more like I didn't just tone myself down for Rob, I killed myself off entirely.

The song changes into something slower, more bass. Brendan's hands land on my hips, and with them comes the memory of those hands as we danced at Olivia's wedding. It's perhaps the most dangerous memory I have.

He'd spent the entire night hitting on the wedding coordinator, so I was surprised when he asked me to dance. I was more surprised by the way he pulled me against him—a way that felt decisive, almost aggressive. I'd wanted to object, but I also wanted to sear the moment into my memory so thoroughly that I would never forget a single piece of it: his fingers on my skin, his smell, his gaze sweeping over my face in a way it never had before.

"Put your arms around my neck," he'd said, his voice rough and low, still watching my face as if it were the last time he'd ever see it. That's when his hands slid to my hips, hands so impossibly large that I was certain he could wrap them around me if he really tried. Things with Rob had been new then, and I couldn't even remember who he was when Brendan looked at me that way.

I'm also finding it hard to remember Rob right now, four years later. All I can see is the stubble on Brendan's jaw, the tiny, beautiful scar at the top of his right cheekbone, and the look in his eyes as they brush over my face.

"I think the last time I danced was with *you*," I tell him. "At Will and Olivia's wedding."

His eyes hold mine, a question there I can't quite read. "I thought you'd forgotten."

I'm not sure how he thinks I could have forgotten. That was the night he ruined everything, the night I gave up on him for good and decided to move on. I'll never forget that night.

I thought I'd never forgive him for it either, but here I am.

He pulls me closer, and I realize neither of us is breathing normally. His eyes flicker to my mouth and hold there, and I feel just as desperate for him as I did the last time we were like this.

Yes, Brendan, do it.

I think it for only a moment, and my mouth parts as if being directed by someone other than me while his hands tighten around my hips. It's so much like the last time, except I remember how that time ended.

Then—and only then—do I remember Rob. Rob who put me back together the last time Brendan broke my heart.

I pull away, unable to think of a single word I can use to explain or justify what I very nearly did, and I'm struck by a realization that sickens me: I didn't give up on him after Olivia's wedding. No matter what happens, no matter what he does, Brendan will always be the one I want most.

Erin
Present

Brendan moves out the following Wednesday, which I know only thanks to a Post-it note he leaves on my kitchen table, along with the key to the pool house. I haven't seen him once since Saturday night.

I tell Rob Brendan has moved out and he says, "See? I told you it wouldn't last forever."

The problem is I'd begun to wish it would.



ON MONDAY MORNING, HARPER WARNS ME THAT IT'S GOING TO BE A ROUGH day. "Timothy got reamed out by the chancellor last night," she says. "I guess there was an error in something."

I sigh heavily and rest my head against the back of my chair. There are so many bad parts about my job, but this is the worst: one tiny error in a brochure, and you may have just ruined a \$10,000 print job. One tiny error means it's possible you'll be fired, and it's *certain* you'll never hear the end of it.

Even though Timothy and the client both have to approve any project before it goes to print, blame is like water. It will trickle down until there's no place left for it to go, and that place is me. I'm senior project manager here.

Almost everything comes through me before it goes out.

“Do you know which piece it was?”

“Does it matter?” she asks.

No, it doesn't. Regardless of whose piece it was, I'm the one who should have caught the error in the end.

Timothy remains holed up in his office all morning, and by the time he finally emerges midday, there isn't a single person here who hasn't started pulling his or her resume together.

“Erin, can I see you in my office?” he asks.

Fuck. I've never been fired before. *Can* he fire me? I've been here nearly four years. Surely one error in four years meets the acceptable quota. Except Timothy hates me, so I'm guessing my acceptable quota of errors is a lot lower than anyone else's. Harper insists he can't fire me, because I'm the one who does his job for him. I suspect, however, that the fact I do his job better than he does is what bothers him most.

“I suppose you know why you're here,” he says, after I take the seat in front of him.

The first law of being caught at anything—speeding, cheating, murder—is to never admit your crime. Fairly easy in this case, since I have no freaking clue.

“No, I don't.”

He raises a brow. “Really, Erin? The counseling center brochure?” he asks, sliding it across the desk.

Relief washes over me, turning the fine layer of sweat I'd broken into cold. “That's not my project.”

“You're the senior staff member here. Which means you reviewed it.”

“I've never seen that before. That's Edie's project.”

His mouth twitches with irritation. I guess he expected me to just roll over. “Let's not deflect blame.”

“I'm not deflecting anything. It's not my project. I was never asked to review that.” Which doesn't surprise me. Edie thinks sunshine blows out of her ass. She *never* thinks her work needs editing. If she can bypass me, she will.

His nostrils flare. “I'm not trying to create a witch hunt. I just want you to admit you had a hand in this.”

And that's when it all becomes clear: he didn't have me review it. *He* reviewed it, and if I don't take the fall, he does, because nothing can leave

this office without my okay or his.

“I *didn't* have a hand in this. The final mock-up will be on file with a supervisor's signature on it. I'd start there.”

“I don't *need* to start there,” he says between his teeth. “I know I didn't sign off on it, which means you did.”

Normally I keep the peace, somehow allow him to save face. But Brendan's departure has left me without a single fuck to give.

“When you can prove that,” I tell him, rising from my chair, “let me know.”

Brendan
Three and a Half Years Earlier

Three weeks after Will's wedding, I moved to Italy. I've been here a month now, leading bike tours. I'm not sure how long it'll take for Florence to seem mundane, but I was raised on a farm in the middle of nowhere...so maybe never.

The only time the streets outside my window are quiet is the middle of the night, and even then there are cars and the sound of doors slamming, the occasional shout echoing in the darkness. I like that, though. The air is muggy in the morning, stained with the scent of coffee and exhaust fumes by the time I rise. I like that, too.

The other Americans I work with, Mike and Sully, are homesick. They talk about the things they miss—decent Mexican food, burgers, people who understand the concept of sidewalk space—but I miss none of it. There's only one thing I miss, and it's the very thing I was certain for so long that I didn't want.

My mother begged me not to run off, but it felt like I had no choice. It was either leave or watch Rob and Erin together, suffer Rob's daily reminders that I fucked up, that I waited too long, though he'd have no idea he was reminding me of anything at all.

I don't know why I thought Erin would hear me out. Why she'd choose me over Rob with his degrees and his job and his 2000-dollar suits. I really did, though. And while a part of me hates her for her decision, the rational

part of me says she made the better choice.



ONCE THE HOLIDAYS END, WORK SLOWS AND BOTH MIKE AND SULLY LEAVE, which means I'm the only non-Italian at Bike Tuscany. The local guys are cool, but they've got their own shit going on. It's still better than being in Colorado, though.

I'm reminded of this almost daily—every time I see a couple walk by with that same besotted look Rob and Erin had before I left, anytime I see a couple kissing. Or when, for instance, Rob calls to tell me he just bought a five-bedroom house.

“Why the fuck do you need five bedrooms, Hugh Hefner?” I ask.

“Well, it's not always going to be just me here,” he says. “And I don't know about Erin, but I want a lot of kids.”

“Kids? You're 25. You're not even married yet.”

“It's all down the pike, though,” he says. “Sooner rather than later, I hope.”

“Don't you think you're moving a little fast? I mean, fuck, you just started dating her last fall.” I know I sound pissed off. I don't give a shit.

“She's not moving in yet. She thinks we should wait until next summer.” He laughs, and there's a dirty edge to it that makes me wish I could reach through the phone and punch him. “I'm not worried. Eventually, with Erin, I always get my way.”

When we hang up, I go for a long run, even though I biked 50 miles earlier in the day. I'm not sure if I'm trying to punish myself or exhaust myself until I'm beyond caring, but either way, it doesn't work.

Erin
Present

For the next two days, Timothy makes my life hell. He dumps more work on me than he does the rest of the office combined. He creates projects and demands first drafts within hours of telling me about them. On Wednesday, he sees me leaving two hours after everyone else and throws another job on my desk, telling me it's due first thing in the morning.

He's trying to punish me for not taking the fall, and the parallels between him and my mother surprise me. How is it that I've allowed so many people into my life who want to throw me under the bus the second problems arise?

I call Olivia on the way home. She, naturally, tells me to quit. She also suggests that I could easily plant a car bomb in his Prius.

"It's so easy. One can of gunpowder and five rocket igniters," she says.

"I knew I could come to you for advice."

The truth is I didn't call her to talk about work at all. I simply want to hear Brendan's name, see how his new apartment is, and any other tidbits she might offer. I ask about the kids, about Will, about Peter and Dorothy. I wait and wait to hear something, but it never comes.

"Have you talked to Brendan?" I finally ask.

"No," she says. "Why?"

"I was just wondering how his new place is."

And how he is.

And if he's dating anyone, and if he misses me.

If he wishes he'd kissed me that night on the dance floor, or if he looks back on it like some kind of bizarre aberration, which I'm certain is how he looks back on the times he actually *did* kiss me.

"I didn't even know he'd moved," she muses. "I bet you're relieved, huh?"

I tell her I am. And of all the lies I've ever told, this is perhaps the biggest.



ON THURSDAY NIGHT I'M UP LATE AGAIN, STRUGGLING TO KEEP MY EYES open as I write copy for the world's least interesting promotional piece on ECU's new student diversity initiative, when the doorbell rings.

As many times as I've thought of Brendan in the last hour I half-wonder if I'm not imagining him when I open the door. But if I were imagining him, he wouldn't look like he does at this moment. He and Will both have the kind of face that looks etched, carved in stone, when upset, and that's how his looks now. As he moves into the living room, I begin running through a list of reasons he might be here, and they are all bad. He sinks into the couch, leaning forward, his hands clasped between his knees. His whole body is tense, as if he's considering fleeing.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "I shouldn't have come so late."

"Brendan," I croak, "you're freaking me out. Is everything okay?"

"No," he says. He stares so hard at the floor I'm surprised I can't see the imprint of his gaze on the carpet. "My mom called tonight. She's having a lumpectomy tomorrow. I guess it's kind of like a mastectomy, but less invasive."

I freeze in place, still standing across from him. That can't be right. Dorothy is young and energetic, and he and Will have already lost their father. It seems too unfair to be true—as if anything has ever led me to believe life would be otherwise.

"Oh God," I finally manage. "I'm sorry. I didn't even know she had cancer."

"I didn't either," he says. "No one did. She's kept it to herself for weeks. I think she only called tonight because Peter forced her to in case something goes wrong..." He stops, swallowing hard, composing himself. "In case

something goes wrong tomorrow.”

“Nothing will go wrong,” I tell him. I would give anything right now to be able to swear that, but I guess I can’t.

“You know what I did when she told me? I went to a bar. Not five minutes after she told me, I fucking drove to a bar. And I'm sitting there with this drink I don't want, about to go home with some girl I don't even like, when it hits me how fucking ashamed my mother would be if she could see me. I'm 28 years old, and the minute I get some bad news, I run off like a coward and try to pretend it didn't happen.”

I sit beside him and squeeze his hand. "Brendan, handling bad news poorly doesn't make you evil. Did you talk to Will?"

He sighs. "I can't. My mother thinks he and Olivia are under too much stress right now. And she doesn't want to throw Olivia off right before the race. She's going to tell them after Western States."

That is just like Dorothy to be more worried about Olivia's race and Will's stress level than her own health. She will sacrifice anything for her kids. I've always wondered what it would be like to have a parent like that.

“So I guess you're heading to Boulder in the morning?” I ask.

He looks excruciatingly defeated. "She needs Will there, not me. He's always handled the catastrophes in our family. What if I make it worse somehow?"

“No one's asking you to assist with surgery.” He looks unconvinced, and so desolate it hurts to watch. “Do you want me to go with you?” I ask impulsively.

His eyes go wide with relief, as if I've just offered him a million dollars or a private plane. "*Would* you?"

"Of course, if it would help." I think fleetingly of the article Timothy demanded be on his desk tomorrow morning and decide I don't give a fuck. If I could give negative fucks, I would.

"Yes," he says with palpable relief. "It would totally help."

I scoot closer, and he immediately pulls me against his chest. It feels natural, like something we've done a thousand times. I know I'm enjoying this whole situation far too much. The smell of him beneath my nose: soap and fabric softener and a hint of alcohol. His warmth and his size.

"I don't know what to do," he whispers.

I know that feeling so well. Every time my father can't be found, every time Sean sounds like he's using again, every time my mother cries to me

because of some way she's been hurt, I feel suffused by my own helplessness.

"There's nothing you can do," I reply, "except try to survive it."



WHEN I WAKE, I'M HALF STREWN OVER BRENDAN, WHO'S HOLDING ME TIGHT to his chest. He has one long leg over the edge of the couch and the other on the floor. It looks horribly uncomfortable, but he's awake and seems in no rush to leave.

"Erin?" he whispers.

"Yeah?"

"You were the only one I wanted to talk to tonight," he says. "Even if I could have spoken to Will and Olivia, you'd still have been the one I wanted to tell."

I feel my eyes welling over. I've been so busy ruing my own loneliness—but mine is temporary, and Brendan's is not.

"I'm glad you did."

He pulls me closer. "I don't know why, but this just makes everything feel better."

I don't tell him, but lying like this makes everything better for me too.



DOROTHY'S SURGERY IS SCHEDULED FOR 8, SO WE LEAVE FOR THE HOSPITAL shortly after waking. I email Timothy on the way and tell him I'm sick. In four years of working there, I've only taken sick leave once, yet I guarantee he'll be pissed.

When we arrive at the hospital, we're ushered back to Dorothy's room. She and Peter both grow animated when we enter, but it's a sort of false, panicked excitement, the kind you see when a mother is assuring her child that the broken bone jutting out of his skin is going to be just fine. They speak too fast, they laugh too loud, and when Dorothy squeezes my hand and thanks me for coming, her eyes brim with tears.

We've only been here a few minutes when the nurse comes in to take her back. Brendan is frozen—not willing to let his mother leave, not willing to

say so aloud. He looks at me, panicked and lost. I cross the room and grab his hand, twining my fingers through his as if he's Olivia's three-year-old son, Matthew, nervous as we step onto the teacups at the fair. I pull him to Dorothy's side, leaning down to kiss her forehead. He squeezes the life out of my hand as he does the same. Then they wheel her out of the room, Peter following them down the long hallway.

Brendan doesn't want to eat, so we go to the waiting room, where he sits with his shoulders hunched over and hands clenched.

"What do you need right now?" I ask him.

"Nothing," he says, but he slides me closer to him, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. I rest my head against his chest and feel his relieved exhale against my hair. "Just you."



IT'S NEARLY TWO HOURS BEFORE THEY TELL US SHE'S DONE AND IN THE ICU, and another hour before they allow Peter to go back. When he comes out, I try to send Brendan in, but he refuses, grabbing my hand again.

"No," he says. "I want you there."

Seeing Dorothy is a shock. I'd never say so to Brendan, but she looks bad—her skin so pale it has a bluish cast, papery thin and dry. If I'd been told she was dying, I wouldn't have expected her to look any worse than she does. They've taken all but one line out, but she has bruises and bandages covering her at multiple points, which doesn't look much better.

Brendan asks how she feels. She tells us she's fine, which can't possibly be true, and says we should head home.

"I'm just going to sleep all day anyway," she says.

Brendan hesitates, glancing at me, not sure if he's supposed to argue. When he finally agrees, she suggests that he go get the car so she and I can "chat" for a moment. I find this almost as unnerving as he clearly does. For a moment he stands, unmoving, as if he wants to refuse, before walking away.

After he's gone, she grabs my hand. "Thank you for coming out here like this. It would have been so much harder on Brendan without you."

"It was nothing. I'm glad I could help."

"No, it wasn't nothing. I hated telling him about this, thinking he had no one to lean on. And he needs someone to lean on, even if he doesn't think

so.” She sighs. “Ever since Gabi, he just refuses to try. I’m not sure he’s ever going to be serious about anyone again.”

Gabi, I assume, is the ex-girlfriend with whom it ended so badly. I feel a moment of blistering jealousy for this girl who held his heart, something I was never capable of.

“People recover from all sorts of things,” I reply. “He may surprise you.”

“Maybe,” she says without conviction, leaving me to wonder just how bad something has to end for people to assume you’ll never enter a relationship again.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

For several months, Italy stops living up to the hype. Whoever coined it “sunny Italy” must have come from the Pacific Northwest, because we get one day of sun here for every seven I’d have gotten in Colorado. Business slows to a trickle, and my ample downtime is spent at bars with the guys from work. I rarely leave alone, but it’s empty. All the things I thought I wanted, when I was so determined to steer clear of Erin, turn out to mean nothing to me.

I’ve begun to contemplate a move to Bali by the time the weather starts to improve and business picks up. That’s also when we get some new staff, including another American, Gabrielle, also from Colorado. Sully set it up, assuring me by email that the girl was “smoking hot”—which is a little fucked up, given that she’s his cousin.

Seb, the owner, asks me to come in on my day off to take her around. He tells me I’ll thank him after I see her. And when I get to the office on Monday morning and find her waiting on the front steps, I have to admit that Sully was right. Italy is full of hot girls, but this one blows them all out of the water: black hair swinging halfway down her back, perfect pouty mouth, almond-shaped eyes.

I don’t sleep with co-workers, but that rule was a little easier to follow when all my coworkers were dudes. When she smiles, it lights up her entire face, and I know that rule has officially reached its end.

The clouds part and the street is suddenly bathed in gold. It feels like a sign. She hasn't said a word, but for the first time in the six months since the wedding, I feel hopeful. Maybe she's what will make me forget about all the things I've been trying, without success, to leave behind.

Erin
Present

I discover multiple missed calls from both Rob and Timothy after I get home from Boulder. I can't say I really want to talk to either of them.

"Where were you?" Rob demands. "I called your cell. I even called your office, and they said you were home sick."

I tell him about Brendan's mom. He's known Dorothy most of his life, so I assume his silence when I'm done is simply shock.

"Are you telling me," he finally says, "that *you*, of all people, took a day of sick leave to comfort *Brendan*?"

"Are you serious right now?" I ask. "I just told you a woman you've known since you were 13 has cancer, and your concern is my use of *sick leave*? You're not even going to ask me how she is?"

"Of course I want to know how she is. I also want to know what the hell is going on, because when we talk on the phone, it's like I don't even know you."

"Yeah, Rob, that makes sense," I reply as I hang up. "I'm pretty sure you don't."



WHEN I GET TO THE OFFICE ON MONDAY, THERE'S AN OMINOUS POST-IT FROM

Timothy on my computer that reads *See me. Immediately.* I imagine telling Olivia all about this later—the inevitable dressing down I’m about to receive for taking one damn day off. And I know she’ll be appalled—not by Timothy but by *me*, by the way I’ll take all of the bullshit I’m about to receive lying down.

“You wanted to see me?” I ask as I enter his office.

He continues to look at something on his computer for a few seconds, pretending to work when we both know his entire job involves shuffling *my* work out to the university and acting like he was somehow instrumental in its creation.

Finally, he turns to me. “We need to talk about what happened on Friday.”

“I took sick leave,” I tell him. “Because I was sick.”

“And you didn’t return any of my calls.”

“Yes because, I repeat, I was sick.”

“I needed that brochure mock-up for the chancellor’s office Friday afternoon, and I had to show up empty-handed,” he says. “I’m writing you up for insubordination.”

I’ve had it. Timothy lives in constant fear of discovery as a fraud. Let him dig his own grave with this.

“Good,” I say flatly. “Write me up.”

He blinks. “You must not understand what the word *insubordinate* means.”

“I know what it means. I’m saying good because I welcome the opportunity to go to Human Resources and explain that you’ve written me up for not returning your calls during my second day of sick leave in four years.”

I’m a little impressed with myself. My hands are shaking with anger, but I sound calm, bored almost—like Olivia might, but without the potential assault charge.

“Are you threatening me?” he asks.

“No, I’m just informing you of the logical course of action anyone would take under these circumstances.”

He does his best to look scary, glaring at me and sitting bolt upright. But for some reason, I’m not that scared. He’s just a little man, the kind who bullies children because he knows he can’t scare anyone else, and I am not a child. In fact, it occurs to me that I’ve been the adult in this situation for years, and maybe it’s time someone other than me realizes it.

Erin
Present

Eventually Rob calls again, and I force myself to pick up. We both apologize, but neither of us sounds sorry. There's a forced civility to our conversations now, as if they are held between two warring countries negotiating a treaty. It's a relief to hang up the phone. I do my best not to examine that too closely.

Brendan texts Tuesday on his way back from Boulder to see if I want to come over for dinner. Although he's been texting me with updates on his mother since we got home from the hospital last Friday, I haven't seen him in person. I know it should probably stay that way, but I can't say no. His mother is sick, and he needs support. Besides, it's not like something is going to happen now, under these circumstances.

In other words, I'm too weak to resist.



HIS PLACE IS IN THE HEART OF MANITOU SPRINGS, NEAR HIS NEW OFFICE. HE lives in the upper half of a subdivided row house—just two rooms badly in need of updating, yet way more to my taste than Rob's shiny McMansion. This place has character: the kind of moldings they don't put into homes anymore, gorgeous hardwood floors worn just the right amount.

He smirks as I look around. “I’m sure you’re wondering where the guest suite and billiards rooms are.”

“It’ll be adorable once you paint,” I reply, flipping him off. “I’m just relieved you took down that stupid hammock.” For many reasons.

“I didn’t,” he replies. “It’s in the bedroom.”

I feel sick and excited at the same time. And why on Earth would I be excited? It’s not like *I’m* going to be trying out the hammock, for God’s sake.

He goes outside to start the grill while I work on potatoes and salad. I tend to hum when I cook, so I’m in my own little world when he comes back in, not realizing he’s there until I feel his hands on my hips. His hands, just like they are, have inspired a hundred different thoughts I never should have had.

“What are you making?” he asks.

His voice is a quiet rumble, not his normal voice. His breath is against my neck, so warm and close I swear that if I leaned back only a fraction of an inch, I’d feel the press of his lips. The fine hairs on the back of my arms stand on end.

“It’s a surprise,” I say breathlessly. It’s not actually a surprise, but I don’t think I could even form the right words at the moment.

He releases me, reaching overhead to grab a plate, and that’s when I realize our moment was nothing more than him maneuvering around me in a small kitchen. Here I am so infatuated that he can’t even touch me in the process of getting a dish without me turning it into a porn-worthy moment. I really need to get a grip, but I know—just as I did years ago—that it’s far too late for that.

Over dinner we talk about Dorothy undergoing radiation therapy. Even though the margins were clear around her tumor, she wants to be certain, so she’ll start treatment after she gets back from Olivia’s race next weekend. “I can’t believe she’s planning to travel that soon after surgery,” I tell him.

He sighs. “I know, but I guess the lumpectomy was a lot easier to recover from than a mastectomy, and she says she’ll never forgive herself if Olivia wins and she’s not there to see it. Besides, she’ll have Peter there to help. I didn’t realize until all this happened how lucky we are that she has him.”

“See? There are some benefits to being in a relationship,” I chide.

He quirks a brow at me. “Really? That’s the best argument you’ve got? That I’ll have someone to take care of me if I get breast cancer?”

I sigh wearily. “Fine, Brendan. I’ll try to appeal to the only thing you care

about: you could get laid all the time.”

He makes a face. “Please never mention that again when we’re talking about my mom and Peter. That’s a pretty piss-poor argument anyway. I’m getting laid a lot more often than you are.”

I stare at my plate. He’s right, of course, but Rob and I are hardly typical.

“His promotion changed things. I’m sure it won’t be like this forever.”

“His *promotion*?” he asks.

The astonishment in his voice forces me to meet his eye.

“I was just talking about you being on different continents for the past few weeks,” he says. “He got that promotion *last* summer.”

Brendan’s surprise provides me a moment of clarity. I’m still young, and for the past year, an important part of my life has been pretty much non-existent. One more item on the long list of things I’ve given up to be with Rob. That list is *too* long. I’m beginning to wonder if this can even be fixed.



I CALL ROB WHEN I GET HOME FROM BRENDAN’S, OUT OF DUTY AND NOTHING more. I don’t want to hear about restaurants with beds, pirate radio stations, how much fun he’s had. I don’t care.

He tells me he’s sorry he didn’t call the day before, but they were all out late, and he passed out when he got in. I didn’t even *notice*, but I keep that to myself. I ask if he had fun for lack of anything else to say, and he replies for mostly the same reason, I’m guessing, telling me about some shot contest they attended.

“Christina had to be—” he begins, and then his voice stops and starts, “uh, carried out.”

Christina is a common name. Just because there’s a girl there named Christina does not mean it’s the same Christina we fought about. Not the Christina who’s thrown herself at him more times than I can count. Surely it cannot be the same Christina, because he couldn’t possibly have just not thought to mention that she was there for six *weeks*.

“Not Christina from Denver.” It’s not a question, it’s a fucking warning, because it had *better* not be Christina from Denver.

“Well, yeah,” he stammers. “I mean, she’s a key player in the merger.”

I say nothing, because honestly, I just can’t believe he’s managed to keep

this fact to himself for so long.

Can. Not. Believe. It.

“Erin...” he says.

“Has she been there the whole time?”

“Well, we needed to have her here for—”

“I did not ask you, Rob, what her *role* is there. I don’t give a *fuck* what her role is there. I asked you if she’s been there the whole goddamn time.”

He huffs in irritation. “And I was trying to tell you. Yes. We needed her here because—”

“So Christina, the little whore who’s hit on you in front of me more times than I can count, is among this group of people you’re wining and dining every night.”

“It’s not like that. It’s a whole group of us.”

“And it’s taken you six *weeks* to share that with me.”

“It isn’t a big deal,” he says with a groan. “I’m shocked you care. You don’t even act like you miss me half the time.”

“Did she go to Belgium with you?” I remember him telling me about the trip—that only a few of them went. I remember how oddly vague he was about it.

“It was a group thing. You know I’d never cheat,” he replies. His non-answer is an answer in and of itself. I can’t believe he went away with her. I can’t believe he’s been lying all this time.

“So nothing has taken place with Christina since you left?” I ask. My voice is like ice. “Absolutely nothing.”

He is silent, and in that moment of silence I realize that a whole world of possibilities exists in a place where I believed there was only one. I’ve believed so thoroughly in his loyalty that it never once occurred to me there was another option. He was the person who would always do the right thing and wouldn’t ever hurt me the way Brendan had.

I gave up everything for that, and it was an illusion.

“One night we kissed,” he says on an exhale. “I was drunk, but I stopped it, and that was it.”

“But you wanted more.”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to say that, Rob. She’s hot, and the two of you are over there together and not sleeping with anyone, and you wanted to do it. And you still have an entire month more of this bullshit—”

“Three,” he interjects quietly.

“*What?*”

“They’re saying late August now. But I’m going to try to come home at the end of June to visit.”

I gave up myself for him. I gave up the things I loved. I hid and scurried to present him with the version of me he’d find most palatable, and *this* is what I get in response: lies by omission and months spent alone and him throwing me this little *bone* of a weekend back here, as if that could possibly make up for anything.

“*No.*”

The word bursts from my mouth with six weeks of rage behind it. *No, Rob. No, no, no, no, no to all of it. To your stupid job and your three more months with Christina, to all of it.*

“You don’t want me to visit?”

“I can’t do this. Us. I can’t do it. Not separated like this. Which you’re now telling me isn’t going to end until August. This is miserable, and you know what? I don’t even trust you right now. You kept something like that from me for six weeks, and as long as I’m here and you’re there, and we’re doing nothing but arguing, I’m not *going* to trust you.”

“You’re breaking up with me?” he asks. He sounds like he’s been hit.

I don’t know what I’m saying. I can’t possibly be ending this, can I? We’re engaged. I’ve been with him most of my adult life.

“I don’t know. But I’m definitely not doing this bullshit anymore. I’m not listening to you tell me every night how much fun you’re having over there with *Christina* while I sit in our home alone.”

I feel my voice growing choked. I’m just astonished by all of it. I really can’t believe she was there all along, that he just told me in *passing* he’d be staying another three months.

“Five *months*, Rob. It’ll be five months by the time you get back. And that’s bullshit. You never once asked me if I was okay with it.”

“You never acted like you even cared. I mean seriously, over *Christina*?” he asks. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No, not over Christina. Over us,” I tell him. “I love you, but I am not happy in this anymore. And I don’t know if it’s going to work when you get home, but I know for a fact that it’s not working now. Every conversation with you is grueling these days, and I’m not listening to a single moment more of this crap. Tell someone else how much fun you’re having. I just can’t

believe..." I have to stop or I will burst into tears.

"Erin, come on, honey. Don't do this right now. You're upset. It's not the time to be making big decisions. Look, I'll call tomorrow. I'll call before you leave for work, and we can Skype. I need to see your face."

I'm not doing that. The idea of seeing his face makes me want to weep. It will only make it harder to do what I know for a fact needs to be done.

"No, Rob. We're doing this now. I ask so little of you that it doesn't even occur to you to tell me until now that you're staying until August. All the things that make me want to get up in the morning are things you've crapped on. It's my fault for letting you do it, but it's also your fault for not caring enough about my happiness to ever try to correct course."

His voice is rough when he finally speaks. "Jesus, Erin. Where did all this come from? We've been together nearly four years, and you're just telling me this *now*?"

"I don't think I even realized it myself until now. Until lately."

"I don't want this to end," he says.

I don't either, not entirely. I don't know *what* I want. Rob is like family. I've certainly spent more time with him than my own family, and he's been better to me than they have, at least until recently.

"We'll figure it out when you come home," I tell him.

"So you're saying what? That we'll start over then? What happens in the meantime?"

"I'm not going to sit here every night wondering what you're doing and if Christina is with you. So do whatever you want."

"What the fuck, Erin? I don't want to be with someone else. I love you. I love our life. That's what I want."

The right words, delivered far too late. "Then," I tell him as I hang up, "you probably should have acted like it sooner."

Erin
Present

I was so firm on the phone. But after the call ends, I desperately wish I could take every word of it back. This, with Rob, has been my home almost the last three years. *He's* been my home.

Telling him we could start over when he returns, that was my safety net. It was based on the assumption that what happens when he gets home will be my choice, but what if it's not? He will sleep with Christina—I basically told him to, didn't I? What if he chooses her and doesn't even want to try when he comes home? I wanted to punish him, but it seems very possible that I'll come to find I've only hurt myself.

I wake the next day feeling blown, as if I haven't slept. Crying most of the night will do that. Even though I've stopped crying by the time I get to work, it doesn't feel that way. Apparently it doesn't look that way either.

"What's up with you?" asks Harper, regarding me with suspicion as she walks into my cubicle. "Let me guess: Tim used the word *stakeholders* one too many times, and you stabbed him to death?"

"You really think I'd cry if I stabbed Tim to death?" I ask with a shaky laugh. And then I do start to cry.

I tell her about the break-up, split, break—I'm not even sure what to call it. I tell her how Rob extended his trip again without even telling me, that I've been realizing of late how much I've given up because of him.

And I tell her about Christina. *That* seals it.

“Good riddance,” she says.

“I thought you loved Rob.”

“No, I love weddings,” she says. “I barely *know* Rob because he’s always at work. He never comes out and he only made it to *one* of our holiday parties. So good riddance.”

“He didn’t cheat, Harper.”

“Hanging out with that girl for six weeks without mentioning it to you? Going to Belgium with her?” she scoffs. “You seriously believe he didn’t cheat?”

“I do.”

She looks as if she feels sorry for me, which I hate.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says. “He should have told you, and he shouldn’t have been taking you for granted all this time. So good riddance.”

It should reassure me that I’ve made the right decision, but it’s always easy to sum up another person’s life as black and white: a bad, inconsiderate boyfriend, who may have cheated. Things are rarely that clear-cut.

Maybe he did things he shouldn’t have. Maybe I encouraged him to do those things. Maybe I should have been a little more assertive and forthcoming all along. And also, most importantly, we were happy. Not mind-blowingly happy, but I’m not convinced anyone is. And it’s sure not like I’m mind-blowingly happy now. So maybe I just gave up a relatively good life for nothing at all.



I GET HOME, FEELING EXHAUSTED AND OVERWHELMED BY MY OWN uncertainty and the decisions I have to make—like finding somewhere to live, when this has been my home for nearly three years. I chose every paint color, every piece of furniture in this house. There’s such finality to moving out. I text Rob, asking him to give me a week to get my stuff out since I’m leaving for Squaw Valley in the morning, and he calls immediately.

“Babe, don’t move. It’s your house too. Come on. At least stay until I get back. Please.”

I don’t know. It seems like a slippery slope, claiming independence and still living in the lap of luxury, just waiting to get seduced back into all the ways being with him made my life better.

“Rob, maybe I need to be on my own, completely on my own, so that if we try this again we’re making a clean start.”

“We *are* doing this again. It’s going to work out. I know that for a fact. You’ll see when I come back. So don’t leave.”

I tell him I don’t know. And then I realize after I get off the phone that he’s already back to ignoring the things I want. So I text him to say I’m moving. And I ask him not to call me again until he’s home for good.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

Gabi is amazing. And it's not just her looks, although in a country full of beautiful women, people still stop on the street to stare at her. She's fun, easygoing, and fucking brilliant—heading to medical school at Stanford next fall. She can keep up with me on a bike as easily as she can keep up a conversation. In the months before she got here, I was basically fucking my way through Italy. Now I'd legitimately rather spend time just hanging out with her than sleeping with someone else.

Being around her makes me realize that I've maybe been a little homesick, too. There's just a certain ease when you're talking to someone who has all the same cultural references, who shares so much of your background. I can quote *Talladega Nights*, for instance, without her looking at me like I'm insane. She fills a void I didn't know I had, and I don't even mind that we haven't slept together yet—although when she looks up at me under those lashes of hers I sometimes wonder if I'm not going to explode waiting for it to happen.

I find myself talking about home a lot. Nearly every high school story I have involves Rob—drunk nights out, hung-over mornings eating burritos at King's Chef—reminding me of a time when I didn't resent him the way I have of late. Gabi has fewer stories to tell because she was a much more driven student than I ever was, and being pre-med ate up all of her free time. She tells me she's had two serious relationships that ended badly, but hasn't

done much casual dating. She asks about my relationship history and I'm reluctant to answer—if she's looking for reassurance, I doubt the truth is going to offer any. I've never dated anyone longer than a month.

"So you've never been in love?" she asks.

"I think I was, once," I admit.

"What was so special about this girl?"

I don't know what to tell her, because it was no one thing. It was Erin's looks, but it was also just *her*—her laugh and the way she tilts her head when she's listening intently, the way she sings when she's doing something mindless and how her eyes light up when something excites her.

"I don't know," I tell her. "It was just everything."

"You sound like you're not over her," Gabi says.

"There was never anything to be over," I reply. "We never went out once. And now she's with my best friend."

"Ouch," she says.

"It's fine. It would never have worked out anyway."

This is something I tell myself all the time, and it's probably true. I just wish it *felt* true.

"Maybe you were meant to meet me here instead," she suggests.

I really hope she's right.

Erin
Present

By Thursday morning, when I meet Brendan at the airport for our trip to Olivia's race, I'm recovered enough to at least pretend things are fine. And I'm really *not* that upset. Not too upset, certainly, to think about how good Brendan looks in everything. Right now he's wearing khaki shorts and a navy T-shirt—nothing fancy, and he still looks completely edible.

I assume Brendan's heard from Rob by now. He's probably waiting on me to bring it up, which I don't plan to do because it's really nothing I want to discuss. I'm just grateful he's behaving as if things are normal.

"I have to warn you," I tell him as we find our seats. "There's something about planes that puts me to sleep. So I'm probably going to snore or drool on you."

"How's poor Rob ever going to join the mile-high club if you're always asleep?"

My smile falters a little. He *must* know. Perhaps he's just heard Rob's take on our split, which is that we're undeniably getting back together.

"Have you *met* Rob? Can you actually imagine him doing that?"

He looks at me out of the corner of his eye. "But you would?"

"No comment."

"I always imagined you'd have a little wild side."

"Spent a lot of time imagining me in bed, have you?" I tease.

His eyes linger on my mouth for one long moment, during which my heart seems to flop over, again and again.

“No comment. Go to sleep, Erin.”

I close my eyes, certain we’ve just had the one conversation that could make sleep impossible. How many times have I fantasized about having sex with Brendan? Countless. How many times have I squeezed my eyes shut, even with Rob, and pictured Brendan’s face? I feel guilty about it, yes, but is it really so different than what anyone else does? I guess it’d be better if it weren’t my fiancée’s best friend, but Brendan was in my head long before I even knew Rob existed. And there’s only so much control you can exert over your own brain. God knows I’ve tried.



WE LAND AND GET THE RENTAL CAR. IT'S A 45-MINUTE DRIVE FROM THE Reno airport to Tahoe, where we plan to take a quick hike before heading up to Squaw Valley. This means 45 minutes of watching Brendan’s thighs flex when he brakes, his broad hand resting on the gear shift, the way he leans back in his seat like he rules the entire fucking world. The effect of watching Brendan drive could be described as mildly pornographic *without* having just had the dirtiest dream possible about him on the flight here. So I’m either the luckiest girl alive right now, or the most tortured. Both, perhaps.

I sneak a glance at him—the clean lines of his profile, his clearly delineated biceps even when he’s not flexing. I should be too upset for lust right now, but obviously I am not. And the very fact that I’ve spent weeks lusting after someone other than Rob, and that I’m doing so now, makes me think perhaps I don’t have quite as much moral high ground with the Christina thing as I’d like to believe.

“So why haven’t you gone over to Amsterdam since Rob left?” Brendan asks abruptly, almost as if he’s read my mind. I wonder if he’s blaming me for the break-up, the same way I’m blaming myself to some extent.

“I guess I should have,” I reply. “But at first he wasn’t going for long, and he always works such long hours here, I figured he wouldn’t have time for me anyway.” *Clearly he’s had plenty of time for Christina, however.*

“If I were you, I’d have gone over just to get laid. I don’t know how you’ve held out this long, to be honest.”

I assume what he's actually saying is that he understands why *Rob* couldn't hold out this long, and it annoys me.

"You probably can't imagine holding out for *a week*," I reply with a roll of my eyes. "But that's something I can take care of on my own when I need to."

"Jesus," he groans. "Don't say things like that."

"What's wrong with that? Guys do it. Why shouldn't I?"

"It's not that you shouldn't do it. It's that you shouldn't sit there wearing shorts that end just below your ass and put that image in my head."

I laugh, assuming he's kidding, and then take in the tension in his jaw. My eyes flicker to his lap, where I discern an unmistakable bulge that wasn't there a minute ago.

"Oh," I say ineptly. "Geez, Brendan. I'm flattered. I figured that threesome with supermodels you probably had before we left would've taken the edge off."

He gives me a dirty look out of the corner of his eye. "I'm not that bad."

"I'm not judging you. If I were a hot 28-year-old guy, I'd probably be doing it too."

"Yeah, but I think your image of me is based a lot more on some bullshit of Rob's than it is the truth."

"It's not any bullshit of Rob's. You took home more girls during that summer we worked together than I've even *met* over the course of my life."

"I was 24, Erin, 24 and stupid, with some money and my own apartment for the first time in my life. That doesn't mean it's who I am now."

"No? How many girls have you had in that hammock?"

"Honestly? Not a single one."

I stare at him incredulously. "Why?"

"I didn't get the hammock to have sex in. I don't have girls over to my place."

"Never?"

"It's best to keep sex separate, so no one gets the idea that it means something."

Would it be the end of the world if it did mean something, Brendan?

I don't ask because I'm pretty sure that for him, the answer is yes.



WE ARRIVE AT THE RUBICON TRAIL FASTER THAN EXPECTED, THANKS TO Brendan's inability to obey the speed limit, and hike it faster than anyone should, thanks to Brendan's inability to walk at a normal pace. We sit for a while at the end, taking in the view.

"This would be a great area to lead tours," he says with a sigh, leaning against a rock and closing his eyes.

I feel a small shot of panic. Not even two months ago I didn't want him moving home. Now the idea of him moving away makes me feel slightly ill. "Better than Colorado?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No. Similar, actually. It's a good place to try a lot of different things."

"What do you mean by 'different'? I thought you were just leading bike tours."

"No. When I go somewhere I want to try it all—biking, hiking, rock-climbing. I don't want people to feel like they have to choose one activity. I can't do it yet, but eventually I'll offer multi-sport tours, things that can be customized. Someone who's only got a week in Colorado will be able to squeeze in every damn experience possible."

"I never would have guessed there was altruism behind your decision to start your own company."

He smiles. "It's not all that altruistic. I plan to charge an assload of money for the experience." He jumps to his feet, and reaches out a hand to pull me up.

"In a rush?" I ask.

"No," he replies, "but there's one thing you can do here that you can't do at home, so we need to make a pitstop."

He leads me down to the tall rocks overlooking the bay. I'm just about to say something about the view when, without warning or hesitation, he pulls off his shirt. I stare. I know I shouldn't stare, but his chest...it deserves its own calendar and commemorative stamp. "You ready, Doyle?" he asks.

I know he's talking about jumping in, but for a moment my mind goes in another direction. He dives in before I've managed to craft a response.

A moment later he surfaces, shaking the water from his face and doing a leisurely backstroke away from the rocks. Just like that, I'm back to staring.

"Come in!" he calls. "It's pretty warm. There must be a spring underneath."

I've never heard of a hot spring around here, but I definitely need to cool

a few things off before we return to the car. “Turn around.”

“You’re not planning to strip, right?” he asks. “It’s the middle of the day.”

“I know I’m irresistible, but I’m sure as hell not jumping in fully dressed. I’ll freeze to death walking back. Just turn around.”

He does what he’s told with a really unnecessary roll of his eyes. I strip to my bra and panties and jump before I lose my courage.

I plunge below, discovering water so cold I am momentarily paralyzed by it. I’m pretty sure it’s only a desire to beat him senseless that propels me back to the surface.

“Motherfucker,” I gasp as I emerge.

My eyes aren’t even open before I hear him start laughing.

“You fucking liar.”

He keeps laughing as I scramble for the sun-warmed rocks, pulling myself out half-naked and too cold to care whether or not he sees. I hear him swimming toward the rocks as I reach the top. I use *his* clothes to dry off before I struggle into my own.

He’s still laughing, the bastard.

“I’m sorry,” he calls, beginning to climb out. “I bet you feel better, though, don’t you?”

“Not as good as I’m about to feel,” I reply, gathering his clothes and pitching them into the water.

I lay back on the rock and bask in the sun, laughing to myself as he jumps in after his stuff. This is a moment that never would have happened with Rob. In part, because Rob wouldn’t have jumped in the first place, and he certainly wouldn’t have lied about the temperature. But I wouldn’t have thrown his clothes in, either. We never had that kind of relationship, and I sort of wish we had.

Moments later I feel Brendan’s shadow looming over me, and before my eyes are open he’s wringing out his soaked clothes on my face and chest.

“Now we’re even,” he says with a grin as he lies down beside me.

I laugh, and he does, and I silently marvel at how content I feel. Yes, we had a good hike, and we’ve got good weather, but I have a feeling I could be doing anything with him, in any weather, and I’d feel the same way.

“This has been a perfect day,” I tell him.

“You’re like a different person here,” he says.

I squint at him. “How so?”

“You’re like you were when I first met you. You were a little firecracker back then. Game for anything. Happy. It all seemed to end when you got together with Rob.”

I sigh. “I should have known we’d have to discuss it eventually.”

“Discuss what?”

“The break-up,” I reply, glancing at him. “What else?”

He stiffens and slowly sits up. “*What* break-up?” He looks shocked. And very unhappy.

“I thought you knew. I’m surprised you seem so upset—wasn’t it your dearest wish that he find someone better?”

“I’m not upset, and I didn’t think he’d find someone better, I just...” He shakes his head, as if he can’t get his mind around this. “Why?”

There are so many reasons, but I focus on the ones that don’t involve him. “We haven’t been getting along for a while. And then he drops this bomb about Christina—”

“*Christina?*” he asks. “Are you trying to tell me he’s been hooking up with *Christina* over there?”

“He says all they’ve done is kiss. But for six weeks he never once mentioned her name until it came out by accident, when he’d mentioned pretty much every other employee. So I find it hard to believe things are entirely innocent.”

Brendan’s face hardens. “I find that hard to believe too.”

He’s the second person I’ve told, and they’ve both assumed Rob is cheating. Do I just know Rob better than they do, or am I incredibly naïve?

“I guess he’s sleeping with her plenty now,” I say. I attempt to sound cheerful, but it ends on a rasp.

He puts an arm around me, and I lean into his shoulder.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Erin.”

I *hate* that he’s sorry. It’s as if he’s confirming that I have indeed lost something.

“I’m fine,” I say, brushing at my eyes. “Honestly. And nothing is over, necessarily. We’re just taking a break until he’s home, and then we’ll see.”

“Why wouldn’t you just end it?” he asks, suddenly angry. “You deserve so much better than that.”

“We’ve been together a long time, Brendan. It’s not a decision you make overnight. And he swore he didn’t cheat, and I believe him.” *Sort of.*

He pulls on his T-shirt abruptly. “The sun’s gonna set soon. You ready to

head out?”

I nod, sorry our afternoon is ending on such a sad note. He seems more unhappy about my break-up than I was, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

We walk back to the car in silence. The sun has begun to fade, and in its absence, the cold seems to seep into my bones. I wish I hadn't mentioned the break-up. I hate the pall it's cast on everything.

By the time we finally get back to the car, I'm shaking with cold. I jump in place, trying to get warm. "Can you pop the trunk?" I ask him. "I need my sweatshirt."

"Fuck," he hisses. He's come to a dead stop in the middle of the parking lot, with his hands in his pockets.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

He looks at me with wide eyes. "I don't have the key."

"What do you *mean* you don't have the key? I saw you put it in the pocket of your shorts!"

"Yeah," he says. "The shorts you threw into Emerald Bay."



ONE HOUR AND SEVERAL TESTY CONVERSATIONS WITH A HERTZ EMPLOYEE later, it is concluded that we will have to wait until morning, when the Tahoe office opens, to get a replacement key. It's now dark, and I'm unbearably cold.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper to Brendan for the hundredth time.

He grins. "It's really okay. You're the only one of us suffering, Frosty."

This is true. I don't think I've ever been so cold in my life, and I live in a state where it hits 30 below in the winter.

Adding to my misery, there's some big convention going on in Tahoe, and after we Uber into town, it takes us over an hour to find a single available room, which has *one* double bed.

"Nothing else?" Brendan asks, pleading in his voice.

The woman stares at her computer. "I'm sorry. This is all we've got at the moment."

"We'll check somewhere else, then," Brendan tells her. "Thanks anyway."

“No, a double is fine,” I argue, teeth chattering. “I’m freezing, Brendan. Please.”

Once again he gets that look on his face, as if I’ve asked him to scale Everest. It’d probably hurt my feelings except I’m too damn cold to feel anything, emotional or otherwise.



I TAKE THE WORLD’S LONGEST HOT SHOWER WHILE HE RUNS ACROSS THE street to find us some food, and as my temperature returns to normal, I begin to recognize just how awkward tonight might prove. Brendan is huge. That double bed is probably too small for him alone, and tonight there will be two of us in there. And one of us hasn’t had sex in almost two months. I feel like I can’t breathe normally at the thought.

He’s back by the time I emerge from the bathroom, wrapped in nothing but a towel because my clothes are still wet.

“I bought you a T-shirt across the street,” he says, “so you’ll have something dry to wear tonight.”

He hands me a T-shirt that says, “I Put the ‘Ho’ in Tahoe,” and starts laughing as he watches my expression. “It was all I could find.”

I don’t bother to point out that he has purchased himself a perfectly non-offensive T-shirt; I’m just excited to wear something dry. I eat while he showers, trying not to focus on the idea of him in there, naked. What would Harper do in my shoes? I know for a fact she wouldn’t be sitting on this bed right now, eating a cheeseburger. I picture opening the bathroom door, climbing into the shower with him, and then I decide this is absolutely not what I should be thinking about at the moment.

I’m under the covers when he gets out, my stomach a storm of anticipation and excitement—two emotions that should not be there in the first place because nothing is going to happen.

He turns off the light, but for some reason it only heightens my awareness of him. The bed sinks a little under his weight, and his bare leg comes into contact with mine.

“Please tell me you’re wearing something,” he says.

“Of course I am,” I reply. “Did you really think I was going to climb in here naked with you?”

“I’m sorry,” he huffs. “But I just came into contact with several unclothed body parts, so I had to ask. Whatever you’re wearing has got to be minimal at best.”

“I’m dressed.”

“Okay.” He sighs unhappily. “Well, good night.”

“Good night,” I reply. His leg brushes mine again by accident. This bed is way too small for anyone his size, plus another human.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

I tell him it’s okay, when in actuality it’s so *not* okay. Brendan’s thighs are like solid rock, and the fact that I’m in bed with him and we are both practically naked would be bad enough without the brush of his thigh every ten seconds reminding me of his presence.

His leg brushes mine again, and my whole body is strung so tight that I practically jolt in shock when it happens.

He exhales. “So what, exactly, are you wearing?”

“The stupid T-shirt you bought. Everything else was wet.”

He groans. “So you’re wearing *nothing* but the T-shirt?”

I huff in frustration. “Did you think I was going to sleep in soaking wet clothes? Should I also keep one foot on the floor?”

He sighs. “I’m not blaming you. I’m just—”

“Just what?”

He hesitates. “Nothing.”

I could pry further, but the truth is I can’t worry about what’s up with him. I’m having a hard enough time with the things that are up with me.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

It takes me nearly three weeks to get Gabi into bed, which feels like 400 weeks in Brendan time.

“I’m not the kind of girl who sleeps around,” she warns me. “So once we do this, I’m not going to be with anyone else, and you aren’t either.”

Of course we’re both naked at this point, so I’d probably agree to anything. Almost any guy would, because not only is Gabi stunning, but she’s got curves that hardly seem real. The sight of her bare ass alone is enough to fry my brain. But I think I’d agree clothed too, though it’s the kind of statement that would have sent me running in the past. If anything good has come out of my experience with Erin, it’s this: I know now that sometimes you’ve got to make an exception. Sometimes you have to stop worrying too much about how messy it might be when it ends, and just go with it.

I’m not in love with Gabi, but it’s not a stretch to see it happening eventually. Either way, there’s not much harm in agreeing to her terms. I haven’t wanted to see anyone else since she got here, and she only has a few months left before med school anyway.

My misgivings are probably just fear of the unknown. I ignore the voice in my head that says they are something else entirely.

Erin
Present

Somehow Brendan and I both manage to fall asleep in the tiny bed, but when we wake the next morning, he's flat on his back, and I'm draped over him like he's a massive body pillow.

"Sorry," I whisper, disentangling myself.

"Do me a favor," he says, "and turn the other way for a minute."

I roll my eyes. "I've seen you in a pair of shorts before."

"Fine, smartass. I was trying to be a gentleman." And with that, he throws back the covers and reveals the kind of bulge that would catapult this moment straight into an NC-17 rating. "Happy now?"

"Good Lord," I say, covering my eyes. "Put that thing away, perv."

"I woke up with your tits pressing against my arm and your bare leg draped over my stomach, Erin. That doesn't mean I'm a pervert. It means I'm straight."

"Ugh. I wish I could un-see that."

"Yeah, I bet," he cracks. "I just made it a thousand times harder for you to get back together with Rob, didn't I?"

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but I've got no complaints about Rob in that department."

"You sure? I can pull it out if you want to do an honest comparison."

I throw a pillow at him. It seems a better option than telling him the truth, which is that yes, I'd very much like to see.



SOMEONE FROM THE RENTAL COMPANY MEETS US BEFORE LUNCH, AND ONCE we're back in our car, we head north. I feel oddly free, the kind of freedom I normally only experience under certain conditions: at the end of a race or as I collapse on my towel after a few hours of surfing. It's the experience of no longer giving a fuck, but in the best possible way—where I'm well spent and all the normal comforts of the world feel extraordinary. When I've pushed myself so hard that I'm beyond caring what anyone else thinks about me. That's how I felt yesterday with Brendan, and that's how I feel today, as we drive to Squaw Valley. I think it has to be him, or at least what he's reminded me about the person I used to be. I just hope I'm brave enough to hang on to the parts of myself I'm reclaiming.

We reach the house we're sharing with Olivia, Will and the crew by mid-afternoon, and find complete chaos. Olivia's crew might be just ten people, but ten people with several significant others, plus Dorothy and Peter and Will and Olivia and two children is...a crowd. Part of me wishes I had Brendan to myself a little longer.

"There they are!" Olivia shouts as we approach. She detaches herself from the group of people in the living room, with Caroline in her arms and Dorothy in her wake.

"Ohhhhh." I reach for Caroline. When I saw her last, she was a newborn—squinty-eyed, with a pursed, pouting mouth, asleep 75 percent of the time and nursing the rest. Now she's an actual baby, with Brendan's eyes and Olivia's features, and she's so gorgeous it hurts.

"Oh my God," Olivia sighs. "Tell me you're not crying."

"She's so beautiful," I reply, my voice cracking.

"Erin cries every time she sees my kids," Olivia tells Brendan. "Keep an eye on her. I'm worried she might walk off with one of them."

I watch Brendan's face as he takes Caroline from me, the way it goes soft and wistful. I wish I knew why he was so adamantly against having kids. It's clear he adores his niece and nephew. And while I watch him, Olivia watches me.

"Let me show you your room," she says, her eyes alight, and I know exactly what I'm in for.

I follow her up the stairs. "We're just friends," I tell her once we're out of earshot.

The Cheshire-cat grin doesn't leave her face.

"We *are*."

"Right," she says, rolling her eyes. "The two of you are both single and sharing a hotel room instead of coming here. But you're *friends*."

"We didn't share the hotel room on purpose, and as I told you on the phone, Rob and I are just taking a break. I'm not planning to spend that time screwing his best friend."

"Something's changed with you two, though," she says. "He's different. Proprietary."

"He looks at me like a little sister," I reply, but even I'm not so sure of that anymore. There have been plenty of moments over the last few weeks that you don't have with a sibling.

"Tell me something: if I'd put you two in the same room all weekend, would anything happen?"

I'm saved from having to reply by Matthew, who comes barreling in and throws his little arms around my neck. He asks where Brendan is, and I'm grateful to deliver him to the room across the hall. And grateful to escape Olivia's question. Because when I think about last night and the way I was about to combust lying there, I don't like the answer.



I SPEND MOST OF THE AFTERNOON INSIDE WITH OLIVIA AND DOROTHY, WHILE Brendan is out doing guy things around the grill with Will and the crew. As far as I can tell, those guy things mostly involve drinking beer and ridiculing the Seahawks.

After dinner, we pack all the gear in the van for tomorrow, and nearly everyone turns in early, since wake-up is at 4 AM. But Brendan and I remain, because I'm not ready for this day to end, and I guess he isn't either. Every minute of it has been amazing.

We go out to the deck, and he pulls a bottle of champagne from behind his back and pops the cork.

"Isn't that for tomorrow night?" I ask.

"We're pre-celebrating. There's tons left for tomorrow." He drinks straight from the bottle and hands it to me. "Come on, where did firecracker Erin go?"

I take the champagne, because so far doing things Brendan's way has worked out pretty well for me.

"Rob would never do this," I say.

"You mean relax?"

"Yeah, that. Or sit out somewhere in the dark, without a purpose. Or drink straight off a bottle of champagne. He wouldn't have stolen the bottle of champagne in the first place," I add with a snort.

"It was weird when you guys got together," Brendan says. "I didn't think it would take. He's so straight-laced."

"I'm straight laced."

"I'm not convinced that's true." He looks over at me.

It feels as if he's reading every filthy thought I ever had. I hope not. They're all about him.

We finish the bottle of champagne and begin a second one. I'm getting tipsy, which I usually find unsettling, having watched my dad do it for so long. But tonight it's just lovely, all of it—the sky, the breeze, Brendan. It's perfect, aside from the fact that I can't stop taking in his profile, the sharp jut of his jaw in the moonlight, the softness of his mouth. And his legs... Normally it's his upper body that's my weakness, but right now only his legs are on display, and I'm forced to admit that they're every bit as perfect as the rest of him.

"I'm sorry I was so shitty to you," he says, apropos of nothing. "That night when you asked if we were becoming friends."

"You weren't shitty. You just didn't seem that interested in being my friend."

He laughs wearily. "It wasn't lack of interest, Erin. I didn't know if I *could* be."

"Why not?"

"Isn't that obvious by now?" The heat in his gaze makes my heart feels like it's fluttering somewhere around the middle of my throat.

"No," I whisper.

"It should be," he says. "I was attracted to you. Too attracted. And it's just always been easier to avoid the whole thing by being an asshole."

I could tell him right now that it's mutual, that for years I've felt like I can barely function when he's around. Except this is a conversation we should not be having at all. Nothing good can come of acknowledging it, so I stare off into the distance and remain quiet.

After a moment he rises. I half expect that he'll just walk inside, but instead he comes around behind my chair with the champagne in his hand. "Tip your head back."

"Why?"

He offers me a deliciously dirty grin. "I've got something I want to put in your mouth."

"I'm warning you, Langstrom. I use my teeth."

"Christ, you've got a dirty mind, woman." He laughs. "And make sure you swallow everything."

"Right. I'm the one with the dirty mind."

He lifts the champagne high overhead. "Mouth wide," he warns.

"No, Brendan, it's going to go everywhere," I complain. "I can't swallow it all."

"That's what she said," he answers.

And then we're both laughing, and he tips the champagne so it seems to explode from the bottle—over my face, my shirt, my shorts—and I laugh even harder. This moment, like so many from the last few weeks, reminds me of biking downhill faster than I should. It feels thrilling and wild and reckless, the danger and the excitement weighted equally. When I compare this moment to the rest of my history, it feels as if I've been tethered to the ground my entire life. Right now I finally feel free.

I jump to my feet, still giggling. "Your pouring skills are legendary."

He sets the champagne down and moves toward me, closer than he should. I can feel the warmth radiating from him. It makes me want to move closer too. His hand presses to my stomach, and I hold my breath.

"You need to change or you're gonna freeze out here. You want me to go get you clothes?"

I shake my head. As much as I don't want to be the voice of reason, and as much I want to remain out here with him, I have just enough common sense to know it's the last thing I should do.

"We should probably head in. We've got to be up in four hours," I tell him. "But I wish we had more time." I wish this was a night we could stretch into a week's worth of hours, or more.

His eyes are brighter right now than I've ever seen them. "I wish a lot of things were different, Erin."

My heart goes triple time, and my breath stills somewhere between my lungs and my throat. The prospect of admitting even a tiny portion of the

truth to him is terrifying. “I wish they were different too.”

His hands frame my face, sliding through my hair, and then his mouth is on mine, better even than I remembered. He tastes like champagne, and all of my resolution is forgotten under the force of this, after years of wanting this exact thing only from him.

This kiss reminds me of diving off the rocks yesterday, of the moment when I first plunged into the water—surrounded, disoriented, thrilled, and horrified all at once. In the space of that moment, only as long as it takes us both to swim to the surface and gasp for air, nothing makes sense and nothing else exists—only tangled limbs and warm skin and hearts that beat too fast. My mouth opens under his, and he groans, one hand sliding down around my hip, pulling me into him so that all of his heat is pressed against me, pulsing and ready.

“I’ve wanted this for so fucking long,” he says, his mouth moving to my neck, his hands sliding to the hem of my shirt, grazing my skin.

There are a million reasons why this is a terrible idea, and I don’t care about any of them. I love his calloused fingers. I love his insistent mouth. I love the fact that he’s not gentle with me, that he doesn’t treat me like something too fragile to touch but something he wants to destroy and put back together. There’s so much of him, and I want all of it. I want that smooth skin and those arms and the trail of hair that dips below his belly button. His mouth and the smell of his neck and the feel of him pressing into my abdomen.

His fingers slide beneath the seam of my shorts. “Fuck,” he groans. “I knew you’d be soaked. All day I thought about doing this, about sliding my fingers inside you and how you’d feel tight and ready, just like this.”

I wrench his zipper down, slide my hand into his boxers to free him. His cock flies forward like something that’s been caged, desperate for release, so thick I can barely get my hand around it. I don’t want discussion or foreplay. I want him to do this before I can remember all the reasons he shouldn’t.

He doesn’t bother removing my shorts. He simply holds them to the side so I can feel him against me, both of us slick and ready. He slides over me once, twice, making me moan, and when I dig my nails into his skin he finally lines himself up to push inside me. I hold my breath, waiting.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve thought about this,” he says.

And then... a sound neither of us has made. It’s the squeak of a screen door flying open.

Matthew. Standing there in his little jammies with the turtles all over them, his bear clutched in one hand, his thumb in his mouth, staring at the two of us like we're some kind of performance art he can't quite understand.

Brendan sets me on my feet, pressing close to me so one very prominent piece of his anatomy isn't flying free.

"What are you doing, Bwendan?" Matthew asks.

He looks so much like Olivia, but at this moment, oddly, he reminds me more of Will. There's something calm and self-possessed about him, as if he's older than both of us. As if he already knows the answer to the question and is waiting for us to discover it ourselves.

Brendan glances at me. A look that says *what the fuck am I supposed to say?* And I have no idea so I just stare back, my eyes wide.

"I'm, uh..." Brendan flinches, zipping up his shorts. "I'm kissing Erin."

"Because you love her?"

Brendan looks horrified. It'd be funny if it wasn't so awful.

He flinches again and swallows. "Sometimes people just kiss."

Because this isn't love. We aren't even dating. Brendan doesn't date. And because I have a boyfriend, sort of. Who is Brendan's best friend.

Ah, yes. The thing I was trying *not* to remember.

"Mommy says that's what people do when they love each other," Matthew informs us.

Brendan turns toward him. "Yeah, uh, sometimes."

"So you love Erin."

"Uh...buddy, you should be in bed."

"I heard a noise. You said the f-word."

"Jesus Christ," Brendan murmurs. "He must have the hearing of a bat."

Glancing back at me with a look I can't decipher, Brendan grabs Matthew's hand and walks him inside and back to bed. And I escape to the safety of my room, locking the door behind me, praying to God that flimsy safety measure is enough to keep me from doing something insane.

Erin
Present

When my alarm goes off at 4 AM, I stumble through the room half-asleep and too tired to worry about the awkwardness of seeing Brendan after last night.

By the time I'm downstairs, however, I feel not just awkward but terrified. Being around Brendan and knowing he's an option is like walking into a buffet after 20 years of deprivation. I'm not sure I'm capable of restraint, and I have to be.

Yes, Rob and I aren't technically together. I suppose I could use this as an excuse to do whatever I want right now. But I can't—not with Brendan. I can't allow this thing to come between him and Rob, and while I trust Brendan, I don't trust *myself* with Brendan. Allowing myself any piece of him is like jumping into the deepest chasm. I can't begin to imagine how I'd ever climb back out. He only wants temporary, but I'd want everything, just like my mother did, and I'd go through my entire life waiting for it to happen.

There's no sign of him downstairs, but the crew is already up and raring to go, creating in me that same mix of excitement and queasiness I felt during my own racing days, only now on Olivia's behalf.

I walk over to Will. "Did she sleep?"

He sighs. "A little. Not enough."

"Is she going to be okay?"

His jaw is set, his face grim. "I wish I knew."

An endurance run of this length comes with special dangers—renal shutdown, heat stroke, low blood sodium. Western States comes with even more. Much of it takes place in the wilderness, inaccessible except on foot. There's wildlife and multiple chances to slip off a path and straight down the side of a mountain. There are rivers to ford, and weather you can't depend on—there's been snow some years, and in others the heat coming off the rocks has reached 114 degrees. For Will, who was fiercely protective of Olivia long before she became his wife, the anxiety must be excruciating, and for her sake he's got to pretend it isn't. Her anxiety would triple if she thought he was worried too.

We watch her walk down the stairs, clad only in running shorts and a singlet, though it can't be 40 degrees outside. She's shivering, but I suspect it's more from nerves than cold.

She tries to cross the room, appearing to see only Will, just as he appears to see only her, but every member of the crew stops her to insist she's going to win—which is nothing she wants to hear right now because she's busy assuring herself she will lose. There's no one alive who can psych herself out the way Olivia can, and by the time she's halfway to us, she looks like she's going to pass out.

"They should know by now just to leave her alone." Will groans. "I've got to get her out of here. Can you manage these guys?"

I nod. We've done this before, Will and I, he the protector of Olivia's sometimes fragile psyche and me left to man the ship. He breaks through the crowd, draping a blanket over her and pulling her to his side.

"I don't have it today, Will," she whispers. "I feel weak."

"You have it." He pulls her closer. I think he'd drape his whole body over her like a cape if she'd allow it. "Let's go."

Olivia—who on a normal day takes orders from no one—leans against him and follows blindly. I've watched it before, but today it makes my eyes well over. In part because I'm so happy for them both, that they found each other. And in part because it reminds me what I've lost: Olivia is able to lean on Will because he's never let her down. I once thought I had the same with Rob, but he's done nothing *but* let me down these past few months. Maybe even for the past four years, though I haven't seen it until now.

I get the crew out the door, with Brendan still nowhere to be found. We head down to the mountain's base, where the race will start, and then begin the process of double-checking everything. Given that we're going to end up

a hundred miles from where we began, leaving something necessary behind could present a real problem later in the day. And the whole time I'm taking inventory, I'm trying not to think about Brendan, but I seem unable to think of anything else.

God. What was wrong with me last night? I was ready to do anything he wanted. Without a condom, for God's sake. And with *Brendan*, who never sleeps with anyone twice. Who, if Rob and I work things out, will be the best man at our wedding. It would have ruined everything.

And yet I think about that kiss, and I know I regret the interruption. I'll be thinking about that kiss on my deathbed and wishing, just once in my life, I'd allowed myself to have what I actually want.

It's 10 minutes until the 5 AM start when Olivia appears, a grim, forced smile on her face. Everyone hugs her, which she bears with something approaching grace, and then she slings the Camelback over her shoulder and walks toward the start with Will still at her side, a cross between bodyguard and avenging angel.

"You think she's okay?" Brendan asks, coming up behind me.

My whole body stiffens, as if I need to shield myself from him, whereas he seems completely relaxed, as if nothing has happened.

I tell him briskly that Olivia's always like this before races, and then I head in another direction. Maybe he's capable of putting it all behind him. I suspect it's going to take a little more effort on my part.



ONCE THE STARTING GUN FIRES, WE CLIMB INTO THE VAN AND HEAD TO THE first checkpoint. I make a point of sitting in the front of the van with Lee, a runner from Seattle who volunteered to come out and, like myself, will be running a portion of the race with Olivia. He's cute in a crunchy, endurance-runner kind of way—wiry and muscular, hair down to his shoulders, sweet. He might have appealed to me before Brendan. Now I barely realize he's male.

"You're running the Cal Loop, right?" he asks.

I tell him I'm nervous about it, and he reminds me that Olivia will have run 70 miles by the time she gets to me, which is exactly what I keep telling myself, though it doesn't help. And then our conversation turns to college

track, which doesn't help much either, as I was the slowest girl on the team and Olivia was the fastest.

He's still talking about it 24 miles later, when we arrive at the first crew checkpoint. He stays by my side the entire time we're carrying gear and setting up, and even though I'm a little tired of discussing all things related to running, I appreciate that he's helping me avoid someone else. It's warm enough now that Brendan's down to a T-shirt. Just the curve of his biceps is enough to make me feel weak. Avoiding that will be my greatest accomplishment today.



AT 8:52 AM, OLIVIA BLOWS IN, LOOKING LIKE SHE JUST JOGGED ACROSS A parking lot instead of running a hard 24 miles through the mountains.

"You're in the lead, babe," says Will with a broad grin.

She smiles, collapsing in a chair. "Don't jinx me." But she's over her early-morning qualms. He pulls her shoes off to check for blisters and changes her socks. "Where are my babies?" she asks.

"On the way. Mom called, and everyone just woke up. They'll be at the next stop. You okay?" Will asks, raising a brow and nodding in the direction of her chest. "You're looking a little swollen there."

"I fed her this morning before we left," she says. "I'm fine."

"Oh my God," Brendan says with disgust. "I thought you were talking about Olivia's *feet*."

Olivia scowls at him. "With all the shit we've heard *you* talk about, you're giving us crap for discussing breast milk?"

"Yes. Jesus. The only thing worse is when Mom and Peter talk about needing 'alone time', like none of us knows what *that* means."

"Nursing is a part of life, Brendan. You'll see when you have kids of your own."

"Which is never happening, thank Christ," he replies.

Remember that, Erin. Listen to the words coming out of his mouth.

He doesn't want a wife. He doesn't even want a girl he's slept with more than once. If I remember nothing else, I need to remember all of those things if I catch myself wanting to think he could be more.

After Olivia takes off, we begin packing down to drive to the next crew

stop, 30 miles ahead. Lee is helping me fold chairs, telling me about some bar they saw driving in, when suddenly Brendan is in front of us both, looming over Lee, smiling at him the same way he did that football player—like he's two seconds from throwing a punch.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asks me, though it sounds less like a question than a demand.

I nod, following him in silence toward the van. He opens the back, and I sit on the tail, avoiding his gaze.

"What's up?" I ask.

His eyes assess me as always. He looks as if he knows everything I've thought in the past 24 hours, and I blush reflexively.

"You tell me."

"I don't know what happened last night," I say.

"I could draw you a diagram."

"I mean I don't know why it happened and why it went so far. But we were drinking." A lame excuse. And one that doesn't exactly explain why it's all I'm thinking about now. "And we stopped before it went too far. So it doesn't count."

"Doesn't *count*? Erin, we didn't stop. Matthew stopped *us*."

I blow out a frustrated exhale. "What do you want me to say, Brendan?"

He steps closer. He is too close, again. "I want to know what you're thinking." His voice is low and husky, sending a shiver up my spine—one I need to kill, stat.

"I'm thinking it was just a tiny drunk mistake, and we pretend it never happened, and everyone's fine."

He nods, his shoulders sagging with either relief or disappointment, I'm not sure which. "Neither of us mentions it to Rob, right?"

"Right." I confirm.

I look up at him and forget everything I've just said. His eyes have darkened and now dip to my mouth, as if he's just come across something he's starved for. It's probably how I'm looking at him too.

I hop off the tailgate, and we close the back doors.

"Do me a favor," he says. "Stay away from Lee."

I roll my eyes. "He's harmless."

"Yeah, he is," Brendan agrees. "But I'm not. So stay away from him."

Erin
Present

Late in the afternoon I change into a singlet and shorts to run my ten miles with Olivia, and as soon as she's gotten her blisters dealt with for the thousandth time we take off.

The pace is punishing, though not nearly as punishing as the conversation.

"So according to my son," she begins, "you and Brendan are in love and probably having a baby."

Oh God. "Oh God."

"What the hell? Why didn't you tell me you two were together? I just asked you yesterday, and you totally lied!"

"We're not together," I groan. "It was a misunderstanding."

"Yes," she says with a serious nod, "so many misunderstandings involve someone accidentally putting his tongue in your mouth."

"We just made a mistake." I sigh. "Shit. Who did he tell?"

"Everyone who will listen. He wants to know how soon the baby is coming, and he wants you to name it Rubble—that's his favorite *Paw Patrol* character."

I groan. "It's not funny, Olivia. I almost cheated on Rob last night. It's not funny at all."

"You didn't *cheat* on Rob. You have no *agreement* with Rob. You can do anything you want. Just like he is."

“It doesn’t mean I’m hooking up with his best friend! We kissed. That’s it. We just got carried away. We were a little drunk, and we weren’t thinking, and it was just this...blip. Matthew walked out, and that’s where it ended.”

“Do you like him?” she asks.

“Does it matter?” I reply. “This is Brendan we’re talking about. I could have been anyone and he’d have gone for it.”

Her arm flies out to hit my shoulder. “Give me a break, Erin. You’ve never been just anyone to him.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter either way. I’m probably getting back together with Rob, and Brendan has clearly stated he doesn’t want a relationship with anyone, ever.”

“So which is it?” she asks. “Is it that you *might be* getting back with Rob, or is it that Brendan doesn’t want a relationship?”

“The first, obviously. I’m just saying it wouldn’t matter in any case because Brendan and I don’t want the same things.”

She sighs, disappointed. “Fine. Will, at least, will be relieved.”

“I’m his children’s godmother,” I say, a little hurt. “He’d really have that big a problem with me dating his brother?”

“It isn’t about you. It’s about Brendan. He thinks Brendan runs through women, and he’d end up hurting you.”

And that, I admit, is exactly what I think too.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

In June, the number of tours picks up dramatically, and for the first time in my seven months here, downtime becomes a rarity. Gabi makes the most of it, however. Italy is the ultimate adventure to her and she squeezes every second out of the experience. And the girl is indefatigable—I've never met anyone who wants to have sex as often as she does. It's like she doesn't even need sleep.

Gabi asks Seb to put us on the same schedule, which is fine with me. We spend every free moment together anyway. Sometimes I feel a little suffocated and begin to worry that I'm not cut out for a relationship—but then something reminds me of Erin and I resolve to try harder.



WE'RE ON THE THIRD DAY OF THE VINEYARDS OF TUSCANY TOUR, SITTING IN the shade while our clients do a wine tasting. Gabi texts her mom, and I check email, feeling a twinge of dread when I see Rob's name. I'm always waiting for the next round of bad news, waiting to hear some new way he's nailed down this thing with Erin.

Rob has many good qualities. He's had my back in every stupid fight I've ever gotten into. When I was on the verge of getting expelled in high school,

it was Rob—student government president, head of the National Honor Society—who stuck out his neck for me. But he has some annoying qualities as well, and ever since he started dating Erin his emails have begun to irritate the fuck out of me. Today he mentions that he had to replace his Range Rover because it wasn't under warranty anymore. He sends pictures of the new house, the one Erin moved into. It's massive, of course. He says he wants to put in a basketball court, but he wonders if they'd use a tennis court more. He suggests that Gabi and I come visit. *You can stay in the pool house*, he says.

None of this surprises me. It's been Rob's M.O. since we were kids—asking about my grades before revealing he got straight As; patting me on the back for my college acceptances, and then casually mentioning he can't choose between Harvard and MIT. You've never seen anyone as irritated to discover his SAT scores were lower than yours. Seven years later he's still fucking bringing it up, mentioning he had a cold that day.

And I just don't get it—I've never tried to compete with the guy. I don't want a big-ass house. I didn't care about getting straight As or going to an Ivy. It's all Rob. Something in him seems continually dissatisfied with the fact that I just don't fucking care. That I don't want any of his shit, and I don't want to be him.

Maybe that's why he can't stop throwing Erin in my face. Because subconsciously, he knows he's finally got something I want.

Erin
Present

I've never been so relieved to finish a run as I am when Olivia and I arrive at the next checkpoint. She still seems fresh as a daisy, of course, while I'm barely able to stay upright. Brendan stands waiting, his arms crossed in front of him, as we come in.

"Your legs are shaking," he says.

I shrug. "It'll stop. I'm fine."

He ignores me, kicking one of the crew members out of a chair and making me sit.

Lee comes over. "Well done! I told you you'd do great!"

I barely have the energy to smile. "I'm just glad it's over."

"I set up a solar shower for you back behind the tent if you're interested," he says.

I choose to ignore Brendan, who snorts and rolls his eyes.

"That would be amazing," I say, following Lee around the corner while Brendan glowers.

I shower and then let Matthew dance around under the spray for a few minutes before wrapping him in a towel and carrying him back to Dorothy, who has clean clothes ready. She looks so healthy it's almost impossible to believe she's the same woman I saw in a hospital bed a little over a week ago.

"I was sorry to hear about you and Rob," she says as I tug the shirt over Matthew's head. I'm about to awkwardly explain that we aren't necessarily

over, but she continues. “Having said that, I’ve waited forever for you and Brendan to get together, so I can’t say I’m truly sorry it happened.”

Groan. Matthew really *did* tell everyone.

“Oh...uh...it’s really not like that. We’re just friends.”

“Erin,” she says, “the two of you have *never* been just friends. I knew he liked you the moment I first saw you together. Just be patient with him. I was so worried, after Gabi, that he’d never try again.”

“Dorothy, I appreciate what you’re saying, but things aren’t like that with us. And I’m sure Brendan will try again someday, but I get the feeling that’s still a long way off for him.”

She laughs. “I know that boy better than he knows himself, so let me tell you something, Erin: he’s already trying. *You* might not know it, and *he* might not know it, but he is already trying.”

There’s nothing I can do but pretend to agree, even though I hate giving her false hope. I have to make sure not to give myself any either.



JUST AFTER 9 PM, OLIVIA COMES THROUGH THE FINISH LINE IN AUBURN, taking first among the women. Though I celebrate with her in mid-field, we don’t get a chance to talk until much later, when I sit on the front porch with her back at the house while she nurses Caroline.

“Happy?” I ask.

“So happy,” she replies, gazing at her daughter. “Now, are you out here because you want girl talk, or are you out here because you’re avoiding Brendan? I noticed you hauled ass out of Auburn in the first van with Lee. He was not pleased.”

“I don’t have a lot of willpower around him, Olivia, but I just can’t... It will mess everything up.”

And it will. It’ll mess up our friendship and open me to a lifetime of wanting something unavailable. Then there’s his friendship with Rob. And things with me and Rob too—how could I ever walk down the aisle toward him and his best man, knowing I’d slept with them *both*?

“If I can just manage to avoid him until I fly out tomorrow, I’ll be safe. Thank God we’re leaving separately.”

“Or,” she says with an evil smile, “maybe you should just sleep with him

and get it out of your system.”

I watch her face to see if she’s serious. It appears that she is. “You can’t honestly think that’s a good idea.”

“You’re so sure you want to marry Rob, yet you’re obviously dying to be with Brendan. Put it to the test. Sleep with Brendan, and if it’s out of your system, problem solved.”

“What happens if it isn’t?”

“If it isn’t,” she says, “then you had no business getting engaged to Rob in the first place.”

I go upstairs with an angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other. There is no realm in which sleeping with Brendan is the logical choice. I just badly, badly don’t want to make the logical choice.

As I reach the landing, he is exiting the bathroom, clad only in a towel, with miles of smooth, tan skin over a body that is nothing but muscle. Our eyes lock, and my heart beats hard—like I’ve had ten espressos, like I’ve just run a sprint. It’s beating so hard I’m unable to think. I only know—the way I would if I were being stalked—that I need to get away, as fast as possible.

I start toward the bathroom, willing myself not to even look at him. “I’m just going to—”

“Erin?” His voice is soft and certain, as is the hand that lands on my hip, pulling me toward him.

And then it isn’t merely his hand on me, it’s all of him, his mouth against mine, his chest bearing down, his hands reaching behind me, running below my hips, tucking me into him so there isn’t a whisper of space between us. I taste the champagne from the celebration earlier on his lips, suck it from his tongue, and he groans, moving me backward toward his room, shutting the door behind us.

Certain forces in life are just too strong to fight. The lure of sleep when you’ve pulled an all-nighter, a wave breaking overhead. From the moment he begins kissing me, I know Brendan is one of those forces tonight. There’s no use even trying.

My hands are on his skin, pushing the towel away while his remove my shorts and rip my T-shirt over my head.

When that guilty voice somewhere in my brain tries to make itself heard, he silences it. “Don’t think,” he says, his breath hot against my neck. “It’ll be fine.”

It’s weak, accepting words you know can’t possibly be true in order to get

what you want. But I am weak, which is not news, and I'm especially weak where Brendan is concerned, which isn't a surprise either.

He pushes me backward toward the bed. The moon is bright through the open window. Bright enough to watch him crawling over me, to see that look on his face—hungry and feral and tender all at once.

His fingers slide up the inside of my thigh, light as a whisper. His sudden lack of haste is agonizing, and when his hand finally reaches its destination, fingers pushing inside me, I make a sound I've never heard myself make. He groans in response.

"Hurry," I plead, "before I change my mind." He reaches over me to the nightstand, and I hear the sound of a condom wrapper tearing. It's been ages since I heard that noise, and even that is exciting to me. I feel him lined up, and knowing what is coming, how close he is, makes the ache border on unbearable. I pull him down, closer, finding his mouth, my nails pressing into his back, and in a single swift thrust, he's inside me.

"Jesus, Erin," he groans. "You feel amazing."

He winces and pulls back just enough to push back in hard—hard enough that the headboard slams against the wall, hard enough that I gasp "oh, fuck" involuntarily. And before I've even recovered, he does it again, kissing me possessively, his arms planted on either side of my head.

There are no words. No way to tell him—if I were capable of speech at the moment—what this is like, how different this is from anything I've ever had.

"Oh my God," I breathe. "Keep going."

But instead he pulls out entirely, kissing me, working his way down my stomach. "Why are you stopping?" I cry. "I'm close."

"Because if I hear you gasp like that one more time while I'm inside you, I'm gonna blow." His mouth moves between my legs, and suddenly I'm ratcheting up and up and up.

"Oh God," I moan, seizing around him, except even when I've settled back onto the bed, he doesn't stop.

"Brendan, I don't... I'm not going to come again."

He raises his head, grinning up at me with the cockiest smile I've ever seen. "That sounds like a challenge."

And not two minutes later, it's a challenge he wins.

The moment I'm done, he's sliding over me. "I can't wait anymore," he says, his eyes shut as he thrusts.

The headboard slams again and again. He holds out, but I can tell he's struggling as he drags his lower lip between his teeth and clenches his eyes shut. I'm sure that I'm done, but as I watch him like that, grabbing the headboard with one hand, pushing hard, I discover I'm not.

"Oh my *God*," I whisper. I sound shocked, almost frightened. "*Again?*"

And the moment it hits me, he loses the fight, slamming into me one last time while I come around him.

A few moments later, in the complete silence that follows, I realize Brendan and I were just *unbelievably* loud.

"Oh my God," I groan. "The entire house just heard that, didn't they?"

"They're all asleep. No one is listening."

I reach up, just for effect, and slam the headboard to the wall once, demonstrating the loud noise we just made at least 30 times, and then we both start laughing.

"Okay, yeah, everyone heard that. But you know what? It was so fucking worth it."

I sigh happily. "Definitely. I thought multiple orgasms were a myth."

"I think maybe we should see if it was just a freak occurrence." He is already hardening again, pressing into my thigh.

"I can't. I can't possibly come again."

He rolls me onto my stomach and grabs my hips to drag me to my knees. "When are you going to learn not to challenge me, Erin?"



I HAVE NO IDEA WHEN WE WENT TO SLEEP. I HAVE NO IDEA HOW MANY TIMES I came...at a certain point I grew too tired to keep an accurate record. All I know is that when my eyes blink open, the room is flooded with sunshine, and the bedroom door is flying open, with Matthew launching himself toward us. Brendan manages to yank the sheets up, but not fast enough.

Matthew, frowning, asks me where my pajamas are. I cast a panicked glance at Brendan, who looks tempted to laugh.

"They must have fallen off while I was asleep." I wince as I say it. *Really, Erin? You couldn't do better than that?*

And if Matthew decides to get any more observant, we're going to be explaining tied-off condoms too, since I don't ever recall Brendan getting up

to flush them.

"Let's go downstairs, Matthew," I say.

"Erin," says Brendan with mock seriousness, "you can't go downstairs. Your pajamas fell off, remember?"

"It seems like a better idea," I reply between my teeth, looking at the floor and nightstand behind him, "than staying in *here*, don't you think?"

Understanding comes into his face, and he swings the covers away. "I'll take him."

In spite of the situation and the presence of a small child, I take one last moment to let the glory of Brendan sink in. The future may be a mystery to me, but I guarantee it'll never involve anyone quite as pretty as him walking out of my bed, bare-ass naked.

"Your 'jamas fell off too, Bwendan?" Matthew asks.

"No, my pajamas didn't fall off," Brendan replies, grabbing shorts from his backpack. "Real men don't wear pajamas."

Matthew follows him from the room, nodding as if he's just learned something valuable. I bet Olivia never convinces him to wear pajamas again.



WHEN THE DOOR SHUTS, I STUMBLE INTO THE SHOWER. MY WHOLE BODY IS sore, and there are certain parts rubbed so raw that soaping them hurts. I emerge feeling almost beaten, dying to climb back in bed and sink into the sort of deep sleep Brendan and I only got a small taste of. But I can't, of course, because I'm leaving in a few hours, and also because if the girl who just ran 100 miles can rally, I can too.

Wearily, I descend the stairs. Most of the crew is here, and there's a look on their faces as I enter the kitchen that lets me know, in no uncertain terms, that we were every bit as loud as I thought last night. I catch Brendan's eye and watch as he tries to maintain a straight face while simultaneously laughing so hard his shoulders are shaking. As does Olivia beside him.

"I hate both of you," I mutter as I walk past them to the coffee.

The discussion, fortunately, has turned to a blow-by-blow of the race. Will comes down and unceremoniously hands Caroline over the table to Olivia.

"Hungry," he grunts. I'm unsure if he means himself or the baby until I

watch Olivia pull her shirt over Caroline's head and start to nurse.

Brendan flinches. "It's so awkward when you do that."

"Yeah." She nods. "But not nearly as awkward as you trying to push the headboard through the wall last night. I mean, I ran a hundred miles yesterday, and even *I* couldn't sleep through that."

He groans. "Olivia, my mother is sitting right here at the table."

"I slept here too, Brendan," says Dorothy. "It's not like I'm just figuring it out now."

"I'm going back to bed," I grumble, turning on my heel to leave the room.

"Don't worry, Erin!" Olivia shouts. "We'll keep Brendan down here so you can get an hour of undisturbed sleep."

Erin
Present

Sleeping with someone you're not supposed to sleep with is an awful lot like breaking a diet. Once it's happened, it's pretty easy to justify breaking it again. It's tempting, in fact, to scrap any attempt at discipline at all.

I woke up later Sunday morning to catch the airport shuttle. Brendan was sprawled out on his bed, asleep, with his door wide open. That was the first moment I thought *one more time wouldn't hurt*. I've thought it about a thousand times since.

I can't act on it, of course, because Rob trusts us. We need to stop while it remains an accident—granted, an accident that occurred *seven* times. Except even now that I'm home, Brendan looms so large in my head it's as if there's no room to want other things. Sleeping with Brendan was supposed to cure me of the desire to sleep with Brendan. Instead it has opened up some bottomless well inside me, one bubbling over with dangerous urges and possibilities.

Timothy drones on endlessly about the importance of branding during the Monday meeting, and I only hear the way Brendan's voice grows raspy just before he comes.

I spend lunch thinking about the cocky way he sits, leaning back in his chair with legs spread wide—as if he's just about to demand you get on your knees and finish him off. I've fantasized about doing it more times than I can

count. Now it's just another missed opportunity, one more thing I should have done Saturday when I had the chance.

I'm still thinking about Brendan when Timothy stops by my cubicle. It's hard not to scowl openly at him. Going from fantasies about Brendan to the reality of Timothy is a difficult transition indeed.

In his hand is the only completed piece for the new branding campaign, a postcard featuring the cringe-worthy tagline Timothy insisted upon: *ECU: A Place to Know, A Place to Grow*, which sounds like the title of a Dr. Seuss book. He throws it on my desk like it's an accusation in and of itself.

"I was surprised you weren't here on Friday, Erin," he says, lips pursed.

I sigh heavily. I knew this was coming. "I told you I was going to Tahoe. You signed my leave slip."

"I thought you'd just be gone Thursday."

Who takes a long weekend by going away Thursday and coming back Friday? I pull the document out of my drawer. "The form clearly stated I'd be gone both days."

He doesn't take it from me. "Well, this project is important, and you deciding to take off and miss a meeting does not signal commitment to your job."

You have got to be shitting me. I know people who didn't finish high school, yet make more than I do, and I routinely work 50- to 60-hour weeks. I don't know if my Brendan-focused lust has left me unable to give a fuck about anything else in my life, or if it's just four years of outrage welling up inside me, but I've officially had it with Timothy's shit.

"When I left here Wednesday afternoon, there was no meeting planned. And, I *reiterate*, you signed the leave slip."

His frown deepens. I see the wheels turning in his brain—he's dying to reprimand me—but fortunately, the wheels of Timothy's brain do a fairly poor job.

"Your job review is coming up," he warns. "I'm going to need to see an attitude adjustment, or you're not going to like what you hear."

I act as if he hasn't spoken and return to my computer screen. I'm glad I paid Sean's tuition, but God, I wish at some point in the past four years I'd gone down a different path. I'm hard pressed to imagine a job that could make me less happy than this one.

I spend Monday night packing to move into the room free at Harper's place while her housemate is in Europe. If I'd hoped it would give me

something other than Brendan to think about, though, I was sadly mistaken.

Tuesday is more of the same. Me: throbbing and needy and miserable with want, barely capable of pretending to do my job much less actually do it. But I'm determined to put Saturday night behind me.

And then I get home and find a FedEx addressed to Brendan on the front step.

"Seriously?" I ask aloud, softly banging my forehead to the door. I've been fighting the desire to contact him since the moment I left last Sunday, and now fate is practically forcing my hand.

No. I'm not using this as an excuse to see him. The safest course is just to deliver it with no phone call or face-to-face contact. Before I can change my mind, I'm racing up to Manitou Springs as if the clock is running on my self-restraint.

I get to his place and slide the envelope under the door, which flies open before I've even stood back up.

His eyes are narrowed, looking from the envelope to me with suspicion. "You were just going to slide this under my door without knocking?"

"Well, I didn't know if you were home or busy or—"

He raises a brow. "Yes, that's why people knock."

"And how awkward would it have been if you'd had a girl here?"

"I already told you, I don't have girls here."

He opens the door wider, gesturing me in. I really should not cross the threshold. What I should do—what a decent person would do—is make an excuse and hightail it back down those stairs. Yet here I am, moving past him into his place. *Stupid, disobedient feet.*

He doesn't ask if I want a drink; he just opens a beer and hands it to me. I imagine, with the anxiety I'm feeling right now, I look like I need one.

I lean against the kitchen counter, ready to bolt, and stare at the beer bottle—as if the label I'm peeling off is a bomb in need of defusing. I try not to look at him, but even in my peripheral vision I see his legs—lean and muscular at once, smooth. The hair on them is light, sparse, and barely visible. Why does he have to be so perfect? Even his damn *leg hair* is perfect.

"How was the rest of the trip?" I ask. "Lose any more car keys?"

"Leave that poor label alone," he says, and I'm forced to meet his eye.

Their pale blue has turned foggy, like the grayest morning in autumn. He isn't smiling. I take a big pull off the beer, the way a man would, out of sheer nerves. I'm sure it's not an attractive sight, but there's something that's gone

avid in his gaze. You'd think I just tied a cherry stem with my tongue or slowly sucked on a popsicle with the way he's watching me. And in the space of that moment I remember him on Saturday night. Above me, flinching as he tried not to come. A muscle spasms low in my abdomen.

"What are you thinking?" he asks.

Oh God. I'm so caught. I can tell just by the way he asks, by the look on his face, that he knows.

"Nothing," I squeak.

I need to get out of here. *Now*. I set the beer down on the counter so quickly it wobbles. My hand shoots out to steady it, and his wraps around mine as he steps forward, eliminating the space between us.

Only our hands are touching but I feel the press of his skin everywhere—a chill at the base of my spine, firing through my bloodstream.

"I should go," I whisper. His nod is barely there, more just a tip of the chin. He releases my hand.

I head across the room with absolutely no idea what I should say when I get to the door. *See ya around? Don't be a stranger?* He follows in silence and I am hyperaware of his smallest sounds—his feet against the hardwood, his breath.

But when I reach the knob, his hand covers mine once more. "Wait," he whispers.

I turn to face him. "I—"

His hand curves around the back of my neck, and then his mouth is on mine. There is no time for me to object, though who knows if I actually would have. The spike of adrenaline that began when we both grabbed that beer bottle is now coursing through my veins, taking over. He kisses me until my breath comes in small wisps and my knees shake. The sound of his zipper sliding down may be my new favorite noise.

"My room, now," he says, breaking away as he starts to pull me past the couch. I allow myself to be led for a moment, but already I'm thinking of all the things we didn't get to on Saturday night, all the missed opportunities I've been ruing. If we're really doing this, I want to leave with fewer regrets than I had when I arrived.

"No," I say, pulling against his hand. I push him toward the nearest chair. "Sit."

He raises a brow but does what I ask, perhaps as surprised as I to discover that I'm taking charge.

I push his shorts to the floor and straddle him, sliding my hand between us, still outside the tight boxer briefs that leave almost nothing to the imagination. My fingers can't quite wrap around him, but even through the fabric I swear I can feel his pulse. "Erin," he growls, and moves as if he's going to lift both of us.

I press my mouth to his ear. "You need to learn some patience."

"Fuck that," he hisses.

I laugh under my breath. We've barely begun but already triumph dances up my spine. It's not some kind of supreme confidence in my own abilities. It's simply that I'm so determined to walk away from this with what I want—the memory of him begging and desperate against my tongue—that I feel certain it will happen.

I slide to the floor, pulling his boxers with me. I give him more of what he wants, but not enough, memorizing his groans and his hands tightening in my hair. It's not until he begs, his breath labored as he thrusts upward, that I take him in my mouth.

"Oh Jesus," he groans. His fingers press to my scalp and already I feel him swelling, wanting release and fighting it at the same time. "I'm gonna come," he gasps too late, not that I'd planned on going anywhere. The pained noise he makes as he finishes is the hottest thing I've ever heard in my life.

"Jesus Christ," he says, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He looks down at me. "Where the fuck did you learn *that*?"

I laugh. "You really want me to answer?"

He shakes his head and then joins me on the floor, pushing me to my back. "No, but at some point I'm probably going to ask you to do it again."

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

At the end of June, Gabi arrives at my apartment with her suitcases, crying. She tells me her roommate kicked her out and asks if she can stay with me for a while.

It gives me pause. Things are great with us just as they are, and I'd rather not mess with a winning formula. I already see Gabi nearly every day, and I spend every night with her when we're on a tour. I'm not sure I'm ready to hand over my remaining moments of freedom, but what am I supposed to say? She's got less than two months left, and she really has no place else to go. I tell her it's okay, but even as I say it, I feel as if there's slightly less air in the room than there was before she arrived.



AT FIRST, HAVING GABI AS A ROOMMATE WORKS OUT PRETTY WELL FOR ME. I seriously can't believe there's a female alive who wants to get laid more often than I do, but I've got no complaints. It's all pretty perfect—until suddenly it isn't.

“Your friend Rob,” she ventures one afternoon, looking up from my iPad. “He's the one dating that girl you liked?”

“Yeah.”

“So her name is Erin?” she asks.

My jaw drops. “Are you reading my email?”

“It was just open when I picked it up,” she says with a shrug.

But this is bullshit. I haven’t heard from Rob in at least a week.

“So...Erin,” she continues. “That’s her, right?”

“Yes. And please get out of my email.”

“Do you have a picture of her?” she asks. Her voice is neutral, but I catch a glimpse of something in there, something needy and fearful.

“No.” I do, of course, but if she’s jealous, seeing a picture of Erin sure won’t help.

“What’s her last name?” asks Gabi.

“What are you doing?” I sigh. “I never even dated the girl. Why does this matter?”

“It doesn’t. I was just curious.”

The conversation ends, but it also remains. It is wedged between us all night, Gabi’s discontentment almost palpable. I’d like to end it, reassure her that it’s over for me. I just don’t think I can do it convincingly.

Erin
Present

When I get home I struggle to fall back asleep. Instead I lay there, staring at the ceiling, replaying everything in my head. Until tonight, Saturday was the most amazing sex I've ever had, but I was able to rationalize it—there'd been so much build up between me and Brendan, and I'd gone without it for so very, very long. But none of those factors were in play this time, so how is it even possible that it *improved*?

In spite of my exhaustion, I arrive at work feeling absolutely wired. I want to stand on my desk and announce my discovery to the world. "I finally get it now! I understand why sex is such a big deal to you people!"

But as the afternoon winds down and the office begins to empty, reality sets in as well. Just because what happened with Brendan was amazing for *me* doesn't mean it was amazing for us both. Tonight, in fact, he'll probably be experiencing a repeat of it, only with some other girl.

By the time I get home, my joy has ebbed away completely. What did I think was going to happen? Did I really think one good blow job and a little intercourse was going to make him *infatuated* with me? If so, I couldn't have been more wrong. It didn't even make him want to do it again.

And I shouldn't be thinking about him anyway. I'm moving out of here once Harper's back from vacation at the end of the week, which means this is one of my last nights in the home I've lived in for the past four years, the home I thought I'd raise children in. There is no universe in which a series of

orgasms should trump that.

The next morning I get in a good, long run before Pilates. Operation Forget Brendan has begun, and working out is really the only strategy I've got so far. I return so exhausted I'm certain I don't have the energy for either lust or obsession, but by the time I'm standing under the showerhead, he's already taking over my brain. I imagine him behind me, wet and soap-slick, sliding into me with ease. I add shower sex to the never-ending list of things we didn't get to do.

My phone is silent all day. I pretend I'm not watching it, reminding myself that it doesn't matter if he contacts me because nothing I want can happen again anyway. What we did was wrong, and it has to stop.

I forget all these things, of course, when he finally texts.

He asks if I'll help him paint. He does not in any way reference Saturday night, Tuesday night, or a desire to repeat either. Maybe he legitimately wants help. Maybe suggesting a friendly activity is his way of reinstating our friendship, making things normal again.

Or maybe he wants more, the way I do. So much that it feels like I might explode even as I sit here in my cubicle on the synthetic-fiber cushion of my chair, staring at a memo someone has taped to the wall about labeling food in the break room.

Operation Forget Brendan, I've got to say, is sort of a bust.



I CHANGE CLOTHES AFTER WORK AND HEAD TO HIM, CLAD IN RUNNING SHORTS, T-shirt, and ponytail. No matter how I feel, I don't want to *look* like a girl who's spent the last 36 hours obsessing over the things he can do with his tongue.

I bring over some of the cupcakes I made the night before, because that's the kind of thing Friend-Erin-Who-Doesn't-Necessarily-Want-To-Sleep-With-You would do, but when I walk into his apartment I completely abandon who I was pretending to be. He looks the way he always does: frayed khaki shorts, gray T-shirt, muscular thighs, hard jaw, and clear blue eyes. The problem is that's enough. It's too much, actually. The sight of him alone is hormonal overload.

I inhale and thrust the cupcakes toward him. "I brought snacks."

Fuck. My voice sounds all breathy, like I just ran ten flights of stairs.

He hears it and holds my eye for a second, calm as ever. I wish I were calm the way he is. Right now I'm a chaotic mess of worry and lust, and he's as still, as cool and impenetrable, as a steel beam.

He takes the box from me, his fingers brushing my hands, staying there a moment too long. Acting normal is almost impossible. I stare at his unshaved jaw and remember how it felt against my lips, the delicious scrape of it against my skin.

"What's going on, Erin?" he asks, setting the box on the counter behind him. His voice is low, smooth, leading.

"Nothing," I reply.

"You bite your lip when you're nervous," he says. He pulls me against him. Slowly his lips trail down my neck, tugging at the soft skin just beneath my jaw, and for a single, delicious moment I let myself have it—his size and his smell of soap and coffee, the feel of his smooth skin under my hands, the prickle of shaved hair at the back of his neck, how ridiculously muscular he is. If I *wanted* to push him away, it would be like pushing a brick wall.

His hands are sliding inside my T-shirt when I come to my senses. "We can't do this," I say. But even I hear the pleading note in my voice saying *Brendan, convince me, convince me.*

His hands spread over my rib cage. "If you want me to stop," he whispers, his breath next to my ear, "say so now. Because otherwise I've got about 15 things I plan to do to you."

I know there is a logical and well-reasoned argument against this somewhere inside me, but mostly I want to know what 15 things he has in mind, and I want him to have already gotten them underway.

"Condom," I demand.

"Not yet," he says. He slides my shorts past my hips and lifts me, depositing my bare ass on his counter. "And by the way," he adds, pulling me to the very edge and pushing my legs apart, "I'm in charge tonight."



IT'S LATE WHEN I FINALLY CLIMB FROM THE BED. HE WATCHES AS I START hunting for my clothes. "Why did you try to stop me when you came over tonight?" he asks.

“You know why.” My throat feels closed over with guilt. Sleeping with Brendan one time was an anomaly. One time was the kind of thing we could forgive ourselves for. But three times is something else entirely. It’s intentional.

He sits up. “You’re seriously worried about being loyal to Rob after what he did?”

“Not exactly. I just don’t see how you and Rob are going to get past this. And if Rob and I get back together, we’d never be able to hang out, the three of us. You’d be his best man—” I trail off, swallowing hard. Just envisioning it makes me sick.

“Erin, I’m not going to be his best man, and you and me and Rob are never going to be hanging out. I’m not going to tell him about it, obviously, but I’m also not going to spend the rest of my life lying.”

I sit at the end of his bed, clutching my shirt and bra to my chest. “I don’t get what you’re saying.”

“I made a choice when I slept with you. I can’t continue pretending to be his friend after that.”

My stomach drops. What I’ve done is bad enough, but for me to be the cause of their friendship’s demise is worse. “Brendan, he’s been your best friend for years. You can’t do that.”

He shakes his head. “I like Rob, or at least I did until he cheated on you, but we haven’t lived in the same place for over a decade, and we’ve both changed. You saw how it was when I got back—we have nothing in common anymore. He’s obsessed with making money. Status matters more to him than anything else. And any respect I still had for him was lost when I heard what he did with Christina.”

I understand his answer, but I don’t like it, for many reasons.

“I don’t know that *anything* happened with her,” I argue.

His mouth flattens. “You want to believe he’s innocent so badly you won’t even look at the facts.”

I keep my disagreement to myself, though in fact I think the opposite is true. At this point I *hope* Rob cheated on me. Because if he didn’t, it makes what I’ve done with Brendan ten times worse.

“Come here,” he says softly. He cups my chin and kisses me. He kisses me until I forget what we were discussing entirely.

I even forget that I’d planned to leave.



HOURS LATER I STUMBLE INTO MY OWN BED. THIS TIME I SLEEP LATE, MISSING my get-over-Brendan run and my get-over-Brendan Pilates. They didn't seem to be doing me much good anyway.

I wake feeling banged up and rejuvenated at the same time, as if I just went on the best hike of my life and capped it off with 15 cups of coffee, or ran a marathon and came in first. Somewhere in the back of my mind I know all this should be tempered by guilt, but I ignore it. Instead I put on my highest heels, my favorite dress and practically skip into the office.

Nothing can touch me. Not traffic, not Timothy's snide comment about my arrival time, even though I wasn't late. I didn't know orgasms could make me invincible, but it appears they have.

I sit at my desk and reread all the texts Brendan's sent me. None of them are even vaguely romantic, but my heart still does this ridiculous fluttery thing, the way it did when I was in sixth grade and Bradley Peterson passed me a note asking if I liked him. But of course, my ridiculous fluttering heart would probably send Brendan running. He likes me precisely because he believes my heart is too busy fluttering for Rob to flutter for him too.

I'm still reading them when Harper pops into my cubicle and comes to a dead stop.

"Hey," I say, dropping the phone as if it's burned me. "How was your trip?"

She doesn't even answer. Just stands there staring at me, tapping her lip. "Something's different," she says, eyes narrowing. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," I chirp, running my fingers through my hair, feigning innocence. I'm quite sure I look completely normal, although I'm so relaxed I feel entirely liquid right now.

"Bullshit," she says. Her eyes widen and a smile flashes across her face. "You little slut!" she cries gleefully. "You got laid!"

I blink. "What?"

"Oh my God, we both know you can't lie for shit, Erin. Don't even try. Who was it? You didn't get back together with Rob..." she says, mumbling to herself. "No, no, you'd have texted me if... Oh. My. God. Brendan. You slept with Brendan? Oh, don't open your lying mouth to me again. You totally slept with Brendan."

I slump in my chair, exhausted by the mental gymnastics she performed

entirely on her own. "You need a psychic hotline or something."

"Wow," she mouths, sitting on my desk. "Tell me everything. Was it amazing?"

I smile. "It was okay."

"Like I said before, you're a terrible liar. There's not a chance sex with him was merely *okay*. So what now? Are you a thing? Have you talked about it?"

"No, of course not," I say. "There's nothing to discuss because obviously we are not a thing, and we will never be a thing. He doesn't want a girlfriend, and I *have* a boyfriend."

"*Had*," she emphasizes. "Had. You're a free agent now, my friend."

"Rob's coming back, Harper. It's not like we could keep this going even if we wanted to, and Brendan isn't the sort to want to."

"Whatever. Until Rob gets here, I want you to tag him as much as humanly possible."

"I'm pretty sure we already did that. My vagina is broken."

"Well, go let him break it some more. Or if you're done with him, send him my way."

I feel an odd little flare of jealousy, which is beyond ridiculous. I don't even know if I'll see him again.

"He's all yours," I tell her.

Just not yet.

Erin
Present

Over the weekend, Mr. Tibbles and I move to Harper's place. The finality of leaving Rob's house—with the possibility that I might not return—hits me harder than I expected. For the three years I lived here, I assumed it was my future. I'd even chosen a room for the nursery. So it's not just my home I'm losing; it's all the potential lives that might have been led here. They'd have been good lives. Maybe not transcendent. Maybe not sex-til-2 AM, floating-into-work-ebullient-each-morning kind of lives, but also not anything to complain about.

And for most of my years, I've believed living a life I couldn't complain about was enough. If Rob and I don't get back together, I have to wonder if the day will come that a life I can't complain about sounds like a dream, if I'll look back on what I had here and be stunned by the stupidity of letting it go. I lock my engagement ring up in Rob's safe, wondering if I'll ever see it again.

On Sunday I go to Littleton to take my brother to lunch. So many times in my life it's been painful to see Sean, but today it is not: he looks healthy for once. He's put on a little weight, and he's excited about everything. About his last semester of school, which begins in a week, and about working to become a counselor after he graduates. It was worth every penny I've spent if it helped get him where he is at the moment.

I tentatively mention that I've been spending time with Brendan. It's

juvenile, but I just like saying his name, as if it will somehow make what is happening feel more real. Which hurts a little, because I know that it's not.

Sean frowns. "You mean as friends, right? Isn't Rob due back soon?" he asks.

"Oh," I reply, staring at my flatware, carefully aligning each piece as if I'm Martha Stewart. "No. Actually, he's staying until August, I think."

"August?" His tone demands eye contact, which I reluctantly provide.

"Yeah. We sort of broke up. I mean, we may get back together when he's home, but I just couldn't do it any more, and there was other stuff."

"It was about the money, wasn't it?" he asks. "He didn't want you to pay my tuition."

"No, of course it wasn't that. There were a lot of issues. The money had nothing to do with it."

"But he was pissed," Sean says, looking dejected. "I could tell when I spoke to him."

I wave my hand. "He wasn't thrilled at the time, but he got over it. Honestly, Sean, money is pretty much the only thing we don't have a problem with."

"You're going to need that money back if Rob isn't supporting you," he insists.

"I can always earn more," I tell him.

He doesn't appear to believe me, and given the increasing likelihood that Tim's going to push me out of my job, perhaps he's right.



I SPEND THE ENTIRE WEEKEND SURREPTITIOUSLY CHECKING MY PHONE, looking for a text from Brendan that never arrives. I crave him, crave everything about him—his smooth skin, his smell. The way he laughs, the sight of his name. It's not until Tuesday, when I've begun to despair, that he texts. It almost feels intentional, the way he's waited until I'm about to give up, before he makes contact.

Brendan: I woke up feeling like my walls could use some more work.

Me: The walls? Are we still calling it that?

Brendan: Fine. My dick. My dick could use some more work. I was trying to be subtle.

I know I should refuse. Anything that can cause me this much grief, this early on, is clearly something to be avoided. But apparently my brother and father aren't the only members of my family with an addictive personality. Every time I get a little of Brendan, I need even more. No matter how bad it is for me.



IT'S JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT WHEN WE'RE STARTLED AWAKE BY A RINGING phone. I bolt upright, certain it's my father, only to find it's not my phone at all. It's Brendan's. He grabs it, fast, and hurries into the other room.

For a moment I'm merely puzzled.

And then I'm pissed.

The only calls a single guy receives in the middle of the night are booty calls, and of course he gets booty calls—he has a whole host of girls he can and *does* sleep with. Which prompts the question yet again: Why am I even here? I've never settled for being one of many to *any* guy, and I'm sure as shit not doing this with a guy who takes the call while I'm in his bed.

Beneath my rage, my chest feels like it's been split in half, and if I were alone I would dissolve into tears. No matter how strong I feel, Brendan has the power to make all my threads unravel. He always has.

I begin searching the bed for my underwear. I'm nearly dressed by the time he gets back in the room.

He stops just inside the door and stares at me. "Where are you going?"

"Home," I reply. I don't sound angry. I refuse to be angry. He owes me nothing, and I owe him nothing.

I move toward the door, but he sidesteps and blocks it. "Why?"

I summon all of my inner fortitude to sound calm, when really I'd like to slap him and scream. "Look, I know how you roll, but I don't need to be a part of it. I can do better than a guy who gets booty calls and *answers* them while I'm still in his bed."

"It wasn't a booty call."

I shake my head. "Please, Brendan. Who else calls this late?"

He stares me down. "Do you trust me?"

Maybe it was Gabi on the phone, but the truth is I'd be upset by that too, so I don't want to contemplate his question. What I want most of all is to end

this now, immediately, before it does me real damage, though I suspect it's already too late.

I fold my arms over my chest. "It doesn't matter," I say. "I need to go."

"Look me in the eye and answer the question, Erin. Do. You. Trust. Me?"

I meet his gaze reluctantly, and almost immediately feel something seep through my blood. I don't want to believe him, but I do anyway.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Then when I tell you it wasn't a booty call, do you know I'm telling the truth?"

Whether or not it was a booty call is irrelevant. He's going to break my heart, and I should not be here. I want to weep for the moment when it will officially happen, as if I can dilute the pain ahead of time.

I nod and he moves closer to me, pressing his mouth to my ear as his fingers go to the button of my jeans. "Then get back in bed," he says, "because I'm not done with you yet."

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

The schedule gets so busy that Gabi and I can't always lead tours together. I'm okay with that. I'm finding she has these little habits that grate on my nerves if I'm around her for 24 hours straight. She employs the words *amazeballs* and *awesomesauce*, for instance, more than the correct number of times, which is zero.

All these small irritations fall away when she gets undressed, however... and Gabi is always getting undressed. The more we have sex, the more she seems to want it. I guess that should be flattering, but at times it almost feels like she's trying to prove something to me or to herself, though I have no idea what that would be. Or what she possibly could need to prove: other than Erin, I've never seen a girl get as much unsolicited male attention.

The guys at the tour company make no bones about their desire to sleep with my girlfriend. One of them says something about her ass every time she walks out the door. It doesn't bother me, but occasionally I wonder if it should. It bothered me when guys even *looked* at Erin, much less commented. It makes me wonder if I've made a mistake, letting this thing with Gabi go as far as it has. Especially because it's starting to seem like we have different expectations of where it's headed.

"You know," she says over coffee, "there are lots of places to do bike tours near Stanford—Big Sur, the redwoods, Napa."

"I thought medical school was pretty demanding," I reply. "Are you

going to have time to work?”

“Not me, silly.” She laughs. “*You*. Wouldn’t that be amazing, leading tours along the coast?”

Yeah, it would be amazing. Except I’m already someplace amazing, and I’m nowhere near being ready to move for Gabi. Sometimes I wish I were. Sometimes I wish I could be in this thing with both feet, instead of constantly missing what this is not, but there’s a hole inside me that I’m increasingly sure Gabi can’t fill.

“I was planning to go to Bali next,” I tell her.

“Will you at least consider it?” she pleads.

I tell her I will. I want to be someone who considers these things. I tell myself I want the things Rob has at home. Except I’m still pretty sure I just want one specific thing Rob has.

Erin
Present

I learn from Olivia that Brendan and Will aren't speaking. Will is somewhat pissed that Brendan didn't tell him about Dorothy's cancer, but mostly he's pissed that Brendan is hooking up with me.

Olivia wants details, but I really have none to give, since I don't even know what's going on with us myself. I know that I hear from him every day. His texts are always funny and frequently dirty, but what they never are is *sweet*. I wait for them to evolve, for him to say *I wish you'd stayed over*, or *I'm sorry I didn't get to see you last night*, but those words never come.

I know that I'm with him more nights than I'm not. I know that we've fallen into a sort of haphazard domesticity—he'll make us dinner, I'll bake. I start staying the night and he doesn't seem to mind. But we are not dating. We don't go out, we don't hold hands. And I don't know where he is on the nights we're not together.

That's what troubles me most.

Brendan's unexplained absences have become a blank screen on which I project worst-case scenarios: cheerleaders with D cups, sex-crazed models. Or nights spent with Gabi—the girl I suspect he hasn't left behind.



HE GOES TO BOULDER TO VISIT HIS MOM WHEN SHE STARTS RADIATION. I don't see him for three days, but I have no idea whether he's with her the entire time. I'm not even sure I'll hear from him again. I'm forced to wonder—not that I ever really stop wondering—when we will end, and if he'll warn me before it happens.

I go to his place when he gets home. He's standing at the stove when I arrive, but takes one look at me and turns the burner off.

"Get undressed," he says, his voice a low growl.

Mere seconds later we are both rid of our clothes, bare skin meeting bare skin. He manages to grunt the word "bed," but we only make it as far as the couch.

When it's through, his gaze follows mine across the room, which we've littered with clothing.

I laugh. "Your apartment looks like a crime scene."

"I did plan to try to talk to you for at least a few minutes first," he admits. "It's those fucking heels of yours. Seeing you naked is mandatory when you come here in those things."

"What's shocking is that you still want to," I venture tentatively. "I can't believe you're not bored yet."

"Why would I be bored?"

I shrug, feigning ambivalence. "It's sort of what you're known for, isn't it? Never the same girl twice?"

He studies my face. "Does that bother you?"

"I just want to make sure it ends well." I grind my teeth together on the last word to keep it from sounding tremulous, because that's suddenly how I feel when I say it aloud—not ambivalent, the way I'm supposed to be about our dirty little secret, but invested. You cannot be invested in something as brief as this, particularly something you've always known will end, but I am.

"You worry too much," he says. "We're in the bubble right now. That's why this works."

"The bubble?"

"Like a pocket of air in a submerged car. It's a little space to breathe that you know won't last. This works because I know you're getting back together with Rob," he says. "If you weren't, I'd have to worry that...you know, you might get attached."

"So you're saying if Rob and I weren't planning to try again, you wouldn't have slept with me in the first place?"

He laughs, shifting just enough to make me realize he's already thinking about round two. "I don't have *that* much self-control. But if you weren't getting back together with him, you wouldn't want this. You'd be off looking for someone just like him."

"Why do you say that?"

He rolls on his back, staring at the ceiling. "You want stability, Erin. You want the boring guy like Rob who's going to work unrelentingly until he can retire at 65, and who's never going to have more than one or two drinks when he goes out."

"Being a hard worker and responsible drinker doesn't mean someone is *boring*."

Brendan rolls his eyes. "Fine. Not boring—controlled. You want someone who's always controlled, and reliable, and steady. And that guy will never be me."

I no longer believe that *controlled*—or *controlling*—is what I need, but I still want someone I can count on. If I were a smarter girl, I'd ask myself why, given that fact, I am here at all.

"Why are you so against relationships?" I ask. "They aren't all bad."

"The problem with a relationship," he says, "is that it's a sort of promise to the other person—not that you're staying together but that you at least think you might. And it fucks people up when you realize you were wrong. I'm not ever making that promise to anyone again."

"Brendan, it's not a promise. It's an attempt. Until you marry someone, you're only promising to try. No one can blame you when it doesn't work out."

"You just never know how someone will react," he says. "Or maybe it's just me. Maybe I bring it out in people. But the few times I've tried have been disastrous when they ended. And when that happens, you bear some responsibility for it, for what you've turned someone else into."

"No, you don't," I argue. "I became someone else with Rob—to keep the peace and to make him happy. But he didn't *make* me change, and he also isn't responsible for how unhappy I became when I did. The only person whose feelings you're responsible for are your own."

"You really believe that?" he asks, staring off into the distance.

"I really believe that," I affirm.

He sighs and glances at me before he jumps to his feet. "I wish I did too."

Erin
Present

I'm not sure who I am right now.
I'm not the girl I was a month ago, or even a week ago.
I'm another girl, one who's only visiting. I wish it were possible for her to stay, but I don't see how she could.

I wake happy and float into the office. The minute I can escape, I'm heading to Brendan's, my clothes shed within seconds of climbing his stairs. We do not discuss what we're doing and all the ways it's wrong. We don't talk about the future. We are, like he said, in the bubble. It is temporary, a mistake that was made and one we will somehow need to correct, but until that bubble pops, I've decided to enjoy it as if these are my very last days on Earth.

The only thing it doesn't make better is my illustrious boss, Timothy.

"I came by your desk yesterday afternoon," he says, leaning into my cubicle on Wednesday, staring me down the way a parent might a misbehaving child.

"Oh?"

"And you weren't here," he adds.

I don't know what his problem is, but I'm done jumping when he says jump for a shitty salary and no chance of promotion.

"Yes, I kind of figured that part out."

"Is there a reason you're suddenly leaving early?"

“I’m not leaving early, Timothy. Our hours here are 8 to 4:30.”

“That’s the *minimum* requirement, Erin. And as one of the senior employees here, I thought you understood that more was expected of you.”

Senior in what way? I long to ask. I don’t have a better office or better pay or better leave. If the only benefit to being a senior employee is longer hours and higher expectations, I have a few suggestions for what he can do with the honor.

“Anyway,” he continues, “the chancellor wants to see mock-ups of the entire branding campaign tomorrow at three, including the new stuff he asked for.”

I very nearly laugh. But then, this is Timothy, who’s never made a joke in his life and therefore must be serious. What he’s asking is impossible. He wants copy for a 10-page promotional brochure, a four-page magazine article, and four recruitment pieces—and then he wants a designer to have them all laid out—within 24 hours.

“That’s impossible. We don’t even have copy yet.”

“I didn’t come here for a status report, Erin. I came here to tell you my expectations. And all of those items had better be on my desk by 2:30.”

I watch his retreating back, and I imagine quitting. I imagine showing up tomorrow at 2:30, empty-handed aside from my resignation letter, and saying, “Here’s your campaign, asshole.” It’s the kind of thing that works for other people—I guarantee Harper could do it and somehow wind up floating out of here on wings of glory, moving a week later into a far better job.

But I’m not Harper. My arc has never gone the way of a Lifetime movie with its inevitable triumph. Which means I will not be seeing Brendan as planned, nor experiencing everything else he detailed in the filthy text he sent this morning. That fact alone makes me hate this job more fervently than anything else that’s happened here over the past four years.

I call Brendan and explain that I can’t come over because I will instead be crafting 20 pages of starry-eyed prose about the glories of ECU.

“You sure about that?” he asks. “I’m making fajitas.”

I groan in dismay. “Oh my God. You know that’s my favorite. But I doubt I’ll even have time to eat.”

“Just come over,” he says, sighing. “Bring your laptop. You can work while I cook.”

I wonder if he has any idea that he sounds like a boyfriend right now. A *good* boyfriend. I don’t point it out. He’d find the revelation horrifying.

“We can’t be having sex the whole time,” I warn.

“Erin,” he says, sounding exasperated, “I’m capable of controlling myself when I have to.”

I snort. “I guess I haven’t witnessed that yet.”

“What do you think I was doing,” he counters, “for the two months before I slept with you?”



I ARRIVE AT HIS PLACE EXPECTING HIM TO UNDRESS ME IMMEDIATELY, BUT HE doesn’t.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” he says, grabbing a plate.

He’s wearing my favorite T-shirt, the one that brings out the gold in his skin and makes his eyes look Photoshopped. I instantly regret the prior claims I made about sex, and us not having it.

“I didn’t really mean we couldn’t have *any* sex,” I volunteer, and he just laughs.

I walk toward him, and he turns to me sternly, wielding the tongs like a weapon. “Don’t even think about getting laid until you’re done with your work.”

“I think you’re underestimating how long this is going to take,” I reply, a hint of pleading in my voice.

“That’s okay,” he says, returning to the grill. “Just get your work done. We don’t need to have sex.”

I suspect he’s doing it just to torture me, because *we don’t need to have sex* is not a phrase I ever imagined coming from his mouth. I bet the words burned his throat a little as they came out.



I SHOULD PROBABLY LEAVE AFTER DINNER, BUT I DON’T WANT TO. WE SETTLE in on opposite sides of his couch: me with a laptop, him with a book, legs intertwined. He seems disappointingly unaware of my presence, whereas I am aware of little other than his. Every time he shifts, every time his foot brushes my leg, I grow very aware of the fact that he is there, and that we have not had sex in nearly 18 hours. Just the way he sits with his legs spread

wide makes me think of things I should not.

“A quickie might take the edge off,” I venture.

“Get back to work,” he says, without even glancing up.

Minutes later, I’ve only typed about two sentences, and I am hyper-focused on the fact that his foot has just brushed mine. Such a small, simple motion. It could happen with anyone and be meaningless, except that it's not anyone, it's Brendan, who has the filthiest mind and mouth of anyone I've ever been with. So that little brush of his foot has an entire soundtrack of memories accompanying it.

“I’m having a hard time focusing,” I whine. “Maybe we should...”

He cocks a brow. “Not a chance, blondie. You asked for self control. You’re getting self control.”

Great. Trust Brendan to turn it into a personal challenge.

“You want to try it in the hammock?” I suggest. “I promise I won’t get mad if we fall out.”

He laughs but doesn’t even glance at me.

“Remember when you told me that fantasy you had, with me in the red thong? Well, guess which thong I’m wearing?”

Even that doesn’t work.

“I give up,” I say, pulling off my cardigan. He watches me remove it, and I catch the look in his eyes before he glances away. *That’s* when I realize how to win this battle.

He returns to his book, but seconds later I catch him looking again, surreptitiously, just for a moment.

I am no longer worried about my project. I can get up at 5 AM to finish it. Or maybe Timothy can fucking provide a week’s notice next time. I set the laptop on the couch, still open, and stand. I start taking off my jeans.

"Seriously?" he groans.

"What?" I ask. "I'm not comfortable. They're cutting into my waist."

"Right," he mutters.

I return to the couch and pick up my laptop, laying down so my back is flat, my knees up, feet slightly apart. It makes me think of going to see a gynecologist. But I'm pretty sure it won't make Brendan think of that.

And then I feel his foot skimming the outside of my thong. Skim and retreat. Skim and retreat. I push forward a bit the last time he pulls away, chasing. The next time his foot returns, I release a small huff of air, a slightly desperate noise, and he groans, diving toward me. Before I've even shut my

laptop he's pushed the fabric to the side and put his magical tongue to work.

"You like that, tease?" he demands.

Yes. Too much. I'm already close and he *just* began. After waiting so long, I feel like I've earned this. I want it to last, and I know for a fact that it won't. He adds two fingers and my whole body jolts, my head hanging off the arm of the couch helplessly as I come. I haven't even finished before his pants are down, a condom is on, and he's pushing inside me, knocking the air from my chest.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to stand when I'm done," he grunts.

And say what you will about Brendan, but he always keeps his promises.

Erin
Present

The next afternoon, with 30 minutes to spare, Harper prints the mock-ups.

“You look terrible,” she laughs.

“I *feel* terrible.” If I had a body scan right now, it would show that I am 90-percent coffee, and yet I still can’t keep my eyes open.

“You should walk in there and forcibly shove these up his ass,” she says.

“That would kind of defeat the purpose of staying up all night.”

She sighs. “Yeah, well, you you shouldn’t have done that either.”

I grab the mock-ups and knock on Timothy’s door. “I’ve got your stuff for that meeting.”

He takes a cursory glance at the pieces and hands them back to me. “The meeting was cancelled, so you’ll have a little time to get these cleaned up. Looks like they need it too.”

He returns to whatever he was doing before. I’m forgotten. The stuff I just spent 24 hours on is forgotten. This is where Olivia and Brendan might turn violent, but I’ve never thrown a punch in my life. I’ve never even pulled someone’s hair.

“I stayed up all night working on this.”

“You wouldn’t have had to stay up all night if you’d gotten it done sooner.”

My voice trembles. “I didn’t know you *needed* it done until yesterday

afternoon.”

“Well, now you have extra time to go over these and refine your work,” he says.

I cross my arms over my chest. I hate him. I really fucking hate him. I do not make less than Olivia’s nanny to stay up all night and put up with this shit.

“My work is about as refined as it’s going to get, Timothy,” I reply. “If you need more refinement, consider giving me a damn raise. In the meantime, I’m going home, and I’m going to bed.”

He calls after me, his voice stern and full of reprimand, and I just keep walking, straight to the chancellor’s office, because he needs to put a face with the work he demands at the last minute all the time.

I’m exhausted, running on nothing but rage at this point. I must *look* like I’m running on rage too; when I step into his secretary’s office, she appears slightly alarmed.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

I tell her who I am. I add that I’m a former student, and that I know the chancellor from my days on the track team, which is a bit of a stretch. I only met him a few times, and I guarantee he doesn’t remember me.

A few minutes later, I am ushered into his office. It’s clear by the look on his face that he has no idea who I am. I introduce myself, mentioning that we met a few times at events in honor of Olivia, who’s probably the only ECU graduate to go on to even marginal fame. That softens him up a little. Olivia, in the years since she left, has put our athletics department on the map. He asks what he can help me with.

“I have the marketing campaign you asked for,” I tell him, trying my best not to sound as pissed as I feel. “These pieces are a little rough, since we didn’t learn until yesterday that you needed them, but I thought I’d bring them by.”

It only occurs to me as I slide the pieces forward that I’ve just bypassed our workplace hierarchy. I’m going to be written up for this, at the very least. Probably worse.

The chancellor looks confused. “Marketing campaign?” he says. “I didn’t ask for this.”

I stare at him in confusion for a moment, and then my body goes cold. I think of all the last-minute requests Timothy’s made, and realize most of them coincided with times he wanted to punish me for something. I wonder if

any of those requests came from the chancellor.

I can't believe I'm just figuring this out now. And I can't believe I just risked my job for no reason at all.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "Timothy gave us this project late yesterday and said they were needed today. I thought it must have been something important, given the turnaround time."

"I didn't ask for any of these," he says. He looks at the pieces again. "How on Earth did you get all of this done so fast?"

My rage is gone, and the exhaustion hits me so suddenly I think I could curl up in this chair and sleep.

"We stayed up all night—me and one artist," I say, rising with dejection pressing down on my shoulders. "I'm sorry I interrupted you."

I did all this work for nothing and may very well have gotten myself fired the first time I tried to do something about it.

"Does this happen a lot?" he asks. "Last-minute projects like that?"

"It happens every week."

He nods slowly. "And do you see much of Olivia these days?"

"I went up to watch her run Western States a few weeks ago, and I'm godmother to her kids, so I'll be back for her daughter's christening in a few months."

He tells me to say hello for him. I get the feeling my connection to Olivia matters far more than the marketing pieces I just left on his desk. I can only pray it matters enough that he doesn't rat me out to my boss.



I TELL BRENDAN THE STORY LATER THAT NIGHT.

He groans. "Please explain to me why the fuck you're still there."

"Normal people require this thing called money, Brendan. I have bills." I don't expect him to understand, though. Brendan comes home each night raving about the tour he gave that day, spilling over with plans for bigger and more extensive adventures. His income is almost an afterthought because he has a job he'd do for free.

"But you act like that place is the only job in the entire world," he argues. "There are lots of jobs, and there are lots of jobs you might enjoy, or have a chance of getting promoted at, or not have to deal with a tool like your boss."

“But I like ECU. In terms of marketing jobs, it’s a good cause. What if my next job is marketing cigarettes to children? Or cocaine?”

He cocks a brow. “I haven’t seen a whole lot of cocaine advertising directed at kids.”

“And I might not make what Rob makes, but I’m sure I could make less. If my dad gets fired again, my parents will need help. And Sean always needs something. That’s not changing anytime soon.”

He slaps his palm to his face. “Are you fucking serious right now? You’re talking about two grown-ass men who can handle their own shit.”

“I’ve just made a lot of huge changes at once,” I tell him. “People do that when their lives suck, but mine didn’t suck. It just needed improvement. And I’m worried that if I keep changing everything, I’m going to look back and regret what I’ve done.”

“Are you talking about work?” he asks, not looking at me. “Or are you talking about Rob?”

“I don’t even know anymore. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Three months ago I had job security and a fiancé and a very nice home. I had 20k in savings. Now I have none of those things. Sometimes people burn a bridge because they must. But you’re not supposed to burn them all at once.



I SPEND THE NEXT DAY WAITING TO BE CALLED INTO TIMOTHY’S OFFICE, feeling sick. The call doesn’t come, but it makes me realize just how often I’ve waited here, exactly like I am now, to be punished for something, and typically something that isn’t my fault.

It’s time to face the music: I love my office mates, and I love my school, but my time at ECU has run its course.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

I go to work on Monday, but my tour's been cancelled. Seb, the owner, asks me to go with him to shop for bikes instead. I agree without a second thought. Shopping for bikes is like porn for me. Once it's suggested, it's almost impossible to resist.

The first text from Gabi asking where I am arrives around noon, and it isn't *until* it arrives that I realize I've been waiting for it, bracing myself almost, the way you do before you reach for a light switch when you know it's going to shock you.

It's puzzling even to me, recognizing that I dreaded this text and that I somehow knew it would make me grind my teeth, that I would loosen this tired sigh before I send her a simple reply, telling her I'm looking at bikes.

She's been doing this more and more, ever since the discussion about Erin, keeping tabs on me the moment I'm out of sight.

But my irritation with her over something so mild also makes me feel like an asshole. She's my girlfriend. Of course she wants to know where I am. Why the fuck should that bother me?

But just seconds later comes the next text, asking when I'll be home.

And I'm annoyed anew.

Because I'm annoyed, I tell her I'm not sure, knowing even as I write the words that I'm making the problem worse. Gabrielle is not the type to handle any kind of ambiguity well—she approaches life as if it is science, and she

wants a precise *why* and *when* and *what* for every question. This is probably why laid-back dudes who lead bike tours don't usually wind up with Stanford medical students—the personalities required for each are diametrically opposed.

When the follow-up text comes from her—*why don't you know?*—I do the ultimate dick move and just turn off my phone. I want to enjoy this. I love looking at bikes, and I love testing bikes, and discussing bikes, and she's ruining it by aggravating me. So I'm not going to let her. I'm going to enjoy this, and I'll deal with her afterward.

It's late afternoon by the time I'm done. I head home, checking my phone. There are 32 texts, all of them from her.

She's pissed when I get to the apartment, but I'm pissed too.

"Texting someone 32 times might work with your little pre-med boyfriends," I tell her, "but it's not going to work with me."

Her face falls, which is when I realize I *wanted* to fight with her. I wanted her to stay pissed off. I guess the truth is I want a little air, a break from this thing. I miss not having to be on my best behavior all the time.

She starts to cry, and my irritation vaporizes, replaced by guilt. I'm responsible for this. She's younger than me, and she's also just...young. She has so much less life experience than most 22-year-olds. In this moment, as I watch her weeping, her hair clinging to her face, I know I've made some kind of grave error.

"Gabi," I plead, "don't cry. I'm sorry."

"Are you cheating on me?"

"What? No! I was seriously looking at bikes. That's it."

"I'm sorry," she says, pressing her face into her hands, crying harder. "I'm not good at being with someone. And now that I've slept with you, I feel like there's nothing to keep you coming back."

"Gabi, that's crazy. Of course there is. I like you. Did you think this was all about me sleeping with you a few times and moving on?"

"I don't know. It's what you've done before, right? I love you. I love you so much, Brendan. I don't know what I'd do if you cheated."

She waits there, wide-eyed and broken, wanting me to say it back. And—because I know the truth will hurt her, because I've fucked this whole thing up so badly, and she's leaving in a little over a month—I do.

Erin
Present

Brendan and I have spent most nights at his apartment, rarely venturing outside of it. I enjoy our nights in, but I sometimes wonder if we're staying in for reasons he'd rather not discuss.

"Harper says if there's a zombie apocalypse, you and I will be the only ones to survive," I tell him.

"Because I'm such a badass that no zombie could take me?"

I laugh. "No. Because we never go out in public."

He's quiet for a moment, long enough that I'm sure I'm about to get the speech: *Erin, we are in the bubble; we aren't dating.*

"My friend Beck has a bar in Elliott Falls," he finally says. "A bunch of friends from school are getting together up there this weekend. You want to go?"

"You want me to go *with* you?" I tease. "In public? You mean actually go out, or would I be wearing an invisibility cloak or something?"

"It's so hot when you reference Harry Potter. Yes, with me, in public. Visible. Unless you're worried about Rob finding out. But he doesn't know any of the people coming."

I tell him I'm not worried, but my smile dims. I hate being reminded that Brendan and I have an expiration date.



“SO HE’S *FINALLY* TAKING YOU OUT,” HARPER SAYS AS I GET READY ON Friday.

“It’s not really a date. It’s just a party.”

“Which you are attending with a guy. A guy who invited you and with whom you are fornicating. It is, therefore, a date. And since I’ve conclusively established that you and Brendan are dating...”

“We’re not dating.”

“Just because he doesn’t realize it’s a relationship doesn’t mean it isn’t one,” she counters. “So I’m wondering what you plan to do when Rob comes home?”

The question rests like a barbell on my shoulders, pushing so hard I actually want to rub them in response. “You mean what’s going to happen with me and Rob?”

“You and Rob. You and Brendan. Brendan and Rob. Wow, it just occurred to me that that would make for one un-fucking-believable threesome.”

“We won’t be having a threesome, I can promise you. And in response to your question, I don’t know. I guess no one will be with anyone.” Rob can never find out about this, so it has to end with Brendan at some point. And I don’t see how I could get back together with Rob without telling him what I did, and I can’t, so...that’s probably off the table too.

“Enjoy it while it lasts then,” says Harper. She goes into her room and emerges moments later, handing me a pair of her skinny jeans and a silky blouse that hangs off one shoulder. “I’m not even bothering to look through your clothes for tonight.”

“Size 25 jeans?” I laugh. “Are you *high*? I can’t fit into these.”

“Of course you can. I’m not sure if you’ve followed the styles over the last, I don’t know, 40 years or so, but jeans are supposed to be tight. You’ll look hot.”

“Yeah, it’s going to be really hot when I go home with Brendan and require medical intervention to pull them off,” I reply, yanking them closed.

She grins. “You look good. Believe me, he’ll be happy to help.”

When Brendan shows up, he appears to agree. “Wow,” he says, looking me over, head to foot. He yanks me toward him, free hand sliding over my ass, mouth finding mine for a soft, slow kiss—one that lets me know where he’d like it to lead.

I forget, for a moment, that we are not at his place. When his mouth moves to my neck, I groan so loudly that Harper, two rooms away, laughs.

"Erin," he says, pulling away only slightly, "unless you're going to let me fuck you right here in the foyer, we'd better get in the car."

I grab my purse. "I guess you'll just have to wait," I tell him over my shoulder as I walk out the door.

"I have a feeling," he says, his mouth close to my ear, "that this may be a very short night out."



WHEN BRENDAN TOLD ME HIS FRIEND HAD A BAR, I EXPECTED SOMETHING small. A glorified shack with six bar stools and a jukebox. Instead I discover a sprawling lakeside beauty with multiple decks, already so crowded at 9 PM that we struggle to find a parking space. I don't know why it matters, but I'm thrilled—I know it's not really a date, necessarily, but suddenly it sort of feels like one.

"Wow. This is not what I was expecting."

"Yeah," he says with a half-hearted smile. "It's something."

I'm not sure what happened to the Brendan I drove here with, but the one beside me now seems to have lost his interest in this night out entirely over the course of five seconds.

I slide my fingers through his as we walk toward the bar. "You okay?"

He nods, pulling his hand away as he reaches for the door. Inside, a group of people wave to us from the deck. I follow as he heads in their direction, wondering what he's told them about me, remembering the summer we worked together and how infuriating I found the endless parade of girls he brought out at night. Is that how his friends will see me? Or has he let them know that this is different, ongoing?

I have my answer pretty quickly.

"This is Erin," he tells the group. "My sister-in-law's best friend."

No, I'm not a part of the parade. I'm *less*. He's just explained my presence here in a way that makes it sound like he was forced to bring me. He didn't even introduce me as *his* friend. He finds me a seat at a table with only one available chair, and then he walks away—no kiss, no hand to my shoulder, no promise that he'll return. I smile awkwardly at this group of

people who all know each other while my stomach sinks to the floor.

This meant nothing. This was him feeling forced to bring me out because I said something. I did not realize how much I wanted this to be a date until now, when I discover Brendan doesn't consider it one. And what makes it all worse is that it's clear he wants no one here to think it is either.

"So you're friends with Olivia?" one girl at the table asks. "Are you visiting from Seattle?"

"No," I tell her. "I live here. How do you all know Brendan?"

"College," she replies.

And then they start swapping Brendan stories: Brendan with triplets. Brendan getting stalked by girls on campus. Brendan caught climbing out of a girl's dorm window. I listen in silence with a forced smile on my face.

"He was with a different girl every night," says one of them with a rueful laugh, twisting the wedding ring on her finger.

Another glances over at him, currently talking to a very pretty girl in the corner. "It doesn't look like he's changed much," she says.

The conversation moves on to other things, but my brain does not. As soon as I can extricate myself, I go the bathroom, wishing I could stay here until this horrible night is over. I step into a stall, listening to two girls at the sink plot ways to get their married boss in bed. It reminds me of the conversation I overheard at a work dinner of Rob's, long before last year's disastrous holiday party: Christina saying that the second she got the the chance, she was going down on Rob "like it's the end of the world." Only *Christina* would think giving someone a blow job was a good way to spend her last few moments alive.

I was so mad at the time, and I'm still mad. She's gotten her wish by now, I'm sure. Probably multiple times. I can't tell if what I'm feeling is jealousy, or just pure rage that she got what she wanted.

I sit in the stall listening to them, feeling as if my entire history is littered with men I couldn't trust, men who didn't want me quite as much as they should have. And Brendan is worse than all of them: happy enough to fuck me as long as he never has to acknowledge it to his friends.

I walk out of the bathroom, certain I can't stand another minute of this night. I cross the bar, heading to the front door, when a hand grasps my elbow. I want, so badly, for it to be Brendan. It isn't, of course.

"Hey," the guy says. "I think I know you from somewhere."

He's tall, though not as tall as Brendan, and cute, but not as cute as

Brendan. He's got the same kind of confidence, though—a guy who's used to getting what and who he wants. He starts trying to figure out how he knows me, without success.

“I think I just have one of those faces that looks familiar to everyone,” I tell him.

“Maybe it's because you look like that actress. The British one. Sienna somebody. Do you know who I'm talking about? She—”

Suddenly a massive shape inserts itself between us. Brendan, glaring down at me with the wrath of a hurricane.

“I've been looking for you,” he says.

The guy I've been talking to wraps his arm casually around my back, hanging a hand off my hip.

“Remove your hand,” Brendan says, his voice a low growl, “or I'll fucking help you remove it.”

The guy removes his hand.

Brendan's fingers wind through mine, too tight and restrictive to ever be considered sweet, but instead of leading me to the deck, we move in the opposite direction.

He glares at me. “I thought you were all ready to get back together with Rob?” he spits out.

“I'm not following.”

“If you're planning to get back with Rob, I don't know why you're flirting with that guy.”

“I wasn't flirting. He said he recognized me, and we were trying to figure out from where. And since when do you care? You invited me to this thing and then ditched me.”

“I care,” he says angrily.

He pulls me into the poorly lit hall, and I look up at him, watch as his eyes darken, pupil overcoming iris. He pulls me tight against him, and as much as I don't want to forgive him, I can feel myself softening.

“I want to take you home now,” he says, his voice low, skimming my skin.

It's a weird, primal thing, the way just the sound of his voice and the look on his face can create this shift inside me, making my skin feel stretched too tight over my bones, lips tingling, everything so sensitive, seeming infinitely fragile. I go from feeling nothing to feeling everything in a second. Not that I'll let him know that.

“Maybe I don’t want to go home with you. You talked to pretty much every girl in this bar but me. I’m sure one of them will be game.”

His lashes lower, his mouth hovering so close that I swear I can feel it before it touches mine.

“I don’t want to take any of them home, Erin. And you don’t want me to.”

“I’m still pissed,” I say. But the words are slightly breathless, unconvincing.

“I know,” he says, “but I can probably do a thing or two that will make you forgive me.”



AS WE DRIVE BACK DOWN THE MOUNTAIN IN UTTER SILENCE, I TRY TO FIGURE out what happened tonight, why he acted like he didn’t care that I was there and then did a 180. I glance over at him, making out the the silhouette of his jaw in the moonlight—blade sharp, his mouth grim. He’s every bit as unhappy as I am.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

It takes him a second to reply, and he sounds reluctant when he does. “I’m sorry about before. I shouldn’t have pulled you away from that guy. You probably *should* be meeting people. Seeing what’s out there.”

My heart begins a long, dizzying spiral downward. I don’t want to meet guys. I don’t want to meet anyone who isn’t Brendan or be with anyone who isn’t Brendan. And I don’t want him to want me to.

“Why?”

“Rob’s going to push hard to get back together. You should know what your options are, before he comes home.”

I could tell him I don’t want options. That I can’t imagine getting back together with Rob now. Except that would puncture the bubble, wouldn’t it? The fact that we should not be doing this, that we both believe this must end, is also what makes it possible.

We get to his apartment, and there are no slow kisses, no leisurely removal of clothes. It is quick and silent—as if it is urgent, or as if he wishes it weren’t happening at all.



BRENDAN'S CELL RINGS LATE THAT NIGHT. ANOTHER CALL HE RUSHES TO THE other room to take. I remain in bed, but even from where I lie, I can tell the girl on the other end is yelling at him. I wonder if it's Gabi, or maybe someone else, just as besotted as me, who can't seem to move on.

Either option is painful, because whoever this girl is, he's still taking her calls. Which most likely means she still matters to him, and if tonight was any evidence, she probably matters more than me.

Erin
Present

Several nights later, a phone rings in the middle of the night again. The calls to him have disturbed me so much that it's actually a relief to discover it's for me.

I grab it on the second ring and take it to the other room, but a minute after I've settled on the couch and begun trying to soothe my father, Brendan follows me.

I wave him off. "Go back to sleep," I whisper.

I don't want him here for this. The two times we've driven to Denver, my father was comatose. This—my father sobbing—is worse in some ways.

He shakes his head. "Your dad?" he mouths, and I nod.

He gets his phone, directs Uber to the address my father gives me, and the two of us sit there, me with my head on Brendan's chest, watching the car's progress on his phone while I listen to my father cry on the other one.

"Your dad needs help," he says after we finally hang up.

"He refuses to get any. I tried, and he and my mother both went nuts. It was the summer after my junior year, and my mom threw me out."

His fingers tighten around mine. "I don't know how you did this in high school. You ran track, and you were valedictorian, and then you dealt with this bullshit at night."

I shrug. "Between Sean going to juvie and my dad's stuff, it just felt like someone in the family had to prove to the world we weren't a lost cause."

I still felt like a fraud, though, delivering my speech at graduation. No matter what I persuaded the audience to believe, I knew I was every bit as sick as the rest of my family.

“It’s just a lot of pressure. I don’t know why you never gave up.”

“I can’t just walk away,” I reply. “This is a problem I helped create.”

“How can you say that?” he asks. “You’re not holding a bottle to your father’s mouth every night. You’re not buying Sean coke.”

“I’ve spent my entire life covering for my dad and rescuing him, doing the same thing for Sean. I should have been helping them, but I was no better than my mom. All I did was make it easy for them to get worse. Hell, I’m still helping both of them. My brother and my father are sick, but my mom and I...we’re sick too.”

“That’s why you hid it all from Rob,” he says after a moment. “Not because your family is such a disaster but because you think you’re just as bad. You think he’d like you less if he knew.”

“He would. Anyone would.”

“I don’t,” he says, pulling me closer. “I think maybe I like you better for it.”

Eventually he leads me back to bed, and as he pulls me against him, I feel something changing inside me. I don’t understand him. I don’t understand how he can act like he doesn’t know me when we’re out and take calls from some other girl while I’m here, yet be so perfect at times like this.

Either way, I’m glad I told him. A secret you keep to yourself festers and grows until it begins to seem monstrous in your eyes. But now, in one fell swoop, it isn’t something quite so poisonous, something I can barely stand to acknowledge. Instead, it becomes a part of my history, what led me to where I am. It isn’t pretty, and it isn’t admirable, but it isn’t quite as ugly as it seemed when I kept it to myself.

That night Brendan sleeps closer to me than he ever has, his fingers tracing some secret pattern over my skin as I fall asleep.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

“D o you love me?” Gabi asks every morning.

There are no words for how uncomfortable this question makes me. Because I said it once, I can’t exactly stop saying it now. So she asks every morning, looking up at me with that mixture of expectation and unrest in her face, and I tell her I do. She asks every afternoon. She asks when we go to bed. She asks and asks, and I have to wonder if the reason she keeps asking is because she knows, like I do, that what I say isn’t true.

Her need for constant reassurance begins to wear on me. It’s not enough that we’re in the same place. She has to be right beside me with her fingers wound through mine. She’s jealous of Erin. She’s also jealous of the book in my hand, the television show I’m watching, phone calls to my mother. She’s jealous of anything that directs my attention away from her. She seems to sense, though, when she’s pushed me too far—just when I get to the point that I’m wondering if I can deal with this shit for even a few more weeks, she starts taking off her clothes.

I fall for it every fucking time.



ON A RARE AFTERNOON WITHOUT HER AROUND, I GO ONLINE AND LOOK AT pictures from the wedding. It's an exercise in masochism, but I can't seem to stop. I remember watching Erin walk down the aisle. It was the moment I finally knew I could commit. God, I wish things had happened differently. I wish she'd been willing to hear me out. Mostly, I wish I'd been worthy of her in the first place.

When Gabi gets home from her tour, I don't really feel like having sex. That makes her cry, of course. *Everything* seems to make her cry these days.

She asks if I'm cheating. Is jerking off to thoughts of your best friend's girlfriend cheating? I doubt it. I tell her I'm not.

She isn't reassured because she knows I *never* turn her down. It even surprises me a little, the fact that I don't want to. I guess maybe I'm kind of bored with our whole thing.

Or maybe it's that I know it would be better with someone else.

Erin
Present

My late-night discussion with Brendan stays with me. If I have a hand in what's gone wrong, perhaps the solution isn't to keep doing it. Perhaps the solution is to take my hand out. But can I? Can I really not answer my mother's calls? Can I really not bail Sean out the next time he's struggling? I sort of doubt it.

I call Sean for the first time in nearly two weeks, and the moment he answers, I know something is wrong—first and foremost because he doesn't sound happy to hear from me. This is always a bad omen with Sean. Second, because he volunteers no information, another bad sign.

"You sound distracted," I say. "Are you in the middle of something?"

"Uh, no. Just studying."

Something feels off about the conversation. I couldn't begin to pinpoint what it is, but I know when Sean is lying, and he's definitely lying right now.

I ask how classes are going, and in the lag between my question and his answer, my stomach slides to my feet. Sean only needs a few credits to graduate, but I've already paid tuition for the counseling program he'll start in September, so we're on a fairly rigid timeline. I wonder if he's already flushed my life savings down the toilet somehow.

"Oh," he finally says. "Yeah. They're good."

"What are you taking again?" I ask, though I know exactly what he's taking. I filled out his registration form myself when he missed the summer

deadline.

"Hey, I've got to run," he says. "Can I call you back?"

There's nothing I can do but agree, knowing he won't call back. Knowing something's gone wrong, and he's going to avoid me until he's fixed it. Or made things worse trying. I don't want to keep feeling this way, but I don't see how I could possibly abandon him either.



JUST AFTER LUNCH, TIMOTHY RETURNS FROM A MEETING WITH A SLAM OF THE office door that rattles the file drawers of my desk.

"Erin," he says. "My office. Now."

When I walk in, he is crumpling up one of the new campaign brochures, and then he swivels in his seat and throws it at me. I watch in shock as it bounces off my arm and hits the floor.

"The chancellor's notes are on there," he sneers. "Did you really think you'd get away with going above me?"

I stare from him to the paper on the floor.

"Pick it up. Fix it. And don't let me see your face until it's done."

I'm so shocked that I feel blank—not worried, not scared, not even angry. But I know I'm completely over this situation. "No," I reply quietly. "You don't get to treat me like this. You don't get to treat anyone like this." I return to my cubicle, determined to do what I should have done long ago.

I grab my purse and walk across campus to Human Resources, and as I go my shock finally gives way to rage. I'm ready to report him for this and a hundred other things he's done. The late nights, the disrespect, the threats. The list grows in my head as I walk, and comes to a screeching halt when I reach their office and find it closed. A note on the door informs me they're away for a team-building retreat and will return after the weekend.

I'm left with a whole lot of anger and no outlet for it. Fifteen minutes later I find myself in Brendan's apartment, ranting, and it's not until my whole story has spun out that it occurs to me that showing up here unannounced is a girlfriendish thing to do, the kind of thing I'd expect him to hate. Fortunately, he's so pissed off on my behalf that he doesn't seem to notice. "I have an easier way to deal with this than going to HR," he says, curling a fist.

“You and Olivia. She suggested I build a car bomb the last time he bothered me.”

“I promise I won’t use a weapon,” he says.

“Brendan, this isn’t the Wild West. Physical violence solves nothing.”

“You know who says that? People who know they can’t win a fight. I don’t have that problem.”

I smile. He is ridiculous but also sweet. I shouldn’t, but I like his outdated chivalry. “I am *forbidding* you to beat him up, Brendan.”

“Fine,” he says. “My tours are done, and we both have an afternoon free for once, so we might as well make the most of it.”

“Should I get undressed?” I ask with a smirk.

“I was thinking about going to a vineyard,” he replies. “But I like the way your mind works.”

The vineyard belongs to a friend of his. It hasn’t officially opened yet, but a small shop on the ground floor is selling wine and cheese. Brendan buys a bottle of pinot noir and way more food than we could possibly eat—four kinds of cheese, crackers, prosciutto, Marcona almonds—and leads me across the grounds to a spot near the lake.

It’s a perfect day for a picnic: a light breeze, sunny but not hot. I spread the blanket, and he lays out the food. Does he realize how romantic this is? It may be the most romantic, date-type thing I’ve ever done in my life. All we need is a violinist and maybe some swans and we’re straight out of a Nicholas Sparks novel.

He opens the bottle of pinot and pours some into plastic cups for both of us.

"You bought a lot of cheese. We're never eating all this."

"Don't try to act like you're a delicate little sparrow," he says. "I saw you pound a large movie popcorn last week, remember?"

I flush, remembering what else occurred in that theater.

He hands me a glass of wine. "You're blushing, Erin."

"No, I'm not."

He catches my eye, his mouth turning up almost imperceptibly. "What are you thinking about?"

"Syria," I reply primly. "Did you know we've now got a large percentage of our military deployed to Syria?"

I completely made this up, but I don’t see Brendan reading *The Wall Street Journal* too often, so I’m probably safe.

"Do you always blush when you're talking about Syria?" he asks. "Where, by the way, we do not have a large military presence. Just admit that you'll never enter a theater again without thinking about last week."

"Will you?"

That light in his eyes turns feral. God, it's ridiculous how little it takes to make me want him. He takes the wine from my hand. "Yeah, but there are one or two more things I wish we'd done there, though."

He pushes me onto my back, wrapping a hand under one knee to pull my legs apart. "What are you doing, Brendan?" I ask, but my voice has already gone breathy and slightly desperate. He pushes my skirt up around my waist. "Someone could see us."

"They can't. I've checked every angle from the main building." He slides my panties off and pockets them. "And sex out here is on my bucket list."

"You're sure no one can see us?" I ask.

"Positive."

I smile. "Then get on your back. I have a bucket list too."

Erin
Present

On Monday, Brendan goes back to Boulder to see his mother, who is getting her final round of radiation this afternoon. Bringing me with him would give her false hope about us as a couple, so I understand why he doesn't ask me to come. But it still hurts.

I stop by Human Resources on my way in to work. They've apparently done enough team building that they can do their jobs today, but I hate the counselor from the moment I enter her office. She speaks to me in an overly soft voice, but there's something patronizing there too, as if she's humoring me, before I've even said a word.

I tell her about the incident, about Timothy's habit of putting assignments on my desk late in the day and demanding they be done by morning. When I conclude, she asks me why I didn't report this sooner.

"I came by on Friday," I reply. "But the note on the door said you were at a retreat."

"You could have emailed, though, or left a message." Her voice is still gentle, but there's an undeniable message of *you fucked up* underlying it.

"Or I could come back first thing Monday morning, which is what I'm doing," I reply.

"The problem, Erin, is that when an employee comes in to file a complaint after she's already been written up, it looks somewhat suspicious."

"Written up?" I ask. "I haven't been written up."

“Timothy submitted a complaint Friday afternoon. He said you refused to complete your work and walked out of the office without requesting leave or informing anyone. He also said you’ve shown a pattern of ‘volatile’ behavior over the last few months.”

“He crumpled up a brochure and threw it at me, then told me to pick it up and fix it,” I tell her. “Was I just supposed to *obey*?”

“His version is somewhat different,” she says.

And right then I know his version is *very* different, and she believes him.

“You’re welcome to file a complaint,” she continues. “Just be aware that your credibility is suspect, under the circumstances.”

When she hands me a brochure *I* wrote about the Employee Assistance Program, it takes every ounce of restraint I possess not to ball it up and hurl it at her, since that kind of behavior is apparently not a big deal around here.

I fume all day long. I fume all evening. The only person I want to discuss this with is Brendan, but he’s not here. I lunge toward my phone when it rings late, assuming it’s him.

Seeing Rob’s name instead is an unhappy surprise. Until now he’s respected my request that he not call, and I’m not sure why I answer. It’s mostly guilt, I suspect.

He asks what I’ve been doing—a difficult question to answer honestly, since I spend every free minute with Brendan—so I focus on work. I tell him what Timothy did, about my complaint to HR, and he advises me to make sure I document everything that happens, and note anything actionable. I’ve been so busy maligning Rob since he left that I’d forgotten his strengths—he’s smart, and focused, and no one is better in a crisis. If there’s ever an apocalypse, Rob will be the one person who acquires food and shelter without breaking a sweat.

As we get off the phone, he tells me he wishes we hadn’t broken up, that he misses me. Though I choose not to say the same, talking to him has reminded me of something I absolutely *do* miss, something I don’t have right now: I miss being with someone I know for a fact is mine. I miss that a lot.

Erin
Present

On Friday I'm on my way to meet Brendan at his friend Beck's bar, already late thanks to Harper's insistence that I allow her to add a few highlights to my hair, when Rob calls. I overlooked it the first time, but now he's pushing it. I hold my temper only because it's 3 AM in Amsterdam, and nobody calls at 3 AM without a reason.

"I was just on my way out," I tell him.

"With a guy?" he asks.

I sigh. "Rob, I think this isn't a good line of discussion, for either of us."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"That's just it. I don't want to know. It doesn't benefit anyone."

"I miss you, Erin," he says. "I miss you so damn much. I wish I'd never let you go. I wish I'd never left in the first place."

I feel almost sick with guilt. He made mistakes, but I do care about him. I don't want him to be unhappy, so I hate what I have to say next.

"Rob, I think it was probably for the best."

The silence on his end of the phone makes me feel even worse. I've heard words like that before, the kind that land like a punch to the gut. I hate that I'm the one responsible.

"You sound like you don't want to start over," he finally says.

"I changed a lot when I was with you," I tell him, "in ways that weren't great for me. I'm not saying it was your fault, or even that we weren't happy

together, but...I'm happier now."

There. I said it. I wish I felt proud of myself for my honesty, but really I just feel sick.

"I had no idea I was making you unhappy before. You have to at least give me a chance."

"Rob..." I begin, but I don't know what to say after that. "I just don't see it working out."

"It will," he says. "You'll see. I can change. And when I come home I'm going to prove it to you."

Except I don't want him to change. I don't want him to prove anything. I want him to walk away.



I'M NEARLY AN HOUR LATE BY THE TIME I FIND BRENDAN, SITTING AT A TABLE with friends. We haven't been out with other people since the disastrous party a few weeks back, so I approach warily. He stands and pulls out the chair beside him, which I guess means he's not going to act like he doesn't know me tonight, but it's a little sad that I've got the bar set so low.

"So what happened?" he asks, pouring me a beer. "You were supposed to be here an hour ago."

"Sorry," I sigh. "Rob called."

The softness leaves his face. "It's the middle of the night there. And I thought you told him not to call."

"I did."

He sets the pitcher down heavily. "So is this first time you've heard from him?" It sounds like an accusation, which is ridiculous—*he's* the one who doesn't want a relationship. How can it possibly matter if I've spoken to Rob before?

"No," I say, a little defensively.

It feels like I can't win with Brendan sometimes. He wouldn't even be spending time with me right now if he knew I'd called it off with Rob for good. These are *his* rules. He can't get mad at me for following them.

"So what did he want?"

I sigh, running a finger over the condensation on my mug. "Just to talk."

"Talk about what?" he asks, his voice tight.

I frown. "I don't know. Just stuff. What's going to happen when he comes home, that kind of thing."

He sets his glass down, too hard, and his chair scrapes the floor as he pushes away from the table. "I'm gonna get another round," he announces. He doesn't even glance at me as he goes, just leaves me there with a bunch of people I barely know, all of them pretending not to notice the sudden tension between us.

His friends continue their conversation but I struggle to follow it. I'm too busy trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

Is he pissed? He seems it, but why? He's the one who doesn't want a relationship, who brings me out with him and acts like I'm his sister.

I glance toward him at the bar. He's not alone—there's a ridiculously beautiful girl hanging all over him. Literally. She's got one hand on his shoulder and the other on his arm, leaning against him. And he might not be encouraging it, but he sure as hell doesn't appear to be *discouraging* it.

My blood begins to pulse behind my ears. The roar is so loud, I can barely hear anything, although the sound of Brendan returning to his seat is as explosive as a detonating bomb.

"You guys remember Paulina?" he asks, introducing the girl from the bar.

The night is warm, but suddenly I'm shivering, the fair hair on my arms standing on end.

I knew one day Brendan would be done with me and return to girls exactly like Paulina, the same kind of girls he always left with back when I was in school. I just didn't realize it would feel like this, that it would cut this way and rob me of breath and leave me half blind. And I didn't realize it was going to happen *now*, in front of me. Him bringing that girl here hurts more than anything Rob did in all of our years together. The pain begins inside me, a laceration that starts mid-chest and slices backward to the base of my spine.

Brendan and his friends are moving around, trying to make room for Paulina at the table. A part of me doesn't want to give up my ground, wants to stay here and fight for him, charm him, lure him back. But I will not lower myself to fighting for a man, especially one who's treating me the way Brendan is right now, and my anger is on the cusp of turning to tears—just the kind of crazy, emotional response Brendan dreads from any female.

"Take my chair," I tell her, rising, the words as small and cold as chips of ice.

"Where are you going?" Brendan asks.

I stare at him, not even trying to hide my disgust. “Anywhere you aren’t.”

I walk out of the bar, so angry I can’t even think. I pull up Uber on my phone, determined to get back to Harper’s before I make an even bigger ass of myself than I just did inside.

I’m still waiting for them to locate a driver when the phone is wrenched from my hand.

“Give me my phone,” I demand.

“No,” Brendan says, moving toward the back of the lot. I assume that’s where his Jeep is parked, but it’s too dark in back to say for sure.

He’s moving so fast I have to run to catch up to him. Between the darkness and my three-inch heels, it’s harder than it sounds. “Give me back my fucking phone!” I shout as I approach.

He rounds on me. “What’s your rush, Erin? Eager to have another romantic chat with Rob?” My eyes have adjusted to the darkness just enough to see the rage in his eyes, though he has no right to be angry.

“What do you care?” I yell. “You *obviously* weren’t going home alone. And since I’m clearly not enough for you, just go back inside and get her.”

“I don’t want her. I didn’t even invite her to the table. She just followed me there.”

Part of me wants to believe him, but another part of me insists it’s time to face facts. What happened tonight is going to happen eventually—when Brendan tires of me, or when Rob comes home—and when it does I’ll be destroyed. That’s why you don’t give yourself to someone with whom there’s an expiration date; because you’re probably not getting all of yourself back when it ends.

Brendan swings my door open so roughly I half expect it to come off in his hand. “Get in,” he growls.

“I’m not getting in your fucking car. Give me back my phone. I don’t need this shit.”

“I think you do,” he replies, and I find myself pressed against the Jeep. His mouth lands on mine at nearly the same moment, his fingers digging into my back, pulling me so tight against him I can barely get a full breath. It’s not Brendan’s usual kiss—there’s something rough and desperate about it, the rasp of his unshaved jaw scraping my skin, the hard press of his mouth and the thrust of his tongue. I’ve never been so excited in my life, and I’ve also never been so heartbroken. Every bad thing I’ve felt over the past hour is something I know I’m going to feel again.

I hear the sound of his zipper, and then his fingers slide between my legs, pushing my thong to the side.

"Already wet," he says smugly. "That didn't take long."

He lifts me against the car and pushes inside me so hard that I feel winded from it. He pins me there, effortlessly, capturing my small moans with his mouth. The relentless slap of his skin against mine is the only sound I hear.

"Oh, God," he groans. "This...*fuck*."

He doesn't complete the thought, and he doesn't need to. Sex with Brendan is always amazing, but this is different. Way different. It's only just started, and I'm already close.

His hands tighten under my ass as he thrusts harder, once, twice, my back thumping against the door of the Jeep, my breathing nearly as harsh as his. He buries his mouth in my neck. "Christ," he groans. "I'm not gonna last."

I dig my fingers into the bunched muscles beneath his shirt, tighten myself around him. "Don't squeeze like that," he pleads.

Except I can't help it. Because I can't last either.

"Oh, God," I moan, my head going backward, eyes squeezed shut. It's so good that I hear nothing, don't care that we're in public, am only vaguely aware of the low growl in his chest as he comes.

He's still holding me up against the car, his head pressed to my shoulder.

"Holy shit," I whisper. "What the hell just happened?"

"I think we just had sex in a parking lot."

I sigh. "Not that, smart ass. I just meant it felt different."

He lifts me just enough to pull out, and when he does, a rush of fluid follows.

"Shit," I gasp, staring at my legs. "You didn't wear a condom. That's why it was different."

"I'm sorry," he says, flinching. "I got carried away. We can get a morning-after pill or something, right?"

"I'm not worried about *pregnancy*," I reply. "I'm on the pill."

His jaw drops. "Then why have we been using condoms this whole time?"

"Brendan, you've slept with more girls than most men even *know* over the course of their lives. Call me crazy, but I don't feel like dying of AIDS just yet."

He rolls his eyes. "I've done my fair share of sleeping around, Erin, but I'm always careful."

"You're really going to tell me that right now?" I ask, glancing down.

"The only other girl I haven't used a condom with since *high school* was Gabi," he says. "You realize what this means, right? No more condoms."

The idea has its appeal, but I still push him away. "Who says I plan to sleep with you again?"

There's a hint of a smirk around his mouth. "We both know you'll sleep with me again."

I fold my arms across my chest. "You hurt me when you brought that girl to the table. Maybe this isn't a real relationship, but if you bring me somewhere, you don't let someone else hang all over you. How would you have reacted if I'd done that to you?"

His jaw clenches. His mouth opens, then closes again. "I just—" he begins, and then stops himself with a sigh. "You're right. I'm sorry." He closes the distance between us, so close that I can feel the whisper of his breath over my skin. "I'm so, so sorry." He presses his mouth to the corner of my lips, to my cheekbones, my eyelids. "Let's go home, okay?" he asks.

I tell myself I'm forgiving him because he called it *home*, as if his place is ours, and because he's so full of regret. But the truth is I was probably going to forgive him no matter what.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

I come home from a tour, and Gabi is crying. My shit is spread all over the floor—personal shit she had no business going through. Sitting beside her on the bed are pictures of Erin. Erin grinning ear-to-ear after a crazy bike ride. Erin in her bridesmaid’s dress with her head thrown back, laughing. Erin turning back toward the camera with that knowing look of hers.

“Is this her?” Gabi cries.

I grit my teeth. “You had no right to go through my stuff.”

“I was cleaning the closet,” she says. “It fell.”

I don’t believe her, but I also feel like I’ve driven her to this—she’s insecure because I’ve made her insecure, because I told her I’m not going with her to California, and when she talks about leaving for Stanford, my words of regret sound as forced as they are. Because when I sleep with her, I am thinking of someone else, and even in our best moments, I know I’d be happier with someone else.

Only an asshole would ask her to move out at this point, when she has just a little over a week left in Italy and nowhere else to go. But God knows I wish that I could. I hate that she went through my stuff. I hate coming home to her at all, if I’m being honest. Sometime over the past week or so it’s like a light switched off inside her. Everything about her just seems dark now—she’s either angry or sad, every minute of the day.

She demands to know why I kept all of the photos of Erin. I tell her I didn't remember they were there, that Erin and I are barely even friends. At least the last part is true. Erin and I aren't friends. She's hated me ever since the night of the wedding, and while I could never hate her, I hated being around her during those weeks before I left Colorado. I hate who I became around her and Rob, how bitter I felt, how petty and resentful. So Erin and I aren't friends now, and we never will be. If it were up to me, I'd never lay eyes on her again.

Erin
Present

Things feel different with Brendan after our argument. All weekend he is gentler with me, as if it's possible he's changed his mind about what this could be. I still want the kind of future I once envisioned with Rob: stability and children and Little League games. A small piece of me has begun to hope, though, that I could have some version of that future with Brendan instead.

We spend Saturday night inside. He convinces me to make him coconut bars and while I bake he sits on the kitchen counter with a map, discussing the first week-long bike tour he's planning for next spring. I catch myself wishing I could come with him. It seems like he kind of wishes I could go too.

Later, we're lying in bed. The song we danced to at Will and Olivia's wedding comes on and he pulls me to my feet to dance, though I'm clad in nothing but a T-shirt. God, I wish things had happened differently that night. I wish the deejay's announcement hadn't interrupted us. Though Brendan had been awful all summer, I'd somehow known there was more to it. For every shitty thing he'd said, he'd done something sweet—making sure I got to my car safe at night, changing the radio to my favorite station when I came into work. He'd even washed my car one day, although when I'd tried to thank him, he'd insisted it got wet “accidentally” when he was cleaning off the kayaks.

I still remember the way I practically ran back to the reception to find him, once Will and Olivia had gone. When Rob told me Brendan had already left with the wedding coordinator, I felt my heart cracking so thoroughly I was sure it would never go back together.

"We've danced to this before," I tell him.

He smiles. "I know. I wanted to kiss you so badly I'm still not sure how I held back until I got you around the corner."

"I wanted you to."

"Sometimes I wish that night had gone a different way," he admits. "I wish we'd had this before I met Gabi."

"So you were ready for a relationship then," I venture, "but you're not ready now?"

"I thought I was ready then," he corrects. "It all worked out for the best. I just would have hurt you."

"If I got hurt, that would have been on me, not you. How someone reacts to what you've done isn't your responsibility. It's not even your business."

"No," he says. "It's a pattern with me. Gabi's not the only girl I ever hurt. There were girls in high school, in college. One of them left school because of me, another one freaked out and started doing meth. I just bring it out in people."

"You're giving yourself way too much credit, Brendan. You didn't bring the crazy out in those girls, you just chose poorly. Normal people don't drop out of school over a break-up, or do drugs. Can you see Olivia reacting like that? Or me? Just allow yourself to consider the possibility."

He pulls me closer. "I'm trying. I really am."

It's the first time in all the weeks we've been doing this that it feels like he's offered me a sliver of hope.



ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, WE RETURN FROM KAYAKING, AND HE PULLS ME toward the hammock. We curl up together, a light blanket over us while the breeze from the French doors streams in.

His mouth ghosts over my cheek, his nose brushing across my skin, as if he's trying to memorize me using all of his senses at once. "I like you best just like this," he says, his tongue flickering out to taste my neck before he

lowers his mouth and pulls at the skin, drawing a small, needy sigh from my throat. "Just you, sunburned and sandy." He pulls the blanket aside and slips my T-shirt over my head. The hammock swings and he puts a foot on the floor to steady us. "With miles and miles of skin to taste." His hand skates up the inside of my thigh, brushing lightly until it is exactly where he wants it, and then he draws a nipple into his mouth, pulling on it just enough to keep me on a tightrope between pain and pleasure. "So I can listen to you gasp." And then his fingers slide inside me, and I arch toward him, helplessly.

"Brendan," I moan. "More."

He rolls over so he's above me. "Is that what you need, Erin?" he breathes as he pushes inside me, his eyes squeezing shut for a moment as if it's just too much to keep them open.

"Yes," I sigh. "That."

The light glimmers and dances around us, and I hear only the sound of our breath and his quiet words. I wish we could stay here, just like this, for hours and days and weeks.

I love him.

The words arrive like something I've known all along. Just like when, as a child, I'd bury my feet in the sand. I knew exactly what was there, if I was only willing to look. But I didn't want to see it.

I don't want to feel this way. Rob hurt me, but Brendan—he could destroy me entirely, irreparably. And it seems almost inevitable that he will.

Erin
Present

It's so early when I pull up to Harper's house on Monday that the sun has barely made an appearance, yet it's already warm. I climb out of the car, grabbing my bag with the weekend's clothes shoved inside haphazardly, and jolt to a halt as if I've hit a glass wall.

There, on Harper's steps, sits Rob.

I'm so stunned that I say nothing, just stand there staring, holding my weekend bag, undoubtedly looking exactly like I feel: as if I've been caught red-handed.

It went without saying that if we broke up there'd be other people. I never doubted for a minute that he'd take Christina up on her generous offers, if he hadn't already. But seeing me stroll in at 5 AM is the equivalent of having it said aloud.

I've never seen Rob's face as long as it is right now, and he doesn't even know the worst part.

"I guess I don't have to ask if there's someone else," he says.

There's nothing accusatory in his voice. He's just upset, which is so much worse.

"I...didn't know you were here," I reply lamely. "Have you been waiting long?"

"I came here straight from the airport last night."

That shouldn't make me feel guilty—I didn't ask him to do it, and I didn't

know he was here—but I feel guilty anyway. Especially when I consider what I was doing during those hours.

“I thought you had six more weeks there.”

“I did,” he says. “But I wanted to see you.”

He stands, looking thinner and less sure of himself than he did before he left, and I'm struck by an intense wave of familiarity, homesickness. There are parts of our life that I miss, and seeing him reminds me of all of them at once. I could have been *happier* when we were together, but I also wasn't *unhappy*.

He wraps me in his arms. This is familiar too, all of it. His smell and his size and the way we line up together, and suddenly I grieve everything that's gone. With Brendan, I exist in a sick cycle of hope and panic—one day cautiously optimistic, and the next certain the end is coming. That was never the case with Rob, and it strikes me that there's a lot to be said for knowing where you stand with someone.

He pulls back after a moment. “I don't want any details. I never, ever want any details. I just need to know if it's serious.”

Serious.

Could I possibly claim that it's serious, when the end is imminent? When Brendan won't even acknowledge me in public? Could I possibly claim that it's *not* serious when it feels like Brendan is holding my heart tight in his careless fist?

“No. It's not,” I reply.

The sun falls across the yard in a sudden stripe of muted gold. I tell him I've got to get work.

“Can I see you later?” he asks.

“How long are you in town?”

He swallows. “I was hoping to talk to you about that. Do you think we could meet for lunch?”

It feels too soon. It feels like I need a month before I hear what he might have to say. But that's just cowardice, so I reluctantly agree.

He stares at me for a long second. “You're so beautiful, Erin. I know I've said it a hundred times, but I'm seeing you now, and I can't believe I ever let you go without a fight.”

He leaves, and I find myself fervently hoping he hasn't decided to fight for me now, either.



AS MUCH AS I WANT TO CALL BRENDAN, I DON'T. I WANT TO TALK TO ROB first, as if there's anything that might be said during our conversation that would keep Brendan from ending whatever this is we have going. Instead I sit at my desk all morning, so sick with nerves I'm barely capable of pretending to work.

I'm sure it doesn't escape Timothy's attention. He's been quiet since the incident that led us both to HR, but I suspect he's documenting my every move—and on his best behavior so I have nothing to document in return. He doesn't comment when I leave for lunch, but he watches me go. I'd bet a hundred bucks that he scurries right back to his desk to make a note of it the second the door shuts.

Rob is already waiting when I get to the restaurant. His face, as I approach the table, is wistful and hopeful at once. We chitchat at first, like business associates. He asks after my family, and I give him the high points. I ask after his, and he does the same, although I doubt he has to do quite as much selective sharing.

"It's so good to see you," he says.

He reaches across the table, his fingers twining with mine. I'd have expected to want my hand back, but I don't. We've done this for so long, it's almost muscle memory at this point.

"I didn't even want to go the house," he says, "knowing you weren't there. Except you never even liked that house, did you?"

I shrug. "Maybe. But relationships are about compromise."

"Yeah," he agrees. "Except you did all the compromising. And because you gave everything up so easily, I thought none of it mattered to you. But it did. You stopped even asking me for the things you wanted."

If he were Brendan, I could explain that this is how I was raised: you ask for nothing, you fight for nothing, you keep everyone happy—whatever the cost. But Rob knows nothing of my past. This is probably why he understands so little about me. Everything I am was created in that environment. And to reveal any of it would be to reveal all of it, so the girl he knows is basically just someone I've substituted for the real me.

"I think maybe we just never had enough overlap, Rob. We're like a Venn diagram where the intersect is tiny."

"I disagree," he says. "Because what I want most—more than my job or

anything else—is you. I never put you first, Erin, but that's going to end now. I swear it."

Suddenly this conversation feels like a train without brakes.

I'm sleeping with your best friend. These are the words that could stop it, were I able to utter them. "Rob, you're still based in Amsterdam. I—"

"I'm home for good," he says, cutting me off. "I told them I either came home or I was quitting. I'll have to fly back once a month, but that's it."

"Why?" I ask weakly. What I want is to say *Why in God's name did you do that? And please don't have done it for me.*

"Every success I ever had was a success for *us*, was something I saw benefitting us as a couple, benefitting our kids. Without you, it's just money, and it's meaningless."

There was a time when I would have loved to hear those words, but now they simply bounce off my surface. He is a good man. He will make someone very happy. But that someone isn't me.

"Please don't decide right now," Rob says. "I know I fucked up, and I just want a chance."

He asks if we can go to dinner later in the week, just as friends. Because I can't think of a workable reason why not, I nod, ruing the hours it means being away from Brendan.

And then I remember: there is no more time with Brendan. Every single plan, every single hour we might have had, died the moment Rob's plane landed.



I DRIVE BACK TO THE OFFICE FEELING SHAKEN. I COULD EASILY CALL Brendan on the way, but I don't. I know what I want him to say—that he loves me, that he doesn't want it to end, that we can find a way to make it work—and I also know he is not going to say it.

I'm not sure I can be trusted to make this call with an audience, so I wait until Timothy leaves the office and Harper steps away from her desk. When Brendan answers, I suck in the rasp of his "hey" like I can taste it. I hear the sound of glasses in the background, the murmurs of a crowd.

"Are you out?" I ask.

"I'm at Beck's place."

It's only 3 PM. I've never known Brendan to be out drinking in the middle of the day, at least not since he came home. I don't know why, but it feels like a bad sign.

I tell him Rob's home, my stomach tipping, lurching—that same roller coaster I've been on since he first kissed me weeks ago, only so much worse.

"I heard," he says, still distracted. I hear the unmistakable clink of pool balls crashing.

I didn't expect that he'd already know. I didn't expect that he'd sound like he doesn't give a fuck either.

"Don't worry," he says. "I didn't tell him about us. Hang on. It's my turn to break."

I've slept with him pretty much every day for six weeks. I have spent every free moment with him. But this conversation isn't even important enough for him to pause his fucking game? I feel that infinitely small wisp of hope gasp and die in my chest.

He comes back to the phone. "Are you going to tell him about us?" he asks. "I don't want to be blindsided."

I wanted him to offer something, at least express a little regret at the ending, but instead he sounds like some cavalier dick who had other plans tonight anyway. "Is that all you have to say?" I demand, a lump in my throat.

"What else am I supposed to say?" he says. "It was fun while it lasted. I hope it all works out for you guys, if that's what you want."

Already I'm crying so hard that my shoulders are shaking and tears are dripping down my face. I will not give him the pleasure of knowing he's responsible for them, so I just hang up the phone.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

Gabi has only a few days left in Italy when we take off to lead a three-day tour of Tuscany. I'm relieved that Seb and Paolo are coming with us—I will need *anyone* who isn't Gabi to talk to while we're gone. My game plan is to make a point of hanging with the guys at night, talking about bikes or whatever until Gabi gets bored and goes to bed. I think it's the only way I'll make it through the the trip without losing my shit.

It's not until we arrive at the meeting point that I discover I'm completely fucked. Unlike our typical clientele—married 40-year-olds, active seniors—this tour group consists entirely of young, hot girls. Gabi's looking from me to them, her smile long gone. I haven't uttered a word to these women, and I'm already in trouble.

The best looking of them is Tatiana, a dead ringer for Selena Gomez. And although I avoid her, Tatiana does not avoid me. She talks to me, rides near me, sits close at lunch. Gabi has gone out of her way to make it clear I am taken. Tatiana doesn't seem to care.

"You need to sleep with her," Paolo insists. "It's a crime not to sleep with her."

"I can't," I say, glancing toward Gabi, who's been watching me nonstop since the tour began.

I could have said "I don't want to," but it would have been a lie. I want

to, and the clingier Gabi gets, the more I wish that Tatiana, with her tongue ring and the hint of a tattoo at the small of her back, was an option.

I am polite to Tatiana, nothing more, but Gabi is upset. Every night she wants to go to the room immediately, and because it's not worth the fight that will ensue, I go with her.

On the last night of the trip, we all eat dinner together back in Florence. This is usually a celebration, but tonight it feels instead like a test of diplomacy, one I am failing miserably. On the one side of me is Tatiana, "accidentally" pressing her tits against my arm all night and talking about anal, and on the other is Gabi, sulking and unrelentingly bitchy to everyone at the table.

When dinner concludes, they all head to a bar down the street, while I return to my apartment with a pissed-off girl who will undoubtedly spend the next five hours crying, yelling at me, or both.

The door isn't even shut before she starts.

"You want to sleep with her, don't you?" she demands.

I know I should say no, but the answer seems so obvious—as if she's asked if I want to continue breathing oxygen—that I don't say anything at all.

This is apparently not the correct course of action.

Her face sags, waiting for a denial that does not arrive. "Go sleep with her then."

I'll admit it. I feel hopeful, like I've been offered a chance at parole. Some stupid voice in my head suggests that maybe Gabi sees this the way I do—that she only has two days left in Italy, and we're not getting along anymore, so how could it really matter?

"You don't mean that," I venture.

"You would, wouldn't you?" she cries. "You'd totally sleep with her right now if you could!" She grabs my backpack and hurls it at me. "Get the fuck out."

"Gabi—"

"Get out!" she screams. "Get out get out get out get out! I never want to see you again!" She throws a book and barely misses.

I'm about to point out that it's my apartment we're in when she picks up a knife. I decide that discussion can wait.

I wander down the street, uncertain at first where to go. And then I realize I'm free. Gabi kicked me out. She said she never wanted to see me again. Which means, for the first time in months, I can do whatever the fuck I want.

I go to the bar where Tatiana awaits. I tell her Gabi kicked me out, and she informs me, tongue piercing flashing in the light, that she has a hotel room to herself. And then her fingers are in my hair and she's dragging my mouth to hers.

I didn't realize just how stifled I've actually been until this moment. I'm free again. I can go home with anyone I want, I can spend an entire night without listening to someone cry, without having to offer assurances I don't mean. Tatiana climbs into my lap and I swear, as she does it, that I am never going to be trapped again.

And as soon as I swear it, I hear the unmistakable sound of Gabi, crying like I've just broken her heart.

Erin
Present

How could it mean so little to him?
And how did I ever convince myself it was otherwise?
I think back to the way he looked at me in the hammock yesterday. The night we danced in his apartment. Everything I thought I saw in his face...could not have been real. Losing him would have been hard enough, but now it feels like he's taken all of my memories and crushed them underfoot too.

I've felt sick like this before. Back in high school, when Sean disappeared and my father's drinking got worse. My mother cried and wanted me to somehow fix it, when I knew I could not. I fell asleep back then apathetic about whether I woke in the morning. I thought this piece of me was gone, but apparently it was only in hiding.

I cry all afternoon. I cry all night. Harper doesn't come home, which is for the best, except it makes me wonder if Brendan won't be going home tonight either. I want to vomit when I consider it.

I miss making dinner with him, having sex with him, sleeping beside him. The next morning I open my eyes and discover I miss waking with him too.

I suspect there won't be a moment of my day—even the moments I didn't normally spend with him—that won't leave me missing something about Brendan. And I have no one I can tell—not Olivia, who'd immediately call Brendan and rip him a new one. Not Harper, who doesn't come home. Not

even Sean, simply because he doesn't answer or return my call.

When I was with Brendan, I was consumed. He was like a drug, and with him I existed in this hazy space of believing the world was good and everything would work out without a shred of proof. It felt like I needed nothing other than him. And now the drug is gone, as I always knew it would be. I have to look at my life again—at the fact that I'm homeless and on my final warning at work—and admit that maybe I didn't need anything other than him, but I also didn't *have* anything other than him.

And I never really had him either.



HARPER DOES HER BEST TO CHEER ME UP WHEN SHE FINALLY COMES HOME. She says all the things women say in these situations: *you're better off without him, he's going to come to his senses*. It doesn't help, though, because neither statement is true.

"Hair of the dog," she insists, coming into my room and throwing a thong at me.

I look from the thong to her. "I'm completely not following this conversation."

"Hair of the dog that bit you," she says. "It's the only way."

"What does that have to do with your slutty underwear?"

"I wasn't sure if you had any of your own. I'm saying you need to fix yourself up and get laid. Brendan isn't the only hot guy in the world."

Except he's the only one I want. I can't imagine I'll ever feel otherwise. And I can't imagine how he was able to feel otherwise the minute I left.



I GET THROUGH THE NEXT DAYS MOSTLY BY DREAMING THAT BRENDAN WILL make some grand gesture. I picture him waiting on Harper's steps so he can tell me he was wrong. Or standing outside my window, playing the song we danced to at the wedding loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. Except the guy who can't even make a small gesture is unlikely to make a grand one anytime soon.

I leave him a message about picking up my stuff—my running shoes, my

favorite jeans—and he waits a full two days to return the call. Waiting two days to call is so casual it's almost as if he's had to *force* himself to do it. I can picture him frowning at the phone, sighing wearily, and deciding he needs to get it over with.

"Hey," he says, his voice completely unworried, nonchalant. "Got your message."

Oh my God. As if we barely know each other.

I was hurt before. Now I'm enraged. He has no right to act like we were nothing—either that or he had no right to act like it all meant something when it didn't. I'm so angry that it's an effort to speak normally. My words emerge clipped and precise, as if I'm calling someone about getting my furnace looked at.

"Yes. I need my running shoes. Is there a time when I can come by and get them?"

He yawns. "I'm on my way out, but I can set them outside the door if you want to get them later."

For the first time in days, I'm glad I have plans tonight. "I can't. I'm getting ready to go out to dinner."

"Oh yeah," he drawls. "The big dinner with Rob. How's that going?" He doesn't sound jealous. He barely even sounds *interested*.

"Fine," I tell him.

I feel spiteful, but it translates, in my voice, to enthusiasm. I'm not getting back together with Rob—I'm certain of it—but fuck Brendan and his ambivalence.

"That's awesome, Erin," he says. "I'm happy for you."

I want to take the phone and smash it against the counter. Or against his head. "Thanks," I chirp. *Fuck you, Brendan. Fuck you fuck you fuck you.*

"So that's it then, huh? 'Mission Make Rob Pull His Head Out of His Ass' worked like a charm," he concludes.

"Yes, Brendan, I owe it all to you," I say snidely.

"Hey," he says with a laugh. "You deserve a little credit too. You laid there so well."

It felt like so much when we were together, and now he's laying it out in a way that makes it nothing if not ugly and cheap—as if I could have been a blow-up doll for all my contribution to the endeavor.

"Fuck you."

He laughs. "I was just joking," he says, and then his voice grows earnest.

"I'm sorry. It was just a stupid joke, babe. I'm really happy for you."

I don't want you to be happy for me, Brendan. Your happiness breaks my heart.

Erin
Present

Rob picks me up later that night, handing me the most gorgeous bouquet I've ever seen.

"You didn't need to do that," I say. His every thoughtful action makes me feel worse.

"I wanted to," he replies. "I wish I'd done it every day we were together."

Instead of something fancy, he takes me to my kind of place, a place Brendan might have chosen.

"You actually want to eat here?" I ask. "Ribs and beer?"

"Of course. I like ribs and beer as much as the next guy. And I'm trying to meet you in the middle."

"You don't have to do this."

"Erin," he chides, "you wanted stuff like this enough that you broke up with me over it. So if it matters that much to you, you've got to fight for it a little."

Except that's not how I'm programmed. I'm never going to fight for something so minimal as where we eat and if we sit outside when we do it.

After we're seated, he reaches across the table for my hand. "I know you're not ready yet. I know I fucked up. But I just want a chance. I want the chance to prove to you that I've changed."

I stare at the tablecloth, so guilty that my voice rasps when I speak. "You didn't fuck up."

“Yeah, I did. I should have talked to you about the trip, I should have made sure you were okay with me staying. I should have come back for Olivia’s race. I definitely should have told you about Christina. I’m so, so sorry I didn’t.”

Anything that happened with Christina is now so minor compared to my own failings that I can barely stand to glance up at him. “It’s okay. But look, about this other guy—”

He squeezes my hand. “I’m begging you, Erin. Do not tell me. You didn’t get home ’til 5 AM the other day, so it’s pretty obvious that things I don’t ever want to think about happened. So can we just agree it’s all behind us? That I did stupid shit, and you did stupid shit, and now it’s over?”

I nod, but I wonder if he’d feel that way if he knew exactly what stupid shit I did, and who I did it with. Especially when not a moment later he asks if I’ve seen Brendan.

I hate lying, which is ridiculous when you consider just how many lies I’ve already told him. My heart thrums in my ears.

“No, not lately. Why?”

“It seems like he’s avoiding me. Maybe he’s just busy with this new girl he’s dating.”

“Girl?” I ask, my stomach going into freefall. “Brendan doesn’t ‘date’ anyone.”

“Apparently he’s made an exception,” Rob says. “It’d be cool if he’s finally met someone.”

It’s only been a few *days*. He couldn’t have moved on that fast.

He couldn’t have, yet he did. And how is that possible? How could anything they have be better than what we had? What does she have that I don’t?

That night, after Rob drops me off, I don’t cry. Instead my tears sit caged inside me, and I long for something that will set them free. They’re like a blister that needs to be popped, and God, I want to. I want something to make it all go away.

I thought this kind of sadness and desperation was behind me. I thought I was better. As it turns out, I was simply numb. Brendan is the only thing with the power to bring this version of me to the surface. I tried to make myself hate him after the wedding. I tried to make him hate me too. I should have kept doing it.

Being numb, not caring, everyone says that’s a bad thing.

But to me, right now, it sounds like bliss.



THE NEXT DAY WHEN I GET HOME FROM WORK, THERE'S A BOUQUET WAITING on Harper's front porch, with my name on the card. For one insane moment I allow myself to hope it's from Brendan. I half-laugh and half-sob at my own stupidity when I find Rob's name instead.

Another bouquet is delivered to work the next day, and again to Harper's the day after that.

"How long are you planning to keep this up?" I finally ask him.

"Until you give me another chance," he replies.

He texts me frequently. He asks how I am, when he can see me. He is the anti-Brendan: he wants to give me everything. It matters to him that I exist. That shouldn't sway me, and it's not a reason to date him again, but there's something comforting about it.

He returns to Amsterdam for a week, but the flowers keep coming.

"My house looks like a florist's shop," says Harper. "And believe me, I'm not complaining. But how long are you going to let this go on?"

"I already told him to stop."

"I don't mean the flowers. I mean *you*. You've been the most miserable human alive now for going on two weeks. Something's got to change. If Brendan is out of the picture, why aren't you going out with Rob?"

"Because I slept with his best friend, for starters."

"So what?" she asks. "Rob told you he didn't care, and you know he slept with Christina. Sure, he'd be pissed off and hurt if he knew about Brendan, and he'd probably never talk to him again, but it wouldn't change how he feels about you. He's obviously in it for the long haul. Either way, it's time to move on."

Moving on. I want that too.

I remember when I first met Rob—at Will and Olivia's engagement party—how it felt like a relief. I was tired of wanting Brendan, tired of fighting it. I wanted it to end. I want it to end now. It has to, because while all of those high points with Brendan were amazing, I can no longer live with the lows.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

Somehow I get Gabi outside of the bar. She's crying, but it's the sheer devastation on her face that kills me. She expected better of me, and I allowed her to expect better of me when I should have told her the truth up front, which is that I am exactly the guy I knew I was: incapable of commitment, careless with others. And I've been more careless with her than I've ever been before because I allowed her to think we meant something.

She goes boneless when we get outside, sliding down the bar's exterior wall into a heap on the sidewalk. "I thought you loved me," she weeps. "You *said* you loved me."

We've only got two days left, and I know I should say something to smooth things over, but I just don't have it in me. I'm tired, and I've put up with more tears and drama in two months than most people do in their lives. I'm done.

"Gabi, you're leaving. I just think it's run its course."

"I'm not leaving," she says. "I deferred for a year. For you."

My entire being cringes. How long ago did she do it? Was it weeks ago, when I was busy counting the days until her departure? She will now start medical school a year late, entirely because I allowed her to believe things that weren't true.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"I thought you'd be happy," she cries, burying her face in her hands.

People walking by stare at us, then glare at me. They don't even know us, don't even speak our language, yet they know I'm the one who fucked up. And they're right.

I crouch next to her. "Come on, honey," I beg. "Let's just go back to the apartment, okay?"

"Are you breaking up with me?" she demands.

"Gabi, you need to go to medical school. I don't want to be the reason you're staying."

"You're worth it to me. I don't even care. I'll skip it entirely, and we'll just stay in Italy if that's what you want."

I am tempted to lie. I am tempted to say whatever I have to in order to get us back to the apartment, where it won't be so fucking awkward to sort things out. But I can't lie anymore. *If only I hadn't lied in the first place.*

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm so fucking sorry. But this isn't what I want."

Erin
Present

The horrible branding campaign—full of trite phrases and insincere accolades—is finally complete. All the copy has been signed off on. The photo shoots are over. I’m relieved it’s behind me.

Except, apparently, it’s not.

“We need a different group of kids for the cover,” Timothy says, flinging a brochure about the Mitchell Scholars Program on my desk.

I run my tongue over my teeth, searching somewhere inside me for a calmness I don’t feel. “These are the kids who actually won the award.”

“They don’t project the image we want. And we need more diversity.”

“How much more diversity could you possibly want? We’ve got ten award winners, of whom *five* are minorities.”

“Well, the minorities you chose are not a good representation of the school.”

He has really picked the wrong week to piss me off. I don’t have it in me to even feign civility at the moment.

“I have no idea what you’re trying to tell me,” I snap. “And I didn’t choose them. These kids all won Mitchell Scholarships. How are they possibly not a good representation for the school?”

“Well, to be perfectly frank, none of them look that smart. And the African-American boy is too...urban.”

Patience, Erin. You are not Olivia. You are not Harper. You don’t get to

lose your shit with impunity. “How exactly can someone be too urban?”

“The jeans, the T-shirt. *Sneakers.*” He rolls his eyes as if this is obvious, when nearly every kid featured is wearing some version of that. “I want something more like this.” He hands me a brochure for affordable housing, which features someone lighter-skinned than the kid who won the award, wearing a button down and a bow-tie.

Patience, Erin. Patience... No, fuck it. “The kid in this picture is one of the ten best students in the school, and he’s dressed exactly like the other kids. So basically what I hear you saying is that anyone other than Carlton from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* looks like a criminal to you.”

“I think you need to bring it down a notch,” he says, his nostrils flaring, bleaching the skin white around the base of his nose. “As you are well aware, you’re already skating on thin ice. And I’m not asking for your opinion, Erin. I want a new cover.”

I slide the brochure back to him. “I’m not doing it.”

“If you don’t do it,” he says, “you have no job.”

“Then I guess,” I say, standing and grabbing my purse, “that I have no job.”

I stride out of the office feeling enraged, full of indignation. It takes me only two seconds after the door’s shut behind me to wonder what the fuck I’ve done.



I SPEND MOST OF THE EVENING CERTAIN I’M HAVING A PANIC ATTACK.

“It’s going to be fine,” Harper assures me. “God, I wish I could have seen his face!”

“It’s not going to be fine,” I insist. “I have no savings, and now I’ve got no job. And no boyfriend. And no home.”

“Of course you have a home. When my roommate gets back, we’ll figure something out. And you don’t want a boyfriend. And you don’t want *that* job. You never did. Just wait,” she says. “This is the start of something amazing. Your life is going to be so much better.”

I guess I have to agree with her there, because I’m not sure it’s possible for things to get worse.



I WAKE THE NEXT DAY WITH A SPLITTING HEADACHE, THANKS TO THE SHOTS Harper insisted I do. “Cheer Me Up Shots,” she called them. I’m officially adding her to the list of people I no longer take suggestions from.

I begin to look at want ads, and any enthusiasm I had for the prospect of getting a new job dims. Promoting nicotine patches, computer programs, or energy drinks holds no appeal for me. I want to care about the product. I liked promoting my alma mater.

Which leads me to wonder if I made a mistake yesterday. I know, via Harper, that Timothy’s been stopping by my cubicle all morning to see if I’ve arrived. Around mid-morning he leaves me a message saying that as long as I’m in by noon, we can move past this, though “some disciplinary action will, obviously, be necessary.”

I can’t say there isn’t part of me that glances at the clock, that doesn’t imagine rushing off to put on work clothes and pretending none of this has happened. Except that job was a lot like a long run; I reach the end certain I could keep going if necessary, but once I’ve stopped, once I’ve thrown myself down in the grass and kicked off my shoes, the idea suddenly feels impossible. If my life depended on it, I don’t think I could get up and go back to work for that man. In fact, I have no idea how or why I stayed as long as I did.



ROB ASKS IF HE CAN TAKE ME TO DINNER “AS FRIENDS” AFTER I TELL HIM about my job. I begin to say no, and then stop myself. Whatever we might lack in excitement, Rob can be a good sounding board. Plus, being around him reminds me of a time when I wasn’t miserable, and that little reminder soothes me—if it was possible to not hurt once upon a time, it’s possible it can happen again. It’s wrong to allow Rob to ease some of the pain Brendan caused, but I allow it anyway. I’m that desperate to begin piecing myself back together.

I arrive at dinner exhausted. Both the late night calls from my father and the nightmare about the tidal wave seem to be happening more frequently. Between the two I got very little sleep last night.

When I mention my half-assed job search, Rob suggests I do a different type of marketing. “Working for a non-profit is never going to make you money,” he says. “Why not do what you’re good at and make a decent living at the same time?” He starts talking about marketing for a wealth management firm like his own, and though he means well, it’s a struggle not to fall asleep listening.

If this were Brendan here, he’d be encouraging me not to settle. He’d swear somehow it would all work out. And a part of me wants that, wants to feel optimistic and hopeful about the future, excited by its possibilities. Except that sort of unrealistic thinking is just like Brendan himself: fun while it lasts, but gets me nowhere in the long run.

As he drops me off, Rob mentions that he has an event he needs to make an appearance at on Saturday. He wants me to come with him.

“It’s a grand opening. Cocktail attire. You know I hate going to those things alone.”

I hate going to those things too, but mostly I’m hard pressed to imagine how dressing up and going to an opening won’t feel like a date.

He grins. “You’re so transparent. It’s not a date, okay? I swear. It’s not a date. Just come with me, and then I’ll drive you home and shake your hand at the door. Hell, if it makes you feel better, I won’t even walk you to the door.”

I sigh. “I don’t know, Rob.”

“I won’t even fully stop the car—you can jump.”

I laugh. “You’re impossible to say no to. You know that?”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” he says, nodding toward the ring on my finger—not my engagement ring but an emerald he bought on our first anniversary. “Because maybe that ring isn’t the only thing from our past worth keeping.”

“I like lots of things from our past.”

“I could have done a lot better, though. The longer I’m back, the more I’m realizing it,” he says, pulling my hands across the console into his. “If you give me another chance, I’m going to devote my entire life to making you happy.”

I walk inside, feeling much better than I did before I saw him. And if being with him makes me feel better, and Brendan only causes pain, isn’t it obvious who I should want? What Rob and I had wasn’t perfect, but at least it was real.



ON SATURDAY I SPEND AN INORDINATE AMOUNT OF TIME GETTING READY. I'M wearing a dress of Harper's—slinky and silver. "It's about time you started caring," she says as she curls my hair.

I don't actually care, but I'm trying to make myself care. Brendan moved on. I ought to at least pretend I have too.

Rob arrives wearing a suit, reminding me how much I used to love watching him dress in the morning. I almost can't fault the girls in his office for throwing themselves at him. *Almost*.

"You look unbelievable," he says. "I'm going to be the most envied guy there."

I warm a little inside. I was merely a small blip in Brendan's existence, so brief and inconsequential I don't even mark a point in his time line. So inconsequential he couldn't even walk away from his pool game to tell me so. But that's not the case with Rob. He's proud to be seen with me, and he wants everything I can give.

We've driven for at least 10 minutes before I notice we're heading away from the city. "Where are we going?" I ask. "There's nothing out here."

"It's a vineyard. I'm a minority partner, and tonight's the official opening."

I release my air in small, controlled puffs. "Blue Mountain?"

He glances at me. "I'm surprised you've heard of it."

"I think Brendan is friends with the owner," I reply, my stomach knotting up. "Is he coming?"

Rob's smile fades. "No idea. We've only spoken twice since I got home. I dropped by his place yesterday—have you seen it?"

It feels like a test, although maybe I'm just being paranoid. What if he saw something of mine there? God only knows what I left behind. I tell him I have, my pulse racing.

"The girl he's dating was there, so I only saw it from the hall, but what's up with the holes everywhere? The place looks like it needs to be demoed."

I feel like I've been hit. Again. When is this thing with Brendan going to stop providing fresh sources of pain? He told me he didn't let girls sleep over. God, I was stupid. I was so fucking stupid to believe him, to believe I was special somehow. I wonder if he's delivering his speech about being in the bubble to this girl. Or maybe *they* aren't in the bubble. Maybe she has what I did not, whatever magical properties are necessary to make Brendan want more.

We arrive, and Brendan isn't there, which feels like the first break I've gotten in weeks. But I still finish my first glass of wine in two gulps. My second one goes down almost as quickly.

Rob starts introducing me to the other investors, and to the vineyard owner—who I never met with Brendan, thank God—and we fall into our familiar patterns. Bland social smiles, my hip brushing his thigh, his hand at the small of my back. This kind of event still isn't my thing, but I don't hate his role in it. I don't hate the way he wants to show me off—the small, possessive things he does that Brendan never did.

Rob leans down. “Are you doing okay?” he asks, his breath grazing my ear.

I smile up at him and nod. “Yes. You?”

“I've never been happier than I am right now,” he says, his hand wrapping around my hip. He leans down, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “I'm gonna get us a sample of the shiraz. You'll be okay for a second?”

I nod, and watch him depart.

An older woman leans toward me. “The two of you are adorable,” she says. “Newlyweds?”

“Oh, uh...no. It's not... No.” *Well done, Erin. That made complete sense.*

“Well, you should be,” she says with a fond smile. “You'd have beautiful children.”

There's a low, unhappy laugh behind me. A laugh I could identify anywhere in the world, under any circumstances.

“She's right,” Brendan drawls. “You're so adorable.”

I turn slowly, bracing myself. His face is the only thing I've wanted to see for the past three weeks. I want to weep for how badly I've missed the sight of him: that sharp jaw and those slightly flushed cheekbones, eyes the palest possible blue against his tan. I've stared at that photo of him in a suit at Olivia's wedding a thousand times, but tonight he puts that to shame. He is so beautiful that he breaks my heart all over again.

“Hey, man, I didn't know you'd be here,” Rob says, coming up behind me. “You know Chris?”

Brendan's eyes fall to Rob's hand as it wraps around my waist, and I get a glimpse of that sneer of his. It's a look I know well—I've seen it far too many times over the past few years.

“Yeah,” Brendan replies. “You?”

“Only recently. I invested in this place a while back.”

I see a hint of tightness in Brendan's jaw, a small twitch, and then he forces it to relax. A girl comes up to the three of us, handing Brendan a glass of red. She is beautiful, curvier than me, and I hate her on sight. I hate her ample cleavage, her leather dress, her perfect hair. I loathe everything about her.

"Crystal," he says, looking only from her to Rob, as if I'm not there, "this is my friend Rob and his fiancée." I don't even get a name now, apparently. Maybe he's already forgotten.

Crystal immediately starts gushing over my ring with the precise level of enthusiasm you'd expect from a 16-year-old. "I love it!" she squeals. "Diamond engagement rings are so over."

Rob and I exchange an awkward glance.

"It's just a ring," I reply. "We're not engaged."

"Oh." She looks up at Brendan with a cute little expression of complete confusion—an expression I bet she has a lot. "You just said they were engaged."

"We *were* engaged, and now we're just figuring things out," says Rob.

"Well, that ring is *fufleek* either way," she tells me.

"*Fufleek*?" I ask, thinking I've misheard her. I'd assume she was just pulling from another language entirely except...come on, Crystal doesn't speak another language.

"Yeah, you know. Fleek as hell. Fucking fleek."

"Ah, of course," I say, casting a shaming glance at Brendan. "Yes, that's what I wanted. A ring that's fucking fleek. We went into Tiffany, and that's what I said. 'Take us right to your fucking fleek section'."

Brendan glares at me, but Crystal just giggles. Because of course she does.

"Right on, girl. Have you thought about music?" she asks.

"Music?"

"For your wedding."

What does this girl not understand about what Rob just told her? "I...no, not really. Like Rob said, we're not engaged."

"Because this is a good song for a wedding," she says, pointing at the small trio playing music in the corner. "I don't know what it's called, though. Classical music should have words, you know?"

"It's called 'Fur Elise'," says Rob. "It's Beethoven."

She looks appalled. "What the fuck? You mean like a fir tree or fur you

wear?"

"It was actually titled 'For Elise', but someone misread Beethoven's handwriting," Rob explains. "He wrote it for one of his pupils."

"Good," she says with a sigh of relief. "Because I'm sorry, but I couldn't get behind a song about fur. I love all animals, even the mean ones like foxes. Killing them just so you can look good is wrong."

Holy shit. This girl is so fucking dumb I almost feel bad for hating her as much as I do. Almost. "You're wearing a leather dress," I point out.

She looks down at her dress and back to me, her face completely blank. "Yeah? What's wrong with that? There's no *fur* on it."

My mouth twitches, the merest hint of the bitter smile I want to shoot at Brendan. He sees it, and he's pissed.

"Have you guys been down by the lake yet?" he asks, holding my eye. "It's the perfect place for a picnic."

Our picnic. I can't *believe* he's bringing it up.

Crystal says that sounds romantic, while I cross my arms over my chest.

"Picnics are overrated," I counter. "Who wants to eat with bugs crawling everywhere?"

"You'd love it," Brendan says, smirking. "I bet you'd swallow everything."

I narrow my eyes. "Sounds like picnics are more memorable for you than they are for me, Brendan. I've never been to one that was worth my time."

Rob glances between us. "I thought you two were finally getting along?"

I go to answer him but I can't, because I want to cry and scream in equal parts. I can't stomach another minute of watching Brendan with that girl, of having him taunt me.

I excuse myself and hurry to the bathroom. Inside, I shut the door behind me and press my face to the cool tiles, flushed by both anger and distress. I reapply my lipstick, willing my breath to slow, my hands to steady. And when I finally step back outside, Brendan is waiting.

I'm not sure if I want to laugh or cry at how little anything has changed. The last time we spoke outside a bathroom it was an identical situation, wasn't it? He'd brought someone hot and dumb then too, and I was blindingly jealous, just like I am now.

"Nice choice," I sneer. "But maybe next time you should look for some quality other than bra size."

"And maybe you should look for some quality other than the size of his

wallet."

"Fuck you, Brendan," I say, as my hands curl into fists. "You know that's never been the reason I was with Rob."

"Oh right. It's probably everything else," he smirks. "It must get you so hot the way he immediately recognizes songs by Beethoven and can tell us all the story behind them."

"At least he'd realized by the time he hit his 20s that leather came from animals."

He looks at me in disgust. "I knew you were going to bring that up."

"Sorry, it's just so completely unsurprising. I should have known you'd wind up with some vapid little girl with a big rack."

"I haven't *wound up* with anyone," he snaps. "Unlike you, I don't move right from fucking someone like I'm never going to get it again to being all over someone else. I mean, how long did it take before you got back together with him?" he demands. "An hour? A day?"

"Does it matter? As I recall, you were 'so happy' for me."

"I just don't know what you're doing with him. The only thing that guy gets hard for is the closing of the stock market."

"Yes, it's so terrible the way he makes tons of money and wants to be a good provider," I reply. "Women *hate* that."

"Yeah, well if you loved it so much, why were you getting naked for me 20 seconds after he left?"

"Maybe I just wanted to see if it could be better with someone else," I fire back. "It wasn't."

He closes the space between us until he is pressed up against me. His muscles are coiled and under the starch of his shirt, I smell *him*—skin and soap and heat. His pupils are so large that the blue is a mere shadow, his mouth slightly ajar, his body tense.

"You're so full of shit," he hisses, his mouth a breath away from mine. "Let's go in the bathroom right now. I'll prove it."

I won't do that to Rob. But I wouldn't do it anyway. Brendan has wounded me endlessly and unforgivably over the past three weeks. He's turned me back into the girl I was in high school and after Olivia's wedding, the one so overwhelmed by grief she could barely get through the day.

I shove him hard and push away. "Move on, Brendan. I have."



I'D PLANNED TO ASK ROB TO TAKE ME HOME, BUT CRYSTAL WON'T LET anyone get a word in edgewise. She's too busy trying to explain how being a Broncos cheerleader is really "the exact same" as being a prima ballerina. It's not until Brendan returns that she finally stops babbling.

"Where were you?" she whines.

"I ran into this girl I know," he says, glancing at me. "I'd forgotten what a liar she is. I'm not sure she tells the truth about anything."

My throat closes in at his words. I know he's just trying to make me angry, but he's right. I'm not even sure which lies he's accusing me of: the one I'm telling Rob by omission, or the ones I've been telling for a long time—about my family, what I want from life. I do nothing but pretend. It's all I know how to do.

The realization exhausts me. I'm so tired of the effort it takes to lie, to be this person Rob thinks I am, to pretend I'm not heartbroken. I tell Rob I'm sick and I need to leave. At least this lie feels true.



"WHAT WAS GOING ON BACK THERE?" ROB ASKS ON THE WAY HOME. "WITH you and Brendan. He seemed like he was mad at you."

I tell him Brendan was just angry that I was being a bitch to Crystal. I can picture him sneering, calling me a liar, even as I say the words.

He pauses. "Why were you?" The quiet in the car feels ominous, as if the question is asking so much more.

"Because she's an idiot."

He could counter that it's unfair to blame her for being an idiot, or that there's no reason to ridicule her for it to her face, but he says nothing.

We reach Harper's house, and he walks me to the door. He watches my face. He wants to kiss me, is wondering if I'll let him.

I do. And just like everything else with him, it is lovely and familiar and eases something inside of me.

"I fly out pretty early in the morning," he says slowly, holding my gaze as if these words are important. "But I'm home on Saturday. You know that I want you back, and I think you're ready to give me a chance, but before I go, I want to make something clear: I don't care what you did or who you were with while I was gone. I just need to know it's over."

There's something in the way he says it, in the way he's looking at me.
It's almost as if he knows I was with Brendan.

Brendan
Three Years Earlier

Gabi cries all night long. All I can do is apologize, again and again. She's a nice girl, and I've fucked up, so badly. I don't know why I allowed it to happen, or how to fix it.

The next morning I go to work, but she won't get out of bed. I lead the morning tour, and just as we're coming in, my landlady calls. She's yelling, and I can't understand her, so I hand the phone to Seb.

"Did you leave a sink on something?" he asks me. "She says there's water coming through her ceiling."

I will always remember this moment. The innocent half-second when I ponder what might have happened, followed by the moment the Earth shifts. The moment where I realize the consequences of my behavior might be so much worse than hurt feelings, than grief.

It's the moment when it occurs to me my mistakes might be fatal ones.

Erin
Present

I cannot sleep, so instead I tally my losses: Sean isn't taking my phone calls. My father is getting worse. I've got no job. Harper's roommate returns in a little over a week, and when she does I'll have nowhere to live and no money with which to acquire something. I've sent a few resumes out, but I've heard nothing back.

And all of that is minimal compared to the agony of picturing Brendan with that stupid, stupid girl. I know I'm not perfect. I can easily imagine that there are better girls out there than me. Girls who are prettier and smarter and less fucked-up. But she's not one of them.

Just the image of him with his arm around her waist makes me want to vomit. He never once stood like that with me in public. It's not even about wanting him back, because that was always a lost cause, always impossible. I just want him to stop breaking my heart. I remember when he told me we were in the bubble. Like a pocket of air in a submerged car, he said. What he didn't say, and what I should have realized, is that when the bubble is popped you don't shoot to the surface. You drown.



I'M STILL AWAKE AT 2 AM, WHEN MY MOTHER'S NAME APPEARS ON MY

phone.

I let it ring once, twice, wondering why I always answer. Why does it have to be me? Why can't *she* go find him? Or maybe she could just let him spend a night in jail, allow him to actually see how serious a problem it is.

She calls a second time and a third, and my hand twitches, but I don't pick up the phone. Maybe I'm feeling sorry for myself, but I've had enough. For once in my damn life, I am not going to allow them to add their problems to mine.

I must fall asleep after that, because it seems as if moments later the phone is ringing again, but the clock says it's just after 4 AM. That's when I start to panic. She didn't go find him, and he's still missing, and I'm a terrible daughter for letting it happen. I know all of this before I ever pick up the phone.

My mother is crying so hard she's almost incoherent. She tells me my father was in an accident. And then she tells me what I already know: that this is entirely my fault.



BY THE TIME I REACH DENVER, THE SUN IS COMING OVER THE HORIZON. I'VE only slept two of the past 24 hours, but I feel curiously alert, and curiously empty, all at once.

I enter St. Joseph's, a hospital I've never set foot in before, but it seems familiar—maybe because I've pictured this exact scenario so many times. I follow the directory to the elevators down the hall, and am then led by a somber nurse to my father's room.

He looks different. Even if I'd walked into the family room on a regular summer day, if I saw him looking the way he does now, I'd know he was dying. His lips are thin, bleached of color, and his skin is so white it has a blue sheen to it. The veins on his hands stand out like rocky outcroppings across a desert plain.

I press my lips together to keep from making noise, but my mom begins sobbing the moment she sees me, helpless and childlike. For a moment I hate her. I hate her for staying with him for so long, for letting him get to this point, for sitting there blubbering like a lost five-year-old who needs me to come in and fix everything. Just once, I would like to have been the lost five-

year-old who got saved.

I pinch my lips tighter, though, and go to her side, taking the seat next to her and letting her collapse on my shoulder. She tells me he ran into a telephone pole, and I silently thank God that it was an inanimate object he hit. It goes without saying that he was drunk.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone?” she cries. “I called and called.”

I’m not getting into this with her right now. Yes, I blame myself, but I also blame her. She’s never lifted one finger to solve this problem the whole time they’ve been together, so I’m not the only one at fault.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” she says, continuing to weep. “The doctors keep talking about the bleeding and cirrhosis, and it doesn’t even make sense.”

I ask the triage nurse to have the doctor stop by our room. It takes over an hour, and when he does walk in, he looks relieved. I imagine he’s glad to find someone besides my mother in the room. She keeps crying and saying “Please just fix him,” like my dad’s a broken toy.

The doctor tells me my father has a subdural hematoma—bleeding in his brain. Right now they’re watching it, but he’s certain my dad will need surgery.

“So can we get that scheduled?” I ask.

“We’d like to wait, if possible,” he says, “because right now he’s unlikely to survive it. Your father has moderate cirrhosis, which is causing some internal bleeding. The odds of him making it through the surgery, in his current condition, are poor.”

“How poor?” I ask. “50 percent?”

“50 percent,” he replies, “would be extremely optimistic.”

My mother cries again after he leaves. She says the doctor is mean and asks me to get a second opinion. I tell her I’ll handle it, and I convince her to go home to sleep for a while. Once she leaves, I take on the other parental role she abandoned, and I call my brother.

I get a message saying his number is no longer in service.

In movies, when the heroine hits rock bottom, the world seems to right itself. Things turn around.

Except each time I think I’ve hit my rock bottom, I find out I can go lower. I thought my life couldn’t be any worse this time yesterday: unemployed and homeless and broken-hearted. But now my father is dying, my brother is missing, my mother is as helpless and grief-stricken as a child,

and it's on me to fix all of it, when I clearly can't even take care of myself.



MY MOTHER RETURNS EARLY IN THE AFTERNOON, THOUGH I WISH SHE HAD not. Her desperation is infectious. Her questions make me feel more overwhelmed and incapable than I already did. She cries and asks me what she's going to do without him. She cries and asks why I haven't gotten ahold of Sean, why they ever came to Colorado in the first place. And then again, why I didn't answer the phone last night.

It's just after dinner when my father finally opens his eyes. He's so happy to see me, and also so sad that I can feel my heart cracking in my chest. I'd like to be the one person in this room capable of holding it together, but I can't do it.

I sit beside him and take his hand.

"I'm sorry, Erin," he says. "It was just a stupid mistake."

"It's okay," I tell him. But it's not okay, of course. He did this to himself, all of it, and it's not okay.

"The doctor told you the odds, with the surgery?" he asks. His voice breaks.

I nod, unable to speak.

"I just want to know you're taken care of," he pleads. "I just want to know that if I'm going, I don't need to worry about all of you."

"You don't need to worry about any of us," I promise him. I know as I say it that as soon as this is over, I'll be taking any shitty marketing job I can find—promoting wealth management or writing cheerful missives to the people Rob's company will lay off, full of euphemisms about "new opportunities for growth" that will make me cringe with each keystroke. Sean and my mother will be more my responsibility than ever if he doesn't survive.

"I'm so glad you found Rob," he says. "He's a good man. He'll make sure you're all cared for. I just wish I could be there to see you married."

Oh, God. They don't even know we broke up.

I nod with a deer-in-headlights stare as my mother bounces out of her seat. "You could, Erin! We could find a priest. Maybe Father Duncan or even the hospital chaplain. You could do it right here."

I blink, unable to tell them the truth at this horrible moment, but unwilling to lie either.

“Would you consider it?” my father asks, squeezing my hand. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not the big fancy thing you probably want, but you could still have that too, later.”

I swallow hard on the lump in my throat. “We’ll see, Daddy. Rob’s not even in the country right now. Let’s talk about it later.”

“Please,” he pleads, “think about it. I’m going to hang on until I can see it. Is Sean on his way?”

Once again, the lies pour from my mouth. “Yes,” I say. “He’s out of state, but he’s driving here now.”

Brendan was right. I am incapable of telling the truth, but the only person who ever knew the truth doesn’t want me, so maybe it’s for the best.



THAT NIGHT, AFTER MY FATHER FALLS BACK ASLEEP, I LET MY MOTHER HAVE the pull-out chair and leave. I’ve been up for nearly 48 hours, and as I walk carefully down the white-tiled hallway, exhaustion makes me feel as if I’ve been adrift at sea for days. Finding Brendan in the waiting room, watching me with his worried eyes, is like finding solid ground. He crosses the room and wraps his arms around me, holding me tight. And though I thought I was too tired to cry, too cried-out to cry, I find that I’m not. I can feel it inside me, rising up.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper.

"Olivia told me," he says. "I didn’t want you dealing with this alone. Are you going home?"

I shake my head. "My parents’ place," I say, my voice growing choked. In a few days, I may never be able to say those words again. "I want to be nearby."

"I’ll drive you there."

"You don’t need—"

"You're not driving there alone, and you’re not staying there alone. You decide you want me gone, I’ll go. But not until someone else is there with you."

I mean to argue with him, but instead my shoulders begin to shake, and I

cry silently against his chest.

“I didn’t answer the phone last night,” I whisper, finally admitting it aloud. In spite of everything that’s happened, he’s still the only person alive I would be willing to tell. “I saw that my mom was calling, and I was so busy feeling sorry for myself that I let it go to voicemail.”

He pulls me tighter. “You were right to do it. You should have done it a long time ago. This isn’t on you.”

For some reason that just makes me cry harder.



I DON’T REMEMBER WALKING TO BRENDAN’S CAR OR RIDING TO MY PARENTS’ condo. I don’t remember any aspect of it until we arrive in the guest room and he lies down, pulling me onto his chest as he drags the quilt over both of us.

I am no longer crying, but I’m also not ready to sleep. My voice punctures the silence. “Why are you here?”

“I didn’t want you going through this alone. I know how your mom is.”

“But why?” I whisper. “The second Rob came back, you treated me like some one-time thing. Like you didn’t even know my name, and it never mattered. So why are acting like you care now?”

He pushes my hair off my face, pressing a thumb to the tear under my eye and wiping it away. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m so fucking sorry. It just seemed easier that way. I wasn’t going to ask you to sneak around behind his back. And if I can’t give you the things you want, someone should.”

“Why didn’t you at least tell me that? You acted so ambivalent about it.”

“I acted ambivalent because I was *pissed*, Erin. You think this is easy for me? Every time I hear from Rob, it sounds like you’re back together, or on your way to it. So I was fucking pissed off and being a dick about it. A few hours after you left my place, he’s calling to tell me you’ve got a date that afternoon. I just didn’t know what to do, and I still don’t know what to do, but I’m sorry.”

“What about the girl?” I ask.

“What girl?”

“Crystal. Rob said she was at your place when he came by.”

Brendan gives a low laugh. “I’m not dating anyone. I had to say

something to keep him from walking in. You never came back for any of your stuff. It's all over my apartment."

"I didn't want to come get it. I thought it would be too hard, seeing your place. I was hoping you'd just drop it off."

"And I never dropped it off," he says, "because then you'd never have a reason to come back."

"You put your arm around her," I say, and my voice breaks all over again. "You were willing to let everyone know you were together last night, but you never did that with me."

"Erin, you were getting back together with Rob, and it's not like we live in a major city. If we'd been all over each other, what do you think the odds are that it'd eventually get back to him? I was doing it for you, and believe me, it pissed me off every time."

"But..."

He laughs softly. "Baby, go to sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

"One more thing," I say. "Who kept calling you at night? Was it Gabi?"

He pauses. The silence stretches so long that it seems like a confirmation in and of itself.

"No," he finally says. "It's her mom."

Brendan
Present

Erin is the last person I want to tell about Gabi, but at this point I don't have much of a choice. And while I hate what this story says about me, I can't go on letting her believe that my inability to be in a relationship is somehow her fault.

So I start at the beginning. I tell her I was mad after the wedding, mostly at myself. That I couldn't stand to see her with Rob, so I finally just left.

I tell her how hard it was, hearing about her and Rob as they got serious. And how, for a while, Gabi seemed like she could fix me. That I led her to believe we were something we were not, simply because I was hoping she could be *someone* she was not. And I let her keep believing it because it was easier than telling her I'd made a mistake.

And then I tell Erin how it ended.



BY THE TIME I GOT TO THE APARTMENT, THE POLICE HAD ALREADY KICKED IN the door and pulled Gabi out of the bathtub. When I came in, she was lying there on our floor, covered in blood, and in that moment I wanted nothing more than for her to be alive.

Now I wish she hadn't been.

There's not a day that goes by when I don't think of her parents. What it must be like for them to see their brilliant, beautiful daughter—the one who once biked 50 miles a day, the one who was going to medical school—and know she no longer recognizes them, can't even feed herself.

That's why, when her mother calls at night, screaming at me, telling me I killed their child, I don't argue.

How can I? I didn't put Gabi in that tub, and I didn't cut her wrists. But that doesn't make me innocent. If she hadn't met me, it never would have happened.

Erin
Present

“**S**he was under the water too long,” he says, and right then I think I know the story’s outcome. I can’t even imagine that a worse ending is possible, but it is.

His sympathy lies with Gabi’s parents, but mine lies with him, dealing with that guilt day-in and day-out.

“If I thought I could be with someone again, it would be you,” he says. “Before you got together with Rob, even while I was with Gabi, it was always you I wanted. It’s never stopped being you. But I can’t.”

Because he thinks of what happened to Gabi as something he *did*, which means he’s capable of doing it again. He had a reputation for messing with girls’ heads before he ever left for Italy. To him, what happened with her was just the culmination of a pattern that had long been in play. So he decided to make sure the pattern ended.

“Brendan, I’m not her. Surely you see now how unstable she was? The things she did even before you broke up with her—that wasn’t the behavior of a rational person.”

“Maybe, but I had a hand in it. I’ve caused problems like that before.”

“Gabi made her own choices. You did the best you could, what was right for you. If what happened to my dad isn’t my fault, by that same logic this can’t be your fault either.”

He listens. For a single, hopeful moment there is something in his eyes

that makes me think I might have convinced him. But then it vanishes, replaced by pain and a grim sort of certainty. I don't know what it will take for him to believe he isn't at fault. I just know that I don't have it.



WHEN I WAKE THE NEXT MORNING, I REALIZE TWO THINGS SIMULTANEOUSLY: my father is dying, and Brendan will really never be mine. He'll never be anyone's. What he said last night soothed my sense of rejection—and finally sorted out his behavior for me a little—but it doesn't change anything.

"Do I have makeup everywhere?" I ask as I lift myself off of his chest.

He smiles. "I'm pretty sure you cried it all off yesterday. I like you better without it anyway."

The way he's looking at me hurts. I've seen that look before, and I made it mean so much. But just because he looks at me like that doesn't mean he loves me. It doesn't mean anything. Or maybe it does, but it won't make a difference in the end.

I take a quick shower and check my phone when I get out. There are multiple texts, including three from Rob, who somehow heard about my dad. He was boarding a flight home when he texted and will be here this afternoon.

I should be relieved that he's coming, because Rob is competent in ways other people are not. If there's anything my parents need, he will find a way to get it. Whether my father lives or dies, he will know what to do. But I'm not relieved at all, because when he arrives, Brendan will leave.

When I get downstairs, Brendan hands me a travel mug. "I looked for coffee, but I could only find instant," he says.

"My dad likes instant better," I reply, suddenly finding it hard to speak.

There are so many stupid, trivial things about the people we love. Things you never care about until they're gone. And then all those things—the sound of a heavy tread at the side door, instant coffee, creaky knees heading upstairs—become things you miss, when they're things you never knew you loved in the first place.

As we drive to the hospital, Brendan asks if Sean is on the way, and my whole body sags. I woke feeling like I was capable of handling this, and now I remember why I'm not. My brother is missing, and I can't give my dying

father a single thing he wants.

"I can't find him. His phone's been disconnected."

"Hey," he says, turning my face to look at him. "It's going to be all right, okay? You worry about your dad, and I'll take care of Sean."

It doesn't really seem like something he can promise, but I nod as if I believe him.

He pulls up to the front entrance. "I'll park and meet you inside."

"You don't have to—"

"Yeah, blah blah blah. I know," he says. "But I am." His mouth curves slightly to one side, and he looks at me in a way no one else ever has: as if he knows me. As if he knows everything I'm thinking, everything I fear, everything I need. What would it be like, going through life with someone who knows you that well, someone with whom you don't have to pretend? It would feel like a miracle.

"If you're coming up," I say, "I need to tell you two things—first, Rob is on his way back from Amsterdam. Second, my parents still think Rob and I are engaged."

His jaw tightens. "You broke up with him two months ago. How can they not know?"

I try to speak, and my mouth twists with the effort not to dissolve into tears. "My dad wanted to see me married so badly. He still does. I figured he'd drink more if he knew it wasn't happening."

"Are you going to tell him the truth now?"

"I can't," I whisper.

Brendan makes his disapproval clear, but his opinion is irrelevant. The chances of my dad living through the surgery are so poor. If he's going to leave the world, I want him to do it feeling like it's safe for him to go, and I'll tell whatever lie I have to in order for that to happen.



UPSTAIRS, I ENTER THE ROOM HOLDING MY BREATH, BOTH EXPECTING THE best—my dad awake, laughing—and the worst—my mother weeping, all the monitors unplugged. It's neither one, really. My dad is asleep, and my mom sits, looking older and more rumped than I've ever seen her.

"How is he?" I ask.

She sighs. "The same."

"You should go home, Mom. Get cleaned up and rest a bit. I'll stay here."

"I shouldn't leave you here alone. What if you need to leave and he wakes up?"

"Oh...um..." I stutter. "I won't be alone. Uh, Brendan is here."

My mother's mouth pinches. "Why is he here? And where's he staying?"

When I tell her he stayed with me last night, she looks as if I told her I'd been running a brothel out of her condo. "Is *he* the reason you were too *busy* to answer your phone on Saturday?"

"Oh right. Because Dad getting drunk and hitting a telephone pole is my fault."

"You could have prevented it."

"Don't," I say, rounding on her. "Don't you dare blame me. It wasn't my job to prevent this. It was Dad's, and it was yours, and you never lifted a finger. You yelled at me when I tried to get Dad to go to rehab. So if you're hell-bent on finding a culprit, start with yourself."

Her mouth opens, but no words emerge. And then, predictably, her eyes well. "I can't believe you chose right now to attack me."

"I'm not attacking you. I'm telling you the truth. Grow up and listen to it for once."

When Brendan enters a few minutes later, we're sitting in stony silence. She's drawn herself up, shoulders back.

"I think I'll go home for a while," she announces, looking at neither of us. "Make sure to let me know when your *fiancé* arrives."

After she leaves, Brendan takes the seat beside me and squeezes my hand. He knows. He knows exactly what I'm feeling: that I'm so tired of supporting my mother and taking the blame, but that part of me agrees with her assessment. He just knows.

We look at my father. He's so still I'd wonder if he was already gone were it not for the heart monitor.

"All he wanted was to see me married, Brendan," I whisper. "And now he won't, all because I was scared he'd make a fool of himself at the wedding and because I didn't want him to drink more leading up to it."

He squeezes my hand. "You can't blame yourself for that."

"Yes, I can. Why did I dance around the whole thing? I should have made him stop drinking. I should have forced him to go to rehab. Instead I did everything I could to smooth the way."

“You *did* try to get him to rehab, remember?” he asks. “He’s a grown man. There’s nothing you could have done, especially without your mother’s support. Don’t start finding ways to blame yourself, Erin. This was your father’s problem, and you about killed yourself trying to be a good daughter to him.”

“He thinks Sean’s coming. He asked if Rob and I could get married here, and I lied and said maybe. What am I going to say when he wakes up?” I start crying again.

Right now I’m hardly better than my mom, with her constant flow of tears. In a single swift move, Brendan picks me and deposits me in his lap.

“Tell me what to do,” he says. “I hate seeing you like this. Anything. Name anything.”

If I were my mother, I’d keep crying and ask him to fix this. To make it go away. To find my brother, to make my father not care about seeing me married, to make it all better.

You could stay, Brendan. You could be the person I lean on, and you could never leave. That’s what you could do.

Perhaps I’m more like my mother than I thought. No matter how many times I’m rebuffed, I can’t stop hoping for things another person can’t give.

Brendan
Present

Erin is in my lap, as fragile as a child.
I tell her I'll do anything, and I mean it, but she doesn't reply.
"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I destroyed your shirt."
"You can destroy all of my shirts, Erin. Every last one."

She removes herself from me and returns to her chair. I wish she hadn't. I miss her weight and her smell and the feel of her, the way her cheek rests just about my collarbone, the way her lashes brush my neck when she opens her eyes. I miss everything. I've been missing all of it for a very long time.



ROB ARRIVES MID-AFTERNOON, IN A FRESH SUIT. DID THE DOUCHEBAG actually drive home and change to come here? He looks distinctly displeased when he sees me sitting beside Erin. I think he already suspects something happened between us—even that girl I brought to the vineyard, whatever her name was, accused me of it on the way home that night. And if she could figure it out, anyone could.

I stabbed him in the back, but I can't bring myself to regret it. Those weeks with Erin were the best of my life, and Rob and I were never going to be friends again anyway. Not after I realized how he'd bullied her into giving

up the things she loved. I left for Italy because I couldn't stand seeing them together, but I left believing she'd be better off with him, and I was wrong.

Erin stands and walks over to him. It seems to me that she rises reluctantly, but perhaps that's wishful thinking. He hugs her, a hug that lasts way too fucking long.

Rob turns to me. "I'll walk you out," he says.

It's impossible to miss his meaning. *Time for you to leave, asshole.*

I want to stay, but I no longer have a place here. I wish I did. I wish it was my job to be the one comforting her.

Once we're halfway down the hall, he stops walking. His hands are in his pockets, and he's staring at the floor.

"It was you, wasn't it?" he asks. "You're the one she was with while I was gone."

He isn't actually asking. For Erin's sake, I'd have denied it, but it's clear he already knows.

I meet his eye. "Yeah. It was me. It was a shitty thing to do, but I don't regret it. I walked away a long time ago because I thought she was better off with you, and she wasn't."

"Oh, but you think she'd be better off with *you*?" he demands. "You can't stay with any girl for more than an hour, and that's about how long you can keep a job. All those years you spent trying to talk me out of shit—telling me I shouldn't ask her out, telling me we shouldn't move in together, and I shouldn't propose—that was all just you wanting to take your shot."

"I didn't want you with her because you don't deserve her. You never deserved her, and I knew you couldn't make her happy. You still can't. And you proved me right when you started fucking around with Christina over there. I don't care if Erin believes your little story about how innocent it was. I know there was more to it than that."

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, so what? Even if there was, I'm not going to take shit about it from you. Let's see you date someone for even a week before you start criticizing me."

"This isn't about me. It's about you. And if you were a better person, you'd admit you can't make her happy and walk away."

He wants to hit me. I can see it. And I want him to do it, because God knows I'd like to hit him back. I've never wanted to hit someone more. But neither of us will go there, not with Erin just down the hall.

"Well, I'm not walking away. I'm going to marry her," he says calmly.

Too calmly, as if he knows something I don't. There's certainty behind his words.

"She doesn't want to marry you. I think she's made that clear."

"But she will," he says, with a hint of smug triumph surfacing in his eyes. "Just watch."

He turns and walks back in to her. Every bone in my body wants to chase him and beg her not to listen, to turn down anything he suggests.

Except I've got nothing to offer in its place.

Erin
Present

Rob settles into the chair Brendan just vacated, grabs the same hand Brendan just held. It's not the same, but chocolate isn't the same as broccoli, and that doesn't mean you're only meant to eat the first.

"How's he been?" he asks. "Has he woken up since yesterday?"

I tilt my head. "How did you know he woke up yesterday?"

"Your mom called me. She did not appear to know we'd broken up." My eyes fly open in alarm, and he squeezes my hand. "I didn't tell her. It was pretty clear from what she said that you didn't want them to know. My question is why you didn't."

It's an opening. If this were a movie, it would be the point where I tell him my father is an alcoholic, and my mother and I have danced around it my entire life. Except this isn't a movie, and that's not who the two of us are.

"I didn't want to upset them," I reply.

"I brought your ring," he says, pulling it out of his bag. "I thought it might help, under the circumstances."

I hesitate, but decide it'll make my dad feel better if he sees it. Just one diamond in that ring could pay someone's mortgage for a year. I look at it and think *showy*, but my dad looks at it and thinks *secure*. And what he thinks matters far more right now. I slide it back on my left hand and move the emerald to my right.

"She told me something else," he adds. "She said your dad asked if we

could get married here, and you said maybe?”

I sigh heavily. *Fuck if my mom doesn't seem to go out of her way to make every aspect of my life harder.* “I didn't know what to say. I just couldn't say no right then.”

“We could, you know.” He recaptures my hand. “The hospital chaplain could do it.”

“Rob, that's crazy. We aren't even dating.”

“Erin, we were a couple for four years. It's just a matter of time before we get back together. Why wait when we could do it now and give your dad what he wants?”

I suddenly feel so, so tired. More tired than I knew it was possible to feel. Though it's insane to even consider what Rob is offering, maybe it's also insane not to.

I could end all the chaos. I could give my parents something positive to focus on now and a little peace going forward. I could go back to the life I had—the nice house and the security of all of it. And maybe, when things with Brendan grow more distant, I could go back to feeling numb again. I want that, because being here, being me, missing Brendan—it feels like too much to bear.

I can grant my father's dying wish. One of them at least. But in granting it, I also know a piece of me will die too.

Brendan
Present

I find Sean holed up above some strip club north of Denver. It's taken me a full day to find him. Erin must be worried sick.

I guess I am too, but for different reasons. That sense of foreboding I felt yesterday is still with me, as if there's an hourglass somewhere, its sand spilling quickly. I don't even know what happens when it reaches its end—I only know the result will be one I can't live with.

I knock on the door and a girl answers, peering at me through the tiny opening allowed by the door chain. I tell her I'm Will's younger brother, and she slams the door and deadbolts it again. It occurs to me, too late, that maybe I shouldn't have led with Will's name since Sean got busted for possession while Olivia was staying at his apartment.

I knock again. A minute later I hear the slide of the chain. Sean opens the door and lets me in. He looks jittery and strung out, but given that I'd expected to find him with his arm tied off and not knowing his own name, he's surprisingly cogent.

"You don't know me..." I begin.

He laughs unhappily, derisively, still refastening the locks. "I know you."

He says it like he knows I've done something wrong, but I'm not sure how he would. Erin hasn't spoken to him in weeks.

"Is Erin okay?" he asks.

"No, not really. She hasn't been able to find you. She's worried sick."

He sneers. "You found me."

Not exactly. The manager at the restaurant where Sean was waiting tables had no interest in talking to me until he got a call from Beck. It was only once I was vouched for that he reluctantly directed me to the people on staff who might know where Sean had gone.

"Look, I don't want to be the one to tell you this, but your dad is in the hospital. And it's pretty bad."

He stiffens. "How bad?"

"He needs surgery, but they don't think he'll survive. They're holding off on it until you get there."

Sean fastens the final lock and sinks into a chair, burying his face in his hands. Sweat beads at his hairline. "I can't," he says. "I can't leave."

I stare at him. *What kind of selfish prick won't go see his dying father?* "You're leaving, Sean, if I have to fucking carry you out of here. Even if you don't give a shit about your dad, you owe this to Erin. For once in her life, she shouldn't have to carry all this alone. So pull your shit together and be there for her. For once."

"I can't leave, okay? I walk out of here, and I'll have a bullet in my head before I ever reach the hospital."

I exhale. I don't know how Erin's put up with his shit for so long. I've only been around him for two minutes and I'm over it. "Why?"

"I was trying to get her money back," he says. "I felt bad when I heard she and Rob broke up. I thought if I ran a few big deals for this guy, I could at least get some of it for her. But during the last one, I got robbed. They took everything. So now I owe this guy 15 grand I don't have. I walk out of here, and I'm a dead man."

"You can't ask him to give you time?"

Sean looks at me like I'm the biggest idiot he's ever seen. "This isn't the IRS. A guy like Danny isn't going to fucking garnish my wages until I've paid it back."

"You realize that if I could find you, they probably can too, right? You've got to go to the cops. Tell them you'll give them information on this guy in exchange for immunity."

"Even if that worked, they're not going to let me just saunter off to the hospital. I'd need to make bail. And believe me, no one I know has that kind of money."

I don't have a lot of sympathy for him, but the only pertinent fact here is

that Erin loves him, and she would rather die than see him hiding here or locked up for life. If she learns what's going on, she'll somehow get the money together to pay this dealer off—probably by going back to the shitty job that made her miserable. Or worse, by getting it from Rob, leaving her beholden to him.

I'd rather lose my whole business than see one more thing weigh her down right now.

“I have that kind of money,” I tell him.



THE POLICE STATION EATS UP MOST OF THE DAY, AND BAIL EATS UP EVERY penny of the money I need to keep my business running this winter. If Sean doesn't return when this is over, my company is done. He's said little to me all day, acting more like a resentful teenager than a grown man who just got his ass bailed out by a stranger.

“Why are you doing this?” he finally asks as we drive to the hospital.

“Because your sister needs you,” I tell him. “And because she's been through too much shit to have to deal with your shit too.”

The sky is the brightest blue, the color of the Caribbean as your plane dips beneath the clouds. Cool outside today, too. A perfect day for biking. I hope when this is done I can hang on to my business, but there's not a doubt in my mind I made the right decision. If her father were to die without seeing Sean, Erin would never forgive herself.

“Erin told me all about you,” Sean says with disgust.

I glance over at him. “Is that why you're still acting like I'm a piece of shit even though I bailed you out?”

“I appreciate what you're doing. That doesn't mean I trust you with my sister,” he replies. “Rob's an asshole, but he wouldn't fuck her up. I could tell from the moment she started describing you that you would. It was like she was upset in advance, like she knew you were going to hurt her.”

Which is exactly what I did.



I DELIVER HIM OUTSIDE THE SAME HOSPITAL DOORS WHERE I DROPPED ERIN

yesterday morning.

“Room 1108,” I tell him.

“You really don’t want me to tell her it was you who found me and bailed me out?” he asks, his hand on the door.

I tell him I don’t. She’s better off thinking of me as the guy who didn’t care enough than the guy who cared a little too much all along.

Dissatisfaction gnaws at me as I drive away, and for no reason I can explain, I want to talk to my brother. We’ve barely spoken since I started hooking up with Erin. But like every other fight we’ve ever had, this one will end when one of us is struggling. And right now, I’m definitely struggling.

“Why the fuck are you helping Sean?” he asks after I tell him what’s going on. “You don’t even *know* him.”

“I’m not doing it for him,” I reply. “I’m doing it for Erin.”

He laughs. “Right, Erin, the girl you don’t want a relationship with.”

“What’s your point?”

Will sighs. “You just risked your entire business to keep her from being upset. You realize that, right? And when you love someone so much you’re willing to give up everything on her behalf, getting nothing in return, committing is the easy part.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” I argue.

“No, it’s not. You’re just fucking scared. That’s all this is.”

I’m pissed when I hang up the phone. Maybe in small part because I wonder if he’s right. I reach the interstate, planning to head south, but I go the opposite direction instead—heading somewhere I should have gone long ago.

Erin
Present

Rock bottom. This must be it.

I cannot find Sean. I have called every friend of his I know of. But “know of” is the key phrase. And the people I don’t know are the people he’s with when he’s using. Which is obviously why I can’t locate him.

I need to tell my parents. I just don’t know how. Like a child, I’m sitting here, waiting on a miracle. A last-minute reprieve, a Hail Mary. Except the hours are passing quickly. The attending informs us that they’ve scheduled the surgery for late this afternoon, at which point I stop counting hours and switch to minutes instead.

There are 202 left.

But Rob promised he’d look for Sean, and while I seem to fail at almost everything I do these days, Rob does not. In the short period of time since he arrived from Amsterdam, he’s already begun to turn things around. Thanks to him, we’ve now got the area’s best neurosurgeon performing my dad’s surgery, and he took care of my parents’ mortgage payment for the next few months.

It’s hard not to see the pattern here: life falls apart without Rob, and it comes back together with him. Rob never hurt me the way Brendan has. Maybe he isn’t perfect, but there’s a lot to be said for the absence of pain.

136 minutes remain. My father wakes and asks if Sean is almost here. I

tell him I think so, part of me hoping he just falls asleep before the surgery so he never learns the truth.

100 minutes, then 72.

My dad stops asking. He just watches the door.

And then, at the 58-minute mark, Rob walks into the room.

“Brought you a visitor,” he says.

And behind him stands Sean.

We all burst into tears—me, my mother, my father. All of us relieved and sick with grief, knowing this may very well be the last time we’re all in the same room.

Sean and my mother go to my father’s side, and Rob comes to sit next to me. I hear my dad telling Sean he’s a good son and he’s proud of him. I guess my mother and I aren’t the only liars in the family.

“How did you find him?” I ask.

He wraps his arm around my shoulders. “I’d do anything for you, Erin. You should know that by now.”

I do know that. I can’t begin to thank him. We were broken—I was broken—and now things feel like they might come together again. All because of him.

“I want you to move back home,” he says. “Harper’s roommate must be due back any day now. I just want to take care of you.”

I hesitate. It feels wrong, but when has making a decision based on what I *feel* ever proven helpful? Brendan’s the only person who’s ever felt right, and he was never even a real option. That verse from the Bible comes to mind. It’s time to set aside childish ways. I need Rob. I’m overwhelmed and incompetent on my own—look at what a mess I made of my life in the short time he was away—but he came back and fixed everything. He is what will keep me from ending up like my parents and Sean. He is the thing that will stand between all of us and disaster.

“Okay,” I tell him. My voice is barely a whisper but he hears it.



MY FATHER IS WHEELED FROM THE ROOM TO GO TO THE OR, AND MY MOTHER weeps. The hours pass, and she continues to weep, aside from the time she spends blaming me for all of it. She doesn’t say it aloud. She just says, “I

wish this hadn't happened," and looks directly at me.

Sean is using again. He's too pale, too restless. For the first time in my life, I'm beyond caring. I'm glad he's alive. I'm glad my dad got to see him. It feels like little else matters at the moment.

"I can go talk to the chaplain if you want," Rob suggests. "I'm sure he could marry us here after your dad's surgery."

I blink. I'd forgotten that was even under discussion. I shake my head. "We're not ready for that, Rob. And it feels like tempting fate, planning something that depends on my dad making it." What I don't say is that the very thought only adds to my grief, and I already have plenty.

He squeezes my hand. "Sorry. I just thought it might help if you had something to focus on."

I know part of why I agreed to get back together with him was gratitude. He found Sean. Agreeing felt like a small concession in light of everything he's done for us. But it's also simply that he's safe. He's solid ground. He's the thing that keeps my head above water so I can do the same for everyone else.

When we get the news that my father has survived the surgery, I go to the chapel. I thank God for letting my father make it this far, which is easy to do, and then I say another prayer of thanks for Rob. That one, oddly, is more difficult.

Part of me still desperately wishes things had gone a different way.

Brendan
Present

The assisted living facility sits in an enviable location. When I arrive, the sun is in its last moments of fullness, hanging heavy before it descends behind the mountains. It's the kind of view that makes you stop in place for a moment, and Gabi is never really going to see anything like it again. The guilt I feel about what happened with her is a constant in my life, but right now it's so amplified I can't feel anything else.

The woman at the registration desk tells me Gabi is probably in the art room. They use a lot of euphemisms here. They label the rooms—music room, art room, game room, library—not for the residents, but for the people who love them. It's a way of pretending anyone here has a normal life.

I walk into the room, seeking one blank face among many, and I find it. Gabi's hair is short now, but I would know her face anywhere, even with eyes that no longer flash or let me see inside her soul. Immediately I wish I hadn't come. She won't understand my apology. I'm not even sure if I came here for her or just to make myself feel better—which is something I don't deserve.

A man approaches me from the other side of the room. It takes me a minute to place him because he's aged a decade in the three years since I last saw him: Gabi's father, a man who must hate me above all living beings.

We haven't spoken since he came to my apartment in Italy to retrieve her stuff. Another hard memory. He'd wanted to see the bathtub, which I hadn't

even seen myself, since the place was still considered a crime scene. The look on his face when I opened the bathroom door to her blood still glazing the tub made me wish I'd refused.

"Hello, Brendan," he says. He extends a hand, which I did not expect. His wife certainly wouldn't have done it.

"I'm sorry..." I hesitate. "I can come back."

"No," he says, indicating the table where Gabi sits, staring vacantly at the wall. "I'm glad you're here."

I take the seat on one side of Gabi, and he takes the other. It's been a long time since I was this near her, and I have the same desire I did the last time: to shake her, tell her to wake up, to come back, to stop doing this to all of us.

"It gets easier," he says softly, looking from my face to Gabi's. "You get used to it."

I nod. There's a lump in my throat, as much for him as for his daughter. I can't imagine living with this kind of pain, and it's pain I caused. Gabi is his only child. I think about this every time I hold Caroline—how unbelievably awful it must be to have a lifetime of memories with your little girl, only to lose her. To know you'll never chat with her at breakfast again or watch her open birthday presents, that she had so many big moments taken from her, all that potential gone.

"I've been wanting to talk to you," he says. "About my wife. I'm sorry about the calls."

My gaze rises. The last thing I ever expected from him, or wanted from him, was an apology.

"I've tried to stop her, but she waits until I'm asleep."

I swallow hard. "Don't apologize. I don't blame her for calling. I deserve it."

He looks surprised. "I hope you don't mean that."

I stare at my hands as they clench and unclench, and then at Gabi's hands, now incapable of action or intent.

"What happened..." I say, my jaw tight, "happened because of me."

"I loved my daughter," he says. His eyes tear up a little, making this so much harder to watch. "I will always love my daughter. But she had problems. It's something my wife never wanted to admit and still won't admit. She was always dramatic and high strung. You told her no when she was little, and she'd either fly into a rage or weep like her heart was broken." His small smile at the memory twists. "It was cute at the time. But as she got

older it was...less controllable. She was diagnosed as bipolar her freshman year in high school, but I don't think either of us really knew how bad it was until the first time she tried to commit suicide."

He must see the utter shock on my face. "You didn't know?" he asks.

I shake my head. I had no idea. The only unhappiness I ever saw in Gabi was the unhappiness I caused.

"Several times, beginning in high school. Sometimes it was over a break-up, but once over a bad grade. I didn't want her to go pre-med. I didn't think she could handle the pressure. I didn't want her going to Italy, either, without one of us with her. My wife, though—she just wanted Gabi to be normal, wanted to believe she was better. She told me your boss knew about Gabi's history and was going to keep an eye on her. I didn't learn until much later that that was not the case."

I look at Gabi's face. She's still beautiful, but she's *gone*. I don't know how he stands it.

"I'm still the one who drove her to it."

"Brendan, you were a kid. You're still a kid. People change their minds about a significant other all the time. I can't tell you how many of my friends are divorced because someone changed their mind 20 or 30 years in. It's hard, but people are allowed to do that. So for you to take responsibility for all this when you only knew her a few months is insane."

"I still shouldn't have—"

He cuts me off. "Stop trying to convince me you're at fault. If this hadn't happened with you, it would have happened soon enough. The first year of medical school? I can't imagine she'd have made it all the way through. So please move on. And stop taking my wife's calls. It's easier for her to blame you than blame herself, but it's time for her to accept the truth."

I sit with the two of them, awed by this man's ability to forgive. I don't think I'd be capable of the same. When I leave, I sit in my car, staring out into the darkness and letting everything he told me sink in.

Maybe it really wasn't my fault. Maybe it's just who she was.

Something begins to loosen inside me, something that's been strung tight for a long time. And as it starts to spin free, all I can think about is Erin.



I WAKE IN MY APARTMENT THE NEXT MORNING TO FIND REMINDERS OF ERIN everywhere—the running shoes she never picked up by the door, her moisturizer on my bathroom sink, the holes I've put in my wall.

In my closet is the box of mementos Gabi once dumped on the floor. I hate that box, and I hate the moisturizer and all the other shit. I hate them because they remind me Erin's gone, and that I was so fucking happy when she was here. How could I have ever thought history might repeat itself with her? Erin isn't Gabi. Hell, of the two of us, I'm the one close to losing it right now, not her.

When I get home the box is still sitting there, and what Will said yesterday finally sinks in: committing to Erin would be easy. It doesn't scare me in the least, because there's nothing I wouldn't give up to have her, and because I know I'm not going to change my mind.

Now I just have to hope that Erin hasn't changed hers.

Erin
Present

My father is released from the ICU the day after his surgery, and while the cirrhosis is not something we can cure, we are told he's "out of the woods" for now.

Later that afternoon, I get a voicemail from the chancellor at ECU, asking if we can meet to discuss job opportunities. I can't imagine any way in which I could gracefully return to my old position, but I would not be surprised if that's what he wants me to do. I've heard quite a bit from Harper about the state of the marketing department since I left, and apparently Tim hasn't fared too well without me to do his job.

So it's a day full of miracles. I just wish a day full of miracles was enough for me. Everything has turned around, but I'm still miserable.

With the surgery behind them, my parents begin planning for the future, and with each minute that passes, I find myself pushed a little closer to the altar. "Did you talk to Rob about getting married at our church?" my mother asks me. The question is entirely for Rob's benefit, as she knows I have not.

Rob raises a brow. "Church?"

"You need to be married in the church," my father explains, his voice raw from being intubated, "so you're married in the eyes of God."

"It's a Catholic thing," I whisper, praying he will at least wait until we are alone to object. "We can talk about it later."

"No," says Rob to my mom, as if *she* is the bride, "I'm happy to be

married wherever you want.”



IT'S EARLY EVENING WHEN I GET PAGED TO THE NURSE'S STATION. IT'S A relief to go—my mother's happy tears are even more annoying than her sad ones.

I'm almost to the desk when Brendan steps into my path. He's unshaven, with circles under his eyes, but he's still so beautiful it breaks my heart. He holds out his arms, and I walk straight into them. I bury my nose in his chest and wish I could stay exactly like this forever.

“I heard your dad made it through surgery,” he says, his voice low against my ear.

His voice, the smell of his skin, the feel of his chest beneath my cheek. These are things I have lost. These are all things I will never have again. God, how am I going to stand living in a world where these things are no longer mine?

“Rob got this amazing neurosurgeon,” I tell him. “It's a miracle.”

He scowls at the mention of Rob's name. “Can we talk?”

I agree, and he leads me down the hall, turning in to the first empty room he finds.

He reaches for my hands, linking our fingers, and suddenly stiffens. His gaze jerks from my eyes to the engagement ring on my finger.

“Why are you wearing that?” he asks, his hands tightening on mine so I can't pull away. “Why the fuck are you wearing that ring?”

“Don't make this harder,” I whisper. “Okay? This has been a terrible couple of days, and I just can't deal with... You didn't want me, Brendan. So you can't come in here now and make it all worse.”

“I did want you,” he says adamantly. He lets go of my hands and cradles my jaw, forcing me to meet his eye. “I wanted you so much, and I was so fucked up over the thing with Gabi I wouldn't let myself try. But some things that happened yesterday made it finally sink in—what you've been telling me all along—and I'm ready now. I'm ready for this to be anything you want it to be.”

That mournful thing I felt inside of me the moment I saw his face rises up. “You're too late, Brendan,” I whisper.

“No. No, I’m fucking not. You aren’t married. There’s nothing here you can’t undo. You don’t even love him.”

“I do. It’s not the same as with you, but I love him. It’s just different.”

“You love him like a *friend*, Erin. You don’t marry someone you love as a friend. You don’t belong with someone you only love as a friend. You want more, and you’ve wanted it for a long time or you’d already have married him.”

“Maybe I did want more, but I was wrong to,” I tell him. “I’ve never spent weeks crying over him. I didn’t feel devastated when it ended, but I did with you. I’m just better off with Rob. Around him, things go the way they’re supposed to.”

“But around me you’re *real*. You get to be the person you actually are, the good and the bad. I love that girl, and he doesn’t even know her.”

“He knows about my dad. I told him. He’s going to help me get him into rehab.”

“Yeah, because you were forced to tell him,” he hisses. “But does he know the rest? Does he know how long it’s gone on? Does he know the things you love? That you hate listening to NPR and that those bluegrass interludes they play make you want to put a knife in your eye? That you’d rather sit outside or hear a band than go to some fancy fucking dinner? That you test drive a Ducati every time you’re here?”

“No, but—”

“Are you ever going to dance with him in the middle of the night wearing nothing but a T-shirt? No, because he won’t even dance. Because he wouldn’t even understand why you’d want to. Are you ever going to strip off all of your clothes and spread out on his couch when you want to get laid? Are you going to bake for him and sing at the top of your lungs while you do it? Let me answer for you: No, Erin, you won’t. That’s not who he is or what he wants, and you won’t. And those things aren’t peripheral. They are *you*.”

Maybe he’s right, but none of those things even feel relevant right now. My family is sinking, and I have a duty to them. That’s what’s important here, not whether I ever dance half-naked again. As much as I might want Brendan, what I need most is to know that we—me, my parents, Sean—are safe. And even if I could afford to risk it, there’s no guarantee Brendan won’t change his mind. The past few weeks have been awful, but to lose him when I’d really thought we had a chance would be so much worse.

“I was happy until you showed up,” I cry. “Before you came back from

Italy, I was fine. I was happy then, and I'll be happy again."

"You weren't happy, Erin. You still aren't or you wouldn't be in here with me crying. And I don't want to make you cry, but I'm in love with a girl you want to kill off, and I don't know what else to do."

He leans in, capturing my mouth, his hands framing my face, and I let him. I let myself have this one last time, his mouth and his heat and my tears slipping between our skin. And then I pull back, and I leave him behind for good.

Erin
Present

By the following day, my father's condition is considered stable. The hospital tells us he can be released within 48 hours. The doctor requests a meeting with all of us, and I'm relieved that Rob is back at work and will miss it. I have no idea what the doctor will say, but it feels like our secrets are on the move now, that the trap door they hide under has begun to shift and lift, and things that are meant to stay hidden may be about to slip free. Rob sort of knows about my dad, but he doesn't know the rest of us are just as sick in our own ways, and it's something I'd prefer he not find out.

My parents are back to performing The Doyle Show when the doctor walks in: my dad the gruff but lovable patriarch, my mother giggling and giddy. I'd almost stopped noticing it, but now I can see nothing else. The falseness of it sickens me.

The doctor's smile is patient, but small. It's obvious he's here to discuss something serious, something neither of my parents wants to hear.

"Before Mr. Doyle goes home," he says, "there are a couple of issues we need to address."

"We can't wait to get home," my mother says briskly. "We're having a big celebration dinner tomorrow night." Her eyes widen as if she's just had the most brilliant idea, so brilliant it startles her. "You should come! You've never had chicken parm like mine, I promise you."

I flinch, embarrassed for her, and Sean looks away. She is the only person

in the room who doesn't realize how insane she sounds.

Dr. Taylor doesn't even smile in response. He's not one of those doctors who makes friends with his patients, and in this case that may be a good thing. He's unlikely to be bringing good news.

"I've gone over your labs and your biopsy report," he tells my father. "As you know, cirrhosis is irreversible, but you still have the possibility of ten good years, maybe more, if you can manage not to drive into any more telephone poles."

My father nods. "I won't. I just need to learn not to stay out so late."

My mother squeezes his hand. "We're getting older. I think we both need to remember to take better care of ourselves."

I feel like I'm choking. My father is dying from alcohol poisoning. He could have killed someone last week. I can't believe they still refuse to see this.

"No." My voice is like breaking glass, making every other action in the room cease, every head turn toward me. "No, this wasn't lack of sleep. You don't get to pretend this was lack of sleep."

"Erin, stop," my mother scolds. Her voice isn't harsh, but her eyes are. They dare me to continue. It's the same look she gave me as a child, when someone asked why my father was absent at a school concert or an award ceremony.

Except I'm an adult now. She's no longer a foot taller, and I'm no longer the little girl who needs her to survive.

"He could have killed someone. That telephone pole could have been a *child*, Mom. That could have been *me*. Would you still be pretending then?"

"We can discuss this later," she says, her eyes shooting daggers.

"Mr. Doyle had a blood alcohol content of .25 when he arrived here that night," says Dr. Taylor. "I think he should consider attending a rehab program."

"Everyone has a few too many once in a while, doc," my dad says.

His tone is jovial. It's his "come on, boys will be boys" schtick. I've heard it way too many times before.

"Your cirrhosis didn't happen on its own," the doctor replies. "If none of that persuades you, I'd encourage you to consider the fact that you're also facing a DUI charge. Given how high your blood alcohol content was and that this wasn't your first DUI, rehab may be the only thing that keeps you out of jail."

He leaves, and my parents bluster, as outraged as they might be had the doctor accused them of child pornography or human trafficking.

“He’s crazy,” my mother insists. “Erin, you and Rob need to find a lawyer for your father. The *best* lawyer.” She turns to my dad. “We’ll get you out of this.”

I laugh, but it’s not a happy sound. I’ve wondered when I might hit the point of *enough*—the moment when my debt to them is paid, when I abandon responsibility. And here it is: with my father in the hospital, dying of cirrhosis, facing jail time.

Enough.

I stand. “Dad needs *help*, not a lawyer. Not a penny of my money, or Rob’s, will go toward defending him unless he’s gone to rehab first.”

“Erin,” my mother gasps, ready to scold.

I stop her before she can start. “Mom, shut up, for once in your life. You’re as big a problem as he is.” I turn toward my father. “Five days ago I thought you were going to die. And if you had, it would have been my fault, and Mom’s, for letting you do this. You’re still going to die. Maybe it’ll take a few years and maybe it won’t, but I’m done being a part of it. When it happens, I’m not willing to feel the way I’ve felt over the past week. You know what your drinking is? It’s cowardice. And Mom, every single time you let him do it without comment, you’re just as bad. And I’ve been bad too. I *shouldn’t* have been answering your calls. I *shouldn’t* have been in bars looking for you at 3 AM when I had to be up for work in a few hours. So Dad, here’s the deal: go to rehab, or this is the last time you’ll see me, either of you. I’m not going to be a part of this anymore.”

All three of them look shocked, but it’s my mother whose shock turns to rage in a heartbeat. “How dare you make this about yourself right now, of all times? Why is it so hard for you to be—”

“Stop, Mom,” Sean says. “She’s right. We’re all fucking cowards. She’s right. I’m going back to rehab. Dad needs to go too. If he doesn’t go, I don’t want to hear from either of you again either.”

My mother starts carrying on about how she raised us, reminding Sean of all the times she’s supported him. It’s my father who stops her.

“Okay,” he says, his voice low and gravelly. “I’ll go.”

“You don’t have to do this,” my mother insists.

“I think,” he says quietly, closing his eyes, “that I probably do.”

Erin
Present

Rob arranges everything. He gets my dad into the best treatment program in the area, and he says he knows a lawyer who “always wins.”

“And I got you an interview with my firm,” he adds.

“Oh,” I stammer. “I appreciate that, but I got a call from the chancellor at ECU. It’s possible they’re going to offer me something there.”

“Erin, you can make 30 percent more at my company. Being at a nonprofit has hardly done you a lot of favors so far. Think about the bullshit you went through with HR. That would never happen in the private sector.” He shakes his head. “I can’t imagine it’s about a job anyway, given the way you left. He probably just wants you to call in a favor with Olivia.”

My heart sinks. But just because the truth sucks doesn’t mean you ignore it. After a moment I nod, though I can’t bring myself to say anything.

So once again, Rob saves the day. And the DoYLES always, always need saving.

We’re lucky to have him. I just wish I could think that without this feeling of resignation. Everything is fixed, and everyone is saved, but I still cry myself to sleep back at my parents’ place that night.

So I guess not everyone is fixed. I secretly wonder if I’m broken beyond repair.



SEAN SPENDS THE NEXT MORNING AT THE POLICE STATION—I DON'T ASK WHY because I don't want to know—and when he returns, I drive him back to rehab.

“I'm sorry about summer semester,” he says. “I'll figure out a way to get those credits. And I'll pay you back, I promise.”

I've heard Sean's promises so many times. He could have said nothing at all and it would hold more weight. But he's trying, and I'm not going to make all of this harder for him by arguing. Very little feels worth fighting over at the moment.

“You think Dad will make it?” he asks.

I glance at him. Given that he's now entering rehab for the eighth time, I can't say I have a lot of faith in the process. I tell him I don't know, and I can hear the apathy in my voice. This week, it seems, has used up my ability to care about pretty much everything.

Sean doesn't speak again until we pull up to the rehab center. “The last time I saw you—when we went to lunch? You glowed, like you did when you were a kid,” he says. “I'd forgotten that about you. I'd forgotten you could even *be* happy like that. You're back to faking it now, though.”

I pull into the first available parking space and climb out of the car. “I'm not faking anything, Sean.” I slam the door harder than I should. “Our father is dying, and I'm unemployed. Who would be happy right now?”

“I don't think that has anything to do with it, though, because you hadn't been happy like that for a long time before, even when you had a job,” he says, reaching into the trunk for his bag. “It was Brendan.”

“If I seemed happy, it had nothing to do with him.”

“If you say so,” he replies. “Or maybe being scared of shit runs in the family.” Without a backward glance, he walks away.

I spend the trip back to the hospital fuming. *What an asshole.* He took my entire life savings and is riding the rehab train for the eighth time. Why would I listen to his opinion about *anything*?

Besides, what he said didn't even make sense—happiness and bravery are completely different things. And he might know plenty about happiness, at least of the heroin/cocaine-induced variety, but he doesn't know shit about courage.

I'm not a coward. I've gone into the seediest bars known to man to find

my father. I kept running track when I wanted to give up. I've held my family together in my most broken moments. I stood up to my boss and ended a relationship when it wasn't working, although I guess I can't take much credit for that now that we're back together.

"I'm not scared of anything," I say aloud, as if I can prove it to myself. Except I don't sound brave, or fearless. I sound like a child arguing against the most obvious truth.



ROB COMES TO THE HOSPITAL EARLY IN THE AFTERNOON TO DRIVE MY FATHER to rehab. He insisted on doing this, although I wish he hadn't. Somewhere inside, I know he finds this situation distasteful. We are like a dirty guest room he's forced to stay in for a weekend. He smiles and struggles to control his disgust the entire time.

My mother climbs in the backseat of Rob's Range Rover with my father, filling the air with false good cheer. It reminds me of bug spray—the scent not quite sweet enough to disguise what is noxious.

"I spoke to Father Duncan," she says. "He said he'd be happy to marry you in the church, despite the situation. We could probably get a date within the month, as long as you aren't going to insist on bridesmaids and..." Her voice grinds to a halt.

Rob's hand, holding mine, feels leaden.

"Yeah," he says. "Just family. No one else."

My mother starts prattling on about the morning weddings she's attended, places we can go to for a nice brunch afterward. She asks if we'll have a honeymoon, and I finally snap.

"Mom, can we please stop discussing this? Let's just get through one thing at a time."

She's probably mad, but I don't really care. I turn on the radio, and Rob immediately hits the preset for NPR. I think of Brendan again, although I never actually seem to *stop* thinking of Brendan. Everything he said was correct. I don't want to listen to this, but I'm not going to ask Rob to change the station. I'm not going to ask Rob for anything I want, ever. I want so many things I wouldn't even know where to start, and I don't think I'd ever be able to stop.

One of their annoying little bluegrass interludes comes on, and I want to laugh and cry at the same time. Even the stupidest, smallest things make me think of Brendan, and every one of them hurts.

My head begins to throb. The bluegrass continues. My mother, behind me, is talking too loudly, her false enthusiasm grating on my ear as she comments on every fucking thing we pass. Every building, every road sign, every billboard.

“I didn’t know they had a Cracker Barrel here, honey, did you?” she practically sings to my father. “We’ll have to stop there when you come home!”

She’s pretending all is well, even with half of her family in rehab.

Rob catches my eye and smiles awkwardly. “Are you hungry?” he asks.

“Not really. You?”

“If you can wait, we could just get a late dinner back home. Why don’t you see if we can get a table at De La Mer around eight?”

De La Mer is quiet and expensive and sterile, the kind of place I hate. I bite my lip. *Brendan, get out of my head.*

“I’m pretty wiped,” I venture. “Do you think we could go somewhere low-key? That place with the patio on Edgemont always looks relaxed. And they have bands sometimes.”

He frowns. “Outside? What kind of food?”

“Just casual, I think. Burgers or whatever.”

“I was kind of craving some ahi tuna. And if there’s a band, we won’t be able to talk.”

It’s not worth fighting over. Very few things in life are. I go online to reserve our table, ignoring the odd dread I feel about the night I’ve just planned. What is there to dread about a nice dinner at a good restaurant? Nothing.

We check my father in, and the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach remains. The truth is that it’s been here, to some extent, ever since I agreed to get back together with Rob. I’m beginning to worry it’s permanent.

My mother decides to stay for that night’s family therapy session, and the reception desk assures us they’ll get her a ride home, so Rob and I return to the car alone. We reach the highway, and he rests his hand on my thigh.

“It’ll be good to have you back home,” he says.

Oh, God. I’m not sure how I’m just realizing this now, but tonight will be our first night alone since we got back together. And there are things he’ll

expect. I've slept with him a thousand times, but the idea of doing it tonight sickens me.

I stare out the window. No place is more beautiful than Colorado in August, but right now all I can see is what's bleak—the grass that's parched and the dry ground and the ugly highway. Everything looks dead to me, looks like nothing, and that's what I feel inside.

I've just chosen a lifetime of things I don't want—NPR and fancy dinners and boring sex—because I'm convinced this life is the safest course.

I squeeze my eyes shut to stop thinking, but I only hear Brendan and Sean in my head, and they're both saying the same thing. They're telling me I'm giving up everything I love because I think it will keep me free—from pain, from worry, from the sick parts of myself. But freedom is meaningless if you gain it by giving away what matters.

I've been confusing comfort with happiness, apathy with freedom. Just like my parents, I'm missing my real life every single day by choosing things that are empty, by choosing to pretend.

I don't want to give up dinner outside, or music. I don't want to give up sex in a hammock, or on a picnic blanket. Or late nights with someone who will stay awake with me when my whole life is turning to shit, who knows everything ugly inside of me and wants me in spite of it. What am I getting in exchange for all of those things I've pushed away? Less pain, maybe. Fewer demons to fight and resist.

Sean is right. I'm as big a coward as anyone in my family.

He turns the radio on. Bluegrass music again. I reach out and turn it off so I can say brave words at last, really meaning them this time.

"I'm sorry, Rob," I tell him, "but this isn't going to work."

Brendan
Present

“**H**ow long you plan to keep doing this?” Beck asks, sliding me a beer.

We’ve been friends for a long time, but that doesn’t mean I feel like answering his questions, even if he does let me drink for free. I wrap my hand around the bottle, looking at it as if it holds answers. “Doing what?”

“Sitting in here alone and pissed off, drinking to forget about Erin.”

“What makes you think this has anything to do with Erin?”

He raises a brow. “Do I really look that stupid to you?”

It’s been three days since she walked away from me at the hospital. Three days since I realized getting serious with Gabi *wasn’t* the biggest mistake of my life, refusing to get serious with Erin was.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s over. She’s marrying someone else.”

Beck hesitates, like he wants to argue, and finally decides against it. “Then you’ve got to move on, man. I’m tired of watching you sulk and go home alone.”

I look around. There are girls here, girls I’d have taken home once upon a time. I don’t have much interest in being that guy again, but who am I otherwise? I’m *this*, the guy who didn’t pull his head out of his ass until it was too late. The guy too damn miserable to care about anything right now, even the business he once wanted so badly.

“Something’s got to change, bro,” says Beck.

Yeah, I guess it does. Realizing that I’m capable of commitment, of the risk involved, must be broader than just Erin. If I can feel that way about one girl, I can probably feel that way about someone else eventually. And in the meantime, I should do what I can. For the next few months, getting over the fact that Rob and Erin are married is going to be so fucking hard. I’m going to need something more than what I’ve got at the moment to survive.

I look around the room. No one appeals to me. Doesn’t mean I shouldn’t at least try.

Erin
Present

I sit outside Brendan's place. His car is here, which is a relief, but also terrifying. I know what he said to me at the hospital, but he was so against commitment, and for so long, that it's hard for me to imagine he's really changed his mind.

Either way, I don't regret breaking up with Rob. Our conversation on the way back to my parents' place was ugly, as I suspected it would be. He called me words I've never heard him utter before. He also refused to believe that it wasn't about Brendan no matter what I said—but it was the truth. If I want to be different from my family, I need to make brave choices. I need to stop confusing comfort and happiness. My happiness with Brendan is not certain, but my unhappiness with Rob is, and that's all I need to know.

Except now, as I stare at Brendan's house, I feel anything but brave. A part of me would like to sit in the car for another hour, drumming up my courage. I don't, though, because Brendan is inside, feet away from me, and I have missed him so desperately that I can't stand to wait another minute.

I climb the stairs and knock. For a moment I think I hear voices inside, and when he opens the door I know immediately that I've interrupted something. He's in nothing but shorts, with sweat dotting his hairline and flushed cheeks.

And then, in the other room, I hear a voice. A female voice.

"Oh." The word bursts from my mouth, along with every ounce of free

oxygen in my body. The disappointment of this moment, the pain of it... it's too much to cope with in such a short span of time. *I should have known. I should have known. I was stupid. Again.*

I should probably still tell him what I came here to say, but I don't have it in me. All I want to do is get away as fast as I possibly can. I turn to leave, but he grabs my elbow before I reach the stairs.

"Erin," he says, not allowing me to pull away. "Wait."

When I don't come back, he reaches a single arm around my waist and lifts me against him, holding me tight to his chest, his arm an immovable band. I feel his breath brush my ear as he speaks.

"Why are you here, and why are you running off?"

"Please just let me go. I shouldn't have come. You've already got someone here, and I should have known you'd—"

"There's no one here."

My throat constricts and words barely edge their way out. "I heard her."

He spins me to face him. "You heard the TV."

"You're sweating. And half-dressed."

He has the start of a smile on his face. "I was doing push-ups."

Part of me doesn't want to believe him. The frightened, cowardly part that knows I'm safest by leaving here, by hating him, by protecting myself from everything that comes if I stay. I've been this person with him so many times that it feels natural. But I'm not going to be that girl anymore, so I do the brave thing, the scariest thing, the thing I most want to do in the world: I stay. Instead of running, I lean into him, pressing my face to his chest.

"Please be here because you broke up with Rob," he says.

"I did," I whisper.

His exhale ruffles my hair. "Thank God."

"Do you still want this?" I ask him.

He tips my chin upward, pressing his lips to mine. "More," he says, "than I've ever wanted anything." He returns to my mouth, his kisses moving quickly from gentle to urgent before he forces himself to back up a step, his hands still gripping my hips.

"I can't believe this is all working out," I say, blinking up at him. After the drama of the past few weeks, it's a little surreal to suddenly discover our story might have a happy ending after all.

"It'd better be," he replies, "because I don't know what I'll do if it's not. I've already put way too many holes in the wall to ever get my deposit back."

I look around as he pulls me inside the door. His apartment *does* look destroyed. “Those were because of me?”

“One every time we spoke, and one every time I had to hear from Rob about you guys getting back together.” He slides his hands through my hair, pressing his fingertips to my scalp. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

He finds my mouth again, and his urgency makes me forget anything I meant to discuss. I decide that whatever it was, it probably didn’t matter all that much, but he pulls away again.

“Why are you stopping?” I ask breathlessly.

He flinches. “I’m trying to behave myself here, but it’s easier said than done. I haven’t had sex since you left.”

“At all?”

He gives a somewhat pained laugh. “I haven’t slept with anyone but you since *Tahoe*, Erin. Before that, even.”

“But...then what were you doing all those nights I didn’t see you?”

“Sometimes work. Mostly trying to get a grip. I wanted to be with you every fucking second and occasionally it freaked me out.”

Oh my God. And there I was making myself sick, imagining him with other girls.

“Well I haven’t been with anyone but you since before *Tahoe* either,” I tell him, “so I don’t want you to behave.”

I see his face move from astonishment to something fiercer, more possessive. In a second he’s on me, pinning me to the wall, his hands making quick work of my jeans and his before he lifts me up and carries me to the couch. His mouth is on my neck, then moves lower as his hand slides under the elastic of my panties. His fingers are unbearably light, a whisper of pressure, nothing beyond that. I writhe beneath him, waiting for him to do more, to move things further, but he doesn’t. He just tortures me with his gentle fingers until my entire body is strung tight.

“Brendan, I need—”

“I know what you need,” he says, his voice husky. “But I’ve thought about nothing else for weeks, so I think I’ll take my time and wait until you’re begging.”

“I’m already begging.”

He laughs, his tongue following the trail his fingers just made, forcing me to arch hard against his mouth.

“Brendan, please,” I say, and he finally relents, moving up and filling me

with a single roll of his hips.

“That’s so good,” he says, squeezing his eyes shut. “Give me a minute. Don’t move.”

Something about being told not to move makes me want to do it more than I ever have before. “Please, Brendan.”

“Christ,” he groans. “Don’t move and don’t beg. Either one of those will end this quickly.”

Slowly he withdraws and enters me again. My nails dig into his skin.

“More,” I demand.

“I don’t remember you being so bossy,” he says with a grin, but he complies—for a minute. And then he slows again.

“Faster. I’m not going to finish at that pace,” I breathe.

“Lucky for you,” he replies, “the night is young.”



MUCH LATER, AFTER WE’VE MADE GOOD USE OF THE COUCH, AND THE kitchen table, and the floor, we find ourselves in bed. This is where we finally talk and where I discover it was him, not Rob, who found Sean, and that he used his heli-skiing money to pay Sean’s bail, which makes me feel like my heart is swelling in my chest, Grinch-style. He risked his entire business on my behalf. Thank God Sean did what he had to so Brendan will get his money back.

“And you let Rob take the credit for it?” I ask.

His eyes narrow. “I had no idea Rob was taking the credit. That’s low, even for him.”

“Well I’m relieved you’re getting your money back,” I say. “I, on the other hand, have none. I emptied my bank account paying Rob back for my parents’ rent and my father’s rehab. Maybe you can ask your friend Crystal if there’s room on the Broncos’ cheerleading squad.”

He pinches my side. “You were so fucking mean to her,” he says, laughing. “Anyway, have you been interviewing? Do you even want to stay in marketing?”

“I’ve gotten a couple of calls. I’m actually meeting with the chancellor at ECU tomorrow, although I don’t know if it will amount to anything.”

The smile leaves his face. “You’re not going back to work for Timothy,”

he says. “I’ll end up getting arrested for assault if you do.”

“Definitely not,” I agree. “But until I find something and you get your money back we’re both broke. It’s a good thing we never leave your apartment anyway.”

“It’s not forever,” he promises, cradling my face in his hands. We’ll figure it out.”

I’m pretty sure we already have.



WHEN WE WAKE I CAN’T SEE THE CLOCK, BUT I CAN TELL BY THE FULL sunlight blazing in through the French doors that it’s not early—which isn’t all that surprising given how late Brendan kept me up. As much as I want to snuggle against him, I don’t. Harper’s roommate gets back today, and I have to get my stuff out of her room before I meet with the chancellor. Reluctantly, I slide one leg forward to climb out of bed when a hand lands on my hip like a vise.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Brendan asks, rolling over and dragging my hips against him. His erection presses into my back, and I feel that familiar longing in my gut, which is just ridiculous. Surely there’s some limit to the number of times you can have sex in a 12-hour period.

“I told Harper I’d be over there this morning to move my stuff into her room. I’m already late.”

“Move it here,” he says.

“I have no idea if I’ll get a job offer today, Brendan. It’s entirely possible that I won’t have money for my own place for months.”

“I don’t want you to get your own place,” he says, rolling me to face him. “I want you here.”

I feel joy flutter in my chest. I never thought I’d see the day when I’d accuse Brendan of moving too fast.

“Baby steps,” I tell him with a laugh. “Let’s see if you can get through 24 hours without a panic attack about feeling trapped.”

“I assure you there will be no panic attack. Come on, Erin. We were practically living together before Rob got back anyway. And I’ve spent weeks feeling sick every time I came home, knowing you wouldn’t be here. I never want to feel that way again.”

“I’ll bring a *few* of my things here.”

“All of them.”

“Some,” I counter.

“All.”

“Brendan, this is a negotiation. You’re supposed to move toward the center.”

“All,” he says, pulling me tighter.



AN HOUR LATER, WE APPEAR AT HARPER’S PLACE TOGETHER. HARPER, WHO took her lunch early to help, looks at our joined hands and raises a brow.

“You sure you want to do that, Brendan?” she asks. “Someone might see.”

He gives her half a grin. “Yeah, Harper, I’m sure. Thanks for your concern.”

We go to the bedroom, where I’ve stacked boxes along the wall on one side. It worked fine in here, but I can’t do that in a room I’m ostensibly sharing—although the odds of Harper or me ever spending the night here are slim.

“I’ll move this stuff into your room for now,” I tell her. “But I think I can probably drive it to Denver in a few days and store it at my parents’.”

“No, you won’t,” says Brendan. “It’s going to my place.”

“*Some* is going to your place,” I reply. “That’s what we agreed.”

“That is not what we agreed.” He grabs two boxes and moves toward the door.

Harper looks between the two of us, and for what must be the first time ever, she looks concerned.

“You’re not moving in with him,” she says, aghast. “You’ve only been single for, like, a day! You need to keep your options open.”

“She’s not keeping her options open, Harper!” shouts Brendan over his shoulder. “She has no options.”

“Erin,” she says quietly, her voice full of doom.

I smile. While I have no intention of moving all of my stuff to his place just yet, he’s really sort of right.

“I don’t want options,” I tell her. “I’ve got exactly what I want.”

That afternoon I go to the chancellor's office, trying to keep my expectations low, reminding myself that Rob is often right, and he was right about this: working for a nonprofit has not done me a lot of favors so far. If the chancellor is going to offer me my old job back, or a crappy job in another department, I'm determined to say no.

We exchange pleasantries. He again seems far more interested in discussing my friendship with Olivia than anything else, and he asks if I think she might agree to be on the cover of the alumni magazine. Just as I'm beginning to wonder if Rob really was right and I'm only here because of my connection to Olivia, he shifts into business gear.

"I'm not sure if you're aware of this," he says, "but the marketing department has been in shambles since you left."

I'm well aware of it, via Harper, but I just give a small nod.

"I'm wondering how you'd feel about becoming our new director of marketing," he says.

My jaw drops. Not in a million years did I ever imagine Tim would walk away from that job.

"Tim quit?" I ask.

"Not exactly," he says. "It's become clear of late that Timothy is not up to the job, and we have a meeting set up with him later this afternoon to let him know as much." He clears his throat. "The problem is that the office has fallen so far behind in the past month that we don't have time to go through the normal channels—posting the position, et cetera. Although, honestly, we don't really need to. We need someone who can hit the ground running, and we think that person is you, if you're interested."

I nod, speechless. If I were a better person, it would be enough for me that I'm being offered a job, particularly one with a starting salary nearly double what I made before. The fact that it's Timothy's job, though, makes it infinitely sweeter.

I walk back across campus to my car. I'm three-quarters of the way to the parking lot when I find myself heading straight toward Timothy.

If it were up to me, we'd just avoid each other, but he chooses to step into my path.

"You can't be on campus," he says. "You're no longer an employee."

"I'm an alum, Tim," I reply. "I have every bit as much right to be here as you."

His lips slide into an ugly smirk. "I'd ask you how the job hunt was

going, but given that you're on campus on a Tuesday afternoon, I guess I know the answer."

And here I was feeling sorry for him...a little.

"I'm not too worried about it," I reply.

"Well, you should be," he says. "Who's going to hire you? You're *persona non grata* at the university, so good luck getting a recommendation from anyone here."

I laugh, which he clearly was not expecting. Why was I ever intimidated by this man? He's a 13-year-old bully in a man's body, and not much of one at that.

"You never know what's in store, Timothy," I tell him. I glance back in the direction of the chancellor's office. "Maybe even right around the corner."



ON THE WAY HOME I CALL BRENDAN TO TELL HIM THE GOOD NEWS.

"I'm still at the office," he says. "Meet me here and we'll go celebrate."

It's the first time he's ever suggested I come by. "Really?" I tease to hide my uncertainty. "This doesn't cross some work/private life divide of yours?"

"It would," he says, "if there were a divide. But there isn't anymore."

I arrive to find his office is laid out very similarly to the one in which we first worked. I shout to him that I'm here and jump up on the tour desk, the way I always did that summer we worked together.

When he walks out, he comes to a dead stop.

"What?" I ask.

"You," he says. "It just hit me, seeing you sitting like that, how you tortured me that summer we worked together."

"I tortured *you*?" I guffaw. "I had such a crush on you, and you were so mean to me."

"I was mean because I didn't want you to have a crush. And because I didn't want to have one on you, but the more I tried to avoid you, the worse it got until I couldn't even think about anyone else."

"Hmm," I say through pursed lips. "You sure managed to look like you were 'thinking' about other girls."

"From our second week at that job, I never slept with another girl without

imagining you. Not once. It fucking pissed me off, and it made me hate you a little extra, but I couldn't change it."

My mouth curves into a smile. "And what were you imagining us doing?" I ask.

"Sometimes it was you, just like that," he says. "You swinging those legs over the tour desk."

"That's it?"

He creeps closer, pushing my knees apart until he's standing between them and our chests are touching.

"Not even close," he says, cupping my jaw. "But I'd start like this."

He kisses me, and for some reason—in this place, in this moment—I become my 22-year-old self, the one so consumed with lust, so obsessed that even the sight of the back of his head could make my legs weak.

"And then," he says, unbuttoning my blouse, "I'd do this."

He pushes my skirt around my waist. "Now lay back," he whispers, "and I'll show you the rest."

Erin
Two Months Later

As I'm apt to do, I start yawning the moment Brendan and I board the flight to Seattle, where we will celebrate Will and Olivia's anniversary as well as our goddaughter's baptism. It's been a busy couple of months, but the best possible kind of busy—I love my job and Brendan's tour company is thriving. Because of our schedules, we really only see each other at night, but we make the most of it.

There are no more 2 AM calls for either of us. Brendan finally blocked Gabi's mother, and my father and Sean successfully completed rehab. I have no idea if they'll stay clean, but I know I'm done covering for both of them.

Brendan once worried that he'd drag me down, the way he thought he did Gabi. But the truth is that I was already drowning—suffocated by the demands placed on me by my family and Rob—and Brendan gave me just enough air to realize it was happening at all, and to make it stop.

“You know what would make a good anniversary present?” he asks me now, sliding his fingers through mine and glancing back toward the bathrooms.

“A, we are not attempting to join the mile-high club in the middle of the day when every single person will watch us both entering and leaving the bathroom.”

“And what's B?”

“B is that it's not even our anniversary. It's Will and Olivia's. And before

you start bitching, keep in mind this *could* be our four-year anniversary too if you hadn't taken off with the wedding coordinator that night."

I've convinced myself it no longer bothers me, but I hear a level of irritation in my tone which might lead one to think otherwise.

"I never laid a finger on the wedding coordinator," he says. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"Rob told me," I say, realizing that yes, even after all these years, I'm still upset by it. "I was completely devastated. I went to my room afterward and cried myself to sleep."

His jaw clenches. "Erin, I waited. I waited and waited, feeling like an asshole, until I got a text from Rob saying he'd finally gotten you to come to his room."

I stare at him, wide-eyed. "He walked me upstairs and dropped me off at the door."

Rob played us both. He knew, even back then, that there was something between us, and he went out of his way to make sure nothing came of it. We sit in silence for a moment, undoubtedly thinking the same thoughts: what might have happened if it had gone another way? Where would we be right now?

"I should probably thank him," Brendan finally says.

"*What?*" I demand. "He kept us apart."

"He did us a favor," Brendan replies. "I was too young, and you were definitely too young. It wouldn't have lasted."

"Maybe. But I still feel like he deserves to be punished."

"I think that's been taken care of," Brendan reminds me, referring to how poorly things have gone for Rob since our break-up. Apparently his fling with Christina began long before they left for Amsterdam, and she wasn't the only woman at the office he was sleeping with. When Christina found out, she and the other woman both claimed they'd been sexually harassed. I have no idea if it'll hold up in court—probably not—but since both women reported to him, it's unseemly enough that he's been asked to resign regardless.

"I still wish you'd kicked his ass at some point," I mutter.

Brendan laughs low, under his breath. "That's been taken care of too."

"What? I don't remember you being in a fight."

He smirks. His cockiness hasn't diminished one bit since we got together. "It probably wasn't obvious to you because when I get in a fight, I don't

lose.”

“But when? I can’t believe it happened and I’m just learning about it now.”

“About an hour after you told me the shit he said when you broke up with him. He called you a whore. Did you really think I was going to let that slide?”

I shake my head and smile to myself. I remember thinking Brendan seemed *unusually* calm when I told him. Now I know why.

“Anyway,” he continues, “it’s all worked out for the best. I’d gladly give up a couple of years with you, if I’m getting forever in exchange.”

“Forever, huh?” I tease, leaning against his shoulder.

“Yeah, smart ass,” he says. “You got a problem with that?”

I laugh. “Nope. Forever sounds just about right.”



EVERYONE’S ON THE BACK DECK WHEN WE ARRIVE AT WILL AND OLIVIA’S. Matthew throws himself at Brendan while Dorothy leaps up to hug us both.

“Hey, Brendan, introduce us to your friend,” Olivia calls.

He scowls. “You’ve known her longer than you’ve known me.”

“Sure,” she grins, “but I want to hear you say it. Go ahead. I know it’s a hard word, but you can do it. Say it with me. *Girlfriend. Guuurrrlfriend.*”

“This is Erin, my girlfriend,” he says with a sheepish smile.

“Now that that’s out of the way, we’re stealing her,” says Olivia, rising to her feet. “We’re going shopping.”

His eyes narrow. “You hate shopping. And we just got here.”

She shrugs. “This was your mother’s idea.”

He turns his glare to his mother. “Take someone else’s girlfriend on your escapade. She worked all week. I’ve barely seen her.”

Olivia laughs. “Don’t you live together?”

“Yes, but…” His shoulders sag in resignation. He leans over to kiss me. “Don’t let them keep you all afternoon.”

“Wow,” says Will to Brendan as we go inside. “You’re even more pussy-whipped than I thought.”



OLIVIA DRIVES TO J.CREW AT PACIFIC PLACE. THE TRUTH IS I'D HAVE preferred to stay back with Brendan—we so rarely get a whole day together—and I don't feel like shopping anyway.

"I'll just push Caroline in the stroller while you guys look around," I suggest.

"But you're the reason for this trip," says Dorothy.

"Me?" I ask. "You know Harper's forbidden me to purchase my own clothes anymore."

The fact that I'm now her boss didn't stop her from swiping my credit card to order me two suits last week.

"Don't worry. This isn't anything Harper's trying to buy for you," Olivia says with a wicked grin as she pulls me to the back of the store.

We wind up in the bridal department.

I look at both of them in absolute befuddlement. "For me?" I ask. "You mean...me and *Brendan*?"

They laugh. "Unless there's someone else you're seeing we don't know about."

"Brendan and I have only been together a few months. We're nowhere near that."

"Maybe *you're* not," says Olivia.

"No one is," I reply.

Olivia smirks. "Let me ask you something—how long after you got together did Brendan start pushing you to move in?"

Twelve hours. "A while."

"And how often does he reference wanting kids?"

Daily. I've never seen anyone reverse on a position as completely as he has. "Occasionally. But this is crazy."

"No, it's not," laughs Dorothy. "Once my boys pick, they don't waste any time."

"It's too early to say Brendan's picked anyone."

Dorothy smiles patiently. "Honey, he picked you years ago. He just didn't want to admit it. And now that he has, mark my words: he's going to move so fast you'll wake up married one day, and you won't even know how it happened."

"You're both insane," I reply. "Next you'll be telling me we should go look at cribs too."

Olivia smiles. "I got pregnant on my honeymoon, so I wouldn't rule it

out.”



EXACTLY 24 HOURS LATER, I’M STANDING IN FRONT OF THE ENTIRE CHURCH with Brendan by my side. He’s giving me that look, the one he should not have on his face in church—especially not now, with everyone watching.

“Pay attention,” I chide, bumping him with my hip. “This is serious.”

“I’m paying attention,” he says, his eyes dipping down toward my mouth. He leans close so only I can hear. “But I’m going to do such bad things to you when we get home tonight.”

I’m okay with that, obviously.

The prayers end. Our goddaughter is handed to the priest to be anointed and begins screaming bloody murder. She might look like Will, but she’s got Olivia’s temper. After Will and Olivia say their part, and Brendan and I say ours, communion begins. I open the missalette for both of us, though I know for a fact Brendan will refuse to sing.

He leans down to my ear again instead. “Will told me this morning that the next baptism had better be our kid.”

I try not to smile and fail. “Yeah? And what did you say?”

“I said the wedding probably ought to come first.”

I’m smiling so broadly that I’m embarrassed for myself. “That’s usually how it works.”

“He also said I should start asking now, since you’ll probably turn me down five times like Olivia did him.”

My eyes flicker to his. “I think you’re safe.”

“Will you drag out the planning until we’re a million years old? There are some rumors that you do that.”

I elbow him. “No.”

“Are you going to refuse to put out the night before like you did last night?”

“Your mother was in the next room, Brendan.”

“Answer the question.”

I laugh quietly. “I can’t believe you’re worrying about something so far in the future.”

He turns to me, watching my face, now surprisingly earnest. “It’s not that

far in the future, Erin. You scared?”

“Not anymore,” I tell him, nestling against his side. “Not in the least.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth O’Roark lives in Washington, DC with her three children. Drowning Erin is her fourth novel. If you enjoyed this book, please post a review!

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