

Spring 2014

Mistakes Were Made

Michael Paul Adams
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Adams, Michael Paul, "Mistakes Were Made" (2014). *Master's Theses*. 4408.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.esy8-uc4s>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/4408

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

MISTAKES WERE MADE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Michael P. Adams

May 2014

© 2014

Michael P. Adams

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

MISTAKES WERE MADE

by

Michael P. Adams

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2014

Nicholas Taylor Department of English and Comparative Literature

Barnaby Dallas Department of Radio, Television and Film

Alan Soldofsky Department of English and Comparative Literature

ABSTRACT

MISTAKES WERE MADE

by Michael P. Adams

In *Mistakes Were Made*, Daniel Sorlin wants out of his troubled sixteen-year marriage, but his narcissism will not allow him to be the one to end it. Daniel proposes that he and his wife, Claire, engage in an open marriage. Daniel, an English professor who trades sexual favors for higher grades, has already been cheating on Claire for years, so the open marriage provides him with an excuse to stop feeling guilty for being a philanderer. Little does he know that Claire has fantasized about having an affair with one of their neighbors, an artist named Greg. Claire takes Daniel up on his offer, leading to an exploration of what happens to a relationship when the idea of fidelity is removed.

The accidental death of Daniel and Claire's three-year-old daughter, Ellie, contributes to their marital problems. Claire suffers from major depression, is institutionalized, and must essentially fend for herself while Daniel carries on with his affairs. When Claire starts seeing Greg, Daniel's unexpected jealousy makes him wonder if their marriage might be worth saving after all, even as he starts dating one of his students, Shelley, exclusively.

The novel shows how a series of unplanned events (Claire's pregnancy, an early marriage, Daniel's affairs, Ellie's death) have made a once-promising relationship wither, leaving Daniel and Claire to figure out if their bond is strong enough to salvage what is broken. Trust and redemption form the basis for the novel, which also examines how much work people are willing to do to better themselves.

DEDICATION

For Cristina, Jefferson, Henry, and Claire

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	vii
Works Cited.....	xiv
Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	13
Chapter Three.....	22
Chapter Four.....	37
Chapter Five.....	54
Chapter Six.....	68
Chapter Seven.....	85
Chapter Eight.....	104
Chapter Nine.....	126
Chapter Ten.....	158

PREFACE

Creative endeavors require a certain amount of influence and inspiration to help bring them to fruition. My thesis project, a novel entitled *Mistakes Were Made*, which details one couple's attempt to either fix or destroy their relationship by engaging in an open marriage, is no exception. There have been many authors who have shaped my writing over the years, but three in particular proved useful as I worked on this manuscript. For his confident abilities with dialogue, I attempted to emulate television writer David E. Kelley. Ernest Hemingway's economy of words motivated me as I tried to keep my descriptions sparse and vital. And novelist Jodi Picoult's fragmented time structure helped me as I ventured on a project that would take my main characters from the present day back to the key moments that lead to their current situation.

When done well, television can be as impactful as literature, and the medium has been a major influence on me from a young age. When I was 15, I was inspired to start writing after watching the series *Picket Fences*, created by David E. Kelley, who also wrote every episode of the show's first season. During the summer of my sophomore year of high school, I began working on a novel with Kelley's stylistic voice ringing in my ears. While that novel was unsuccessful on many levels (I was a teenager after all), Kelley's words continue to spur me on to this day. Through dialogue, he takes important issues—the treatment of Alzheimer's disease, Native American rights, teenage sexuality, to name just a few—and presents them in ways that are not only entertaining but enlightening. In the episode called "Fetal Attraction," Jimmy and Jill Brock, small town sheriff and doctor, respectively, examine their relationship after Jimmy catches Jill

kissing an old flame who is in town to help Jill with a medical case. The following example shows how Kelley writes crisp, pointed, and meaningful dialogue. (It should be noted that the ellipses and underlines are not mine.)

BROCK: I know you well enough to know you don't kiss a man just because you find him attractive. There's more to it.

He's staring straight into her. Daring her to be honest. A beat. Then—

JILL: Sometimes... I feel very alone with you. (his stare says "go on") My emotional needs are met by you. My sexual needs and mostly my intellectual needs.

BROCK: Mostly?

JILL: Part of who I am... is a doctor. My creative and intellectual... well, fulfillment... comes from medicine. And I can't share that with you. I can't come home at the end of a day and discuss the discovery of a new enzyme or... being with David made me realize how much I miss that.

Brock just stares at her.

JILL: (painful truth) I feel I sacrificed my professional potential... to come to this town.

BROCK: Your choice.

JILL: Subject to your influence. You were adamant about living in Rome [Wisconsin]. The truth is, Jimmy... you can max out here as town sheriff, I can't as town doctor. I see in David what I could've been. And maybe I resent you for what I'm not (39-40).

Kelley's characters never shy away from difficult conversations. At certain points in this passage, Jill stumbles a bit as she tries to explain away her lapse in judgment. But the words she chooses are measured, direct, and powerful. She tells Jimmy exactly how she feels, prepared to deal with the consequences of her honesty. Kelley creates a more literary world than one might expect to find in a television show, where slates typically get washed clean at the end of every episode. In fact, Kelley re-ignites this argument in a second-season episode that comes a full year after the events in "Fetal Attraction" take place. Kelley uses his characters in a very novelistic way, showing that what happens in one episode will continue to come into play far down the line.

In *Mistakes Were Made*, I model Kelley’s ability to pare dialogue down to its essence, particularly in exchanges between Daniel and Claire, whose damaged marriage could benefit from some frank communication. Dialogue is my favorite thing to write, and, like Kelley, I aim to conjure dialogue that propels the action forward while remaining natural and incisive. A moment in my novel that I hope serves as a good example of this is an early scene that puts Daniel and Claire at odds with each other in a restaurant, a demonstration that, for them, civility is hard to come by, even in a public venue. As Claire needles Daniel for an honest answer about the state of their relationship, Daniel finally erupts:

“What do you want me to say, Claire?” He continued to soak up the water with his napkin. “That we’re a fucking joke? That we made the wrong choices? That we wasted our youth on each other? Is that what you want to hear? ‘Cause that’s how I feel most of the time.”

The manager approached the table. “I’m sorry, folks, but if you can’t keep your voices down, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. You’re distur—”
“Fuck off,” Daniel said. “Both of you.” (31)

Because my book has such a narrow scope, it is even more important for the characters’ interactions to feel personal and intimate. After years of watching David E. Kelley’s shows and seeing how his dialogue puts characters’ emotions at the fore, deepening their understanding of each other as well as the audience’s understanding of them, I hope that I have accomplished the same feat in *Mistakes Were Made*.

Just as dialogue moves a story along at a faster clip, so does spare description. Long, narrative passages tend to weigh a story down, so I gravitate to the writing style of Ernest Hemingway, who can set the scene in just a few words. Because Hemingway’s descriptions are so frugal, the reader gets the sense that he chooses his words much more

deliberately than a writer whose style contains paragraph upon paragraph of detailed description.

Consider this example from “Cat in the Rain,” a story featured in Hemingway’s collection *In Our Time*, in which a woman reenters a hotel after going outside to rescue the titular kitty:

As the American girl passed the office, the padrone bowed from his desk. Something felt very small and tight inside the girl. The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance. She went on up the stairs. She opened the door of the room. George was on the bed, reading. (93)

Here, Hemingway reveals only the most pertinent information. He could easily have given the reader a more exhaustive description of the scene, such as what the padrone looks like or the exact number of stairs the woman has to climb. Instead, Hemingway intentionally avoids such insignificant minutiae in favor of a brief trip inside the woman’s psyche. Twice the reader is told that the woman feels “very small,” and twice more that she experiences a simultaneous feeling of importance. This repetition offers much more detail than any long physical description ever could. The woman feels small because she fears the padrone’s judgment (a fear which actually originates with her husband) for having gone out in the rain to fetch the cat, but the “supreme importance” comes from her taking action rather than staying in her hotel room and ignoring the cat’s distress.

When I come across excessive description in a novel, my attention wanders, so I aspire to keep the language sparse within my own writing. To that end, in *Mistakes Were Made* I attempt to borrow from Hemingway’s restrained style. For example, in the following passage I try to eschew grandiose dramatics in favor of simplicity and

directness as Daniel and Claire's daughter, Ellie, suffers a fatal accident while on a playground slide:

[Tucker] continued to shove until finally Ellie took her hands off the sides and prepared to sit down. As she began to crouch, Tucker gave another shove, making her lose her balance. Ellie teetered and tried to grab hold of the rail again, but her little hands just couldn't react quickly enough. Tucker laughed as he slid down, oblivious to what he had done. Both Claire and Rita struggled to get to Ellie before she landed. Claire tripped in the sand, falling to her knees and being forced to watch her daughter plunge to the bottom, Ellie's scream interrupted by the thud her head made when it hit, like a volleyball being spiked. (130-31)

I do not make any claim that my writing is nearly as accomplished as Hemingway's, but I am definitely indebted to him. Like the example from "Cat in the Rain," this scene could have been drawn out with more detail; I could have waxed on about the trees or the outfits the mothers were wearing. But there is more power in bluntness. My goal here is to have Ellie's death deliver an emotional jolt, even though the occurrence comes as no surprise to the reader at this point in the novel. By keeping the language matter-of-fact—not only in this scene but throughout the book—I hope to strip away the artifice and produce a gut reaction in the reader that makes her feel for these characters and their tragic situation.

With dialogue and description covered, my final influence proved helpful with the structure of my thesis. In Jodi Picoult's novel *The Pact*, she employs a "Now and Then" structure, transporting the reader back and forth in time. The novel begins in November 1997 ("Now"), flashes back to the Fall of 1979 ("Then"), returns to November '97, then goes back to Summer 1984, continuing this trip through time in alternating chapters that allow the author to delve deeper into the backstories of her characters.

The Pact tells the story of Emily and Chris, a teenage couple whose suicide pact goes wrong, with only Emily winding up dead. By using the “Now and Then” structure, Picoult shows how the teenagers’ families become friends, how Emily and Chris begin dating, and how all the relationships change following Emily’s death. The structure also allows Picoult to use dramatic irony since the reader knows of Emily’s death from the beginning and gets to see how the events of the past have affected the present (something I also get to do by revealing Ellie’s death early on in my book). In *The Pact*’s first flashback, when Emily and Chris are only babies, there are hints at how their romance will end: “And although she was completely unaware, when Emily Gold again settled into sleep, she was holding tight to Christopher Harte’s hand” (25). Picoult recalls this instance during Emily’s death scene, when “[Emily] pressed his hand, and it squeezed on the trigger, and then he was deaf and dizzy and falling, with Emily still in his arms” (373). Emily and Chris’s inseparable bond takes them from birth to death. Picoult’s fragmented narrative multiplies the impact by taking the reader along on every step of the couple’s journey.

My thesis, though not laid out in so orderly a fashion as *The Pact*, is essentially a collection of temporal shifts between present and past. Daniel and Claire have a sordid history that I dole out in bits and pieces, starting with Ellie’s death, the event that brought their nascent marriage to its knees. What I attempt to do throughout my novel is to have the present-day chronological storyline inform where the flashbacks will take the reader. For example, at one point Claire walks in to find Daniel about to have sex with another woman in their living room. The next scene is a flashback in which Claire asks Daniel to

have her committed to a mental institution following Ellie's death, after which I then return to the present-day and have Claire demand that Daniel leave their house. During this sequence, Claire finds herself in a position of vulnerability, but in the present-day scenes she is able to overcome that feeling and ultimately put herself in a position of power, showing how she has been strengthened by experience. Later, when Daniel's parents show up unannounced, I juxtapose a scene of Claire in group therapy during her institutional stay with a dinner scene in which Daniel and Claire try to pretend that everything is fine, the potential for catharsis existing in both scenes. Toward the end of the book, I conjoin the present-day and flashback scenes in a sequence where Daniel and Claire go on a date that is designed to help get their marriage back on track; in the flashbacks, I show how their early courtship period played out. Daniel and Claire have such a contentious relationship through most of the novel that I thought it would be fitting to hold these flashbacks until the end, to simultaneously give a sense of what they once had and what they might someday achieve again. My hope is that the alternating timelines give the reader a 360-degree view of how "mistakes were made."

Having influences to draw from as I embarked on the task of writing this novel made the whole enterprise a bit less daunting. It was as if the authors were with me, guiding me through treacherous scenarios, helping me make decisions that, with any luck, work in the characters' (and the reader's) favor. I do not know if my writing career will ever have my name being said in the same breath as the writers whom I admire, but I hope that one day I can prove to be an inspiration for an upstart writer just as David E. Kelley, Ernest Hemingway, and Jodi Picoult have been for me.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. "The Cat in the Rain." *In Our Time*. 1925. New York: Scribner, 2003. 91-94. Print.

Kelley, David E. "Fetal Attraction." *Picket Fences*. 22 Jan. 1993. TS. Collection of Michael Adams, Camarillo, CA.

Picoult, Jodi. *The Pact*. New York: Morrow, 1998. Print.

CHAPTER ONE

Sometimes when a person's life is really screwed up, all that can be done to change things is to somehow make them even worse.

That's what Daniel Sorlin thought when he proposed to his wife the idea of an open marriage. Never in a million years would she go for it. Or would she?

"Is this your way of asking for my permission to sleep with your students?" Claire said, lowering her menu just enough so that the tip of her nose poked out over the top of it.

Daniel had brought her to their favorite restaurant, an Indian place where the curry was extra spicy and the conversation was as authentic as the teenage waitress with the Valley Girl accent and the dot on her forehead. "What if I said yes? Would that make you mad?" he asked. He waited for her to explode, to cry, to mistakenly request the check even though they had yet to order. But he got none of that. Instead, Claire studied the menu, seemingly nonplussed, as if she had been waiting years for Daniel to pose this question.

She set the menu down. "Does this mean I get to fuck other men?" she asked.

The waitress arrived. She set two glasses of water on the table and, having overheard Claire's query, looked at Daniel with surprise in her eyes. "I'll give you a few more minutes," she said, and chuckled slightly before hurrying away.

"If you're interested in having sex with other men, you would absolutely be able to do that." Daniel knew he had to assent, but that didn't make it any easier to actually say the words.

“I’m in,” Claire said.

“What? Just like that?”

“Yeah, let’s do it. Is there anything on this menu we haven’t tried yet? I’m really in the mood for something new.”

“I guess you are,” Daniel said.

Daniel Sorlin never thought of himself as a jerk per se. In fact, he thought he was a pretty nice guy. But marriage was something that was thrust upon him unwillingly and the whole situation escalated to a point where escape was no longer an option. So it didn’t take a doctorate in psychology to figure out Daniel’s motive for suggesting an open marriage. It was sabotage, pure and simple. But his plan to make things worse in order to make them better had been foiled, at least temporarily.

In the sixteen years that Daniel and Claire had been married, he had cheated on her exactly 122 times. He kept a logbook in his office at Cormier University, tucked between a copy of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. He got a certain rush knowing that his secret was waiting to be discovered by anyone curious enough to pull out the unlabeled volume that sat unwittingly between two modern classics.

Daniel wasn’t sure if Claire knew about his affairs. If she did, she said nothing, choosing instead to single-handedly uphold the sanctity of their union. Which was why her willingness to agree to Daniel’s idea caught him so off guard. This was going to be

his way out, his “Hit the road, Jack, and don’tcha come back.” She wasn’t supposed to say okay.

There was a knock on the door and a student poked her head into Daniel’s office. “Professor? Do you have a minute?”

“Come in, Shelley,” he said, casting a glance at the logbook that sat silently on the bookshelf. Shelley would make a nice number 123.

“I was hoping to talk to you about my essay on *Jane Eyre*,” she said.

“I thought it was very good.” He looked up at her face, her eyes framed by wire-rimmed glasses, her auburn hair pulled back in a ponytail that swung from shoulder to shoulder as she spoke. She had the kind of look that really turned him on.

“But you gave me a B.”

“Yes, I told you it was very good.”

“I don’t get B’s,” she said. “I’m about to graduate and I’ve been able to sustain a perfect 4.0 GPA the whole time I’ve been here. This—,” she dropped the essay on Daniel’s desk, “ruins everything.” A fleck of spittle flew from her mouth and landed on Daniel’s arm; he ignored it.

“Shelley, do me a favor,” he said, calmly.

“What?”

“Take a deep breath.”

“What?” she said again, this time confused.

“Just go with me here. Take a deep breath.”

She inhaled and exhaled quickly through her nose, keeping an unamused eye fixed on Daniel.

“Again,” he said.

“Look, Professor Sorlin, with all due respect, I already know how to breathe. I’m more concerned about my grade than oxygen deprivation.”

“In through the nose.” He closed his eyes and took in a long breath. “Out through the mouth. Go ahead, nice and slow.”

Shelley obeyed, mimicking Daniel. He took a quick peek at her breasts while she wasn’t looking. Daniel had found that most of the halfway intelligent girls were lacking in the tit department, as if a woman could only be blessed with one ample body part. Shelley broke the mold, but she was a feisty one.

“Feel better?” Daniel asked. Shelley nodded. Daniel suspected her agreement was more out of obligation than truthfulness, not that it mattered to him either way. “Now, I want you to tell me in ten words or less why I should even consider looking at your essay again.”

“My thesis is strong, I supported all my claims, and—”

“That’s ten. I’m not convinced. Let me ask you this, Shelley. What are you willing to do to get an A on this essay?” He leaned in so that their body heat nearly mingled. His gleaming smile hinted that Shelley had a real shot at redeeming her grade.

“I could do a full rewrite, pull in more sources, tighten the argument.” She was clearly excited at the prospect of delivering another draft.

Daniel appreciated her optimism. “You could do that,” he said, handing the essay back to her. He got up from his chair and moved slowly toward her. “Or you could do something... more fun.” He placed his hand on her right knee and locked eyes with her, trying to anticipate her reaction.

“You’re kidding, right?” she said. She brushed his hand away. “That is so cliché.”

“And why do things become clichés? Because they’re effective. I’ll give you a sliding scale—B+ for a session of heavy petting, A- for fellatio, and an A for intercourse. Keep in mind that the grade in no way relates to your performance. I wouldn’t want to be presumptuous.”

Shelley rose from her seat. “I could report you to the Dean for this. Not to mention the fact that you’re married.”

“My wife and I have an understanding. Shelley, you enjoy my class, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“You think I’m a good professor?”

“Yes.”

“Funny?”

“I’ve laughed a few times.”

“Smart?”

“Yes.”

“Charming?”

That one she didn’t answer.

“What’s the problem? We can both make out like bandits here, pardon the pun.” He was in her face then, speaking more and more softly, trying to determine whether she was repulsed by him or, he hoped, maybe a little attracted. “Breathe with me some more, Shelley,” he said, and he started to inhale through his nose, exhale through his mouth. By the third breath, Shelley was his. He kissed her gently at first, making sure that she was committed to moving forward. He pulled away to lock his office door and turned to find her lying on the couch, her features strewn with a combination of apprehension and resolve. She wanted that A. Daniel looked again at the logbook on the shelf. The list practically wrote itself.

Claire had gotten pregnant when she and Daniel were both seventeen. Their youth vanished within an immature adulthood for which neither of them was prepared. Trapped by the influence of Claire’s strict Catholic upbringing—an upbringing that still saw her engaging in premarital sex—her parents pressured Daniel into making Claire an “honest” woman. Neither of them knew whether they were really in love with each other. There were no mutual admissions of love exchanged until well into their first year of matrimonial confusion, and even then it was awkward for them to say it.

“Are you happy?” Claire asked one morning as their three-year-old daughter Ellie slept between them.

Daniel looked at Claire, then turned his eyes to the ceiling. The room filled with the echo of his silence.

“Have you ever been?” Claire persisted. “With me, I mean?”

“I don’t even know what the word means,” he told her.

She nodded and knew that he did not say this to be cruel or to punish her for being less than what he wanted. Despite their mirrored malaise, they almost never fought. The energy between them was too enervated for arguing. Claire knew that Daniel was unfaithful and she chose not to care. She also knew that he was screwing another woman the day Ellie died.

It was the tallest slide at the park, and Ellie insisted on climbing up on her own, a way of showing her mom what a big girl she was becoming. Claire stood at the bottom, ready to catch Ellie when she came down. Ellie reached the top and stood triumphantly on the slide’s summit.

“Look at me, Mommy,” she squealed.

“I see you. Sit down now, Ellie,” Claire said. She shielded her eyes against the glare that bounced off the metallic slide. She never even saw the other child climb up, never saw him give Ellie an impatient push that sent her head first over the side. Claire’s final memory of her daughter was the sound of her innocent, full-bodied laughter transforming into a brief but unmistakable howl of terror. The impact was too much for Ellie’s tiny neck.

“Daniel, our daughter’s gone,” Claire said into his office voicemail, her voice barely audible and yet somehow possessing enough anger and sadness to amplify her words tenfold. Later, when Claire asked him where he was when she called, when she had needed him more than she had ever needed anyone, he told her that he had to step away from his desk to “make some copies.” That it took him three hours to call her back

made Claire think that Daniel had waited until the worst day in the world to tell the worst lie in the world.

There was a man Claire had had her eye on for some time. He lived three houses down from her on the opposite side of the street, and she had seen him—*ogled* might not even be too strong a word—several times as he washed his car shirtless. She had thought about introducing herself every now and again, planting the seed for the affair that she had deserved to have for so long now. But it just wasn't in her. She couldn't bring herself to do anything but wave politely at him.

With the open marriage on the table, though, she felt her inhibitions begin to fall just a little. Claire wasn't interested in just hopping into bed with another man, but a friendly hello wasn't completely out of the question.

She peeked out the front window and saw his car in the driveway—nothing extravagant, a Toyota Prius. She wondered why it was that her neighbor was home in the middle of a Wednesday. Claire herself hadn't worked in years. After Ellie's death, Daniel had allowed Claire to quit her job, vowing to take care of them on his own. No longer a stay-at-home mom and without a paying job to define her, Claire never knew quite how to classify herself. The only title that might apply was wife, and even that was more of a formality than anything else.

The image of Suzy Homemaker clicked into Claire's mind and she thought it might seem tacky and intrusive for her to present herself to her neighbor empty-handed. Suzy would surely have come bearing some kind of pie or pastry. Claire was no

hausfrau, though, and the choice between potential rudeness and potential food poisoning weighed heavily in favor of the former.

She looked in the mirror at a face that was on the verge of betraying its age, as if one more day of depression was all it might take to cascade into a world of Botox and collagen. In the nearly two decades since she'd gotten together with Daniel, her flirting muscles had gone into atrophy. Not having gained much experience during her teenage years, she wondered if she was even capable of seducing a man anymore. Steeling herself as best she could, Claire jostled her fingers through her hair and began the seemingly endless walk across the street.

The doorbell was muffled through his front door, but Claire thought it sounded similar to the three chimes produced by the NBC logo. Fall, rise, fall. Despair, hope, despair.

“Can I help you?” a voice asked from the side of the house.

Claire turned to find her neighbor coming out of the side entrance. He was shirtless again, but there was something on him, something red. Blood spatter, Claire thought, and she prepared to run away if necessary. She noticed that his hands were caked in the red stuff also, and that some had dried on his face. As he got a little closer, Claire realized that the substance wasn't blood but clay.

“You're a mess,” she said, and immediately recoiled at the reality of such an awful introduction. If first impressions really were all that mattered, then she might as well have just headed on home.

“It washes off,” he said. “You live across the street, right?”

“Yeah, Claire Sorlin. Nice to meet you.” She stuck her hand out before remembering that he was in no position to shake it. He quickly wiped his hands on his pants and delicately accepted the tips of her fingers. She tried not to appear too obvious as she watched his jeans sag just a little under the weight of the clay.

“Greg Nobeloch. What brings you by?”

“I just wanted to say hello. And insult your cleanliness, I guess.” Claire let out an uncomfortable laugh, and felt some relief when Greg laughed too.

“Oh. Well, hello. You’re welcome to come in and see why I look like a pig in mud.”

Her mouth said “Sure” as he opened the door, but her feet wouldn’t budge. What if he was some kind of murderer who liked to preserve his victims by dipping their corpses into a giant vat of clay, like an oven-baked version of a wax museum? She wondered how long you had to know someone before they were no longer considered a stranger. Then she turned that question on her relationship with Daniel and realized that she might go her whole life without an answer.

She walked inside, the room a converted garage with a huge skylight. If it weren’t for the occasional blotch of bird shit breaking the illusion, one could be forgiven for thinking that the room had no roof at all. The sun flooded the studio, giving Greg’s artwork an earthy glow. No clay-covered dead bodies here, just some of the most incredible sculptures and paintings Claire had ever had the privilege of seeing in person. There must have been close to 100 pieces on display, walls and shelves covered with Greg’s talent. Claire’s eye caught a metal sculpture that looked like a DNA strand, the

double helix being topped off by a head on each side, one distinctly human, the other robotic.

“Man versus machine.” Greg told her. “It’s one of my favorites. I call it ‘Destiny.’”

“I like it,” she said. She stood in front of a painting that depicted a simple seascape, a pedestrian image that seemed at odds with Greg’s more avant-garde pieces. But the painting was so detailed that, as the sun beat down on her, she could smell the ocean and feel thousands of grains of sand moving between her toes. The room was filled with such beauty and imagination that Claire found herself at a loss to take it all in.

“Follow me,” Greg said, and he led her to the opposite side of the studio, where an L-shaped partition separated his workspace from the gallery. The area was divided into three sections: one for welding, one for painting, and one for turning clay. This last section, where Greg had just been working, was even messier than he was, with clay all over the walls and floor. “This is what I was crafting when you knocked,” he said, pointing to the potter’s wheel.

“What is it?” Claire asked. She didn’t want to venture a guess herself for fear that she might actually offend him this time.

“Well, right now it’s just a lump of clay. I have no idea what it’ll be later.”

“If you stopped working on it now, I bet you could still make a fortune off it.”

“You think it’s that good, huh?”

“It’s the most amazing lump I’ve ever seen.”

They shared another laugh, this one easier and more playful than the last. Claire watched the curve of his smile, the way it seemed to want to puncture his cheeks. She couldn't remember the last time Daniel had smiled at her with such sincerity.

"Do you make a living with this?" Claire asked. Her tone was one of genuine interest rather than nosiness.

"I do all right." His blue eyes, which stood in stark contrast to his deep tan complexion, began to draw her toward him.

"I bet you do," she said, and felt herself take a step back before the magnetic forces between them could take full effect. Guilt gripped her, accompanied with a wave of nausea. Permission or no, this felt forbidden, an alien activity that wasn't supposed to occur inside of a marriage, even a bad one.

But if Claire looked past the guilt—which she thought was a useless emotion that only served to keep people from what they really wanted anyway—she could see that branching out in this way could be healthier than it appeared. It might not be Greg, but she felt the possibility that someone somewhere might find it within themselves to cherish her.

"If you're not busy I could fix you lunch," Greg said.

"Tomorrow," Claire said. "Something to look forward to." She excused herself, but not before noticing that the sun's reflection off a studio mirror entwined her and Greg's shadows in a pattern of light and dark that recalled the "Man versus machine" sculpture.

Destiny.

CHAPTER TWO

The atmosphere in the apartment was supposed to change when Ellie came home from the hospital. They had agreed, non-verbally, that having a baby would make their relationship stronger, that it would cure what was ailing them. Once again, though, reality reared her ugly head and greeted them with a hearty laugh.

“Can you pick Ellie up from day care today?” Claire asked as she rolled a pair of Spanx past her thighs and snapped the waistband over her hips. Six months after having Ellie, she was still self-conscious about exposing any of her leftover baby weight. There was a part of her that hated Ellie for what she had done to her body, leaving stretchmarks where teenage suppleness used to be, cellulite patches in places that were once smooth. Her mother told her it was God’s way of punishing her for disobeying, but offered no response when Claire asked about the extra thirty pounds her mother had been carrying around for years. Claire was beginning to see that hypocrisy could only take a person so far in life.

“It’s Tuesday,” Daniel said. “You know I’ve got class after work.”

“Can’t you skip it? I have that interview at the Olive Garden later and Ellie has to be picked up by five.”

“Sorry, Claire. You’re gonna have to figure this one out. I’m going to school to get a *real* job.”

As cruel as Daniel’s words could be, she believed them. Of course a college degree would provide for them better than a job waiting tables, and she couldn’t fault

Daniel for being honest about it. Instead, she channeled her anger toward the little girl whom she regarded as the root cause of all their unhappiness. In Claire's mind, it was easier to be mad at someone who couldn't answer back.

“And so in *Moby-Dick*, we talk about the issue of...” Daniel turned toward the dry erase board and scrawled the word. “Trust,” he said. “The trust between a ship's crew and its captain, between Ahab and Ishmael, between Ishmael and good old Moby Dick. In some cases, there is no trust at all; in others, perhaps too much.” He glanced at the clock. “For next time, I want each of you to find three specific places in the novel where Melville deals with the topic of trust, or the lack thereof.”

Barely waiting for Daniel to finish his sentence, the students gathered their belongings and shuffled out of the classroom. All except Shelley Buchanan, who made her way to the front of the room, her arms crossed. Daniel saw her coming and started to erase the board, hoping that she might go away if he ignored her. She didn't.

“I could have your job for what you did to me yesterday,” she said, her words tinged with a mixture of ferocity and fear.

“How old are you, Shelley?” Daniel asked as he wiped the eraser across the board.

“Twenty-one, but I don't see what that—”

“Well past the age of consent. You could have stopped at any point and said no, but you didn't. Why not? Because you had greater concerns yesterday than your moral integrity. It was academics with a price, and you were more than willing to pay.”

“But what about your moral integrity? Don’t you even care?”

“Let’s not worry about me. I’ll be just fine.” He shrugged. “Unless I’m not. And don’t forget that you have as much to lose as I do if you go to the Dean with this. Your pristine record, every one of your grades would come into question.”

“You’ve got all the answers, don’t you?” She shook her head in disgust.

Daniel took the question as a compliment. “That, Shelley, is why I’m the professor,” he said. “See you on Monday. Don’t forget the homework.” He picked up his book bag and headed for the door, leaving Shelley to stare at the word *Trust*, still faintly visible on the board.

Greg was curious about Claire’s intentions. Did she come over just to be neighborly or was there more to it than that? Her wedding ring would seem to imply the former, but he could not deny that there was a definite attraction between them. Regardless of her motives—he would be following her lead as far as that was concerned—he wanted to make her feel special at lunch.

He spent the morning picking up fresh ingredients from the local farmer’s market, then hurried home to begin food preparations. Greg had no formal training as a cook, but he had managed to accrue a gaggle of compliments from friends and family over the years. It seemed as though his hands were capable of creating almost anything that required a hint of artistic ingenuity. The knife sliced through the tomatoes, onion, ham, and turkey as easily as his brush cascaded across the canvas. Remembering which of his pieces Claire was most drawn to, Greg tried to construct a meal that mirrored her taste in

art, settling on a spicy gazpacho and turkey saltimbocca; he thought of it as a combination of the unorthodox and the ordinary, not unlike the DNA sculpture and the painted seascape.

Greg was setting the table when the doorbell rang. Greg had toyed with the idea of answering the door without a shirt on to make sure that Claire recognized him, but thought that the joke might be misconstrued and come across as disrespectful. Before opening the door, he took a second to wipe the sweat off his palms. “Hello again,” he said, and gestured for Claire to come inside. He watched her as she entered, saw the way the light bounced off the pleats of her sundress and reflected upwards, radiating over her bare shoulders. Greg hoped that his perceptions were not wrong, and that she had come with a purpose other than filling her stomach.

Sitting at the table, Claire looked at Greg, his black hair slicked back but not greasy, his body free of the clay that had clung to him the day before. It sounded silly, but she couldn’t help but think that she was being given the chance to wash away her past and begin anew.

“I’ve lived here for more than a year and you never walked over here. Why not?” Greg asked as he lifted a spoonful of the gazpacho to his mouth.

“Well, that question could go both ways, don’t you think? You didn’t come to my side of the street, either.” Claire was impressed by the trouble he had gone to; she wasn’t expecting anything more than Chinese take-out or a pizza. That was Daniel’s idea of cooking for her, and she had forgotten how it felt to be treated like this.

“I’ve had some trouble with husbands in the past. They get insecure and think I’m trying to make time with their wives.”

“And are they right?”

Greg hedged for a second. “I would never do anything to purposely ruin someone’s relationship. I may have fantasized about...” He sighed. “I would never act on it.”

“So you didn’t want to meet us because you assumed my husband would be jealous of you?”

“When you say it like that, it sounds pretty—”

“Accurate,” Claire interrupted. “Daniel would hate you.”

Greg leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Is that why you’re here? To piss off your husband?”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant. Daniel and I, we’re conducting an experiment.”

“An experiment?”

“An open marriage.”

Claire tried to get a read on Greg as he processed this information. She worried that she was being too forward by even broaching the subject. Maybe Greg only wanted to be friends. Maybe he would be turned off by being given permission to sleep with her instead of thinking that theirs would be a clandestine affair.

“Does this make me the guinea pig?” he asked.

“I guess so, if you want to look at it that way. Or you could look at it the way I do. I’ve been attracted to you from a distance and now I’ve chosen you to do this with me.”

“Don’t play with me,” he said.

Claire shook her head slightly, sensing that words were not needed to assure him.

“Jesus,” Greg said, “all this and we haven’t even finished our soup yet.”

So many young people have no idea the mistake they’re making. Daniel knew, from the second the stick turned blue to the day he was forced to give Claire a sponge bath because she was too depressed to do it on her own. Every minute cursing under his breath, every breath taken with the promise that someday soon things were going to change.

Sixteen years later, Daniel waited. He waited for the day when he would feel something other than the intense desire to escape. He waited to love, truly and completely, the woman with whom he had experienced so much pain and hardship. Most importantly, though, he waited to be real.

Daniel’s life was made up of a series of *supposed to*’s and *have to*’s. Sure, there were a few *want to*’s thrown in (like being the youngest tenured professor in Cormier University’s history), but he felt like the majority of his life had been predicated on obligation rather than aspiration.

“Claire and I are getting married,” he told his parents after his high school graduation ceremony. Betty and Earl Sorlin displayed the exact same crestfallen look.

They had vowed always to be supportive of their son's decisions, but they could not hide the disappointment that accompanied the news.

The tassel that hung from Daniel's cap seemed to recoil as he offered an explanation. "She's pregnant," he said, his voice as flat as roadkill. There was no excitement, no thought of the miracle of life, only the bare facts—that pregnancy led to marriage led to... death?

"Oh," was all Earl could muster, and Betty went so pale that Daniel thought she might faint in front of the graduation crowd. Daniel had made their seventeen years of trouble-free child-rearing collapse in a heap of unwelcome announcements.

Claire rushed over, holding onto her cap, the front of her gown blowing open as she ran. She practically tackled Daniel as she hugged him, kissed him, congratulated him on his commencement, an ironic term considering the gravity of their personal matters.

"Did you tell them?" Claire asked.

"I did. They're thrilled."

Claire turned to Betty and Earl and their fraudulent grins. She rubbed her belly. "It could be a New Year's baby," she said.

"Happy New Year to us," Betty said. Daniel watched the visions and ambitions she had held for him well up in her eyes and drop to the ground in the most minute of splashes.

Unwilling to succumb to a life where he was defined only as a husband and father, Daniel was determined to see his professional dreams through to fruition. He had bought a massive book when he was twelve years old—*The Complete Guide to Every Job*

Ever Known to Man—and told himself that whatever job he flipped to the first time the spine was cracked would be the job that would become his career. No one in his family had even attended a college course let alone taught one. But the book said he would be a professor, and damn it, that's what he was going to be.

Betty and Earl expressed hesitation at first, which Daniel saw as their being uncomfortable at the prospect of having a son who was so much smarter than they were. They came around when they realized just how badly Daniel wanted this; it wasn't a pipe dream that rusts over when things get too difficult, but an honest-to-God goal that he had set for himself. Who were they to let their own egos get in his way?

And who was Daniel to let something as pesky as a wife and child interfere with the completion of a twelve-year-old boy's prophecy?

"Go ahead, ask me," Claire said, sitting on a wooden bench in Greg's backyard. She sipped a glass of iced tea.

"And what is it that you think I want to know?" He sat next to her, but kept a gap between them to avoid any bodily contact.

"Why I stay. Why I don't go someplace where I'll be happy." They were questions Claire had asked herself many times before, but she had never arrived at a satisfactory answer.

"I don't need to ask. I already know."

Claire was surprised by his boldness. He had known her for less than a day and already thought himself qualified to make such assumptions. “Please, enlighten me,” she said.

“It’s simple, really. You’re afraid.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s not nothing,” Greg said, his tone serious. “Fear can cause us to do things that no other emotion is capable of. Sometimes that’s a good thing, sometimes it isn’t.”

Claire felt herself growing defensive. “What exactly do you think I’m afraid of?”

“The same thing we’re all afraid of—being loved.”

The words caught her off guard. She had no control over the tears that were forming and looked away to keep Greg from seeing them. “That’s ridiculous,” she said, fixing her gaze on an oak tree, its sturdy trunk reminding her how unstable she was.

He inched closer to her, reached for her chin, and turned her head toward his, locking eyes. “It must be ridiculous. Otherwise you would do something about it, right?” Still holding her face, he lifted his thumb and wiped away the remnants of a tear.

“Who are you?” Claire asked, thinking that he had to be some kind of mind reader or psychic or something.

“I’m just a guy,” he said.

But Claire knew that that was far too simple a response.

CHAPTER THREE

“Never give up,” Daniel announced into the microphone. “It sounds trite, but you’d be amazed at just how difficult that advice is to heed.”

Cormier’s banquet hall was loaded with eminence for the annual awards ceremony honoring exceptional students; emeriti, faculty, parents, and students joined together to celebrate shared brilliance. Daniel had been named Professor of the Year after one of his classes produced the highest aggregate GPA of the school year. The attendees feasted on lemon chicken as they listened to his speech.

“There was a time in my life when people stopped believing in me. It’s crushing, really, to know that those you rely on for support have lost faith. The students in this room tonight represent the absolute best that Cormier University has to offer. Each and every one of you has a goal in mind for the future. Some will be harder to attain than others, and people will invariably doubt your resolve along the way. It’s up to you to maintain your focus, to prove those naysayers wrong. Never give up—simple advice, hard to follow. I’m the man I am today for having done so.”

Daniel stepped away from the lectern, shook the Dean’s hand, and took his seat, soaking up the applause that the audience so generously gave him. Everyone, that is, except Shelley Buchanan.

“That’s a nice plaque,” Shelley said, standing in the doorway to Daniel’s office.

Daniel held his award up to the wall, looking for the perfect spot to hang it. He jumped a bit at Shelley's voice, not expecting anyone else to be in the building. "What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to say congratulations. I think you really earned it."

"As did you. I understand you'll be graduating summa cum laude." He sat down on the couch. Maybe it was the late hour, or the fact that Shelley would never again be in one of his classes, but he found himself motioning for her to sit, too.

"Where was your wife tonight?" she asked as she took a seat.

Daniel paused, considered telling a lie but decided against it. "She was with another man." It was the first time Daniel had said the words aloud and he couldn't understand why, with the open marriage being his idea and all, it hurt to voice it.

Shelley looked stunned. "I can't say I was expecting you to tell me that."

"We, uh, we have... it's kinda what we're doing right now."

"Openly cheating on each other? That's what you're doing?" Shelley managed to ask the question in a way that connoted a desire to understand rather than pass judgment.

"Temporarily," Daniel said.

Shelley nodded and pushed her hair back behind her ears. "Why?"

The song started playing in Daniel's head: *Hit the road, Jack / And don'tcha come back / No more, no more, no more, no more.* A way out, a soupçon of freedom.

"Well," he said, "why not?"

“You’re very good, you know that? You have no idea how many times I’ve given you the benefit of the doubt in the three months since I let you fuck me. I keep looking for a shred of humanity in that body of yours and every time I come up empty.”

“You don’t know me,” he said.

“I know you better than I ever really wanted to. We’re more alike than I’d like to admit.” She picked up a throw pillow and hugged it to her as if it were a teddy bear.

“That little speech you gave tonight—never give up? That’s just what I was thinking as you unzipped my pants that day. I was doing what it took to see my goal accomplished. You weren’t supposed to be such an important part of that, but we zig and zag as needed. I got an A, you got a lay. I’m no Dr. Seuss in the rhyme department, but it seemed to work out for both of us.”

“Then why were you so mad before?”

“Well, Professor, you did take advantage of me. I wasn’t prepared to just gloss over that. And like I said, I didn’t want to own how much we have in common.”

“It almost sounds like an apology,” Daniel said.

Shelley lobbed the pillow at his head. “Leave it to a man to think that. For someone so smart, you can be really dumb.”

“Oh, yeah?” he said, like a five-year-old.

“Good comeback. Women are always attracted to witty guys. No wonder you get so much tail.”

They watched each other as they laughed, the act smoothing their edges, calming them down.

“I think I’d like to kiss you now,” Daniel said.

“Okay,” Shelley said, and leaned in until their lips connected. It was a fast kiss, not exactly deep and erotic, but it was satisfying and far overshadowed the coldness of their last encounter.

“That was—”

“Nice,” Shelley said.

“Yeah.” Daniel drew her in as the song sounded again in his head: *No more, no more, no more, no more, no more*. For the time being, he didn’t care.

Claire knew that Ellie would never be a source of happiness in her marriage. She wasn’t one of those people who deluded herself into believing that whatever problems a couple were having somehow magically disappeared when a child was added to the fray. It’s true that after the initial panic that came with finding out she was going to be a mother before she turned 20, there was a period during which Claire was excited about the possibility of what grew in her belly. But a nature documentary showed her that she was merely the host to the parasite that was her unborn child, an analogy that Claire couldn’t shake, one that stuck with her even after giving birth.

For eighteen years she would be tasked with the role of servant, with no way of knowing whether her master would emerge on the other side grateful or resentful. It was an overwhelming thought, so grand in its scope that it sent Claire into a deep depression, all the while pretending she had gotten exactly what she wanted.

Right on cue, Ellie started to crawl at six months, Claire's obstacle made mobile. It was a peculiar crawl; Ellie would keep one leg almost totally stiff as she pushed off with her hands and used her other, bent leg for balance. Watching this was like torture for Claire, who wanted to know why her daughter had to drag herself across the floor instead of getting up ably on both knees like a normal baby. Who was more to blame for this, Claire wondered, the parent who was supposed to be teaching her child how to survive in the world, or the baby who was apparently too stupid to do even the simplest of things properly?

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?" the dispatcher asked.

"She's sick," Claire said.

"Who's sick, ma'am?"

"My daughter."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She's throwing up. A lot. She's just a baby."

"Did you notice any—"

"I think she may have swallowed some bleach."

"Okay, ma'am. I'm sending an ambulance to your house. Can you please verify your address for me?"

"432 Rowley. She just started to crawl. I should have known better."

"The paramedics should be there in a few minutes."

"Thank you," Claire said.

Ellie was rushed to the emergency room, where a tube was forced down her throat to pump the contents from her stomach. She was hooked up to an IV to restore her bodily fluids and was transferred to the pediatric ward to recover.

The police had questions. Claire volunteered to go to the station, anything to avoid having to sit next to her child's sickbed.

"Have you notified your husband of what's happened, Ms. Sorlin?" the female detective asked.

If years of watching TV crime dramas had taught Claire anything it was that putting her with a woman, even one as butch looking as this one, was an attempt to manipulate her, make her think she had someone on her side. She wasn't falling for it. If her own husband didn't care about her, there wasn't a chance in hell that this detective did. "He's in class right now. He's got an important test today and I don't want to bother him," Claire answered.

"Don't you think he should know that his daughter's going to be all right?"

"Seeing as he never knew that she *wasn't* going to be all right, I don't see any reason to interrupt his exam." Claire looked around the room, imagined that her body was being absorbed by the gray, barren walls. "What did you say your name was?"

"Detective Trainor. Louise. You can call me Lou."

Another stab at friendliness that Claire saw right through. "It's kinda dark in here, Lou."

"Yeah, it is. How old are you, Ms. Sorlin?"

"Please, call me Claire, Lou. I'm 19."

“Must have been scary. You probably weren’t expecting to have a baby so young.”

“I don’t know. Were you expecting you’d grow up to be a dyke?”

Lou smiled and continued. “Why don’t you tell me what happened to Ellie?”

“I already told the cops at the hospital.”

“Tell me. I want to make sure I understand everything they put in their report.”

“You trying to catch me in a lie?”

“I just want to hear the story from your own mouth.”

Claire’s breathing got heavier, her palms moistened, her pupils dilated. It was all she could do to keep from bawling, but she was determined not to show the detective that level of weakness. “It’s not a story,” she said through gritted teeth. “It’s the truth.”

Lou nodded. “Of course.”

“I was doing the laundry when I heard the dogs in the neighborhood start barking. I knew that meant the mailman was coming, and getting the mail is the best part of my day. There’s always the chance you’ll be surprised when you open that box. So I went outside—it was only for a minute—and when I came back in, I found Ellie on the floor of the laundry room, throwing up and covered in bleach. I think she must have tipped the bottle over.”

“You left it accessible?” Lou asked.

“I didn’t even think about it. She just started to crawl. I had no idea that little thing could move so quickly.”

“I listened to the tape of your 911 call. You didn’t sound very upset.”

“I was in shock. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Right. That must have been awful for you, that feeling of helplessness.”

Claire sat rigidly in her chair, worried that the detective had formed the wrong conclusion about her. She wasn’t interested in arguing the point, though. Nothing they could do to her could be much worse than the hell she was already living.

“Out of curiosity, was there anything good in the mail?”

“Just a bunch of junk. Nothing exciting,” Claire said.

“Good thing. You’ve already had enough excitement for today,” Lou said.

It was the first time they had had dinner together in months, since the open marriage proposal in fact. Daniel and Claire had each done a pretty decent job of avoiding the other; it was like they were roommates who just happened to share a bed.

“I missed this place,” Claire said, scanning the Indian restaurant. “I’ve been craving their masala.”

“It has been awhile. I feel like we haven’t really seen each other in so long.”

“That’s because we haven’t. Aside from the obligatory greetings and salutations, we haven’t even really had a conversation in months.”

“Well, I guess we haven’t needed to,” he said, turning his attention to the menu.

Claire wanted to laugh, unsure whether Daniel was speaking out of honesty, stupidity, or both. She decided it didn’t matter because the idea of two married people not needing to talk to each other was stupid regardless.

The waiter came and took their order: Daniel got the tandoori chicken, Claire a vegetable plate.

“I thought you wanted the masala,” Daniel said.

“I changed my mind. I wanted you to be the only chicken at the table tonight,” Claire said. The insult had sounded stronger in her head.

“You’re blaming me then,” he said.

“We’re both to blame, Daniel, but I’m not the one who leaves early for work and comes home late as an act of evasion.”

“It’s the end of the semester. You know I get busier around this time.”

“Come on, Daniel, why don’t you just admit that you don’t want to have anything to do with me anymore? I mean, isn’t that what this whole open marriage thing was about anyway?”

Daniel picked up the wine list, once more taking his focus away from Claire. She tried to let it go, but his blatant disregard for her feelings got the better of her.

“Put down the goddamned menu,” she yelled, accidentally knocking over a glass of water as she snatched the list from his hands. All eyes in the restaurant were trained on her, but she didn’t care. Making a scene in public wasn’t her concern. Getting through to her husband was.

Daniel reached for his napkin to mop up the water.

“Leave it,” she commanded. “I’m here, Daniel. I’m right here. Talk to me, dammit.”

“What do you want me to say, Claire?” He continued to soak up the water with his napkin. “That we’re a fucking joke? That we made the wrong choices? That we wasted our youth on each other? Is that what you want to hear? ‘Cause that’s how I feel most of the time.”

The manager approached the table. “I’m sorry, folks, but if you can’t keep your voices down, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. You’re distur—”

“Fuck off,” Daniel said. “Both of you.” He glared at Claire as he stood up, knocking his chair into that of the man seated behind him. He threw open the door and handed his ticket to the valet. “Hurry up, you useless fuck,” he said, and started pacing frantically as he waited.

Claire emerged a minute later, having taken the time to apologize and pay for their uneaten dinners. She was calm, gave Daniel some space.

“It’s not my fault, not entirely,” he said as the valet pulled their car around.

“I know,” Claire said.

They made the drive home in complete silence.

“Okay, now I have to say that I really don’t get it,” Greg said after Claire told him about dinner with Daniel. “Why *do* you stay together?”

“It’s complicated. There’s a part of me that doesn’t understand it, either, and I’m right smack in the middle of it.”

They walked through the park like a normal couple, except for the fact that they were anything but. There was no holding hands, no touching noses, no signs that they

were anything more than casual acquaintances. During a stroll through the park, Claire was a happily married woman; the professor's wife would never deign to sully the image of such a well-regarded member of the community. Soccer moms might gossip, but she and Greg didn't give them any real ammunition, keeping things chaste while outdoors, not letting on that there was more than friendship between them.

"I think I can handle complicated," Greg said. "Otherwise I wouldn't still be with you."

Claire heard a little girl scream on the opposite side of the park. A look of panic came over her before she realized that the girl was expressing joy not fear as she was being propelled higher and higher on the swing.

Greg noticed Claire's reaction. "Are you okay?"

"That sound..." she started, and gazed up at Greg to make certain that it was safe to tell him. His eyes invited the truth that she had kept from him; it was time for him to know. "That little girl reminded me of my daughter." Her voice trembled a bit, partly from nervousness, partly from the force of the memory. She had envisioned this scene many times, trying to prepare herself for how Greg would receive the news. He had not yet shown her anger, but Claire imagined that this would be the moment when he would lash out at her. *How could you keep such a secret from me? How can I ever trust you again?* But Greg didn't blow up, his face didn't turn red, he didn't clench his fists. Other than a slight raise of the eyebrows, he had no discernible physical reaction at all.

"I've never seen you or your husband with a child. I didn't know you had a daughter."

“She died a long time ago. Fifteen years actually. She fell off a slide and broke her neck.”

“Oh my God. How old was she?”

“Three,” Claire answered. Three years, three months, eleven days—it was a calculation that reverberated in her head on a daily basis, a sequence of numbers that added up to the death of her daughter, the emotional burden that kept on giving.

Greg tried to put his arm around Claire’s waist. She took a step back, denying his advance.

“I don’t want your sympathy,” she said. “I just thought you should know, that’s all.”

“Thank you,” he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Claire turned to watch the girl on the swing, the child beaming as her mother pushed her from behind. It was a happiness that Claire had never been able to fully appreciate, enthusiasm so enormous that it would have crushed her if she had.

Daniel flipped on the light switch with one hand as he guided Shelley inside the house with the other.

“This feels wrong, Daniel,” Shelley said.

“I told you, she’s out for the night. It’s perfectly fine.”

Shelley stepped tentatively across the threshold.

“Relax,” Daniel said. He stood behind her and massaged her shoulders while slowly pushing her toward the sofa. “This is no time to be tense. I want you to have a

good time.” Daniel went to the kitchen, grabbed two glasses and a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon.

“So this is what a professor’s house looks like,” Shelley said, swirling the wine around her glass.

“You gonna drink that or just play with it?”

“I thought this was what you were supposed to do. Smell it, swirl it, look for legs.”

“If you’re an oenophile, yes. You and me, we just have to swig.”

Shelley chuckled and took a gulp from her glass. “I do like your house, though.”

“We try to live modestly. If you have too much, you might never find yourself wanting anything. Eliminate desire and we might as well be dead.”

“Said the man who has no qualms about cheating on his wife.”

“We’ve been over this, Shelley. It’s not cheating, remember? We’re in the clear here.”

“Does that mean I’m supposed to believe that this is the only time you’ve had sex with a woman outside of your marriage?”

Daniel squirmed a bit in his seat and set his glass on the table. “Why are you here, Shelley?”

“Because you brought me here,” she said.

“You make it sound like I made you do something against your will.”

“No, it isn’t like that. You’re just so... comfortable with this whole situation. Like you don’t care who’s getting hurt in all of it.”

“I can’t care about what isn’t happening, Shelley. Nobody’s getting hurt.”

“Just because you say it, doesn’t mean it’s true. Your wife—”

“My wife is not your concern,” he said, his voice escalating. “I’ve explained our arrangement to you. That’s all you need to know about my wife.”

“That *is* all I know. You’ve never even referred to her by name. And call me crazy, but I don’t think you’d be getting this worked up if everything was as perfect as you say it is.”

Daniel swallowed the rest of his wine. “Perfection is subjective,” he said. He pushed his hand through Shelley’s hair and pulled her toward him, kissing her gently, as if to tell her that everything was going to be just fine

“Daniel,” she tried to say as his tongue entered and exited her mouth. It came out sounding more like “Thangull.” Attempts to push him away made Daniel hold her even tighter until he felt her give in to him completely, his kiss containing some kind of magical elixir that made him impossible to resist.

They helped each other with the task of removing their shirts, Daniel also unhooking Shelley’s bra. She reached down his pants, wrapped her fingers around him. So intent were they on one another that neither of them heard the keys jangling outside the front door, the knob being turned, Claire walking into the living room. She watched them for a moment, before Shelley, who was grinding on top of Daniel, caught sight of Claire’s shadow and did a double take, grabbing her shirt and dismounting Daniel as quickly as she could. Daniel turned to see what had spooked Shelley.

“Having fun?” Claire asked.

Daniel wanted so badly to answer in the affirmative, but he didn't want to give Shelley more ammunition for her argument that Daniel was out to hurt his wife.

"Welcome home," he said instead, kicking his feet up on the coffee table as if nothing unusual was going on.

CHAPTER FOUR

As Claire packed up the few toys she had brought from home during Ellie's two-day hospital stay, Lou walked into the room. Ellie started to fuss. Claire gave her a pacifier.

"So, this is Ellie," Lou said. She reached over the bed's side rail and touched the top of Ellie's head. "She's precious."

"You come to arrest me?"

"The opposite actually, but it sounds like someone has a guilty conscience."

"I didn't think cops ever showed up with good news."

"I wanted to visit the victim."

"She's not a victim. It was an accident." The coldness that Claire displayed at the police station had vanished. She was no longer a woman in shock but a mother ready to pounce at any sign of distress. She hoped that Lou would recognize this, and that she wouldn't continue to think of her as an attempted murderer.

"You're right. It *was* an accident. Or at least that's how the DA's office sees it. They say there's not enough evidence to file charges. It's your lucky day, Ms. Sorlin." She reached over the rail again. Ellie wrapped her hand around Lou's finger. "I'm not sure I can say the same for you, little one."

Daniel entered the room. "The car's out front. You ready to—" He stopped when he saw Lou. "What's going on?"

“You must be Daniel,” Lou said. She stuck out her hand. Daniel, who normally had a firm handshake, only grabbed the tips of her fingers. “I’m Lou. I just came by to let your wife know that, as far as the county is concerned, she’s off the hook for trying to kill this beautiful girl.”

“Claire told me you harassed her, that you tried to make her feel worse than she already does about what happened,” Daniel said.

“Just doing my job, Mr. Sorlin. I don’t like people who hurt kids. She may have picked up on that, but I assure you I treated her like I would any other suspect.”

“She never should have been a suspect.”

“Like I said, just doing my job. I can help you out to the car if you want.”

“We’re good. I think you should leave.”

Daniel went to pick up Ellie. He put his arm around Claire, who appreciated the effort he was going through to make it seem as if they were a happy family. If possession was nine-tenths of the law, appearance was nine-tenths of a marriage.

“Don’t make me regret standing up for you,” Daniel said once Lou was gone.

Without asking what he meant, Claire assumed that Daniel had doubts about her innocence. She decided it didn’t matter if her assumptions were right or wrong. Either way, she had enough doubts for both of them.

Months passed and Claire found herself sinking into depression. Taking care of Ellie and Daniel was too much to handle; adding herself to the mix pushed her over the edge. She was inactive, a barnacle on top of the bed, dead weight cursed with being

alive. She wondered why her life hadn't turned out the way she had been promised. It was supposed to be all rosy cheeks and bubble gum. A house made of gingerbread. Kids running up to Daddy when he got home from work. The smell of stew boiling on the stove. Cozy winter nights in front of the fireplace. Claire had given up so much and got so little in return.

“Commit me,” she whispered when Daniel walked into the bedroom one night.

He looked at her, his eyes bloodshot from exhaustion. “What?”

“I don't want to be here right now. I'm tired of feeling this way. Commit me.”

“Are you talking about going to a mental institution?” He sat down at the foot of the bed, watched her feet wriggle underneath the sheets.

“For a little while. Daniel, I need help.” She waited for him to finally see the pain that radiated out of her every pore.

“We'll go first thing tomorrow,” he said.

“What the hell happened to you?” Claire said to Daniel after Shelley had scurried out of the house with profuse apologies.

“What are you talking about? Please don't get all dramatic on me again, 'cause I don't really need that right now, okay?”

“You know what I don't need, Daniel? I don't need to walk into my house and find my husband in the throes of having sex with another woman. I don't need to be told when and where I can launch into a fit of drama. And I sure as fuck don't need to be patronized by you.”

“We had a deal, Claire,” Daniel said, as if he were offering a legitimate excuse.

“The deal didn’t include bringing people here. You crossed a line.”

“You think it’s any different than you going across the street to that guy’s house all the time? What, you couldn’t have found somebody who lives on the next block or in the next town? No, you had to start with the nimrod who can’t even find a decent shirt to wear half the time.”

“Where I go and what I do is my business. I’m not bringing it home with me, though.”

“Are you listening to yourself? Of course you bring it home with you.”

“I’ve never once brought Greg into this house. It would be inappropriate.”

“Maybe you haven’t physically brought him here, but he’s with you every night in bed, he’s in that goddamn humming you do every morning now.”

“This is unbelievable. Are you seriously jealous here? This was your idea, Daniel.”

“But it wasn’t supposed to make you so happy.”

“Did you think I was just going to clam up and mourn your extramarital activities? I’ve been doing that for too long already. I’m not doing it anymore.”

Daniel’s mouth hung open, his face frozen with a look of unmitigated shock.

“You knew?” he said.

Claire started to laugh, loudly and uncontrollably. She couldn’t stop and, for the moment, didn’t want to. It was the first genuine belly laugh she’d had in ages; that it was coming at Daniel’s expense made it all the richer. “You must really think I’m an idiot.

I'm not sure what's worse, your not being in love with me or your constant visual of me wearing a dunce cap."

"How long have you known?" He spoke more quietly, but with a harshness that implied Claire was the bad guy.

"It doesn't matter. Six months, fifteen years, what's the difference? You're a bastard either way." She finished the sentence with another laugh.

"What part of this is funny to you?"

"None of it. But this is all so ridiculous, I just have to laugh. I can't help myself."

"You're losing it all over again."

"Well, if this is me lost, don't bother coming to find me. I'm going for a drive. Don't be here when I get back."

What do you do when your wife has been admitted to a mental hospital and your daughter is continuing to recover from ingesting poison? If you're Daniel Sorlin, you call a friend and invite him out for a drink.

"Bourbon, rocks," Daniel told the bartender.

"Whatever's on tap," Ryan said. Daniel's friend was a stocky fellow with a gut that looked like he'd already had too much of what was on tap. "How's Ellie?"

"Back to normal for the most part. Her babysitter's been checking in a lot over the past few weeks, helping out sometimes when Claire couldn't... when Claire wasn't feeling well."

“And how is *she*?”

Daniel stared into his glass, hoping that he could make his problems melt away as quickly as the ice in his drink. He would settle for a watered-down version of happiness. “I honestly don’t know. I haven’t seen her in a few days, she hasn’t called. I’m sure she’s fine.” He looked at Ryan, who was doing a horrible job of hiding his disapproval of Daniel’s actions.

“Don’t you think she needs you, Daniel? She’s probably pretty scared in there all by herself.”

“She’s not by herself. I saw her talking to another woman the last time I visited. It looked like they became fast friends.”

“I’m not sure that’s the place you want to be making lifelong companions.”

“Yeah, well, it is what it is. Let’s talk about something else. You got any job prospects after graduation?”

“There’s an ad agency in New York that wants to bring me in at entry level. It sounds promising. How about you?”

Daniel was grateful that Ryan didn’t lay into him, try to convince him that he wasn’t behaving properly. After all, he had no way of knowing what Daniel was feeling inside, no idea whether even sitting upright on the barstool was a struggle for him. “I’m going straight into a Ph.D. program. I already got accepted into Stanford. I haven’t told Claire yet, though. This probably isn’t the best time to tell her she’s got to pack up and move.” Daniel raised his glass to the bartender, asking for another round. “Sometimes I wish I could go do my own thing without having to worry about responsibilities at home.

These past few years would have been so much easier if I could have just focused on school. But I guess it doesn't matter now, it's almost over."

"Yeah, I can't wait to be done and move on to the next phase. We're supposed to be ready to be grown-ups by the time we're done with college, right?"

"That's the line we all got sold in high school. Everybody's just pretending anyway. Deep down we're all incredibly selfish animals waiting for somebody else to fuck up so we can take advantage of their mistake. That's as mature as any of us will ever get."

Ryan emptied his glass. "What a rosy outlook on humanity. Have you always been this cynical?"

"We aren't gonna get paid to be optimists. That's probably the most grown-up thing I've learned in my life." Daniel swiveled the stool so that he was looking out at the other patrons in the bar. He rested his elbows on the edge of the counter and laced his fingers across his belly. "Look at these people, Ryan. All coming in here to drown their sorrows, each one more pathetic than the next."

"Maybe they aren't pathetic. Maybe they're here to have a good time."

Daniel tilted his head toward the ceiling. "Don't they know that's just not possible?"

"Claire, you have visitors," the nurse said. "Would you like me to invite them in?" She spoke in a pitch that was as high as her waist was wide, which is to say that she sounded something like a dog's squeak toy.

Claire sat in a chair in the corner of the room, her feet tucked up under her so that she looked extremely compact. “I don’t want to see her. He can come in, but have one of the orderlies watch her.”

“I don’t think your mother needs to be babysat, Claire.”

“My mother?”

“Yes, your parents are here.”

“What do they want?”

“To make sure their little girl’s okay, I would imagine. Should I send them in?”

Claire nodded and stood up, smoothing out her gown and pulling back her hair to make herself look as presentable as possible. Her parents had almost completely cut off contact with her after she married Daniel. They would make the obligatory calls on Christmas and her birthday, but a real relationship between Claire and her parents simply did not exist. She had sinned in their eyes by having premarital sex, and when Claire stopped going to Sunday mass during her pregnancy, they saw it as an affront to the way they had raised her. She had chosen to go down a path of debauchery and hedonism, of which the Lord would sorely disapprove. They came from a time when Catholic ideals were the only things taken in excess, when the perceptions of others was paramount, and when judgment was in the eye of the beholder.

The nurse showed them in and closed the door behind them. James and Harriet Underwood shuffled in slowly, Harriet looking back to see if the door had shut completely, seeing if she could still dart back out before it was too late. She wore a navy blue floor-length dress with long sleeves leading up to a white collar, while her husband

had on a suit and tie, looking the part of the businessman even though this was hardly a professional call. They stood in the center of the room, keeping a safe distance from their daughter.

“Hello, Claire,” James said.

“I didn’t expect you to come,” Claire said. “Actually, I wasn’t sure I’d ever see you again. How did you even know I was in here?”

“Daniel called. And we’re glad he did,” James said. “This doesn’t have to be adversarial now, Claire. Let’s be civilized, hmm?”

Claire sat back down in the chair and crossed her legs like a lady. “You can sit on the bed,” she told them.

They sat down so as to barely touch the edge of the mattress, as though making contact with anything in the institution might somehow contaminate them. “Campbell misses you,” Harriet said.

“Did you come here to tell me about the dog, Mom? How about my bike? Is it getting rusty?”

“We wanted to let you know that we still love you,” Harriet said.

“Even though I’m crazy, is that what you’re saying?”

“Of course not,” James said. “We would never call you crazy. Everybody goes through hard times. Yours is particularly tough right now, but we’re here to help you.”

“What’s the catch?” Claire said. Even in her altered state she recognized that her parents were acting out of character.

“Come home with us,” Harriet said. “Forget all of this nonsense with Daniel and Ellie. You’re clearly not up for the responsibility of caring for others. Come back to us, to the church.”

“You want me to... what?” Claire folded her legs up to her chest and lowered her head so that her forehead was resting on her knees. Her instincts told her to lash out at her parents, but she took a moment to control herself. She lifted her head. “I remember when I was ten years old and May Montgomery cut my ponytail off with the teacher’s scissors. I turned around and punched her in the side of the neck. Not what I was aiming for; I’d wanted to sock her in the nose as hard as I could. But not bad for the first punch I’d ever thrown. Of course I got in trouble—two weeks of detention—even though she started the whole thing. Worse was the punishment you gave me at home. All I heard for what felt like a year was how good Catholics don’t solve problems with violence. And how disappointed God was in me. And how having my hair cut off was a test to see how I’d react, a test I’d failed miserably. Do you know what hearing that kind of thing does to a ten-year-old girl?”

“God only gives constructive criticism. You chose to hear it as negativity instead of embracing it as something that could give you strength,” James said.

“I wish you could hear how you sound. No wonder I ended up in a mental institution.”

“You can’t blame us for this,” Harriet said. “This is the path you went down, not the one we—or He—would have sent you down if you’d paid attention.”

Claire stood up and walked toward them. She knelt down in front of them, put one hand on her mother's cheek, the other on her father's. They both recoiled a bit from her touch, seemingly uncertain of what she might do. "I haven't missed this," Claire whispered, then went back to the chair.

"We're willing to forgive you," James said. "All you need to do is extend us the same courtesy."

"Even in here I'm a better person than either of you will ever be." She resumed her position, legs tight to the chest, head down. A dismissal. She didn't even bother to look up when she heard her parents' footsteps as they walked toward the door.

"We'll pray for you." Harriet said, her sentence punctuated by the close of the door.

After a minute, Claire went to the window. She watched her parents get into their car and lifted a middle finger in their direction.

Daniel stared out of his office window into the night sky. It was incredibly clear, and he could make out a large number of the moon's craters. He longed to be on that dangling orb, away from the ruckus he had created. He wondered if it would make any difference, being on the moon. He would probably find some way to mess things up even from a quarter million miles away.

At this point, he couldn't remember whether his true motivation for coming up with the idea of an open marriage was to make Claire leave him or to somehow make his relationship with her stronger through sheer force of will. After so many years, they had

come to take each other for granted, and what was granted was negativity and discontent. He wanted to magnify what was wrong by engaging in encounters with other people. But there weren't supposed to be actual connections being made with those other people. If a little extra sex came their way, so be it. That was as far as it was supposed to go. No feelings, no emotions, no real enjoyment. Nothing that added to the messiness of an already filthy situation. From the looks of it, they were both guilty of going against that clause in the contract. He liked Shelley, and Claire liked the bozo across the street. Now what?

Daniel took his log book down from the shelf. It hadn't been touched in months, since the first time he'd had sex with Shelley. He leafed through it, some of the names and dates bringing back fond memories, while others were nothing more than spent ink. He didn't chide himself for not remembering all of them; it would be like trying to remember the plot of every book he'd ever read simply by hearing the title.

There was Natasha Coleman, who gave one of the best blow jobs he'd ever received. He came twice with the same erection when he was in her mouth. Four years later, her sister Stephanie was the first woman who agreed to anal sex. He and Tania Fernandez took a risk by doing it in the school gym's locker room after the basketball team won their home opener. And Katharine Larouche helped him fulfill one of his deepest fantasies when she agreed to take him by force when he was least expecting it. She broke into his car while he was at the hardware store and waited, ready to pounce when he came back out. It was worth the cost of having the car's window repaired.

Daniel had certainly had his share of sexual adventures. The problem was that none of them had been with his wife. If it hadn't been for the women in his book, Daniel would probably have had sex only two dozen times in half as many years. His and Claire's appetites just didn't synch up, and the rate of occurrence dropped as their intolerance for each other increased.

He left the book open on his desk and went to lie down on his couch. It was close to midnight and he decided that sleeping in his office would be the easiest thing to do. Easy. There was a word that didn't apply to many things lately. Was there room to complain when he had brought so much of this on himself? He decided that the answer was yes. Claire was no angel, either. They had built their dysfunctional home together, and he wasn't prepared to accept more of the blame just because he was the man. They were charter members of the Mutual Detestation Society, fighting on the same side, but with completely different agendas. They didn't know how to survive without the constant threat of an emotional cannonball being fired at them. Their fuses, lit for seventeen years, were finally getting close to the gun powder.

The night after going out for a drink with Ryan, Daniel found himself back in the bar again, this time alone. Not having a buffer between him and Ellie proved too difficult, even if Claire wasn't winning any Wife/Mother of the Year awards. And the babysitter didn't mind, either; another easy thirty bucks to spend the evening gossiping with her friends on the Sorlins' phone.

“You making a habit of this?” the bartender asked as he poured Daniel a glass of the Jim Beam he had been drinking the night before.

“I once read that it takes twenty-one days to form a habit. Ask me again in three weeks,” Daniel said. He was hunched over his glass, his mouth hovering so close to the rim that if a single drop rolled down the side, he would be able to lick it up before it hit the bar. He wondered what the other patrons would think of him if they knew his story, if they were to find out that he had essentially abandoned his wife and child in favor of spending another night on a torn, foamless barstool. Then he caught the eye of a girl sitting four seats down from him and no longer cared what anybody else in the room thought of him.

She picked up her drink and moved to the stool next to Daniel. “Hasn’t anybody ever told you that you shouldn’t drink alone? It makes you look pathetic,” she said.

“Aren’t you here alone?”

She looked around the bar. “Yeah, I guess I am. But I’m not pathetic.”

“Oh, really. And why is that?”

“Because I’m hot.”

Daniel couldn’t argue with that. She *was* hot. And dark. Her hair, her perfectly symmetrical face, her deep red lipstick. Everything about her had an air of mystery, half suspicious, half flirtatious, all erotic.

“Does hot come with a name?” Daniel asked.

“Marina,” she said.

“Hi, Marina. I’m—”

“Don’t tell me. I honestly don’t care. Marina’s not my real name anyway. You can make one up, too, if you have to.”

“That’s okay. I’ll just be Mr. X.” He was even more intrigued now. Not only did she give a fake name, but she *told* him she gave a fake name. This girl was either a psychopath or the best kind of weird, if there was a difference between the two.

She picked up his left hand and spread his fingers in front of her face. “Is that a wedding ring, Mr. X? A little young for that, don’t you think?”

Daniel pulled his hand away and waved in the bartender’s direction. “You could use another drink, too,” he told her. “What are you having?”

“Vodka tonic,” Marina said. “Absolut.”

They took their drinks and a bowl of pretzels to a table in the corner of the bar. Marina sat as close to Daniel as the wide-armed, Old West-style chair would allow.

“Where’s wifey tonight? At home baking cookies with the kids, waiting oh-so-patiently for Daddy to get home from his long day at work?”

“Not quite.” He chomped down hard on a pretzel.

“Sore subject, huh? And I thought you were here because you liked the atmosphere.”

“Do you go to Cormier?” Daniel asked.

“Used to. Dropped out before the start of my sophomore year. Don’t go thinking that I’m stupid, though, or that I couldn’t handle it. School just isn’t my thing. I’m plenty smart without it.”

“A lot of people get on just fine without a college degree.” As Daniel continued to explain why not having a formal education wasn’t necessarily detrimental to a person’s success—even citing famous high-school dropouts like Albert Einstein and John Travolta as examples—Marina moved her hand onto his knee, slowly working her way up to his thigh, grazing his crotch as she reached back up to the table for her drink. Despite the flutters that coursed through his body and the nervous constriction of his throat muscles, Daniel did not stop talking. “There’s no shame in being a townie, either. You know—”

Marina stuck her tongue in Daniel’s mouth, kissing him so abruptly that he didn’t even have time to process what was happening before instinct kicked in and he joined the party. He had no idea whether he was engaging with Marina voluntarily or if he was just following her very powerful lead. She tasted so good that he ultimately didn’t care. Marina’s strawberry-flavored lip gloss made kissing her more enticing than kissing Claire. Everything about Marina was more exciting than Claire: the way she took control; the way she covered the sides of his face with her hands as they kissed, as if she wanted to devour him; the way the top of her bra peeked out over her shirt, daring Daniel to look, making him feel like a pervert for doing so.

Months later, when Daniel got the idea to document his extramarital conquests, Marina went on the first line of the first page, his official entrance into the world of adultery. He knew that her name was false, and guessed that there were many other things about her that were less than authentic, but none of that mattered when she allowed him inside her body. There would be no more sulking about his pitiable life as long as

there were women who were willing to let him fill their voids. And luckily for Daniel, there were scads of them.

CHAPTER FIVE

From inside her bedroom, Claire heard the sound of a car door being shut and mentally prepared for Daniel to walk into the house. She was operating on very little sleep and was not in the mood for another confrontation. It had been her intent to be out of the house early enough that she might be able to keep from seeing him, but it appeared that she had moved at too leisurely a pace this morning for that to happen. *Oh, just let him come in and get it over with*, she thought. *Why further put off this two-decades-in-the-making inevitability?*

Claire was placing the last decorative pillow on the bed when the doorbell rang. Her face contorted with confusion. She had told Daniel to get out, but she hadn't taken away his house key. She walked to the door, thinking that maybe she was getting some kind of special delivery. Flowers from Greg, perhaps. Suffice it to say, Claire was massively disappointed when she opened the door to find Daniel's parents, Earl and Betty, on the other side. And they had come without flowers.

"Where's Daniel?" Betty said, seeing herself inside. Earl followed, luggage in tow.

"Hello to you, too, Betty."

"All these years and you still refuse to call me Mom. What do I have to do to change that?"

“Um, treating me like a daughter would be a start,” Claire said. She was stunned by this sudden arrival. To the best of her knowledge, there had been no arrangements made for Daniel’s parents to visit. “You brought bags,” she said to Earl.

“Well, you didn’t expect us to drive all this way and just turn around and drive right back, did you? We’ll be here a few days.”

“Really?” Claire said. “Does Daniel know about this?”

“No, silly. It’s a surprise,” Betty said.

“Why? What’s the occasion?”

“A mother doesn’t need an occasion to visit her child,” Betty said. “It’s called love.”

The way she said the word *love*, as if Claire had never heard of the concept before, set Claire on edge. Betty had been making cracks about Claire’s incompetence as a mother since shortly after the initial shock of Ellie’s death wore off. She thought it was her right as a bereft grandparent to say such things. Claire hated her for it, but took the abuse anyway, on some level considering herself deserving of it.

“So, where is Daniel?” Betty asked.

“He’s not here. We had...” Claire wanted to tell them what was going on, that their precious boy was a whore and had been for a long time, that she had walked in on him having sex with another woman, that he substituted intellect for intimacy and made her feel inadequate on both counts. She thought better of it, though. They were here to see Daniel, not to hear about their marital problems. As much as she disliked them (and vice versa), she didn’t want to begin this visit by inviting them to be a part of their private

tribulations. “We had to tear out one of our rose bushes in the backyard last week, so he went to the nursery to get a replacement.”

“I didn’t know you two had planted a garden. Not a very healthy one from the sound of it,” Earl said.

“Yeah, well, neither of us was blessed with a green thumb.”

“Gardens take a lot of care. They’re like people, you have to feed them, water them, make sure their room is clean, protect them from predators,” Betty said.

Claire nodded. She could think of nothing nice to say in response to the umpteenth insinuation that she was a bad mother. “Let me take your bags.” She wheeled their luggage into the empty bedroom, closing the door behind her and picking up the phone.

“I think you dialed the wrong number,” Daniel said when he answered.

“I don’t care where you are or what you’re doing, but you need to get back here right now. Your parents just showed up unannounced.” She frowned as Daniel laughed.

“This isn’t funny, Daniel.”

“They’ve always had the worst timing, that’s why I’m laughing.”

“Gee, ya think? Just come home.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Claire walked back out to the living room, where Earl and Betty were inspecting the décor.

“I would have switched places with those two pictures and I definitely would have hung that one lower on the wall. I feel like I have to crane my neck to see it,” Betty said to Earl.

“I just talked to Daniel. He should be back shortly.”

“Great. That gives us a chance to hear what’s new with you, Claire,” Earl said, sitting down in the exact spot where his son’s bare ass had been twelve hours earlier.

“Yes, please, tell us everything,” Betty said.

“Oh, I’m not sure you want to hear everything,” Claire said.

“She spoiled the surprise, didn’t she?” Betty said into Daniel’s ear as she hugged him.

“You know I’m always surprised to see you, Mom. And Dad.” He moved from Betty to Earl, giving his father a hug and a hearty pat on the back. They had never shown up without giving notice before. “How long are you staying?”

“We just walked in the door and already you’re asking us when we’re leaving?” Earl said.

Daniel watched Claire go into the kitchen, her meager attempt to gain some distance from his parents. “I’m not trying to get rid of you. I just want to make sure we have enough food in the house.”

“Oh, don’t worry about us,” Earl said. “We’ve been taking advantage of the senior specials at Denny’s lately. It may not be the best meal on the planet, but it saves your mother from having to cook, and it’s pretty damn cheap, too.”

“Why don’t you two make yourselves comfortable? I have to go talk to Claire for a minute.” Daniel handed the TV remote to Betty.

“What is this? We drove 500 miles to watch TV?”

“Give it to me, then,” Earl said, stretching out his hand to take the remote.

The sound of a whistling teakettle greeted Daniel as he walked into the kitchen. Claire removed the kettle from the stove and filled four mugs.

“Can you get the Splenda out of the pantry, please?” she said, her voice quiet and clipped.

“I didn’t know they were coming, I swear,” he whispered.

“It doesn’t matter. They’re here. We have to make the best of it, right?”

“So we’re on the same page with that, then? We act like nothing is wrong.” He scanned the shelves of the pantry, having no luck locating the box.

“Like every other visit. We’ll just keep on pretending. I don’t see anything wrong with that at all.” She reached past Daniel and grabbed the box of Splenda packets that sat on the shelf directly in front of his face. She took a few packets out of the box and placed them on a serving tray.

“Let’s try to make it as painless as possible.”

Claire put her hand to her heart and feigned a look of sentimentality. “Always the romantic,” she said, then carried the tray out to the living room, where Betty was futzing with a flower arrangement and Earl had already fallen asleep watching *Judge Judy*.

* * *

Group therapy was one of the few things Claire actually looked forward to each week. It didn't take her long to figure out that she was pretty normal compared to some of the other whack jobs with whom she was forced to spend time. Two months into her hospital stay and she was feeling more at peace than she had in years. She took her usual seat in the therapy circle, directly across from Dr. Kamura. Claire felt like she had more of the doctor's attention when she could make direct eye contact with her. Ronald and Debra—the patients only knew each other by their first names—flanked her on either side. He was a suicidal bank manager who had flipped his lid when he was locked in the vault during a robbery nine months earlier, she a bipolar former beauty queen who lost her crown when she set another contestants' evening gown on fire—while said contestant was wearing it. Around the circle were four other patients of varying interest to Claire. There were none of the nattering schizophrenic types with whom she had expected to be locked away (they were apparently on another floor). Her cohorts looked like average folks on the outside and happened to be a little more mixed-up than most on the inside. None of them ate their own hair or shoved Brussels sprouts up their ass or tried to gouge out other people's eyes when they heard the word *succulent*. They may have been crazy, but they weren't *crazy-crazy*.

“Okay, who wants to start us off this week?” Dr. Kamura asked. Middle-aged and Japanese, Dr. Kamura sometimes came off as a little bipolar herself, offering tenderness, tough love or blunt, harsh realities depending on the day's disposition. She

seemed to be in a felicitous mood today, which boded well for everyone. Ronald, averting his gaze, was the first to be picked on.

“Why me?” he said, taking on the victim role he had adopted since the robbery.

“Just talk,” Andrea said. Barely out of her teens, Andrea’s parents checked her in after her manic depression became too much for them to handle. “We’re all gonna have to go sometime.”

“I like the sound of that,” Ronald said, misinterpreting Andrea’s words as a reference to death.

“Dumbass,” Vivian said under her breath. She had anger management issues and had been ordered into treatment after several arrests stemming from violent behavior. The final straw came as a result of a road rage incident in which she took a bat to the back window of a car and her fist to the face of the driver.

“No name calling,” John said. He was seated next to Dr. Kamura and looked to her for reassurance that he had said the right thing.

“Oh, yeah, this from the guy who wants everybody to call him Tarzan,” Vivian said.

“I have a very common name,” John explained defensively. “I want to be unique.”

“I’d say that thinking you can swing from one tree to another by tying a piece of floss to a branch is pretty unique,” Vivian said.

Claire relaxed in her chair, crossing her arms and reveling in the other patients' interplay. She loved watching them go around the circle, taking turns laying into one another. It wasn't very productive, but it sure was fun to see.

"We're all special, John," Dr. Kamura said. John clenched his teeth when she called him by his real name. "I mean, Tarzan," she corrected.

"Dr. Kamura, can you please ask Judy to stop staring at me with those transient eyes of hers? She's creeping me out," Ronald said.

Judy, an African-American woman, sat next to Ronald and found it hard not to stare at the odd way that Ronald's hair swirled around the crown of his head. It was like a whirlpool, and it caused Judy's eyes to bug out a bit, making her look like a loony transient one might find sitting at a bus stop (which, incidentally, is where she was found, surrounded by cats and yelling about how MC Hammer had promised to take care of her). She could easily go ten minutes without blinking.

"Why don't you ignore Judy and focus on me, okay, Ronald?" Dr. Kamura suggested. "Tell me how you've been feeling this week."

"Well, I beat Tarzan in a game of chess two nights ago. I liked that."

"Good."

"Then he accused me of cheating and I wanted to kill myself all over again."

Tarzan grew excited. "I saw him put one of the pieces in his pocket. He must have done some kind of magic with it, though, 'cause I reached into his pocket and I didn't find anything."

"That's 'cause I didn't cheat, you stupid fuck."

“Ronald, you know our policy on foul language. Please apologize to Tarzan,” Dr. Kamura said.

Ronald rolled his eyes. “Sorry.” He shrank back in his chair. “Can I go again later? I don’t feel like talking anymore right now.”

Dr. Kamura nodded. “Do I have a volunteer to go next then?”

Claire raised her hand. She knew that Dr. Kamura liked it when she volunteered. Claire had a way of bringing order back into the room. She was perhaps the only one who had any semblance of self-awareness left intact. As much as Claire liked to sit back and watch as a circus act was performed around her, she also got pleasure from helping Dr. Kamura try to keep the therapy session constructive and on topic.

“Thank you, Claire. What’s been going on with you this week?”

“Kissass,” Vivian muttered.

“That’s enough, Vivian. Claire, go ahead.”

“My parents came to see me on Saturday. They only stuck around long enough to remind me of all the horrible decisions I’ve made. I can’t help but wonder how someone like me came from people like them. I mean, not that they’re bad people. They just aren’t *my* people. They used to be, but they clearly aren’t anymore. I’ve grown past the constant judgment, the catering to the Lord, the righteous indignation. It takes a lot of energy to keep up such a meticulous façade. I think I’m a better person for not having them as involved in my life.”

“I agree with you, Claire,” Debra said. “When I lit that bitch on fire I felt freer than I ever did before. I was the best person I’d ever known how to be. Is that how you felt when you tried to kill your baby?”

“Debra...” Dr. Kamura scolded.

“I didn’t try to kill my baby. That was an accident. I’m not here because...”

Claire took a deep breath and let it out slowly, a calming exercise she had learned during her stay. “It was an accident.”

“How do you think your parents feel not having you in their lives like they did when you were younger?” Dr. Kamura asked.

“I don’t think it fazes them. At this point, I’m just a disobedient heathen who needs to be saved from herself. They don’t really try to appreciate what it is I’m going through. It’s cut and dry with them—you are or you aren’t, and it turns out I’m not.”

“Does that mean that they’ve essentially excised you from the family?”

“That happened a while ago, but there was still a thread of hope that they clung to, that I would come running back to them. I think I shredded their belief in me the other day. For all intents and purposes, we’re done.”

“That’s why I hang out with cats. They can be smellier than people sometimes, but if you keep ‘em fed, they won’t give you no bother,” Judy said.

“Does it make you sad, Claire, being so different from your parents?” Dr. Kamura asked.

“It might sound mean to say it, but I really don’t care. They’re them and I’m me, and somewhere in the middle is a big ball of misunderstanding that keeps us from

communicating properly. It's okay, though, really. I still have my husband and daughter, right?"

The group got quiet. Six people who always proffered a sarcastic quip or an amusing non sequitur suddenly had absolutely nothing to say. They had heard Claire talk about her relationships with Daniel and Ellie, hardly a saving grace.

"Maybe you could just focus on yourself," Ronald said, "without worrying about what anybody else needs. You know, until you start to feel normal again."

"That's pretty good advice, Ronald," Dr. Kamura said. "What do you think, Claire?"

Claire nodded in agreement, but was confused. Inside, she couldn't help but feel that only thinking about herself was what got her here in the first place.

Some people like to exercise to release pent-up frustration, others write in a journal, or scream at the top of their lungs while driving, or meditate under a tree. Claire liked to rip pages out of the Bible. Not just any Bible, either. These were Bibles that she took from the pews at St. Lucy's Parish. An obvious way for her to retaliate against the religious dogma that was forced down her throat growing up, the act of tearing out and crumpling scripture made her giddier than it should have. She didn't know whether or not she still believed in hell, but was positive that, if it did exist, her sacrilegious behavior would land her there. There was some solace in knowing that Daniel would most certainly end up there as well; they may not like each other very much, but at least she'd have familiar company with whom to spend eternity.

Claire went to St. Lucy's every few weeks to clear her head. It was true that she was no longer a practicing Catholic, but the church was the place where she could find the most peace of mind. It was quiet yet dramatic, and Claire took refuge in its grandiosity. She wasn't there to pray for salvation, only to get away from the world by going to a place that, in another lifetime, had led to enormous disillusionment. A priest had stopped her on her way out one time and asked if she had forgotten to put back the Bible that she was carrying out. Claire didn't miss a beat, telling him that she would be happy to make a contribution to the church if she could be allowed to take one of their Bibles home every once in a while. She didn't tell him what she was going to do with them, nor did he ask. He agreed—after all, what priest is going to turn away a charitable contribution?—and Claire went home to commit her act of desecration.

On this day she took her Bible to Greg's house, where she sat on one side of his studio, making a mess, while he was on the other side, making art. Greg was working on a painting of a homeless man circa 1900 who was delighted to find a penny on the sidewalk. The painting had several thought balloons depicting what the man might do with his newfound loot, each escalating in loftiness, from buying a loaf of bread to riding in a horse-drawn carriage to owning a mansion. It perfectly captured basic human dejection, the inanity of innocence, and the urge toward being a self-made man.

"Some people might consider what you're doing right now to be making an artistic statement," Greg said from across the room.

"Well, those people would be nuts," Claire said, ripping out a page and wadding it up into as tight a ball as she could. She had enough tiny pieces of paper around her that

the uninitiated might walk in and think that she was playing a game of marbles. “You’re sure this doesn’t bother you?”

“Please, I can’t think of an artist I’ve met who hasn’t committed religious treason in the name of his craft. It doesn’t affect me one bit.”

“You make me feel safe here, did you know that?”

“I didn’t, but I’m glad. You can use this place as sanctuary any time you want.”

“I’ll probably take you up on that, at least until they’re gone.” The thought of her in-laws made Claire pull out four pages at once. Luckily, Bible pages are thin so it wouldn’t have too great an impact on how much longer she could vent her frustration.

“Are you sure Daniel didn’t do this on purpose, invite them and not tell you, I mean?”

“He doesn’t like it when they visit anymore than I do. Subjecting himself to his parents wouldn’t exactly be his form of warfare. Besides, he probably won’t be able to see his little mistress while they’re here, so I don’t think this was done to screw with me.”

“I thought *he* was supposed to be the jealous one,” Greg said.

“What? I’m not jealous.”

“The way you commented on the other woman made it sound like you, I don’t know, like you care more than you’re letting on.”

“That’s ridiculous. I might still be a little pissed that they were going to fuck on my couch, but isn’t that the beauty of free will? It allows others to witness us doing stupid things.” Claire closed her Bible, collected the scraps of paper, and threw them

away. She walked to the other side of the room and reached around Greg, kissing his neck as he finished a brushstroke. “Come to dinner,” she said.

Greg laughed and turned to face her. “Speaking of doing stupid things.”

“No, I’m serious. Daniel’s mom is cooking dinner tonight and I think it would be wonderful if you joined us.”

“As what, your date?”

“I can introduce you as our lonely neighbor. They’ll feel so sorry for you they won’t be able to turn you away.”

“Somehow I doubt that Daniel’s going to welcome me into his house with open arms.”

“Don’t worry about Daniel. He owes me. And it’s not just his house.”

“Why do I suddenly feel like the guy in this painting?” he said, pointing to the homeless man.

“I guess that makes me the penny on the ground. Good thing you found me.”

CHAPTER SIX

Betty whipped potatoes with an electric mixer while Claire set the table for five. Earl and Daniel were in the living room watching a poker tournament on TV. It felt like Thanksgiving, except that it was July, everyone was wearing shorts instead of parkas, there were no football games on, and there wasn't that sense of holiday joy to tide over hard feelings. The oven timer beeped at an annoying decibel. Betty stopped whipping and put on a mitt to remove the roast from the oven.

"I wish I could cook like you," Claire said, expressing envy of Betty for perhaps the first time in all the years she had known her. Claire expected her to say something about how being a good cook came with being a good mother, but Betty's response surprised her.

"I hate it actually."

"How could you hate something that you do so well?"

"That's the problem, I do it well. The second you let a man know that you can cook, you've just chained yourself to the kitchen for the rest of your life." She added some milk and butter to the potatoes and turned the mixer back on.

The doorbell rang. Daniel bolted up from his chair. "I'll get it," he said.

Claire watched anxiously as he opened the door and greeted Greg with a bit too much enthusiasm. Daniel had looked hurt when she told him that Greg was coming to dinner, nodding his head without saying a word. Claire tried to explain that this wasn't payback for the other night, but it didn't seem to make a difference.

“We finally meet,” Daniel said as Greg stepped inside. “Dad, this is Greg, our neighbor from across the street.” Earl gave Greg’s hand an obligatory shake, then craned his neck so he could see the TV screen that Greg was blocking. Daniel walked Greg toward the kitchen.

Claire met him halfway. “I can take it from here,” she said.

“You sure? I was just going to—”

“I got it, Daniel.”

Claire could feel Greg’s discomfort, saw him trying to communicate the words “I shouldn’t be here” with his eyes. She gave him what she intended to be a reassuring pat on the back, knowing that the only thing that would alleviate his unease would be to leave, which she hoped he wouldn’t do. “Betty, this is my friend Greg. Greg, Betty.” Claire spoke loud enough for Betty to hear her over the mixer.

“Dinner smells wonderful,” Greg said, matching Claire’s volume.

“Thank you,” Betty said. She finished the potatoes and turned off the mixer. “I hope you brought your appetite.”

“It goes where I go.” Greg smiled.

Claire poured Greg a glass of wine. He took two big swigs while Betty’s back was turned and held out the glass for a refill. Claire was happy to oblige. “You can go watch TV if you want,” she said.

“No, you don’t. Dinner is served,” Betty announced. She set the roast pan on the table and motioned for Daniel and Earl to join them in the dining room.

“This guy’s about to win half a million bucks, though,” Earl complained.

“What do you care? It’s not you who’s winning. Come eat.”

Earl turned off the TV and stamped over to the table, his demeanor lightening a bit at the sight of the food on display: the roast and potatoes, of course, but also cornbread, green bean casserole, steamed spinach with a hint of nutmeg, and broccoli in cheese sauce. Betty had really outdone herself, putting the meal together on such short notice. She’d also made her specialty, a crisp, tart apple brown betty (it wasn’t a coincidence), for dessert.

They all took their seats around the circular table, with Daniel inadvertently ending up between Claire and Greg. Daniel looked at Claire suspiciously, as if to accuse her of making the seating arrangements on purpose. She shrugged back and passed the spinach to Greg, who wasted no time filling up his plate.

“This all looks delicious,” Greg said. “I like to cook myself, but I usually end up throwing something with no nutritional value in the microwave so I can get back to work.”

“Oh, what do you do?” Betty asked.

“I’m an artist. I work out of my garage, which I converted to a studio space.”

“An artist, huh?” Daniel said. “Anything we would know?”

“Probably not. I’m not exactly a household name. I’ve done a few out-of-state shows, nothing too big. Having the university nearby certainly helps with sales, though. All those highfalutin professors and art majors.”

“Yeah, we professors are a pompous bunch, aren’t we? You know, if you can’t get your stuff in a big show, maybe you should take that as a sign.”

“Of what, exactly?” Greg asked, but Daniel just pointed to his mouth, which he had stuffed with a forkful of meat.

“He’s got an amazing eye actually,” Claire said. “I’ve been trying to get him to give me a discount so I can put some of his art in this place.”

Daniel scanned the room. “I don’t know, Claire. The house might start to look tacky if we add anything else.”

“Can we save the namby-pamby talk for later and just eat?” Earl grouched.

“Don’t mind him,” Betty said. “He’ll be in a better mood once he’s got a loaded belly. Greg, not to pry, but Claire made it sound like you don’t have many friends in the neighborhood. Why is that? You seem like a nice enough fellow.”

“Yeah, Greg, why is that?” Daniel said.

Greg raised his napkin to his mouth and wiped off a few errant cornbread crumbs. “I guess I keep to myself mostly. Loner is sort of my middle name.”

“Is it because you’re a homosexual?” Betty said, and all heads turned immediately in her direction. “I’ve heard that they sometimes lock themselves away so they don’t have to face their own denial.”

Greg laughed. Claire had warned him about Betty’s uncouth ways, but she could never have anticipated that five minutes into dinner Betty would be accusing Greg of being gay. “I’m not...a homosexual.”

“Oh, ex-con then?”

“Betty, that’s enough,” Claire scolded.

“I’ve read articles about artists and a lot of them are either homosexuals or ex-convicts. It’s a documented fact. Look it up. No offense, Greg, but you can’t blame a woman for wanting to know who she’s breaking bread with.”

Daniel stared down at his plate to keep from showing everyone the smile on his face. Normally, Betty’s inappropriateness would have set him off, but Claire could tell that he was enjoying tonight’s personal dinner theater, that he was content to let Betty lay into Greg all she wanted.

“You’re a terrific cook, Betty,” Greg said.

For a moment the room was filled only with ambient sounds, the clanging of knives and forks on dinner plates, the slight slurp of Daniel’s drinking, the smacking of Earl’s lips as he chewed a bite of roast.

Claire broke the pseudo-silence by proclaiming, “I wouldn’t fuck a gay guy or an ex-con, Betty.”

Everyone was stunned, including Claire. Daniel’s amusement waned, and Greg looked humiliated.

Betty was stoic. “I’m not sure what you mean by that, Claire, but that kind of language at the dinner table is—”

“Perfectly acceptable. *My house, my language.* And what I meant by that is Greg and I have been seeing each other for months. Scandalous, huh? Not quite as tawdry as your beloved son, though. He’s been fucking other women for over a decade.”

“Claire, I don’t think this is the time,” Daniel said.

“You come to my house unannounced,” she yelled at Betty, “you walk in and immediately start judging me. It’s a goddamn invasion.”

“You can curse, but do you have to shout? I’m just trying to eat here,” Earl said, ironic since living with Betty didn’t come without its share of shouting.

“And you,” Claire turned to Daniel. “I don’t even know what to say to you anymore.”

“Maybe I should go,” Greg said, starting to stand. Claire put a hand on his shoulder and he sat back down.

“If you and Daniel are having problems, I don’t see why you feel the need to take them out on us. We’re your guests,” Betty said.

Claire got out of her chair and stood behind Betty. She reached over Betty’s shoulder and grabbed a handful of the food from her plate. Starting from her forehead, Claire smeared the food down Betty’s face, leaving her with potatoes on top, pieces of broccoli floret hanging from her eyelashes, and meat sauce lining her chin. With Betty in total shock, Claire wiped the excess on the back of Betty’s neck before heading down the hall and slamming her bedroom door.

Daniel rushed to his mother’s aid, offering her his napkin and helping her wipe the nape of her neck. Earl’s face flared red as he tried to stifle a laugh. The sound of the front door closing as Greg left drew everyone’s attention, as pure a punctuation mark as anyone could have asked for.

* * *

With his mother cleaned up and Claire refusing to open the bedroom door, Daniel decided to take a walk, something he hadn't done in years. Always being in a hurry to get to campus or getting too caught up in his own drama didn't leave Daniel much time to enjoy the neighborhood he called home. The sun was slowly descending, illuminating the tops of the trees. It was still warm out, the balmy temperature perfect for a jaunt around the block. The whirl of air conditioners blended with the engines of the cars passing by to create a symphony of motorized wind.

Daniel wandered through the downtown streets, a cozy series of mom-and-pop shops lined with bulbous plants and old-fashioned lantern-shaped lights. He stopped at the window of a jewelry store and got nostalgic at the sight of the diamond engagement ring on display. He had promised Claire a ring like that someday, when they could afford it. Of course, it had been some time since they were in financial straits, and yet he never delivered on the promise he had made so long ago. He wondered if Claire ever thought about it, if she looked down at her finger and lamented the missing extravagance. He knew that she wasn't especially fond of the matching wedding bands they had bought way back when, no jewels, just simple gold.

The song came back into his head: *I guess if you said so, I'd have to pack my things and go. That's right!* And it was true. If Claire told him to leave, he wouldn't put up a fight, wouldn't try to tell her that it was *his* house and that she was the one who should be leaving. He would walk out the door, head held as high as he could possibly hold it, grasping at whatever amount of pride still coursed through his veins. But the reality was, he wasn't sure anymore if he actually wanted to leave. Seeing her there,

sitting next to that guy, that Greg, it did something to him. As much glee as he felt for the third degree Greg got at dinner, he felt just as much sadness that the guy from across the street was getting more attention from Claire than her husband was. Just a few months ago, it was all Daniel could do to sabotage his marriage, to devise a way of turning Claire into the bad guy so that he wouldn't have to be responsible for ending things. Now he wondered if there might still be something worth saving. Maybe he didn't have to hear the words *Hit the road, Jack* after all.

A tiny bell rang as Daniel pushed open the door of the jewelry store. "Good evening, sir," the jeweler said. "Can I help you find something?"

Instead of dwelling on her present situation, stewing in a pity pot full of *Why me's*, the only thing that Claire could think about as she lay crying into her pillow was the time she had abandoned Ellie. She had been out of the hospital for just a few weeks and was still feeling incredibly fragile. It was a big transition, coming back into her normal day-to-day activities after living for six months under the watchful guidance of a trained professional, and the smallest of tasks could sometimes create the greatest anxiety.

Claire looked at her grocery list as she pushed the cart with Ellie seated up front. Ellie was leafing through a copy of *Highlights for Children* that Claire had picked up in the magazine section. She found a page filled with drawings of animals and started to recite their names.

“Fwog, ephant, tighu, RAWRRRR!” Ellie’s tiger impression was loud and startled an elderly woman who was passing by. The woman smiled and laughed after realizing that the sound came from Ellie, but Claire was nervous.

“Ell, not so noisy, okay?” Daniel was supposed to be around to help out with things like this, to alleviate some of the tension Claire felt whenever she had to be alone with Ellie. It just wasn’t the same interacting with her daughter after she’d been accused of trying to kill her. She felt the stares from nearly everyone who walked past her. They all knew what had happened, they all judged her, she was a horrible person. No amount of therapy can make feelings like that go away.

“Doggy,” Ellie said as she turned the page. “Woof, woof, woof.” She giggled at herself.

“Why don’t we put the book back now? Mommy’s almost done shopping.” Claire took the book out of Ellie’s hands and slid it on top of the cans of creamed corn on the shelf.

“Book,” Ellie said, a calm request to get it back. When Claire didn’t stop, when the distance between Ellie and the book kept growing, that’s when Ellie took her volume to another level. “Book! Book!” she screamed, and the tears started to come, and the sobbing. “Book! Mommy! Book!”

Claire pushed the cart faster, wanting to get the hell out of the store. She made her way to the checkout lane and started to pile the groceries on the conveyer. “That’s enough, Ellie.” She wasn’t even looking at Ellie, but at the other customers, who, in her mind, were cursing her silently, wondering why they had to put up with her sniveling brat

of a kid. “I said that’s enough,” she said through her teeth. She pulled up on the cart’s push bar, lifting the front wheels and slamming them back to the ground. It scared Ellie, which was what Claire wanted, but it only made the crying worse.

“Maybe if you pick her up,” the woman behind Claire suggested.

Claire turned to the woman. “*You* pick her up,” she said, and shoved past the customer in front of her who was handing cash to the clerk. Claire walked out the front door, leaving Ellie sitting in the cart, bawling uncontrollably. She could hear Ellie screaming “Mommy, Mommy,” but kept moving, her purse tucked under her arm like a football player running toward the end zone. Getting to her car, she struggled with the keys, the tremor in her hands making it almost impossible to get the key in the door. She gave up finally, leaning her back against the car and slowly sliding down to the asphalt, her head bowed, her breathing short and heavy, her butt landing directly atop an oil stain. It was too soon for something like this to happen; she hadn’t been out of the hospital long enough. A year down the line maybe it would be fine if she lost her cool again, started to have some of the same feelings as before. At that point it might even be understandable. But mere weeks after coming home, this wasn’t supposed to be the way. Claire felt like a failure, like all those months of hard work had been for naught. *Bring me back to Tarzan*, she thought. *I’m crazy enough to be his Jane.*

She heard the cry of a child, *her* child, and peered around the back of the car to see Ellie being carried around the parking lot by the woman who was behind Claire in line. The woman scanned the lot, looking for any sign that Claire hadn’t driven off. She caught a glimpse of Claire’s head as it dipped back behind the car.

“You forgot something,” the woman said as she rounded the rear of the vehicle. She set Ellie down. Ellie stopped crying and waddled toward her mother, climbing tentatively into her lap. Claire wondered if Ellie’s young age would keep this from becoming a trauma that rested inside her forever.

The woman squatted next to Claire. There was no anger in her face, no disapproval toward a person who could leave behind a helpless child. Instead, her features were filled with understanding. “I have three teenagers,” the woman said. “I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to do exactly what you just did.”

“But you never actually did it, right?” Claire said, ashamed.

The woman smiled sympathetically. “The manager wanted to call the police, but I convinced him that it wasn’t necessary. I lied and told him I know you. I said that you were going through some stuff right now. I’m not sure why people are so willing to forgive when they hear that people are going through ‘stuff.’ It doesn’t really tell them anything. But it worked.”

“Thank you. Nobody ever understands.”

“Oh, I think they all understand. They’re just too afraid of what people will think of them if they *say* they understand. Do you need any help getting home?”

“No, thank you.” She kissed Ellie on the cheek. “We’ll be okay.”

“All right. Don’t be scared to ask for help when you need it, though.” The woman walked back to the store, as clueless as everyone else about the fact that Claire had just spent months getting “help.”

Years later, she still questioned how much better off she was than before she was admitted. Sure, she continued her therapy once she was out of the hospital, for a little while anyway. But it didn't keep her from staying in a sorry excuse for a marriage. It didn't keep her from crying herself to sleep some nights. And it sure as hell didn't make her feel any better about the way she had treated her daughter.

When Daniel left for his walk, he never imagined he would end up at the house of his wife's lover. Greg looked just as surprised to see him standing on his porch as Daniel was to be standing there himself.

"I'm not sure what the protocol for this is. Am I supposed to invite you in?" Greg asked.

Daniel didn't answer, just stood there looking expectantly at Greg as if he was the Wizard of Oz, coming out from behind a curtain to give Daniel his share of courage and heart before he tapped his heels together and headed home. Greg stepped back from the doorway and allowed Daniel to enter. They stared at each other for what seemed like forever, the chasm between them shrinking and growing in tune with their breathing. There was an unspoken understanding that connected them, telepathic thoughts that confirmed that they were fallible, human. Neither of them confused it with liking the other, but it was nice to know that on some base level, they both knew exactly where the other was coming from.

"We never slept together," Greg said. "She only said that to get a rise out of your mother. It never happened."

“I don’t need to know that. She could have if she wanted to. It was part of our deal.”

“But she didn’t. I want you to know.”

Daniel put his hands in his pockets and rocked a bit on his heels. It was clear that Greg wasn’t going to fix him a cup of coffee or ask him to sit down and watch the evening news. Still, he had hoped that they might talk in a more comfortable manner than they were. Greg wasn’t moving, though, and Daniel felt it might be inappropriate to force the issue. “I don’t hate you,” Daniel said.

“Oh. Okay. She’s a good woman. She deserves the world.”

Daniel wondered how much Greg knew about his and Claire’s relationship. He wondered how deep Greg’s concern for Claire went, and what Greg’s end game was. “I know,” he said.

“No, I don’t think you do. It seems to me like you take her for granted an awful lot. Hell, you probably both take each other for granted, but you... With everything she’s been through, she needs someone who makes her feel safe. She’s scared, and, from what I can gather, has been for a long time. I don’t know what’s going to happen between us, but I do know that for as long as she’s a part of my life, I’m going to make damn sure that she feels as protected as possible.”

“Whatever she’s told you, we went through that stuff together. It wasn’t one-sided.”

“It never is,” Greg said. “You ever try letting her know that?”

“I’m not gonna stand here and get relationship advice from the man who’s been trying to get into my wife’s pants.”

“Look around, Daniel. You’re in my house now. You came to *me*.”

“Yeah, well, that was obviously a mistake.”

Greg reached out and put his hand on Daniel’s shoulder. Greg’s face was calm, his tone even as he repeated one of Daniel’s words: “Obviously.”

Daniel walked into his house and the quiet gripped him immediately. While he and Claire hardly ran a noisy domicile, the absolute absence of any sound made it seem like he was walking into a haunted mansion. He prepared himself for the possibility that a ghost might come flying down the hallway at any moment. The bedroom door was still closed tight, and he thought it best to leave Claire alone until she made the decision to come out. From the kitchen window, he saw some movement on the patio and went outside.

“You’re back,” Betty said with perhaps the least excitement in her voice since Daniel told her that Claire was pregnant way back when. She and Earl were eating the dessert that no one else had stuck around to enjoy.

Daniel pulled up a chair, sitting far enough away from his parents so that any venom they had to spew might not be able to reach him. “Claire come out at all?”

Betty shook her head and took another bite, cringing a bit at the mere mention of Claire’s name.

“I’ll give you one thing, Daniel. You have a beautiful garden,” Earl said. “Those lilies are blooming nicely.”

“Claire planted those. Actually, she does most of the work back here. Inside, too, come to think of it. I’m not much for decorating.”

“You’re not much for being a decent husband from the sound of it, either,” Betty said, “not that she’s much of a wife.” She put the last bite of apple brown betty in her mouth, then set her plate on the table, sliding it slowly as if initiating some sort of challenge. Earl lowered his head, indicating that he didn’t want to get too involved in the mess his son had made.

“You don’t know what’s been going on, Mom.”

“Just tell me one thing, Daniel, and then I think I’ll have a pretty good idea of what’s been going on. Is what she said about you true? Have you been having affairs for years?”

Daniel turned his head to the garden, too embarrassed to be having this conversation with his parents, too ashamed to even attempt to lie his way out of it. “It’s true.”

Betty and Earl both shook their heads in disgust. “Why, Daniel? If that’s what you want to do, why stay married?” Betty asked.

“Why are you disappointed, Mom? You don’t like Claire anyway, you never have.”

“Claire and I may have our differences, but I wouldn’t wish this on her. She doesn’t deserve to be treated this way.”

“You must’ve missed the part where she announced that she had sex with Greg.”

“Oh, please, I may be getting on in years, but I can still tell when a man and a woman have slept together, and those two most certainly have not. She made it up. Now, why she invited the man over to begin with is another story.”

“We’re trying an open marriage,” Daniel said. These were the last people that he ever wanted to talk about this with, but they were here and they were exposed to it and, whether they agreed with his decisions or not, they could be counted on for a modicum of support.

“Sounds like you’ve been trying that for a while,” Earl said.

“A few months.”

“So, all these years then, you were just cheating?” It wasn’t in Earl’s nature to speak to Daniel in such blunt terms. Ordinarily, he would couch his advice in a sports metaphor or he would veer off on another topic entirely. His directness caught Daniel off guard. Daniel didn’t have to respond for Earl to have his answer, though. “There are countries where a lot of people would have wound up dead for what you’ve been doing. God bless America.”

“We wanted to stay until you came back, so we could say goodbye,” Betty said.

“You’re leaving? You just got here.”

“Daniel, you’ve got more important matters that need your attention. You don’t need us here getting in the way. I guess this is what we get for not calling first, huh?” She chuckled, then turned serious again. “Give us a call when you’ve got all this sorted out.”

Betty and Earl got up to go inside, Betty taking the dessert plates with her. She turned back to Daniel, who hadn't budged from his seat. "We still love you," she said, and left her son to figure out some way of fixing his problems.

"I wasn't sure I'd ever hear from you again," Shelley said as she shoved her overnight bag into the backseat of Daniel's car. She got in the passenger seat and snapped her seatbelt in, looking excitedly at Daniel. "So, where are we going?"

"Wherever this tank of gas can get us. I just need to get away."

"Trouble at home?"

He stared straight ahead, concentrating on the road. "Yeah. Trouble."

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was after 1:00 A.M. when Claire emerged from her bedroom, her dry throat demanding water. She had cried herself to sleep and came out feeling tired and dehydrated. Too lazy to get a glass out of the cabinet, she tilted her head under the faucet and sucked the water into her mouth, letting out a big “aah” and wiping the excess wetness from her cheek when she was done.

The night hadn't gone quite as she'd planned. Regardless of what she'd said, inviting Greg was her way of making Daniel feel some of the pain he had caused her. The way things got out of hand, though, was not part of her agenda. Betty wasn't supposed to question Greg's sexuality, Daniel's cheating wasn't supposed to come out, food wasn't supposed to be spread on her mother-in-law's face. Simple, silent revenge was all she had in mind, and even revenge was the wrong word to describe it. It was more like a way of raising Daniel's awareness. There were just too many different truths at the dinner table for the evening to have gone smoothly.

Her thirst slaked, she walked to her bedroom, noticing along the way that the door to the spare room, where Betty and Earl had been set up, was open. She peeked in the room and found no luggage, no other indication that she had houseguests. She went to the living room and looked out the window; hers was the only car in the driveway. Instead of being taken care of in an apparent time of need, she had been abandoned, left to her own devices, whatever *they* were.

Crossing the street at this time of night, Claire felt like a raccoon, bathed in the yellow of the streetlight, walking swiftly, hunched over a bit to appear less human.

Greg answered the door in just his boxer shorts, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. “Claire?”

She said nothing, only pushed herself onto his body, kissing him frantically, as if this were the first and the last time she would ever get the chance to do so. Her momentum propelled him backwards and he kicked the door shut with his foot as they continued to kiss. She slid his boxers to the floor, took a step back to admire his body, watched him get harder as she started to disrobe. He kissed her breasts and her stomach and got on his knees. She closed her eyes and felt her whole body shake as he tasted her quickly before standing back up.

She pulled him down to the floor, put him inside her, and took a deep breath. She thought for a second about the potential ramifications of having unprotected sex, but the sexual being in her that had gone ignored for too long overtook her. They moved in total synchronization; the day’s heat had turned to nighttime humidity, and sweat rose from their pores, a natural lubricant for a machine that was already running very smoothly.

Claire held his face and kissed it. For perhaps the first time in her life, she felt like she was having sex for all the right reasons. No parents to rebel against, no religious hypocrisy causing a mutiny, no wifely duties to confuse the issue. She shuddered as Greg finished and slowly made his way to the lower half of her body, producing her first orgasm in what seemed like forever. When it was over, she rested her head on his chest, circling his belly button with her index finger.

“So, what brings you by?” Greg said.

“I was lonely.” She picked her head up and kissed him. “I’m not anymore.”

“Sorry I took off without saying anything earlier. It was uncomfortable, and I just wanted to get the hell out of there.”

“Don’t apologize. I wouldn’t have let you in my room anyway. I needed to be by myself for a little while.”

“I’m glad to see you got over that.”

She smiled. “Me, too.”

A small gas tank lit up on the dashboard, alerting Daniel to the car’s need to be refueled. He looked over at Shelley, who had fallen asleep during the drive and was just starting to wake up. The deal was to stop when the gas gauge got to “E,” no matter where they were. Of course, exceptions would have been made if they’d ended up in a town whose only lodging facility bore too close a resemblance to the Bates Motel, but that wasn’t the case here.

“Where are we?” Shelley asked, adjusting her seat to an upright position.

“Humboldt County.” He pulled the car into a motel parking lot, where only three other cars were parked. The motel was a row of 14 single-story rooms, with the front office located smack in the middle. Daniel noticed that there was no room with the number 13.

“I always wondered who stays in these little rinky-dink motels,” Shelley said.

“Well, you’re about to be one of them,” Daniel said. They got out of the car and went into the front office. There was no one at the desk, so Daniel rang the bell, the sound reverberating obnoxiously through the stillness of the night. A woman opened a door behind the desk; she was wearing flannel pajamas and was moving crookedly, her body trying to recover from being woken out of a deep sleep. Daniel felt her look at him with contempt for having disturbed her slumber, though to be fair it was difficult to determine just what emotion her eyes conveyed as one of them wandered inward toward her nose, giving her the appearance of being perpetually perturbed.

“We’d like a room, please,” Daniel said. He noticed the nameplate on the desk and decided to butter her up by addressing her casually. “Linda.”

“Oh, I thought you was here to sell me Girl Scout cookies. And my name ain’t Linda. She’s dead,” the woman said.

Shelley looked at Daniel with wide eyes, her face telling him that they should get the hell out of here. But Daniel ignored her, seeming to revel in the oddity of the experience. Shelley went to the far side of the office, where the brochures of popular tourist spots in the area were kept in a large rack. It was only an hour’s drive to go whitewater rafting, and hiking trails littered the area. There was also a brochure for Disneyland, which apparently advertised everywhere, even in fleabag motels hundreds of miles from the park.

“Room 14,” Not Linda announced. Her eye made it hard to tell which of them she was talking to. “Out this door and to the left.”

“It’s not really Room 14,” Daniel felt the need to inform her. “I saw that there was no number 13, which would make ours Room 13, regardless of what it says on the door.”

“You can call it the goddamn presidential suite for all I care, it don’t get me back to bed no sooner. Checkout’s at 11.” She handed him the key and went back into her room without another word.

“Charming,” Shelley said.

“Think of it as an adventure.”

As they walked to their room, they heard sex sounds coming from the room two doors down from them. The man seemed to be more into it than the woman, who was much less vocal than he was. There was a sheer quality to the curtains, and they could decipher the outline of the couple in a doggy-style position.

Shelley laughed. “Do you think we sound like that when he have sex?” she whispered as Daniel opened the door.

“We’ll have to check the tape,” Daniel said.

Shelley looked at him with concern. “You had better be kidding.” He shrugged his shoulders and they entered the room. “Daniel, if you—” She stopped talking when Daniel turned on the lights. The room was painted a bright pink, like a flock of flamingoes had been stuck to the wall. The bedspread, a hideous shade of orange that didn’t match anything else in the room, had visible stains on it. It was exactly the kind of place that brought to mind the investigative pieces that *20/20* would run, always around the summer vacation season, where the reporter took a black light inside hotel rooms and

found blood and semen and urine and who knows what else lurking on just about every square inch, with the worst being the bedding that had never been properly laundered. The human body was full of nasty stuff, and somehow it all got left behind when people rented a room for the night. At least one roach—neither of them wanted to know if there were more—scattered for any remaining darkness in the room. There was no telling what mysteries might lay under the surface of the lifeless brown carpet.

“We can’t stay here,” Shelley said. She didn’t even want to set her bag down.

“Shelley, it’s late. We won’t be here very long. You can suck it up for a few hours, can’t you?” He tore the bedspread off, wadded it into a ball, and threw it into the corner of the closet. “That better?”

“Not really, but I appreciate the attempt.” She kissed him, her forward momentum causing him to fall backwards onto the bed. She straddled him, started to raise his shirt, but she was met with resistance. One nice thing about Shelley was her ability to go from zero to horny at the drop of a hat, but tonight it gave Daniel mental whiplash.

“I need to get some sleep,” he said, rolling Shelley off him, taking off his shoes, and sliding up to the pillows. He turned on his side, facing away from Shelley, and was asleep before she could even ask what time to set the alarm.

Two hours passed, and Shelley was still wide awake. She knew it had been a long day for Daniel, though he spent the entire car ride avoiding specifics about what had happened. All he told her was that his parents had arrived and the house was full of

drama. She tried very hard not to feel as if Daniel had just summarily rejected her, but his lack of intimacy so far on the trip had led her to believe that she was acting as nothing more than a body, a source of thermal energy that kept him from feeling like he was all alone in the world. It was not the role she wanted to play in this relationship, if this even qualified as a relationship. She wasn't looking for a fuck buddy and didn't want to be called in when the boss needed a pick-me-up. She had spent the past four years working her ass off, producing a dream of a college transcript, and it was time for her to have some fun now. She wanted to know what it was like to have an actual boyfriend instead of playing courtesan to the dead literary giants of yore. She wanted more than to be sitting up in the wee hours of the morning watching a man sleep while she contemplated wanting more.

“Maybe I should be readmitted. I don't think I was ready to be let loose on the world again. It was too soon.” Claire sat in Dr. Kamura's office having her weekly one-on-one session that had started after she left the hospital. She played with one of the leaves on a medium-sized ficus tree that was positioned next to her chair. There were at least two-dozen potted plants and flowers of various sizes in the room. Dr. Kamura had read a study about how spending a few hours a week in a greenhouse had an incredibly calming effect on people who had a tendency toward anxiety, something about the increased oxygen levels counterbalancing whatever it was in their brain that caused them to be anxious in the first place. While Dr. Kamura couldn't really replicate a greenhouse

in a room that only had one window, Claire still enjoyed having her therapy sessions in a makeshift rainforest, scientific study or no.

“What happened?” Dr. Kamura asked.

“She’s too much for me to handle right now. I’m not ready to be a mother again. I never was ready.”

“Is Daniel not helping out?”

“Oh, he helps when he can, but he’s busy. He can’t always be there. I left her in the supermarket last week. Some stranger brought her out to me, but I was seriously thinking about getting in the car and taking off. It wouldn’t have been so bad, her staying there. She would’ve been well fed anyway, right?”

“Do you really mean to be making jokes about this, Claire?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I *mean* to be doing. I only know what I *am* doing, and that’s not being a whole hell of a lot happier than when I first came here.”

“The goal is not happiness but the ability to cope with what life throws at you. You’ve made progress, Claire. We’ve talked about the progress you’ve made before. You acknowledged it and told me that you were going to continue to make things better for yourself. Do you remember that?”

“It was so much easier to say those things when I was still locked up here. It’s scary out there. There’s responsibility and hard work and people who have no idea where I’m coming from and I’m just trying to fit into a place I’m not sure I ever should have been to begin with.” Claire was out of breath and inhaled deeply.

“Sounds to me like you’re putting an awful lot of pressure on yourself. You don’t have to impress anybody, you just have to make it through the day. I think it was really brave of you to go to that store and try to do what you needed to do. Maybe it didn’t end up looking the way you had hoped it would, but you went. This is a process, Claire, and it may take a while longer before you start to feel like a normal person again. You have to get back into the rhythms of everyday life and that can be a daunting proposition. Go easier on yourself, okay?”

“But what about Ellie? I keep dragging her into my twisted world. I’m scared for her. She deserves better care than I can provide.”

“Everything that’s happening to you is making you a better mother. Would you ever leave Ellie in a supermarket again or would you stop and think before doing something like that next time?”

“Sometimes it doesn’t seem as easy as just stopping and thinking about what I’m doing. Sometimes it feels like I don’t have any control over my own faculties, like I’m possessed or something.”

“And you’re the only one who can combat those demons. You have to be stronger than your own impulses. No one said it was going to be easy. My magic wand is in the shop, so I can’t just wave your problems away. I wish I could. I wish I could make you stop hurting, but I’m just a conduit. The real work has to come from you.”

“Can’t I do the work in here, where it’s safe?”

“It *is* safe out there, Claire. It may not seem like it right now because you’re so close to it. Here’s what I want you to do—take a step back and observe. When you feel

yourself start to get nervous, just step back, take a breath, watch what's happening, and then figure out how to deal with it. See if that makes you feel any better."

"If it doesn't, then can I come back?"

The sun found its way through the slats in the blinds and shone on Claire's nose, splitting her face into two perfectly symmetrical halves. Awakened by the light, she tried to stretch and realized that her arm was trapped under Greg's body. She moved her arm slowly, inching it out so as not to disturb him.

"I'm awake," he said with a smile, keeping his eyes closed.

"You looked like you were still sleeping," she said.

"I was meditating. Harder to do when you've got somebody's arm wrenched under you." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I can't believe we slept on the floor all night."

"To your credit, you have very comfortable carpet."

"So do you," he said.

"So cheesy," Claire said, and gave him a playful shove.

They stood up and gathered their clothes. Both took another glance at the other's naked body before getting dressed. In the three months that they had been "dating," this was the first time that they were nude in front of each other in the light. They had had make-out sessions where they were partially clothed, but it was always in a dark or candle-lit room.

"I can make breakfast," Claire offered.

“That would be great. I’m gonna go to the studio. I’m feeling inexplicably inspired this morning.”

They kissed and went their separate ways within the house. Claire may not have had the best culinary skills, but the one thing she could do in the kitchen was make a good omelet. She whisked the eggs while trying to figure out just how she felt about what had happened the night before. She hadn’t intended to sleep with Greg—ever, really. As far as she was concerned, her part of the open marriage agreement was about having fun in the company of another man (or men) if the opportunity presented itself. Yes, she was sexually attracted to Greg—few women wouldn’t be—but actually taking the step to have sex with him was not at the forefront of her thinking. She liked fooling around with him, a little under-the-shirt, over-the-bra action, and that was as far as she thought it would go. Sex outside of marriage, even when given approval, was something that Daniel did, not her.

So why did this experience make her feel so much more alive? Was she actually falling for this guy? For that matter, was she even capable of falling for someone? Unfortunately for Claire, the answers weren’t going to be found at the bottom of the frying pan into which she poured the eggs. She let the eggs firm for a minute before adding the rest of the ingredients: ham, cheese, bell pepper, onion, and avocado. Good thing Greg kept such a well-stocked fridge, despite his claims that he rarely cooked for himself. She repeated the exercise to make a second omelet while the coffee machine percolated on the countertop.

Balancing the plates on her forearms while carrying the coffee pot in one hand and the empty mugs in the other, Claire went into the studio and found Greg hard at work on his painting of the homeless man. Although it looked finished to her days ago, Greg continued to tinker with it, adding portions of light here and there, adjusting some of the colors to make the thought balloons pop more. She was amazed at how much better these subtle changes made the painting look, and thought it was interesting that Greg did not stop working on the painting simply because it appeared to be a finished product to the untrained eye. He put down his paintbrush and rushed to Claire's aid, taking the plates from her and setting them on separate stools. After Claire poured the coffee, they sat down on the floor—they seemed to like doing things on the floor—and ate.

“Best omelet ever,” Greg said, not even swallowing his bite before he complimented Claire on her efforts.

She looked at him without responding, her cheeks flush from the kudos. She wondered where Greg had been twenty years earlier, why she couldn't have met him as a teenager and gone through life with him instead of Daniel. There was a combination of regret and longing on her face.

“Don't do it,” he said.

“What?”

“I recognize that look. Don't fall in love with me.”

“What are you...? I'm not falling in love with you.” She set her coffee cup down and stared into it, wished she could crawl inside and drown in the caffeinated abyss, forever free from emotion.

“I’m not as good for you as you think I am. I don’t want to be responsible for ruining another marriage, no matter how bad that marriage might be.”

“But you said that you’d never broken up a marriage.”

“I said I could never intentionally do that. That doesn’t mean it’s never happened.”

“So that talk about only fantasizing, never acting, that was a lie?”

“I told you husbands don’t like me. Wives don’t either. Well, mine didn’t anyway.

“You had wives? Plural?”

“Married three times, divorced three times, though the last one feels like it should count for two.”

Claire was not amused. Whatever afterglow was leftover from the night before was fading quickly. “Why get married if all you want to do is fool around? And why bring down other people’s marriages, too?”

“Same reason you stay in your marriage. Unfinished business. I needed to get to a place where I understood what I was doing and why I was doing it.”

“I can’t wait to hear the answer.”

“And I can’t wait to give you one. Unfortunately, I haven’t come to it yet. Which would explain why I’m lying on the carpet with you.”

“Are you? Lying, I mean.”

“No, I meant lying in the physical sense, not—”

“I know what you meant. But are you lying to me right now? Can I trust you?”

“I’m being as honest as I can be. Whether you should trust me or not, well, that’s not for me to decide.”

“How many marriages did you break up, not including your own?”

“That’s not important. What’s important is—”

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t want to know. How many?” She had only eaten half her omelet and felt like that half might be making its way back up soon.

“I don’t know, six, seven maybe. I really don’t know.”

“I thought you were better than that. I thought you were different.”

“I’m not going to defend myself here. I haven’t done anything to you personally. This stuff is all in the past. And let’s not forget that it was you who came over to pursue me, not the other way around.”

“But you were the one who made me feel. I was dead, Greg. Convinced that I was never going to care for another human being for the rest of my life. You changed that. Don’t you get it?”

“I do. That’s why I’m telling you not to fall in love with me. It wouldn’t be good for either of us.”

“Why sleep with me then? Is that your way of making women hate you even more when you send them packing?”

“Think about it, Claire. Look how long I waited to sleep with you. If you were just some cheap lay, don’t you think I would have tried to get you in bed months ago? I care for you. That’s the problem.”

“Why is that a problem? I don’t understand.”

“Because you’re married.”

“But I don’t have to be.”

“Yes, you do,” he boomed, rising from the floor. “You do,” he repeated, more quietly. “Seventeen years, Claire. Are you going to tell me that leaving Daniel is as easy as meeting me? Shit, you could have met somebody else a long time ago and gotten the hell out of there, but you didn’t. Don’t tell me that a lousy marriage certificate is the only thing that’s kept the two of you together all this time. You may not be the picture perfect happy couple, but there’s obviously still something between you. And do you really think it’s a coincidence that you found me? The only thing that separates me from Daniel is the ring on his finger.”

She looked down, tried to fight the urge to cry. Her efforts were futile. There was simply too much emotion coursing through her to make any attempt at squelching the tears feasible. “Since I’ve known you, you’ve been saying things to me that make it seem as if you’re in my head, things that I’m not even sure I know about myself. Do you know what that does to me, how uncomfortable that makes me?”

“That’s not my intent.”

“You’ve known me for months and you already know me better than I do. How could a person not want to fall in love with that?”

Greg took a final sip of his coffee and went to stand in front of his painting. “You really have inspired me, you know.”

Claire had the urge to take the painting off the easel and break it over her knee. She wanted to destroy whatever pieces of art had been “inspired” by her. She wanted his

chest to feel as cavernous as hers felt right now. But she couldn't will any of those things to be. Greg wasn't even being mean to her, just honest. After spending so many dishonest years with Daniel, she couldn't find fault with a man who was finally brave enough to tell her the truth. "I should go," she said.

Greg followed her to the door, spinning her around and kissing her as passionately as the first time. His lips seemed to promise that this wouldn't be their last kiss. They both knew that probably wasn't the case.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Claire walked away without looking back. She collapsed immediately upon entering the house, her own floor welcoming her back without judgment. The coldness of the hardwood sent shivers through her. It took just a minute, though, for her body heat to create a warm circle around her, a temporary force field through which no good or bad could pass. It was a spot where she could just allow herself to *be*. In this moment, there was no Daniel, no Greg, no horrible marriage, no adultery. There was only Claire and her thoughts, thoughts that at one time in her life she was scared of, but that were now her sole companion. Whatever transpired over the coming days, weeks, and months would inevitably come attached with hardship and pain; she had been around long enough to know that much was true.

For now, though, she was alone, and that was okay.

"I did something today," Claire announced when Daniel came home from his evening class. He was surprised to see her awake. Ordinarily he would find her tucked

into a fetal position, her back turned away from him as he stripped off his clothes and got ready for bed. Most nights he suspected that she wasn't actually asleep, just playing possum to avoid a conversation—or a confrontation, depending on the day. Tonight, though, she was as spry and alert as he'd seen her since coming home from the institution. It made him anxious.

“What's that?” he said.

“I went to Jefferson City College and filled out an application. Classes start in a few weeks,” she said, looking proud. She and Daniel had discussed the possibility of her returning to school. Her dream of attending UCLA had been crushed when she got pregnant and chose to follow Daniel to Berkeley instead.

“A junior college? You're smarter than that.”

“I don't feel strong enough to apply to universities yet. The thought of being rejected does me in. At least this way I can dip my toe in and see if it's something I'm even capable of doing.”

Daniel had his doubts. There were few things that Claire seemed capable of doing these days. Even with the incident at the grocery store serving as something of a wake-up call, there were still days where it took a lot of effort to get herself dressed, said effort trickling down to Ellie, who would often still be in her pajamas when Daniel got home from work. Sometimes Daniel worried that Ellie wasn't even getting her basic needs met, but between his meager pay and the student loans he took out to supplement his income, they couldn't afford to bring in extra help.

“You know the statistics on people who go to community colleges, right? Only fifteen percent graduate,” Daniel said.

“Thanks for the support.”

“All I’m saying is you keep putting yourself in negative categories: teen mom, college dropout—”

“I haven’t even started yet. Why don’t you give me a chance before you automatically declare me a failure?”

“I just think going to a junior college is a waste. If you’re not gonna go to a real school, I’d rather see you just get a job and contribute to the family.”

“Oh, now I don’t contribute?”

“I don’t know, Claire. I don’t know what the fuck you do all day. Maybe when Ellie gets a little older she can tell me.”

“Yeah, and maybe she’ll have something to say about her absentee father, too.”

“I’m trying to provide for us. Hopefully Ellie will appreciate that more than you do.”

Almost as if she heard her name, Ellie started to wail from her bedroom. Without saying another word, Claire rolled over on her side and pulled the covers up around her head. Daniel decided the argument wasn’t worth continuing. If Claire wanted to spend her nights flitting around a campus that was essentially nothing more than an extension of high school, so be it. In all likelihood, it would be a short-lived enterprise, and as long as it didn’t interfere with attaining his own goals, he couldn’t care less.

He picked Ellie up and sat against the wall, snuggling with her in the dark. She calmed down, reached up and started pulling at his face. “Nose,” she said. He lifted his head up a bit to keep her from sticking a finger in one of his nostrils.

“Your mother’s crazy, you know that?” Daniel said.

“Yeah,” Ellie said. She had only recently started answering any question posed to her this way. “Eyes,” she said, and Daniel had to pull his head back again to keep from getting poked.

“She’s not really crazy. Troubled maybe? I don’t know how I’d describe her. You know your daddy loves you?”

“Yeah.”

“And that no matter what happens between me and Mommy—”

“Oars.” It was the mispronunciation he loved the most, said at a time when she seemed to be intentionally cutting him off. She reached up and tugged on his right ear.

“Oars,” he repeated. He kissed her cheek and placed her back in her crib. She raised her arms above her head, a clear signal that she was ready to go back to sleep. Daniel was ready for sleep, too.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Shelley's foot slipped on a rock and Daniel, walking behind her, grabbed her arm and helped steady her.

"You all right?"

"I'm good," she said, and continued walking. After checking out of the motel, they decided to go for a hike along a local trail before leaving the area. The trail was lined with trees, with roots stretching from one side to the other and a canopy of intertwining branches shielding the hikers from the harsh direct sunlight. Neither of them had brought the proper shoes to hike in; Daniel had on Hush Puppies, Shelley a pair of sandals. They moved carefully and kept within an arm's length of each other, just in case.

"I'm sorry about last night. I was exhausted. Do you hate me?" Daniel asked.

"Of course not. But you could work a little harder on sweeping a girl off her feet."

"I thought that's why you tripped before."

Shelley looked back at Daniel, scrunched her face, and shook her head. They had been walking for only fifteen minutes and both of them were breathing hard. From what Shelley has seen, sex was the only kind of workout Daniel got on a regular basis, and she herself had a high metabolism that kept her figure trim and pert without the need to spend hours each week in a sweaty, stinky gym. The trail was steadily inclining, the steepness

making it harder for them to carry on a conversation without huffing and puffing between words.

“Are you...ever going to tell me...what happened?” Shelley said.

“You’re better off...not knowing.”

Shelley stopped abruptly and made an about-face, causing Daniel to take a quick step to the right to avoid smacking into her.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m not...an idiot.” Shelley bent over, her hands on her knees as she tried to catch her breath.

Daniel wiped sweat from his brow and found a large rock on the side of the trail to sit on. He took a swig of water and said, “Okay.”

“No, not okay.” She stood over him, making him crane his neck up to look her in the eyes. Her jugular vein was pulsating. “You drive me out to the woods...in the middle of the night...put me up in a rat-trap motel...and refuse to tell me why.” She took his water bottle and gulped the rest of it down.

“What, you think I brought you out here to kill you? To get rid of my mistress?”

“I can’t say it hasn’t crossed my mind. This hasn’t exactly been a fun trip. Wouldn’t dying be the perfect way to cap it off?”

Daniel crunched rocks and twigs into the dirt with his feet. Shelley wasn’t sure what she wanted to hear from him. Maybe he owed her an apology for dragging her here. Or for letting things go as far as they had. Or for breaching the teacher-student relationship. Or for ever having met her in the first place.

“I screwed up,” he mumbled.

“What?”

He stood up, his face only an inch away from hers. “I screwed up,” he said, loud and clear this time. “That’s as much as I’m willing to say right now. If that isn’t good enough, well...tough.”

There was no reason why that should have been enough for Shelley, but it was. Perhaps it was the sudden increase of oxygen flowing to her brain, or it could have been that she was so damn desperate not to hear Daniel tell her it was over. Whatever it was, she took his admission of liability at face value and left it at that.

“We should head back,” Daniel said, “before it gets too hot.”

“Yeah.” As Daniel started, Shelley uncovered one of the rocks that Daniel had buried in the dirt. She picked it up and slipped it in her pocket, hopeful that some of Daniel’s secrets might shake out over time.

It was in his first year as a professor that Daniel had the biggest scare of his life. Her name was Erin Coleridge, and if you attempted to find her listed in Daniel’s big book of conquests, you would be hard-pressed to do so. She’s there, but her name was stricken with a Sharpie, and her history with Daniel, in writing anyway, was now nothing more than a black blob.

Daniel’s schedule consisted of three freshman composition classes, all remedial. He was responsible for teaching the jocks and cheerleaders how to write a clear and cohesive sentence, how to introduce a topic in an essay, and how to avoid using the

passive voice, among other basic grammatical skills that they should have learned in middle school and had reinforced in four years of high school. Now here they were in college, still unable to properly use the language most of them had been speaking since infancy. It was enough to make Daniel lament his berth in the American educational system.

He saw promise in Erin Coleridge, a student who may not have had the strongest vocabulary of the bunch, but who clearly made an effort to turn in the best work she was capable of producing. Unlike so many of her classmates, Erin showed drive and a willingness to learn. She had asked Daniel if he could tutor her during his office hours once a week. She even offered to pay him what paltry amount she could afford. He turned her down and told her to go to the school's writing center, where she would get more hands-on help than Daniel would be able to provide. When he noticed that her work wasn't getting much better—in fact, it may actually have been a little worse—Daniel changed his mind and agreed to see Erin for an hour once a week, no money required.

At first, he did what he had intended to do: help a student in need get the most for her tuition. Slowly, the topic started to turn toward more personal matters, with Erin asking about Daniel's home life and Daniel finding out that Erin had lost her virginity when she was thirteen. It was information that neither of them needed to know about the other, but the more comfortable they were as a team, the more improvement Daniel saw in Erin's work. Not wanting to dissuade her, Daniel allowed their relationship to continue, sharing details about himself and listening to Erin's problems.

She was the one who made the first move, stroking Daniel's cheek one afternoon as he leaned over to look at her paper. Being Daniel, he didn't back away, didn't offer up a reprimand or tell her that he couldn't keep tutoring her under these circumstances. Being Daniel, he leaned down further and kissed her on the lips.

Until Shelley, Erin was the only one of Daniel's students with whom he'd had more than a one-off fling. Their tutoring sessions routinely turned into lovemaking sessions, and Daniel's list ceased to grow for the duration of the semester. He had enough regard for Erin not to sleep with other women while she was in his class, but he would soon come to regret having begun the affair at all.

"Thank you for bringing me here," Erin said as she and Daniel waited for the doctor to come into the room.

Daniel had no response. He walked around the perimeter of the room, reading the posters about proper condom use and how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases. He wished that they were only here to get treated for chlamydia. The reality was much more dire than that.

Erin tried to comfort him, explaining that she had been through this twice before. "You don't lose it as young as I did without having a few abortions to look forward to in your life," she said, letting out a laugh that Daniel felt was too genuine given the situation.

Escorting one of his students to a Planned Parenthood clinic wasn't part of Daniel's grand plan. It had been six years since Ellie's death and anything having to do with children made him wince. Seeing perfect, happy families driving around in

minivans stirred in Daniel feelings of deep loss. Now here he was about to fork over \$400 to end the life of another one of his children. As with Claire, he had only had unprotected sex with Erin once. They pound it into kids' heads in high school: it only takes one time. Daniel apparently hadn't been paying attention.

The doctor walked in and took a seat on a swiveling stool. Daniel guessed she was in her mid-30s, but the heavy bags under her eyes made her look ten years older. He wondered how many abortions a person had to administer before she started to look as tired as this woman did.

“Two previous abortions?” the doctor asked as she leafed through Erin's chart.

“The first time they sucked it out of me with a vacuum. Last time, they just gave me some pills.”

The doctor looked surprised by Erin's cavalier attitude, as if she wore her multiple unwanted pregnancies as badges of honor. “Well, you're only six weeks in, so the pills should be effective this time, too. You might remember the procedure from before, but I'm going to go over it again anyway. If you have any questions, please feel free to stop me.” Erin and Daniel nodded obligingly. “I'm going to give you a 600mg dose of a drug called mifepristone, more commonly known as RU-486. What that's going to do is keep your body from producing progesterone, which will then cause the uterine lining to break down. In 24 hours, you're going to take another kind of medication called misoprostol. This is the drug that's going to cause the actual abortion. It's going to induce contractions and expel the fetus. You're going to start bleeding heavily, and you might even see some blood clots and tissue. Don't worry, though, this is perfectly normal. In a

week, I'll see you back here to make sure that everything worked the way it was supposed to. Any questions?"

"How long does the whole thing take to happen?" Daniel asked.

"It could be as soon as a few hours after Erin takes the misoprostol or it could take up to a week. There's no way of knowing for sure. Do you remember how long it took the last time?"

Erin shook her head, let out an impatient huff. "Can I get the pills then?"

Daniel was amazed by her behavior. He couldn't imagine that the same girl who had worked so hard to get her grammar correct on an essay could be so casual when it came to matters of far greater import. He was in no position to raise an illegitimate child, nor did he think it would be fair to even ask Erin to consider carrying the baby to term. Daniel was about as liberal-minded as a person could get, but being on the inside, experiencing the process for himself, challenged his long-held beliefs. Pro-choice or pro-life didn't matter when it came time to actually make the decision. They were just political buzzwords that ultimately had no human consequence. The stark reality of the situation was that this was a grave Daniel had helped dig, one that would soon house the remains of his unborn child.

The doctor continued. "It seems that your mind is set, but I have to ask: Are you sure about your decision to end this pregnancy?"

Erin and Daniel shared a look. For a second, Daniel actually thought she was going to change her mind. Instead, she gave him a nod, assurance that she was doing the right thing. Turning back to the doctor, she said, "I'm sure."

“All right. I’ll have a nurse bring you the pills. She’ll also give you instructions for the next dose and an emergency phone number in case you have any problems. Do you have any more questions?” Her gaze was directed more toward Daniel than Erin, who seemed more interested in just taking the pills and leaving.

Of course he had questions. He wanted to know how many abortions the doctor performed each day, if she ever had trouble sleeping at night, if protestors had ever threatened to kill her, and how lucrative her profession was. Instead of asking, he simply said “No,” and watched Erin pop a mint in her mouth.

Claire heard the phone ringing when she turned off her hair dryer.

“Claire, it’s Mark Reynolds from the university. Is Daniel available?” Reynolds was Cormier’s dean, an affable fellow with whom Claire had socialized at fundraisers and banquets. In all the years Daniel had taught at Cormier, she couldn’t recall a time when Reynolds had called him at home.

“He isn’t here right now and I have to be honest, I’m not sure when he’ll be back. Can I take a message?”

“Yes, tell him that I’d like to have a meeting with him as soon as possible. He can call my secretary and set up an appointment.”

“Can I tell him what it’s regarding?” This was Claire being nosy, rather than trying to get information to pass on to Daniel.

“It’s about a book he wrote. I just want to get some clarification on a couple things.”

Claire didn't know that Daniel had been working on a book. She wasn't exactly surprised that he would keep her in the dark, though she was a bit hurt that he wouldn't mention what was ostensibly a grand ambition. "I'll pass along the message when I see him," she said, and hung up the phone.

Claire worried that Daniel's book might be some type of memoir, that her dirty little secrets would be exposed for the whole world to see. It would be just like Daniel to do that to her, and to do it behind her back, keeping her from having any say in the matter until the damn thing was published and it was too late. She had experienced delusions of grandeur in the past, when she got out of the hospital and thought that everyone around her knew what she had done and where she had gone. Now, with a little help from her adoring husband, they really would know.

Claire went back to blow-drying her hair, hoping that a gush of air might somehow find its way into her ear canal, penetrate her brain, and erase any memory of who she used to be.

"You had dreams once I imagine," Dr. Kamura said.

"Like every other girl: perfect husband, perfect child, perfect house, perfect life," Claire said. It was her first therapy session in two weeks; Dr. Kamura had had to cancel their last session. Claire was feeling particularly anxious as a result.

"That's a lot to live up to."

"And I have failed on every front."

“Maybe you just need to reframe your thinking. Instead of looking at these things as failures, what if you saw them as experiences that are leading you toward some ultimate goal?”

“That goal being?”

“Something other than perfection, I know that much. What about your professional life? You’ve never talked much about that.”

“Probably because I never had one. I waitressed for a while, but that’s about it.”

“What did you want to be when you grew up?”

“Believe it or not, I wanted to be you,” Claire said.

“A therapist?”

“That would be like the fucked-up leading the fucked-up, right?”

“We shrinks have a lot of problems of our own. Being certifiable is part of the job description. Most of us even have our own therapists. Have you ever thought about going back to school?”

“Yeah, I applied at a community college last week.”

Dr. Kamura’s head jerked back in surprise. “Talk about burying the lead. That’s great.”

“I’m not gonna go, though.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think I have the energy. Ellie takes a lot out of me.”

“What did Daniel say about it?”

“Oh, you know...” Claire hedged.

“I don’t. Was he supportive?”

“Not exactly. In all honesty, it was a bad idea. Maybe I can try going to school once Daniel is established in his career and Ellie is a little older. Right now, it doesn’t make sense.”

“Is that Daniel talking or is that how you really feel?”

“I’m not sure there’s a difference.”

Daniel pulled into the driveway and sat in his car, steeling himself for the prospect of a fight with Claire when he walked inside. After a less-than-stellar night and day spent with Shelley, he was in no mood to be confronted by the woman who thought it would be appropriate to smear dinner down his mother’s face. For all he knew, she might still be cooped up in the bedroom, coming out only to grab a snack. He looked around the neighborhood and saw a gardener mowing a neighbors’ lawn, the mailman making his daily deliveries, a carpooling soccer mom dropping off a pair of twins. It all seemed so idyllic and so twisted at the same time. He found it strange that people just went about living their own lives when there was so much going wrong in the lives of others. Nobody could actually care whether the leaves in their front yard were raked up when their fellow man was suffering just down the block. Or maybe they could. Pundits might postulate about our interconnectedness, but when it came down to it, this was a “me, myself, and I” society, and no amount of proselytizing about helping your neighbor was going to change that. Daniel didn’t need to look any further than Greg’s house to see the truth in that statement.

Daniel walked inside a house that had a different kind of energy than he had anticipated. Claire had lit candles in the living room and kitchen, giving the air the sweet aroma of lavender and eucalyptus. Any trace that his parents had visited was gone, the house as tidy as a model home about to be displayed to prospective buyers. He went down the hallway and found his bedroom door wide open, the curtains drawn so as to allow the sunlight to take a nap on the crisply made bed. Claire had been busy, that was for sure. From the bedroom window, he could see her working in the garden, her iPod strapped to her arm, the wire from the earbuds forming a Y at the top of her cleavage. He hadn't watched her work for a while, and had forgotten how much she loved it out there, her fingers picking apart the soil to find the perfect place to make a plant thrive. With enough care, one of Claire's plants could live forever, a mark of posterity that could outlast generation after generation of humans. Plants were like the physical embodiment of love—they could endure over time without aging. And, as with love, there might be difficulties sometimes, moments when it appears the leaves might fall off or the roots refuse to drink, but with enough attention, they can bounce back and become whole again, possibly even stronger than before.

Claire was startled when Daniel tapped her on the shoulder. She screamed and sent a fistful of dirt flying in the air, some of it landing in her open mouth. Repeated spitting did nothing to rid her of the feeling of grit between her teeth. "Why did you sneak up on me?" she said, pulling out her earbuds.

"I didn't mean to. I thought you would have heard me coming."

“Well, I didn’t.” She spit again and stood up, holding onto Daniel for support after kneeling for so long. It was hard for her to remember the last time she had relied on Daniel for help, and she was surprised by how natural it felt.

“The house looks good,” he said.

Claire brushed the soil from her pants. “Thanks. Where’d you go?”

Daniel thought it was an unusual question from a woman who hadn’t been overly curious about his whereabouts in some time. “A long drive,” he said.

“Oh. You look tired.”

“Yeah.” Uncertainty hovered in the air as Daniel stared at his wife. He had a sudden desire to kiss her. He didn’t follow through with it, though, and wondered if Claire would even allow him to make such a move. The tension broke, and they both took a half-step away from each other, like erasing a line in a game of connect-the-dots.

“The dean called you,” Claire said.

“Reynolds? What did he want?”

“To talk to you about a book you wrote. Please tell me that you didn’t write about us, Daniel. I don’t think I could handle everyone knowing my business.”

“I didn’t write a book. I don’t know what he’s talking—” A look of concern came over Daniel’s face. “Did he say anything else?”

“No, just that he wanted to set up a meeting with you right away. Do you know what this is about?”

“I think I do. I’ll tell you everything. But not today. Not right now.” He couldn’t recall the last time he had promised to let Claire into his life completely. It felt right.

“Okay,” she said, and kneeled again on her gardening pad.

Daniel watched as she removed a weed from the soil and threw it in the trash can next to her.

Daniel didn’t even bother to call the dean’s office. He drove straight to the campus and took the elevator to the top floor of the administration building, where Dean Reynolds sat staring at his computer in his corner office. Daniel blew by Reynolds’s secretary, who could not react fast enough to his sudden presence to warn Reynolds that Daniel was there. Daniel entered Reynolds’s office and closed the door behind him. He stood in the middle of the room, his palms sweaty, too agitated to take a seat.

Reynolds looked up from his computer and turned his chair to face Daniel. “Claire gave you the message. Good.” Reynolds was in his early 50s and had already lost most of his hair, the gray remnants forming a U shape from one temple to the other. Under ordinary circumstances, he was an easy man to get along with, genial and pretty laid-back considering his position at the university. These weren’t going to be ordinary circumstances. Reynolds reached into his desk drawer, took out Daniel’s logbook, and threw it to the edge of his desk. “Do you recognize that?” His tone was harsh, accusatory. It gave Daniel the impression that he was guilty until proven innocent.

Daniel wanted to reach for the book, to get it back in his own possession. If he just tucked it back onto his shelf it would be forgotten and everything could go back to the way it was. He knew that wasn't going to happen. "Where did you get that?"

"A member of the cleaning staff brought it to me yesterday. She knocked it off your desk by mistake and noticed its contents when she picked it up. I'm hoping it's a work of fiction."

"Sir, I can—"

"I'm not looking for an explanation, Daniel. Quite frankly, if it were up to me you'd be out of a job right now. Fortunately for you, you're tenured, which means I don't have the authority to just fire you. I've convened a disciplinary panel for Friday at two. You can bring counsel if you'd like, though I suspect the panel would prefer to hear from you directly. I'm just glad this came to light in the middle of the summer when no one's paying attention to what's happening on a college campus. Six weeks from now, when the students return for the fall, a scandal like this would be disastrous. It still could be. We'll have to wait and see. Now, get out."

Daniel nodded and walked out of the office, shame dragging down his facial muscles. This would be the end of him, he knew it. Everything he had worked so hard to attain, the goals he had striven to achieve would all go up in a short burst of smoke. It was true, he had brought this on himself; a part of him even dared someone to catch him. But he never dreamed that it would actually happen. For years now, his book sat on that shelf in his office with no one but him wise to its contents. Daniel thought of it as one of his constants: the world went around, the seasons changed, the book stayed a secret.

What does a person do when one of their constants is suddenly no longer reliable? No amount of education could provide an answer. At least not until Friday.

“I need you to say it never happened,” Daniel told Shelley. For the second time in as many days, he had gone to her in a time of need. And for the second time in as many days, he had completely disregarded her feelings. Here he was asking her to defend him against the school’s disciplinary board, to say that her name wasn’t in that book for the reason they thought it was. That there was even such a book in existence nauseated Shelley, to the point that she had to turn away from Daniel lest the sight of his face make her vomit.

“I know what you must think of me,” Daniel said to her back. “When I put you in that book, I had no intention of—”

“Please don’t finish that sentence, Daniel. To this day, I have no idea what your intentions toward me even are, so please don’t tell me what they *weren’t*.”

“I need you, Shelley. I can tell you that much.” He reached out to touch her and she lurched forward, her shoulder sinking inward. “I need you,” he said again.

Shelley faced him, her lips forming the slightest smile as she allowed herself to buy into Daniel’s seemingly heartfelt request for help. He was finally asking her to be something more than just the former student with whom he was having an affair. This could be her way into his heart, the moment where he realized that she had fantasized about their future together. She loved that their story sounded like something out of a movie: boy manipulates girl, girl hates boy but sleeps with him anyway, boy leaves

unhappy marriage to be with girl. All she had to do was lie for him and it would all be over, he would be hers, and she could get the happily-ever-after she thought she might never achieve.

“I need you, too,” she said.

Like so many times before in his life, Daniel was at a loss as to how to fix this situation. At this point, he wasn't even sure if it was something he wanted fixed. Perhaps the time had come for him to face up to his past, whether that meant he might lose his job, his wife, anyone who cared for him. This is what he got for not considering these things at the outset. The hole he had dug for himself was narrow and long, and all he could see was the reflection off the shovel as someone stood above ground dropping dirt on top of him faster than he could displace it.

Daniel had not expected Shelley to give him an affirmative response so quickly. He also didn't expect her to repeat his words back to him. Hearing her say that she needed him sent Daniel's head to spinning. He hoped she didn't think that he was committing to something beyond his current crisis. Regardless, he had her where he wanted her. Anything else could be dealt with later. For now, Shelley was his best bet at convincing the disciplinary panel that his student-teacher relationships were chaste and that the book was nothing more than the idle imaginings of a damaged, lonely husband who spent too many days trapped in his office.

* * *

Claire wanted to march across the street and explain to Greg that he was going about this all wrong, that they didn't have to make declarations of love to have a good time with each other. She already missed his company, and thought that if she could show him that she was capable of having a casual relationship he might be willing to take her back. She thought this, but she wasn't quite sure that she could carry it out effectively, which made her as surprised as anyone to be letting herself into Greg's studio without knocking.

Music blared through the speakers that were strategically placed in each of the room's four ceiling corners. It was Paul Dukas's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," a piece that always made her think of *Fantasia*. Claire thought Greg could use an army of brooms right about now since the studio was an absolute mess. His paintings had all been taken off the wall, the sculptures were cloaked in bubble wrap, and there was a pathway of boxes leading her back to Greg's workspace. She found him turning clay on his potter's wheel. He was oblivious to her presence until she snuck up behind him and whispered "boo" in his ear. He jumped off his stool, sending his creation flying off the wheel and landing splat on the floor. Whatever he was making, he would have to start over from scratch.

"Jesus, Claire. You scared the shit out of me." He used his right hand to scrape the excess clay from his left, doing the same in reverse, and placed the final clump of material on the wheel before grabbing a towel to finish cleaning himself up. He left the piece he had been working on exactly where it had fallen. "Why did you do that?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

“Well, mission accomplished.”

“What’s with all the boxes? Did you make a big sale or something?”

“It’s nothing. What are you doing here?” He spoke to her directly and abruptly.

Claire might even have described it as cold and distant.

“I miss you,” she said.

“Claire, we can’t—”

“Hear me out, okay? I don’t want anything serious. I can keep my feelings in check if you’d be willing to give me another chance. There are a lot of hours to fill in a day and a girl can only spend so many of them in her garden. We can be friends, nothing more. Two mature adults should be capable of handling that, right? I mean, it would be pretty sad if we couldn’t at least do that.”

Greg sighed and said, “Wait here.” He went into the house and came back a few seconds later with a piece of paper. He handed it to Claire.

She noted the quality and weight of the linen paper and knew that the contents of the letter must be important. She read the letterhead—New York Art Society—and then proceeded to the body of the letter.

Dear Mr. Nobeloch,

After carefully considering more than 2,500 applications, we are pleased to offer you one of this year’s New York Art Society Fellowships. As you already know, this fellowship is among the most prestigious in the country, allowing artists the opportunity to hone their craft, receive feedback from seasoned professionals, and display work in

public galleries. The portfolio you sent with your application showed remarkable ability and—

Claire stopped reading but continued to stare at the document. It was dated May 16, less than a week after she had first introduced herself to Greg. “You’ve known about this the whole time? Why...?”

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you, I swear. I wanted to pack my things and get out of here before you even noticed I was gone.”

She could feel the sweat pooling up on her hands and could see the paper begin to wrinkle under her fingers. Not wanting to damage the letter, she set it down gently on the stool and backed away from it as if it was covered in anthrax. “This is why you ended things the way you did.”

“Yes.”

“To protect me from the truth.”

“I didn’t know how to tell you I was leaving.”

“The first time we met, when you walked me through this studio and told me how passionate you are about what you do, you could have mentioned it then. Just a casual, ‘By the way, I’m moving to New York in three months.’ Would that have been so hard?”

“In hindsight, probably not. But that isn’t what happened. And then we got deeper and deeper. I didn’t know what to do about it.”

There was a question that Claire felt she had to ask. She did not know if she truly wanted the answer, but she would regret it forever if she stayed quiet. “Do you love me then?”

He held her gaze for a second before answering. “I don’t know. I think so.”

Claire’s heart fell to her feet. She imagined that it didn’t look any better than the ruined clay sculpture that still lay on the studio floor. If only he had stopped at “I don’t know.” That she could maybe handle. The possibility that he didn’t love her would make this whole situation that much easier to digest. She could try to convince herself that the scales tipped more on the side of his not loving her and find some small amount of solace in that. After all, you can’t argue with unrequited feelings; they’re either there or they aren’t. But he added “I think so,” causing the scales to tip in the other direction, a prospect that was too much for her to bear.

“Congratulations,” she said, sniffing to keep back the tears. “I’m happy for you, I really am.”

“Claire, you have to know that nothing was ever going to come of this...whatever you call what we were doing. It was fun and it was crazy and it was destined to be short-term, whether I was going to New York or not.”

“The difference is that you knew that from the beginning. You didn’t think to let me in on your little scheme.”

“It wasn’t a scheme. I wouldn’t feel like total shit if this were a scheme.”

“You slept with me two days before you had to pack up your things and travel across the country. I’m not stupid, Greg. I know when I’ve been played. I’m just glad you got what you wanted out of this.”

“What I wanted was for you to come with me.”

The anger melted from Claire’s face, replaced with confusion. “What?”

“I wanted you to come with me. But I couldn’t ask you to do that, not after what I’ve watched you go through this summer. You’re not done here, Claire. I said it before and I still believe it. You and Daniel still have work to do. And for what it’s worth, you still have a lot of work to do on yourself. You’ve spent way too much time being the professor’s wife without establishing an identity for yourself. I know you had dreams at some point. It’s time for you to let yourself see those dreams fulfilled. As much as you may not want to hear that, I think you know it’s true.”

Claire looked up at the skylight and wondered if other people had such difficulties or if meaningful human interactions just came more naturally to everyone else. It seemed like there was no point in trying so hard if all you ended up with was a big rock where your heart should be. After thousands and thousands of years on this planet, no one had figured out how to live their life without hurting another person. It was a fact that we had no choice but to embrace lest we be sucked into some cosmic vortex of denial and immobility. But how did we keep going on when there was so much pain around us? Why was that a trait for which we adapted? Darwin would scoff if he could see those who were deemed fittest today. Claire was finally starting to realize that we survive in spite of our fitness, not because of it.

“Good luck, Greg.” She left the studio without giving him a final kiss, without hugging him goodbye, without even giving him the chance to look her squarely in the eye. A sudden surge of power shot through her body. Loved or not, she would survive. It was the only thing she could count on.

CHAPTER NINE

Claire's days had become centered on getting back to normal. She had been told numerous times in therapy that there was no such thing as normal, but she needed something to strive for, and achieving that ever-elusive condition seemed as good a place as any to start. The incident in the grocery store had gone unrepeated. With the help of Dr. Kamura and the neighborhood pharmacy that filled her prescription for antidepressants, Claire had found a technique that allowed her to get a better handle on a difficult situation. She didn't have to go into freak-out mode anymore; she could take a minute to read the situation, try to fend off any potential anxieties before they got to the point of being overwhelming, and react to the whole thing by staying calm and in control. It was amazingly effective, this way of taking things in stride instead of letting them get the better of her. In this spirit, she woke up one morning and decided it was time to have fun with her daughter rather than viewing her as a harbinger of unwanted responsibility.

They left for the park as the neighborhood kids were boarding the school bus. Parents honked their horns in an attempt to get their children to school faster than the flow of traffic would allow. Claire pushed Ellie in the stroller, singing to her in a voice just loud enough to be heard over the din of the cars.

"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands," Claire sang, and Ellie delighted in following the song's simple instructions.

Daniel and Claire had made the mutual decision not to allow Ellie to see her mother during her time in the mental hospital. Daniel didn't want Ellie to visit an

environment that was predicated on unpredictable behavior, while Claire was more afraid that some of the crazy from the other patients might rub off on Ellie. Their divergent opinions aside, the result was that Ellie was without any maternal contact for the duration of Claire's stay. Claire worried that Ellie wouldn't recognize her, that she would reject her in favor of Daniel or, worse, the babysitter Daniel had been using. None of that came to pass, though. Within two days of Claire's return, Ellie was already calling her "mommy," a word she had not even tried to say before Claire was admitted. If only Daniel wasn't still spending so much of his time away from home, they might actually have resembled a happy family.

In order to get to the playground, Claire had to wheel the stroller along a segment of unpaved sidewalk. Ellie loved it, opening her mouth wide and saying "ahhhh" as the loose gravel caused the stroller to bounce and her voice to undulate. Claire laughed and Ellie raised her voice even higher, her "ahhh" becoming more of a giggle, made uneven by the stroller's inability to absorb shock.

Ellie practically leapt out of the stroller when Claire unhooked the safety restraint. The second her feet hit the sand, she was on her hands and knees, confused by the sudden change in terrain. Claire saw her bottom lip begin to fold over and encouraged her to race for the swings before she could start to cry. Ellie ran toward the swings, trying to use her elbows to push herself onto the unstable piece of equipment. She was unsuccessful, opted to wait for Claire to arrive and set her to soaring. Her blond curls defied gravity; they froze in midair and refused to come down until Ellie was finished swinging.

The sky was unusually clear that morning, making the sun seem all the brighter as it crested over the tops of the trees that welcomed visitors to the park. Claire squinted and wished that she had remembered to bring her sunglasses. The combination of the anti-depressants and too much direct sunlight gave her a terrible headache. She had even had to cut back on the amount of time she spent in the garden.

“Good morning,” a voice behind her said.

Claire hadn't heard anyone approaching and was startled by the woman's greeting. The woman had a child of her own in tow, another toddler who looked to be a bit older than Ellie. The boy let go of his mother's hand and hurried over to play with Ellie, who was hard at work making what she called a sandcastle but was really more of a sand hump.

“Rita Harris,” the woman introduced herself.

“Claire...Sorlin.” She didn't know whether they were supposed to shake hands. Rita wasn't making any motions, so Claire assumed she was safe in keeping her hands to herself. Anxiety started to grip her. She didn't want to have to make small talk on a mother-to-mother level. Comparing notes with other people on how they were raising their children wasn't something that held particular interest for Claire. She could not understand why so many mothers treated parenthood like a competition. It was all she could do just to get through a day let alone try to make sure she had something to brag about when it came time for a tête-à-tête with another parent.

“Your little girl's adorable,” Rita said. She was well put together considering the early hour. Could be she was on her way to work after taking her kid to play for a few

minutes, but Claire didn't get the sense that Rita was a working mother. No, she was more than likely one of those women who couldn't leave the house without applying a too-severe layer of makeup and making a visit to the couture side of the closet. A trip to the park was no reason to look like a slouch.

“Oh, thanks. How old is your son?”

“Tucker's 40 months.”

Claire had to stop herself from laughing out loud. She thought it was ridiculous how women counted their baby's age in terms of months, as if saying that the boy was three years old wasn't good enough, as if knowing about those extra four months really added a maturity quotient that Claire wouldn't have noticed otherwise. She envisioned Rita telling a stranger ten years from now about the cute thing her son did when he was 158 months old.

Done in the sandbox—the 40-month-old wouldn't let Ellie build a castle without knocking it down when it got to a certain height—Ellie made her way over to the slide. She stood at the base and looked up, ready to scale the slide like Jack did the beanstalk. Claire, nervous about the slide's height, walked over to help her climb, but Ellie, with all her pint-sized stubbornness, shrugged her off.

“I do it,” Ellie said.

Claire backed away with a warning for her to be careful. She would have preferred that Ellie had chosen one of the smaller slides to start on and worked her way up to this ten-foot-tall metallic behemoth. As Ellie climbed, Claire made her way to the front of the slide. “Mommy will catch you, okay?” She reached the mouth of the slide at

the same time as Ellie climbed the last step on the ladder. Shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun, Claire tried to position herself so that the light didn't bounce off the slide, but no matter where she went the harsh brightness followed.

"Look at me, Mommy." Ellie was excited by her bird's eye view as she stood precariously atop the slide.

Claire couldn't look. Her pupils were dilating too quickly and her eyes were watering. A quick glance to make sure that Ellie was all right was all she could muster before averting her eyes to allow them to adjust.

"Tucker, you wait your turn," Rita said from too far away to be effective. He was already climbing up the steps with too much juvenile enthusiasm for him to stop.

"I see you. Sit down now, Ellie," Claire said, though she couldn't see much of anything except her daughter's hazy outline.

Tucker paused when he neared the last step. "Go," he whined, drawing the word out even further the second time around. "Go-o-o-o." He tried to shove himself past her, but Ellie's grip on the rail was too tight.

"Tucker..." Rita scolded.

He continued to shove until finally Ellie took her hands off the sides and prepared to sit down. As she began to crouch, Tucker gave another shove, making her lose her balance. Ellie teetered and tried to grab hold of the rail again, but her little hands just couldn't react quickly enough. Tucker laughed as he slid down, oblivious to what he had done. Both Claire and Rita struggled to get to Ellie before she landed. Claire tripped in the sand, falling to her knees and being forced to watch her daughter plunge to the

bottom, Ellie's scream interrupted by the thud her head made when it hit, like a volleyball being spiked.

"Oh my God," Rita shouted, running toward Ellie's limp body.

"Don't touch her," Claire yelled. "Don't move her. Go get help."

Rita scooped Tucker up in her arms and ran inside the park's rec center.

Ambulances and fire engines roared onto the scene within two minutes, though no life-saving measures were actually taken because there was simply nothing that anybody could do for her. Ellie was declared dead on arrival.

Rita tried to console Claire, put her arm around Claire's shoulder. "I want to help," Rita said.

"Get off me," Claire said, with as much politeness as she could manage. Claire didn't know this woman. Consolation didn't have the same effect when it came from a perfect stranger. And besides, Rita's fucking monster had done this to her baby. The only way Rita could help right now was if she took her son to the top of the slide and sent him down the same way Ellie had gone, eye-for-an-eye style. Claire thought about asking the police if they could arrest the little bastard for murder, but she knew that would never happen. She also knew that Tucker wasn't the only one responsible for Ellie's death. When it came time to lay blame, Claire would have to point a finger at herself.

"We have to talk," Claire said when Daniel got back from his meeting with the dean. She was fired up in a way Daniel hadn't seen in forever. And Daniel knew why: it

was truth time. Enough with this flitting around each other, ignoring the pertinent issues in favor of faux civility.

“Looks like the gun is loaded. Should I get a blindfold?” Daniel quipped.

“Can we be serious about this please?”

“You wanna talk serious? I’m about to get fired.” He collapsed on the couch, his body so limp that as he sank into the cushions it looked like he was all skin and no bones.

“What?” Claire sat down next to him.

Daniel rubbed his eyes. “It’s the book.”

“They’re going to fire you over a book you wrote? Is that even legal? Seems like it would be a First Amendment issue. Can’t they just tell you they don’t like it?”

“It’s not that kind of book, Claire.”

“I don’t understand.”

Daniel started to practice his breathing exercises, the same kind he used to calm his students when they were reticent about the idea of having sex with him. He inhaled deeply, envisioned his lungs filling with hot air. After holding the breath for ten seconds, he released it through his mouth, groaning a bit as the carbon dioxide left him.

Claire grew impatient as he repeated the exercise. “Stop breathing,” she said, and Daniel wondered how many times she’d wanted to say those words in a more literal context. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Reynolds has a book, a log that I kept with the names and activities of…”

Daniel wanted to take another deep breath, if for no other reason than to further delay the conclusion of his sentence. He settled for a brief pause. “Of the women I’ve slept with.”

Claire sat quiet for a moment as Daniel tried to read her face. Whatever she was feeling, she wasn't sharing it with him. Not yet anyway. He imagined two possibilities: she might be grateful for his honesty, no matter how long it took to come about, or she might be outraged by his admission and ask him why he felt the need to hurt her even more than he already had. All Daniel saw was the face of a woman who had suffered too much at his hand, a face that had gone vacant and, he feared, might never see full occupancy again.

"You made a list?" Claire asked, her voice less than a whisper.

Daniel felt more shame than remorse. Since there was no way to take back what he had done, he didn't see the point in feeling guilty about it. But there was certainly disgrace and embarrassment in the way he had acted toward Claire and toward all the women whose names were preserved inside the pages of a tawdry professor's journal.

"I don't know what to say. It doesn't seem right for me to try to defend myself. Not to you. There's going to be a disciplinary hearing. I'll save my irrational pleas for that."

"It's my fault," she said, even softer than the last time she spoke, so quiet that Daniel couldn't hear her.

"What?"

She repeated the words, louder and with more conviction than before. "It's all my fault."

Daniel's first instinct was not to indulge her in her quest to determine which of them was most culpable. Going in that direction would turn the conversation into a

peeing contest, something neither of them needed at the moment. But the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to know what she meant, how Claire was to blame for “all” of this. She wasn’t the one who screwed 123 different women. And she sure as hell wasn’t the one who stupidly left the evidence out for the damn maid to discover.

“How is this your fault?” he asked.

She stared at him for a minute. “I wanted to get pregnant.”

“You mean with what’s-his-name from across the street?”

“No, I mean with you. In high school. I wanted it to happen and it did and now look at everything that’s happened since. I fucked up both of our lives. None of this is your fault, Daniel. It’s mine.”

It was a rare moment when Daniel was at a total loss for words, but right now his mind and vocal chords refused to cooperate with his mouth, which hung open, waiting expectantly for the words that did not come. Claire, shame etched on her face, could not bear to look at Daniel. But the terrible silence had to be filled.

“My parents hated us together, you know that,” Claire said. “What you don’t know is that I loved that they hated us together. I had been choked by the cross for so long that it felt good to finally have a way to get back at them. Their precious little girl was dating someone they disapproved of and then she came home pregnant. My God, I can still see their reactions. You would think I had just murdered a puppy in front of them. The idea of being the grandparents of a bastard child... I had waited so long to see their self-righteousness taken down a peg and I found the perfect way to do it.”

“But they forced us to get married,” Daniel said.

“I thought I was in love with you. On some level, I didn’t feel forced at all. It felt right. I could get out of an oppressive household and start my own family. To a 17-year-old girl, that solution sounds unbelievably logical. It wasn’t until it actually happened that the inherent flaws were exposed. Once they were, it all became too overwhelming. A baby, a husband I wasn’t sure I loved or loved me, no help from anyone. It was too much. Something had to give and I knew exactly what that something had to be.”

Daniel wasn’t sure he wanted to hear what Claire was going to say next and tried to stop her from continuing. “Claire, you don’t—”

“You need to know this,” she boomed. “That little girl, that helpless little girl... I killed her. I killed Ellie.”

“Claire, no.”

“That day with the bleach was no accident, Daniel. I knew she’d get into it if I left her alone. As soon as she found out that she could move around the house, she became the most independent baby ever to set foot on this planet. You remember, she’d be playing peacefully with her toys one minute and the next minute she’d be in the kitchen trying to open up the pantry and get a bottle of baby food. She was such a handful. I’m not a bad person, Daniel, you know I’m not a bad person. I just couldn’t deal with her anymore. So I brought her into the laundry room, left the lid off the container of bleach, and walked away, knowing that she was too inquisitive not to see what was inside that container. It was perfect. Curious baby, beleaguered mother. Who wouldn’t understand what I was going through? Who wouldn’t say how sorry they were for everything I had to put up with? I guess I overestimated the sympathy of strangers.”

“Ellie didn’t die that day, Claire. Her death wasn’t your fault. You were so much better with her after you came home from the hospital.”

“Better doesn’t keep kids alive. Once a negligent mother, always a negligent mother. I looked away, Daniel. She was standing on that slide—on the edge of the world, where nobody could reach her—and I looked away. I shouldn’t have let her climb up there all by herself. She was three years old, for God’s sake. Where was I when she needed me?”

“You were there. There was nothing you could have done.”

“And that woman. Rita. She wanted to take Claire into her arms like she was her own child. I’m stuck in the sand and she thinks it’s okay for my daughter to take her last breath cradled in the arms of a stranger.”

Daniel reached around Claire and pulled her into his body, her head dropping onto his shoulder. She was a wreck, her hands shaking, tears cascading down her face, her nose running. There were no tissues nearby, but if Claire didn’t care then Daniel didn’t either.

“You’ve been holding onto this for a long time,” he said, gently brushing her bangs to the side with his free hand.

Claire sniffled. “You wouldn’t talk to me.” It was such a simple statement, and it was totally true. Daniel always had a reason not to talk—papers to grade, meetings to attend, girls to fuck. There was never a good time to have a sit-down with his wife and try to work past some of the issues that haunted them both. So he did his thing and she did hers. Before either of them knew it, fifteen years had passed and, instead of softening

with age, their problems had only escalated, until finally there was no way to avoid them any longer.

You can dangle a piece of meat over a bear cage, but sooner or later that bear's going to get hungry enough to find a way out, and when he does, look out—he's likely to come after more than just the meat. Daniel felt like the meat dangler in this scenario. Even though they weren't arguing, Daniel still felt like Claire had ripped his head off. The idea that she had been walking around with these awful, guilty feelings devastated him. To think how much more pain he had contributed by ignoring her, by cheating on her, even by proposing the open marriage, was enough to send him into a tailspin of regret.

“I never got to be Santa Claus,” he said.

Claire pushed herself up and wiped her nose with her sleeve. “What do you mean?”

“Ellie wasn't around long enough for me to get dressed up in a Santa suit and surprise her on Christmas Eve. I wanted to do that so badly, to see her eyes light up. My dad did that for me when I was a kid and I wanted to do it for her. It was maybe the only magic I had to offer her and I didn't get the chance to. You'd be amazed what a little make-believe can do for a person's spirit.”

Claire mustered a half-smile and took Daniel's hand, lacing her fingers with his. “Sounds like I'm not the only who's been holding on to stuff for a while.”

They sat quietly with each other for a minute, trying not to drown in their honesty and yet wanting to lap it up before it went out with the tide. How do you live with

someone for so many years and not have a truthful conversation the whole time?

However it happens, Claire and Daniel had perfected the formula. Life becomes a series of innocuous moments not worth mentioning, and before you know it, nothing that happens on any given day, good or bad, big or little, is worth talking about. You vanish into a crevasse of inconsequentiality, where the ordinary ceases to matter and the unique is too much to comprehend. It is living without really living, going through the motions to get to the next day, a day when, if you're lucky, someone (including yourself) might finally give a damn.

“It may not be much consolation,” Claire offered, “but even though you didn't get to be Santa Claus, we've been playing make-believe for a long time.”

After Ellie's death and Erin's abortion, Daniel wasn't in the mood to take any more risks. Rolling the dice with human life was not his idea of a bet worth placing. The way he saw it, he had two options: stop fooling around with women who were in their fertile primes—a notion he rejected out of hand—or make sure that no woman would ever get pregnant by his seed again.

“Am I still going to be able to have sex normally?” Daniel asked his general practitioner, Dr. Wallace. He was both Daniel and Claire's doctor, the one they had chosen out of the Blue Cross book after Daniel's probationary period with the university ended.

“Depends on what you consider normal,” Dr. Wallace said with a chuckle. When Daniel didn't respond in kind, Dr. Wallace continued. “A vasectomy has no effect on

sexual functioning. All it does is take those little swimmers of yours out of the erotic equation.” Again, he chuckled; again, Daniel did not. Dr. Wallace was a student of the Patch Adams School of Medicine, wherein doctors think that any question or concern from the patient can be laughed away. It wasn’t a style that Daniel particularly cottoned to, but he also didn’t want to go through the process of finding a new doctor just because this guy liked to tell lousy jokes.

“And Claire doesn’t have to know, right? You wouldn’t need some kind of marital consent or something?”

“I don’t need Claire’s consent, nor will she ever find out about this from me. Just because I see you both does not mean that I have the authority to share privileged information with her. I advise you against keeping this a secret, though, Daniel. After the loss you two have suffered, it just seems cruel for you to do this without her knowing.”

Daniel ignored Dr. Wallace’s advice and proceeded with his questions. “How long before we know if it worked or not?”

“We’ll run a semen analysis in about 12 weeks and see if you’re running on empty.”

“I have to wait 12 weeks to have sex again?” Daniel was outraged at the mere prospect of this. He wouldn’t even have to wait that long to buy a gun.

“No, no, you can start having sex within a few days if it’s comfortable for you. But you’ll have to use some form of contraception because your pipes won’t be cleared out yet.”

Relief washed over Daniel's face, followed by a wince as he processed the doctor's use of the word *comfortable*. "How much is this going to hurt?"

"Oh, it shouldn't be too bad. I'll give you a local anesthetic—we don't even use needles anymore, it's a high-pressure spray now. No scalpels, either. Just a small puncture, a little snip-snip on each side, and you're done. I wouldn't schedule any marathons that day, but you should be able to leave here without having to walk like John Wayne."

"When can you do it?"

"We'll have to check with the receptionist. Maybe next week."

"Great. The sooner, the better."

Dr. Wallace made some notes in Daniel's chart. "One more thing," he said. "You're probably gonna need someone to drive you home. I bet Claire would be happy to do that for you."

"I'm pretty sure that's why God invented taxis, Dr. Wallace. To keep wives out of the loop." It was a joke on the same level as the ones the doctor always told, but now he was the one who wasn't laughing. For a second, Daniel thought Dr. Wallace might refuse to do the procedure. But Daniel was determined, and he would have just found another doctor who would. As much as Daniel could tell that Dr. Wallace detested the idea of doing this behind Claire's back, he would perform Daniel's vasectomy. And if Dr. Wallace needed a little more persuading, Daniel could just explain that he was doing a public service, a way to keep future generations from having a clone of Daniel Sorlin running around, spreading duplicity with abandon.

A week later, the deed was done. Daniel told Claire that he had a conference to attend and wouldn't be back for a week. In actuality, he checked himself into a hotel two towns over and spent his recovery time watching pay-per-view pornography. It was his form of basic training, of strengthening his penis's resolve and getting beyond the uncomfortable part of the healing process. He watched in small doses at first, stopping when he began to feel the stitches being pulled toward the base of his penis. Over the course of a few days, he was back to normal, masturbating with extreme alacrity and anxious to try out his new worry-free pecker on a woman, though that of course would have to wait several more weeks. Pleased with his progress, he treated himself to a massage, requesting a man so as to eliminate the potential for temptation.

There would be no more pain associated with children in Daniel's world. He had convinced himself that the procedure would soften the hurt he felt when Ellie died and the challenge he had when he took Erin to the clinic. As long as he couldn't produce any more offspring, the one that was and the one that wasn't did not have to seem like such huge losses. It was a stupid thought, perhaps the worst of all the stupid thoughts Daniel had had over the years. But in times of pain, the human mind is capable of making us believe the most outrageous of inaccuracies.

The look on Jaden's face when she found out who her friend Shelley was sleeping with said it all. The disgusted "Professor Sorlin?" wasn't even necessary, though Jaden added it for good measure anyway. It was the first time Shelley had told anyone about her dalliance with Daniel, and she had expected a more supportive reaction.

“What’s wrong with Professor Sorlin?” Shelley asked. Of course, she had her own list of ways to answer that question, but she was curious what Jaden thought of him.

“I don’t know. He’s old.”

“He’s, like, fifteen years older than us. It’s not that big a deal.”

“That means when he started college, you were three years old. That’s gross,” Jaden said.

“No wonder you got a C in Logic. That’s a terrible argument. We’re both adults now. Besides, isn’t this what youth is designed for? The way I figure it, once I graduate it’s going to be a lot harder to justify making these kinds of stupid decisions. I’ll have to be a real adult then.”

“Trust me, I’ve seen plenty of ‘real adults’ make some incredibly stupid decisions. I don’t see you as the type to have an affair with a married man.”

“It’s not like I’m in love with him or anything,” Shelley said, more for her benefit than Jaden’s.

“Good, because you’d be wasting your time. He tried to hit on me once, you know.”

“Really?” Shelley feigned surprise. At this point, she assumed any woman Daniel came into contact with had been fair game.

“I shot him down. The guy’s a sleaze. Please be careful.”

“The university might fire him. He wants me to speak on his behalf.”

“Let them fire him. You’ve got your integrity to think about,” Jaden said.

“I feel like I owe him something.”

“I don’t want to see you get hurt here.”

“I don’t think I’m the one who’s about to get hurt,” Shelley said.

Dean Reynolds sat at the head of an elliptical table, flanked by four other faculty members, two on either side, who had assembled for Daniel’s disciplinary review. The meeting was being held in the English Department’s conference room and, other than the dean and the university’s provost, the panel was made up of professors from the department. The table wasn’t very big—only twelve feet long—but Daniel felt like he was in a different zip code as he took his seat at the opposite end. Against his protests, Claire had come, too. She wanted to be there as a show of support, though Daniel was afraid that if she was to get emotional it might sway the panel’s opinion. Also, unbeknownst to Claire, Shelley was supposed to be there, and Daniel didn’t think it would help his cause to have his wife and his mistress in the same room. Shelley had yet to arrive when Reynolds hit the record button on a digital voice recorder and began the proceedings.

“All right, we’re getting started in the matter of alleged impropriety on the part of Daniel Sorlin, tenured professor with the English Department. Present are myself, Mark Reynolds, provost Carrie Turner, English Department head Steven Fowler, professors Katherine Kinnealy and Frank Santos, Mr. Sorlin, and his wife, Claire.”

Reynolds was interrupted by a knock on the door. Shelley peeked her head inside, saw that she was in the right room, and entered. She sat down next to Daniel, on the opposite side of the table from Claire, who looked at her husband with a hundred

questions in her eyes. Daniel nodded to her, silently telling her that he would explain later. To Daniel, Shelley represented the possibility that his job could be saved, but he knew that for Claire she was the woman who invaded her home and sullied her couch.

“Sorry I’m late,” Shelley whispered to Daniel.

The faculty members were surprised to see Shelley, who had been one of the English program’s greatest ambassadors. Smart and attractive, she was money in the bank when it came to recruiting high school students and people with undeclared majors. Now here she was sitting next to a man accused of sexual misconduct.

“Please state your name for the record,” Reynolds said.

“Shelley Buchanan.”

Reynolds continued. “Mr. Sorlin, I assume neither of the women you’ve brought with you today is acting as counsel.”

“No, sir. I’ve opted not to confer with counsel at this time.” The way he said “at this time” made it sound like there might be more of these meetings in the future, as if the panel might actually give him the chance to cause more harm.

“Late last week, a member of our cleaning staff brought to my attention a book that she found in Mr. Sorlin’s office. Said book contains a numbered list of over 100 students, along with sexual acts that they allegedly performed with Mr. Sorlin.”

Reynolds passed the book between the panel members, each of them flipping through it quickly to get a better understanding of its contents. Facial expressions were evenly divided between the men, who reacted with raised eyebrows, and the women, whose mouths turned downward.

“Did this book in fact come from your office, Mr. Sorlin?” Reynolds asked.

“Yes, sir, it did.”

“Is this your writing on its pages?”

“Yes.”

“And these are the names of former students of yours, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Did these women perform the acts you’ve described?”

“No, sir, they did not.” Daniel was sure that the digital recorder had to be picking up the near-deafening thump in his chest. Like a modern day Edgar Allen Poe story, if they went back and listened to the recording, they would be able to tell that he was lying by the telltale beat of his own heart.

“Can you please explain to us then what the purpose of this book is?”

“It’s fantasy, pure and simple. I’m 34 years old, I love women, I work in a place where beautiful young women congregate, and I fantasize about them. One day I got the idea to write some of these fantasies down, not too specifically, just a name and an action or two. Not too vulgar, either. It’s pretty clinical stuff, you have to admit. ‘Oral sex, intercourse.’ These are hardly offensive terms.”

“The issue isn’t whether what you wrote is offensive, it’s whether these things actually happened,” Carrie Turner said.

“And I assure you they did not. That’s why Shelley Buchanan is here today. Her name is in that book—the very last entry, I believe—and she will testify to the fact that nothing happened between us.”

Shelley smiled in the panel's direction. She had taken classes with professors Kineally and Santos, and Fowler knew her based on her academic reputation. Three out of the five members of the panel were already predisposed to believe whatever came out of her mouth.

"Professor Sorlin was one of my favorite teachers. He pushes his students to do their absolute best and I really respect him for that. But he does things that aren't very respectable, too. He propositioned me for sex in exchange for a better grade on an essay. I brought the essay if you'd like to see it." She took a folded paper from her purse and slid it to the other end of the table. "You'll notice the grade has been changed from a B to an A. Based on my personal interactions with Professor Sorlin, it is my belief that everything in that book is true."

"What are you doing?" Daniel said through gritted teeth.

The panel shook their collective heads in disappointment.

"Let me make sure I understand," Reynolds said. "Is it your testimony that you had sex with Mr. Sorlin in order to get a better grade in his class?"

"It is. And there's more, sir." She turned to Daniel. "I'm pregnant."

Reynolds buried his face in his hands.

"What?" Daniel said, his cheeks a deep shade of red. "That's not possible."

"Well, tell that to my uterus," Shelley said.

Claire was frozen, her mouth hanging open.

This sham had to come to an end. Any more lies would only make things worse than they already were, and things were looking pretty damn grim. Daniel took a deep

breath and addressed the panel. “Okay, I’ll admit it. The book is real. I did all of those things, every last one of them. And you know what? I enjoyed it. I won’t lie about that. But I did not get this girl pregnant. I had a vasectomy after...” He couldn’t bring himself to say the reason out loud. “I had a vasectomy,” he repeated, and left it at that.

“Daniel...” Claire said softly.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel offered, but he knew that it would never be enough.

The room was quiet for a moment as both sides of the table tried to collect themselves.

“I think we’ve heard enough here. We’re going to discuss this and meet back here shortly to give you our decision,” Reynolds said.

Daniel left the room, Claire trailing behind him, her head hanging. Shelley followed a few feet back, a smug grin on her face. They waited for the elevator in silence, Daniel resisting every urge to grab Shelley by the neck and throw her up against the wall. The second the elevator doors closed, Daniel laid into her.

“What the fuck was that about? You were supposed to help me in there.”

“I changed my mind,” she said calmly.

“You changed your mind? She changed her fucking mind,” he said to Claire, as if she would care. “Then why’d you even bother showing up? Just to ruin my career?”

“Oh, I think you did a pretty good job of that on your own. Don’t blame me for telling the truth, Daniel.”

“The truth? You’re not pregnant. Not by me anyway. If you’ve been whoring around with someone else, leave me out of it.”

The elevator dinged on the third floor and the doors opened. A man took a step to get on, but Daniel stopped him with a curt “It’s full,” and the man backed up, waiting to catch the next car.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m pregnant or not. What matters is that those people think you are absolute scum, because you are. You had me fooled for a while, coming over and telling me how much you needed me, whisking me away for overnight trips to nowhere. I was an idiot, though. I mistook your narcissism for real feeling. I actually thought that he might like me better than he liked you.” She pointed to Claire and began to address her. “Then I wised up and realized he isn’t capable of liking anybody more than he already likes himself.”

Another ding as the elevator reached the ground floor. They stepped off, curtailing the conversation until they were out of the building.

“You’re pathetic, Daniel, and I hope what I said in there damages you in ways you can’t even begin to imagine. It’s been real,” she said, and walked away without giving Daniel a chance to respond. He could have told her how sorry he was for the way he treated her. He could have yelled some more about what she had just done to him. He could have tried to convince her to go back and recant her testimony. None of it would have done any good. Better to let her go and deal with the fallout than to prolong the suffering of all involved.

“Was it worth it?” Claire asked without a hint of animosity. This time, Daniel had the opportunity to respond, but he simply didn’t want to.

* * *

It was easily the longest half-hour of Daniel's life. He was certain of the meeting's outcome before he and Claire even stepped back on the elevator for the interminable ride up to the sixth floor. Reassembling just so the panel could make his firing official seemed like a cruel joke. None of the members of the panel made eye contact with Daniel as he took his seat, though he thought that the two women cast sympathetic glances in Claire's direction.

"We are back on the record in the matter of the sexual allegations leveled against Professor Daniel Sorlin," Dean Reynolds announced. He looked saddened by the circumstance, as if it were one of his own children that he was having to discipline. "Cormier University has a plainly stated policy on the subject of fraternization between professors and students. Although we certainly do not recommend it, it is not expressly forbidden for an instructor and a student to have sexual relations with each other. It's a private matter between consenting adults and, quite frankly, it would be almost impossible to keep from happening. What is forbidden, however, is sexual harassment, and that, Mr. Sorlin, is the category in which we feel your case falls. Shelley Buchanan's testimony is highly suspect given the nature of the claims she made against you today, but we were inclined to believe her about the essay, especially with the evidence she had of the grade being changed. A university's reputation is defined by the integrity of its faculty and, under the circumstances, we can't help but seriously question yours. It is the finding of this panel that your employment at Cormier University is terminated effective immediately. In addition, we will deny recommendation to any school at which you seek

employment in the future. Please have your office cleared out by the end of the day.

This meeting is adjourned.”

As the panel got up to leave, Daniel called out to Reynolds. “Mark, do you have a minute?”

Reynolds looked at the other board members and nodded for them to continue on without him. He stayed on his end of the table, keeping his distance from Daniel. “If you’re going to make some kind of appeal—”

“That’s not what I want. Friend to friend, Mark, I want to apologize. I never meant for things to get this out of hand.”

“I trusted you, Daniel. What’s more, your students trusted you. They named you Professor of the Year, for God’s sake. In my mind, there is no more blatant and inappropriate misuse of power in our system than what you did to those poor girls. It isn’t me you should be apologizing to, it’s everybody in that goddamn book of yours. And maybe that woman standing next to you right now.”

As Reynolds left, Daniel, dejected, turned to Claire and prepared to say something, but Claire put her hand to his mouth.

“Do it because you want to, not because he told you to,” she said. “Come on, I’ll help you pack your office.”

Putting his books in boxes, Daniel noticed how much of his collection was made up of tragedy. *Hamlet*. *Macbeth*. *A Doll’s House*. *The Crucible*. *Dr. Faustus*. He had a whole shelf full of tragic plays yet he failed to heed the lessons they tried to impart. So

much wisdom in such small packages, all of it wasted on a man who chose not to see beyond his libido.

“I don’t know how you can stand to be in the same room with me,” Daniel said to Claire, who was taking his degrees and awards off the wall.

“I have to be honest, it’s not easy. But I thought you would rather have a friend than an enemy after what just happened.”

“You consider us friends?”

“Just accept the gesture, Daniel. Don’t try to read too much into it.” They continued packing in silence for a moment before Claire said, “You could have told me, you know.”

“What?”

“About the vasectomy. I would have understood. I wasn’t exactly chomping at the bit to have another kid anyway.”

“There was more to it than Ellie’s death.” He stopped there, not sure if Claire would want to hear all the details of the things he had been doing behind her back.

“I’ve got time,” she said, sitting down on the couch and inviting Daniel to do the same.

They talked for over an hour, him telling her more than he ever imagined he would. There was no reason to be secretive anymore. He told her how it started, how he could escape the unhappiness at home by fooling around with someone he wasn’t supposed to be with. He told her about the mistake he made with Erin and how it led him to take measures to keep from bringing more kids into the world, from adding to the

sadness that ensconced every fiber of his being. He offered no apology; at this moment, saying sorry wasn't going to fix anything.

“Trust me when I tell you that I felt as guilty about what happened to Ellie as you did.” He paused and corrected himself. “As you still do. I know I haven't done a very good job of showing it, but I do feel it.”

“You weren't even there.”

Daniel wasn't sure whether Claire meant that Daniel wasn't at the park that day, so he couldn't possibly bear any responsibility for what happened, or whether she was saying that he was never around to provide the proper support to those who needed him the most. It didn't really matter either way. “I know,” he said.

“We've talked more in the past few days than we have in years. I mean, real conversation. We haven't even yelled at each other.”

“And you've had plenty of reasons to yell.”

“It doesn't seem necessary. You know, I'm not even sure I'm mad at you, Daniel. We've been so miserable for so long that I think somewhere along the line we stopped recognizing it as misery and just started to accept it as the norm.”

“*Abusus non tollit usum*,” Daniel said. “Misuse does not remove use.” Claire's furrowed brow indicated that she would require further explanation. “Just because something has been abused does not mean it must always be.”

Claire sighed and smiled. “There you go being smarter than me again.”

“Not possible.” He clutched her hand, squeezing it tightly enough to make the tips of her fingers turn red.

“We should probably finish up in here,” she said.

Shelley, not completely dry from her just-finished shower, tried to slam the door as soon as she saw it was Daniel standing outside her apartment, but he grabbed it before it shut, narrowly missing having his fingers smashed.

“I don’t want you here, Daniel,” she said.

He let himself in and followed Shelley into her bedroom, where she proceeded to towel off and put on her underwear. He liked how free she was with her body, even in front of someone she currently detested.

“I couldn’t say it yesterday, but I wanted to apologize,” he said.

“You know, I could have you arrested for trespassing,” she said as she looked through her closet for the day’s outfit.

“Yeah, and I could be pissed as hell for the way you turned on me, but I’m choosing to take the higher road and own my fuck-up.”

She turned around. “Is that what we were? A fuck-up?”

“I was wrong to take advantage of you the way that I did. I’m sorry about that. Things went further than I ever thought they would.”

“Because I was just supposed to be another number in your little book.”

“Is that what you want to hear? Yes, Shelley, that’s all you were supposed to be. You’re the one that came into my office for more after threatening to end my career. I didn’t go seeking you out.”

“It’s amazing the things you say to make yourself right.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“You *are* doing that. Why even show up here except to make yourself feel better, to pretend that you’re the bigger man for acknowledging how screwed up you really are? I was stupid for thinking that you might actually care for me.” She pulled a dress off its hanger and stepped into it. “You’re absolved, Daniel,” she said.

He watched her for a second, deciding whether he should say more, opting to leave it alone. She stared into the mirror, fluffing her hair as he showed himself out. On the way home, he wondered how many other women he had made feel the same way Shelley felt. He hadn’t spent as much time with any of the others as he had with her, so he never imagined that they might have developed some kind of attachment to him. Short of contacting everyone on his list (which wasn’t even in his possession any longer), there was no way for him to find out what kind of an impact he had made on the lives of all the women he had manipulated into sleeping with him. The way Daniel saw it, he had two choices: he could dwell on the past, letting the memory of every mistake he had ever made transport him to a place where darkness ruled and hatred (for himself, from others) dominated the atmosphere, or he could choose to move beyond his prior bad acts, to accept the flaws that had brought him to where he was now and make an attempt at appreciating those who had stuck by him, whether out of obligation or misguided loyalty. For anybody else, this would have seemed an obvious decision. It was a tough choice, though, for a man who had spent so many years trying to mask true emotion with desolate sex. Daniel wasn’t sure if he was ready for such a massive life change, one that would require him to look beyond his own needs and see that others actually relied on

him on a daily basis. Change is never easy, but then again, Daniel had already lost his job, his girlfriend, and his daughter, and should have lost his wife a thousand times over. If anybody was tailor-made to deal with change, it was him. Now he just had to decide whether he wanted to deal with it again.

“It’s been over a year, Claire. At some point you’re going to have to forgive yourself and move past this.” Dr. Kamura was taking her usual tough stance with Claire, who had cut her therapy sessions back to once a month after Ellie died. Dr. Kamura tried to tell her that she probably needed this hour a week more than ever at such a tragic time, but Claire told her that it would just be too hard to relive that moment every Tuesday at 4:00 P.M.

“I don’t know how to do that, and I’m not sure I want to. That little girl put her trust in me. I was supposed to protect her and nurture her and show her how to be a good person. I’m 21 years old. What the hell do I know about being a good person?”

“Give yourself more credit than that. You’ve been through a lot and you’re still kicking. Maybe you don’t think so, but that says something about your character. Are you perfect? Of course not. But then there are no criteria for what perfect is. For all intents and purposes, it doesn’t exist.”

“Is it wrong that I don’t really miss her?”

“You miss her in your own way. Why would you spend so much time feeling guilty over someone you don’t even miss?”

“Daniel’s cheating on me,” Claire said, making no attempt at a segue. “It’s a gut feeling.”

“Do you have any evidence?”

“You mean like lipstick on his shirt collar or something like that? No, but I’ve suspected it for a while now and haven’t said anything.”

“How long is ‘a while’?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say since I was in the hospital. You remember how he wouldn’t come visit, how he said he didn’t want to bring Ellie? I think he didn’t want me to figure out what he was really up to.”

“And now you’ve figured it out.”

“He’s a very sexual man. Even when we didn’t exactly like each other, we were still physical. Lately though, he hasn’t made any attempt to be intimate. You don’t go from having sex at least once a day to not having any at all, it just doesn’t happen. Which means he’s getting his needs met elsewhere.”

“Does that bother you?”

Claire thought about it for a minute. Her knee-jerk reaction was to say it drove her nuts, that she couldn’t even imagine her husband being with another woman. Getting past that initial response, she realized that she had already come to accept this as one of Daniel’s peccadilloes. “I guess it doesn’t,” she said. “It just is what it is.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“What’s the alternative? Leaving him and going off on my own to do God knows what? I can’t just throw away what we have. It may not be love, but it isn’t hate, either, and maybe I have to make that be enough.”

“In one of our first sessions, you said one of the things you missed the most since you and Daniel got together was being happy. Do you think that doing nothing while he goes off and—allegedly—has sex with other women is going to make you happy?”

“To be honest with you, I don’t even know if I believe in happiness anymore. I think happiness might be one great, big, giant illusion. It’s just a placeholder for the sadness.”

Dr. Kamura frowned. “That makes *me* sad, hearing you say that. Do you really believe it?”

“Yeah, I think I might. If I stumble across happiness somewhere along the way, terrific. If I don’t, at least I won’t have set myself up for disappointment. Sometimes we have to see the reality through the fantasy.”

“If that’s true, what do we have to cling to? What’s the point of going on?”

“Funny, I was about to ask you the same question,” Claire said. She was proud of the way she had boiled her life down to what she thought was most important: comfort in what was familiar, pragmatism over irrationality, and, most of all, accepting mediocrity instead of taking a chance on finding something greater. For Claire, there were some things that just weren’t worth the effort it would take to change them.

CHAPTER TEN

“Hello?”

“Betty, it’s Claire.”

“Oh, hello,” Betty said, with much less enthusiasm than her initial greeting.

“You made it home okay, I guess.” Claire hated small talk in general, and with her mother-in-law in particular. Knowing that Betty didn’t like her and had no real interest in talking to her made Claire loathe exchanging pleasantries with her all the more.

“In record time. We couldn’t wait to get back.”

“I can only imagine. Listen, this isn’t easy for me to say so I’m just going to come out with it. I’m sorry. There, I said it.”

A second of silence, which felt more like ten minutes, followed before Betty responded with a sarcastic, “Well, that was very nice, Claire. Heartfelt.”

“I’m trying here. Give me a break, will you?”

Betty laughed. “I cooked a wonderful meal and ended up with half of it hanging off my face. ‘Give me a break’? Sorry, Claire, but maybe you could try just a little harder.”

“Hey, to be fair, you were never invited, and I—”

“This doesn’t sound like it’s getting any closer to a real apology. Let’s try this again, shall we?”

Claire gripped the phone tightly, wanting to throw it across the room and pretend that as it smashed into a million little pieces so too did the woman on the other end. The mere thought of Betty exploding gave her some inner peace (not in a depraved way, but more in the way that Dorothy watched the Wicked Witch of the West melt into the ground after being doused with water). She prepared herself to give the apology another go. “Betty, I know we’ve had our differences—”

“That’s an understatement.”

“If I’m going to do this, I need you to stop interrupting me.” She softened her tone again and added, “Please.” When she felt that Betty was ready to listen, Claire went on. “There’s a part of me that hoped you and I could be friends. Believe me, I don’t have any delusions that that would ever actually happen, but it would have been nice. Despite what you think of me, I don’t consider you a bad person. I stole your only son away from you. It makes sense that you would harbor some resentment toward me. But it’s been a long time, Betty. It’s been a really long time, and I think you need to stop looking at me as the woman who ruined your little family unit. What I did the other night was completely out of line and inappropriate, and for that I sincerely apologize. You need to know, though, that I am not the enemy. I never have been.”

The line went quiet again. This was perhaps the most genuine thing Claire had ever said to her. Claire imagined that Betty was struggling with how to accept it. “Are you still there?” Claire asked.

“I’m here, I’m here. The way you make it sound, I should be the one apologizing to you.”

“This hasn’t been easy for either of us. We act as the perfect bait for each other. We know exactly which buttons to push to get the most dramatic reaction. It’s a skill, really.”

“I know that what you said about Daniel at dinner is true. He admitted as much before we left. On the drive home, I tried to put myself in your place. I’m not sure how I would handle everything that you and Daniel have had to deal with. I know if Earl had pulled that shit with me his ass would be out on the street faster than he could change the channel on the TV.”

Claire hadn’t heard Betty cuss before and she took note of how liberated she sounded doing it. Like the moment in Claire’s kitchen, it seemed as though they were capable of understanding each other when they wanted to. Allowing themselves to get into the frame of mind where they *could* understand each other was another thing altogether. They had spent so much time coming up with potshots that they ended up not having any time left over to try to be nice. It was the in-law curse.

“Why do you stick around?” Betty asked. “I mean, not that I want to see my son go through a divorce, but don’t you think you could do better than a philanderer?”

Betty was standing up for her; the gesture sent prickles down Claire’s spine. She could not have anticipated that Betty, a woman who had made an art out of finding just the right way to make Claire feel like absolute shit, would take her side.

“It keeps me up nights, wondering how I got myself into such a mess. It used to be residual Catholic guilt that kept me here. Fear of going to Hell can be a powerful motivator when it comes to staying in a situation that may not be the most healthy. But

as simple as it might sound, I also believe that everything happens for a reason. Walking out the door would have been easy to do, and maybe I'm the most stupid woman on the planet for not doing it, but I've learned so many lessons by not leaving. I am who I am today because I stayed. Everyday I feel stronger, more myself, more...human."

"So it's a good thing Daniel cheated on you?"

"Pretty ridiculous, huh?"

"I don't know where your generation gets its ideas of right and wrong. All that matters, I guess, is that they work for you."

"You know what one of the things that keeps me going is? I ask myself, if Ellie were alive today, would she be proud of her mom? Very rarely is the answer yes, and that's when I know I need to try harder. She wasn't blessed with the best parents while she was on this earth, but that doesn't mean we can't honor her by trying to be the best people we know how to be."

After another brief pause, Betty said, "I'm sorry for what he did to you, and for what I did to you, too."

"Thank you." Claire smiled and said goodbye. Following her logic that everything happens for a reason, she realized that she could not have had this conversation if it hadn't been for her food-filled hands streaking down Betty's face. Maybe she should have done the same thing to Daniel years ago. A little chocolate pudding in his hair may have incited them to have the deep discussion that they had put off time after time.

* * *

The bar closest to Cormier was unusually dead for a summer night. In the past, Daniel would have walked in to find the place raging—loud music, loud clothing, loud co-eds. Tonight, the bar was almost serene. Sure, the hip-hop music was still deafening, but without the bodies of college students packed tighter than a vacuum-sealed bag of almonds, it just didn't have the same cantankerous energy. Daniel hadn't been to the bar since early in his teaching career. When he realized that he could get the same results without all the work by just bribing his students to sleep with him, he stopped wasting his money buying drinks for girls who couldn't afford a fake I.D. In hindsight, it seemed pretty pathetic to do what he had done for the sake of getting laid when there were far more important issues that needed to be addressed at home. It's the biggest downfall of having a penis; as its own entity, the male member has no incentive to care about what's going on in its surroundings as long as its needs are still being attended to. And Daniel never lost sight of how much attention his penis demanded.

Daniel sat on a stool and waited for the female bartender to notice him. She was finishing up a phone call, yelling over the music for the person on the other end of the phone to pick up some tampons for her. Her eyebrows arched in apology when she saw Daniel.

"You must have snuck in," she said. "What can I get you?"

"I'm feeling low. What's good for that?"

She started to mix a drink, her hands moving so quickly that Daniel couldn't even see which bottles she was grabbing. He had to ask what was in it when the glass was set

in front of him. “It’s a Royal Fuck,” she told him, with a tone that said *duh*, then she went on to explain what it was anyway. “Amaretto, Crown Royal, a little cranberry, a splash of pineapple. One of my favorites.”

Daniel wasted neither time nor a single drop of alcohol as he downed the dose of liquid pleasure in haste. He set the empty glass on its side and spun it around, getting lost in the dizzying motion.

“What’s got you down?” the bartender asked.

His eyes still locked on the spinning glass, Daniel answered, “Lost my job today.”

“Let me guess—car salesman? No wait, I’m gonna say IRS auditor. Am I close?”

“Not quite, but if you ask the right people, they might tell me you that I’m just as slimy as those guys are.”

“So what did you do?”

“I was a professor at Cormier.”

“Wow, it seems like as long as you’re smart enough, that would be a hard job to lose. You must have done something pretty awful to get kicked out of there.”

“You know, I liked you a lot more when you were making me drinks.”

She mixed him another Royal Fuck. “That one’s on the university’s tab.”

“Thanks.” Once again, he tossed back the drink like it was water. He thought the bartender looked upset that he wasn’t spending more time savoring her fine handiwork, but he just needed to get the booze in his system as quickly as possible.

“We can talk about it if you want. I don’t just pour drinks. I’m also an armchair psychologist.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I think I’m gonna play this one a little close to the vest. No offense.”

“None taken. I’m here if you need me.”

Before the afternoon’s events, Daniel would have seized upon her words and told her how much, how very much he did need her. How if she ever decided to take a class with him, he could make it worth her while if she was a little more motivated (wink, wink). How it could be mutually beneficial if she did more than just make his liver work a little harder that day. While he found her attractive and sensed that he would face no resistance smooth-talking his way into her pants, the desire to sleep with her soon escaped him. It was as if his dick had lost its job, too.

Daniel called down to the bartender, who had moved to the other end of the bar.

“Can I ask you something?”

She moseyed back down to him and leaned against the counter, her breasts resting on her crossed arms. “Shoot,” she said.

“What do you think of me?”

“Well, I don’t really think anything of you. I don’t know you.”

“Yeah, but gut reaction. A reasonably young guy comes in here alone, fresh out of work, where does your head go?”

“If you’re asking me if I feel as sorry for you as you do for yourself, the answer is no. Then again, I have no reason to feel that way since all I really know about you is you like to drink fast.”

“So, you have no opinion about me whatsoever?”

She studied him for a moment. “‘I wonder what he’s afraid of.’ That’s what I asked myself when you sat down. You don’t seem to have a purpose other than needing someplace to go. If I had to guess, I’d say you’re probably avoiding or running away from something. You’re not sad because you lost your job. That’s part of it, but there’s more to it than that. You’re sad because of who you are, something you don’t like about yourself.”

“All that came from the ten minutes I’ve been sitting here?”

She shrugged. “Like I said, armchair psychologist. Am I right?”

Daniel didn’t answer. He stared at her cleavage, though he wasn’t actually looking at it. He was off in his own world, curious as to how someone who didn’t know a thing about him could figure him out so easily. He didn’t think of himself as being that transparent. Along with his great intellect, one of the things that Daniel prided himself on was his depth. He always thought he had far more to offer in that respect than most other men. Somewhere along the way he must have lost sight of himself without even noticing. Claire would probably agree with that statement, but she was coming from a severely biased standpoint. Here was a stranger telling him things about himself that he might never have figured out on his own.

The bartender set another drink in front of him. “One more can’t hurt,” she said.

Almost before she finished her sentence, the alcohol was warming Daniel's belly, if not his heart.

Not stopping at just one more drink, Daniel had to ask the bartender to call him a cab by the time he was ready to go home. It was after midnight and the bar had stayed as empty as when Daniel had first walked in. No new temptations sauntered in to take his mind off his present situation, not that he would have done anything about it if they had. Instead of giving the cab driver his home address, Daniel instructed him to take him to the beach. At first, the driver seemed reticent about leaving Daniel alone, telling him that the beach was closed. When that failed, he even offered to wait until Daniel was done doing whatever he was going to do there. Daniel turned him down, assuring him that he was fine and that he would call another cab later.

Daniel slipped his shoes off, nearly falling over in the process. He sat down in the sand to take his socks off, knowing that he didn't stand a chance of remaining on his feet long enough to maneuver the worn fabric over his heel. The sand swallowed up his feet up in a hurry; the water washed in and out with a whisper. Daniel walked toward the shoreline, the moonlight that bounced off the ocean acting as a beacon that drew him nearer. He giggled as the water played with the top of his feet, tickling his toes before receding back into the great unknown. He couldn't recall the last time he had laughed about something as inconsequential and wonderful as this. He continued into the water, submerging himself up to his waistline without giving a thought to the fact that he was still fully clothed. The summer heat had warmed the water to the point where just a slight

chill remained. Daniel splashed around like a child in a wading pool, droplets coming down on his head as he genuinely delighted in the experience. It was only when he heard someone else laugh that he stopped and looked around. He didn't see anyone and chalked it up to a drunken delusion.

Then he heard it again. A little girl's laugh.

"You're funny, Daddy."

He turned around and saw Ellie before him. She hovered in the water, her upper body exposed to the night air. She wore the same outfit she had on the day she was buried. Daniel's face showed fear, not because he could see his dead daughter, but because they were too far out for her to be able to touch the ocean floor, and Ellie had never learned how to swim. He reached for her arm, his hand going right through her.

"That felt weird," she said, shivering a little. "Don't do it again, okay?"

"Ellie? How?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're drunk. Strange shit happens when you're drunk."

Daniel couldn't believe what he was hearing. Ellie was still in her two-year-old body, still had the same voice she had way back then, but she had an adult vocabulary.

"How do you know that word?" Daniel asked.

"Oh, you mean *shit*? Funny thing. When you die, your mind keeps developing. I may look like a little kid, but I've got a mouth like a sailor and a brain like Einstein's. At least I like to think so. Got a lot of free time on your hands when you're dead."

“I guess so.” Daniel was at a loss for words. He wanted to try to touch her again, to hold her in his arms, but since she didn’t seem to like it when he had done it a minute earlier, he resisted the urge.

“You’ve really fucked things up for yourself, haven’t you?” Ellie said.

“Do you think you could stop cursing? It’s a little disconcerting.”

“I’m not making any promises.”

“How do you know what I’ve done?”

“I’ve been watching you and Mommy ever since I left. Good call on that vasectomy, by the way. The last thing this planet needed was another Sorlin running around.”

Hearing those words from his own daughter, ghostly illusion or not, made Daniel wince. The sad part was that Daniel could not deny the accuracy of her words. He was more than certain that he had done a lousy job parenting without having to hear it from the victim herself. His feelings were offset by how adorable Ellie looked. Her unruly curls still failed to cooperate; the circular scar above her right eye, a remnant from picking at one of her chicken pox scabs, was even more noticeable in the overhead light. She still bore all the marks of the childhood she never got to finish.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel said.

Ellie smiled innocently at him, her tongue visible through the spaces between her teeth. “You did the best you could, Daddy. Mommy, too. I know that.”

Daniel was still having a hard time getting his head around his daughter’s advanced speech. It was bizarre to watch a two-year-old speak so eloquently yet still

refer to her parents as Mommy and Daddy. Then again, they were the only names by which Ellie ever knew them.

“You think things would be different if I forgave you,” she continued. “There’s no such thing as absolution. It’s up to you to find a way to forgive yourself. I can’t do it for you. As far as I’m concerned, I was never wronged. Everything happened exactly as it was supposed to. Whatever Mommy did, whatever you’ve done, it’s all working out just as it should.”

“How do—” Daniel stopped when he heard his voice crack. Tears came to his eyes and he tried again. “How do I do that? How do I forgive myself? Ellie, I’m a horrible person.”

Ellie shrugged. “Better than some, not as good as others. You’re a work in progress. We all are, even those of us who aren’t corporeal anymore.”

“I wish I could have seen you grow up.”

“I’m glad I’ve gotten to watch *you* grow up, Daddy. Your route is a little unorthodox, and it’s taken a lot longer than it should have—no judgment—but you’re turning out okay. Even though I don’t have access to a crystal ball or anything, I have a feeling you’re going to be just fine. Tell Mommy I love her.”

From out of nowhere, a wave crashed over Daniel’s head, pushing him forward and down to the shallow floor. A rock dug into his cheek, the pain causing him to rear back and emerge from the water. He crawled onto the beach and looked around for Ellie, not seeing her anywhere. He thought about running back into the water to save her before remembering that she wasn’t in a position that required saving. For the second

time in his life, Daniel had lost Ellie without having the chance to say a proper farewell. In spite of that, he was grateful that he got to see her again, to be privy to the wisdom that can only come from the mouths of babes.

Warm blood trickled down his cheek, and Daniel used his shirtsleeve to stanch it. Being tossed around the ocean did not do much to sober Daniel up; his legs were still wobbly as he made his way to a pay phone. He dug in his pants pockets for loose change, coming up with nothing but a ball of lint and one of his business cards, now just a wadded-up ball of paper, as useless as his college degree. He picked up the phone and banged the handset on the receiver, over and over and over again. It was the only thing he could think to do to relieve some of the frustration he was feeling. Trapped at the beach, wet, cold, bleeding, soused. Stupid. It was perhaps the only word in the entire English language that could sum up just how Daniel felt at that moment. Stupid.

Daniel put on his socks and shoes, and started on the 13-mile trek back to his house. If he was lucky, he might make it home by sunrise.

At eight o'clock the next morning, Claire woke up to an empty house, a sensation that was becoming more and more familiar, even if she didn't want it to be. The coffee machine let out an angry sound as it began to brew, like it was tired of having hot water run through its bowels and wanted to take a morning off. Claire was able to get just enough out of it to fill up her mug before the machine went on strike. Going out to look for a new one would be a nice distraction from what was going on in her house and what was going on across the street at Greg's. It took everything she had not to go visit him

again, to tell him that he was making a mistake and that New York could never provide him with the same level of happiness that he had living here. But that would presume that he was indeed happy, and she had no real evidence that was true. Besides, logic would seem to indicate that he would be staying if he were truly happy. A man doesn't move three thousand miles away from something that makes him feel good about himself. Claire would do her best to forget about Greg, though she knew it would certainly take more than a day spent shopping for a new coffee pot.

Taking her mug outside, Claire intended to spend the morning in her garden. Even when it looked absolutely perfect to everyone else, she could find some way to make it better: a weed that needed to be pulled here, dying petals on that flower over there, a plant that looked especially thirsty. She had not expected to step onto the patio and find Daniel stretched out between two pushed-together plastic chairs, sleeping. He looked like hell, his clothes damp and dirty, his eyes sunken in, even as they were closed, tugging on the rest of his facial features. If she didn't know it was her husband, Claire would have thought that a homeless person had wandered into her backyard for a brief respite.

“Daniel,” she said softly, poking him in the arm with one finger. “Daniel?”

He stirred, smacked his lips, and opened his eyes, kicking his feet off the chair and nearly tipping over in the process. Instinctively, Claire reached her arms out to steady him, helping keep the chair upright and Daniel inside it.

“What time is it?” he asked as he blinked exaggeratedly, each time opening his eyes a little wider.

“It’s after eight. Have you been out here all night? And why are you wet?”

“Too many questions. Are you going to drink that?” He grabbed for her coffee cup. She relinquished it without a fight, as it was rather obvious that he needed it right now more than she did. Seemingly impervious to the temperature of the liquid, Daniel chugged half of the mug’s contents and handed it back to Claire.

“You keep it,” she said.

He blinked again, looked at her as if only now realizing that she was standing there. “Good morning.”

“Is it? Daniel, what are you doing out here?”

“I walked home.”

“From where?”

“The beach. I saw her last night, Claire. Our little girl.”

“What are you talking about?” She sat down in the chair that had previously supported Daniel’s feet.

“Ellie came to me last night. She talked to me, told me everything was okay. It was beautiful. You should have seen her. Whip-smart and cute as ever.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to. She wanted me to tell you that she loves you.”

Claire looked out at her garden as tears started to form. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m not doing anything. It’s true. I saw her.”

“Daniel, you were drunk. You still are. I don’t know what happened to you last night, but I can guarantee you that seeing our dead daughter wasn’t part of it.”

“I know what I saw. You don’t have to believe me.” He drank the rest of the coffee and set the mug on the table. “She turned out to be a really amazing kid.”

Claire had dreamt about Ellie hundreds of times, and each dream had the same ending—Claire was a bad mother and Ellie hated her. Now here was Daniel trying to tell her something different than what she had told herself for so long. There was no reason to believe the ramblings of a man with a hangover more than she believed the voices in her own head. She wanted to believe him, though, as hard as it might be to do so. To know that Ellie had positive feelings about her instead of the abhorrent ones she had ascribed to her since the day she was born.

“What else did she say?” Preposterous as it may have sounded, she sat back and listened to Daniel tell the story of how his daughter’s ghost visited him in the middle of the night. She chose to regard Daniel’s words, whether he was drunk or not, as helpful rather than cruel. It was a way for both of them to cope with the single most important event that had happened in their lives since they’d met as awkward teenagers.

I ♥ ?

That’s what Claire had scrawled on her Pee-Chee folder at the beginning of her sophomore year of high school. As a freshman, she had spent her time pining for the captain of the varsity volleyball team. Not the most popular choice, and still out of her league as far as she was concerned. There was no chance of him even giving her the time

of day, what with her being deep in her second year of orthodontia and her parents' unwillingness to buy her the trendiest clothes.

Going into her sophomore year, though, Claire decided to take a different approach: not to set her sights on anybody in particular, but to let love find her. If she didn't try so hard, then she couldn't be disappointed when she ended up alone on a Friday night, which was exactly what happened most weeks. Her parents made her get her weekend homework out of the way on Friday so she wouldn't be like all the other kids who were scrambling to get their work done on Sunday night, staying up late and complaining that they didn't want to get up on Monday morning. On occasion, Claire was allowed to go out with her friends to see a movie or have dinner, but only if her homework was completely done beforehand and she was home and in bed by ten. James and Harriet Underwood believed that if any hanky-panky was going to take place, it wouldn't be happening until after ten o'clock, and by that time their little girl would be underneath her covers, safe from the lascivious advances of high-school (or worse, college) boys. Saturday night was church services, followed up on Sunday morning by another mass and the weekly parishioners' potluck lunch. Claire hated that her parents were in total control of how she spent her time. She was a teenager, for God's sake; she should have been exercising some newfound sense of independence, doing all the things that she heard the other kids talk about but that she could only lament in her journal.

Meeting Daniel changed all of that. He was the new kid in school, transferring in from the next county over after his dad got a new job. They shared a math class together, and Claire knew from the second he walked into the classroom that the question mark

she'd inked on her folder would not remain a mystery for long. When she saw him eating alone on his first day, she made it her mission to welcome him.

“Miss Turnbull's a tough one,” she said, blocking out the sun as she stood in front of him.

He looked up and saw her smiling at him, the gray of her braces blending in with the same-colored turtleneck that came all the way up to her chin. “I don't like geometry much anyway. Math isn't my subject,” he said.

Claire sat down next to him, her butt landing on his book bag. He tugged on it, and she lifted herself up just enough for him to pull it out and move it to his other side. She could feel his nervous energy, unsure if it was because he was the new guy on campus or because of her presence. She decided that it was a combination of the two.

“It must be hard,” she said.

“What?”

“Being new. I've been with the same group of kids all the way since kindergarten. I would think it would be hard to adjust to a new school, especially at our age.”

“It's okay. I'm trying not to make a big deal out of it. They can't think of you as the new kid forever, right?”

Claire opened her backpack and took out a sack lunch. She pulled a sandwich out of the bag—peanut butter and jelly on white bread, her favorite despite her age. “So, what *is* your subject?” she asked after chewing her first bite.

“English. I read almost anything I can get—”

She tried to be sly as she sucked globules of bread from between her braces, her tongue working overtime behind her closed lips. The look on Daniel's face, a mixture of amusement and disgust, coupled with the way he'd stopped talking abruptly, told her she wasn't as sly as she thought. She was relieved when Daniel continued without making mention of it. "I'm a big reader. The classics in particular."

"Right now we're reading *Huck Finn* in Mr. Bowler's class. Who do you have for English?"

"It's my next class. I don't think it's with Bowler, though."

"Too bad. It would have been nice to have a friend in there. All of my friends are in a different class than me, so I'm stuck with a bunch of losers that don't really want to be there. They should just drop out and make life easier on the rest of us."

"It's always the dropouts who seem to go on to make the most money. Go figure, huh?"

Claire finished her sandwich and once again tried to be discreet about freeing the balls of moist bread from her teeth. She was grateful when Daniel averted his eyes long enough for her to successfully complete the task.

"I'm Claire, by the way."

"Daniel."

Shaking hands felt like too adult an introduction for a teenager to engage in, so they settled for an uncomfortable laugh. After agreeing to have lunch together again the next day, they parted company, glancing back shyly at each other as they walked away.

Claire liked the feeling of being looked at, and she got a surge out of knowing that she had been caught looking, too.

“It turns out I do have Bowler, just in a different period,” Daniel said when Claire arrived the next day.

“Cool. So you’re reading *Huck Finn*, too?”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty far behind. The class is already halfway through it. I’m gonna have to play catch up.”

“We could study together, maybe make a trade. I could help you with the geometry homework and you could help me get through *Huck Finn*, once you’re caught up, I mean. The library has Cliffs Notes.”

His eyes grew disapproving. “I don’t believe in Cliffs Notes. That’s just half-assing it. We’re talking about classic literature here, and people think all they need to do is understand the basic story and locate a symbol or two. It’s so much more than that.” Daniel took out his copy of *Huck Finn* and held it in his outstretched palm. Claire, who had been digging through her bag for her lunch, stopped when she saw the passion spread across Daniel’s face.

“I can feel the weight of history in this book,” he continued. “It isn’t just entertainment, it’s real. These people really lived, if only in the mind of Mark Twain, but they lived. There is no such thing as true fiction. Whatever we can imagine, we can make real in one form or another. There’s power in these pages, Claire. High school students may be too self-centered to appreciate it, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t there. It’s just waiting to be discovered by the right reader.”

“So, no Cliffs Notes then?” Claire joked, though she could not hide how impressed she was with Daniel’s enthusiasm for the written word. She took out her own copy of the book and held it in her hand as Daniel had, chills running down her back as she replayed his sentiments. “You’re right. I feel it,” she said.

He fingered the book’s smooth spine. “There’s magic in this binding. It holds us together as much as it does the pages of this book.”

“You sound like a teacher. Actually, you sound better than a teacher ‘cause at least I can understand you.” Her stomach growled loud enough for both of them to hear it, a reminder that their lunch period would soon be over and they should start eating.

“It’s what I want to do. Teach, I mean,” Daniel said as he took a bite of the burrito he had ordered in the school cafeteria.

“Maybe you can finally get high school students to care about their education.”

“That’ll have to be somebody else’s job. I want to be a college professor.”

“Wow, that’s a lofty goal.”

“Yeah, who knows? I could end up having your kids in my class someday.”

“That would be weird.”

“So, what do you want to be when you grow up? Do you know yet?”

The question always made Claire sad. When she got asked this as a child, she would give the pat answers that every kid gave—astronaut, veterinarian, police officer. Different day, different profession. But none of them ever excited her. When she got to high school and the counselor asked her the same question, she realized that she had no idea what she wanted to do with her life. There wasn’t much of anything that she did

exceptionally well, no subject that she enjoyed enough to pursue further. While her parents tried to steer her toward a job with the church—which she knew would never happen—the school counselor showed her pamphlets on machinist jobs, dead-end positions for which the school got kickbacks when a graduate was successfully placed. She even met with a military recruiter, figuring that at the very least she could earn money toward the college education she knew her parents couldn't afford. Few things can make a teenager feel as empty as not having anything to work toward, and Claire was absolutely clueless when it came to her future.

“I'm keeping my options open,” was how she answered Daniel, and he seemed satisfied with the vague response.

Daniel accepted Claire's offer to become study partners, and they spent two hours in the school library each afternoon. Their friendship grew, as did their attraction to each other. Neither of them was bold enough to make a move, though, so for months their relationship remained platonic. That is until one day when Claire, faced with another Friday night at home with James and Harriet, decided that she was tired of waiting.

“Do you maybe want to go see a movie or something tonight?” she asked as they sat in the library. She didn't even lift her eyes from her book, too embarrassed at the prospect of being rejected. Every scenario she ran in her head ended with Daniel telling her how he thought they worked better as friends.

“I like movies,” Daniel said. Reaching under the table, he grabbed her hand and gave it a soft squeeze, the sweat on both of their palms creating a clammy mixture of relief and anticipation.

Claire smiled, still without raising her head, and turned the page with her free hand, feigning interest in anything but the fact that a cute boy was actually touching her and she was about to go on her first date.

Following a session of persuading her parents that she was old enough to go out alone with a boy, Claire's father picked Daniel up and dropped them both off at the movie theater.

"You look really nice," Daniel said, even though Claire didn't look much different than she had when he saw her at school four hours earlier. Aside from putting on one of the tops she normally reserved for Sunday mass and a thin application of eye shadow—something else she had to fight her mother for—Claire had not altered her appearance much for the big night.

"Thanks," Claire said anyway, accepting the compliment with the same level of sincerity with which Daniel had delivered it. "Do you have a job I don't know about?" she asked as she watched Daniel pay for the tickets, a large tub of popcorn, a box of Milk Duds for him, Reese's Pieces for her (braces and caramel were not a good combination), and sodas for both.

"I've been saving my allowance for a special occasion."

Claire blushed. Arms full, they found seats and settled in. With so much food, it took nearly half the movie for them to eat it all. Once the treats were gone, they had no barrier between them, no excuse not to hold hands. Yet both of them seemed to be suffering from a case of first date paralysis. Claire didn't dare turn her head away from the screen for fear that Daniel would try to kiss her. Not that she didn't want to be

kissed; she just didn't want to be the one responsible for making their first kiss a lousy one, and she was sure that a good kiss was much harder than it looked in the movies. And so nothing happened. No handholding, no kiss. They were even too mutually nervous to laugh when something funny happened on the screen.

It's a horrible thing, a first date, Claire thought. She was in no hurry to try it again anytime soon. She wasn't even sure if she was interested in going on another date again, period, if there was just going to be a lot of second-guessing and awkwardness. The drive back to Daniel's house was spent in silence, not only because Claire's father was in the car, but also because neither of them had any idea what to say to the other. Claire was certain that the date, though neither a success nor a disaster, was a horrible idea, and that their friendship would never be the same because of it.

At school on Monday, after an initial clumsy greeting, they pretended as if Friday night had never occurred. There would be no mention of going out again, nor would they acknowledge the obvious chemistry that they had together outside of any forced romantic confines. Inexperience led Claire to believe that a gawky first date meant that they shouldn't give it another shot. It wasn't until a month later, when Daniel found out that Claire had accepted a date from Curtis Cantwell, head of the debate team, that he confronted her.

"Curtis is kinda boring, don't you think?" he asked, not even trying to disguise his passive-aggressiveness.

"He's nice." She had softened her stance on not having any more first dates when she saw the question mark on the front of her folder every time she took it out of her

backpack. If Daniel wasn't the answer to the question, that didn't mean she had to stop searching altogether. Teenagers weren't supposed to be experts at these things anyway, she told herself.

"Nice and boring," Daniel said, clearly pleased with what he thought was a clever retort.

"Do you even know him, Daniel?"

"I've met the guy. Seen him in gym class, as a matter of fact. No muscle tone."

"You were checking him out?"

"I was trying to save you the trouble."

"How thoughtful."

"Thank you," he said.

"I was kidding. To be honest, Curtis isn't my first choice. But he's the only one who's asking, so... You take what you can get, right?" she said with a shrug.

"Is that how it is now? Desperation time for Claire?"

"What am I supposed to do? I've been waiting weeks for you to get your shit together and show some interest. We went back to studying after school like nothing had ever changed. Well, things changed, Daniel. Maybe not for you, but they did for me."

"You never said anything. How was I supposed to know?"

"I didn't say anything because it seemed like you didn't want to go there with me. I mean, other than joking about how much food we ate and whether or not we liked the movie, we didn't even talk on that stupid date."

"I was scared, okay? I'm new at this."

“So am I. But I like you, Daniel. Sometimes if you really want something, you can look beyond the fear and go after it anyway. Neither of us has been able to do that.”

“I wanted to. The signals I was getting from you were telling me not to try again.”

“What signals? I haven’t been acting any different than before.”

“That’s the problem. I figured if you wanted to go out again you would start treating me like I was more than just a study partner, maybe tell me some of your secrets or touch me a little. Instead, you walk a foot away from me so our arms don’t accidentally graze. And then you agree to go out with someone else. That’s a pretty big signal right there.”

“I don’t really want to go out with Curtis Cantwell, Daniel. He’s like the opposite of what I find attractive.”

“I don’t understand girls sometimes. Why would you go out with someone you don’t even—”

Claire saw the light finally turn on in Daniel’s head. Better late than never.

“You wanted to make me jealous,” he said.

Claire said nothing. She wanted to find out what Daniel was thinking, and knew that he would take it upon himself to fill the silence.

“I like you, too,” he said.

Claire waited for more, but that was it. Short, simple, sweet. As he had done before, he reached his hand under the table and grasped hers. This time, she scooted her chair closer to his and rested their conjoined hands on his leg.

“I’ll tell Curtis I have other plans,” she said, and they shared a smile.

Despite Daniel’s having taken the summer off from teaching, it still felt strange when he found himself home alone in the middle of the day, now unemployed not by choice but by mandate. Claire had left not long after he revealed his conversation with Ellie from the previous night; she didn’t say where she was going, though it didn’t take a genius to figure out why she had to go. There was a U-Haul parked in Greg’s driveway, a sight that had made her visibly upset. Daniel, realizing that this would likely be his last chance to confront his competition, felt compelled to go to Greg’s house. If nothing else, he could release some of his bottled-up anger on an unsuspecting participant.

The truck was backed into the driveway, and Daniel walked around it to find Greg stacking boxes inside its belly. Daniel picked up a box and loaded it onto the truck before announcing his presence.

“Howdy, neighbor,” he said with a swaggering cockiness.

Greg, his body so saturated with sweat that there was a ring of droplets around his feet, turned to find Daniel holding a box of his art. Greg acknowledged Daniel by name and then went back to arranging the boxes, essentially telling Daniel that he didn’t have time for any trouble.

“Leaving, huh? Did Claire break your heart?”

Greg grunted as he lifted a box above his head into the attic space that protruded out over the truck’s cabin. “Idiot,” he muttered.

“What’s that? I couldn’t hear you from all the way back there.”

“I called you an idiot.”

Daniel nodded his head. “I see Claire’s told you all about me,” he said, and laughed. He thought he saw Greg chuckle a bit, too.

“If you’re here to invite me to another dinner, I’m a little busy.”

“I think our hosting days may be behind us. Appearances aside, my mom actually thought you were very charming. Then again, she’s easily impressed when it comes to men. How else can you explain how she ended up with my father?”

Greg jumped off the back of the truck. “Seriously, I have to be on the road by sundown, so…” He pushed his way past Daniel to get another box.

“I can help. I’m sort of an expert since I just packed up my office the other day.”

“You switching offices?”

“Lost my job actually.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that.” Greg stacked boxes on a hand truck and wheeled them up the ramp.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“I was just trying to be polite. I honestly don’t care.”

“Of course you don’t. Why would you? You’re just the guy who’s fucking my wife. Can’t expect you to give a damn about her husband.” Daniel carried a medium-sized box up the ramp, setting it down in the middle of the floor where it would block Greg’s walkway. He waited for a reaction, either to the box being in Greg’s path or to the accusation that Greg had slept with Claire. Greg just stepped over the box and headed back down the ramp.

“Not gonna deny it this time?” Daniel said, repositioning the box on top of the others.

“There’s nothing to deny. Suffice to say things have changed since we last met.”

In trying to goad Greg into some kind of fight, Daniel had only ended up receiving information that he did not particularly want to know. His stomach sank and he felt queasy. It took a lot for him to resist the incredible urge to start kicking at Greg’s boxes, destroying all of his art as Greg had destroyed his wife’s purity. Part of him understood Greg’s predicament, though. After all, he was only a man, and men can’t be expected to determine right from wrong when it comes to matters of a sexual nature. They’re hard wired to go after what they want at all costs. And with their open marriage agreement in place, Greg didn’t even have to try that hard. The lucky bastard got to sleep with a beautiful woman without having to hide it or do any of the legwork usually required to get a woman into bed. In a strange way, Daniel found himself admiring Greg for his brazenness. It isn’t every man who would have an affair knowing that the woman’s husband was right across the street. Not that his admiration made him any less nauseated nor did it excuse the fact that Greg had been inside Claire. Still, Daniel had to give credit where credit was due.

“Where you running off to anyway?” Daniel asked.

“New York. Listen, I have a pretty heavy entertainment center in the living room that I was kind of dreading loading up on my own. Do you think you could give me a hand?”

“Of course. That’s why I’m here.”

Greg rolled his eyes as he led Daniel into the house. The entertainment center, made of solid oak, towered two feet above their heads and stretched halfway across the living room's main wall. Divided into two components—one for storing music and movies, the other for the TV and sound system, each as tall as they were wide—it was definitely a man's piece of furniture, the modern day equivalent of displaying a moose's head over the fireplace. Daniel tipped one of the pieces toward Greg, who steadied it as Daniel slid a furniture dolly underneath. Greg set his end down, and the hunk of wood teetered as they started to roll it toward the door. The dolly got hung up at the threshold, where the wheels refused to go over the slight bump. Daniel, on the outside of the door, pulled the piece from the bottom as Greg shoved it from behind. They cleared the bump, and the trip to the truck looked smooth until Daniel, walking backwards, tripped over a crack in the cement, sending him to the ground with the momentum of the dolly still on Greg's side.

“Shit,” they both said, as Daniel's foot got caught under the dolly. Greg struggled to keep the piece from falling off. He held it up from the side as Daniel, who was determined not to show Greg the pain he was feeling, slipped his foot out and hobbled back up.

“You all right?” Greg asked.

“I'm fine. Nice reflexes.”

They got the piece on the truck, then moved the other half of the entertainment center, though this time Daniel managed to stay upright. Greg took two bottles of water out of a cooler and handed one to Daniel.

“Thanks,” Daniel said. They sat on the back of the truck and drank.

“Does your foot hurt?”

“It might be a little bruised tomorrow. No big deal.”

After a minute, Greg said, “Your mom was right, you know.”

“I knew it. You *are* gay.”

“No, but I am an ex-con.”

Daniel laughed, then looked at Greg and saw that he was serious. “What’d you do?”

“Art forgery. As students, they teach us to copy the style of great artists. I got caught trying to pass off one of my paintings as a ‘newly discovered’ Matisse. The judge gave me a six-month suspended sentence, so I never actually served any time. I don’t know why I’m telling you this. Blame the heat.”

“Does Claire know?”

“No, but I’m sure she will now.”

“She won’t hear it from me,” Daniel said.

“Really?”

“However you guys ended things is how they ended. I won’t interfere with that.”

Daniel was impressed by his own magnanimity. He never imagined he’d be the one playing the role of the bigger man. “So, the Big Apple, huh? What’s there?”

“I got an art fellowship. They’re actually going to pay me to pursue my dream. The acceptance letter said there were over 2,500 applicants, and I was one of five that were chosen.”

“They don’t care about your past?”

“They don’t even know. It’s not like they’re performing background checks. Good thing, too, because I’ve been trying to get into this program since the moment I realized I was good at creating art.”

Daniel was surprised at how forthcoming Greg was being, almost like he was talking to a friend. “We aren’t supposed to like each other, but...congratulations. You need to do everything in your power not to screw this up. Dreams don’t last forever. Sometimes they can be ripped out from under you when you’re least expecting it.” Daniel tapped his water bottle against Greg’s as if they were toasting.

“What about you?” Greg asked. “Got a plan now that you’re unemployed?”

“Well, I never got to backpack across Europe before college. Maybe now’s the time.”

“So, you don’t know then?”

“Not a clue.” Daniel finished his bottle of water. “Let’s get this truck packed up, get you on the road to prosperity.”

Hearing that Greg was continuing to go after something he truly wanted gave Daniel hope. He had brought all his misfortune on himself, but he well knew that everyone got lost once in a while. He also knew that it didn’t take much to either get back on track or careen uncontrollably into a bottomless pit of desperation and ennui. Daniel wondered if it wasn’t too late for him to turn his life around, and Claire’s in turn.

* * *

By the time Claire got home later that day—in addition to getting the coffee pot, she had bought herself a new dress and gone for a manicure, something she hadn't done in a while—the U-haul was gone and a For Sale sign had been hammered into Greg's lawn. Or what used to be Greg's lawn. She drove past the house slowly, thinking how perfect the place had been for him, how much creativity had been accomplished in that converted garage. The next owner would almost assuredly turn it back into a parking spot, and the space would lose all the luster it once held. There would be power tools and pictures of half-naked women hanging from the walls instead of exquisite paintings and art supplies. The new owner would cut the grass differently, making the front yard lose the energy that spiraled out of the clockwise loops Greg made while pushing the lawn mower. And the doorbell, if she ever got the nerve to push it again, would sound like a regular doorbell, not the delightful melody it had become when she knew what to expect on the other side of the door.

While all this was playing in her head, Claire could not help but think how comforting it was to pull into her own driveway and not have to worry about what was going on across the street. Home was a place where, even if she didn't clamor to be there, she could take refuge. Everything was out on the table now; for the first time since she didn't know when, she was communicating with Daniel on a level that bred involvement rather than animosity. She came home to the feeling of possibility, the chance to start over—whatever that meant.

Daniel was lying on their bed reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* when she walked in. It was a book that Daniel reread at the end of every summer, in preparation for his

class on classical literature. Of course, there would be no class this fall. He marked his place and set the book down as Claire took her new dress out of the bag.

“What do you think?” she said, holding it in front of her and swaying her body back and forth so that the hemline, which ended just above her knees, moved the way it would if she was actually wearing it.

“I like it. It’s very you.”

Claire had to stop herself from wondering if Daniel had any idea what was “very her.” Instead, she accepted the compliment and hung the dress in the closet.

“You could wear it tonight.”

Claire was confused. Obviously, there were no more university dinners or special events that she would have to attend, so whatever was happening tonight had completely slipped her mind. “What’s tonight?” Her voice indicated that she wasn’t really up for faking authenticity in a social situation right now.

“I thought we could go see a movie, maybe grab some dinner. If you’re nice, I might even let you order dessert.”

“Oh, if *I’m* nice?” At the thought of a real night out, her tone changed to playful.

“Yeah, well, the last time we went to eat, we got kicked out, remember?”

“That’s because you wouldn’t talk to me. If anyone’s to blame for that one, it’s you.”

“I’m just saying.” He reached for her hand and pulled her toward him, kissing her. “I’ve missed you.”

Claire smiled and once again had to fight the inclination to doubt Daniel's sincerity. After all, she hadn't gone anywhere. He was the one who was stepping out, doing everything in his power to keep them from becoming a cohesive unit. But dwelling on these thoughts wasn't going to progress any healing that might take place. Claire gave Daniel another kiss and asked, "What time does the movie start?"

An hour in and their second date was going much more smoothly than the first. Despite weather reports predicting rain and a steadily increasing cloud cover, Daniel was adamant about taking Claire to play miniature golf, explaining that he hadn't played since he was a little kid and he simply couldn't go another day without a putt-putt fix. Claire put up a fight at first, not wanting to get stuck in a downpour, but gave in when she sensed that Daniel was actually serious about how much he wanted to play. Being outside and having some form of activity as a distraction made them much more natural around each other than when they were squeezed into uncomfortable, retractable seats, trying to keep their shoes from sticking to the floor of the movie theater.

"By the time we leave here today, I will have made a hole in one," Daniel announced. "You are going to be the lucky witness to history."

"If I don't get struck by lightning first."

"So young yet so pessimistic." Standing in front of a ceramic clown's gigantic gaping mouth, Daniel placed his ball on the tee. Like a professional golfer, he got down on his hands and knees and used his club to line the shot up, though the distance the ball had to travel was far greater than the length of the putter. Back up on his feet, Daniel

winked at Claire and prepared to swing, taking one, two, three fake shots to the side of the ball before hitting it for real. A clap of thunder sounded at the same time as his club struck the ball. Daniel jumped, causing the ball to veer to the right and stop just short of entering the clown's mouth. Claire thought it looked like the clown was laughing at Daniel through its fluorescent-colored maw.

“I meant to do that,” Daniel said.

Claire nodded. “I thought so.” She set her own ball on the tee and swung immediately, taking no time to see where the ball was supposed to go or where her swing was sending it. The ball became airborne as it burst off the tee, narrowly missing ricocheting off the clown's upper lip as it sailed to the other side and landed mere inches from the hole. They both squatted so they could look through the mouth and see where Claire's ball was.

“Beginner's luck,” Claire said.

Daniel rolled his eyes and shook his head. He was doing a lousy job hiding any humiliation he might have felt being shown up by a girl who wasn't even really trying. He gave his ball a quick smack in an attempt to bank it off the back wall and have it roll within striking distance of the hole. At the very least he would still make par. The ball did bounce off the wall and roll down, but instead of stopping next to the hole, it hit Claire's ball and knocked it in. Daniel's mouth was as outstretched as that of the clown who mocked him.

“Does that count as a hole in one?” Claire asked, suddenly becoming much more excited. “Cause technically I only hit the ball once before it went in.”

“Let’s just say you won this hole and leave it at that.” He putted his ball, marked down their scores, and moved to the next hole, a bridge that led straight into a castle with two moats on either side of a narrow drawbridge opening.

“Maybe this game’s kinda fun after all,” Claire said.

“Every game’s fun when you’re ahead.”

“Oh, come on. You’re not a sore loser, are you?”

“I haven’t lost yet. There are still three more holes to go.” Down on the ground again, Daniel once more lined up his shot. This time, his careful planning paid off as the ball traveled perfectly along the bridge and sailed straight through the castle door. Still not a hole in one, but better than the last attempt.

Claire took another haphazard swing, faring less successfully than before; her ball ended up in one of the moats alongside the castle. Daniel laughed out loud.

“Don’t be a jerk, Daniel,” she said, and retrieved her ball from the water, dropping it on the tee without any concern for its actual placement. She watched as Daniel gave his ball the quick tap it needed to find its way into the hole, and grew angry as he performed a little victory dance. Claire raised the club above her head and smacked the ball with a ferocity that sent it over the facility’s fence and onto the adjacent street, barely missing the hood of a parked car.

“The LPGA could use a swing like that. I’ll just put you down for three over par on that one,” Daniel said.

A light rain began to fall as Daniel moved to the next hole, not noticing right away that he was walking alone. Claire set her club on the ground and crossed her arms in defiance.

“I don’t want to play anymore,” she said.

Daniel turned around but didn’t go to her. “We’re almost done,” he said.

“I *am* done. You can finish if you want. I’ll be at the front waiting for my ride.”

For a second she thought Daniel might actually stay behind and finish his game. But he followed, keeping pace three steps behind her, she assumed to give her some space. It began to rain harder as they stood in front of the complex and waited for Daniel’s dad to pick them up, a slight roof overhang protecting them from getting too wet.

“I’m not good at this,” Claire said. She had put her hood on and was not looking directly at Daniel.

“It takes practice. You’ll get better.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t even know if I want to. It seems like so much trouble.”

He put his arm around her and said, “You’re turning it into something much more serious than it needs to be. I mean, I know everybody wants to win, but you don’t have to let it ruin your day.”

She shrugged him off of her and turned to look at him. “I’m not talking about miniature golf, Daniel. I’m talking about you and me, and dating in general. I suck at it. I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting a little bit? It seems like every time something doesn’t go the way you have it mapped out in your mind, it means you have to quit. Not every moment of every day is going to go the way you want it to. I’m sorry if I was too competitive for you today, but you shouldn’t let that keep you from having fun. Let’s make a deal: from now on you call me on my shit. When I’m bugging you, when I’m too far into myself, when it feels like I’m not really with you, you have my permission to slap me in the face. Metaphorically, not literally. Whaddaya say?” He stuck out his hand. “Do we have a deal?”

Claire accepted his hand and gave it a firm shake. Her eyes widened and her lips separated into a smile. “Deal,” she said, then took off her hood, grabbed his face, and kissed him. It was a bold move on her part, one that she had not envisioned making herself. And yet it felt very right—and oddly belated. Both of their cheeks were flushed as they pulled apart in time to see that Earl was waiting for them. Taking on the persona of a gentleman, Daniel opened the door for Claire. Before she got in, she told him, “Just so you know, that deal works both ways.”

“Okay.” He closed her door and went around to the other side, getting in the backseat so that he could sit next to Claire.

“Looks like the rain didn’t keep you two from having a good time,” Earl said.

“Nope,” Claire said, and put her hand on Daniel’s thigh.

Daniel paid the host fifty dollars to avoid having to be placed on the waiting list. The Italian restaurant, one of the city’s finest, required reservations weeks in advance,

and he and Claire had shown up on a whim. As Daniel looked around, he noticed that they were both slightly underdressed in their jeans and T-shirts. It was too hot outside to dress in layers, and they figured if the host didn't have a problem with how they looked, then they shouldn't worry about it either.

Daniel requested a bottle of Merlot and took it upon himself to order Claire's meal, something he had never before attempted. "I'll have the penne arrabiatta, easy on the marinara, and she'll have the fettuccine alfredo."

"Very well, sir," the waiter said, retrieving their menus.

"How'd I do?" Daniel asked.

"Well, other than the fact that I'm allergic to dairy, you did great."

"Really? Oh my God, I didn't know that. What would you like?" He raised his hand to call the waiter.

Claire reached across the table to put his arm back down. "I was joking. I love fettuccine alfredo."

Daniel laughed uneasily, though he didn't think Claire's "joke" was especially funny. "I should know when you're joking. I should know what you're really allergic to. It's embarrassing to admit that I don't know these things."

Claire leaned back in her chair, laced her fingers, and rested her hands on the table. "At some point in our relationship, we stopped sharing. It's like we peaked very early and then had no choice but to plateau or sink into the valley. I'd say we did a little of both on the way to getting where we are today. The question now is what to do about it."

“How do you fix something you worked so hard to screw up?”

“I guess it depends how badly you want to fix it? Most people in our situation would have cut their losses a long time ago and moved on with their lives. There’s something that keeps us from doing that, Daniel. Even Greg saw that, and he barely knew us as a couple.”

“He said that?”

“Yeah. Believe it or not, he wanted us to work.”

“I believe it. We spent some time together before he took off for New York earlier today.”

Claire sniggered. “You and Greg hung out? And you’re both still alive?”

“I helped him load his truck. It wasn’t totally altruistic as I’m sure you can imagine. The sooner he was all packed up, the sooner he could get out of town. But I know that he only wanted what was best for you, something that I neglected for a lot of years. What’s the old saying—fondness makes the heart grow absent?”

“Something like that,” Claire said.

“He asked me what I was going to do now, being unemployed and all.”

“I was wondering that myself. Any thoughts?”

“No school’s likely to touch me at this point, so my teaching days are done. I’ve always wanted to write a detective novel.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“That’s because I didn’t talk about it. It’s frowned upon when professors pursue endeavors that aren’t considered scholarly. Elitist pricks. But if I get a book published now, the media might dig up some dirt about me and turn the thing into a bestseller.”

“Wishful thinking,” Claire said, and they both laughed.

“Until then we’ve got some savings to hold us over. I was thinking it might be your turn to try something while I figure out what’s next for me. You could finally get that psych degree, if you’re even still interested in that after all this time.”

“Fresh starts all around.”

“Never too late,” Daniel said.

The waiter brought the wine and uncorked the bottle. While he poured them each a glass, Daniel and Claire shared a look. It only lasted a second, but had incredible depth. Daniel knew it would be a struggle for them to move beyond the heartache they had both suffered and caused. Healing an emotional wound was never as simple as healing a physical one; we train our minds to fear the unknown, and making ourselves vulnerable to another person’s impulses certainly qualified as the unknown. The payoff, however, could be huge.

Daniel thanked the waiter and raised his glass. “To remembering yesterday, changing tomorrow, and living today.” They clinked their glasses and took a sip.

“That’s good stuff,” Daniel said.

Claire checked her watch.

“Got somewhere else to be?”

“No, I was just thinking that we’ve been here twenty minutes and we haven’t picked a fight yet. It’s gotta be some kind of record.”

“Could it be that we’re actually capable of being civil toward each other?”

“Let’s not be ridiculous now,” Claire said.

“I almost forgot.” Daniel reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring he had bought on his walk a few days earlier. He had taken it out of the box soon after purchasing it and had been carrying it around in his pocket ever since. It even went into the ocean with him the night he talked to Ellie, and he was grateful that it hadn’t gotten lost in the water.

Claire’s eyes widened and her face blanched at the unexpected sight.

“Whatever happens between us,” Daniel said, “you deserve to have this. I promised you an engagement ring when we were younger and never made good on that promise. Accept this ring as a gesture of my honoring a commitment, finally.” He slipped the ring on Claire’s finger, a perfect fit.

“It’s beautiful.” She wiggled her finger to make the diamonds dance in the restaurant’s dim light.

“Please don’t think I’m trying to buy your adoration. I’m not naïve enough to presume that giving you a ring automatically makes all of our problems disappear. I just wanted to give you something that you’ve had to wait far too long to get.”

“Thank you. I love it. And I would never for a second...”

* * *

“...let you copy off my homework. You’re gonna have to find some other way to get it done in...” Claire glanced up at the clock in the library. “Eleven minutes.”

“You know I’ll never get it done that quickly.”

“Well, I guess you should have thought of that yesterday before you spent two hours making out with me in your bedroom,” she chided.

“How did you get it done anyway?”

“I’m magical, and that’s all you need to know.”

Daniel studied her face and saw past the effusive grin. “Who’d you copy off of?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“These are hard theorems we had to prove, twenty of them. There’s no way you got ‘em all done after I left yesterday. Whose paper did you copy?”

“A lady doesn’t cheat and tell.”

“You see this?” He pointed to himself, ran his finger up and down in front of his body. “You don’t get any more of this unless you let me have your homework.”

“Oh, that’s so cute. You think you have control over the physical part of our relationship.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” She slid her paper across the table. “You’re down to ten minutes. Better hurry.”

“Shhh. I need to...”

“...send this back. The pasta’s overcooked,” Daniel said to the waiter.

“Is yours okay?” the waiter asked Claire.

“Mine’s fine,” Claire said.

“I’ll get you another one right away, sir,” the waiter said, scooping up Daniel’s plate and heading to the kitchen.

“I wouldn’t eat that when he brings it back,” Claire said.

“Why? Do you think he’s gonna spit in it?”

“Or worse. I saw things when I was a waitress.”

“I thought that was just restaurant mythology.”

“No, it’s all true. Dine at your own risk.”

“I’m hungry. I’ll take my chances.”

“Suit yourself. I’m gonna keep eating, if you don’t mind.”

Daniel gestured to her with an open palm, inviting her to continue. He took a sip of wine and followed it with a deep breath. “She would’ve been eighteen next month, you know.”

Claire stopped chewing, nodded her head. “A freshman in college. Maybe even enrolled in one of her daddy’s classes.”

“Are you kidding? She could have done better than Cormier. Plus we would have butted heads all the time. She was a stubborn kid.” Still, Daniel wondered what it would have been like to look out at a room full of fresh-faced college students on their first day, before the pressure and the deadlines and the weekend benders made their features droop with exhaustion, and see Ellie’s magnificent smile beaming back at him, father and daughter as proud as they could possibly be of one another.

“For what it’s worth, I think you would have been up to the challenge.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I wasn’t there for her, though. How can you possibly think I would have been a good teacher?”

“Because I know you, Daniel, better than you think I do. You would’ve come around eventually. It’s your way.”

The waiter came back with another plate of pasta. “Hopefully this is more to your liking, sir.”

“Thank you,” Daniel said. As the waiter walked away, Daniel looked to Claire for support before diving into his meal. “Wish me luck.” He took a bite, rolled it around in his mouth to see if he could detect any foreign flavors.

“How is it?”

“Tastes like...”

“Shit!” Claire yelled.

Daniel’s teenage brain told him to laugh, and he did just that, even as he helped Claire pick herself up off the ground. She had tripped on a crack in the cement and took four massive stumbling steps before falling down, the weight of her backpack keeping her from remaining upright.

“It’s not funny, Daniel,” Claire said, brushing the dirt off her hands. “Look at my pants. The knees are all torn. I look like an orphan girl.”

“Actually, I think it looks kinda cool, like you did it on purpose. What a rebel.”

“Don’t try to make me feel better. Everyone’s laughing at me.”

Daniel looked around to see if a crowd of gawkers had formed. “There’s nobody here, Claire. Nobody even saw you fall.”

“That’s because they’ve already run off to tell their friends what a fool I made of myself.”

“Come on, you know you’re not nearly popular enough to be the subject of gossip.”

She gave him a light punch on the arm and they both broke into laughter.

“I had no idea you were so clumsy,” Daniel said.

“I usually fall down at the worst possible times.”

“Is there a good time to fall down?”

“No, you know what I mean. Like this one time, I had to go the bathroom before mass and when I got back, it had already started. I tried to get to my seat as quietly as I could, but my shoe got caught on the runner as I was walking down the aisle. I tripped, knocked over a fountain of holy water, and almost ended up in some old man’s lap—not that he seemed to mind. Old men are such pervs, even in church.”

“Maybe it’s something you’ll outgrow. I think it’s cute.”

“It’s cute seeing me hurt myself?”

“No, not that part. But thinking about it later, picturing how it happened. You have to admit, it can be pretty funny.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Don’t make fun of me, though, okay?”

“Why would I make fun of you? I love you.” The words came out of his mouth without Daniel even realizing it. He wasn’t sure what had possessed him to say such a thing, or if that was even how he really felt about Claire. Would the words have slipped so easily off his tongue, though, if they weren’t true? Nobody had told him what the formula was for determining whether or not you were in love with someone. As far as he knew, there was no geometric theorem that could prove what it meant when stimuli x led to response y , which equaled emotion z . Love was too confusing a topic for mathematicians to tackle.

Daniel stood there, looking at Claire like a stunned moth that just flew too close to a bug zapper. Claire tilted her head toward the sky and pretended to be distracted by an airplane passing overhead.

“You don’t have to say it back,” Daniel said.

“It was sweet of you,” Claire said, still following the airplane as it slowly vanished from sight.

“It was stupid. I mean, I shouldn’t have—”

She put her hand over his mouth. “It was sweet.” She pulled her hand away and gave him a light kiss. “I want to be in love with you, Daniel, I do. I’m just not there yet.”

For once, Daniel didn’t say exactly what was on his mind, didn’t tell her that he wasn’t really in love yet, either. There was no reason to be that honest with her right now. Instead, he kissed her again. “Let me know when you’re there,” he said.

“Call me later?” Claire said.

“Of course. How can I go to sleep without hearing the mellifluous tone of your voice?”

“Ooh, big word. Sexy.”

“That’s not all I’ve got that’s big,” Daniel said, and they both laughed.

“Maybe you can show me just how hard...”

“...that head of yours is. You told me I could pick the movie.” They were standing in line at the box office, studying the marquee that displayed the showtimes for twenty different movies.

“I know, but I don’t want to spend two hours watching the great Cameron Diaz flirt with some snaggle-toothed British guy.” Daniel was nearly whining. “There’s a limit to the amount of torture I can handle in one lifetime, and the length of that movie surpasses it. Besides, the new Bond movie just opened. You know you love Bond movies.”

“Fine, but I want my own popcorn.”

“Okay,” Daniel said, and approached the ticket window. “Two for James Bond.”

“I’m sorry, that theater’s full,” the box office attendant told him.

Claire pressed her lips together as she tried hard not to guffaw. She already knew that they weren’t going to get tickets; the electronic marquee flashed the movie’s showtime followed a few seconds later by the words SOLD OUT. Daniel just hadn’t been paying close enough attention. He sent a joking glare in Claire’s direction, then bought two tickets for the Cameron Diaz romantic comedy.

“You knew it was sold out the whole time, didn’t you?” he asked.

“It said it right there.” She pointed to the marquee. “Not exactly a secret. I still want my own popcorn, though.”

Daniel pretended to pout, rolling his eyes and walking a step ahead of Claire. He got their tickets torn and headed for the concession stand.

“Oh, come on,” Claire said. She caught up to him, wrapped her arm around his, and leaned into his body. “I promise we’ll see your movie next time.” She rested her head on his shoulder as they walked.

“I’m having fun with you tonight,” he said, giving the top of her head a kiss.

“Me too. Are you surprised?”

“I think I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I was, at least a little. Who knew we were capable of it still?”

“I’m glad we are.”

“Yeah.”

“Next in line,” the concessions worker called.

They stepped up to the counter and Daniel placed their order. “I’d like two…”

“…minutes where I don’t have to think about my future or what school I’m going to attend or how my SAT scores are going to stack up against everyone else’s. It’s exhausting.”

“That’s what you get for having goals in life,” Claire said with a bored huff.

They were in Daniel's bedroom, Daniel at his desk, a half dozen books open in front of him, while Claire, who had finished her homework an hour earlier, lay on his bed reading the latest issue of *People* magazine. She had tried unsuccessfully to get Daniel to blow off his work and play with her. It was a beautiful day, she told him, and they had already wasted most of it in class; why waste the rest of it chained to a desk at home, too? But Daniel was determined to complete his assignments before engaging in any extracurricular activities, as tempting as Claire's offer was.

"I won't be much longer, I promise," Daniel said.

Another hour passed before Daniel closed his books and declared that he was done for the day.

"Finally," Claire moaned, half serious.

"So, what is it you've been chomping at the bit to do for the past two hours?"

"Nothing in particular. Something that gives you those two minutes away from schoolwork you were asking for. We could go get something to eat, we could go to the pet store and play with puppies, we could fly a kite. Whatever, I'm open."

"Puppies, huh?"

"Proven to reduce stress in old people and overburdened students."

"Well, if that's true, how could I possibly say no?"

The pet store was within walking distance of Daniel's house, about a quarter-mile away. They held hands tightly the whole way, like a pair of Siamese twins taking turns supporting each other. Claire had a tendency to walk faster than Daniel, who would often

find himself being dragged behind her. She appreciated the extra effort he made to keep their fingers interlocked and maintain their proximity.

An overweight woman—she looked as though she had eaten more animals than she'd sold—gave them an alert when they entered the store. “We close in fifteen minutes,” she said, lifting a terrarium with a tarantula in it over her head and onto a shelf.

Daniel and Claire made their way to the middle of the store, where the puppies were kept in a circular, open-topped wire pen, free to interact with each other and with the patrons who came in to ooh and aah over them. Claire stepped into the cage. A crew of five tiny dogs gathered around her, balancing on their hind legs as they clamored for attention. She moved carefully so as not to step on any paws; Daniel had an easier time getting in, with Claire providing a distraction for the excited pups.

“Oh, look at this one,” Claire said, picking up a pugle. She held it in front of her face and got licked on the nose by a light, rough tongue. As she kneeled down, the other four puppies tried frantically to climb into her lap, jealous of the cuddles their comrade was receiving.

Daniel knelt down also, a Yorkshire terrier perching itself on his lap. The little face was too much to resist, and Daniel scooped the Yorkie into his arms, caressing it gently as it burrowed its way into the crook of his elbow.

“I think you've made a new friend,” Claire said.

The other dogs—a Labradoodle, a Chihuahua, and a Maltese—started to roughhouse, tumbling, growling, barking, biting each other's ears, doing whatever they could to get noticed. Claire gave in to their request, put down the pugle, and grabbed a

nearby chew toy, which they all tried to get at once. She laughed as they slipped on the tile floor, their twelve-week-old legs still gaining strength. Daniel looked perfectly content with the Yorkie in his arms. He stroked the dog's chin, and it appeared to be well on its way to falling asleep. Claire smiled at him and went on playing with the other dogs. She had not yet seen this side of Daniel, the soft side that liked small animals and was willing to get on the floor and entertain them. It was somewhat of a surprise to her; she figured Daniel would be too uptight to play this way. She was glad to have been wrong about that. She tried not to turn this into one of those moments in the movies where the girl looks at her boyfriend in a new light and suddenly her feelings for him are crystal clear. But she couldn't shake the sense that she was finally seeing the real Daniel, not the Daniel who always needed to impress her with his incredible intellect or inadvertently pissed her off with his competitive edge. Daniel Sorlin was finally in front of her, and damned if it didn't make her like him just a little bit more.

"Time to go, kids," the overweight woman said. "You can come back some other time." She took the Yorkie from Daniel. The dog whined as he stepped out of the cage.

"It's okay," Daniel assured the dog, giving him one last pat on the head.

"You were quiet in there," Claire said on the walk back to Daniel's house.

"We were bonding."

Claire knew that he meant him and the puppy, but part of her wanted to interpret his statement to mean that she and Daniel had formed a greater connection in the pet store, too. She thought it would sound silly if she said it out loud, so she kept it to herself, and hoped it was true even without his confirmation.

“That was a great idea. I feel much less stressed,” Daniel said.

“Good. I guess we know where to go from now on when the world gets to be too much to handle.”

“I think you’re right.”

“Would you ever get a dog?”

“Probably not. They’re a lot of responsibility. It’s kinda like having a baby, except the kid eventually stops relying on you for everything; the dog never does. I feel like I’m going to have enough to account for in my life without adding the pressure of having to take care of a helpless creature.”

And just like that, Claire doubted again whether or not her feelings for Daniel had actually deepened. If that was truly his opinion on the subject, then he certainly wouldn’t make for a very good father. She questioned why she was even thinking toward that end. They had barely been a couple for two months, not to mention that they were only sophomores in high school. There was no telling what the future had in store for either of them, and she definitely shouldn’t be thinking about a long-range forecast at such a preliminary stage. Claire forced the thoughts from her head and focused on something more tangible.

“I’m starving,” she said.

“How does a burger sound?”

“Great. My treat.”

“Really? Thanks.”

“Consider it a reward for all the hard work you put yourself through. Buying you a burger is the least I can do for someone who’s got as much gumption as you do.”

“Wow, dinner and a compliment. It must be my lucky night,” Daniel said.

“You deserve to feel special every once in a while. That dog knew what a good guy you are, and I want you to know that I know it, too.” She paused. “I think we should have sex.”

Daniel produced a sound that made Claire think he might have swallowed his tongue, then he started laughing hysterically.

“I’m serious,” Claire said.

Daniel calmed down. “Isn’t that against your beliefs or something?”

“Not *my* beliefs. My parents’ maybe, not mine. If you don’t want to…”

“No, I want to, I want to. I just wasn’t expecting you to offer yourself up that way. I’m sorry I laughed.” There was an awkward silence, then Daniel asked, “Did you want to do it before or after the burger?”

“Not tonight, doofus. Soon.”

“Whenever. You let me know.”

Claire could hear Daniel’s eagerness at the prospect of getting laid. “Okay, but let’s not make a big deal about it. Just play it cool. We don’t want to tip anybody off. My parents are already very suspicious of you.”

“As they should be. I mean, look at me. I’m a hooligan in khaki pants.”

She grabbed his hand and started to walk faster. “Yeah, well, come on, you dirty thug. I want to eat. Let’s…”

* * *

“...get out of here. This movie blows.”

Even in the darkened theater, Claire could see that Daniel had an I-told-you-so expression on his face, his mouth half-upturned in a silent gloat.

“God, that was awful,” Daniel said as they drove out of the theater parking lot. “I’m so glad you wanted to leave, ‘cause I don’t know how much longer I could have held out before I started running up and down the aisles out of sheer boredom. And who decided that Cameron Diaz is a good actress? I think now that I’ve got the time, I’m going to start a campaign to show the world that Cameron Diaz couldn’t display an actual emotion on screen if her life depended on it.”

“You done there, Roger Ebert? I promise never to make you sit through another one of her movies again. Feel better?” She patted his leg.

“I won’t stand to be patronized, either. This is serious business.”

“I’m sure that you think it is.”

“That sounded patronizing, too.”

With the car stopped at a red light, the only way Claire could think to distract Daniel from his rant was to place her hands on either side of his face, pull him toward her, and kiss him.

“I could start an anti-Diaz blog,” he began again as soon as their lips separated.

“Oh, for God’s sake, let it go, Daniel.”

The light turned green.

“That was a nice kiss,” Claire said. “We’ve been living more like roommates for so long I’d sort of forgotten we could do that.”

“I guess I have been a little preoccupied with getting those needs met elsewhere, haven’t I? Do you even remember the last time we had sex?”

“You know I have a pretty good memory for a lot of things, but I honestly don’t know. I would say it’s probably been two years at least.”

Both of them sounded sad as they discussed the calamity that was their physical relationship. There was a time, even after Claire got pregnant, that they couldn’t get enough of each other. Somewhere along the line that changed, and instead of reaching out for intimacy, they kept each other at arm’s length.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” Daniel asked. “All those years, you knew exactly what I was doing and you just kept it inside. If our roles had been reversed, I would have kicked your ass to the curb so fast...”

“That would have required you to actually care what was going on with me. I’m not sure you’re capable of that. I suppose I kept quiet for the same reason that you proposed the open marriage: eventually something’s gotta give. Either we’d destroy each other emotionally, go our separate ways, and find out that no one in their right mind ever wanted to be with us again, or we’d end up perfectly miserable living out the rest of our days together. Kind of a lose-lose situation, wouldn’t you say? So I kept my mouth shut.”

“You know what’s crazy? I sort of lost my motivation to sleep with other women after we agreed to the open marriage. Shelley was the only one, and she was way more

into me than I was her. Not that that makes up for years of infidelity, but it's kind of funny how things work out."

"Well, not that this is going to come as a surprise, but Greg was the only man I saw during that time."

"Did you like it? Being with another man?"

The question caught her by surprise. She guessed that there was a part of Daniel that was afraid to hear her answer and another part that needed to know, regardless of how painful it might be. "He made me feel wanted and special and nurtured. All the things I hadn't gotten from you. There was a lot of guilt involved, too, because I was being unfaithful. Can you believe it? After everything you put me through, I still feel guilty for having sex with a man who actually appreciated me."

"Do you wish he wasn't moving to New York?"

"Yes and no. I do think that I could have loved him. At the same time, he showed me that you and I had a lot of business to sort through. We've been sitting on our hands for way too long, complacent for reasons I can't even begin to understand. Whether you choose to believe it or not, I do love you, Daniel. Hell, I may not always believe it myself, but that doesn't change the truth of it. I miss who we were, before Ellie, before all the women. I think we can get back there. I'd like to try."

"Who knew that deceit could be used as such an effective adhesive?" Daniel said.

"Everything happens for a reason, right?"

"It was so much easier then."

“And fun. Don’t forget, we had a lot of fun. We’re still young,” Claire said.
“We have a lot of time left to fix this, screw it up a few more times, and fix it all over again.”

“Do you think we might be happy? I’d really like to be happy.”

“I think it’s worth a shot.”

Daniel turned down their street, the streetlights flickering as the summer twilight turned to darkness. Passing by Greg’s house, a sense of calm and relief washed over Claire as she realized another chapter of her life had come to a close.

Daniel pulled into the driveway. Claire got out of the car and started for the front door when she noticed that Daniel wasn’t behind her. He had turned off the ignition but was still sitting behind the wheel.

Claire tapped on the car window. “You coming?” she asked.

As the streetlights decided that they were in fact supposed to be on, Daniel stepped out of the car, grabbed Claire by the waist, and kissed her as deeply as she could ever remember him having done in the past.

“Whatever it takes,” he said to her, “I’m in.”

The only thing that Claire’s preoccupied brain could think to say was, “Okay.”

After Claire’s declaration that she wanted to sleep with Daniel, it was all either of them could think about. Waiting for the perfect moment no longer mattered. The only thing that did matter was satisfying urges without getting caught. For that, a plan had to be devised.

“But Saturday’s still five days away,” Daniel grumbled as he talked to Claire on the phone. Unbeknownst to her, he had started to pleasure himself before she called with the aid of a Victoria’s Secret catalog he found sitting on top of the trash. While the catalog had a few coffee grounds and a strange green substance on it, they wiped off without damaging any of the precious photos, though Daniel was slightly disturbed that his mother had earmarked some pages before throwing it out. Regardless of how hot the women on those particular pages looked, they were to be avoided at all costs.

“We could have phone sex,” he suggested, mostly because he was almost at the point of climax when Claire called and didn’t want to have to start from scratch when they hung up.

“Um, no,” Claire said. “Can you imagine if one of my parents walked by my room and heard me talking to you? I’d be sent to a convent for sure.”

“So Saturday then?”

“It’ll be perfect. I mean, the plan will be perfect. The sex, I hear the first time’s not usually so great. Not to put any pressure on you or anything.”

“No, of course not.” Daniel watched his erection go slightly limp.

“I’m going to pretend that I’m sick so I don’t have to go to church. They’ll be gone for at least two hours, which should give us plenty of time to get down to business.”

“You make it sound so romantic.”

“Please. We can have romance another time. This is about getting it done. Are you having second thoughts?”

“What? No. Are you kidding? I’m counting down the hours.”

“This is going to be good, Daniel. Even if it’s not that good, it’s still going to be good. You know what I mean?”

Daniel shook his head as he answered, “Yeah.”

“I have to go. See you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight.”

“Bye.”

The excitement that Daniel felt at the prospect of losing his virginity was evenly matched by the anxiety that it evoked. Second only to becoming a college professor, having sex was a dream of his since he discovered the human body was capable of producing an orgasm. Just because he had practiced for the event almost every day for over three years—sometimes three or four times a day—didn’t mean that he was fully prepared for the challenge. Looking forward to it though he was, his nervousness was such that he couldn’t even bear to look at his Victoria’s Secret catalog again. He tucked the magazine underneath the socks in his dresser drawer and agreed to give himself the night off.

It wasn’t long after they got inside the house that Daniel and Claire, having assured themselves that their marriage actually meant something to them and that it was worth the effort to save, found it impossible to keep their hands off each other. Claire’s thoughts of any real foreplay vanished as soon as Daniel unzipped her jeans. They collapsed on the bed, Daniel on top, both of them struggling to release their clothes from around their ankles and maintain constant lip contact. It was the most purely animalistic

they had been with each other since Ellie's death, and, after seventeen years of buildup, neither of them wanted to do anything that would break the moment's continuity.

Claire had forgotten how good he felt, how he filled her up in a way that made her think that their parts were specifically designed for each other. It was the very same thing she thought the first time they had made love.

"Did they seem suspicious when they left?" Daniel asked. He was talking in between kisses as they lay on Claire's bed.

"I don't think so. Can we not talk about my parents right now? It's kind of a mood killer."

"Yeah, sorry."

Just as it was Claire who took control by bringing up the subject of sex, it was also Claire who was in control now. Daniel had showed up with sweat stains on his shirt, and he was shaking as they held hands on the way to Claire's bedroom. She undressed him and, to supplant his nervousness, placed his hands on the parts of her body that she wanted touched, hoping that eventually he would get more comfortable and take a little initiative of his own. So far that hadn't happened. She was on top of him, kissing his neck and chest while he lay flaccid, in every possible way.

"We can stop if you want to," Claire said.

"Maybe just for a minute."

Claire detected shame in his voice when he accepted her offer. No teenage boy wants to be stopped on the cusp of having sex with his girlfriend, especially the first time.

Claire thought about something Daniel had told her he had been doing in preparation for tonight. In order to approximate the feeling of a woman, he put lotion in a plastic sandwich bag, then placed the bag, with his penis inside, between his mattress and box spring. He said he liked it—that he even lasted longer than usual—but that he imagined she would make for a less rigid partner. Daniel closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths, in slowly through his nose, holding it, and exhaling through his mouth. Claire watched him start to grow, and began to give him an encouraging massage, one that Daniel definitely responded to. He pulled up from the bed and drew over Claire, forcing her on her back as he fumbled to get himself inside of her. She guided him in and turned her head to the side as she tried to keep him from seeing that she was in pain. She had heard that the first time could hurt, but had no idea how intense the pinch would be. The pain only lasted a few seconds—Daniel’s movements were slow and gentle—before Claire was overcome with the feeling that this was the most perfect moment in her young life.

While rubbing his back with one hand and his butt with the other, Claire stopped abruptly. “Fuck,” she shouted.

“We are,” Daniel said, continuing his exercise.

“Daniel, stop.”

Reluctantly, Daniel granted her request. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“The condom. I totally forgot about it.” She was verging on panic as she pushed Daniel off of her. “How could we be so stupid?”

“Claire, calm down. I didn’t even come yet.” His chest puffed out just a little as he said the words.

“Weren’t you paying attention in sex ed? Whatever dribbles out before the full release is more potent than anything else. It’s like concentrated or something.”

“You’re not going to get pregnant the first time you have sex.”

Claire cocked her head and looked at him with disgust. “For a smart guy, you say some pretty dumb things.”

“I promise that you’re not going to get pregnant.”

“You promise?” She rolled her eyes and leaned over the edge of the bed, grabbing her bra and panties and putting them back on.

Daniel sighed and reached for his underpants, tucked his half-erect penis into his boxer shorts. Claire curled up in the fetal position. He tried to turn her, but she would not budge. Pushing himself up against her, he kissed her neck and stroked her arm.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said. “We’ll be more careful next time. Whatever happens, it’ll be okay.”

“Don’t make promises,” she whispered, and turned toward him, her face wet with tears.

Daniel wiped her cheek and kissed her nose. “You know, this doesn’t have to be a complete loss.”

“What do you mean?”

Daniel started to scoot himself down her body, licking a trail toward his final destination. Claire grew uncomfortable and tried to pull him back up. Daniel ignored

her, and by the time he circled her belly button three times with his tongue, Claire wondered why she had ever wanted him to stop. He removed her panties once again and licked her as if she were the sweetest lollipop he had ever tasted. His inexperience meant that he wasn't always hitting the right spot, though Claire definitely gave him plenty of brownie points for trying. Even if his efforts weren't going to produce an orgasm, she decided that it still felt pretty damn good, and she wasn't going to complain.

She forgot about her earlier pregnancy concerns—for now—and submitted to Daniel's noble intentions. A sense of alarm came over her when she felt the bed shake, thinking they were having an earthquake. Looking down, she saw that Daniel was masturbating as he serviced her. She let out a wail and gyrated her hips a little, simulating what she thought would be a climax. The look on Daniel's face indicated to her that he thought he had done his job. They traded positions, Claire taking Daniel into her mouth. After only a few strokes from her tongue, he came. Claire couldn't help but grimace as she swallowed his semen.

They held each other then, and the world around them ceased to exist. Before too long, Daniel would have to sneak out of the house, Claire would have to go back to pretending she was sick, worries about the future would seep back in to their consciousness. But for this one moment, they were ensconced in an aura of perfection that would prove all too fleeting.

Claire had fallen asleep in Daniel's arms, a place she wasn't sure she could allow herself to feel so vulnerable ever again. His body was welcoming and warm, and he felt

like a spouse. Not the abstraction she had created just to make it through the day, but a real, honest-to-God husband who cares for his wife less because he has to and more because he wants to. This was how it never was, how she had always dreamt it would be.

Daniel's stomach let out a loud gurgle, stirring them both awake. They gave each other a quizzical look, though neither was sure whether it was because they were surprised to find themselves together or because Daniel's belly had made such a horrible rumble.

"Did you hear that?" Daniel asked.

"I think the neighbors may have heard that. You wanna eat something?"

"It's the middle of the night."

"And...? I didn't know our kitchen had hours," she said.

"I'm not going to eat alone."

"I could eat."

Daniel went to the bathroom and Claire headed to the kitchen, where she proceeded to put on her own one-person production of Stomp as she clanged pots and pans together looking for the right one in which to make scrambled eggs. Opening up the refrigerator, Claire thought herself lucky to find four eggs left, enough to split between the two of them, and a few pieces of bread to make toast.

"Late night breakfast," Daniel said when he walked into the kitchen. "Like drunken college students."

"I hope that's okay." She had already started whisking the eggs.

"Sounds good to me. What can I do?"

“You can make the toast.”

“I have a doctoral degree and the most challenging thing you can come up with for me to do is make toast?”

“But just think, with that kind of an educational background, you might be in a position to make the best toast ever.”

“Valid point.” He put two slices of bread in the toaster and tried several times to push the lever down; each time it popped back up. “I think this thing’s broken.”

Claire, who was trying hard not to laugh, put down her bowl and went to help Daniel plug in the toaster. “How’s that degree working for you?” she said, cracking herself up.

“Ha, ha.” He started the toast, then stood behind Claire, wrapping his arms around her and kissing the nape of her neck as she poured the eggs into the frying pan. “Anything else I can do?”

“I think you’re doing enough.” She wanted to melt into him, to forget the past and embrace the fact that they had managed to stay together through devastating odds. For now, though, it would remain just that—a want. It was too soon to move forward as if nothing had happened.

“Mistakes were made,” Daniel said quietly into her ear, as if he could hear her thoughts.

Those three words were all it took for Claire to lose it completely. Her body bent slightly as she began to sob, the low wail coming before the tears. The admission was too honest, too all-encompassing. It was the first true acknowledgement that what had

happened to their relationship was the result of both of their actions, as well as exterior influences. Marriages are not damaged in a vacuum, but rather are done in by committee, sometimes intentionally, sometimes completely unaware. Ultimately, the *how* doesn't matter because all that remains is the *what*.

Claire turned around, her lower lip quivering, tears flowing from her eyes with abandon. She kept her gaze at the level of Daniel's chest, resisting his attempt to raise her chin. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," she said. "Snow White and Prince Charming, that's the way I wanted it to be. That's how every girl wants it to be." She looked up at him finally, with a sadness that had been stored deep within her facial muscles for years. "I know I'm not Snow White. But why couldn't you have been Prince Charming?"

"Life's not a fairy tale. Especially not ours. I never presented myself as a knight in shining armor, never gave you the impression that I would ever become one. We were both doing whatever it took to make it through the day, and then make it through the next one, and the next, and the next. Maybe things would have been different if Ellie hadn't died. Maybe I thought I could forget all my problems in the beds of other women. Maybe things really do need to get worse before they can get better. I don't know. All I know for sure is that I'm not going to try to make excuses, and you shouldn't either."

The high-pitched beep of the smoke detector broke the moment.

"Shit, the eggs," Claire said, pushing off of Daniel and rushing the pan to the sink. White smoke billowed up from the pan as Claire doused it with cold water, the charred smell of the blackened eggs filling the room. "So much for breakfast."

“We still have my toast,” Daniel said, removing it from the toaster.

“I’ve sort of lost my appetite.”

“Do you think we have a realistic chance at making this better?” He waved a towel in front of the smoke detector to abate its piercing howl.

Claire thought for a second. She could already tell that she and Daniel were interacting differently than they had in a long time. There was a sense that they were friends again, that things had changed just enough to make their relationship salvageable. But Claire was reticent to declare her opinion when so much still seemed unresolved. “Who decides what better is?” she asked.

Daniel bit down on a corner of his bread. “This is damn fine toast,” he said.

Claire pulled his hand toward her mouth and bit off another corner. “As good as toast can be,” she said, though she couldn’t help but notice that it felt a little rough on her throat as she swallowed it down.